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The Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

**THE CHURCH OF OUR BLESSED REDEEMER WHO WALKED
UPON THE WATERS**

**A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
IN
CREATIVE WRITING**

by

Preston L. Allen

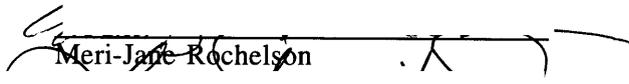
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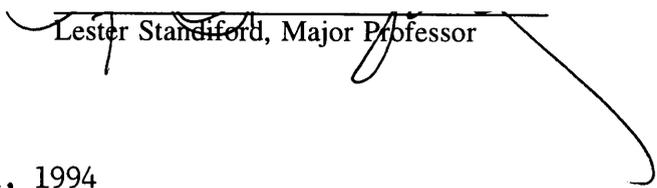
To: Dean Arthur W. Herriott
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Preston L. Allen, and entitled The Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

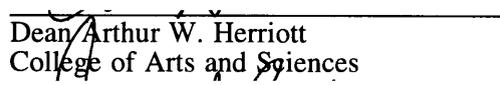

Lynne Barrett

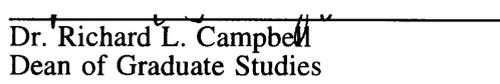

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The thesis of Preston L. Allen is approved.


Dean Arthur W. Herriott
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Florida International University, 1994

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to Dawn, without whose love and support the completion of this work would have been impossible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the members of my committee for their helpful comments and support. I also want to thank Professor John Dufresne and those who attended his Friday night workshop for their insight and encouragement. Thanks, too, is due Barbara Murphy, the English department secretary, who ever watches over the countless small things that amount to so much.

A special thanks must go to my major professor, Dr. Lester Standiford, for his direction, insight, and patience.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
THE CHURCH OF OUR BLESSED REDEEMER WHO
WALKED UPON THE WATERS

by

Preston L. Allen

Florida International University, 1994

Miami, Florida

Professor Lester Standiford, Major Professor

The Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters is a collection of short stories about Elwyn Parker, a devout pianist who becomes a worldly car salesman. "Thirty Fingers," "My Father's Business," and "Apostate" introduce Elwyn, a saint at church and a trouble-making evangelist at school, who nevertheless finds himself in a love affair with an older woman, Sister Morrisohn. In "Captivity," Elwyn, a college freshman, experiences worldliness, then grows to resent and ultimately reject Sister Morrisohn. In "The Leap," Elwyn is back at the piano, but unemployed and unhappily married. He finds comfort only in his decade-old affair. In "The Lord of Travel," Elwyn, a car salesman, appears bereft of his former morals until he hoodwinks Ida, who reminds him of the now deceased Sister Morrisohn. Elwyn repairs Ida's car, redeeming himself in the process.

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I. Thirty Fingers

I never really wanted to play the piano, but it seemed that even before I touched my first key I could play it.

When the old kindergarten teacher left to go have her baby, the new teacher made us sing: "Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream . . ."

"Elwyn," said the new teacher whose long name I could never remember, "Why aren't you singing with us? Don't you know the words?"

Yes, I knew the words--just like I knew the words to "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"--I had memorized them as soon as the old teacher, Mrs. Jones, had sung them to us the first time. But I could not sing the words. Mrs. Jones knew why I could not sing the words but not this new teacher.

"Elwyn, why won't you sing with us?"

I could not lie, but neither was I strong enough in the Lord to tell the teacher with the long name that singing secular music was a sin. So I evaded.

I pointed to the piano. "Mrs. Jones plays the piano when we sing."

"Won't you sing without the piano?" she said. "I can't play the piano."

"You can't?" I was amazed. I had assumed all adults could do a simple thing like play the piano. "I'll show you how to play it," I said, crossing the room with jubilant feet.

"You know how to play, Elwyn?" she said.

"Yes," I said, though I had never touched a piano key before.

During my short life, I had carefully observed Mrs. Jones at school and Sister McGowan and the other ministers of music at church and had developed a theory about playing I was anxious to test: high notes go up, and low notes go down.

After a few tries, I was playing the melody with one finger. "See? Like this," I said. My theory was correct.

The other kids squealed excitement. "Let me play. Let me play," each cried.

"What's the big deal?" I said. The high notes went up, low notes down. It only made sense.

But the new teacher had to give each one a turn. I directed them: "Up, up, now down, down. No. Up, up more."

When it came to be my turn again, I played "Mary Had a Little Lamb." The new teacher got the others to sing the tune as I played. I had but a child's understanding of God's Grace. I reasoned that if I sang secular words, I'd go to hell, but I had no qualms about playing the music while others sang.

I was young.

That day should have been the last time I played the piano, because, in truth, my fascination with the instrument did not extend further than my theory of high and low tones, which I had sufficiently proven. No, I did not seek to be a piano player. I assumed, most innocently, that I already was. Should I ever be called upon to play a tune, I would simply "pick it out" one note at a time. This was not to say, however, that I was not interested in music.

On the contrary, music was extremely important. Demons, I was certain, frolicked in my room after the lights were turned off. At night, I watched, stricken with fear, as the headlights of passing automobiles cast frighteningly animated shadows on the walls of my room. Only God, who I believed loved my singing voice, could protect me from the wickedness lurking in the dark. Thus, I sang all of God's favorite tunes--hummed when I didn't know the words--in order to earn his protection. When I ran out of hymns to sing, I made up my own.

I am your child, God. I am your child--

It is real, real dark, but I am your child.

I believed God was partial to high-pitched, mournful tunes with simple, direct messages. God was a brooder.

What did I know about His Grace?

What did I know about anything?

* * *

Ambition. Envy. Lust. Which was my sin?

I did not want my neighbor's wife. I did not want his servant. I did not want his ass. There was, however, a girl. Peachie. Brother and Sister Gregory's eldest daughter.

I had known her all of my life, but when she walked to the front of the church that Easter Sunday, sat down at the piano, and played "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?"--my third grade heart began to know envy and desire.

Peachie Gregory did not pick out tunes on the piano. She played with all of her fingers--those on the left hand too. Such virtuosity for a girl no older than I. And the applause!

That was what I wanted. I wanted to go before the congregation and lead them in song, but all I could do was play with one finger. I must learn to play like Peachie.

An earnest desire to serve the church as a minister of music, then, did not compel me to press my parents, a maid and a school bus driver, for piano lessons--though that is what I claimed. When they said they could not afford piano lessons much less a piano, I told them a necessary fiction.

"Angels flew down from heaven. They played harps, and they wanted me to join them. They pointed to a piano. I trembled because I knew I couldn't play the piano." I opened my eyes wide so as to seem scared and innocent. "I have never taken any lessons."

"Were you asleep?" my father said. One large hand clutched my shoulder. The other pushed his blue cap further up on his head, exposing his bald spot. "Was it a dream?"

Before I could answer, my mother said, "He already told you he was wide awake. It was a vision. God is speaking to the child."

"You know how kids are," my father said. The money would come from his pocket. "Elwyn's been wanting to play piano so bad, he begins to hear God and see visions. It could be a trick of the Devil."

My mother shook a finger at my father. "Elwyn should have been taking piano lessons a long time ago. He is special. God speaks to animals and children. Elwyn doesn't lie."

My father's grip weakened. "But if it's a dream, maybe we need to interpret it. We can't be so literal with everything."

"Interpret nothing." The maid pursued the school bus driver to the far side of the room. He fell into his overstuffed recliner where it was customary for him to accept defeat. "Some Christian you are," she said. "You'd rather spend money at the track than on your own boy."

I agreed with my mother. A child's piano lessons should come before a nasty vice. My father was beaten. He did, however, achieve a small measure of revenge. Instead of giving up his day at the track, he told my grandmother, that great old time saint, about my "visions," and my grandmother, weeping and raising holy hands, told Pastor, and Pastor wrote my name on the Prayer Sheet.

How I cringed each week as Pastor read to the congregation, "And pray that God send brother Elwyn a piano to practice on." I believed that God would send one indeed--plummeting from heaven like a meteor, crashing through the roof of the Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters to land right on my head.

Every Sunday Pastor's words were hung like millstones around my neck: "Liars shall have their part in the lake of fire."

I prayed, Heavenly Father, save me from the lake of fire. I lied, Lord, but I'm just a child. Cast me not into the pit where the worm dieth not.

God's answer was Brother Morrisohn and his ultra-white false teeth. If he hadn't stood up and bought that piano for me, I would have surely died just like Ananias and Sapphira--struck down before the doors of the church for telling lies.

Brother Morrisohn was a great saint, a retired attorney who gave copiously of his time and energy--as well as his money--to The Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters. It was his money that erected the five great walls of the church, his money through the Grace of God that brought us warmth in the winter and coolness in the hot Miami summers. It was his money that paid Pastor's salary in the sixties when the Holy Rollers built a church practically on our back lot and lured the weaker members of the flock away. After the fire that destroyed the Rollers' chapel, it was Brother Morrisohn's money that purchased the back lot property back from the bank, putting the Rollers out of business for good.

"I can't sit by and watch God's work go undone," he always said.

On the day they delivered the second-hand, upright piano, he said, "You're going to be a great man of God, Elwyn." He extended his forefingers like pistols and rattled a few keys: C, F#, C, F#, C, C, F#, C. Grinning, he showed his much-too-white false teeth. "I love music, but I never learned to play. Maybe someday you'll teach me." He was seventy-eight at the time.

"I will," I said. I was eight.

"I wish you would teach him, Elwyn," said Sister Morrisohn, the fair-skinned wife who was about half Brother Morrisohn's age. She took off her shawl and draped it over

his shoulders. She smoothed it onto his frame with her palm. "We have that big piano at home that no one ever plays."

Brother Morrisohn frowned. "I'm not cold," he said, but he did not remove the lacy shawl. He rattled the keys again: C, F#, C.

"I'll teach you piano," I said.

I was so happy. I hadn't had my first lesson yet, but I sat down at the wobbly stool and made some kind of music on that piano. At about two in the morning my father emerged from the bedroom and drove me to bed.

"Good night, Good night, Good night," he sang, accentuating each beat with a playful open-palm slap to my rump. It was a victory for him too. Just that weekend he had won \$300 at the track. It didn't seem to bother him that my mother had demanded and gotten half of the money and set it aside for my piano lessons.

Every night I offered a prayer of thanksgiving, certain God had forgiven me.

* * *

Peachie Gregory was another thing entirely.

Peachie Gregory--with those spidery limbs and those bushy eyebrows that met in the center of her forehead and that pouting mouth full of silver braces--I didn't completely understand it when I first saw her play the piano, but I wanted her almost as much as I envied her talent.

She dominated my thoughts when I was awake, and in time I began seeing her in my progressively worsening dreams--real dreams, not made-up visions. Then I began manipulating my thoughts to ensure that my dreams would include her. At my lowest, I dreamt about her without benefit of sleep.

By age thirteen, I knew I was bound for hell.

I couldn't turn to my parents, so one Sunday I went to the restroom to speak with Brother Morrisohn.

He said, "Have you prayed over the matter?"

"Yes," I said, "but the Lord hasn't answered yet."

"Maybe He has and you just don't understand His answer." He smiled, showing those incredible teeth. "I'm sure He's leaving it up to you." He put an arm around my waist and drew me near. He smelled of mint and talcum powder.

"Leaving it up to me?"

We stood inside the combination men's washroom and lounge his money had built. Four stand-up stalls and four sit-down stalls lined one wall. A row of sinks lined another. In the center of the room, five plush chairs formed a semi-circle around a floor-model color television. We were between services, so a football game--Rams versus Cowboys--was airing. Otherwise, the television would have picked up the closed circuit feed, and broadcast the service to those members of the flock who found it necessary to be near the facilities. At eighty-three, Brother Morrisohn attended most services by way of the floor-model television in the combination men's washroom and lounge. His Bible and hymnal rested in one of the chairs.

He said, "I don't care what anyone tells you--God gets upset when we turn to him for everything. Sometimes we've got to take responsibility. Elwyn, it's your mind and your hand, and you must learn to control them. Otherwise, why don't you just blame God for every sin you commit. God made you kill. God made you steal. God made you play with yourself."

Brother Morrisohn was so close I thought he was going to kiss me. There were those teeth again. That grin. His arm pressed hard against my ribs. But he was right. I had to control my own hands.

Brother Morrisohn began to tremble. He released me and coughed into his palm. He looked at what he had coughed up, a red, gelatinous glob. "Age," he said. "Old age."

I quickly turned on the faucet so that he could wash his hands, and he did.

I said, "What about the dreams?"

"Dreams?" he said.

"The nasty dreams about . . . Peachie."

Brother Morrisohn rubbed his hands together under the running water. "God," he said, "controls the dreams. They're not your fault."

"OK."

"Control your hands."

"I will."

Brother Morrisohn turned off the water. He smiled. "Peachie Gregory, huh?" He pointed to the television. "That was Peachie last Sunday backing up Sister McGowan's boy."

"Yes."

"She's talented. She and that Barry McGowan make a great team. He can really sing."

Barry was not my favorite brother in the Lord. Barry was a show-off, and he had flirted with Peachie in the past, even though he was five years older than Peachie and I. But now I smiled because soon he would be out of the way. "Barry just got a scholarship to Bible College," I said.

"Good for him. He's truly blessed. But that Peachie is a cute girl, isn't she?" He laughed mischievously. "If you're dreaming about her, Elwyn, by all means enjoy the dreams."

I handed him a towel. He was a great saint.

And thank God that as I grew in age, I grew in wisdom and in grace. With His righteous sword I was able to control my carnal side.

While she lived often in my waking thoughts, it was only occasionally that I dreamt about Peachie anymore, and even less frequently were the dreams indecent. Awake, I marveled at how, through the Grace of God, I was able to control my mind and my hand.

* * *

At sixteen, I counted Peachie as one of my best friends and sisters in the Lord. We served as youth ministers together. We went out into the field together to witness to lost souls. As a pianist, she demonstrated a style that reflected her classical training. Disdaining my own classical training (we both had Sister McGowan for piano teacher), I relied on my ear to interpret music.

Sister McGowan, a purist, often stopped me in the middle of a lesson, "Elwyn!"

I tried to explain: "I just added a diminished ninth and I syncopated the third and fourth--"

"I'm aware of what you did, Elwyn." Sister McGowan pushed her half glasses up on her nose. She tapped the sheet music with her pointer. "But Chopin does not need to be improved upon."

I shot a glance at Peachie sitting on the couch. Her turn was next. She gave me a thumbs up.

Barry McGowan, wearing an undershirt and tight, white shorts, passed through the room. He carried a glass of ice water. "Boogie woogie classics," he said, winking at Peachie.

Peachie smiled politely.

I said to Sister McGowan, "You didn't like the way I played it?"

"To be honest," she said, "I loved it." She patted my hand. "But play it as it's written."

Those were the rules--play it as it's written--though I found them impossible to abide by. Classical music was good for finger exercises, but the music that worked on my

heart was the sound of WMCR (Miami Christian Radio) after midnight on Saturday when all the Lutherans and Presbyterians had gone to bed and it was left to the Baptists and Pentecostals to give praise. Rev. James Cleveland, Andre Crouche, Walter Hawkins, Sister Dorothy Love Coates, the Five Blind Boys From Alabama--such as these were my inspiration. Shouts of Glory! Soul stirring harmony. A piano sound overflowing with discordant arpeggios and a left hand popping like a drum.

Chopin could scarcely hold my attention.

Thus, on first and third Sundays, Peachie was minister of music for the stately adult choir; on second and fourth Sundays, I played for the more upbeat youth choir. As different as our tastes were, Peachie and I emulated each other's style. I'd steal a chord change from her. She'd borrow one of my riffs. We practiced often together.

By the Grace of God, genuine affection, if however guarded, had replaced the poisonous envy and lust I had felt for Peachie as a child.

Thus, when Brother Morrisohn passed away, it was my best friend Peachie I called for support.

"They want me to play," I said.

"You should. He was very close to you."

"But my style may not be appropriate," I said. "When I get emotional, my music becomes too raucous."

"Do you think it really matters?"

I tried to read Peachie's words. For the past few weeks she had grown cranky; I had chastised her more than once for her sarcasm, which bordered on meanness.

"Yes," I said. "I think it matters. It's the funeral of a man I loved dearly."

"Well don't look to me to bail you out. Play what's in the book."

"I hate playing that way."

"Then play like you know how to play," she said. "Play for the widow. Play for Brother Morrisohn. Play like you have thirty fingers."

"OK," I said. "I hope the choir can keep up."

"We can," she said.

Then we talked about what songs I would play and in what order and some other mundane things, and then somehow Peachie ended up saying, "Don't worry, Elwyn. The Lord will see that you do fine. And I'll be there watching you, too."

"Bless His name," I said.

We ended with prayer.

* * *

So it was a funeral, but you wouldn't know it from my playing.

Keep up, choir, I thought. I'm syncopating. Keep up!

I played for the stout old ladies of the Missionary Society, who sat as Brother Morrisohn's next of kin because at eighty-six, he had outlived all of his immediate family except for his wife Elaine Morrisohn--who was now exactly half his age--and a daughter from a previous marriage, Beverly, who was about five years older than her step-mother.

The twenty or so women of the Missionary Society took up the first four pews. They wore black dresses and big, black church hats with black silk ribbons tied into bows. My grandmother stood among them, raising holy hands. Back in the thirties, Brother Morrisohn and my grandmother, my mother's mother, had founded the Missionary Society, which later became the fulcrum of the church's social activity.

Sister Morrisohn, his widow, sat there weeping among her dark sisters. She was the youngest member of the Missionary Society and that mostly because she had been his wife. It was rumored that Sister Morrisohn had lived a life of singular wickedness before meeting and marrying Brother Morrisohn.

Beverly Morrisohn, his daughter, was not in attendance--although I had spotted her briefly at the final night of his wake. She wasn't much to look at, a round-faced woman with her hair done up in a bun. A non-believer, Beverly had worn a checkered pants suit to her own father's wake. No wonder Beverly and Sister Morrisohn hadn't been on speaking terms for longer than the sixteen years I had been alive.

I played to comfort his widow.

Watch out, ushers, I thought. I'm going to make them shake today. I'm going to make them faint. Watch out!

I played so that they would remember Brother Morrisohn, benefactor and friend. Brother Morrisohn, the great saint, who had put the Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters on the map.

My fingers burned over the keys. Remember him for the pews and the stained glass windows! Remember him for the nursery!

Remember him for the piano he bought me!

Now the stout old ladies of the Missionary Society were my target. I aimed my cannon, fired. Musical shrapnel exploded in the air. The Missionary Society jerked back and forth, euphoric. They praised the Holy Spirit, but it was I who lured them into shouts of dominant seventh--Hear That Old Time Gospel Roar Like A Lion!--I who made them slap their ample breasts through black cotton lace.

Remember Brother Morrisohn. Remember!

I looked at the choir, swaying like grass in a measured breeze, and caught the eye of Peachie Gregory, my secret love. She sang lead soprano. Though I seldom dreamt about her anymore, I would marry her one day. Peachie winked an eye and flicked her wrist as if swatting a fly. It was a signal. Play like you know how to play!

I did. I hit notes that were loud. I hit notes that didn't fit.

Then I pulled the musical rug out from under them. No piano. No piano--except a strident chord on the third beat of each measure backed by whatever bass cluster I pounded with my left hand, now balled into a fist. The celestial echo reverberated. The whole church moved as a many-headed creature, swaying in organized frenzy--the Holy Spirit moving throughout the earth.

Peachie gave me a quick thumbs up.

Then I joined them again, laying into that final chorus like I had thirty fingers.

For the first time, I played for Peachie. Even she would admit I was quite good.

Was that my sin? Pride?

* * *

At graveside, I hurled a white rose into the hole. It slid off the smooth surface of the casket and disappeared into the space between the casket and the red and black walls of earth.

The widow collapsed beside me, but I grabbed onto her hand holding her own white rose before she hit the ground. My skinny arms and the meaty black arms of the Missionary Society steadied Sister Morrisohn on her feet again. She was not a heavy woman. She smelled of sweet blossoms.

"I don't want him to go," she said.

"The Lord taketh the best, Sister," my grandmother said. "He lived way beyond his threescore and ten."

"Amen" and "Yes, Lord" went up from the assemblage.

"His life was a blessing to all," said Pastor, just beyond me and the circle of Missionary Society women that surrounded Sister Morrisohn.

"Yes, but--" Sister Morrisohn said.

"Throw the rose, child," my grandmother said.

My grandmother, that great old time saint, had one arm over Sister Morrisohn's neck. She massaged her gently. My own arm had somehow got around Sister Morrisohn's waist, and I didn't know how to move it. I couldn't snake it out of there without causing a disturbance as my grandmother's belly of a stomach had pressed the hand flat against Sister Morrisohn's slender waist.

Peachie Gregory watched me from the other side of the hole. She looked as though she had just eaten a lemon.

"Throw the rose."

Sister Morrisohn clutched the rose to her chest. "Can I see him one more time?" She made rhythmic sniffing sounds.

"You shouldn't, child," said my grandmother.

Sister Morrisohn said, "Please," and the August wind blew aside her veil. I looked at her ears, each of which was twice pierced--before she had accepted the Lord, of course. She turned to me. "Please."

My grandmother pulled away, muttering sweetly to herself, "Lord, Lord," and then crunched through the gravel in her flat soled funeral slippers to Pastor. In a loud, conspiratorial whisper, she told him to open the casket one more time.

"Amen" and "Yes, Lord" went up from the assemblage again.

When the groundskeeper, a burly man with a patch over one eye, arrived to pull the levers that raised the coffin up from the hole, Sister Morrisohn was holding my hand. She walked me over to the edge of the shiny box in which Brother Morrisohn lay. He had an expression on his face like a man dreaming about childhood. His lips were painted red. I wondered if they had removed his false teeth.

Sister Morrisohn fixed his dead fingers around the white rose. When she stepped back from the box, I stepped with her.

"Thas' all?" said the man with the patch over his eye. A hand in a dirty work glove rested against the controls. "Ya'll finish?"

"Yes," said my grandmother. "You may lower it again."

The man snorted, "Church folk." As he set to work lowering the casket, he mouthed what may have been obscene words but we couldn't hear him for the singing:

We are marching to Zion. Beautiful, beautiful Zion,

We are marching upward to Zion, that beautiful city of God

Sister Morrisohn bent to get into the hearse already loaded with sisters from the Missionary Society. "Thank you, Elwyn." She squeezed my hand. "He really cared about you. Your music meant so much to him."

"Thank you," I said. "I'm glad."

I remained stooped over, because she yet held my hand. I could not command her to release it; she was the widow. Should I tell her that Peachie Gregory was waiting for me to give her a ride home, that we had planned to stop off at Burger King to finish our grieving over French fries and milk shakes? What did one tell a recent widow? One certainly couldn't trot along outside the hearse until she decided to drop one's hand. I averted my eyes and in a sudden move wrenched my hand from her grasp.

When I dared look again, the hand that once held mine was trembling, then brushing at tears falling down her cheek.

"Don't forget about me, Elwyn," she said.

"OK," I said.

Who knows what the grieving widow meant by that: "Don't forget about me." But strange music began to play in my head. Was it the aroma of her flowery perfume making

me light-headed? I could still feel the shape of her waist in my empty palm. I remembered catching her as she stumbled.

She was not a heavy woman.

God forgive me, I silently prayed, This is Brother Morrisohn's widow. Brother Morrisohn, a man I loved.

"Don't forget about me," she said.

"OK," I said. "I won't."

When I caught up with Peachie, who was only a few yards away, I was breathing as though I'd just run a great distance.

* * *

Peachie unnerved me as we drove to Burger King.

"The church is going to be a sadder place without Brother Morrisohn," I said.

"Poorer," she said, but she did not look at me. The wind from the open window blew her braids straight back. It was hot, and my old Mazda had no air conditioning. "No more free rides."

"At any rate," I said, "I think we presented him a great tribute."

"Especially your playing, Brother Elwyn. It brought tears."

I ignored her sarcasm. "He was a great saint. He'll be missed," I said. "I for one am going to miss him."

"You and the widow both," Peachie said.

"What?"

"Nothing." She stared out the passenger window. Her legs, crossed away from me, shook agitatedly. She pursed her lips and made jerky up and down movements with her lower jaw as if she were chewing some small, hard morsel. It produced a wooden sound, like someone trilling the highest note on the piano with the damper pedal depressed. Peachie said, "I said nothing, Elwyn. Nothing."

She was not telling the truth--she had indeed said something, a something that unabashedly implied impropriety: "You and the widow both." I may have been in love with Peachie, but I was not going to suffer her insolence. I had never been anything but a gentleman with any of the sisters at the church, Peachie and Sister Morrisohn included, so how dare she intimate such a vile idea? Such a rude side of Peachie I had never encountered.

Was Peachie jealous?

Just as I was about to chastise Peachie for her un-Christlike behavior, my old Mazda stalled.

"This old car," she said.

"God will give us grace," I said. I cranked the engine a few times to no avail. The Mazda rolled to a stop in the middle of traffic. Other cars began blowing their horns, and then whizzing around us.

I got out. Peachie crawled into the driver's seat. I popped the hood and, careful not to get grease on my hands or my suit, I jiggled the wire connecting the alternator to the battery. Peachie clicked the ignition at regular intervals. When her click matched my jiggle, the frayed end of the wire sparked in my hand and the engine came to life. I closed the hood, got back into the car.

