Winesburg, Indiana: Reverend Dave

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Abstract
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For a time, life in Winesburg was good, and the Lord Our God blessed our town with prosperous yields, fertile soil, and faithful Christian soldiers. My flock was rapidly expanding, the pews in First Family of Christ Living Center and Day Care overflowing with spirits in desperate need of saving.

I was happy to oblige.

“I will show you the One Way,” I bellowed from the pulpit. “I will lead you to the glorious land of salvation.”

In addition to Sunday service, I also held Ladies’ Night each Thursday, during which I offered a similar message, though slightly altered to appeal to the female audience.

“Rise up and lower yourself for His Humble Servant, the Rev. Dave,” I preached, “and I will make my deposit into your temple!”

Some of the more God-fearing women were skeptical of my advances, though I assured them the Lord smiled upon those whose passions knew no bounds.

“But...is promiscuity not a sin, Reverend?” inquired the buxom Jackie Patch, to which I pressed a firm hand to her left buttock and replied, “My sweet lamb, the commingling of sacred temples is a blessing to God.”
That very night she and I blessed Him several times, glory to God in the highest.

*

There are two types of laws in Winesburg—man’s law and God’s—and while I left Sheriff Gordon to dole out his half, I took much care in doling out the other. There was never any doubt whether or not a car was double-parked, though the great moral questions required interpretation, and I was the town’s sole interpreter. For years, the Lord rewarded my interpretations by bestowing upon me an entire cornucopia of Winesburg’s most eligible bachelorettes, and, never one to shy away from the Lord’s generosity, I helped myself to his bounty on a nightly basis.

And then one night—prior to commingling with a young, thick-thighed maid by the name of Bridgette Steepleton—the contemptible Pastor John infected our quiet town with his heresy. He was a bicep-laden, square-chinned Pentecostal from the sinful city of Fort Wayne and had no qualms about storming into the only lit building in town on Thursday night—Emile Durkheim High School—and interrupting the PTA meeting to make his presence known.

“Something is rotten in the state of Winesburg,” Pastor John informed the Parent Teacher Association—a literary reference lost on all but English teacher Ms. Lydia Hatcher who began clapping wildly from her place in the second row.

“Point of clarification,” corrected PTA Secretary Joseph Lowry, licking the tip of his pencil. “According to the zoning board, Winesburg is classified as a town, not a state. I’ll make a clarifying note in the minutes.”

“Duly noted,” Pastor John humbly agreed before starting in on his true purpose—publicly decrying the town’s spiritual leader (me) for having taken part in what he deemed “improper relations” with many of the “fertile, young lambs” of the congregation.

I, an at-large member of the PTA (a post I regretted as soon as I realized childless bachelorettes didn’t attend PTA meetings), cloaked myself in God’s protective graces by faking sleep, resting my head against my chest and snoring at a pitch just loud enough to assure the other PTA members that my lack of rebuttal was due to the exhaustion of their overworked reverend and not a sign of weakness. I tried to deduce exactly what had brought this cretin to our town, but the possibilities were endless.

*Had I helped myself to a few handfuls of his congregation’s tithes during my stint as a traveling preacher?*
Had I imbibed too deeply from the blood of Christ he’d offered?

My sins—while modest—were far-reaching.

“I challenge Rev. Dave to a faith-off,” Pastor John continued, interrupting my speculation. “Tomorrow evening, in this very auditorium, I will stand before you and perform the five signs as indicated in the book of Mark. I shall cast out devils, speak in tongues, take up serpents, drink deadly things, and lay my hands on the sick to heal them.”

In a matter of moments, the PTA meeting had become far more interesting than the association ever imagined, and quite suddenly, voting for the approval of a new fleet of pencil sharpeners no longer seemed a priority.

“I know not where your so-called reverend is hiding,” Pastor John began as several heads turned in my direction, “but make him aware of my challenge. Tomorrow evening, come prepared to witness miracles performed by the truly faithful.”

With that, the forked-tongued pastor swept across the gymnasium floor and allowed the PTA meeting to continue precisely where it had left off.

“Very well then. Any new business?” asked PTA President Donald Crumble.

There was none.

“Motion to adjourn?”

The motion was seconded.

The association scuttled into the hallway to partake in punch and cookies, at which point I, the town’s spiritual leader and at-large PTA member, snapped awake and quite heroically snuck out the emergency exit door.

* 

The following afternoon, as Pastor John spiritually prepared himself for the miracles ahead—anointing his body with rosemary-scented oil just beneath the basketball hoop of the Emile Durkheim High School gymnasium—I watched on from a cracked door in a nearby janitorial supply closet. What I witnessed was nothing short of shocking—a man seemingly in complete control of his faith. He appeared somehow exempt from the world’s temptations. I sent the ferociously beautiful Helen Koppelford (Emile Durkheim’s head cheerleader) into his recently anointed arms offering leftover punch and cookies from the
PTA meeting, and he refused her kindly, sending her on her way without casting so much as a lustful eye.

As she walked away, Helen spied me from my place within the closet and shrugged, as if she too could not understand a man whose faith was not the least bit shaken by the great depths of her low-cut halter.

*

Hours later, when Pastor John left to relieve himself in the boy's room, I leapt from the janitor’s closet, returning home to begin my own spiritual preparation—two Advil and a whiskey sour. As the clock struck seven, I gathered my suitcase of faith-healing tools and set off toward the high school. The school’s doors were flung wide, and a carnival atmosphere had developed, my once-faithful flock now anxiously awaiting my trial.

