

The Revivalist

“Mylifesashammmm,” the man slurred his words. He sat two stools away, drunk and wallowing in self-pity and bourbon.

Ed hunched over his beer pretending not to hear—wasn’t having a great week himself.

“Bet you can’t tell what I do for a living.” The man abandoned two empty highball glasses while moving to the stool next to Ed. A third drink he brought along.

“I’m not a betting man,” Ed replied. He needed to go home to face his wife.

“On the contrary, I see a man who’s already gambled and lost,” the man said clearly enough.

“Gambled? On what?” This guy was the icing on Ed’s crap cake of a day.

“Yourself. Else you wouldn’t be in here measuring your life against your next drink.”

Ironic, thought Ed.

“So ... do you know what I do for a living?”

“How should I know?”

“No clue, huh? I bet you know my ministry though, don’t you?”

“Like I said, I don’t bet.”

Ed looked the old man over. He wore a rumpled white suit, worn and dingy, splotted with stains. His hair matched his suit, gray, yellowed, and unkempt. In contrast, his diamond pinky ring and gold watch sparkled in the bar’s dim light.

“My daddy was a travelin preacher. A reviver. Lordy! He had God’s gift.” As he spoke his eyes became fiery and his slurred speech took on a southern drawl. Ed didn’t hear that accent much in Indiana. The watch looked like a Rolex, but he couldn’t tell if it

was a fake like the accent seemed to be. The man's face suddenly registered though. It had been plastered on placards stuck to every light pole and fence in town. "The Revivalist" they'd said.

"Reverend Jim." He said, sticking out a hand. Ed looked at it but didn't shake.

"My daddy had the gift. He could heal folks. I got the call when I was thirteen—preaching with Daddy all over. Then Mama passed and Daddy lost his fire, so I filled in more and more." He sipped again. "I could preach too, praise Jesus!—collection plates always full." He chuckled. "That wasn't the *main thing*. Naw. We was saving souls, bringing folks to Jesus, that's what Then Daddy, Lord rest his soul, went to be with Mama in heaven. After that... hoo-eee. I cleaned up."

Ed thought, *Chrissy must be worried, or worse.*

"My ministry grew and I moved into a permanent church in Dallas." He trailed off eyes on his glass. "That's when things got a little crazy. Folks be linin' up out the doors for healin'. It was exhaustin. Healin takes it out of ya."

How could a man heal the sick just by "laying on hands" and praying? Ed thought, I should be going home right now.

"I was doin' two, three services a week and Wednesday nights too. Rakin' it in. Souls, I mean. Got a radio show, then TV, a Dial-a-Prayer line."

"Dial-a-Prayer? You're kidding, right?" Ed snickered.

"No! I don't kid. Direct line to God!" Jim said seriously, then laughed.

"So ... why here in hicksville? What happened?" Ed asked.

The old man suddenly wailed and dropped his greasy head onto his forearms, knocking over his glass. The regulars swiveled their heads to look.

“Shh. People are staring, man.”

“Lordy. I’ve lost it. I’ve done lost it.”

“Lost what?” Ed asked.

“Ever’thin. My church, my folks, my followers ... an’ my *money!*”

“Why? You were doing so well.”

“I am but a man! And no match for Satan, not like our Lord Jesus.”

Ed, now intrigued said, “Go on ... what happened?”

“Well ... there was a bit of trouble with some charity funds and a woman, and the booze.”

“Ahhh.”

“I lost the touch too and I am tryin’ get it back. Gave up the Jezebel. I got no funds, but a man’s gotta have one vice, eh?” He fumbled for his glass, but the attractive bartender had taken it away.

“Well Reverend, I hope you find it.” Ed downed his beer, dropped a buck on the bar, and got up.

“I hope you find it too, son.”

What the hell did that mean? Ed wondered. *Chrissy’ll be pissed by now.* Into a foggy drizzle he crossed the gravel lot to his old Chevette, which after three tries, cranked over to a soft purr and familiar rattle.

On the dark, wet, two-lane highway, he mused. It had been a week since he’d packed up his cubical and stowed it in the trunk, along with a pink slip. As far as Chrissy knew, he was coming home late from work. It was the second time in four months he’d been laid off. *Who are you kidding, asshole? Fired. They fired your ass.*

Ed had been fired from a dozen crappy jobs in the five years since he dropped out of college. *I can't seem to finish anything*, he thought morosely.

Chrissy had “come up pregnant” in the summer of their freshman year at Indiana University. He'd done the right thing. They were both from the same small town—they had to marry—it was expected.

I'd have married her eventually anyway, he thought. They had been happy for a time, but Chrissy miscarried at five months. Medical bills, student loans, and a depressed wife stressed Ed to his breaking point.