"Thanks," I said.

Peachie stared out the open window again. "I'm not hungry," she said. "Take me home."

"Peachie--" I said.

"Please, Elwyn, take me home."

"OK." I passed to the center lane and prepared to make a U-turn. The traffic light caught me. I floored the clutch and the gas pedals so that the car wouldn't stall while we

waited for green. "OK," I said, "I'm taking you home, but would you at least tell me what I did to upset you."

"Who said you upset me?" She still wouldn't face me. "I have serious things on my mind."

Serious things I little doubted. She was jealous.

"Ever since you got into the car, you've been answering me curtly or ignoring me altogether. I thought we were friends." The light changed. I made the U-turn. "See there," I said, "You can't even look at me."

"Says who?" For a second she looked at me with angry eyes. I was relieved when she turned back to the window.

I said, "Are you jealous of Sister Morrisohn?"

She laughed. "Jealous of the fragile widow?"

"Are you jealous?"

"Now you're being silly," she said. "Jealous of what? Wait. Are you in love with Sister Morrisohn? You certainly seemed concerned about her at the funeral. And what--do you think she is in love with you? She's only about three times your age."

"I didn't say I was in love with anyone," I said. "I just thought that maybe you felt threatened."

Peachie looked at me with eyes that mocked. "And what--how can I feel threatened? Do you think, my dear Brother in the Lord, that I possess any feelings for you other than the sincerest and purest friendship?" If she had been standing, Peachie's hands would have been akimbo. "Did I forget to share with you that Barry McGowan has written to me several times from Bible College?"

"Barry McGowan?" Sister McGowan's son, that great tenor. Why didn't he leave Peachie alone? At twenty-one, he was much too old for her. "How is Barry doing?" I asked.

"He graduates in December. He's building a church in Anderson, Indiana. He wants me to direct his choir." Then she added with finality, "He wants me to marry him."

"Well you won't," I said. "At least you won't marry him now. You still have school to finish. And your mom and dad--"

"They're all for it," Peachie said. "They love Barry. And I can finish school up in Anderson, and then go to Bible College."

"But they'll just let you go like that? You're so young."

"Lots of sisters get married young," she said, as though I should know this. And well I should, having played at many of their extemporaneous weddings. But Peachie didn't have to go that way. I was sure she was virtuous. "Don't worry, Elwyn, Barry can take care of me. He's a great man of God."

"Peachie." I had trouble focusing on the road. "This is so sudden."

"I've been thinking about it for four months."

"Four months! You never told me," I said.

"I know."

"Why? You tell me everything."

"Everything but this." Her features softened. "I didn't tell you this, Elwyn-- because, I guess, I didn't want you to hold it against me. You're so perfect, so holy."

"I'm not that holy. I told you that I deceived my parents in order to take piano lessons."

"That's small, Elwyn. Everyone does little things like that," she said. "I took piano lessons with Sister McGowan in order to be around Barry."

"Really? You never told me that."

"Yes, I did."

I didn't argue, but no she hadn't told me. I would have remembered that. I had always believed Barry's crush to be hopelessly unrequited.

Peachie said, "Elwyn, you're so innocent, you wouldn't understand how these things happen. If I had told you about Barry and me, you'd have held it against me."

"I'd never hold anything against you, Peachie," I said. Then I found my confidence. "How can I hold anything against you, Peachie? I love y--"

"Don't say it," she warned.

"But I do." It sounded funny, but it felt so good to say. "I love you."

"Elwyn."

"I think you love me too, Peachie."

Peachie seemed forlorn. "Elwyn, why didn't you tell me this before?"

"You knew. We both knew."

"Oh, Elwyn."

She was practically melting on the seat. I thought myself some charmer.

I said in my deepest voice, "Don't go to Anderson with Barry. Stay here with me."

I let go of the gear shift and found her hand on the seat.

She squeezed my hand in both of hers for one feathery, hope-filled moment. She lifted my hand and brushed it against her lips. Then she pushed it away.

"Stay, Peachie."

Peachie nodded her head. "I can't," she said.

"You can," I said.

Peachie patted her stomach, and finally it made sense, but impossible sense!

"You and Barry?"

"Four months."

"But that's a sin," I said. "Fornication. The Bible says--"

"It is better to marry than to burn."

"But you have defiled your body--the Temple of God."

Peachie said, "God forgives seventy times seven. Will you forgive just once, Elwyn?"

How could she smile? Such a cruel smile. She was mocking me. And the church. Where was her shame?

I wanted to cry, really cry. My Peachie, whom I had never kissed. Gone. Out of the ark of safety.

"Christ is married to the backslider," she said. "Barry and I went before God on our knees. We repented of our sin. But you, Elwyn, will you forgive us?"

"I'm not God," I said. "It's not for me to forgive."

She made a sound somewhere between a gasp and a sigh and then touched her bottom lip with the tip of a finger. Of all things, I noticed that the braces, long since removed, had done a great job of correcting her overbite.

My Mazda stalled again.

I got out. I jiggled as she clicked.

When I sat back in my seat, she pointed to a black splotch of engine grime she said was on the collar of my white shirt. I reached up to touch the spot on my collar, but she stopped me:

"No. Your fingers!"

The tips of my fingers, too, were marred black.

Oh God, I prayed, give me grace.

* * *

I didn't feel so holy as I waited for the last remnants of the Missionary Society to leave Sister Morrisohn's house.

My grandmother, of course, was the last to go. She stood on the porch with her heavy arm draped over Sister Morrisohn's shoulder telling the grieving widow some last important something. As my grandmother talked, she scanned the surroundings. East to

west. What was she looking for? Did she think I would make my move with everyone watching? She should have known that I would park down the street behind a neighbor's overgrown shrubbery where I could see and not be seen.

My grandmother embraced Sister Morrisohn and kissed her on the cheek, at last. She lumbered down the short steps with the help of Sister McGowan (Barry's mother!), who often gave her rides now that she could no longer drive. As Sister McGowan's car pulled off the property, I fired up my engine.

I left my black funeral jacket and tie in the car. I rang the doorbell.

"Elwyn."

"Sister Morrisohn."

"Come in."

"OK."

"Sit there. Would you like something to drink?" she said. "I've got fruit punch."

"OK."

I was sucked into the plush red-velvet couch. Mounted on the wall across from me was a large oil painting of them on their wedding day. She was chubbier as a young woman. He looked about the same. Beneath the painting was the grand piano he had bid me play every time I visited his house. I remembered that two years prior, we had performed our Christmas cantata right here in their living room. I had played "O Holy Night," while Barry, on Christmas break from Bible College, had sung. And I had foolishly thought that Peachie's enthusiastic applause was meant for me.

Sister Morrisohn, still wearing black, returned with a glass of fruit punch and a napkin. She handed me the punch and napkin and sat on the couch a few inches away from me. I drank the better part of my punch in one swallow.

She said, "I don't know when my appetite will return." She cupped her stomach. "I haven't eaten much since I woke up and found him."

"Well," I said because I didn't know what else to say. "Well."

"If it weren't for the church," she said, "I don't know how I would have made it. Everyone has been so nice to me."

In a voice that flaked from my throat like pastry, I said, "You must have loved him."

"Yes. I was a very different person when we met," she said. "He saved me from myself. He led me to the Lord."

She was "different" when he met her. Lord forgive me, but I glanced at her doubly pierced ears. What was she like before? Could she be that "different person" again?

"Before you met him, what kind of sins did you commit?"

"Sins? I don't think about them anymore." She raised her hands. "Praise God, I'm free."

"Praise God," I said, "but are you ever tempted?"

"All are tempted, Elwyn, but only the yielding is sin." She clapped her hands. "Hallelujah."

"Hallelujah," I said. I followed her neck line down to the top button of her blouse. Yellow flesh showed through the black lace. On the surface she denied me, but all the signs were there--her smell, her touch, her plea that I not forget her. I would not let her get away as Peachie had. "Do you ever feel like yielding?"

"What?"

I folded my napkin under my glass of punch and with trembling hand spilled some of the punch in attempting to set the glass on the octagonal coffee table before our couch. I turned and reached for her hand.

"Elwyn?" she said. "What--"

I kissed her on the mouth. I pulled her hands up against my chest.

"Elwyn!" She pulled away from me. She rose to her feet. "Elwyn--Help me Jesus!--what are you doing?"

"You're a beautiful woman," I squeaked, but it was no use. She was not to be seduced.

"Elwyn!"

I buried my head in my hands. I was wrong.

"You need prayer, Elwyn," she said. "You need the Lord."

"Yes," I said, without looking up. "Yes."

Now there was a soothing hand on my neck--like a mother's. I wept and I wept.

"Serving the Lord at your age is not easy, Elwyn. Don't give up." Sister Morrisohn rubbed my neck and prayed. "Christ is married to the backslider," she said.

"Confess your secret sins."

And confess I did.

And then I wept some more because the more she rubbed my neck, the more forgiveness I needed. And when she got down on her knees beside me and began to pray against my face, her very scent expanded my lungs like a bellows, and her breathing--her warm breath against my cheeks, my ear, into my eyes burning hot with tears--was everything I imagined a lover's kiss would be.

II. My Father's Business

At sixteen, I met my first great temptation, and I yielded with surprisingly little resistance--I who had proclaimed myself strong in the Lord. There had been, it seems, a chink in my armor, and Satan had thrust his wicked sword through it.

As I wondered how I could have felt so strong and yet been so weak, I labored mightily to get back into the ark of safety.

I took a more active role in the Lord's work. On Sundays, I rose early and joined the maintenance Brethren in preparing the main hall for morning service; I stayed late to help them clean up afterwards. Brother Al and Brother Kitchener were surprised but happy to work with me. Often, we discussed music.

"Elwyn, I really like when you do that dum-dum-da-dum thing at the end of service," said Brother Kitchener, a retired seaman of about seventy who had both a stoop and a limp. When he pushed a broom, he resembled a man perpetually about to play shuffleboard.

Brother Al, a squat man with a massive chest, and arms like telephone poles, shouted down from the ladder upon which he stood replacing a cylinder of fluorescent light: "I was first trumpet in my high school band."

Unemployed and in his late twenties, Brother Al spent his days lifting weights or visiting one of the three children he had sired out of wedlock with a Nicaraguan seamstress named Bettie. This was, of course, before he had accepted the Lord.

"Maybe you and me'll do a duet one Sunday," Brother Al said.

"Maybe we will, Brother," I said, scraping cinnamon chewing gum from the bottom of a pew with a butter knife.

Now on those Sundays when it was not my turn to play piano for the youth choir, I stood as usher at the entrance to the church: *I'd rather be an usher in the house of the Lord than a prince in the palace of hell.* My legs, standing motionless for the better part of the hour, were diligent for the Lord, my knees strong and true.

I stopped the children from talking or fighting, tapped them awake when they fell asleep. "Suffer the little Children to come unto Me," Christ says. When babies cried, I was quick to pull them from their grateful mothers' arms and take them outside into the calming sunlight, or lead some other mother--a visitor--to the restroom at the back where she could change a soiled diaper, or perhaps breast feed.

When the Holy Spirit descended, I waited for Him to touch one of His favorites--Sisters Davis, Breedlove, Naylor, or Hutchenson--and set her to trembling, to move upon her so powerfully, in fact, that she would collapse. I would rush to the fallen sister and drop the large, velvet shawl over her spasming legs, hiding what would otherwise be revealed--the usher is the guardian of decency--and then with the help of another usher, I would carry the fallen sister to the nursery where she could rest on a cot until the Spirit had passed.

Scripture says it is not through our works that we are saved; only through His Grace. And scripture can't be challenged. But, I reasoned, after the devil had caused me to offend the widow, that if I were indeed going to work, let it be in the service of the Lord.

* * *

It struck me that part of my problem was that I didn't pray enough; yes, morning, noon, and evening found me on my knees, head bowed, but what about the times in between? Scripture does admonish us to pray without ceasing. So I increased my standard prayers to five times a day, and I began a campaign of fasting on the weekends.

One Sunday afternoon, during the lull between morning service and youth hour, I sat in my bedroom reading from the Book of Daniel, searching perhaps for my own handwriting on the wall. I heard my grandmother say:

"Elwyn's not eating today?"

As was customary, we had guests over for Sunday dinner--my grandmother and Sister McGowan, my old piano teacher.

My mother said, "Elwyn's fasting." This was my third consecutive weekend.

"Fasting?" said my grandmother. "Every time I come over here he's fasting."

My mother said, "All of us Christians should be fasting along with Elwyn. There is so much trouble in the world."

"Take the hostages in Iran," said my father.

"Please pass the salt," said Sister McGowan.

"Here," said my father. "If Reagan wins, there's sure to be a war. Armageddon."

"We are living in the last days," said my mother.

"True. Watch and see if the Lord doesn't return in 1999," said my grandmother.

"Amen's" went around the table.

"Yet I still think Elwyn's been too serious of late," my grandmother said.

"Something's troubling him."

Forks clinked against the good china, and my mother said: "'Know ye not that I must be about my Father's business?' The Lord was only twelve when he said that."

My grandmother's voice boomed. "Don't quote scripture with me."

"Mother," said my mother, timidly.

"I know my grandson. And I know--"

"So much salt?" my father interrupted.

Sister McGowan said, "I know it's bad for my blood pressure, but I've had more of a taste for it since Barry and Peachie announced they're getting married."

Oh Peachie. My foggy eyes could not read the prophet. I found my ear moving closer to the open door. Why did I want to hear what I already knew?

"Peachie and Barry make a nice couple," said my father. "I pray their children don't witness Armageddon."

"They're so talented," said my mother.

Then there was awkward laughter as they attempted to maintain the pleasant air.

"Humph," snorted my grandmother, "All this time I thought she was Elwyn's girl."

"Mother," said my mother, "Elwyn doesn't have a girl."

"At sixteen?" said my grandmother.

"But he likes girls, I can tell you." My father laughed without vigor. "He's my son."

"I-thought-Elwyn-liked-Peachie," my grandmother said, emphasizing each word.

It became quiet.

I pictured my grandmother, her large arms folded across her chest, her head tilted at a defiant angle, and everyone else seeming to eat but only just touching their lips with empty forks, or filling their mouths with drink they did not swallow. My grandmother was an old time saint. She wielded the truth like the two-edged sword Saint Paul says it is. She was noted for rebuking the women of the Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters when in the late fifties they thought it was acceptable to straighten their hair. Later when the skirt-like *gauchos* became popular, my grandmother exhorted the women not to wear them because skirt-like or not, *gauchos* are pants, and women weren't supposed to wear pants.

It was about a half minute before my grandmother broke the silence: "But now I guess Peachie and Barry have to do what's best."

"I've seen them . . . they do love each other," said Sister McGowan, the mother of Barry, the father of Peachie's unborn child.

I felt a useless anger well up in me. This anger was an emotion I, the happy, forgiving Christian, was unused to. Anger obscured the obvious: Peachie was lost; and the other one, the one I had harmed, the widow, should never be mine. I prayed for a clear head.

"And it's probably Elwyn's fault," my grandmother said. "He's too serious for these modern girls, that's what."

"He tries to be a good Christian," my mother said.

"I guess you can't blame him," said my grandmother. "But he could at least give me a hug. He played so nice today."

"Yes, he did," my mother said.

"He was always my best student," Sister McGowan said.

"The actual city of Armageddon," said my father, "is somewhere in the Middle East, isn't it?"

Forks clinked against the good china again, and my stomach growled. I sipped from my glass of water, which was the only thing one was allowed to consume on a fast. Lord, give me strength, I prayed, and I headed out to the dining room and greeted Sister McGowan and gave my grandmother her hug.

Fasting left me numb, light-headed, closer to God. Fasting was good. Before it was all over, I had fasted four consecutive weekends. A month of hungry weekends.

I was trying to be about my Father's business.

* * *

At my high school, I did not speak to my acquaintances except to witness to them. Admittedly, a large number of students fled at the sight of me. Others hungrily accepted the tracts and Bibles I handed out. There was always a crowd at the prayer meetings I held in the back of the cafeteria during lunch. Many came to laugh and deride, but others bowed

their heads and uttered their first nervous words to their creator. More than a few shed tears.

None could escape the faithful servant of God.

I skipped classes in order to confront those of my fellows who were themselves skipping classes to smoke marijuana cigarettes and vent their carnality in the dark dressing chambers between the band-room and the auditorium. These last were not happy to see me; but as God was on my side, they came to respect, both spiritually and literally, the power of the light I brought to them.

I was on the battlefield for my Lord.

In fact, I increased my evangelistic efforts so much so that I found myself barely paying attention at school.

I was busy saving lost souls--John Feinstein, Eldridge Pomerantz, Marco Japonte, Marigold Hendricks, the bubbly Anderson twins, Tina and Sabina, and many more to whom I was spiritual leader. What did I care about trigonometry?

I ended up sitting on an iron stool in the principal's office.

Mr. Byrd was a short man with a voice that thundered. His office was dominated by a large, wooden desk overflowing with pink and yellow sheets of paper. In a wooden picture frame nailed to the wall directly behind the desk, was a color photograph of Mr. Byrd and a round woman wearing a pair of riding pants and riding boots. The woman stood a few inches taller than Mr. Byrd, who had his arm around her waist.

"Just stop it," Mr. Byrd said. He sat on his desk. An unlit pipe trembled between his lips. "Stop it."

"I am a child of God," I said.

"Amen. I'm a deacon. A Baptist," he said. "But I'll expel you if you don't stop it."

"Then you understand, deacon," I said, "I've got to do my Father's business."

"Just stop it." His words boomed off the walls.

"No, sir."

"Would you like me to call your parents?"

"They support my evangelism."

"That's right. You're all fanatics. That whole Church of the Blessed Christ Walking Whatever-you-call-its."

I was prepared for such as he. "Feel free to make fun of us because we don't drink, don't smoke, and our women don't wear pants," I said.

He cupped the bowl of his pipe in his hand. He turned and glanced at the picture on the wall of him and the woman in the riding pants. "What's wrong with pants?"

"Pants," I said. "Deuteronomy 22:5."

"What a strange lot." He laughed. "And you don't dance, or wear jewelry either?"

"We do not."

"King David danced. He wore a good deal of jewelry, too."

"David was before Christ's time. That's Old Testament."

"Deuteronomy is Old Testament, too," he said.

"Well, Christ didn't do away with everything under the old law."

"Not those things which please your church, at any rate." Mr. Byrd hopped off the desk. He raised the volume of his already incredible voice. "They didn't even have pants in the Old Testament!"

I was undaunted: "A woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man." But my time was too precious to argue with Mr. Byrd. I should be out serving the Lord. "I guess Baptists can do just about any old thing they please," I said.

"Don't mistake us for you." Mr. Byrd laughed, whistling through the unlit pipe. He opened a folder filled with pink sheets of paper and read: "Six unexcused absences,

seven tardies, failing English, failing health, a warning in trigonometry--do you plan to go to college, Elwyn?"

"Yes. Bible College."

Mr. Byrd sighed, as though I, a child of the King, were the lost cause. "Do you plan to graduate high school?"

"Of course."

"Then stop it. Get back to being the student you were."

"God's will."

Mr. Byrd closed the folder. "I don't want to expel you, Elwyn. You're not the worst kid we have here."

He signaled with his hand for me to leave.

I stood up.

"Just stop it."

"No, sir," I said.

"The Bible is a book about life here on earth, Elwyn. For your own sake, start living life."

"I am living, deacon. But perhaps you'd rather I smoked a marijuana cigarette or got someone's daughter in trouble."

"You wouldn't know where to start," he said.

I opened the door and stepped out of his office. "Praise the Lord," I said.

Mr. Byrd's door slammed behind me.

* * *

I was gracious with Barry McGowan. I even shook his hand in brotherhood during one of his trips home to preach a sermon on humility. Barry proved a charismatic speaker. That and the two songs he performed evoked thunder claps of "Amen" and "Yes,

Lord" from the congregation in spite of what he had done. I wished Barry well and meant it.

I also wished Peachie well, now that her condition had become obvious and the congregation was reacting to her as it always did to those who had strayed. Pastor had removed her from the choir and relieved her of her duties as minister of music. She no longer led prayers at youth hour, though she continued to give a cautionary testimony that moved all of us teenagers to avoid lasciviousness and be stronger Christians. Like me, Peachie was determined to regain that special relationship with God which she had lost.

I asked Peachie and Barry if there were anything at all I could do.

"Play the organ at our wedding," said Peachie.

"I'd be glad to, Peachie," I said. I embraced her, careful not to disturb the unborn child, who seemed to kick, she said, especially hard when I was around.

Barry said, "Remember, Elwyn, this is a wedding. None of that boogie-woogie stuff you like to play." Barry was a tall man, and broad with thick limbs. Barry's little head seemed wrong for his Goliath body. When Barry shook his head back and forth, it reminded me of those wobble-headed dogs people decorated their dashboards with.

"Don't be silly, Barry," said Peachie standing between us, holding one of my hands, one of his. "Elwyn's always done a fine job at weddings."

"I'm just making sure," said Barry. "Things are bad enough as it is without the musician going boogie-woogie on us."

"Things aren't that bad," said Peachie, who was five months pregnant.

"I'm just making sure," Barry said.

"I promise I won't play boogie-woogie at your wedding, Brother McGowan, especially since I don't play boogie-woogie." I smiled up at him. "It's called 'Gospel'."

Peachie shot me a warning look, a furrowing of her single eyebrow, but Barry didn't seem to take notice or offense.

"Well that's settled," he said. He nodded his little head. "Now how much is it going to cost? You know we're on a tight budget with me trying to build the church up in Anderson and all."

"There's no need to--" I began, before he cut me off.

"We'll pay you twenty dollars. If you want more than that, my mother will get one of her students to play." He glared at me with his little eyes. "I'm not flexible on this point, Elwyn."

Sister McGowan, Barry's mom, wouldn't play at a wedding for less than \$175. My usual fee was \$125. But--Praise God--the Holy Spirit bridled my tongue.

"Barry," I said, "There's no charge. Think of my music as a wedding gift."

As Barry struggled to figure out how I was getting one over on him, his eyes grew large in his little head.

"A gift," I repeated. "Free."

"Thanks, Elwyn," Peachie said. She gave me another hug and then flinched.

"Ugh. The baby just kicked."

Barry, a quizzical look on his face, shook my hand. "Thanks a lot, Brother Elwyn."

"Think nothing of it."

"OK. But this doesn't mean you can get up there and play any old thing you feel," Barry said. "I'm still the groom."

"Anything you say, Barry," I said. "Praise the Lord."

I had asked God for grace, wisdom, humility, and strength, and He had given them to me. A little more than a month after my transgression and already I had gotten over Peachie. I had stomached Barry--even Barry. My faith was stronger than it had ever been. I was well on my way to becoming a great man of God.

Now there was but one thing I had left undone--my confession--and with my renewed faith I was willing even to do that.

Of late, I had stopped avoiding the widow's eyes. I had greeted her quite pleasantly one Sunday as I stood usher and she passed through the doorway surrounded by a trio of Missionary Society sisters. I had addressed her by her name, Sister Morrisohn, and cast a friendly smile her way. She had seemed surprised, but smiled back, waved with her fingers. Is this the same Elwyn who had . . . ?

Yes, I was he, that vile, weak creature, but now I had thrown off my mantle of iniquity and been reborn. Christ lived in me. I had nothing to hide.

Yes, if the widow so desired, I would even confess my sin.

"Praise the Lord," I said.

"Praise the Lord," Barry and Peachie said.

We ended with prayer.

* * *

Peachie married Barry the second Saturday in October. It was a small ceremony, though all of the congregation was there. Aside from Peachie and Barry and Pastor, there were only three members of the bridal party: Peachie's thirteen-year-old sister, Gwen, stood as maid of honor; Ricardo, Brother Al's Nicaraguan son, was cute and precocious as the ring bearer (we all laughed when he loudly echoed the "I Do's" of the bride and groom); and Brother Philip, Barry's roommate from Bible College, stood best man.

Peachie wore a powder blue dress that was tailored to hide the obvious. She was positively beautiful, despite the somewhat desolate expression she wore throughout the ceremony. Then again, who could be truly happy marrying Barry?

At his own wedding, Barry sang a solo, "O Perfect Love," which drew tremendous applause. He sang on his knees, troubadour style, looking up at Peachie. His mother

accompanied him on piano while I sat at my silent organ musing. They hadn't told me about the solo, and it wasn't in the program.

Barry and Peachie's reception was held in the Buford Morrisohn dining hall, the first such reception held in the church's dining hall since we had renamed it three Sundays ago in honor of Brother Morrisohn, our late benefactor. The congregation, eating home-baked pastries and drinking grape juice, was surrounded by pink and blue wedding streamers and Brother Morrisohn-memorabilia: photographs of him from childhood to adulthood, the plaques we had given him over the years, his degrees from Tuskegee and Oberlin, even his birth certificate. He had been our greatest saint.

He had been my friend. It was he who had purchased the old upright that stood in the hallway of our home, the piano upon which I had learned to play.

I had no appetite. In my mind, the Buford Morrisohn dining hall that afternoon was divided into three zones. Peachie and Barry controlled the middle zone, surrounded by food, drink, well-wishers, levity. I occupied the zone at a far end, away from the commotion. At the other remote zone sat the widow, sister Morrisohn. She seemed more interested in the pictures of her late husband than the newlyweds. She still grieved.

