

## Savior

“**I**sense someone here is suffering. Suffering with guilt and shame in their heart. Someone here is walking that lonely path that leads to the house of the devil. You know who you are. This is your chance to break free from the chains of Satan. Take this opportunity to get back in God’s good graces. This is your chance to rise up out of the darkness and enter the light! Stand up!”

A man three rows in front of me jumps out of his seat and raises his hands high above his head. His sleeves slide down, revealing monkey hair and stick-figure forearms. I can’t see his face, but I imagine his eyes are shut tight. His head is tilted back, and he’s trembling. Through his laughable comb-over, I see an assortment of brown moles that trail off toward his neck. They look like little colonizing parasites migrating to more lucrative regions. *Please God, give me a full head of hair. Please God, remove these hideous growths.* He remains standing in a sea of sitting bodies.

This is how it starts.

“Yes! Thank you brother! You see that folks? God moved that man! God filled him with the Holy Spirit and lifted him out of his seat!

Let God move you too!” A woman gets up and trots toward the stage like she has crabs nipping at her feet. She loses her equilibrium and falls to her knees. Her sobs mix with the singing and yells of “Hallelujah,” but can still be heard in the nosebleed section. *Please God, find me a man. Please God, make me rich.* People run up and touch her back as she rubs her face on the cheap industrial carpet. Immediately, they’re infected with her zeal. They fall to the ground beside her. *Please God, give me a BMW. Please God, give me bigger breasts.*

This is the opposite of stained glass. This is the opposite of church bells and gothic statues. This is what happens when you add Civil War to Reconstruction and give it 150 years to fester.

A man who bears a striking resemblance to Ted Kaczynski starts jumping, and the woman next to him follows suit. She quickly runs out of breath and has to wedge herself back into her seat. To my right, a skyscraper of a man looks up at the ceiling and shouts, “Thank you, God! Fill me with Your Spirit.”

“Yes! Do you feel that? Oh Lord! Oh Lord! Please give us strength to remove sin from our lives! Please give us strength to honor You and do Your bidding! Please come soon oh Lord, and take us to Eternal Paradise!”

“Take me, Lord!” I hear from behind. “Me too!” from somewhere up front.

Kaczynski’s neighbor gets her second wind and starts the arduous process of standing up again. The Unabomber is too focused on his own plight to offer any help. She manages to get her left side out, and I see her grimace as the armrest meets her kidney. She heaves one last time, breaking free from her seating bondage, only to sit back down a few moments later, gasping for air. *Please God, let me be beautiful. Please God, make me thin.*

A vast chorus, a mixture of all types of God’s children, stands on

four rows of bleachers stage left. They're swaying, but not in sync with the music or each other. This is known as kinesisis. A pimple-face kid is playing electric guitar. There's a drummer and a keyboardist. There's a violinist and bass-player, two flutes, and a trumpet. This is God's Orchestra, and it's being led by a man whose only qualification is that he bought the book *Conducting for Dummies*. Some people are running around and throwing themselves on the stage. Everyone is trying to one-up the last person. If this goes unchecked, people will be climbing the walls and swinging from the ceiling fans, stampeding over the weak and trampling each other. This is known as Darwinism.

Knowledge gave us humanity; religion took it away. These people need to be saved. They need something personal, something on a deeper level. Jesus just watches it unfold during the football commercials on his all-seeing TV. If he knew what humans were going to do to his faith as he died on the cross, he might have said, "Fuck em up, Dad. They're all a bunch of little bitches, anyway," instead of, "Forgive them, Father, they know not what they do."

The trick is to be the last to stand up. It's like the State of the Union Address. No one knows when to rise in support. Some people lead the way, while others remain seated throughout. That's who you notice. The people going against the crowd. The people who had too many martinis before the big show.

Everyone but me is on their feet, which is my cue to slowly get up. A few members of the parish glance at me side-eyed.

The only thing more profound than being saved is the act of saving. That's what these lost souls need. They need the points. This is the big game. There's no next season. They think God won't answer their prayers unless they assimilate me into their little subculture, make me a productive member, so I can start my evangelical quest to bliss.

It's the big pyramid scheme to heaven. You save three people,

and they each save three people, and so on. If their quota isn't met, they'll perform poorly at work. This will indelibly lead to a reduction in consumption. Economies will crumble, inflation will increase, unemployment will be out of control. If they can't save me: anarchy. I'm just doing my piece to keep society on its feet. By letting these people save me, I am saving humanity one over-zealous Christian at a time.