Anyway, thought Ed, *if that customer hadn't been such a dickwad I wouldn't have cursed at him and hung up. How did I know he was a friend of the big boss?*

The last week and a half Ed left the house at seven, drove to Dunkin' Donuts and sat with the newspaper want ads, making calls, filling applications, then to the library's computer. He'd come up empty. *Like my pockets—like my bank account soon would be.*

Now with a new baby coming ... he couldn't tell Chrissy. By five he'd head home, but the last two nights he'd stopped at O'Malley's. *Well, three counting tonight.* He had to tell her, but didn't want to throw her into another funk, especially not now.

She was so excited, spending her time off from work preparing the baby's room: painting, sewing curtains, buying little stuffed animals. It was cute, but she'd have to stop buying stuff. *I gotta tell her. She's spending way too much on all that shit. Money we don't have.*

Chrissy continued to work at the Pak n Pay even though it tired her out and made her feet and ankles swell. She didn't complain. She'd work until she went into labor that's what she'd said. *She's a trooper. I'm such a shit.*

The old preacher's words echoed around Ed's head as he turned down the dirt road leading to the little rented house. "I hope you find it too, son."

What did he mean?

As Ed walked in, Chrissy got up from the couch. "Eddie ... jeeze. What time is it?"

"Uh ... it's nine-thirty, sweetie," he cajoled.

She yawned. "Mmmm. I don't know why I'm so sleepy." She rubbed her big belly.

"I do." Ed hugged her.

She pushed him away. "Ed! Why so late? Three nights you've missed dinner. I kept some warm in the oven, but it's probably dry as a bone by now."

"I know, baby I'm sorry," Ed deflected. "What did you do today?"

"Oh! I've got to show you ..." She pulled Ed down the hall to the baby's room.

"That's ... pretty. Yellow... I like yellow."

"I finished painting!" Chrissy smiled up at him.

The room had been transformed. Ed's guitars were gone; the bookshelves emptied of his books, replaced by neatly arranged powders, ointments, and baby toys. The walls were a pale creamy sunshine, the windows framed in yellow ruffles.

"Heads up, Ed!" A soft white rabbit landed in his hands. He gazed around the room, calculating the money she'd spent. *I can't tell her.* Ed's eyes rested on the grainy black and white sonogram photo pinned to the wall above the diaper-changing table. *I haven't paid that bill yet either.*

When Chrissy had lost the first baby, she came home from the hospital and sat on the couch. Four months later, she was still there. Ed tried everything to cheer her up. He coaxed, nagged, prodded, and finally shamed her into doing something, anything. The relationship deteriorated and Ed thought they would break up. He dropped out of school to work full time. They moved out of South Bend back home to a tiny old ruin of a rented house. It was only temporary, but temporary has a way of turning into life.

One morning, Chrissy finally got up, showered, went out, came back with groceries and a new job. A fragile happiness grew in her, one he hoped would last.

Chrissy had a job and now *this* baby had given her new purpose; she was *all* about the baby. It was as if the first tragedy of their marriage had never happened—she had hope and even joy. But Ed’s dreams were lost with their first child. Though in truth he wasn’t that sorry about the miscarriage. Chrissy’s unexpected pregnancy and then her loss of the baby had screwed up his whole life. Ed felt she was living her dream while his had shattered—he couldn’t tell her he’d failed again and resented her for it.

At seven the next morning Ed left for his Dunkin Donuts routine. He sat with the morning papers, the local, and the *Chicago Sun Times*. He splurged on a pack of glazed donut holes to go with his coffee. Classifieds open, he considered: “Cash Paid for Plasma!” Ed didn’t see him until he sat across the table and dipped a tanned, spotted fist in the donut box.

“What the —?”

“Good morning, son.” The reverend flashed a yellowed-toothy smile at Ed. His voice held none of the slurred, southern drawl of the night before.

“First, I’m not your son and second,” Ed said, slapping the man’s hand going for seconds, “hands off my breakfast.”

“Point taken.” He grinned. “I suppose you’re wondering why I sat here.”

“No, but I bet you’re gonna tell me.”

“Not a morning person, eh boy?” Jim’s voice had lost its charm altogether.

Ed balled his fists over the newsprint. “What is it you want? Money? Sorry, fresh out.”

Jim tapped a ridged fingernail on the want ads. “Looking for work? I think we can help each other.” He grinned wolfishly and laid out his proposition.

A few silent moments passed. Ed had nothing to lose and agreed to the terms. He’d start that evening—three hours of easy work—seventy-five bucks cash. Glancing at the want ads now on the car seat Ed thought, *I guess it beats selling my blood.*

He wondered what kind of excuse he would give Chrissy for being out late for a fourth night in a row. As it turned out, she was working a later shift and wouldn’t be home until after ten herself.