I wondered if the memory of my previous behavior did not in some way contribute to her depressed spirit as well. Of course it must have. It was Brother Morrisohn who had taught me that I must take responsibility for my actions, my sins.

I passed through the happy crowd--"Congratulations, Peachie. Good Luck, Barry, though I know you won't need it, ha, ha, ha"-- to Sister Morrisohn's side of the room.

"Hello."

"Elwyn!"

"I have to tell you how sorry I am," I said, getting right to the point.

"For what?" she said. She closed her eyes, opened them slowly, remembering.
"For that? Don't let it worry you."

"What I did to you . . . what I assumed about you was horrible."

"Did I strike you as that kind of a woman?"

"No," I said. "I was confused. Forgive me."

She looked around the room. She drank from her glass of fruit punch. She looked up at me, smiling. "I forgive you." She looked around the room again.

"Thanks," I said, "for forgiving me."

"God, I'm sure, has already forgiven you, and that's what really counts."

"Praise His name."

"I hear," she said, "about all the things you're doing around the church and at school. My neighbor's twins--Tina and Sabina--go to your school. They think you're amazing."

"Praise His name," I said.

"You are amazing, Elwyn. I don't think I could have played at Barry's wedding if I were in your place."

"It was just a wedding."

"Don't deceive yourself, Elwyn." She extended her hand, and I helped her out of her seat. "All liars, even those who deceive but themselves, shall have their part in the lake of fire."

I took my hands away from her. I put them in my pockets. A few feet away Barry guided Peachie's hand as she cut their cake. A camera flashed. There was applause. It all seemed very far away, as if happening in another country but being broadcast on TV.

"Peachie and I never promised each other anything."

"Deception, deception."

"No, really."

Sister Morrisohn shook her head. "It must have really hurt you." She framed my mouth between her thumb and forefinger; she shook my mouth like my mother once did

when I was young and had accidentally said something unseemly. "Poor boy. Love is often cruel."

I considered Sister Morrisohn's own mouth, the way the bottom lip poked out when she pronounced a word with an open vowel sound: "You," "Poor," "Boy."

There was so much pink on that pulsating bottom lip.

I reminded myself that I was strong in the Lord. Strong!

"Sister Morrisohn," I said, "I've got to go." I pulled away from her and walked straightway to my car.

I drove in a blur. I pulled over to the side of the road, clasped my hands, bowed my head before the steering wheel.

Lord, I prayed, give me a sign. Show me what to do.

My vision cleared. I looked up and saw that I had parked beside a canal. A large turtle rested in the grass on the shoulders of the canal. I got out of my car. I picked up a long branch that still had some leaves on it and prodded the turtle with the branch until it retreated into its shell. I put down the branch and pondered the large turtle safe inside its shell and at length concluded that if this were, in fact, a sign, then I certainly had no idea what it meant.

At about 6:00 p.m., when I figured the reception had ended, I drove back to church to help the maintenance Brethren clean up.

I was surprised to find Brother Al and Bettie, filling garbage bags with paper plates and cups, colored streamers, and their son Ricardo using all of his weight to push a broom across the tiled floor.

"Brother Kitchener had to go home. His blood pressure," Brother Al explained.

I caught up with Ricardo, convinced him to exchange the broom for a rag. "Wipe the tables. It's more fun."

"OK," said the boy, running to his task.

I leaned into the broom.

"Bettie's just helping out so we can finish faster," said Brother Al. "Michigan's at Notre Dame tonight."

"Good matchup," I said. I noticed Bettie was pregnant. There was no way to hide it in the t-shirt and slacks she wore. Of course, she was not a believer--but to allow her into the house of the Lord wearing pants? And pregnant again.

Lord, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

"You played great today. When are we going to do that duet?" said Brother Al. "I was first trumpet in marching band."

* * *

The next day was Sunday. I fasted.

Sunday night, I received a call. I recognized Peachie's voice, but she was crying so much that it took me a few minutes to figure out what exactly she was saying.

"I made a mistake," she said. "And now everyone hates me."

"No one hates you, Peachie," I said. "And you know God loves you. His greatest gift is that He forgives us our sins."

"It's not that, Elwyn. It's just that everyone thinks I deceived you."

"What?" I sat up in my bed.

"Your grandmother makes it sound like I--"

"My grandmother?" Of course. The truth is like a two-edged sword. It cuts going and coming.

"Yes," Peachie said. "And Sister Morrisohn, and that whole Missionary Society. They make it sound as though--"

I cut her off. "Sister Morrisohn?"

"Yes, she wouldn't even talk to me at my own wedding."

Peachie deteriorated into sobs and it was a while before I could understand her again.

"Sister Morrisohn is who pressured Pastor to kick me off the choir."

"But you were pregnant," I said.

"It has nothing to do with my pregnancy!" Then Peachie's voice became calmer.

"There've been pregnant girls up there before. You said yourself God has forgiven me. They wouldn't even let me have a regular wedding. That ugly blue dress! The real problem is I offended their pet--you."

"What?"

"With all the witnessing and stuff you're doing at school, you make the Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters look good. All of those new converts. And me, your perfect mate, big and pregnant for another man."

"That's not how it is," I said.

"That's what it looks like."

I felt sorry for Peachie, but I couldn't help feeling that this turn of events served her right. These were the wages of her sin, the fact that she had wronged me notwithstanding. I could not tell her this, so I tried to change the subject.

"Where's Barry?"

"He's right here. It's him who told me to call," Peachie said. "He's afraid they won't ordain him if I don't apologize to you."

"Peachie, this is ridiculous. You don't owe me any apologies."

"Yes, I do."

"No, Peachie."

"I'm sorry, Elwyn. I'm so very sorry," she said.

* * *

The second day after Peachie married Barry was a Monday, but I did not drive directly home from school.

I stopped by Mr. Byrd's office. I was a conqueror come to claim a new country for the Lord.

"What now, young evangelist?" he said.

"I feel I'm being persecuted for my religious beliefs."

"How so?"

"Security broke up my prayer meeting today," I said.

"Good," he said. "I sent them.

"Why?"

"The cafeteria, I believe, is a place for eating," said Mr. Byrd. "Many of the students complain that your activities upset their stomachs so much that they can't eat their meals." He set his jaw.

"I don't believe you," I said. "What students have complained, sir?"

Mr. Byrd bellowed. "Don't press me, boy."

I had him where I wanted him. I opened my book bag, pulled out five sheets of paper. "I have a petition here signed by over a hundred students and staff who feel that I should be allowed to--"

He snatched the papers from my grasp. "I don't see my signature," he said. "I am the principal." He tore the petition into eighths and sprinkled it into the wastepaper basket.

"I have a photocopy," I said.

"Who cares?" he said. "The real issue is not your prayer meeting but your grades. This is a school."

Mr. Byrd, the Baptist deacon, walked around his desk and approached me. When we stood toe to toe, he proved to be about a half inch shorter than I (and I am no giant), but

I was suddenly afraid of him. I shrank into my shoulders at the sound of his explosion of a voice.

"I know Christians, but you're not one, Elwyn. You're weak. And you use your religion to shield your weakness. You can't make it on the football team, so you lure the best players away to your Bible studies."

"I'm not an athlete. They come freely."

"You can't get a girl, so you preach about adultery and fornication."

"Fornication is ruining our women."

"Not my woman. And I got a woman," he said. He pointed to the photograph behind his desk. "A big, happy, sexy woman. Look at her smile."

"I'm happy for you."

"You should be," he said. "But you should also try passing a few of your classes instead of passing out Bibles."

"I can pass if I want to. I'm an honor student."

"You were an honor student. What happened to you?"

"Who cares? I'm smart."

"Smart enough for Bible College at any rate. What S.A.T. scores does Bible College require?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" I was on the verge of tears, and I didn't know why. "You're persecuting me."

He grabbed me by the shoulders. "Don't use God as an excuse for failure and unhappiness, Elwyn. Don't think that your misery on earth is a free ticket to heaven. Have fun. Be young. Pass your classes."

I cried. Satan was winning.

Whack. Whack. Whack. Mr. Byrd slapped me three times hard in the face.

With the tip of my tongue, I tested my lip, which had begun to swell. It stung. I was in shock. I stared without anger at little Mr. Byrd.

"Now you'll probably sue me for assault," he said. He ushered me out of his office, one hand behind his back holding the door open against its strong spring.

* * *

I did not drive directly home after getting slapped by my Principal. I visited Sister Morrisohn.

A Christian must be valiant, brave.

"I am saved," I said.

"By the Grace of God," she said.

"How, then, did I ever let go of His unfailing hand?"

She forced my hands together. "Pray, Elwyn."

I bowed my head. I closed my eyes. A sobering thought prevented me from praying. I opened my eyes. "You never told anyone what I did that day."

"There was no point in ruining your reputation." Sister Morrisohn wore a red sun dress. A half hour ago she had removed her shoes. When I found myself staring at her perfectly formed feet, I looked at my watch. It was 4:15. "A good name is rather to be chosen," she said.

"I would have lost my position in the church, like Peachie."

"You didn't really sin," she said. "Peachie sinned."

"I did sin."

"But you prayed for forgiveness."

"So did Peachie and Barry. And they confessed openly," I said. "I didn't so much as do that. Open confession is good for the soul."

"God knows the heart," she said. "Why does everyone have to know? Let your little transgression be our secret."

"But the secret is driving me crazy," I said. I was at a crossroads of faith. I either had to do what the Bible said was right, or not do what was right at all. I either had to confess . . . or I'd never have the strength to stop thinking about her delicate feet, their texture, their perfect shape, their exotic yellow complexion.

"There are many secrets lurking in the church, Elwyn," she said. "Those who confess are no worse than the rest, but they suffer for their forthrightness."

"The Bible says open confess--"

"Everyone will treat you like a backslider, Elwyn. You don't want that." Frowning, she closed her eyes, nodded her head. "Some will even laugh at you."

"Laugh?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "You're so much younger than I. They would find that amusing."

"Did they find it amusing," I asked, "when you married Brother Morrisohn?"

This seemed to catch her off guard. Her face underwent a series of quiet transformations, from disbelief to anger to resignation, before she spoke again several seconds later: "How old are you, Elwyn? Sixteen?"

I nodded my head.

Her spine straightened as she did the arithmetic. "That makes me twenty-seven years older than you." She rose from the couch where she had been sitting for about the last half-hour, and she walked in her stockinged feet to the other side of the room. She stood under the portrait in oil of her and Brother Morrisohn on their wedding day. It was a painting in broad strokes and drab colors: black, gray, a rusty brown, a pasty yellow where white should have been. Sister Morrisohn did not so much as glance at the large painting. She just stood under it. "I was married for twenty years to a man forty-three years my senior. I loved him every second of that marriage."

"You're saying it doesn't really matter, then, the age difference," I said.

"It matters little. Oh, there are times when--" She broke off, watched me through slits. She laughed suddenly into her hands. "I just can't believe that at your age--well, just look at me." Sister Morrisohn lifted her arms like wings and spun in gay circles, revealing herself from all sides.

I gazed unabashedly. She had dancer's calves, a slender waist, arms that were thin as a young girl's.

"I see nothing wrong with you," I said.

"Look at me again," she said. Now she grabbed her hem with both hands and raised it above her dimpled knees. "All of these imperfections that come with age." She spun. Her sun dress spread out like an umbrella, exposing thigh-high garters, white cotton panties with green and red and yellow butterflies on them.

* * *

When I looked at my watch again, it was almost 8:00 p.m.

"Elwyn," Sister Morrisohn said, "this is a secret you'd better keep." She buried her face in my chest. She laughed, and then she cried.

I cried.

We put on what pieces of our clothes we could find, and then we knelt at the foot of the bed. To Pray. But she was too close to me, and Satan won the battle again.

"Oh, God," I said.

"Lord," she said. It was our first time on all fours, and her head hit the bed frame twice. We crawled out into the middle of the floor where it was safer. "Lord."

And then we sinned again--me and the woman who smelled like spring blossoms, whose slender waist had fit so pleasingly into my palm, the woman who did not weigh much when she fell, even though she was nearly three times my age. I and the wife of my deceased benefactor and friend.

Afterwards, she said, "How are we going to do this, Elwyn? People may begin to wonder."

"I could be giving you piano lessons twice a week," I said.

"Good," she said. Then: "Only twice a week?"

I called home once more.

"I'm still at the mall," I said. "Witnessing."

"Don't forget dinner is waiting for you," said my mother. "Or are you fasting again?"

"I'll be home in a while. I'm hungry. Bye, Mom."

"I'll keep your plate warm. Bye, Elwyn."

Father, forgive me.

III. Apostate

In two weeks I would be leaving Miami for Gainesville to enroll as a freshman at the University of Florida. I was eighteen and eager to get away from the widow and the shameful life I was living. I would go away and, with God's help, come back a new man and a better Christian.

My father wanted me to study engineering because he had heard there was good money in it--even though engineers didn't get a chance to actually drive the train. My mother, disappointed that I had chosen not to go into the ministry, wanted me to work towards a degree in social work, which she felt was the next best way to use my education in the service of the Lord. My grandmother, too, was saddened when I turned down my scholarship to Bible College.

"Be a teacher, Elwyn," my grandmother suggested. "Then when you come back, you can be superintendent of the Sunday school program. Many of our Sunday school teachers just don't know how to reach our kids. We're losing them to the streets."

"I don't want to teach," I said. Teachers were not my favorite people.

Just a few months earlier, I had attended the senior awards program at my high school and suffered one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. The principal, Mr. Byrd, in announcing the winners of the Grand Gopher Awards (we were the Miami Gardens Senior High Gophers), deliberately stuttered: "El-El--"

I rose to my feet thinking he was about to say my name, "Elwyn Parker," which was not a haughty presumption because he was nearing the "P's" and I had been, at least during my junior and senior years, an outstanding gopher. Over the final two years, no one had achieved a higher grade point average with as rigorous a course load as I carried--

all advanced placement classes, all "A's"--never mind that I had received straight "F's" sophomore year.

No one had been better known around campus than I, by students and faculty alike, and no one more feared. For I had fearlessly done all my Lord had commanded. My confrontations with the secular administration of the school had become famous. I had been interviewed by the local newspaper too many times to count, so even the surrounding community had been aware of me.

Finally, no one had presided over a school club with as many members and as much influence as the one I had founded and headed, the Jesus Club. At our largest, we numbered 150; it was through our efforts that the administration changed the school's nickname, which had been around since the school opened thirty years before, from Red Devils to Gophers.

So I stood when Mr. Byrd said "El-El" because I deserved a Grand Gopher, deserved to have my senior picture hang permanently in the Gopher Hall of Fame.

"El-El-Eldridge Pomerantz," Mr. Byrd said.

I sat down quickly, but the damage was done. All around me, people were chuckling.

As Eldridge Pomerantz, a second string football player who had been a regular at our prayer meetings until he made first string, took his place on the stage next to the other Grand Gophers, Mr. Byrd's eyes met mine, and I recall that he smiled. Another battle won by Satan.

But he was wrong. While the administration did not bestow upon me one single popularity prize that gloomy awards night, I did march to the stage four times to collect awards that had stipends attached to them: National Merit Award, \$2000; The Young Musicians Award, \$800; The National Christian Scholarship, \$500; and from the Jesus Club, the Blessed Gopher Award, of which I was the first recipient, \$298.

In truth, I didn't know what I wanted to study in college--music, medicine, anthropology all interested me--but if Mr. Byrd were an example of what a teacher is, petty, mean, vengeful, then no, I didn't want to be a teacher.

There was one more thing I didn't want to be--an attorney. Sister Morrisohn's late husband, Buford, had been an attorney, so she pushed for me to study law.

"Then when we marry," she explained, "it'll be like it used to be."

Sister Morrisohn had to be kidding, of course. I was eighteen. She was forty-five. Marriage was ludicrous. But as the time of my departure for college grew nearer, she had been kidding in that manner much too frequently to suit me. Her strange taste in humor gave me headaches.

* * *

Was it but a week ago that we visited the mall where she bought my going away gift, the expensive leather briefcase with dual combination locks and hidden compartment for toothbrush and floss?

As always, Sister Morrisohn and I behaved in public as mother and son. While "mother" paid for the briefcase, "son" witnessed to a sixteen-year-old girl who had wandered into the store.

Yes, the girl attended church. A Methodist.

Yes, she knew about Jesus. Who didn't?

No, she hadn't accepted Him as personal savior. But she would when she was older, she said. Too much living to do now.

Take a look at this, I said to the girl, and I made to reach into my jacket pocket for a tract ("We Know Not the Hour When Death Shall Appear") but found my hand detained by Sister Morrisohn.

She kissed me on the mouth. "Let's go, hubby."

I jerked my hand out of her grasp but followed her out of the store, forgetting to give the confused sixteen-year-old the tract which might have led to her salvation.

I was so shaken, I didn't say a word until we reached her house.

"Why would you do a thing like that?"

"I was just kidding," she said.

"Someone from the church could've been passing by."

"No one saw," she said. "I checked first."

"It's dangerous. Crazy."

"You liked it though, didn't you?"

"No. It made me very nervous."

"You liked that girl, didn't you?" she said.

"I was just doing the Lord's work."

She grew silent. My devotion to the Lord always seemed to surprise her. It was true I had sinned--and would perhaps continue sinning until I put some distance between us--but I was not the great hypocrite Sister Morrisohn was. I had not hardened my heart against God.

While I prayed every night for forgiveness, she had gradually, if however discreetly, become a backslider. Once again she took pleasure in the things of the world--cigarettes, which she admitted she had never truly given up; wine, which she insisted helped her forget that she was a poor widow spending all too much time with a lover a third her age; and those melancholy Jim Reeves records. Not his hymns, mind you! But those monotonous, two-step odes to heartbreak and unrequited love. How I grew to dread that brooding baritone. She often played her favorite, "Distant Drums," as a prelude to our sordid communion:

I hear the sound, of distant drums

*Far away, far away
And if they call for me to come
Then I must go, and you must stay*

She asked me to teach her how to play "Distant Drums" on the piano, but I refused. At least she could not get me to do that.

So there we were after she had kissed me in the mall.

"I'm not interested in the girl. I was just doing the Lord's work."

Sister Morrisohn seemed on the verge of either laughter or tears. "Do you love me, Elwyn?" she said.

"Let's not get into th--"

"I'm nothing to you," she said. "You're just using me. All I am is your harlot."

"Don't say that."

"I'm a fallen woman. You could never love me."

"That's not true."

"I wish Buford were here. You don't love me."

"That's not true."

"Then say it," she said. "Say it, Elwyn."

She had that kind of power over me. She must have known I did not love her. She certainly knew I could not risk losing her. I cried, "I love you! I love you!"

She smiled. "I don't believe you." We were alone in her house. She moved close to me. She loosened her clothes. I should have turned my head. I should have prayed for God to deliver me. But no matter how many times I drank from the fountain, I found myself yet thirsting. "Touch me when you say you love me," she said.

I touched her. I became aroused--this for a woman who had posed as my mother but a few hours before. "I love you."

We were on the bed. Our clothes were piled on top of the new leather briefcase on the floor. "Say it with feeling," she said.

As we moved, I felt many things, and I used some of these things to say it the way she wanted me to say it. "I love you."

It was, of course, a complete lie, but Sister Morrisohn didn't seem to notice. She hummed, but no matter--I still heard the words.

Then I must go, and you must stay

The wages of sin, it turns out, is not always death: sometimes it's a life of Jim Reeves records.

* * *

My grandmother said, "So what's wrong with being a teacher?" She spoke to my back; I watched her in the mirror. She had gotten so large that she had to use her hands to lift her legs, one at a time, up onto my bed, where, at last, she stretched out, exhausted. She fanned herself with a hand, breathed through her mouth. "He made some preachers; He made some teachers."

I said, "I just don't think He's calling me to teach, Gran'ma."

"Well, your students say you're a better piano teacher than Sister McGowan, and nobody, not even Pastor, can explain scripture like you."

"Well, Gran'ma, I don't know." My mother handed me a black tie. I slipped it around my collar and began the first loop of a double Windsor. I liked a thick knot.

"No. Wear your good white shirt," my mother said. "This one makes the tie fit funny." She turned and began searching the closet for my good white shirt.

"I like this shirt, Mom," I said, but already I was beginning to unfasten the tie.

"Turn around," my father said. There he was with his new camera. "I want to take a picture."

I turned. "But I'm not wearing any pants," I said.

"So? Now hold the tie like you're fixing it. No, don't smile. Act natural," he said. The camera flashed. "It's a work of art. Young Man Dressing."

"He's not going to wear that tie either," my mother said. Now she held the new blue one in her hand. "The church valedictorian's got to look his best."

I took the good white shirt and the new blue tie from my mother.

My father snapped a shot before I could put them on--just me in my Fruit of the Loom. "This one's even better. I'm going to put this one in the church yearbook."

"No you won't," said my grandmother. As she lay, propped up on her side, she might have been a Peter Paul Rubens woman--in print dress, and with ankles swollen by diabetes. "People won't know what to make of this family." She trembled with laughter, two fingers covering her mouth.

My father grinned. "He's not just smart and talented and a great warrior for the Lord, he's the flower of manhood." My father posed in accordance with the Marquess of Queensberry and when I blocked right, he landed one with a left. It hurt only just a little. "Feel that. Solid!"

"Stop it. Stop it." My grandmother, slapping her thighs now, laughed until she coughed. "You two. Oh, what a blessing."

I put on my shirt, buttoned it, slipped the new tie around my collar.

"Take a picture," said my father. He handed the camera to my mother. He put an arm around my shoulder. One more inch and I'd be as tall as he was.

"Let me at least put on my pants," I said.

My father laughed. "No." He wasn't holding me so firmly that I couldn't break away. We were having a good time.

"Take off your hat," said my mother behind the camera.

My father protested. "The bald spot."

"They already know," said my grandmother and mother in unison.

We all laughed at that, even my father doffing his school bus driver's cap. It amused us when we said the same thing at the same time. We were a family.

"Snap the picture," my father said.

"Something's wrong," my mother said. "Your collar's too large. That's not your good shirt."

I looked down at my shirt. She was right. It was Brother Morrisohn's good shirt.

"Where did you get that?" my mother said.

"Sister Morrisohn gave it to me," I said in an off-hand way, like don't you remember when she gave it to me, Mom? You were there. You were definitely there, so don't ask any more questions. I only have two more weeks in Miami, and when I return, I promise I'll be your son again. "A gift," I said.

My father tested the sleeve with thumb and forefinger. "That's very nice of her. This is good material."

"Rich. But why would she give you a white shirt?" said my mother. "Pink, green, blue I could understand."

"I don't know," I said. "She's old fashioned."

"Graduation gift?" said my grandmother.

"No," said my mother, "I've seen this shirt in the laundry more than a few times and meant to ask you about it. When did she give it to you?"

"I'm not sure," I said. I had to remain calm, nonchalant. I had to derail her instinctive suspicion. "I think she gave it to me after I taught her to play 'In Love Abiding Jesus Came.' That was Brother Morrisohn's favorite hymn. It's a dopey gift."

"Don't call a gift 'dopey,' Elwyn," warned my grandmother. "All Gifts come from God."

"Sorry, Gran'ma."

"Bridle your tongue, Elwyn. Buford, rest his soul, and Elaine Morrisohn are very dear friends of mine. They have always been fond of you." My grandmother pulled herself to a sitting position. "Buford, if you recall, bought that piano for you. You didn't think the piano was such a 'dopey' gift, did you?"

"No, Gran'ma."

"Elaine was your first piano student. It's not so 'dopey' when she puts ten dollars in your hand for a half-hour's work, is it?"

"No, Gran'ma."

"With all the blessings God has given you, I should think you'd be the last to bite the hand that feeds you. Here you are on the eve of manhood, getting dressed to go to church and pick up a scholarship funded by the same woman who gave you a 'dopey' gift."

The Buford Morrisohn Scholarship for the Outstanding College-Bound Christian, \$4000, of which I was the first recipient.

"Sorry, Gran'ma."

"Don't let me hear such rubbish again." My grandmother signaled for her four-pronged walker. I passed it to her. My father and I helped her to her feet. "I love you, Elwyn, but you'd better pray that God never takes back any of your 'dopey' gifts."

My grandmother lumbered out of the room. My mother and father, shaking their heads, soon followed. I finished dressing alone.

It had worked.

My mother had left without asking the one question I could little answer: By the way, Elwyn, where is your good white shirt?

I certainly could not tell my mother that on that night more than a year ago when Sister Morrisohn had finally mastered the chord changes of "In Love Abiding Jesus Came," there had been a dinner set on the floor in the fashion of the Chinese with all the romantic trappings, and afterwards someone's happy foot knocked over a candle and destroyed the sleeve of a good white shirt, which by all means had to be replaced.

I couldn't just walk into our house with a charred sleeve.

Oh, that? As the widow Morrisohn and I were making love

And I certainly couldn't have entered our home bare-backed.

Yes, Dad, it is a solid chest, isn't it? Quite manly! Those aren't birth marks.

Tonight during climax the widow used her teeth.

So instead, I had accepted Sister Morrisohn's gift of one of Brother Morrisohn's shirts.

"They look the same," she had said. "I never noticed it before, but you're about his size."

And that's when she started with the Elwyn-marry-me jokes.

Not even John on the Isle of Patmos had such hellish visions of the future.

* * *

Two o'clock in the afternoon on a Saturday in August, the Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters was packed for the awards ceremony.

