

3680 words

Revival

“Stand up! Stand up for *Jee*-sus!”

The celebrity preacher from Georgia is thundering into his microphone, and he’s come down off the stage just for Sam and her mother. He’s too tall and too thin and way too close, hovering over her like an evil drone, if the drone had greasy black hair and a narrow, acne-scarred forehead.

He’s wearing a fuchsia-pink, sweat-soaked t-shirt with "Jesus Loves Me!" printed in black glitter ink across the front. He’s also got a wide black leather belt strapped across his hips, holding up skinny black jeans. The shiny belt buckle could be a big oval trophy plate from some rodeo, except Preacher Billy’s trophy buckle gleams with a huge rhinestone cross, not a calf roper or bronc rider.

Thirteen-year-old Sam can see the sparkly cross on the preacher’s belt buckle very clearly, because his crotch is just two feet in front of her face.

That’s gross. Ignore the crotch, she tells herself.

Sam sits in a center aisle seat, row twelve in a raggedy sea of metal folding chairs, on the hardwood floor of a junior college field house. Her mom is on her left, seated unhappily on her

own hard chair and staring straight ahead. Aunt Jeannie, sweating and swaying, up on her feet on the other side of Sam's mom, insisted these were premium seats with a good view of the stage, when they'd arrived an hour earlier. Sam disagrees. There are no premium seats or premium-anything here.

"Stand up!" Preacher Billy screams again. He crouches forward and thrusts his stinky head in front of Sam's face so she can't dodge the sweat flicking off his hair.

He's working hard to hold Sam with his squinty pale green eyes. Attempting, she knows, to stare directly into her soul. Maybe he can't see anything but he keeps trying, peering in from what seems like just inches away.

Sam closes her eyes, shuts him out. She holds her breath, hoping there will be a chance to come up for air.

"Stand up! Stand up and be *saved* in Jesus!" His heavily amplified voice bounces off the roof and walls of the field house.

Every instinct tells her to flatten her hands over her ears, or scream and kick him away and flee. But she'd have to summon more courage than she has right now. It's easier to sit tight and stay here in her seat. If she keeps her eyes closed, her ankles crossed and her hands tightly gripped in the lap of her jeans, she won't be tempted to grab his belt buckle or smack him in the jaw. She can sit there forever on this hard metal folding chair. It's stupid and embarrassing but she needs to endure it.

She hears Preacher Billy pivot away and she flicks her eyes open to see him whip the microphone back to his mouth. He snaps upright, and bellows out to the crowd again about getting saved. He's been yelling for nearly an hour already. That's an impressive set of pipes,

Sam's father would say if he were here.

Now trumpets and tambourines join in. The crowd rises, shouting *Hallelujah!* and *Jesus save me!* and *Yes Yes Yes Lord!*, until there's a tidal wave of sound. Sam twists her head to one side, tugs off the elastic on her ponytail, and lets her heavy mane of flat dark hair flop forward, hoping it will hide her face. If she'd been wearing a hoodie, she'd have pulled the drawstrings tight to seal herself in like a box turtle, but it's summer, her t-shirt is useless.

“You *feel* it, I know you *feel* it! If you believe yourself *saved!* In the name! Of the Lord! Stand up! And be washed *clean* of your sins! Cry hallelujah! *Yes, Lord!* Stand up and say it! I am saved! *Stand up!*”

There. Other than a dozen people in wheelchairs, exactly two people are still sitting, Sam and her mother. The other three thousand, four hundred and seventeen people are on their feet, jumping and swaying and screaming *I am saved*, trying their damndest to raise the roof off this sweat-stinking field house.

It certainly does stink, with the body odor of so many devout bible-thumpers getting so agitated on a steamy summer night. Even Sam's prim and prissy, platinum-tinted Aunt Jeannie is shouting and shaking. Jeannie's deodorant quit twenty minutes ago and her face is bright pink, a close match to her lipstick. Her nice new cotton summer dress is hiked up and stuck on the damp skin at the back of her thighs. Aunt Jeannie is always so righteous, she'd be mortified to see herself behaving like this on a video, but cellphones are banned here, so not a chance.

Sam likes the thought of a secret video, though. It would serve Aunt Jeannie right, seeing herself on YouTube. She's the one who brought them here, driving them up into the mountains to quote-unquote “help you find salvation.” Ever since Sam's dad died, four months ago, Aunt

Jeannie hasn't been able to keep her nose out of their lives.

Sam knows why they got dragged out here. It's because Aunt Jeannie saw her with Davey Murdock, out back of the old barn a couple of weeks ago.

Sam allows herself a tiny smile, thinking about Davey, the artist. Davey, who wants to be a surgeon.