Dressed as instructed, Ed drove south to Mortonsville. It wasn’t hard to find the place. There sat a large white tent pitched on a dirt lot the other side of the co-op feed mill. A dozen dusty cars and farm trucks were parked alongside the tent. Ed didn’t know what to expect having never been to a revival. He got out and leaned against the car watching people park and go inside. A circus-like atmosphere emanated from the tent, loud gospel music pouring into the dusk with the low roar of people laughing and talking.

Ed joined the crowd and entered through the main opening. The reverend told him, “Blend in, but act your part.” He did his best, stooped over, held his back and limped, dragging a foot.

Inside, a thin, gray-haired black man met Ed and introduced himself, “Horace.”

“Edward,” he replied.

“Rev Jim, says you’re ta sit up there.” He pointed to a row of empty seats up front. Ed started to limp his way up the aisle.

“Naw. Not yet.” He fastened a surprisingly strong hand on Ed’s arm. “Just stay here a bit, ‘til it fills up.”

He stood back against the canvas wall. A broad cross-section of rural folk shuffled down the dirt aisle: old farmers in overalls, their wives in flowered dresses, or too-tight stretch pants; couples with little snotty-nosed kids; a few Mexican families—migrant workers, Ed guessed. A knot of teenaged boys roughhoused in 4-H or John Deere tractor caps filled the back row on one side, while across the aisle teen girls in form-fitting T’s and skin-tight blue jeans giggled.

When the seats had filled Horace leaned in and whispered, “You’re on Shakespeare, lean on me. Don’t overact.”

Ed looked toward the ground, bent over holding his back with one hand and leaning on Horace with the other. Ed doubted that he’d be recognized here. Horace guided him to a seat in the front row with a flourish of feigned sympathy. He made sure the audience saw Ed’s inability to walk unaided.

Seated to his right, a pimply-faced young man wore thick glasses and a hearing aide with a big beige box hanging around his neck and wires going up to big buttons in both

ears. *Did they even use those ugly things anymore?* Horace pushed a woman in a wheelchair into the empty space on Ed's left.

The lights dimmed. On the low platform in a single spotlight stood a plump black woman in a blue dress. Horace started another cassette tape and the woman sang a gospel song at full volume. Ed didn't know the tune, but it had a lively beat. She was good, and enthusiastic. The audience clapped along and sang the choruses. A couple more numbers followed and she had the crowd pretty well warmed up.

Reverend Jim took the stage. He began with a prayer and Bible verses, something to do with faith and repentance. Then launched into a theatrical sermon and at intervals he repeated himself three times. Plenty of *praise Gods, holy Jesuses, and amens* peppered his speech, matched with echoing calls from the crowd. The temperature and the energy level had risen along with the fervor of his dynamic delivery. His southern drawl more pronounced than ever.

"Do you *believe* in the power of God?" He shouted.

"Yes! Hallelujah! Praise Jesus! Amen!" The congregation shouted back.

"Do you *believe* that the power of God can *heal* all man's ills?"

"YES!"

"What? I can't hear you." He cupped his hand around his ear, "DO YOU BELIEVE THE POWER OF GOD CAN HEAL YOU?"

"YESSSS!" The crowd yelled.

"Raise your hands to the sky and praise God with me!" He held up both hands, closed his eyes, and yelled, "Praise be to God!" He opened his eyes and prompted, "Pray with me. Praise be to your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ! Oh Lord we ask you to heal the sick,

God! Heal these people! And God...” he paused, opened his eyes, and with a sweeping gesture over the people said, “Let’s do it NOW Lord!”

The tent erupted with the cries of *amen*, and *praise God*, and *help me Jesus!*

That was our cue. Jim stepped back for sip of water, and wiped his face with a towel. Horace took the mic and called for folks to line up. He helped the first row of people to their feet, the ones who could stand, and brought us forward to the stage. He wheeled the two chair-bound people to the front of the platform. Ed speculated that these were shills —people hired to get the crowd *in the spirit*. Ed hung back, he wanted to see it done first.

Reverend Jim seemed to listen carefully to the complaints of each person, repeating them for the crowd. The healings all followed the same pattern. First he asked them, “Do you believe you can be healed by the power of Jesus?”

The person would affirm, then he’d ask again. “This is important now. You’ll only be healed if you BELIEVE! ... Say it with me now, *Jesus!*”

“Jesus!”

“Say it, *Jesus!*”

“Jesus!”

“Say *Jesus!*”

And finally the person would go rigid or spasm, and Jim would put a hand on their forehead and give them a good shove. Two big guys standing behind would catch them. The only variant was with the cripples in chairs. Instead of pushing them down, he helped them up. They’d take a few steps and the crowd would shout, *Amen!*

Ed’s turn came. He followed the procedure, explained his condition into the mic, chanted the name of Jesus, a few times. He went down, was hauled back up, and walked

upright and smiling across the stage. Ed looked toward Jim for confirmation of his performance, but the preacher had moved on.