I got up from the piano when they told me to get up, and I marched across the pulpit.

I stood where they wanted me to stand, at the head of a line of about thirty recently graduated high-schoolers. I could neither see the pews nor the floor, just three hundred brown faces floating above a sea of sharp suits and pretty dresses. Body heat negated the effects of the air conditioner. Sweat poured down my brow.

In my valedictory address, I said what they wanted me to say--The future is for the children of God. Satan's days are numbered, for with Christ in our vessel, we can smile at the storm--and so on, and so on, to thunderous applause.

Then I collected my Buford Morrisohn Scholarship for the Outstanding College-Bound Christian and sat back at the piano to close the service.

When it was all over, I mingled with my fellows and our parents (and grandparents), congratulating those who had received lesser scholarships, and receiving congratulations for my own award.

Then the larger crowd descended upon us. From every mouth there came the same questions:

"Where are you going to college?"

(As though you don't already know.)

"When are you leaving?"

(Not soon enough.)

"Are you excited?"

(Relieved.)

Everyone seemed to want to shake my hand, and I politely acquiesced, though I was eager to get away from the church grounds. I hoped to avoid Sister Morrisohn, who had been giving me the eye all through service.

Besides, my parents were throwing an after-party for me at home where I could celebrate in safety.

Outside, small children dressed in their best clothes played with reckless energy, running and hitting and screaming and falling and getting up again. I ducked out of the way of a running one pursued by an angry one waving a hymnal over his head like the two tablets of stone. Another one said a naughty word, and I chastised her.

"It slipped out," she said.

Where were our children picking up such terrible language? "You want to be a good girl for Jesus, OK?" I nodded my head.

"OK," she said, struggling to escape my grasp.

She wanted to go play, but I held her firm. "You want to grow up good so Jesus can take you to heaven, OK?"

"OK." The child was absolutely precious. Pigtails and ribbons and black, patent leather shoes. She stopped resisting me. "When will I go to heaven?"

"When you die," I said.

"Oh," said the girl, whom I recognized as Brother and Sister Naylor's youngest. "So can I go play now?"

"Yes," I said.

"Thank-you-Jesus," she said. She skipped away.

I walked to my old Mazda. I opened the door, slipped inside, slammed the door, started the car. Sister Morrisohn, appearing as if out of nowhere, knocked on my windshield.

"Hey," she said.

I rolled down the window. Up close, under her perfume, I smelled alcohol. She had been drinking wine again. She wore a blue church dress with a modest collar, but when she leaned against the car, almost passing her head through the window, the modest collar hung loose around her neck revealing that she was wearing no brassiere.

She had never behaved this way on church grounds before.

I pulled away when she made a sudden move, thinking she was trying to kiss me as she had in the mall.

"Hey," she said. She passed me a greeting card. "Congratulations on your graduation."

"Thanks," I said.

She raised her head and checked to see that no one was near enough to hear. "We haven't been together in a week. Why are you avoiding me?" she whispered. "What did I do wrong?"

"We'll talk later," I said.

"Was it the mall?"

"Yes. The mall."

She made a face like I was being ridiculous. "That was a joke. No one saw. I swear I checked."

"It's too risky. And it's so wrong. We're Christians," I said. "We're the light of the world."

She sighed. "You don't plan to see me anymore."

"I don't," I said.

"This is the end."

"Yes."

"When you said you loved me, did you mean it, Christian?"

"Could we talk later?" I said.

Her eyes blinked nervously. "Tell me now. Did you mean it?"

"No," I said.

"No?" she said. She nodded her head. "Yes you did. Yes you did."

"Sister Morrisohn," I said. "We have to get on with our lives. We have to wake up. What we did can lead to nowhere good."

She said, "Look, Elwyn, we're not going to get married. That's impossible. You're just a kid. I'm . . . mature. Too bad. But you can't tell me you don't love me because no matter where you go or what you do, I'll always love you." She put her hands together as if in prayer. "And I know you love me."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You're not sorry. You're scared. What we did may seem wicked in the eyes of the church, but it is real. You know it's real."

"I want to go to heaven when I die," I said.

"So that makes it OK to step on my feelings? To use me?"

"I didn't use you," I said.

"Then you loved me?"

I didn't answer. I wasn't sure anymore that I knew the answer. Why did I feel it necessary to go to another city? Why hadn't I broken it off before?

"Love is never a sin," she said.

"Bye," I said.

"Come by tonight. Let me prove your love."

"Sister Morri--"

"Just one last time, then it's over forever," she said. "Go on with your life, pretend you don't love me."

"No." Help me, Lord. "No, I won't."

"Just one last time." She smoothed the hairs on my arm. "Then I'll let you go."

"OK," I said. Already I had become aroused. "One last time."

"You won't be sorry."

"OK," I said. I put the Mazda in reverse. "Bye."

"See you later," Sister Morrisohn said. And then: "You look very good in his shirt."

* * *

The party that took place afterwards was a lot like the awards ceremony, except that there weren't so many people--just my parents, my grandmother, my best friends from church, and several members of the Jesus Club from school. The Rev. James Cleveland boomed "Lord, Do It" from the record player. There was turkey and ham and collard

greens on the table. Hugs, congratulations, and the unavoidable questions abounded: "So where are you going to college?"; "Excited, aren't you?"; "Can we get together before you leave?"

My mother said, "It's your party, Elwyn. You say grace."

"Lord, bless this food that it may give us the strength to do your will."

"Amen," we all said.

My father said, "Dig in."

We ate, we laughed, we cried. After I straighten out my problems with Sister Morrisohn, I thought, I shall be able to take genuine pleasure from such fellowship divine. As it was, I was eager for the party to be over. The devil yet had full control of my hormones.

But I was not the only one eager for the party to end. Eldridge Pomerantz, the Grand Gopher himself, was there. He had avoided me all afternoon, still fearing the power of God.

Now he sat at my piano with Sabina, the less bubbly half of the Anderson twins. Sabina played the right hand of "Old Rugged Cross," Eldridge the left. She had already begun taking classes at Miami-Dade Junior College, where she was a powerful witness for the Lord. He was leaving in two weeks for Pennsylvania to play football and study architecture at the University of Pittsburgh.

I approached them.

"Elwyn," they said.

"Eldridge; Sabina," I said. "I see you're making lovely music together."

"I'm teaching him," Sabina said. "Praise the Lord."

"Praise the Lord," I said.

Eldridge smiled. He was a nice guy, though a backslider. He wouldn't have come to my party had Sabina not been there. They had been in love for about a year.

Accidentally, Eldridge hit an augmented chord. "OOPS," he said. "What was that?"

"Sounds good. Play it again," I said.

They played the chorus again, using the augmented chord instead of the plain F chord.

"Wow," said Sabina. "We sound like experts."

"The augmented adds another dimension to the song," I said.

Sabina caught my cue. "Just as Christ adds another dimension to our lives," she said.

Eldridge's spine seemed to lose an inch.

"We miss you at Bible study," I said. I placed a hand on his wide shoulder.

Eldridge said, "Football practice, you know?"

"I've been telling him," Sabina said, "that football won't get him into heaven."

"Neither will simply being a nice guy," I said. "And you're one of the nicest people I know."

"Being married to a Christian won't do it, either," Sabina said.

"Neither will having your picture hang in your school's hall of fame," I said. "It is only through the Grace of God that ye shall enter the kingdom of heaven."

"Well," said Eldridge Pomerantz, a boy with thighs like fire hydrants, "I should know better. I'm just waiting--"

"Waiting? Jesus didn't wait to die for your sins!"

Eldridge's eyes darted from me to Sabina to the crowd that had begun to gather. I moved away and watched as the Christians, led by my grandmother--that great old time saint--descended upon the only unsaved person in the room:

"Seek ye first the kingdom of God."

"Serve the Lord while ye are yet young."

"Tomorrow's day may never dawn."

"Do you want to lift up your eyes in hell?"

"Jesus died for you."

The Christians devoured the lion.

After a while, Eldridge fell to his knees and cried out, "Help me. Help me, Jesus."

When the party ended, there were shouts of jubilation. A lost sheep had returned to the fold. No one was more delighted by Eldridge's conversion than I was.

"You must write to me when you get to Pennsylvania," I said.

"Yes, Elwyn," he said, brushing away tears.

"Are you happy?" I said.

"Yes." We moved out of the way so that the new offensive lineman for the Lord could shout and jump for joy. "Hallelujah! I'm going to heaven."

Now Eldridge was a truly Grand Gopher.

* * *

I helped my parents clean up, and then I headed for the door, on my way to the final trial.

My mother said, "Where are you going?"

I said, "To visit an old friend."

"You sure?" said my father.

"What?" I said. They never questioned where I went. I was their good Christian son. Did they suspect? Impossible. With Eldridge still on their mind, how could they?

"A friend. Are you sure?" said my mother. She held the platter with the remains of the turkey in it. The bird had been almost entirely eaten; but one leg, skin and all, remained intact. The leg was my favorite part. Perhaps I would eat it when I returned from Sister Morrisohn's house. "Are you sure?" my mother repeated.

"Yes," I said.

My father laughed awkwardly. "Sorry," he said. "It's just that your grandmother thinks--"

My mother interrupted him. "No! I believe Elwyn. Let him go."

"Good," I said. I was playing it cool. "Save me the leg."

But they knew. Somehow they knew. I was terrified.

* * *

"Where were you?"

"I drove around for a while," I said. I walked into her house, turned, scanned the street, then closed the door.

"Why?"

"I think they know."

"Don't be ridiculous. No one saw us in the mall," she said.

"Not the mall. I think--" I could not finish my sentence. All I could do was stare at Sister Morrisohn.

"What?" she said, smiling innocently as though she didn't know what had left me temporarily bereft of speech. As though I should not be at all moved by the vision of her before my eyes--the see-through nightgown that stopped above her waist; the brassiere underneath that thrust her breasts forward but did not cover the nipples; the panties below that were but a cross-section of strings running through her private parts; and everything, her rouge, her lipstick, even the rubies in her earrings, red like the fires of hell. "What?"

"Blessed Jesus."

"Before I married Buford, I was a young woman. I loved him, so I surrendered my youth," she said. She pirouetted. "But many say that at forty-five, I am still striking."

"You are," I said, stricken.

"Of course, the church doesn't allow me to dress as I like." She touched her earrings. "So even those closest to me may not notice my appeal."

"I see," I said.

"You should see me in pants," she said.

She led me to the bedroom. She sat down on the bed. I sat down on the bed beside her. I stared at her like an idiot. I reminded myself that I had seen it all before--not like this--but we had been together over two years. I should have more control.

"Would you like me to stand up again?" she said.

"Please."

She stood up. She did a silly dance. I drank her in with my eyes. What did it matter? She was mine.

"A relationship should be built on more than physical attraction," she said. She walked over to her stereo. She set the needle on the record. "But when your man goes away, the physical must be foremost on his mind or he will forget."

I hear the sound, of distant drums

Far away, far away

The music did not upset me this time. In fact, I shouted, "Turn it up."

She did. Holding her with both arms, I sang along with Jim Reeves and knew that I was no longer a Christian.

And if they call for me to come

Then I must go, and you must stay

"Do you want to have sex with me?" she asked. It was the first time either of us had called it that. "Sex."

"Yes," I said, and we did.

Later she said, "Would you like to make love?" It was the first time either of us had called it that. "Making love."

"Yes," I said. "I would like to make love with you, Sister Morrisohn."

"Elaine," she corrected.

"Elaine," I said, and then I made love with her.

* * *

We scrambled for our clothes when we heard the knock at the door.

The knocking did not surprise me as much as it did Elaine. I had been expecting it.

"Sit there at the piano," she told me. She wore her blue church dress and house slippers. She was naked underneath except for the strange brassiere. "We'll say piano lessons, OK?"

I sat at the piano as she commanded, though I knew it was useless. We had taken too long to answer the door. Elaine's face was still rouged.

My grandmother walked in behind her four-pronged walker. "Give me a firm seat," she said to Elaine. "If I sit in your couch, I'll never get up."

When Elaine ran to the kitchen on her errand, my grandmother stared at me but spoke to someone standing behind her outside on the porch: "You go wait in the car. I have to talk to Sister Morrisohn about something in private."

I heard the footfalls of whoever it was walking away. Then my grandmother closed the door.

I guessed that the unseen person was Sister McGowan, who was my grandmother's good friend and driver: at 75 my grandmother no longer drove. It was by my grandmother's design that I did not see the unseen person and, especially, that the unseen person did not see me.

"Elwyn, Elwyn," my grandmother said.

I looked down at the piano keys.

"You were His best, Elwyn. His best."

* * *

Sister Morrisohn placed the firm-backed chair in the middle of the living room, and my grandmother sat down heavily. She leaned forward, one hand holding the walker for support.

Sister Morrisohn rubbed her hands together nervously. She said, "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Drink!" My grandmother shook her head in disbelief. "There'll be scarce little to drink where you're going."

Sister Morrisohn sat down in the couch, her head bowed.

"I can't believe that a woman of your age would take advantage of a poor, innocent child of God," My grandmother said. "Aren't there enough slack-leg Johnnies with whom you can satisfy your vile, pagan lust? When it burns down there, why don't you just run to the nursery and throw yourself on the infant with the fattest diaper?"

Sister Morrisohn sobbed.

My grandmother said, "Thou thankless apostate, thou creeping Jezebel. The stink of thine iniquity rises to the nostrils of God."

Sister Morrisohn wrapped her arms around herself.

My grandmother said, "You should be flung from the highest tower. And when you burst open, the dogs should pick your rotting flesh from your putrid bones."

Sister Morrisohn cried out, "Oh God, what have I done? What have I done?"

This went on for many minutes, this exhorting, this lamenting. I trembled not only because my turn would come soon, but because Sister Morrisohn's pain was my pain. I wanted to put a hand over my grandmother's mouth.

My grandmother said, "You are lucky that Christ is faithful and able to forgive us our sins. If it were me . . . but Christ the redeemer died on the cross. Confess your sin, O daughter of Babylon. Confess before this humble servant of God."

And Sister Morrisohn confessed and confessed and confessed the entire two and a half years of our affair. Her memory was astonishing. It brought tears to my grandmother's eyes and set her head to nodding from side to side. But for me, each moment that had become part of the dull amalgam in my mind was reclaimed, whole, distinct, animated, golden. I wanted to shout: "Yes, I remember the Ft. Lauderdale Holiday Inn on Sunday between services. I remember the sun on your face at the pool, how your beautiful toes stirred water, then splashed, and every drop for me! Happy Birthday. Happy Birthday, each said. And I was happy. I held you too long and only just made it back in time for Youth Hour."

Sister Morrisohn confessed and then collapsed onto the floor.

My grandmother turned to me: "Elwyn, Elwyn, why did you turn your back on God?"

The tears flowed easily, though I didn't feel much like crying. I wanted to hold Sister Morrisohn, Elaine, and tell her that I remembered.

"Elwyn, you were His greatest servant. You can be His servant again. Confess, confess here before me," my grandmother said. "I'll see to it that no one ever finds out about this, but you must confess. Jesus calls you to confess."

"Yes, Gran'ma."

"He is faithful and just to forgive us."

"Yes, Gran'ma."

"Confess, my child. Confess!"

And so I confessed on that evening two weeks before I drove my Mazda up the Florida Turnpike to Gainesville. I confessed to appease my grandmother. I confessed so that Elaine would know I remembered.

There was but one thing I left unsaid. I could have told my grandmother that as I sat confessing, my mind's eye wandered over the fallen body of Sister Elaine Morrisohn, and I planned how in a few weeks when I returned from college to visit, I would arrive one day earlier than I had told everyone else, and I would spend the night right here in this house with the beautiful, forty-five-year-old woman I loved.

Jim Reeves, of course, would be on the stereo.

IV. Captivity

Rev. Jedediah Witherspoon held court every day at noon in the Plaza of the Americas, a tree-lined public forum and major thoroughfare on the campus of the University of Florida. As we passed through the plaza on our way to the library (which bordered on the north) or classes in the GPA building (the south), Rev. Jed, as he was called, accosted us like a Twentieth Century Samuel.

To a couple holding hands: "Your parents sent you here to make 'A's', not babies! Your body is the Temple of God!"

To a long-haired man drinking beer from a paper bag: "God has a new weapon for dealing with the slothful--Ronald RAY-GUN! Zap. Zap. Zap."

To the Krishnas serving vegetarian meals in the Plaza and their potential recruits: "Heed not the false prophet! God is no cow!"

The Reverend's doggedness, which reminded me of myself before I had sinned, never failed to attract a sizable crowd. Unfortunately, many of the other students came only to make sport of his ministry.

One young man, perhaps a drama major, went so far as to dress in a black suit and tie similar to the Reverend's. Then positioning himself a few feet to the left of the fiery evangelist, the student proceeded to shadow him throughout the sermon.

When Rev. Jed raised his Bible to heaven, the young man raised his. When Rev. Jed fell to his knees to cry "Hosanna," the young man knelt also, like a mime in training. When Rev. Jed pointed his Ronald RAY-GUN! at a pair of men holding hands--"God has a new weapon for dealing with the Sodomite!"--the crowd exploded with laughter, for Rev. Jed's shadow had beaten him to the punchline.

"Ronald RAY-GUN! Zap. Zap. Zap," said the young man, pointing his crooked finger.

Sensing the danger, Rev. Jed's daughter, Sister Donna, thrust herself between the scrawny young man and her father, the giant of God, who had dropped his Bible and raised a fist:

"Darest thou mock the anointed of God!"

"Daddy," urged Sister Donna, who wore white tennis shoes and a shapeless black dress that hung to her ankles. She restrained her father with a small hand on each of his shoulders.

"God shall smite thee!" Rev. Jed said to the retreating drama major. "God shall smite thee!"

"Daddy," his daughter said, "other sheep need tending." She indicated the laughing, hooting crowd.

Rev. Jed understood. The drama student was a distraction sent by Satan. The Bible in his hands again, the evangelist barked--"The wicked flee when no man pursueth, but the righteous are bold as a lion!"--and Sister Donna went back to collecting donations from the crowd.

Blessed are they who forgive.

After eighteen years in church, I knew that what Rev. Jed and Donna really wanted to do was grab the little sinner by the ears and say: "I could just abandon you to the wrath of the Almighty . . . I'm doing you a favor, stupid!"

But now I was one of the stupid.

I wasn't about to end my love affair with Sister Morrisohn, even though she was back home, three-hundred miles away in Miami.

Six weeks into my freshman year, and already I had gone back twice to be with her. It seemed we couldn't spend enough time together.

Last trip, after I kissed my family goodbye, got into my car laden with clean laundry and Tupperware containers of black-eyed peas and rice, fresh bananas, apple tarts, and chicken salad, I drove north on the Turnpike for forty miles and then suddenly and illegally crossed the median. I sped back to Sister Morrisohn's.

"Elwyn, Elwyn," she said, falling into my arms.

Then, up before the sun, I stumbled into the bathroom, braced myself against the sink, my knees tingling like electricity. We were inexhaustible. I got back to Gainesville at 1:35 p.m., five minutes late for Calculus II. There was no quiz, so I slept face down in my textbook. I could add that I dreamt about her, but I didn't recall the dream, only that a page of linear equations was stuck to my cheek with sweat when I awoke.

But at least I wasn't a hypocrite.

* * *

In Gainesville, I took care to avoid the scattered few with whom I had gone to high school and church and therefore knew me as a Christian. Upon their approach, I pedaled down many a wrong street and ducked into stores I had no intentions of entering, looking, always looking, the other way. Sometimes, of course, I didn't see them before they saw me.

"Brother Elwyn! Elwyn Parker!"

I was in the basement cafeteria of Broward Hall. For \$3.00, one could get an Italian sub, a bowl of French fries and a Coke, and then eat the meal in the adjacent lounge where four giant-screen TV's showed rock videos.

I turned. Three places behind me in the salad line was Tina, the bubblier half of the Anderson twins. Smiling beside her in a neat, white shirt and tie, was Marco Japonte, a young man who prior to his conversion had been fond of heavy metal music and marijuana cigarettes. I had baptized Marco three times before it stuck. Tina and Marco broke the line

in order to hug me and shake my hand, as though we hadn't seen each other back home in Miami just over a month ago.

"I can't believe you haven't called," Tina said. "Where are you living?"

"Rawlings Hall."

"I'm at Sledd," she said. "It's beautiful. Ivy grows everywhere like an olden days church. You must visit."

"I'm in Beatty Towers East," Marco said.

I lifted my tray so that the line could pass. "Is that right?" I said. "Sledd. Beatty Towers."

"Beatty East," Marco said.

"Here's my phone number." Tina tore her napkin in half, set the torn half in the tray, pressed the tray against Marco's back, and scribbled her number. She tapped Marco's head with the eraser end of the pencil. "What's your number, Marco?"

Marco recited his number.

"Good. Now you have both our numbers," Tina said, handing me the strip of napkin. "What's your number, Elwyn?"

"I haven't memorized it yet." This was not true. Then I said, "I'll call and give it to you when I get home," which was not true either.

Tina said, "Good. Now we can start hitching rides to church with you. Greyhound is too expensive."

Tina and Marco knew better than to attend one of the local churches--the Church of God, the Methodist, the Holy Rollers Tabernacle of Faith--but the nearest branch of our church, the Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters, was nearly a hundred miles away in Jacksonville. A few short months ago, I would have been happy to make the two-hour drive to worship God with my own kind, my old Mazda loaded with new converts and brothers and sisters like Tina and Marco who had no cars.

Instead, I told Tina and Marco, "I haven't been to church since I got here."

"Really?" Marco turned to Tina. He turned back to me. "There was a brother in church who looked just like you last week."

"It wasn't me," I said.

"Same height and everything." Marco demonstrated with an arm held horizontal under his nose, which now had a smooth, raised place on its left flap where Marco used to insert his nose-ring.

"It wasn't me."

Tina said, "Is your car working?"

"It's working fine," I said.

"Then why aren't you going to church, brother?" said Tina, who along with her identical twin Sabina, had been a star on the cheerleading squad before I had led her to the Lord. "The Bible says forsake ye not the assembly of believers."

"I know what the Bible says," I said.

"I'm sure you do," Marco said. "So on Sunday you should find yourself in church."

"Most Sundays I sit around watching TV or sleeping," I said. "Sometimes I go to a movie."

"Movies!" said Marco.

On the other side of the salad bar, a dark woman wearing a white hat and apron rapped the counter three times with a long-handled spoon. She glared at us: "Are you all gonna' talk, or get salad? You're holdin' up the line."

I followed Tina and Marco to an empty table. We did not sit down.

Tina watched me out of one eye. "I can't believe it."

"Movies," Marco said.

Tina wagged a finger in my face. "You, of all people, a backslider. I simply can't believe it."

Marco said, "You've read the Bible, Elwyn. You have no excuse."

"We're going to pray for you, Elwyn," Tina said.

"Yes," said Marco.

They raised their hands to my forehead, but I pulled away. They seemed surprised that I had moved away. Actually, I had surprised myself.

Tina nodded sadly. "We'll still pray for you, brother." Tina took Marco's arm, led him out of the basement cafeteria. Tina knew better than to eat with backsliders.

Go ahead, I thought. Pray for me. For I was indeed a backslider, but a backslider is less evil than a hypocrite. Scripture says the hypocrite is a foul smell in the nostrils of God. The backslider, on the other hand, has a chance.

Christ is married to the backslider.

A backslider I would remain until I was weaned of Sister Morrisohn, which time and distance, I was certain, would accomplish.

* * *

My certainty began to fade when I found myself calling her every night.

"It's four in the morning, Elwyn," she said. As always, she had answered after one ring.

"I just got back from the Gamma house," I said. "The Jam to End All Jams. Four hundred people. Ten sixteen-inch speakers. Eight kegs of beer. It's still going on, but Squeak and Gypsy got sick."

"Did you drink?"

"You know I don't drink," I said.

"Did you dance?"

"I'm learning," I said. "No one laughed tonight."

"Good," she said. "Did you . . . dance with anyone?"

"Yes," I said. But since I understood what she really meant, I added, "No, I haven't found anyone. I'll tell you when I do."

"I'm sorry, Elwyn," she said. "I shouldn't be so jealous."

"It upsets me that you don't trust me."

"But you're up there living a vagabond life, and I'm alone." She sighed.

She wanted me to say: "Don't worry. I love you. I'll always love you." But I didn't want always to love her. The prospect of loving someone so much older depressed me. Or I should say it depressed me when I was away from her. When I was with her, age mattered not.

We were inexhaustible.

"I'll be home again for Thanksgiving," I said.

"That's months away," she said. "Perhaps I could come up to Gainesville next weekend."

"No," I said.

"You don't want to see me?"

"You know I do."

In fact, I did, especially after spending the past few hours at the Gamma house where I had watched many a young woman follow her young man into one of the bedrooms at the top of the stairs. But I knew better than to have my forty-five-year-old mistress visit me in Gainesville.

"I just think it's better to wait for Thanksgiving," I said.

"I can't wait. I'll bring the red teddy you like."

The very thought of her golden flesh spilling out of that fiery cloth aroused me, but I found the strength to say, "No. Stay home."

She cried then, but in Gainesville, "no" meant "no."

I waited until her crying stopped. I tried to explain: "I've got too much schoolwork this week."

"You always have too much schoolwork," she said.

"I was home two weeks ago."