But here comes the preacher again. "Stand up! In the name of the Lord! Stand! Up! And! Be! *Saved!*" He's hurling his voice over the crowd, asking them to help lift Sam and her mother out of their chairs. People nearby are making "stand up" gestures, urging them onto their feet. But it's not working. Maybe it's the weight of their sins.

Sam sneaks a look at her mom's face in profile, on her left. She's never seen her mother so angry. That angular face, the lifted chin and clenched jaw, could be carved in smooth cold marble. Her mom's nostrils are flaring like they do when something smells bad.

Sam knows that look, or a modified version of it, from when she was six and pretended not to hear her mother call her in for dinner. And when she was ten, and neglected her homework for the first time. People, who've never seen that look, always say such nice things about her mom. Such a saint, they say. Widowed and raising a teenage daughter by herself. It can't be easy, these days, with drugs and sex and social media and pornography everywhere.

Sam considers taking her mother's hand in her own. A sign of solidarity would be nice, just a quick gentle squeeze of the fingers to say, hey, we're together in this, we can endure whatever we have to.

But her mother continues to sit and stare into the middle distance, quietly furious, so Sam continues to sit with her hands in her lap and her face tipped forward, hiding behind her curtain

of hair.

Sam's mom will give Aunt Jeannie a piece of her mind when they get out of there. Or maybe not. In Sam's family, people don't really talk much about religion or feelings or anything else that makes them feel awkward. So they've gotten pretty good at enduring uncomfortable situations.

Speaking of uncomfortable, these metal chairs are downright painful. Maybe that's the plan, Sam thinks. You sit on these hard chairs, and then three thousand people stare at you and tell you to stand up, and pretty soon you're standing. It might be a relief, to stand.

Now everyone else is beginning to move in ragged lines toward the front of the hall. The preacher lopes away, threading through the scattered chairs toward the stage. Curious, Sam exhales, flips her hair back, and stretches as tall as she can to watch Preacher Billy moving through the mass of people. The lights in the hall make his pockmarked skin look yellow.

Her father's skin turned yellow, just before the doctors removed his gall bladder. That was the jaundice, Davey told her. The first sign of the cancer that killed her father.

This preacher looks nothing like her father, who'd been a soft-spoken farmer with a slow smile and wide strong shoulders. This preacher looks more like Mick Jagger, the early-degenerate, thirty-something version Sam has seen on grainy old YouTube videos. There's that tight-assed swagger, the ferocious intensity, the microphone getting caressed and almost swallowed.

Her aunt says this fundamentalist preacher and his traveling road show pack the arenas and mega-church halls all up and down the East Coast, from Florida to here in northern New York state. Aunt Jeannie insists Preacher Billy has just one mission: to "get people right with

Jesus.” When Sam asked her, the day before, about what his church *does*, like feeding the poor or finding beds for the homeless, Aunt Jeannie’d stared at her sadly. “No, Samantha,” she’d said. “You don’t understand, honey, this is about saving your *soul*.”

Sam can’t see how her soul will get saved by all these crazy theatrics. The amplifiers are juiced to somewhere above screech, trumpets are blasting, and the choir is yelling another hymn with unintelligible lyrics.

As Preacher Billy leaps onto the stage, five large silent men in crewcuts, wearing black suits and radio headsets, step out from the wings and organize everyone into four crooked lines. Sam decides they look more like bodyguards than ushers. People are shuffled quickly along to the base of the stage, so they can drop money into fancy gilt-edged donation boxes mounted on gleaming pink marble pedestals. One pedestal is shorter, conveniently placed so the wheelchair-bound worshippers can reach it.

Some of the congregation—a select few, how do they decide?—get to go on stage and touch Preacher Billy’s hand. They’re in tears, they kneel in front of him, they grab his jacket until a black-suited man tugs them away. The trumpets have shut down but there’s still too much crowd noise for Sam to hear voices. Maybe they’re asking Preacher Billy to pray for someone special, to intercede directly on God’s private line. That’s what he calls it, his private line to God and Jesus. It’s a thing he’s got, that everybody seems to want.

The music fades, the crowd goes mostly quiet, and now several people have appeared on stage to testify how they were healed of serious illnesses—MS, epilepsy, breast cancer, something else—by the grace of Preacher Billy’s personal intercession. They cry, he holds them, they get down on their knees and bow their heads—not the preacher, just the others—and they

pray together beneath his outstretched arms.

Then the crowd roars a collective *Hallelujah* and the tambourine players smack and rattle their instruments.