I placed my suitcase beside a chair facing the audience, while alongside me Pastor John had his own tools—a chicken wire crate full of coiling rattlesnakes as well as vials of strychnine.

The crowd took their seats as Pastor John approached me, held out a leathery hand and whispered, “So you’re the lecherous old codger who knocked up my niece, eh?”

I stared at him, foggily recalling a feisty, red-headed vixen with the same square-chin, the same Pentecostal upbringing. She was a young lamb whose temple I’d breached on several occasions, glory to God in the highest. However, I hadn’t yet been aware that my Essence had played a role in her child’s not-so-immaculate conception.

“Perhaps this was God’s will,” I began, stuttering. “Glory to God in the...”

“God’s will,” he scoffed, fiddling with his snake box. “Allow me to show you God’s will.”

And then, with the precision of a skilled mountebank, Pastor John proceeded to cast out devils, blather in tongues, slurp down strychnine, lay his hands on Henry Compton (a long time sufferer of whooping cough) and drape an entire knot of rattlesnakes upon his sweaty head. My flock watched on in wonderment, praising the Lord for bringing this righteous man to their humble town.

“Hallelujah!” they cried. “Praise Him!”

Impressed with himself (though I will remind you pride is a sin), Pastor John
returned the snakes to their box before offering an extended bow as the crowd erupted in cheers, overcome by the power of the Lord.

Pastor John returned to his chair while every eye in the room shifted toward me, creating a silence louder than the tumbling walls of Jericho.

“My loyal flock,” I cried, beginning my reverend stroll across the length of the gym floor. “Before being swayed by such vapid parlor tricks, allow me to show you the One Way. Allow me to lead you to the glorious land of...salvation!”

I had hoped words alone might reaffirm my place as Winesburg’s spiritual leader, though a few of the men crossed their arms, assuring me that they required miracles.

“To begin,” I said, stammering, “allow me to...cast out a devil.”

I turned to Pastor John, arms outstretched, and shouted, “Scat, devil! Git a move on, you serpentine scoundrel!”

I made a few kicks at the air while Pastor John took a sip of water, unfazed.

“Very well then,” I continued, unlatching my suitcase. “On to miracle number two.”

I pulled out my abridged Latin dictionary and began reciting languages in tongues foreign to the ears of Winesburg, though when that, too, failed to impress, I took a full swallow of the day-old punch from the PTA meeting, which was pretty lethal in itself. A few of my faithful were already heading toward the exits, so I upped the ante, offering Henry Compton a spoonful of Robitussin to soothe his throat before concluding by pulling two writhing garter snakes from my suitcase and thrusting them toward heaven.

When I fell to my knees shouting, “Glory to God in the highest!”, a single clap echoed off the cinder block walls.

As that clap dissipated, it became suddenly clear that my services were no longer needed; that all my canoodling and commingling had backfired, that on my path to saving souls I had, perhaps, desecrated one too many temples.

Shoulders slumped, I collected my suitcase and headed toward the door when quite suddenly, a miracle revealed itself. Pastor John toppled to the floor, collapsing in a heap on the free throw line. The strychnine was proving too powerful—even for a man of his faith—and the people of Winesburg turned once more to their spiritual rock (me) to save that wicked pastor from death’s greedy embrace.
“My children,” I shouted, leaping into action, “we must pray for a doctor! We must pray for this terribly sinful man to receive the medical attention he requires!”

We clasped our hands tight as Dr. Grover Rayburn—a longtime member of the congregation—walked unsteadily toward the sick man, his cane clicking, and pronounced the pastor “still alive.”

“But he ought not to have drank up all that poison like a damn fool,” Rayburn diagnosed. “If he was smart he’d vomit it right back up.”

Quite heroically (and with the Lord’s strength), I lifted John’s sweaty head into my arms and forced him to drink what remained of the day-old PTA punch. Almost immediately, the poison came flooding out of his mouth like a red sea and the congregation cheered my miracle—claiming it the truest display of spiritual healing they’d ever witnessed.

“I am no hero,” I proclaimed modestly as Pastor John continued retching beneath the basketball net,” for the Lord God has blessed me with great strength and fortitude and…”

“Rattlesnakes! Goddamn!” a voice cried out, and I turned to observe the last of the snakes slithering from their unlatched cage and winding around the wood-paneled floor. God spoke to me then—a voice I hadn’t heard in years—whispering, “Dave, this moment calls for divine leadership.” And then it struck me: this moment, quite simply, called for Reverend Dave.

Like Moses on Sinai, like Christ on the Mount, I climbed to the high ground, leaping heroically to the top of the bleachers. While some of the more brazen men tested their own faith to recapture those snakes, I stood atop the bleachers and prayed for their wives, promising the Lord Our God that if, heaven forbid, anything were to befall those gentle souls, I might offer their wives sanctuary on all the coldest and loneliest nights.

B.J. Hollars of Fort Wayne, Indiana is an instructor at the University of Alabama where he received his MFA in 2010. He’s served as nonfiction editor and assistant fiction editor for Black Warrior Review and currently edits for Versal. He has work published or forthcoming in American Short Fiction, Barrelhouse, The Southeast Review, among others. He has edited the book You Must Be This Tall To Ride: Contemporary Writers Take You Inside The Story. Go to: www.bjhollars.com or www.YouMustBeThisTallToRide.net.

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