"Do you love me?" she said.

"I phone you every night, don't I?"

"Yes, but a girl likes to hear her guy say it when he's so far away."

There it was again. Sister Morrisohn needed constant reassurance, as though, after all we had been through together, I were going to fall for the first college woman who smiled at me. If nothing else, I was faithful. And true. Other women were invisible.

"Please say it," she said.

"I love you," I said, though I wished I did not mean it.

"I believe you, but you're so far away," she said.

But not far enough.

* * *

On the third floor of Rawlings Hall, everyone had a nickname.

"Brain Dead" was a sixth-year engineering major, who would never graduate until he passed his freshman composition classes, ENG 1101 and 1102. He couldn't string together two coherent sentences, he often omitted verbs, and a third grader could outspell him. On the other hand, Brain Dead could calculate the square roots of complex equations in his head without use of pencil or calculator.

Brain Dead's best friend was a sunburned freshman we called "Squeak," who got his name from his voice, which was, indeed, a squeak. Squeak seemed ever mired in the sexual ambiguity of puberty.

Squeak and Brain Dead taught me to play poker, and I stayed up many nights protecting my plastic tumbler full of pennies from them. I was not enthusiastic about gambling, but I was trying to fit in.

"Woe unto thee, thou backsliders!" Squeak squeaked, laying down a flush. He picked up the upturned Go Gators! cap we used as the pot for our penny-ante games. He dumped out the pennies and drew them to him with the sides of his outstretched arms, in mimicry of the great shepherd reclaiming his lost sheep. "Render unto Caesar all that is Caesar's."

"The rich just get richer." Brain Dead downed a shot of Captain Morgan's Rum.

"Yeah?" Squeak said. Squeak's father ran a Pepsi-Cola distributorship in Ann Arbor. We held our games in his private suite where even the resident assistant dared not enter without knocking first. By then the beer and rum would be hidden under the bed. Squeak passed me the deck. "What's your game, Preacher?"

"Preacher?" I said.

"Aren't you a preacher, dude?" said Squeak.

I shook my head. "No."

"You're not a preacher?" chimed in Brain Dead and the other players: A-T-O Joe, Punching-bag Brown, and my roommate, whom everyone called "Gypsy," not because he was a brilliant sophomore cellist with the University Symphony who could be heard late at night practicing Franz Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody"--which was, in fact, true--but because he had inherited a pair of strangely protruding eyebrows and an olive complexion from his Syrian mother.

"I am not a preacher," I said, desperate to be worldly. "What would make you think I was?"

They all seemed reluctant to speak, except for Squeak, who was rich. "Things," he said. "Little things."

"Like what?" I said.

"Things."

My elbow accidentally hit my stacked pennies, and they went flying. "What things?"

I didn't go to church.

I kept my Bible and tracts in my briefcase. I read them only in the safety of a bathroom stall.

I took great care in the handling of the letters I wrote weekly to Pastor, Sister Morrisohn, my grandmother, and my parents. No envelope was ever left unsealed so that its contents might be perused. I addressed Pastor's letters to "Dr. Zebedee Miller," which was a name no one at the Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters ever called him. To us, he was simply "Pastor." Sister Morrisohn's letters were addressed to "Elaine" and sealed in lavender stationery covered with flowers and hearts, which was intended to convince my dormmates I had a lover and was, therefore, anything but a Christian.

Perhaps I should have let them read her letters:

My Dearest Elwyn, it has been a week since we made love, a week of the jitters. Do I love you, or am I horny? I'm up to a pack a day, and I'm sure your grandmother's on to me. In missionary circle Monday night, she announced, staring right at me, "I smell smoke, but I don't see the fire!" Will she always hate me? Brother Kitchener proposed again. Smile. I love only you.

"What things?" I said.

"Things like that," said Gypsy, indicating the scattered pennies. He exchanged knowing smiles with Squeak.

"Don't get upset, dude. It's just a nickname. Chill out," said Squeak.

I chilled out. I laughed. I got down on my knees to collect my pennies.

Squeak said, "You don't drink, you don't smoke, you don't get laid, and you can't dance worth a--"

"You can't dance either," I said. I pushed Punching-bag Brown's dirty sneaker out of the way so that I could retrieve two pennies near the leg of the small desk we used as a card table.

"But I'm not expected to, soul brother," Squeak said.

Back in my seat, I stacked my pennies in piles of ten. I had about twenty cents more than before I had knocked over the stacks.

Squeak said, "You're just like Gypsy was before we turned him out." He pointed with his thumb to Gypsy.

"Greater Church of God," Gypsy said. "A preacher's son. Can't you f---ing tell?"

"Look at him," said Squeak. He threw up his hands in a gesture of futility. "My prodigal son."

Gypsy said, "One year later, I'm a boozer, I smoke like a chimney, I get laid every chance I get, and I still can't dance."

To prove it, he stood up and waltzed with himself. He spun in mad circles. Then Punching-bag Brown stood up and became Gypsy's partner, one arm around Gypsy's waist, the other around his back. They hummed "The Blue Danube." Then A-T-O Joe joined them, and the three locked their arms together and did some sort of kicking dance.

"Come clean, Preacher," said Squeak, laughing. "We won't eat you."

"Come clean," said Gypsy and Punching-bag Brown and A-T-O Joe, crouching and kicking.

I started to speak: "Well, I used to be a . . ." But how could I say "Christian" in that chamber of gambling and drinking and man dancing with man? I should have screamed, Christ died for sinners such as you!

But now my nickname was 'Preacher,' and it was my turn to deal.

"Five card stud!" I said.

Brain Dead belched. "Not again. I never win at that game."

I shuffled the deck. "Five card stud!" It was the only game I knew.

* * *

Like the Israelites, I was a captive in the land of Babylon--only I was quite enjoying my captivity.

Gilly Gorilla, the discus thrower, taught me how to play table tennis, and then she ran up a string of victories against me.

"Sixty-six straight," she said.

She taught me the rules of chess also, but in a few days I was playing her to a draw.

"Four draws in a row. Pretty soon I'll be beating you," I said.

"You think so?"

Gilly Gorilla was very competitive. She developed a new game called "chess for beers": each of us chugged a beer from a six-pack, we played a game of speed chess, and then the loser (me, two in a row) chugged the remaining four beers. It was the first and last time I ever chugged beer, the first and last time I ever missed a day of class because of a hangover.

She rolled me onto her lap and forced my lips apart with thumb and forefinger. She poured a cup of black coffee into my mouth.

"I hate coffee," I said.

"What you need is a beer. Strange as it sounds," she said, "beer is the best cure for hangover."

"No more beer," I said. My stomach felt like someone had sanded it.

"And you call yourself a man," she said.

* * *

A-T-O Joe took me to parties at the A-T-O house, from which we did not return until 4 or 5 in the morning. As always, I was the designated driver. Joe had tried twice but never successfully pledged A-T-O, though his father and two elder brothers before him had.

"Hell Week always kicked my butt. Once I was even hospitalized with broken ribs," Joe explained. "But I can at least drink their beer, can't I?"

"What's the big deal?" I said.

"They owe me, man. They owe me." A-T-O Joe was working toward a degree in child psychology.

* * *

Punching-bag Brown, who often accompanied me to the piano room in the basement of Rawlings Hall, could have been a musical prodigy. When I got up, he sat down and played almost note for note whatever I had been playing: Beethoven, Chopin, even impromptu gospel numbers that I made up.

"That's great," I said.

"I never took a lesson in my life," he said. He held his hands too low over the keys, and his riffs were only rudimentary, but he had an incomparable ear for chords. "It just comes to me."

He would have made a great gospel musician.

He had earned his nickname, "Punching-bag," at an inner city high school in Tampa, where he had never won a fight against the thugs who daily harassed him. He had

also never backed down from them, though his nose was twice broken and several teeth knocked out.

"The pain isn't so bad," he said, "And after a while, they've got to stop hitting you."

"Why fight if you can't win?" I said.

"If you keep fighting, you always win," he said. "I graduate college next term. Most of them are in jail. One is even dead."

I was a sinner now, but I felt compelled to evangelize Punching-bag. He would have made a great warrior for the Lord.

* * *

K-Sarah, the gaunt physics major, walked out into the common lounge in a sleeveless blouse, a short skirt, and high heels as though she were going to a party. Then she sat on the couch and drank Vodka, one shot at a time, until she was drunk. She fell asleep right there on the couch, her limbs splayed every which way.

A-T-O Joe and Squeak, who had been watching her all night, now stood over her gawking.

Squeak lifted K-Sarah's blouse with a finger, dropped it excitedly. "Jee-sus. She's not wearing a bra."

"So what? She's flat," said A-T-O Joe, now on his hands and knees. "But what a pair of legs." He reached out his hand.

"Don't touch her. You'll wake her," said Squeak. "Let's go get our cameras."

"Great idea." A-T-O Joe sprang to his feet. "Watch her until we get back, Preacher," he said. He vanished down the hall after Squeak.

What A-T-O Joe and Squeak planned to do to the unconscious K-Sarah sorely vexed me.

Though I was a worldly man, I still turned off the TV in disgust when a racy moment was broadcast. I still averted my eyes when I met women wearing skimpy garments--and there were many such women at the university. I found myself unable to regard such women in as lowly a manner as they regarded themselves.

My upbringing had taught me that one must help the weak.

I lifted K-Sarah and carried her into her room. Her walls were painted black and bedecked with large, white, five-point stars and an autographed poster of Mr. Spock. A Star Trek floor mat lay before her bed. I placed her on her bed. She awoke.

"What happened, Preacher?"

"You're drunk."

"Where is he?"

"Who?"

"The guy I made love to last night. The Alpha Lambda guy." She pushed herself to a sitting position. She indicated her clothes. "I bought this outfit because I thought he would like it," she said. She began to cry. "He never showed up."

I put an arm around her. "You shouldn't just sleep with everyone you meet," I said. "That's how this kind of thing happens."

"He was so handsome. A pre-med senior. A Trekkie, too."

"Here," I said, handing her some tissue I found on her night stand. "Perhaps he'll call tomorrow. Or you can call him."

She blew her nose with the tissue. "I don't even remember his name, Preacher. I'm awful." She dabbed at her eyes.

"You're not awful," I said. I smoothed the hair off her forehead. I tried to get her to lie down. "Get some sleep."

She resisted. "I have to undress first, Preacher." She wriggled out of my grasp and flung off her blouse. She shifted to one hip and unzipped her skirt.

She kicked off her shoes.

I sprang up from the bed and hurried to the door. But I turned when she called to me.

"Are you a Trekkie?"

"No."

"Work on it." Exposed, her bosom was not nearly so flat as it had seemed. She beckoned with painted eyes.

Now my hand traced her contours. She was thin, with knees like pink door knobs, with hairless, flawless skin, except for the moon-shaped scar just above and to the left of her navel.

She sucked around the edge of my mouth like a fish.

But I was strong. "I won't do this."

"Why?"

"You're drunk."

"Que sera sera," K-Sarah said, which was all she had learned, she claimed, in four years of high school French.

I pulled away. When she fell asleep, I drew a sheet over her body and left her room.

* * *

The phone was silent for several seconds before Sister Morrisohn said, "Do you like this girl?"

"No," I said. "Not at all."

"Then why did you put yourself in that situation?"

"She was drunk," I said. "It was the Christian thing to do."

"Beware the daughters of Babylon," she said.

"You're jealous again," I said.

"I'm always jealous," she said. "If you're not careful, something bad is going to happen."

"Like what?" I said.

"Somebody's going to marry you."

"Marriage isn't so bad," I said. "My mother and father are married." I laughed at my joke alone.

She said, "Someday, I would like to marry again."

"Maybe someday you will." Miami was so distant from Gainesville, I didn't see the trap being set.

"In the last year alone, Elwyn, I have turned down four proposals of marriage: Brother Whyllie, Brother Meechum, Brother Gordon, and Brother Kitchener."

"They're all anxious to get their hands on the Morrisohn treasure, no doubt." Brother Morrisohn, a prosperous attorney, had left her a wealthy woman.

"Brother Kitchener has tried to place his hands on more than the treasure," she said.

"Brother Kitchener," I said, referring to the church janitor, who was well over seventy, "is toothless and can barely walk."

"But he knows what he wants. And so do I," she said. "I want very much to marry you, Elwyn."

And there was the trap. Marriage was ludicrous, but she knew I wouldn't say anything to hurt her, which meant I wouldn't respond at all.

"You are my treasure. I am never so happy as when I am with you. Elwyn, am I so terribly old? Is being married to me such a horrible idea that you'd give up your religion to avoid it?"

The trick was to let her say what she had to say.

"I was a good wife for twenty years. Buford was much older, and sometimes I felt . . . but I never strayed. You don't know how much I loved him."

"Yes," I said. "He was a great man. I loved him too."

"But I know--and this is no trick to win points with you, Elwyn--but I know that if he were alive again and I was yet his wife, I would deceive even him to be with you."

Again I could offer no response.

"I love you that much. I am on my way to hell because I can't give you up, and you won't even consider the remotest possibility of marrying an old thing like me," she said.

"I don't see you as an old thing," I said. "But maybe I'm a young thing--"

"Maybe you are," she said. "You're certainly ungrateful."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I said.

"You started this whole affair. It was you who wanted me." Then she laughed. "I was hot stuff."

"I was young," I said. "Innocent."

"And now Miss Star Wars is hot stuff. Why don't you just go have your way with her," she said.

"I'm not interested in her."

"You've done nothing but talk about her all night."

"That's not true."

"Go sleep with her," she said. "And pray that I don't run off with Brother Kitchener, honey."

"Elaine--"

"Honey," she said.

"What?"

"I like calling you 'honey.' Honey, honey, milk and honey," she sang.

We hung up, and I went to bed thinking, so that's it--she's drinking again.

* * *

That same night, I was awakened by a terrible pounding on my door.

"Preacher, get up!" It was Gilly Gorilla. "Something's happened to Quiet Fat Girl."

The most peculiar nickname in all of Rawlings Hall belonged to the young woman called 'Quiet Fat Girl.' She was, indeed, quiet and fat, but she probably had no idea that almost everyone in Rawlings referred to her as Quiet Fat Girl because, as far as we knew, no one in the dorm had ever spoken to her. No one even knew Quiet Fat Girl's real name, except perhaps for the women's resident assistant, who lived off campus with her boyfriend and only came by once a month for a surprise inspection.

Her parents, we assumed, were wealthy, because like Squeak on the men's side, Quiet Fat Girl lived without a roommate in one of the luxury suites. We saw her only for the few seconds it took her to get from her private suite to the main door, and from the main door back to her suite. If someone nodded to her, it was said, she often nodded back--she never said hello--and then she was out of that door in a flash.

If you asked the person who had nodded to her just who it was he or she had nodded to, the answer invariably came back: "That quiet, fat girl."

I opened the door and saw Gilly Gorilla gesturing wildly. Her housecoat hung unbuttoned on her sinewy frame.

"Quiet Fat Girl's bleeding up my room," she said. "She might be dying."

"What happened?" said my roommate Gypsy, now standing behind me.

"She knocked on my door saying she needed help," said Gilly Gorilla. "I opened up, and she collapsed."

"When?" I said.

"A few minutes ago."

"Who?" said Gypsy.

"Quiet Fat Girl," said Gilly Gorilla, pulling me by the arm. "Come on."

The three of us ran down the men's corridor, through the common lounge, and then down the women's corridor all the way to Gilly Gorilla's room, which was next door to Quiet Fat Girl's suite. A noisy crowd had gathered outside Gilly's door.

A young woman in a Minnie Mouse sleeping gown pointed to the floor, where blood connected the private suite to the bathroom and the bathroom to Gilly Gorilla's room in a scarlet "V."

"So much blood," she shrieked.

The young woman raised the hem of her gown and stood on tiptoe like a woman in a hoop skirt preparing to walk through mud.

"Move!" Gilly Gorilla pushed through the crowd.

Quiet Fat Girl lay face down on Gilly Gorilla's Oriental throw rug, her arms hugging her waist. Quiet Fat Girl's nightgown, like the throw rug and the checkered tiles on the floor, was covered with blood.

She shivered. "Help me. Help me."

Brain Dead said, "We should call an ambulance."

Brain Dead had the right idea, no doubt, but Gilly Gorilla grabbed one side of Quiet Fat Girl, and I grabbed the other, and before we knew it we had her lying on the back seat of my Mazda.

* * *

Gilly Gorilla sat in the back with her. Gypsy sat up front with me.

"It hurts," she said.

"We're almost there," said Gilly Gorilla. "Can't you go any faster, Preacher?"

Gypsy glanced behind him, turned, and spoke to me with his eyes--hurry, Preacher!

"I'm going as fast as I can," I said. We were on Archer Road. Shands Memorial Hospital was just over the next two hills.

There came a sound from the back like someone spilling a bucket of water.

SPLLEKK!

"Oh no," Gilly Gorilla said. "She puked."

"F---ing gross," said Gypsy. He pinched his nose. He stuck his head out the window.

"I'm sorry," Quiet Fat Girl said. From the back seat, there came what sounded like someone slapping around in a puddle of vomit. "I can't hold it back." SPLLEKK!

"It's a mess back here," said Gilly Gorilla.

"Look what I did to your car," said Quiet Fat Girl.

"Don't worry about the car," I said. "As long as you're all right."

SPLLEKK! "I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't worry," I said. "What is your name?"

"Nicole--I'm sorry--Nicole Watson."

"I'll say a prayer for you, Nicole." I roared over the top of the last hill. Shands was just around the corner. "No matter what happens, God still cares about you."

"OK--Oh Daddy--pray for me."

I prayed. It was my first real prayer since coming to Gainesville.

I prayed for Nicole Watson, the quiet, fat girl, who, doctors would later tell us, had actually been the quiet, pregnant girl before she had thrown the infant down the garbage chute in the Women's bathroom of Rawlings Hall. A vagrant would find the corpse in a garbage dumpster two days later.

In a week, Nicole's belongings would vanish from her suite, and all that we would ever know about her we'd get from the *Gainesville Sun* and the *Alligator*, which made Nicole's case front page news for nearly a month. She was never charged with murder, for the baby had been stillborn. Her father, however, was arrested and spent time in prison for the part he played in the drama.

"Her own father!" said Gypsy, throwing down the newspaper. "And wouldn't you know he was a preacher. One of my people, too. Greater f---ing Church of God."

"Don't make a hasty generalization." I picked up the newspaper and tossed it into the wastepaper basket on "my side" of the room because Gypsy didn't own a wastepaper basket. He owned the cello that leaned against the wall, and the bumper sticker on the cello case that read: "Honk if you love Baroque." He owned the pile of dirty laundry that grew around the base of the cello, but no wastepaper basket. "Not all preachers are like that," I said.

"Find me a good one," said Gypsy. "They're all lechers."

"Not where I come from," I said, suddenly proud of my background. No one at the Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters had ever molested a child. We protected our children who, to us, were sacred, for they were the future of both the church and the world.

"So defensive of the church," said Gypsy "Maybe you really are a preacher."

"No, I'm not," I said.

Gypsy moved to his cello, picked up the bow which had lain beside it in a tangle of brightly colored socks, and began to play "Amazing Grace."

"I think you are a preacher, Preacher," he said. "I think you are."

It was a familiar sound--the Lord's song--so strangely beautiful in this place where blood and beer flowed in a single stream.

I remembered home and the people who loved me: my gentle father who had never said a harsh word to me; my mother who doted over me; my grandmother, that great old time saint, whose very breath was the Word of God; and Elaine Morrisohn, with whom I shared a strong but illicit love.

It occurred to me quite unexpectedly that I had been only sixteen when Sister Morrisohn and I first made love.

One could argue that she had molested me.

* * *

The next day, K-Sarah invited me to her room. The white stars on the wall were treated so that they glowed in the dark. One bare leg dangled over the edge of the bed; the other one was doubled under her. She was sober. I pulled her to me by the shoulders.

"Isn't this cozy," she said. She blew warm air against my neck.

"It's this kind of thing," I said, "that sends a soul straight to hell."

She laughed against my face. "Preach it, brother."

"What I mean is, how well do you know me?"

"Not very well. That's the fun of it."

"What are you looking for?"

"Whatever you happen to be right now," she said. She untucked my T-shirt and passed her hands under it. She tested my flesh with the tips of her fingers.

"Ooh," I said.

She pulled the T-shirt over my head. She kissed my chest. She was the right age. She was pretty. The stars glowed ghoulish green.

"What about the Trekkie?" I said. "The Alpha Lambda man."

K-Sarah said, "Make me forget him." She brushed her cheek against my chest. As skinny as she was, she forced me back on the bed.

"If we get into something," I said, "you must promise not to see him anymore."

"Who?" she said. She lifted her head. "What?"

"If we get into something--"

"Something?" she said.

"A relationship," I said. "We have to have rules. It kills me to see you dress so immodestly. And you must not get drunk. Your body is the Temple of God."

"Is this a joke, Preacher?" she said.

"No," I said. I was worldly, but I still had my standards.

I took her hand. "I want you to be my woman."

She handed me my T-shirt. "I'm not ready for this."

"What?"

"Que sera sera, Preacher."

"Wait," I said. "I don't think you under--"

"Please leave," she said. "When I need prayer, I'll call you."

I left K-Sarah's room.

And then the word, as it always does, spread quickly.

* * *

In the days that followed, my dormmates began to change toward me. Now they avoided me, or treated me with exaggerated deference when they couldn't avoid. It was not true, but I was accused of Christianity, and there was no greater threat to the college student's itinerant lifestyle than the love of God.

Even Gypsy thought me saved.

"You didn't boink K-Sarah? Everyone boinks K-Sarah." Gypsy's laughter winged up from the bottom bunk. "You really are a preacher."

"No. I'm a backslider," I said.

"A preacher."

"My sin is terrible."

"Sin? Sinning is what preachers do best," he said. "It's no mistake that all the best Christians at church seem to have lived such dastardly lives before coming to Christ."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"The bigger the sin," he said, shaking the bed as he moved, perhaps, to a more comfortable position, "the better the testimony. What you are, Elwyn, is a young, horny preacher out collecting regrettable moments for your testimony."

"You don't understand," I said. It was time to tell him. "I have a lover."

"I've never met a shepherd who didn't shear his sheep."

"Be careful what you say about the servant of God."

"Be honest, Preacher. You only let K-Sarah escape because she wasn't pure enough for you. I know your type," he said. "Whores scare you. Innocence turns you on."

"You're wrong," I said.

"I bet you're hot for Quiet Fat Girl. One minute you're praying for her, the next minute you're preying on her."

"You have no reason to be so mean to me," I said.

"I hate preachers."

"But your father is--"

"He is precisely the f---ing, self-righteous, tyrant I hate most," he shouted. "I can't tell you how many times he beat my thighs with a broom handle because I fell asleep in church. Beat them until they bled. I was just a kid, maybe twelve--but I was supposed to go to church seven, eight, nine times a week without falling asleep? Each time the church doors opened, there I was getting out of that f---ing Buick."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You don't know sorry!" He pounded the mattress. "You say you have a lover, Preacher. A lover you call it. So did my father. Lots of lovers. My mother knew about his lovers. I'm sure everyone in the church knew about his f---ing lovers. But when I found someone, what happened? More broom handle. Whack, whack, whack. Sins of the flesh, he said. He chased him away. Then whack, whack, whack. I'm not allowed to

have wet dreams, either. Imagine that, Preacher, training yourself to get up early so that you can change your drawers before morning inspection. Imagine that."

Gypsy got out of bed. He walked around in the dark room throwing his hands up in the air.

I sat up. "Are you OK?"

"The worst part was that I loved him, I believed in him, and I f---ing thought there was something wrong with me, until I found out that his latest fling was with the same boy he had chased away from me. He liked them young."

"Boy?" I said. "I thought you meant--"

"If you could think, you'd curse God and die."

Gypsy moved to the window and opened the blinds to their maximum. Then he sat in his bikini underwear with his back to his desk and his feet propped up on his cello case. He lit and then smoked a cigarette. He knew he was not permitted to smoke in the dorms, and he knew I particularly disliked smoking.

"Pray for me, Preacher."

"My prayer won't do any good," I said.

"Too bad," he said, positively glowing in the light from outside.

Thank God, I thought, I never undressed in front of him.

* * *

The whole situation had put Sister Morrisohn in a cheery mood. "Reverse hypocrisy," she said over the phone. "You're a sinner accused of Christianity. I find it all very amusing, don't you?"

"No," I said quietly, for Gypsy had finally fallen asleep.

"So are you a preacher or not?" She giggled like a woman one quarter her age.

I said, "I don't think you'd laugh if you could see how messed up Gypsy is." He slept hunched over in the chair.

"He'll get over it," she said. "Children have a way of outgrowing bad fathers."

"I wouldn't know," I said. "I have a good father."

"Count yourself lucky," she said. "The only difference between my father and Gypsy's is that mine never set foot in church his entire life."

"Your father?"

"Daddy was no Christian," she said. "And he didn't like boys."

I was amazed that her voice still had its cheer.

"My checkered past began at fourteen," she said. "The day they buried my mother, Daddy slipped a hand in my underwear and told me I was her replacement. So I cooked, cleaned, raised my little brother. I didn't sleep in my own bed again until I was eighteen. A hospital bed. The baby didn't survive."

The "baby," had it lived, would have been nine years my senior.

She continued: "But then I was a fallen woman, so I lived like one, from man to man to man, until Buford came along."