On the other side of Sam's mother, Aunt Jeannie bends down and attempts to push damp pale curls off her sweat-streaked cheeks. "See, it works, the healing," she says below the swell of noise. She sounds positively rapturous. "You could've joined up earlier, come with me last year. Then your John would still be with us!"

Sam's mother frowns, leans back, crosses her arms, shakes her head. Sam risks rolling her eyes, but it's wasted, there's no one looking at her.

The music switches to "Onward Christian Soldiers" and everyone who isn't already pushed up against the stage surges forward, screaming and stomping. Preacher Billy stands by himself, arms and face raised, in a hazy spotlight in the center of the stage now, in his sweaty fuchsia shirt, and below him the crowd sways and weeps. A chubby, pasty-faced teenage girl—she's maybe seventeen, a few years older than Sam—is writhing on the dirty floor in the aisle, muttering. Her skirt is hiked up above pudgy thighs so Sam can see her pale blue panties. People step respectfully around her thrashing body, some smiling and nodding.

The "marching as to war" music ends, something with violins starts up, and people begin shuffling back to their seats. All Sam can see are bodies at eye-level, bellies and torsos wrapped in wrinkled pants and sweaty shirts.

She thinks of what's right in front of her, what's inside each body. Bones but also all the soft organs, kidneys and liver and bladder, stomach and looped intestines. And the pancreas. Davey's told her about the pancreas. Six inches long, tucked in behind the stomach with its tail

extending along the left side of the abdomen.

She'd pronounced it wrong, at first, as they were sitting on the grass bank behind the barn. "Pan-cras?" she'd said. "Isn't there a Catholic saint with that name?"

He'd laughed. "It's pan-cre-as, not pan-cras. Pancras is the saint, pancreas is the body part. Your pancreas makes insulin, and that helps regulate blood sugar." He'd paused, then said gently, "It probably took the doctors a while to find your dad's problem. Pancreatic cancer is a tough one. It's complicated, with lots of different kinds of cells involved, so it's not so simple to fix when something goes wrong."

Nothing is simple, Sam thinks. It's all complicated.

As people jostle by Sam's chair, on the way back to their own seats, they offer a few smiles of pity. Some pat her shoulder. "I pray you will see the way," one offers. Another leans down and says, "You'll see the light, we know you will."

Her mother whispers, "I have a headache. You?"

Sam nods and takes two orange ibuprofens from her mother's hand, swallows them dry.

People are tucking in their shirts, straightening up chairs, finding their seats. They must feel better, now that they've paid their money and sweated out their sins.

Here's Preacher Billy again, down from the stage and heading her way. His flashy belt buckle grows larger and then it's right in front of her face, again. It's intentional, Sam suspects, this crotch-in-the-face stance. She decides to ignore the buckle and the gross below-the-buckle part of him.

But what if she touches him above the belt, on the left side of the abdomen? His right side, she corrects herself, my left. If I were a surgeon, I'd indicate where to cut by drawing lines

on his skin with a colored marker. That's what Davey says they do. Then I'd fold back the skin and slip my fingers in beneath his lowest rib, under the liver. Find the gall bladder, perhaps. Hold it in my hand. I could do that, he's that close. He might not even notice.

She feels her fingers twitching, so she folds her hands in her lap again.

Preacher Billy crouches beside her, interrupting thoughts of surgical incisions. He's got one hand on the back of her chair, behind her right shoulder. He's breathing hard, after all those hallelujahs, but he's not done with Sam or her mother.

There's no microphone now, just his raspy coaxing voice aimed at the two of them. "If you don't feel ready yet, that's okay. You'll get there, you'll see the light. You *will* take the glory of His love inside you."

Sam leans away, into her mother's solid shoulder. The man's breath is vile. Brimstone, she thinks, must smell like this.

"It can be hard," he breathes at them, "so very hard, when you have lost someone, a beloved husband, a father. Jesus knows, and I know, the *depth* of your pain and your *grief*."

Sam stiffens. There's a scream building inside her head, so she bites her lower lip to hold it in.

Preacher Billy is almost pleading now. "Just step through that door. A private invitation, just you and your mom and me and Jesus. Come through the door."

He waves one hand and Sam realizes he's pointing to an actual door, at the side of the hall. We're making him look bad, she thinks. Everybody else stands, sits, and throws money on command, except Mom and me. If we walk through that door, right now, everyone will applaud and he wins. He's got his victory and the troublemakers, that's us, we'll be taken care of.

Aunt Jeannie frowns and fidgets from her seat on the far side of Sam's mother. Sam and her mother do their best to ignore both of them.

"Dammit." The preacher's whisper goes harsh. He's losing it. "What the *fuck* are you doing here if you're not gonna declare yourselves saved?"