These are *my* points.

"Yes! Do you feel him? Do you feel the Lord? He's all around us. He's the blanket of our lives. He keeps us warm when we're cold. He keeps us dry from the wet rain. He makes us strong when we're weak. God does this for all of you. Now what are you gonna do for him?"

Men, dressed in their Sunday best, start marching down the aisle with collection plates. Some put on a big show, over-exaggerating the motion of donating ten ones wrapped in a twenty dollar bill. Others are very careful to make sure no one's looking to see their feeble contribution. Some opt to hide their *charity* with envelopes, while others have the impudence to pass the plate on as soon as they get it. A few give every penny they can spare. This is their quid pro quo. They're buying themselves eternity in the Lincoln Bedroom. They're buying themselves a pardon.

"Generosity is the key to the doorway of heaven. Give your heart to the Lord and only happiness will come. The war for souls is not cheap and God needs your help. God needs your hard-earned money because we are all soldiers in this perilous fight. The Devil is a formidable competitor. He has lust, greed, and hatred on his side. But believe me when I say those weapons are dull and weak when compared with the Blinding Light of the Lord!"

For this to work, I have to avoid eye contact and stand very still.

I feel a hand on my shoulder, and before the full weight bears down on me, I zip my head around. A Jenny Craig flunky twinkles a

soccer-mom smile. I can only manage an awkward one. Her stubby fingers tenderly rub my back, and a tear falls from her eye. This is first contact. The whole congregation sees this moment of warmth and knows the door has been opened.

I stay in character, returning my focus on the preacher, who is now running around touching people's foreheads and speaking in tongues.

People everywhere are planning their lines of attack. They're thinking, I'll approach him after service and invite him to Bible study. Some are planning on captivating me with lunch requests. These are the soldiers of the Lord, and I am the prize. Me, a prize? Me, worth fighting for? This is the opposite of loneliness. This is the opposite of estrangement and solitude.

"Ok, Ok. Let's bring it down a little. Let's settle down for a second." People with beaded brows gradually sit. "Folks, I want you to look around. Take a good look at the brothers and sisters next to you." My eyes stay fixed forward. "What you see are sinners; sinners who need your help. They need you to share with them your troubled past, and they need you to share with them the road to redemption. Your homework for this week is to find a sinner and help them find the Lord!"

Service ends with song and everyone exchanging smiles. After the announcements of barbecues, picnics, and Bible studies, the minister says, "Go in peace, and may God bless you all." I make a beeline for the exit.

"Hi! Are you new to the parish?" comes from a woman waiting for me in the atrium. She's dressed in I'm-humbler-than-thou thrift store fatigues, her eyes aglow with anticipation. I don't answer too quickly. They like the chase, the possibility that I might make a run for it.

"Yes," I whisper to her second-hand shoes.

"I thought so. I haven't seen you before, and I know everyone at the parish. I'm Event Coordinator, you know? I'm the one you talk to

about events.” She extends her hand. “My name’s Darlene.”

“Roger,” I tell her.

“Well Roger, it is a pleasure. You absolutely must come to my house for brunch next Sunday. I would invite you today, but Rosa is only cooking for twelve. Roger, it is faaaantastic; we feast on food, and then we feast on the Word of God. It’s important to fill both appetites, don’t you agree? I’ll tell Rosa to plan for one more next week. I think we’ll have Eggs Benedict. Do you like Eggs Benedict Roger?” She is already leaving to finish her rounds. “It was a pleasure meeting you. See you at church next week.”

She didn’t reach me, but she made a key next step. She let me know I was welcomed back. All the points won’t go to her, but God remembers team players. The way they save people is by making them feel like part of the family, letting them know they belong. Saving is accomplished through repetition and the memorization of Bible verses. This is the opposite of free will. This is the opposite of dissent and rebellion. But I can’t give in. Everyone’s watching, waiting for an opportunity to pounce on the prey. If the first couple of people don’t connect, it makes it all the more meaningful to the person who does. They want to be the one who climbs Mount Everest and dances a jig on the summit. If I’m saving souls, I want it to be special.

I continue my race for the exit but my arm is grabbed before I can escape.