"I don't know what to say," I said.

"There is nothing to say," she said. "One can outgrow a bad daddy. Gypsy will be all right."

"I hope so."

"Just keep him at a safe distance."

"I sleep in my pajamas."

"And get out of there first chance you get," she said.

"Why? He's a nice guy. And a great musician, too."

"It's amazing," she said, "how in such a short time he's rubbed off so much on you--gambling, drinking, and now music too."

"He's my friend."

"I wonder what your other friends are going to think," Sister Morrisohn said, "when they see you in his pink socks."

* * *

For a while we were stuck with each other. No one else would have Gypsy as a roommate now that they knew, but neither would they accept me.

Why wouldn't they accept me?

Ostracized, I slipped back into my old routine. I prayed, publicly, three times a day; I carried my Bible wherever I went. I handed out tracts feverishly. Here I was, a total backslider, striking up a friendship with the Rev. Jedediah Witherspoon, who was glad to meet me.

"I see the spirit of the Most High God emanating from you," he said. "Together, we shall do great things for the Lord, young man. I won't hold your faith against you either."

I was in no way a Holy Roller as were Rev. Jed and his daughter, Donna, a first-year student at the nearby Santa Fe Community College, but now, while Rev. Jed preached at the Plaza of the Americas, Donna and I distributed tracts and Bibles and collected whatever money people wanted to give us--and many gave. I was certain they gave often just to get us off their backs, for indeed, they gave to the Krishnas and the Jehovah's Witnesses, too.

At the insistence of Donna, I started an interfaith Bible study group on Thursday nights in the bowling alley of the J. Wayne Reitz Student Union. Thursday night was league night, so the alley was more crowded than usual, more souls to save.

On Wednesdays, Donna and I put on orange T-shirts that said in large blue letters "Gators for Christ!" and rode our bikes through Porter's Quarters, the two and a half square miles of clapboard houses where the city's poorest lived in the shadow of crime and

vice. We knocked on doors. We handed out Bibles and tracts; we invited people to prayer meeting.

We even parked under the trees where young men in enormous gold chains and sweat suits exchanged Zip Loc bags of drugs for money, jewelry, sex, or expensive sneakers. We sang hymns, and we ministered to the young men, but not one of them, in their fancy clothes and cars, ever came to Bible study. Neither did a single one attempt to do us harm. They simply watched us as we watched them.

It troubled me that we had not earned their souls as well as their respect. Then again, I was not a real Christian, but the source of much evil.

One morning there was a message etched on the last stall in the men's room: "GYPSY'S AIDS CLINIC."

Missives of hate were slipped under our door nightly: "Faggot Go Home!!!"; "Wanted, tutor for Sodomy 101"; "What do they do with the foreskins after circumcision? Package them as chewing gum for faggots."

Gypsy was excluded from the poker games in Squeak's suite.

Only Punching-bag Brown remained loyal to Gypsy. They played duets from time to time in the piano room. "I don't see what all the fuss is about," Punching-bag said. "Gay or not, I still like him."

So did I.

But whenever I offered him a tract, Gypsy would suck his teeth and say derisively, "f---ing Church folks!"--as though it were entirely my fault that everyone in Rawlings now called him "Sweet Gypsy Rose."

Now they called me "Reverend Gator."

And Sister Morrisohn was yet to lose the cheer in her voice.

* * *

With a notarized letter of explanation signed by the church elders, the deacons, and Pastor, I broke my lease at Rawlings with no negative repercussions. A week before Thanksgiving I moved off campus and rented the small bedroom at the back of the Witherspoon home. The rent was low (\$130 a month) because I had agreed to give Donna piano lessons on Saturday afternoons.

I was not a Holy Roller, but since Rev. Jed and Donna had proved kind to me, I ignored Pastor's warning and attended Sunday services with them. The real difference, I soon discovered, between the Holy Rollers and the Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters was not so much the speaking in tongues, but the noise. The Rollers used tambourines and drums along with their piano and organ.

It made for quite a racket.

Then there was Donna, hands raised, eyes rolled up into her head, waiting for the spirit to descend. Sometimes when it arrived, she tried to pull me along with her.

"Come on, Elwyn," she said. "Let Him into your heart. He wants to use you."

I wouldn't budge from my seat.

And off she'd go, shouting, "Atallabula, Atallabula," in unknown tongues, dancing light-footed down the aisle.

They couldn't hold me. I was not a Holy Roller.

But then Donna grabbed my hand as we prayed at the start of a piano lesson. She wore a blue print dress with a broad square collar as from a sailor's uniform. She leaned against me, smelling of Ivory soap and strawberry jam on toast, which she ate constantly. God's food--bread and berries--is how she explained her sweet diet. For a moment, I thought she was going to kiss me, but all she did was press her cheek against mine and say: "I want you to teach me my favorite song."

On the piano, the hymnal was opened to page 39, "I Find No Fault in Him."

"You haven't progressed that far," I said. She had natural talent, but it was only her fourth lesson.

"I have faith in you. You can teach me anything." She raised her hands. "Atallabula, Atallabula, Sa Sa Sa, Atallabula," she said, in that same unknown tongue, which this time came from somewhere deep in her breast, and was more a groan than a shout.

* * *

Later that night, I whispered into the phone, "Donna held my hand today." I had a private line, but my room was right next to Donna's, and sometimes I worried that she eavesdropped on my late-night calls to Miami.

Sister Morrisohn said, "I'm surprised she waited this long, Reverend Gator. The question now is how you feel about her."

"To be honest," I said, "I don't know."

"I should have guessed it would happen eventually."

"Nothing has happened."

"You're living in her house."

"So?"

"If you were living in my house, they couldn't keep me off you. It's an old trick," she said. "Rev. Witherspoon, that fox, is setting you up to be his son-in-law."

"You're too cynical," I said. "The Witherspoons are the kindest people in the world. All they care about is the Lord's work."

"Wake up, Elwyn," she said. "If you want to leave me, then go ahead. But don't let some homely preacher's daughter set you up for a shotgun wedding."

"They're not like that," I said.

"Just because they're in the church doesn't mean they're not human," Sister Morrisohn said. "Look at us."

She always brought up our affair when she couldn't get me to see the world as she saw it of late: that secretly everyone was selfish, evil.

I said, "By the same token, just because we are corrupt doesn't mean everyone else is."

Sister Morrisohn said, "What if I told you I was with child?"

"You're too old," I said.

"Didn't I seem a little heavier to you when you visited last week? And more irritable?" she said. "What if I told you that in six months you are going to be the father of a forty-five-year-old woman's child?"

What could I say? My heart beat faster. I had a shortness of breath.

"Elwyn? Elwyn?" She shouted into the phone. "Elwyn, what are we going to do?"

"I don't know." There was only one thing we could do, but what would my parents say about a daughter-in-law older than they were? And my grandmother, who had caught us in the act once before, but spared us the humiliation of open confession--this would kill her, if she didn't kill us first. "I don't know what to do," I said.

"Elwyn? Elwyn?" Sister Morrisohn said. She laughed. "I'm not pregnant."

"What?"

"I'm not pregnant. But check your pulse. This is just how you're going to feel when Donna and the good Reverend pull this same stunt on you."

I felt both anger and relief. Mostly anger.

I said, "Thank you."

Perhaps she heard the emotion in my voice, for she said, "I don't want them to hurt you is all."

But that was not the reason at all. In her words, "I was her prized possession." Her captive.

"Thanks," I said, "for saving me."

She said, "Get some sleep, honey. Try to come down again next week."

"Sure."

Which is the worse trap, I wondered, as I went to sleep for the last time in Rev. Jed's home, the trap Donna was laying for me or the one I was already in?

* * *

I spent the next few nights in a hotel. Then I dropped by on Saturday with a moving van.

Rev. Jed said, "I respect your commitment to the Lord, Elwyn, but you don't really have to leave."

He glanced at Donna sobbing face down on the couch.

"She's promised not to tempt you anymore, and we can trust her." Rev. Jed touched the broad black belt that held up his pants and smiled. "I put the strap to her."

Spare the rod and raise a harlot.

"It's not that," I said.

I had already put a deposit on an apartment in the student ghetto, so I could have left without saying anything further. I had to know, however, if Sister Morrisohn were right about Rev. Jed and Donna. Was everyone selfish?

I said, "The problem is I don't think I'm strong enough to fight my own feelings. I don't think I even know what my feelings are."

Rev. Jed said, "Good! Explore those feelings." He put an arm around my waist. He pulled me near. "Even Saint Paul says that it is better to marry than to burn."

"Really?" I said.

"Yes." The man of God winked. "Unless, of course, something's wrong with you."

Donna lifted her head. She smiled hopefully.

I said, "Rev. Jed, my parents sent me to school to make 'A's,' not babies."

As I pulled away, I watched him. It was a silly notion, but in the back of my mind I feared the giant of God might suddenly put the strap to me.

At any rate, he did not help me carry my belongings to the van.

* * *

The following Sunday, I drove the hundred miles to Jacksonville to worship with my own people. It was a week before Christmas. The newlyweds, Marco and Tina Japonte, were my passengers on the trip--a hundred miles of cows and billboards and saintly conversation.

"It's good to have you back, Brother Elwyn," Tina said.

"It's good to be back," I said.

He sat up front with me while she sat in the back where she was not required by law to wear a seatbelt. Seatbelts proved a discomfort to Tina, who was just beyond the first trimester of her pregnancy. I did the arithmetic. Tina and Marco, married two weeks, were the eleventh couple in our church that I knew of who had walked down the aisle after a sudden pregnancy.

Then again, what else was there to do if one didn't smoke, drink, dance, or go to movies?

"You're going to love the Jacksonville church," Marco said. "It's large and you can't find a more loving congregation."

"Sounds wonderful," I said.

"And the youth choir is looking for a pianist." Marco nudged me.

I declined. I said, "Jacksonville is so far away. It's impossible to be so regular."

"We're not pressuring you. You have your own ministry to take care of now," Tina said from the back.

My own ministry. Behold the Reverend Gator: He holds prayer meeting in the student union. He gives away Bibles like handshakes. Tell him your sins, and he shall wash them white as snow.

But Lo! The Reverend Gator is a sinner.

"Just visit sometimes," Tina said.

"OK," I said.

I checked the rearview mirror. Tina lay stretched out on the seat. Her stomach was a ball. Or maybe a church bell.

* * *

We spent Christmas in the nearby town of Micanopy. But even in sleepy Micanopy I bumped into someone who knew me.

"Pray for me, Reverend Gator," the stranger said as I snuck out of my motel room to buy a pack of cigarettes for Sister Morrisohn, who continued to smoke despite my objections.

"Pray for me," the stranger said. "You are the Reverend Gator?"

"Yes," I said. Even wearing the large hat and dark glasses, I was recognized.

I lay my palm against the man's sloped forehead and prayed that his father would survive open-heart surgery. He thanked me and got into a rental car with a nervous woman who I doubt was his wife. By the time it occurred to me that the woman bore a striking resemblance to K-Sarah, the car had driven out of the parking lot.

I could not be sure.

I stepped in fresh chewing gum. I angled my foot and scraped most of it off on the edge of the sidewalk. What was left of the gum adhered bits of gravel to the bottom of my shoe.

I limped back to the room. I threw the cigarettes on the bed where Sister Morrisohn lay.

"Now what's your problem?" she said. She picked up the pack and tore off the plastic wrap. She tapped a cigarette into her palm, and gestured for the ashtray.

I passed her the ashtray.

"I hope it's not Gypsy again," she said.

Especially Gypsy.

I kicked off my shoes. I removed my shirt.

She said, "His kind begs for that sort of treatment--"

I cut her off. "The problem is it's too cold in here," I said. I pushed the switch that turned down the air.

"Turn that back up," she said. "I like it cold. I paid for the room." I turned the air back up.

Tomorrow was Christmas. She was all mine this week, this interminable week. My parents had little accepted my excuse: Mission work.

My mother had refused to take my calls.

My father had said, "She still loves you, but you know how women are." He had managed a laugh. Then: "Is it money? I've got a little savings account your mother doesn't know about--"

"No," I had told him. "No."

Then there was my grandmother's message on the answering machine: "Is it just coincidence that you won't come home for the Lord's birthday, and Sister Morrisohn is spending it in Boston with her brother? Beware the daughters of Babylon! If I could drive, I'd come up to Gainesville and check your mission work."

Not Gainesville, Gran'ma, Micanopy, a town noted for its motels.

I shivered. I said to Sister Morrisohn, "It's really cold."

"Put your sweater back on," she said, laughing. "Or you can climb back under the sheets and do your duty." She patted the bed.

I stripped to my shorts and climbed back under the sheets. At least there was that. I put my open mouth against her neck. I thought happy thoughts.

"Wait until I finish my cigarette," she said.

I was so cold I embraced her, but there was no warmth in her body. I released her and pulled the sheets over my head, which helped only a little. I dozed off.

She kissed me awake after she had finished her cigarette. Though there was little desire, I found myself fully aroused. The cold had worked its miracle.

Afterwards she said, "There. That certainly warmed your bones, didn't it? Like old times." I lay on my back, and she ran her fingers across my chest. "Let's do it again."

I rolled to one side. She was inexhaustible. "At least let me rest first," I said.

"OK," she said, lighting another cigarette. Smoke curled from her nostrils. She chuckled. "Sometimes we're no better than an old married couple. Except we're not married."

And, I might have added were I bold enough, we shall never marry--at least not each other. I want to be free.

Now she massaged my neck, her fingers needles of ice. Her smoky breath sang in my ears, "Once more, my love, my strong, young man."

"I'm not so young anymore," I said.

She tested my loins. "At least you're still strong," she said, laughing again.

But I felt very weak. And dangerously tired.

Suddenly, wrapped from neck to knees in flimsy linen, I rose from the bed.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"It's too damned cold in here!" I reached for the switch that controlled the temperature. It was stuck. I hammered it with my fist to loosen it. I moved the needle to eighty. I extended my fingers over the vents now humming with warmth.

When I turned, there was a look of terror on Sister Morrisohn's face. She didn't say a word, but she puffed anxiously on that cigarette, waiting to see what I would do next.

"Merry Christmas," I said.

"Merr--" Her face contorted as she became caught up in a fit of coughing. One hand over her mouth, she crushed out the cigarette in the ashtray and then reached for the Dixie cup of water on the night stand. She swallowed. "Merry Christmas," she said.

I moved back to the bed and took the empty Dixie cup from her. "What are you afraid of?"

"Don't leave me," she said. It had been a while since she had looked so lovely. "Just don't leave me."

"OK," I said. But she must have known I couldn't stay.

V. The Leap

The Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters was packed for the first night of the revival, with people squeezed so close together that chairs had to be brought from the nursery and the dining hall and placed in the aisles between the pews. Still there were many left standing along the back wall of the church.

And it was hot. A noisy fan labored in each corner, and the stained glass windows of the building were wide open, but the blanket of thick July heat was not thrown off.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead with the tissue I kept in a box in the piano seat. I loosened my tie. As the pianist, I had my own fan, but trust me--this was not a good night for the air conditioning to fail.

Sharing the pulpit with Pastor were the Rev. Dr. Barry McGowan--Peachie's ex-husband--from Anderson, Indiana; the Evangelist Rev'run Lewis from Tifton, Georgia, who had traveled to Miami by chauffeur driven Winnebago to work his annual miracle; and an unintroduced white minister who wore no tie.

When the musical portion of the service concluded, I only half listened as Rev'run pronounced sentence on this "weak and abominable generation" with his famous "Lake of Fire" sermon. I knew the sermon by heart. As far back as I could remember, Rev'run had been preaching the "Lake of Fire" on the first nights of his revivals, realizing, perhaps, that his audience would grow thinner and sleepier, and would carry less pocket change as the week advanced.

It was my job to remain alert, prepared to render inspirational accompaniment should Rev'run launch into song or melodious prayer. So I picked my teeth, wiped away sweat, fanned myself, yawned, and picked my teeth again without appearing irreverent or inattentive--a simple trick for me since I had been the church's pianist for most of the past

fifteen years. The main thing on my mind that night was how I would pay this month's bills.

If I didn't get any sub work, I'd have to cut at least ten yards, which worked out to two yards a day--unless I planned to work weekends. My church paycheck, \$200, would be cut on Friday, and I could steal another \$150 from Visa. My Mastercard was maxed out. I could borrow the rest from my mother, or Sister Morrisohn. Perhaps I should definitely cut a few yards on Saturday.

Rev'run was walnut-brown and fat. His head was bald, his lips beet-red. Tonight he wore a double-breasted suit woven from the finest mint-green polyester. His swollen midsection strained against the buttons. The Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters frowned upon jewelry, but we made an exception for Rev'run. On the pinkie finger of each hand, he wore a gold ring on which was inscribed "The Holy Ghost Is With You" (his left hand) and "Behold The Son Of God" (his right).

Pastor once explained, "Rev'run is a divine instrument of God. Let God alone hold him responsible for his eccentricities."

Rev'run preached rhythmically in a majestic baritone and punctuated his message by stomping a foot or pounding the lectern with a fist. When Rev'run ended a phrase or caught his breath, he grunted his trademark syllable, "AH," and the congregation echoed his cue with shouts of "My Lord," "Oh Lord," "Yes Lord," and Amen."

Rev'run bellowed, "You say your hearts belong to Jesus-AH."

The faithful cried, "My Lord."

"But ya'll bearin' the wrong kinda' fruits-AH."

"Oh Lord."

"You say you're an apple tree-AH, but I see bananas on your branches-AH. You claim to be a Christian-AH, but I see malice in your heart for your brother-AH. You say you love the Lord-AH, but you spendin' your time makin' goo-goo eyes at your

neighbor's wife-AH. All the vices know to man, you is doin' 'em-AH. You smokin'-AH, drinkin'-AH, womanizin'-AH. Some of you even manizin'-AH. Stay with me now-AH. Yes! You sodomizin'-AH. But you foolin' yourself thinkin' God ain't lookin'-AH. But Oh-AH!--"

"My Lord."

"Oh-AH!"

"Oh Lord."

"Oh-AH!"

"Yes Lord."

"Oh-AH!"

"Amen."

"Hallelujah-AH," he wailed, raising his large hands toward heaven. "I believe the poet when he says-AH, 'Vice is vice and vice a versa-AH.' And let me tell you, brother-AH, and sister-AH, and mother-AH, and father-AH. You goin' to the lake-AH--"

"My Lord."

"To the lake-AH!"

"Oh Lord."

"To the lake-AH!"

"Yes Lord."

"To the lake of fire-AH!"

"Amen."

"Hallelujah," Rev'run shouted. He clapped his hands and laughed victoriously.

The congregation followed his lead. The Spirit was moving.

Sister Naylor screamed and fell to the floor--fainted dead away, except for her trembling legs. The ushers, clearing a path through the extra chairs and stools, rushed to her. They threw the velvet cloth over her legs and dragged her to the back of the church.

Deacons Arnold Blake and Trevor Tidewell, who had been feuding over money bet on a football game, who had sworn never again to share the same pew, who had come close to exchanging blows at last week's prayer meeting, found each other in the happy confusion and embraced, tears flying everywhere. It would take more than five dollars to lure them into the lake of fire.

Sister Elaine Morrisohn--president of the Missionary Society--rolled her gray eyes heavenward and entreated, "Try me, Lord. Try me."

I found her words sadly ironic, for I had indeed tried Sister Morrisohn, who had been my mistress for well over a decade.

Up on the pulpit, Pastor clapped his hands and commanded, "Heed the words of God's anointed. Heed his words."

Rev. Dr. McGowan, a tall man with a small head, closed his eyes tightly, and soon tears were streaming. He stretched his arms around his torso and began to rock back and forth in his chair. He groaned, "God is good. God is so good."

Trapped in her web of dark senility, my eighty-seven-year-old grandmother struggled to her feet and began to tell her life story in a loud, rasping voice. When she regained control of her mind, which happened only rarely, she apologized for having spoken out of turn and dropped back into her seat. A few minutes later she was standing again saying:

"My mother, being half Indian, never used a straightening comb in her life, but she had such pretty hair. Not like this old dry head I got from my father . . ."

"Try me, Lord," said Sister Morrisohn. "Try me."

"Heed the words of God's anointed," said Pastor.

"God is good. God is so good," said the Rev. Dr. McGowan, whose ex-wife, Peachie, lay in a hospital after trying to take her own life.

The white minister was the only one who seemed to be as unaffected by the proceedings as I was.

Unlike the rest of the men, the white minister wore neither a tie nor a jacket, just a simple white shirt and a pair of black slacks, which weren't particularly well pressed. He sat with legs crossed in the plush throne-room chair, reading the advertising on his hand-held, cardboard fan. Sweat rolled off his pink face, soaking his shirt. He stared at the front of the fan--Martin Luther King, Jr. and family in church. Moments later, he flipped to the back of the fan--the Brigg's Funeral Home. Then he flipped to the front again, and after that the back, and so on, only occasionally breaking the pattern to wipe away a lock of sandy brown hair that had fallen to the front of his face and perhaps obstructed his view.

Was it possible that in the whole building, I alone noticed the man spinning the fan from front to back, back to front?

Not even I was prepared for the leap.

The white minister hopped to his feet with a loud thuh-dump. He latched onto Rev'un's shoulder and slung the fat man from Georgia into the Rev. Dr. McGowan's lap. All at once the church was silent.

The man grabbed the microphone. Deafening feedback spewed from the speakers. The white minister shouted into the microphone, "Sontalavala, Sontalavala, Ghila. Sontalavala."

With that, he clapped a monstrous Bible to his chest and leapt from the five-foot high pulpit without touching one of its seven steps. He ran down the path those standing in the aisle quickly cleared for him and then out of the church.

We heard a car door slam, an engine fire up, a car zoom out of earshot, tires screeching.

And then it was all I could do to keep from laughing. I looked around for a kindred spirit, but the church was stunned mute except for my grandmother, who stood again and lost herself in oratory:

"We had only one mule to cover all that dry, rocky soil, but we prayed to God, and God touched the hearts of our neighbors who lent us not only their mules, but their horses, their strength . . ."

My father put an arm around my grandmother, his mother-in-law, and got her to sit back down.

Pastor signaled for me to play a hymn, any hymn.

Rev'run and the Rev. Dr. McGowan, untangled at last, began chattering to each other:

"Was he with you?"

"I thought he came with you."

"He didn't come with me."

The entire church was buzzing by the time I hammered the first chords of "Just As I Am." When the church finally began singing, it was without enthusiasm. Then Pastor, usually long-winded and boring, made a faint attempt at altar call.

"Jesus loves even you . . . so come up and get saved before it's too late. Amen."

When no one responded, Pastor announced that a meeting of the Brethren would immediately follow. Then he adjourned, forgetting even to pass the collection plates.

* * *

While I had found service entertaining for a change, I did not stay for the Brethren's meeting. On my way out, I shook hands with Christians who were polite but abrupt. They were still jittery from the "miracle," as they were now calling it.

I passed by mothers and children congregated on the cemented space around the flagpole. They marveled at God's power and pondered the role of the white minister. Sister Naylor caught my eye.

"Brother Parker, what do you think about the miracle?" she said. "I missed it. I was in the back." Sleeping off the Holy Spirit.

"I don't know, sister," I said. "It's a mystery to me."

"These are the last days," said Sister Naylor, and she returned to those who might better fill her in on what she missed.

Then Sister Morrisohn stopped me. "You played real nice tonight, Brother Parker. How's Sister Parker and little Brian?" She smiled knowingly. "We missed them in service tonight."

"Sister Parker wasn't feeling too well tonight," I lied. My wife Mary was a Baptist, and she despised this church, calling its members "dry heads." In our eight years of marriage, she had attended but a handful of Sunday morning services along with a few weddings.

"Really?" said Sister Morrisohn. "What did you think of the beautiful witness of that white brother? Didn't it touch you?" She rolled her eyes.

So, I thought, she found it humorous too.

"Yes, the Spirit was really moving in him," I said.

"Indeed." Then she added in a way that only I would understand: "The Spirit hasn't moved in a long time."

"I'm certain it won't move anymore tonight," I said, in a way that only she would understand.

We walked away from the crowd of women. We positioned ourselves a safe distance from each other. Just two Christians, the pianist and the president of the Missionary Society, talking after church.

"Service ended early. Such a wasted opportunity."

"I've got to get up early for subbing tomorrow."

She caught me off guard. "At what school?"

"At . . ."

"Liars too shall have their part in the lake of fire," she said. "It's hard being alone, Elwyn."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Family problems, unemployment . . ." The list could have continued. I could have said "Peachie."

"You need money?"

"No. I've got things lined up."

"Don't be afraid to tell me," she said.

"I'm OK."

She smiled. "I just miss you is all." She took my hand, a sister in the Lord shaking the hand of her brother in the Lord. "I don't always know my place."

Sister Morrisohn walked away. I opened my hand to see what she had given me: a hundred-dollar bill.

Now with ten yards and what I could get from Visa, I'd be but \$300 in the hole. Things were looking up.

* * *

When I got home, I had every intention of telling Mary and Brian about the white minister, but they were watching a sitcom on TV. Mary sat on the couch; Brian sat Indian style on the floor, his face about two feet from the screen.

I said, "What did I tell you about sitting so close to the screen? You'll ruin your eyes."

Mary said, "Move away from that screen, Brian."

I said, "You wait until now to tell him to move away from the TV? You had all night."