Sam feels heat rise into her face. She looks toward her old-fashioned mother, who doesn't believe anyone—ever—needs to swear. Because swearing is the refuge of a small mind, a failure of creativity as well as civility.

Sam's mother turns, finally, and looks directly at Preacher Billy.

"I think we've reached an understanding, Reverend," she says, using her coldest, stone-hard schoolteacher voice. "My daughter and I have come to the wrong place. So we'll save you further shame and frustration by leaving. Sam, let's go."

And that's what it takes, Sam thinks. One swear word. And, now that everyone else in this packed field house is sitting down, we are going to stand up, just the two of us, and walk out.

There's a hush, then a rising murmur from the crowd as her mother places a firm hand on Sam's shoulder. They rise from their twelfth-row, premium aisle seats, and thread their way out, through the sea of folding chairs and all the sweaty, saved souls. Out the double doors flung wide to the night air, out into the sweet-smelling, just-mowed hayfield that serves as the field house's overflow parking lot.

Since they'd come in her aunt's car, and Jeannie's still back there with the rest of the congregation, Sam's not sure what will happen next. Her mom points to a lichen-covered boulder at the edge of a hayfield, beyond the parked cars. They sit facing the fields and hills beyond. It's a clear night with a sky full of stars, and they can hear the rhythmic hum of late-

summer insects, cicadas and crickets and katydids.

“I really need to pee,” Sam says.

Her mother fishes a small flashlight and a tissue out of her shoulder bag, then points to a stand of trees at the edge of the field. “Watch for poison ivy.”

When Sam returns to the boulder, her mother sighs. “I’m sorry we got pulled into that. I had no idea. But we survived, so no harm done, right? We’ll have to consider it an anthropological experience. A field experiment.” Sam can hear the twist of a sardonic smile, then her mother is serious again. “So. Tell me about Davey, please. You’re thirteen—”

“Almost fourteen.”

“—and he’s sixteen. Aunt Jeannie said she saw you two doing something—together, out back of the barn. That’s all she said, but whatever it was, it got her really upset.”

“So yeah, it’s my fault we got dragged here, isn’t it?” That sounded defensive, so Sam tries again. “Look, it was like this. I kind of owed Davey, because he did me a favor, helping me catch up in science homework. Back in April, when I was out of school, for the—the funeral.” Sam feels her throat close but she pushes on. “And when I went back to class, most of the kids avoided me. Even the teachers kept cutting me slack, like they were tiptoeing around me. Except Davey, he was cool. He wants to be a doctor. A surgeon. So he was doing all this research about pancreatic cancer, and he tried to help me figure out why Dad died. Then the medical part, the reasons behind it, made more sense. So I was still sad but not so angry.”

“Sad, I understand that. But why were you angry?”

Sam feels a familiar flush building. She’s raw and hot like she’s run too far but she has to keep running. “How could I *not* be angry? My father left me! He *died*.”

Her mother stares at her, then hides her face in both hands.

Don't cry, Sam thinks. But she doesn't know if she's talking to herself or her mother.

She speaks quickly then, trying to pick up the thread and bring them back. "So, with Davey. He was getting teased at school. Bullied, I guess, about never having kissed a girl." She's rehearsed this part, she knew she'd get asked. The words come in a rush. "I think he's not sure if he's gay or bi or whatever. So he asked me for a kiss, so he could say he'd kissed a girl, and I'd be his proof."

Sam peels a bit of thick lichen off the rock they're sitting on and rubs it between her fingers. It feels like rubbery skin, like the skin of the rock. High above the hayfield, she can see the crisp shape of the quarter moon, a fat clipped fingernail shape hanging low above a line of trees. If she squints a bit and lets her eyes glaze over, the moon looks a bit like a curled pancreas.

Where is it? she'd said to Davey, that day behind the barn. Show me my pancreas. She'd lifted her t-shirt and he'd hesitated, then traced the shape with a purple marker from his backpack, stretching the skin of her abdomen taut with gentle fingers so the lines would be clear. Purple, he'd said, for the cancer. I've always thought of cancer as a deadly purple flower.

Where's my gall bladder? she'd asked. Show me where that is. Draw it in yellow, for the jaundice. Label it, so I won't forget.

That's behind the liver, he'd said. I'll use red for the liver, for all the blood cells there. And back by your spine, we have the kidneys, you'll have to turn over. Maybe blue for the kidneys?

The brilliant colors of his precise, careful lines, all the swirls and shapes and neatly

printed labels, had bloomed and converged on her body in a bouquet of crimson and indigo, violet and gold.

“And?” says her mother.

“And so I kissed him, just once, like he asked.”

“That was it? That was all?”

Sam shrugs. “No big deal.”

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