“Where’s the fire, lil buddy? Got somewhere more important to be than God’s House?”

I stutter an answer and the booming man tightens his grip. He says, “Good, you can come with me for coffee. There’s a great little place right down the street where I always go after Service. We’ll walk and enjoy this Glorious Day that God has given us.” His voice monopolizes the hall like a trucker telling a dirty joke.

Normally, I don't give in this easily, but as we leave the church something tells me he won't let go.

“Did I overhear you say your name's Roger?” he asks. “Where are my manners? My name's Peter. You know? Like the disciple. Soooo... Roger, you married?” He needs to share for me to share. I need to know I can speak freely. “Me, I've been married twice. Of course, that's before I got saved. Yeah, I was a real hellion, ha. Partying and drinking myself into a constant state of stupor. I can't even remember my first wedding. In fact, I didn't even believe it when I saw the ring. But then I saw the pictures. They weren't very flattering. I was wearing a teal tux — can you believe it — I got married in a teal tux, ha. They should tell that story in high school to keep kids from drinking. Don't drink or you'll end up in a church at three in the morning. You'll be wearing a teal tuxedo, marrying a woman who looks like a cross between Mrs. Doubtfire and Mike Piazza. Even with the storybook beginning, I wasn't very good at honoring that whole faithful vow. She left me in '94. I can't say I blame her. I took to drinking even harder and doing a little dope here and there. I'm not sure if it was because she left me or I just needed an excuse to really start killing myself. The whole time I was looking for something. I just didn't know what. I married my second wife in '98 God bless her, she was a bit of a drinker, too. Come to think of it, that's where we met, at an AA meeting. Somewhere between the booze and the dope, we managed to pop out a couple of kids. The most beautiful things you ever saw, two daughters, Jennifer and Melissa.... They got taken away from us in 2000. After that, needless to say, the wife was hopeless. We went through all the court proceedings to try and get them back, but some *colored* judge had the nerve to tell us we weren't fit parents. Can you believe it - that judge ruined her - she took her own life that same year.”

The door jingles as my savior opens it for me. The vague smell of Vanilla Cream, Hazelnut, and French Roast pollutes the air. “You grab a

seat over there, lil buddy. Coffee's on me."

He meets me at the booth closest to the bathroom with a Styrofoam cup, "I put two creams and two sugars in there for you," he says. "That's how I take it — yeah, well, after my wife died, I took my drinking up a few more notches. Drinking was my life."

My new friend will do anything for me; I'm his project. I'm what keeps him from throwing himself off an overpass. Sure, all this is artificial. It's all some programmed story he goes through every time he's on a saving mission. But what isn't artificial? How often do you have that real connection, where each person is sharing because of some cosmic chemistry? No, people talk to hear themselves talk. People listen because they are waiting to speak.

"Something had to change," he continues. "I'm not saying change happened over night. I went to a lot of meetings, worked through a lot of issues. What really helped me was reading the Bible. After I started doing that, things became much easier. The Bible saved me. Now life is great. I haven't touched the bottle in over a year. I got a wonderful woman. And most important, God is with me every step of the way."

My new friend would cook me dinner, give me the shirt off his back. My new friend would loan me his car or let me sleep on his couch. I'm his retirement plan.

It's nice to be with someone, to have friends. The coffee shop is filled with people who see me with this other man, having what looks like a bona fide conversation, and for a moment I become real. I'm functioning in society like everyone else because I can sit in front of a cup of coffee with two creams and two sugars. It's like the old philosophical question, "If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?" If people aren't functioning in society, do they really matter?

"The first time I came to this church, I was like you," he says. "I was scared, timid. Skeptical? I was like, What the heck are all these idiots



doing running around waving their hands in the air? Religion is supposed to be somber and dignified. I promised myself I would never go back there again. But then, something happened. Something so powerful. All of a sudden I had wings. I was running around acting insane, but I didn't care. I mean, in retrospect I must have looked pretty silly. But when you're filled with the Holy Spirit you just lose control."

He takes the last sip of his coffee, and there is a long silence. Then he asks, "Aren't you gonna drink that?"

I smile without showing any teeth. The first coherent thing I ever say to Peter-you-know-like-the-disciple is, "I don't drink coffee."

Peter returns the same smile I just gave him and we become two men sitting in a coffee shop, both trying to save ourselves.