Mary was ready for me. "Sure I had all night. I always have all night. And all day," she said. "You're never home. You don't have a job, but you're never home. And when you do come home, all you do is give orders."

Mary's skin was a dark olive, her head of curly hair jet black. She was tall--two inches taller than me--and thin with long, delicate hands and fingers. In that respect she reminded me of Peachie. Also like Peachie, she had thick eyebrows that ran together in the middle of her forehead. Mary's brown eyes seemed sensuous and at the same time too large to be set against her small nose and mouth.

Her left eye squinted almost shut whenever she became angry.

I said, "What do you mean I don't have a job? I work hard. Who puts food on the table? Who pays the bills?"

Mary said, squinting, "Your mom and dad. Your friends. Your credit card. And anyone else who is willing to give you a handout."

"That's not true," I said. It was true, but I didn't want her to say it was true.

"Oh, yes, you tell everyone you're a college graduate. Top of your class, you brag. Oh yes, you preach the benefits of a liberal arts education, but where is your job?" Mary said.

"I work hard," I said.

"A substitute teacher one day. A yard man the next. And the big money rolls in at the end of the month when that dry-headed church pays you. All together you make about six hundred a month. Rent alone is five hundred!"

"I work hard," I said.

Brian buried his face in his hands and began to cry in deep heaves. Mary scooped him up.

"You're not fooling anyone, Elwyn. You're a beggar. If I didn't have a part-time job at Sears, we'd starve." She carried Brian into his bedroom. When she walked back into the living room about ten minutes later, she too was crying.

She plopped down into the couch beside me, rested her head on my shoulders, wrapped her thin, downy arms around my stomach, but I refused to look at her. That she was sorry came as no surprise to me. We had been through this routine too many times in the last eight years. Why was she always sorry after she had shredded my confidence?

Mary said, "You try, Elwyn. You really try. We're gonna' make it." She touched my cheek. "If I had gotten my degree, I could help you more."

I wondered how much better off we would be if Mary had, in fact, completed her undergraduate studies in anthropology.

"You should take off your shoes, honey. Here," she said, "I'll take them to the room for you."

Kneeling in front of me, she took off my shoes and socks, and kissed my feet playfully. I did not respond. Mary swelled up to cry again, but for some reason she didn't. Too bad. She rose with my footwear and headed for the bedroom.

Because I wanted her to feel guilty, I would spend the night on the couch.

She stopped by the bedroom door. "There's a couple slices of pizza in the kitchen if you're hungry."

I loosened my tie, took off my shirt and pants, folded them neatly, and then placed them on the coffee table. I stretched out, my legs dangling over the armrest. I fell asleep. Around midnight, I awoke. An obnoxious salesman on a TV commercial was shouting:

"I want to save, save--I mean save you money!"

There was something about his manner that reminded of Rev'run.

I got up, turned off the TV, and went to bed. Mary always fought me for my favorite pillow, which tonight I found pressed between her legs. I thought she was awake,

so I said, "Tonight a visiting minister grabbed the mike from Rev'run, spoke in tongues, and leapt off the pulpit."

But Mary was asleep. At least she was snoring.

* * *

The next morning, two schools called asking for me to sub. The elementary school was about fifteen minutes away, but I chose to sub across town at the high school, not because it was where I had graduated many years ago, but because it was located in a neighborhood that had many overgrown yards. I would carry the lawnmower in my trunk and visit some of the houses during lunch hour to set up yard work for later that day and the rest of the week.

Mary wanted to make love.

I refused. I was still angry about last night.

She said, "The Bible says, 'Let not the sun set upon your wrath.'"

"I'm not angry anymore," I said. "I don't want to be late for school, and I want to conserve my energy in case I get some yard work."

She said, "When we first got married, we used to do it every night and every morning, and sometimes you'd pick me up at work and we'd go do it in the car parked behind the dumpsters."

"Did you iron my white shirt?" I said.

She handed me the shirt. ". . . and we'd do it and do it until our knees were shaky."

"There are still wrinkles in this shirt," I said. "I can't wear this."

"Those are creases," she said. "Now we do it maybe once a month. This month is almost over and we haven't done it yet."

"This is the shirt with the missing buttons," I said.

"Are we going to do it or not?" she said.

"Do what?" I said.

"Divorce." For a second or two, she eyed me the way one would eye a suspected thief. Then she smiled as though she had only been joking. "I mean sex. Are we going to do it at all this month?"

So that's it then. Joke or no joke, divorce was on her mind too.

I had never loved Mary. I was nearly certain she had never loved me. Eight years into a marriage and we hardly knew each other.

So why did we ever get married?

We first met at the University of Florida just before Christmas Break in a piano cubicle in the basement of Rawlings hall. I was practicing "Clair de Lune." She was passing by on her way to her dorm room, a large fries and a strawberry shake in either hand, when, she claimed, she heard the music.

She knocked on the door. I opened it.

"The music was so lovely," said Mary, the tall freshman, "I had to see who was playing it."

"Just me," I said.

"Your playing is marvelous. I used to take lessons as a kid, but I could never play like that," she said.

I stood up.

She sat down. She played "Chopsticks."

"That's all I remember," she said.

"It's lovely."

Then we played it together.

"I've seen you around the labs," she said. "You're a senior, a physics major."

"Math," I said.

"Oh, that's right. You helped my friend Trudy pass calculus, remember? I was there with her a few times. That's where I know you from. Do you remember me?"

She did look familiar. "You're Jeff Edward's girlfriend. ROTC Jeff?"

"Yes," she said. "I mean no. We broke up. He was too religious."

"I'm in his Bible study group."

"I didn't mean it in a negative way."

"Yes you did."

"Yes I did," she said. "He was too pushy. Are you pushy?"

"No, but I know the type," I said. Who was I to judge people? A few weeks earlier during a trip home to Miami, I had spent almost all of my time with Sister Morrisohn. I said: "Salvation is for everyone and at the same time not for everyone, if you know what I mean. I let people do what they want to do."

"What do you want to do now?" she said.

"Anything you want to do," I said. I reached for her strawberry shake, sipped it up through the straw.

Not counting Sister Morrisohn, Mary was the first woman I had ever slept with, so when she became pregnant, I didn't encourage abortion. I proposed to her. My reasoning was that marrying Mary would help me end my years-old affair with Sister Morrisohn, which was almost as taxing as it was necessary. I was wrong. Sister Morrisohn and I still met as often as we could.

Poor Mary, I would never love her.

But divorce scared me. I would never be able to live on the little money left over after child support. And what if she wanted alimony? I wanted to see Brian grow up. I was stuck.

So on the morning after the white minister leapt from the pulpit, I approached Mary from behind, one hand sliding up under her short top, gliding over her naked waist, pulling her backwards against me.

"Ah, yes." Mary became soft lips, clean skin. She smelled very much of talcum powder. "I love you, Elwyn. I love you," she said.

But I didn't believe her.

* * *

"I'm a sub," I said to the security guard, who was new and didn't recognize me.

"Lift your arms," she said. I lifted my arms, and she passed a buzzing paddle under them, up and down my legs, between them. "You're clean."

Mr. Byrd, my old principal, saw me. "That's Elwyn Parker. He's a sub."

The security guard said. "He's clean."

I shook Mr. Byrd's hand as I always did when I subbed at Miami Gardens High, and he said the same thing he always said: "The bars, the armed guards, the metal detector, you'd think this is a prison. What year did you graduate?"

I said, "1982."

"In 1982, we sent two students to Harvard, six to Princeton and MIT, twenty to Stanford, forty to the University of Florida and Florida State, and nearly a hundred to Miami-Dade Junior College. Over seventy percent went on to some kind of higher education."

"I remember," I said, though I wondered at Mr. Byrd's astonishing memory. Would he recite the same figures if one day I told him I had graduated in, say, 1981?

Mr. Byrd pointed down the hall at two girls in cut-off shorts, halter tops, and gold sprinkles in their hair matching their gaudy gold necklaces and bangles. The girls were casually smoking cigarettes. One girl was clearly pregnant. "Put those cigarettes out!" Mr. Byrd yelled.

The girls eyed him menacingly before putting out their cigarettes. They disappeared around the corner, no doubt to smoke again, or worse.

Mr. Byrd turned to me. He took a deep breath and tapped the pipe in his breast pocket.

I waited for him to say "But now."

"But now," he said, "I am lucky if fifty percent of the students even graduate. Luckier still if fifty percent of those who graduate can read. Luckier still that one of them doesn't blow me away for taking away her cigarettes . . . or dope."

"We can't give up on them," I said.

"No," Mr. Byrd said. "Maybe you could come out here and preach to them, I don't know."

We both laughed at that, but for different reasons.

I had a hard time believing in God anymore. I wasn't an atheist, but neither was I certain God paid much attention to me. Maybe He was punishing me. Yes, that would explain it. I was smart and educated and hadn't held a full-time job since graduating college.

Behold the wrath of God.

Then Mr. Byrd said, "It was sure easier breaking up illegal Bible studies in the cafeteria."

Again, we both laughed.

At lunch time, I quickly devoured the tuna fish sandwich and apple tart that Mary had packed for me, washing everything down with a Coke from the vending machine in the teacher's lounge. I crossed the street to the first of four overgrown yards on the block. I knocked. An elderly man opened the door, and after I offered to cut his lawn, he explained that he couldn't afford the twenty dollars.

"Fifteen?"

"No, I live on a fixed income."

I said, "Don't your neighbors complain about the way the yard has gotten away from you?"

"Around here nobody cares."

I looked down the street at the ghastly paint jobs, barred windows, barred doors, derelict cars parked in the yards--sometimes on the lawn itself--hedges grown out in profuse disarray. The neighborhood had gone, as they say, to hell. His was but an eyesore among eyesores.

I persisted. "Twelve?" I said.

"I just don't have the money," the man said.

"What can you afford?" I said. There was some leeway; I was my own boss.

"Six?" said the man.

"That's low, but I'll do it for six," I said, figuring I'd make up the loss on someone else's yard. The idea was to foster goodwill. Soon there would be talk about the nice man who cuts yards cheap. The whole neighborhood would improve, starting with the lawns.

The man said, "Young man, I can't lie to you. I need to buy half a gallon of milk with some of that money."

I walked down to the next house on my block and had more success. The woman who came to the door in a rumpled housecoat and slippers greeted me with an exhausted smile. A baby wailed behind her from somewhere inside.

"Yes, cut it please. God it grows fast in the summer," she said.

"I'll be back after school," I said.

"Good."

No one answered at the third house, but a branch sagging low with mangoes caught my eye. I picked a fat, yellow one and went on to the fourth house. No one answered there either.

I couldn't believe it. One house. Twenty lousy dollars. I was still in the hole. I would have to cut four houses tomorrow to get caught up.

I bit the mango, and it turned out to be quite sweet, but stringy. I sucked hard to dislodge the stringy fibers between my teeth.

After school, I mowed the haggard mother's yard, and she paid me with two tens; then she thought about it and passed me another dollar, a tip.

"Please," she said, "come back next week."

Then I pushed the lawnmower down to the old man's house and began mowing. After a while, he came outside and looked on from his porch.

When I finished, he walked on his freshly cut lawn in his bare feet and handed me the six dollars: three crumpled bills and twelve shiny quarters. I gave back the quarters.

"Go buy your milk," I said. I felt great when the old man smiled.

"What?"

"Go buy your milk." It was simply the right thing to do.

Then I contemplated cutting every yard in the neighborhood for free, but, of course, I didn't. My faith wasn't so strong anymore.

* * *

I stuck my head into room 323-H.

"Not you again," Peachie joked. "I'm better. Go home."

They had removed the heavy bandages from her hands. The scars had healed like the footprints of pigeons. She spotted the roses.

"For me?" she said. She pointed to a vase on the rolling night stand. "Are they scented?"

"They cost fifteen dollars," I said.

"Big money. We'll send them back if they're not scented," she said. Her eyes were red. She was still having trouble sleeping.

I sat on the edge of her bed. "I came by to tell you something interesting," I said.
"About church."

"If it's about the Rev. Dr. McGowan, save your breath," she said. "Four years married, three years divorced--I could write a book. Stingy, pompous, impotent."

"You have three children," I said.

"I meant stingy, pompous, and ignorant," she said.

I laughed. "It's not about Barry."

"Good."

"Although he is in town."

"The annual revival," she said. "He called."

"Really?"

"He wanted to include me in his prayers," she said. She brushed the invisible Barry away.

"Ignorant, indeed," I said. "I warned you about him."

"When you loved me," she said.

"Then along came Barry," I said.

"Whatever." Again, Peachie brushed the invisible Barry away. "Did Rev'run get any fatter?"

"The holy man of God is a veritable behemoth."

"The Goliath of God," she said.

"And growing."

Peachie said, "Did he bring his whore with him?"

"Huh?" It took me a few seconds to realize she was talking about Barry and his new wife. "I couldn't tell you," I said. "I don't even know what she looks like."

"A small, ugly woman surrounded by tall, pretty children who look like me."

"I know not the lady," I said.

"You'd like her, Elwyn," Peachie said. "She's not quite as old as Sister Morrisohn, but she's getting there."

"I'm taking my flowers back," I said, deadpan.

Peachie wasn't laughing. She said, "Getting dumped by a man you do not love for a woman who can't hold a candle to you is bad enough. But for a judge to call you an unfit mother . . . unfit? I am not an unfit mother."

Peachie was transforming from witty to bitter right before my eyes.

"Indiana is a Bible belt state. They frown on . . . adultery."

"Barry screwed around too. With that same rodent who's called 'mother' by my kids!" she shouted. "But, of course, the good Rev. Dr. McGowan looks better in court than his little tart of a wife who didn't even finish high school."

Peachie's shouting had attracted attention. A nurse walked in. "You're going to have to leave, sir."

"He's my friend," said Peachie.

"You need to rest. He's disturbing you," said the nurse. She was a serious-looking nurse. Big.

"Stay," Peachie said.

"I'm going," I said. I kissed Peachie on the forehead. I got up from the bed.

"Wait," she said. "You had something to tell me about church."

"It's nothing. Something funny happened at the revival last night is all," I said.

"I'll tell you later."

The serious nurse urged me on out of the room.

* * *

I tried to practice the hymns I would play that night, in B major, which was for me the most difficult key, but I could not concentrate. Mary was a great deal upset.

No doubt, it had made little sense telling Mary about the old man whose yard I had cut that day, but I was proud of my good deed, and one ought to tell one's good deeds to one's wife. Especially when one's wife considers one pathetic. Or maybe not.

Mary inexplicably lost her cool. She slammed things. She walked around the apartment muttering to herself. When she picked up the phone, I overheard her tell someone that she was married to a fool who cut yards for three dollars a piece.

Then Mary tried to slam the piano door down on my fingers, but I was too fast.

"This is it, Elwyn," she said, pointing a finger. "Find a job or lose your wife."

"With the school board cutting back, there's little chance--"

"I don't care. Find a job," she said.

"Well I do have several good leads working."

"I don't care about leads. Find a job!" She uttered a profane word and stormed off to the bedroom, squinting. "This is the last time I'm telling you."

Not another ultimatum, I thought. Must it ever be this way: sex in the morning, fighting at night?

As I was leaving for the second night of the revival, I noticed that Brian was again sitting too close to the TV. I didn't mention it to Mary.

* * *

At the Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters, it was customary to honor a visiting Evangelist by acting more penitent than usual. At revivals in years past, droves of weeping backsliders had come to the altar at Rev'run's behest and begged God to have mercy on their reprehensible souls. They had openly reconciled themselves with their maker, and Rev'run had left Miami convinced that he had wrought a miracle.

This year, a greater miracle had pre-empted Rev'run's. God had sent a white man to speak His message in unknown tongues.

On the second night of the revival, the church was more crowded than the night before. Anxious, sweating saints waited for another spectacle. They were only just tolerating Rev'run.

Knowing this, perhaps, the fat man from Tifton, Georgia, preached timidly and completely without appeal. He seemed almost embarrassed to utter his customary syllable, "-AH"; halfway through the sermon, he abandoned it entirely. When he finished preaching, only the regulars ambled up to the altar where they dutifully repented: Beatrice Naylor, sixteen, unmarried and pregnant with her second child; Eldridge and Sabina Pomerantz whose seven-year marriage was on the rocks again; and Brother Al, the maintenance brother, who, like me, was looking for a job.

You could see it in everyone's face: Where was the white minister?

Pastor frowned at the meager substance in the collection plate and said, "Since we forgot to take up collection last night, let's pass the plates around an extra time tonight."

The plates went around again and returned with less money than the first time. Pastor shook his head distastefully and clapped his hands.

"Saints. Saints," he shouted, "is this how we take care of God's servant who has traveled all the way from Georgia? I want you to dig a little deeper into your hearts and pocket books. I'll start it with the first dollar."

Magnanimously, Pastor tossed a dollar bill into a collection plate. The Rev. Dr. McGowan, with much ceremony, flipped in four quarters. The plates went around again but returned with mere small change glittering around Pastor's dollar bill.

Service ended early again.

* * *

And because I knew it was useless to fight, I followed Sister Morrisohn to a hotel on Biscayne Boulevard, where we rented a room for two hours.

A large bed and a color TV bolted to the wall were the only luxuries, but the hotel, we had learned over the years, was safer than her house. As president of the Missionary Society, Sister Morrisohn received too many unexpected visitors.

We lay with our nakedness hidden under the sheets and our heads propped up by pillows that might have been filled with cardboard. Sister Morrisohn dug through her pocket book and pulled out a bent cigarette. The last one in the box. She straightened the cigarette, struck a safety match, and lit it.

"Will it still work?" I said.

"No, but I hate to waste them," she said.

"They give you cancer," I said.

"As long as it kills me at the end of my life and not in the middle," she said. She flicked off the broken end, lit the stub, inhaled, exhaled. Smoke, like a dragon's breath, curled heavenward from her nostrils.

I couldn't believe she was nearly sixty. Her eyes were the only things gray on her body. Her hair was dyed raven black, and she wore it now in two long braids that met behind her head. Her ginger colored skin dispersed into tiny freckles on her cheeks. She had a perfect nose. It was small and straight. I loved her face in spite of the increasing wrinkles. When she smiled, I didn't even notice them.

I had a hard time believing in God anymore. I wasn't an atheist, but heaven just seemed so far away. Mind you, God was certainly a good idea: someone who sitteth high and looketh low and guideth my feet wherever they go.

A God could help me regain control of my life. I wouldn't have to cut yards for three dollars a pop, or play piano for people who had less faith than I did. I wouldn't have to borrow money to pay rent. I might even honor my wife.

But in the absence of God, there was the hotel on Biscayne Boulevard and Sister Morrisohn.

At least I still lusted after my mistress.

"You're beautiful," I said. "When will you marry?"

"When my lover grows up," she said.

"You've taken a lover?"

"And he's married," she said.

"I hear he doesn't love his wife," I said.

She turned her head. "Then why did you marry her?"

"Because of you," I said.

"I know." With a sweeping motion of her hand, she brushed away ashes that had fallen onto the sheet. "But since you brought it up, I think I should warn you that I would like to marry again before it's all over," she said.

"Really?" I said.

"Really," she said.

"Please don't," I said. "It would unnecessarily compromise our relationship."

Sister Morrisohn smiled, and the wrinkles vanished for a few more minutes. "And another thing," she said. "Who was that white minister yesterday?"

Yes! "I've been meaning to talk to somebody about that." She always knew where my mind was.

"One crazy guy," we said at the same time.

VI. The Lord of Travel

It is Sunday morning. I am dressed in a sport coat and tie, but I am not in church. I am running in order to get to the next customer before Curly or the Arab can.

She's a real lay down, this girl who rides in on a bike. It's like she has "Scholarship Money" stamped on her forehead.

"My name is Ida," she says, taking my hand.

I love the way you speak, Ida. Where are you from?

"I'm from New Jersey," she says.

New Jersey, I say.

This New Jersey joke runs through my brain--something about the "Garbage" State Bridge--but I can't remember the punch line. It's just as well. If I offend her, I'll have a harder time selling her the car. So I play up the tough Northerner thing.

Oh yes, the South sucks. Too slow. Not like up North, I say (although the farthest north I've ever been is Gainesville when I was a student at the University of Florida). Not like New Jersey. Only one thing would make a sane person leave New Jersey for a one-horse town like Miami. You're a student.

"Yes. U.M. How did you guess?"

Glasses, looking intelligent but stunning on your pretty face. You rode a bike. And I don't see your father, husband, or boyfriend. All independent women are students or lawyers.

"That's not true, is it?"

Definitely. What's your major?

"Anthropology," she says.

Anthropology? Anthropology? My ex-wife majored in anthropology.

"Really?"

Yes, I say. And do you know what she does for a living now?

"What?"

She spends my alimony at Sac's on thousand-dollar handbags.

"Good for her," says Ida.

When Ida laughs, her teeth show even and white. Her laugh says she likes me, trusts me. I have sold myself well. If this keeps up, she's going to drive home in a brand new clunker and they'll need a wheelbarrow to deliver my paycheck.

I run a hand over the shiny parts of the car and begin my spiel.

Beautiful finish, I say. One owner, I claim. Great gas mileage, I lie, for a car this size. Four-door convenience--just right for someone with a lot of friends. I myself took this baby to the beach last week (just don't tell my manager, ha-ha-ha), and girl, let me tell you how they envied me. A true classic, only ten thousand were made.

She notices a door handle is missing.

That little thing can be fixed, I say. Oh yes, we were going to fix that anyway. Don't you worry about that.

She runs a hand along the scratched up left side.

And those scratches? We can paint those. Here, let me write it down. Scratches, door handle Anything else? OK. Back tires, side view mirror, dent in roof. Good, good. We'll take care of everything, really.

She turns to eye other cars on the lot. Resistance.

Ida, I say, touching her hand, making Honest Abe eye contact. Ida, for the kind of money you're looking to spend, this is the best buy in town. The absolutely best buy. True, I could show you something a bit nicer, a little cleaner, but you'd have to raise your sights. Over there, for instance--the red Mustang. Pretty, isn't it? I'd love to sell it to you, but you're talking at least four thousand dollars more. Can you do that?

"No."

I didn't think so. You see, Ida, I'm not the kind of guy who is going to rip off a young, attractive sister like yourself. Especially with your being in school. I was a student, and I know what it's like to live on a budget.

"Thanks," she says.

Black people have to stick together, I say, opening the car door.

I take her for a test ride, and she begins to act more and more like a buyer. She adjusts her seat and the rearview mirror to her comfort. She fiddles with the radio. She plays with the knobs on the dashboard until she figures out the air conditioner. Cool air rushes out of the vents, humming. For my part, I am pleased that the car doesn't stall in neutral as it did the day before.

All the while I'm saying, Nice car, Isn't it? Drives great, doesn't it? Air feels good, doesn't it?

And I watch her head nod in approval. I am putting Ida in a "yes" mood. After saying "yes" twenty times, it's hard to say "no." Psychology.

Ida turns down a lonely street and punches the accelerator. The car belches forward, its ancient V-8 roaring mightily, "Out of my way! I am the Lord of Travel, master of the road!" Blue-gray smoke trails out of the exhaust pipes, but Ida doesn't notice. She is a woman in love with a car. She smiles all the way back to the lot.

We park.

Ida sucks in a deep breath. When she turns to face me, her smile is replaced by a look of false concern. She is about to pretend she is little interested in the car so that she can get a better deal from me. She will claim she can't afford it, say she needs to think about it, say she is considering other cars, say she wants her father, husband, boyfriend to look at it before she decides. She will try very hard to get the best possible deal, and she

will fail utterly. However valiant be her fight, she is outmatched. You see, Ida is buying her first car; I sell them every day.

You felt good in that car, didn't you?

I nod my head. She nods hers.

It drove so sweetly, didn't it?

I nod my head. She nods hers.

If you could get a good deal on this car, you'd buy it, wouldn't you?

I nod my head. She nods hers--and then she shakes it, saying, "But I don't know how much it costs."

Ida, did I mention cost? Listen to me carefully. If I write a deal that you, IDA, feel is the best deal in the world on this wonderful car that you, IDA, are in love with, would you, IDA, buy the car and drive it home today?

I nod my head. She nods hers. "Yes, if you did all those things. Yes," Ida commits. Ida is a real lay down, the customer who buys it just the way you lay it out--no questions, no resistance, just an occasional burst of delighted giggling.

We go inside and she signs her name to various documents that give her title to the over-priced gas guzzler. She writes the dealership a check. I hand her the keys. She drives off.

Done deal.

The others come over and pat me on the back to hide their envy. They ask how much money I made.

Too much, I tell them.

The manager shakes my hand. Biggest sale of the month on a car he thought no one would sell, the Lord of Travel--a wreck on wheels, a bone mobile, a junker, a heap. And to sell it as though it were the best car on the lot! He mentions a bonus. What wouldn't he do for the guy who just bought him another month or two in his cushy job?

Then Ida returns.

I see her through the glass doors, walking briskly. She seems irritated. I suspect she is suffering from buyer's remorse, the headache buyers get when they drive off the lot and begin to realize that they didn't get such a sweet deal after all, that, in fact, their deal was quite sour.

The others move away from me, eyebrows raised. Oh-oh, they think. Another sale gone sideways. Customer wants her money back.

I suspect they are right.

Ida says, "You forgot to give me one of those temporary tags."

(Praise God.)

No problem, I say. Wouldn't want you to get a ticket.

I make out the tag, the magic marker shaking in my grasp. I tape it to her rear windshield. I congratulate her again on her wise purchase, and she hugs me, of all things.

"I feel so independent now," she says.

The car coughs, rattles, emits black smoke, and finally starts. Ida smiles stupidly and drives off. She even waves good-bye.

Yes, a real lay down.

* * *

I go inside. I am a nervous wreck. My palms are sweating. I make for the bathroom but can't get past Curly and the Arab, who block my path.

Curly says, "Close call."

Never doubted it for a second, I say.

The Arab says, "I had a customer like that once. Easy sale. Full pop. A real lay down. He leaves the store, right? I'm celebrating when I get this phone call. It's raining and I had forgotten to show the guy how to work his wipers. So I explain it to him over the phone and we hang up. Half hour later, this guy shows up, and he is pissed. The

windshield wipers work fine, but the car stalls when he turns 'em on. Get it? So he can't drive in the rain. He can't have the wipers and the engine on at the same time."

Curly laughs. "I remember that car. Twenty dollar paint job covered up all the rust. Came this close to selling it to a missionary when it conked out."

"That's the car, that's the car," says the Arab, who hates being interrupted. "So I tell this guy to bring the car back tomorrow so's the mechanic can look at. The wires are crossed or something. No. He wants it done now or he wants his money back. We go back and forth like this. But you know me. I finally tell him to make like Michael Jackson and 'Beat It!' He starts to cuss' and scare off the other customers, and he wants to sue --"

The Arab drones on. I hardly listen, but I nod in the right places. I know this story, and I've been involved in hundreds like it. As Curly winds up to tell his version of the same tale, I steal away to the bathroom where I dry my palms and my forehead.

What is wrong with me?

Checking the mirror, I notice my tie hangs funny, and there is a grimy spot where my gold tie pin would be if I had not hocked it. I need a haircut. Once again I forgot to shave. Otherwise, I look great.

So what is wrong with me?

I am sweating. My stomach is jumping. Is it Ida? Is it guilt? No, I am a salesman; I'm hardcore.

A while ago, I closed a phone deal with a local millionaire. Like many wealthy people, he was above coming to the dealership, so I had to go to his house to deliver the car and pick up the check. When he saw that I was black, he revealed himself as a bigot. At his request, I sat in the back during the test drive. When we got back to his home, he did not offer me a seat. I stood while he read through the papers. He even let fly a comment about the damned niggers and spics who are ruining this country. I was unmoved. I told him I was offering him a great car at a great price; he signed the papers

and bought the car. I felt a burning hatred for the man, but no guilt for selling him a car. Money is green and silver and copper and gold, never black and white.

When I leave the bathroom, I find Ida waiting in the showroom. Behind her, through the glass walls, I see her car, the Lord of Travel. Its hood is popped open. Thick black smoke is billowing out of the oil pan, and water is spraying up from the radiator.

* * *

Well, Ida, I say, it's your car. You chose it. You paid for it.

"Yes, but you said . . . ," she begins.

It's your car. You paid for it.

She considers this silently.

I wait for her to attack me, threaten to sue, or burst into tears. I've seen it all before. Instead she turns away from me and stares at her smoking car. "Great Deal" is still written on the front windshield in large, red letters. The handle bar and front tire of her bike lean out of the half-closed trunk. I deny my need to help her; I must be firm. It is important that she understand it is her car polluting the air with smoke and rusty water. No deposit. No return.

When she does turn on me, she is well composed. "I'll stop payment on the check," she says.

It has already been cashed, I tell her.

At our dealership, we "hammer" checks. In other words, we send a runner to cash the check at the issuing bank as soon as we receive it. Ida's check was cashed before she had driven off the lot the first time.

"I'll call a lawyer," she says.

So will we, I say. Now let's see, you were eighteen when you read and then signed the buyer's order, right?

"I trusted you," she says.

You chose the car. You signed for it. Now, if you want our mechanic to look at it, say so and I'll get him to check it out for you tomorrow. If not, you'd better call a towing company to haul it off our lot, or the manager will charge you \$50.00 per day for storage.

Ida wears a white coverall that hangs to mid-thigh, and a light breeze flaps the material around her chubby legs. Flap, flap, flap. Black and smooth is her skin, but at times the loose cloth around her shoulders shifts to reveal a frilly bra strap and the lighter flesh beneath it. Her hands balled into fists are useless on her hips. When her eyes fill up and turn red, I notice something else about Ida, something I didn't notice before.

I am surprised--disturbed by it.

"How much will your mechanic charge?" She says.

If you're nice about it, nothing. Just parts and labor and taxes. (As though there is anything left to charge.) And I'll have Miguel, the lot boy, drive you home in his pick-up. I don't want you riding that bike home. It's getting dark. Give me your keys.

Taking her keys, I touch her hand. I linger. I pull away.

As a car salesman, I meet many women I could happily fall in love with, but I usually realize this after I have sold them cars, and then it is too late. The smart ones never want to see me again. And the dumb ones, well, I don't call them back after sex. I just can't respect anyone dumb enough to get screwed twice by the same guy.

It isn't really a bad car, I say. Once we fix it up, you'll see you made a wise purchase.

"OK," she says, "but promise me." Now she is on the verge of tears. I let her take my hand.

Trust me, I say.

"Promise me," she says.

Trust me.

I nod my head.

She nods hers. "I do trust you," she says, my cold hand warm in both of hers.

"You're not like the rest of them."

No, I'm not, I say.

The resemblance is amazing. They are sisters in sadness, Ida and Elaine, the one lost to me forever.

When Miguel returns and they pull off the lot, Ida waves at me. She actually waves at me and smiles, this Ida.

And it comes back to me: "Love. God is love."

* * *

It is late.

Outside, the lot boys are locking the doors on all the cars. The security guard, having already blocked off two of the entrances, waits at the third. He checks his watch.

Inside, I watch the Arab dramatize his defeat by throwing up his hands. His customer, a tall, thin man in a white shirt and dress slacks, rises from his chair. The man wears no watch.

"I'm leaving," the man says. "I would like my money and my driver's license back."

The Arab says, "I'll call the manager." He moves towards the man in the white shirt and dress slacks. "Maybe we can work something out." He touches the man's shoulder as though they are old friends, and the man shrinks away.

The man says in a firm voice: "Please, young man, retrieve my money and my license. I no longer wish to do business with you."

"OK, OK," says the Arab, making his way to the tower, where Curly, the manager, and I are waiting. "OK. OK."

The Arab needs a "Turn"--a fresh salesman to save the sale. This is quite a surprise, for the Arab is our best closer.

"He's a puke," the Arab says. He falls heavily into a swivel chair and swivels.

"He's not buying. Throw him out."

The manager counts the man's deposit, four hundred fifty dollars in twenties and tens. He picks up the man's license and turns to me and Curly. "There's still money on the table. Who wants to play manager?"

Curly and I say "I do" at the same time.

"He's a puke, I tell you," says the Arab.

But Curly and I feel no pressure taking a turn from the dealership's top earner. If we close a deal that has slipped from the Arab's stubborn grasp, then we are super salesmen and we get half the money. If we don't close it, no problem--we weren't expected to anyway. We go home early.

"Give it to me," says Curly to me, "I haven't had a sale in two days."

Yes, I say, but I haven't lost a sale in a week.

Big Curly puts himself between me and the manager. "You owe me one," says Curly to the manager. "I can close this guy. I do well with clean-cut guys."

But preachers are my specialty, I say.

"A preacher," says my manager, handing me the money and the license: Hezekiah McBride, 45, safe driver, most likely a Holy Roller. "Go make us some more money."

"A puke," says the Arab.

I step down from the tower and walk toward Hezekiah McBride. Brother McBride. Pastor McBride. A man whose diction speaks of sterling credit and a Holy Bible With Concordance in his briefcase. The good Rev. McBride is not here to play games with heathen who call God "Allah." He's here to buy a car, and I'm just the Sunday school dropout to sell it to him.

So I take my time. I check the tires on our showroom model. I take a side trip into an empty office and sit in the dark for thirty seconds. I come out and sip water from the

fountain. I address Miguel who is now pushing a dust mop over the showroom floor. I ask him if he is certain all the cars outside are locked up. When he informs me they are, I say "good" in my most authoritarian baritone and then sip from the fountain again.

I take my time not because I'm afraid of Hezekiah McBride, but because I have his license and his money, which he won't leave without. A power game. The longer a buyer stays in the store--no matter how badly you treat him--the more likely it is he will buy.

Hezekiah McBride demands his money and license as soon as I arrive, ignoring my hand extended for an introductory shake; I hand everything over but position myself at the exit of the half-office so that he cannot leave without pushing past me impolitely. He fumbles to replace his license and money in his fat wallet. In the process, he drops two twenties; I pick them up, hand them to him.

"Thanks," he says.

Hezekiah McBride, because he is a man of God, hopes to conceal his anger. I shall use this against him.

Hezekiah, I say, I could hear your voice way up in the management tower, and, well, we've been having some trouble with him.

I point in the general direction of the Arab.

"That young man is a liar and a thief," he says. "He lied about what he was going to give me for my trade-in until I got ready to sign the papers."

Did he now?

"He said he'd give me a thousand, but then he added the cost of air and tires and rust proofing to the new car, raising its price by seven hundred fifty."

In effect, paying you two hundred fifty dollars for your trade-in.

"Two hundred fifty dollars."

I frown. I pick up the buyer's order.

Is this the deal?

"Yes."

Trading in a '74 Eldorado. Moderate condition . . .

"Good condition," he corrects. "It just had a paint job."

. . . Some rust. Missing grille. Bald tires. Forty-two thousand miles.

"Two hundred forty-two thousand," he says. "It went over twice."

Thanks for being so honest.

"Mine is not a deceitful tongue," he says.

I lower the buyer's order. I look him straight in the eye.

I appreciate that, Hezekiah. If more people were honest, I say, selling cars would certainly be a lot more enjoyable. You'd be surprised what sort of junk I pay top dollar for.

He says, "No one can fool you. You're a car salesman."

So many years in church, I say, has made me an easy mark for the false tongue.

"Really? What faith are you?"

I say, It's against policy for me to discuss religion at work.

I could say, my faith is money--though it didn't used to be.

Even now on Sundays when I'm not slamming customers or stealing the commission from some ignorant green pea, I might visit the Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters. I arrive late, take a seat in the back, of course, sing as loud as anybody else--without use of a hymnal--the songs I've known since childhood, and then leave as soon as the musical portion ends. I like music. I can pick out a tune on the piano just like the best of them. But I have no time for sermons anymore. And no faith, except for the green kind, since Elaine passed.

One day I left my wife and child and God for her. It was long overdue. I think I was happy. The next day she was hospitalized. No cancer. No heart disease. No high

blood pressure whirling out of control. An embolism--whatever that is--in her brain. And then in my heart.

"Love," she said. The green, electric mountains became hills, then smaller hills, and then they lay flat against the horizon.

The blip-blip became a sigh.

"What?" I said, leaning close to her ear.

"God is Love," she said. And then she died, even though I held her hand. She was a year shy of sixty.

"You wouldn't be a Holy Roller, would you?" Hezekiah McBride says.

Are you?

With his thumbs, he pulls his pants up higher than his waist. "I'm Pastor of the Greater Miami Holy Rollers' Tabernacle of Faith."

Beaming, I shake his hand.

I lie, I'm a Holy Roller, too!

"Really? I've never seen you in service. Where do you worship?"

I'm not local.

"Kendall, Goulds, Homestead . . . ?"

Yes, Goulds.

(Wherever that is.)

"Pastor Jeroboam, right?"

Yes.

(I guess.)

"Well," he says, "you must come up to Greater Miami next week. We're having a tent meeting, and believe me, brother, you don't want to miss the Rev. Jedediah Witherspoon. He's a dynamic speaker come all the way from Gainesville to preach God's word."

Rev. Jedediah Witherspoon, I echo. I've heard of him.

(He hates me.)

"Well this is something," he says. "To meet a brother at a car dealership."

He made some preachers, He made some salesmen, I say.

"Amen," he says.

I tell you what I'm going to do for you, Pastor McBride. I'm going to simplify this deal. How much do you really think your trade-in is worth?

He knits his brow. "About eight hundred."

A '74 Eldorado with rust, no tires, and no grille?

"Five-hundred?"

Pastor, it's got over two hundred thousand miles.

"Three-hundred?"

A hundred fifty dollars tops, I say.

"That's no deal," he says. "The other guy offered me more."

On paper he did. But when you figured it out . . .

He sighs.

What about this? What if I buy the car from you? What if I give you the hundred fifty in cash? Real money. It's more than these heathens are going to give you when they finish writing it up on paper.

"Cash? Can you do that?" he says.

Yes, I'll buy the car myself. I need something to putter around town in, I say.

You can add what I give you to your down payment and get a cheaper monthly rate. And we don't have to let the dealership know. This is between brothers.

"Amen," he says. And Hezekiah McBride, without my asking him to, sits down and once again pulls out his four hundred fifty dollars in tens and twenties; I reach into my

wallet and pull out the "biscuit"--the hundred fifty dollars that the dealership gives me for just such occasions.

I give the biscuit to Hezekiah, and he gives it back to me with his down payment. Now he's happy with the deal.

So am I.

Perhaps if Pastor Hezekiah McBride had earned a useless bachelor's degree in mathematics like I did, he'd realize that biscuit or not, I just snatched his trade-in for a hundred dollars less than the Arab was offering him.

* * *

"You are on a roll, my friend," says the Arab.

We could've made more money if you hadn't been so transparent.

"Like you're hurtin' for money," Curly says, "after the mint you made on that black girl."

I shouldn't have buried her, I say. It's her first car.

"So?"

She rode in on a bike.

"Don't worry about it," says my manager. "With the money you made, you can afford to take her out to a fancy dinner. Wine her, dine her, take her to bed. I did it a hundred times when I was in sales."

The Arab says, "Best lovers are customers."

Curly says, "Ever notice how when a customer forces a great deal out of you, I mean practically steals the best car on the lot, that this same jerk customer--instead of being satisfied--always returns again and again to complain about everything? But you rip a customer off, bury the sucker like you did that black girl today--and guess what? That customer never bothers you again. If anything, a sucker like that refers other suckers to you."

She's not a sucker, I say.

"No offense," says the Arab, "but you know young black women are the easiest sell. Young black women, then young black men, then young white women, young white men, and like that all the way up to the toughest sell, old white men."

So where do sand-niggers like yourself fit in?

"Hey," exclaims the Arab.

Are kikes on that list?

"Wait a minute," says Curly, rising to his feet--Curly whose paternal grandfather had survived Treblinka.

I turn to my manager, but he is a peckerwood with the power to fire me.

He smiles. "Take it easy," he says, putting a hand on my shoulder.

"You've gone overboard," says Curly. "You wouldn't like it if I called you the 'N-word.'"

"I thought we were friends," says the Arab.

Forgive me, I say. You are my friend. You are all my friends. I'm just under a lot of pressure.

"But you made so much money," say the Arab, Curly, and my manager.

Yes, I did, I say.

But maybe money isn't everything.

* * *

I pull up to my parents' house, where I live in a room over their garage. A light is on in the living room, and through the verticals I make out my mother, my father, and my ex-wife, who I know is there to ask me in a most displeasing fashion why child support payments haven't been received in two months, so I back up and out of the driveway.

I drive a two-seater tonight, my reward for burying Ida and bamboozling Pastor Hezekiah McBride. The odometer reads 25--a virgin. The smell is Windex and Lysol and

something lemony. Then the car smells like smoke, too, when I light a cigarette. I'm trying to quit. I take two, three, four drags and I crumple the cigarette into the ashtray. Then I chew a piece of Juicy Fruit, wad it up, and stick it in the ashtray as a little something for the new owners to find--let them know I was here first. I ride the clutch. I make the tires squeal when I round corners. I pull onto the lonely expressway, pretend it is the Autobahn, crank it up to 120.

As usual, I end up in that bad section of town where Peachie, my oldest and dearest friend, lives. My car is eyed by two lanky, teenaged men with heads shaved except for on top where there is a profusion of short, tight braids tied with rubber bands. I get out of the car. I do not bother to lock the doors. It's insured.

Inside, Peachie lights cherry incense. We fall onto the couch and grope each other until it is obvious nothing more is going to happen.

I light a cigarette.

"I thought you quit," Peachie says. She makes a prune face and fans the fumes away from her.

The spirit is willing, I say, but the flesh is weak.

I take a final puff and smash the cigarette into the brightly-colored, ceramic, elephant-fending-off-tiger-attack ashtray on her coffee table.

"You're the only one who ever uses that," she observes.

I reach for Peachie again.

She closes her housecoat, pulls away. "Don't start the engine if you don't plan to drive," she says. "So talk."

My life is shit.

"Not your life," she says. "Your job. Just quit your shitty job."

It's not that easy. I love my shitty job, I say. It's great getting paid to play mind games on people.

"It must be, because they certainly don't pay you much. Your ex-wife is hounding you for child support. When last has she allowed you to see your son? And look at you--a car salesman who can't afford a car."

It beats preaching.

"Who are you kidding?" she says. "Preachers make plenty of money. And I know from experience that they get laid a lot, too."

It's just a joke, I say.

"The joke is that at thirty-five you still live with your parents."

Thanks for cheering me up, Peachie. I feel so good I could just kill myself.

"That'll teach you not to withhold sex from me," she says.

So I say, when last have you seen your kids?

Peachie straightens her spine. "Touché," she says. Peachie cracks her knuckles. "If you really want to know, the Rev. Barry McGowan filed a restraining order on me. If I come within a hundred yards of my kids--my own kids--I will be arrested. And all because I went after him and his new bride with a knife."

Barry and his "new" bride have been married eight years. Peachie and Barry's marriage had lasted four years before ending in divorce some fourteen years ago.

Barry has no sense of humor, I say.

"Whatever," Peachie says. "So who has rendered you impotent this time? A secretary, a fry cook, a bag lady . . ."

Bag ladies don't buy cars, I say.

"Sorry. A maid, a postal clerk, a stripper," she says. "Strippers buy cars, don't they?"

Yes. I've had a few strippers.

"A ditch digger, a cop, a paralegal . . ."

A student, I say.

Peachie says, "Aha! Seduction of the innocent. Have you slept with her yet?"

No. And I think there may be something more to it this time.

"Give me a break."

Really. I regret ripping her off.

"Not you," Peachie says. Now she mimics me: "I feel no guilt. I'm a salesman. I'm hardcore."

The student reminds me of Elaine.

Peachie understands. Now she says in a soft voice, "In what way?"

When she cries, she reminds me. I ripped her off, threw it in her face, and yet she doesn't seem to hate me.

"Turning the other cheek," Peachie says. "So much like Christ."

Not funny.

"I couldn't resist," she says. "Why did you rip her off?"

I didn't notice the resemblance until too late. Blinded by greed, I guess.

"It's not greed if they don't pay you shit," she says. "Blinded by stupidity more likely." Peachie kisses me on the forehead. "Go after her."

I'm thinking the same thing.

"And make amends."

I no longer subscribe to the concept of guilt, but I'm thinking the same thing.

"And get out of the car business. It's taking your soul."

I no longer subscribe to the concept of a soul or a God, Peachie, but I'm thinking the same thing.

"Liar," she says. "You're just as much a Christian as you've ever been."

What proof do you have that this is so, Peachie?

"Your life, in fact, is shit," she says, "but you're still able to love."

Perhaps.

* * *

So here I am the next morning, fighting with Lou the service writer. First he tells me the Lord of Travel is going to have to wait its turn in line. The mechanics won't get to it until late tomorrow. They won't finish it until late the day after that. It's going to cost at least \$400.00.

Four bills? I know you can fix it for less than four bills, I say. The car is for my "mother," Lou. I'm sure you can do it for less than four bills, and don't give me that crap about waiting in line. We work together, Lou.

Lou says, "What can I do? I don't own the business. I don't make the rules."

I know, I know, I say. But remember, Lou, I covered for you on that tires and batteries thing, and all I asked for was a measly twenty when I could've asked for fifty or a hundred. Remember, Lou, one hand washes the other.

Lou remembers the tires and batteries thing. "I'll see what I can do," he says, "for your mother."

At 1:00 p.m., Lou calls me.

I run to the service area and pay my "mother's" tab, \$50.00 in cash, which I hand Lou and which he puts in his wallet.

The Lord of Travel does not emit smoke nor spray water anymore, but I notice it pulls too much to the left. When it runs, I can hear its belts grinding. It stalls, once in a while, in idle. I worry about the brakes, which are slow to respond. I take it back to Lou, who is not happy to see me but smiles anyway.

My mother says the car needs a tune up, new belts, a new battery, new brake shoes, I tell him. She travels out of town a lot and wants to feel secure on the road. By the way, she was wondering if you could check the alignment and, if it's not too much trouble, throw a couple tires in the trunk. The ones in back are just about worn out.

"Your mother is a thief," Lou says.

And she needs it by five . . . today.

"My God."

It's just a little favor, Lou.

He whispers, "OK. But after this, no more. We're even."

Sure Lou.

"No. To hell with that. Now you owe me."

I'll take care of you, I say. I know a few people who could use a discounted set of tires, no questions asked.

* * *

They finish the Lord of Travel just after 4:00 p.m. I take it for a test drive, and I am impressed. Lou had them put over a thousand dollars worth of parts and labor into the car in less than seven hours. And all for \$50.00 and a smile! The car wasn't so bad after all. It just needed to have a few specific parts repaired.

I take it across the street to the Amoco station where I fill it with gas using the dealership's credit card. Then I slide Miguel \$5.00, and he washes and waxes it until I can see my reflection--I am framed in a shave, a haircut, a new tie. I'm not so bad either.

Curly pats me on the back. "Lookin' good. I hope the sex is worth all this."

I'm not after sex this time.

"Is she rich?" says the Arab.

It's not like that, I say. This is my last day.

"Yeah?" says the Arab. "Where you headed this time? Buick? Isuzu? Honda?"

He reads something in my expression that is not there. "Aha, so 'Big Bonus' Mike over at Honda got your attention again."

Curly says, "It's not a bad idea. They pay thirty percent after the tenth car."

"Thirty percent?" says the Arab. "Really?" He licks his lips, looks at me.

I have no idea, I say. I'm not going to Honda. I'm not going anywhere. One good deed for this woman, and then I'm gone. I'm getting out of the business.

"Out of the business? No way," says the Arab. "Once a car salesman, always a car salesman. It's like religion."

"What will you do for money?" says Curly.

Anything but this, I say. I'll flip hamburgers. I'll paint houses. I need a real job. I'll sell Amway.

"No way," says the Arab. "You'll never quit."

"And why would you want to quit?" Curly says. I am sandwiched between them. A determined hand on each of my shoulders keeps me from moving. "Why quit after you made so much money? Is it this girl?"

Of course. It's always a girl.

* * *

When Ida arrives, she does so in a car driven by a large, hairy man whose face is a mask of hatefulness. As the car rolls by, she points to me and the angry man gives me a look that leaves no doubt he wants to hurt me, so I toss Miguel the keys and run inside the showroom.

Take care of her, I say. Tell her I'm in a meeting and can't be disturbed.

Inside I watch, hidden behind the Arab, who always carries a can of mace, and big Curly, who was on his college wrestling team before he flunked out.

Ida and the man park next to the Lord of Travel. They get out and slam their doors. The man runs his hands over the car. He seems pleased with what he discovers, and his expression softens somewhat. He looks at Ida, who shrugs her shoulders. She grabs the keys from Miguel, and she and the large man hop into the Lord of Travel and spin off for a test drive. Nearly an hour later, they return. The large man gets into his car and drives away without a word to Ida.

Ida stands beside the Lord of Travel, perplexed. I walk out to meet her.

"He likes the car," she says. "He had one like it when he was younger."

(Probably the same one.)

I told you it was a nice car, I say. You see, I am a nice guy. I had them fix it up for you and everything. And I paid for it out of my own pocket.

"I bet you did," she says.

I really did.

"But you overcharged me for it in the first place."

I tried to get you the best deal I could.

"I bet you did."

I really did.

"Doesn't matter. If he says it's a nice car, it's a nice car."

He's your . . . mechanic?

"My boyfriend."

Lucky guy, I say.

"He came to get my money back. And if necessary," she says, her eyes narrowing to slits, "to beat the hell out of you."

Lucky me, I think. But I know she would never let him hurt me, this hairy man she claims is her boyfriend. She brought him because she knows what I am capable of, and she wanted a fair fight this time. Smart.

Ida is beautiful. I want to hear her say that I'm not like the rest of them. I want another hug. I want to love her.

So I say, well you got yourself a nice car though, didn't you?

I nod my head. She nods hers.

All your friends will be impressed, won't they?

I nod my head. She nods hers.

And, I add, you made a new friend, didn't you?

I nod my head and extend my hand, but she only looks at me and laughs.

She says, "It never ends with you people, does it?"

No, I say. I'm not like that anymore. I quit. I really did.

"Lucky you," she says, and then she gets into the refurbished Lord of Travel and drives away, leaving me standing there with my hand extended.

I think, God is Love, God is Love, God is Love.

I am so choked up that the Arab almost beats me to the next customer who pulls up on the lot. But I can tell by the man's haughty bearing and the cut of his double-breasted jacket that he's a preacher. The poor Arab doesn't have a chance.

I move so fast I must have wings.