Ed thought that people with real ailments received a blessing too. He watched the same ritual performed over and over. Seemingly miraculous healings were followed by shouts of *thank you Jesus!* and *praise God!* After a half hour, it was getting monotonous, but the excitement of the crowd appeared to be a mass frenzy of faith.

Ed wondered what Jim had meant when he said he'd *lost it*. It looked like he was doing pretty well. People seemed happy with the healings and Ed noticed the offering buckets got passed, not once, but three times through the crowd.

Afterwards, he followed the other “professional healees” around the back of the tent to the door of a large, expensive looking, late-model motorhome.

When his turn came, he mounted the steps and went in to see Jim sitting at the dinette with many stacks of dollar bills piled up. A paper bucket stood on the table nearly full of coins. As he counted and stacked he sang under his breath, “Thank you Jesus, thank you Jesus.” Seeing Ed enter, he motioned for him to sit, “Well son, what did you think?”

Careful not to touch the money, he rested his palms on the table. “It was ... pretty impressive.”

“Yes, well ...” Jim smiled. “It’s not like the old days. I do better in the south, but it wasn’t bad, not bad at all. Praise the Lord.” He grinned again, and sipped a glass of amber liquid. He counted out seventy-five dollars in small bills then pushed them across the table. Ed reached to take them, but Reverend Jim held them firmly.

“So, do you want to come back?”

“Come back?”

“Right, I have a need of your services the next three weeks. After that, I’ll be moving on to another state. Are you interested in the job, or not?”

Ed hesitated. He needed the money and job hunting had turned up nothing. The act hadn’t been hard, so why did he feel so guilty?

“You’re not a believer, are you son?” He took another sip of his drink.

“After what I saw tonight. What I *did* tonight. Should I be?” he said, pulling the money out from under Jim’s wrinkled hand.

Jim shrugged, “It’s different things to different people. People believe what they need to believe.”

“You didn’t heal anyone tonight did you?”

“Me? No. I didn’t heal anyone. But they felt better didn’t they? You saw them. I made the lame walk and the blind see.” He chuckled, “But no, it wasn’t me. It was their faith. They feel better and even if it’s just temporary, they believe. So what’s the harm?”

Ed rose, pushing the money into the pocket of his jeans.

“So, are you in, son? Tomorrow night same time, same place.”

At the door he stopped with both hands on the doorframe, his face out in the night air, he looked back, “The name’s Ed.”

When Chrissy walked in from her late shift, Ed sat on the couch watching TV. “How was your day sweetie?” He noted the big Pak n Pay bag she dropped on the floor. Good thing she got an employee discount, but still.

She collapsed on the sofa and put her feet in his lap. He removed her shoes and rubbed her puffy ankles. She sighed, her head rolled back against the cushions. "I'm so tired. Did you eat?"

"Yep," he lied.

"Mmmm. Feels goooood." Her eyes were closed.

They sat for a few minutes, while the news anchor chatted cheerfully about a train derailment in Quincy. Ed continued to rub her feet.

"Chrissy," he said softly, "Honey, I have to tell you something."

She was breathing slowly and deeply and didn't open her eyes. She had fallen asleep. Ed picked her up and carried her to bed. He wouldn't tell her that night, either.

Friday night the revival meeting passed much the same as on Thursday. He performed the same act, and got paid the same money. It looked like the take was even better than the night before.

Jim told Ed to bring changes of clothes for two performances on Saturday and three on Sunday, at two and three times the money. In addition, he asked that Ed come up with different ailments. Ed wondered how people could see him being healed again and again and not catch on. Jim explained that faith is so strong that people don't question it. They just believe.

I guess that's why it's called blind faith, Ed thought.

Chrissy worked all day Saturday.

Ed feigned arthritis and chronic pain for the first service. For the second, in different clothes, he demonstrated a severe stuttering problem. Jim raised his eyebrows when he

heard Ed's attempt to speak, flashed a crooked grin and proceeded with the standard healing. Asked to recite a Bible verse he after being healed, Ed read it flawlessly. Reverend Jim laughed out loud, "Praise the ever-lovin Lord Jesus! Don't that beat all?" He addressed the crowd. They responded with their amens, and he moved on, but not without a wink in Ed's direction. Ed was pleased with his performance.

On Sunday Ed told Chrissy about a fishing trip with a couple of guys from work. With pole and tackle box packed in the car, he cranked the Chevette and backed down the dirt driveway. Chrissy waved him down with a bagged lunch. *Wow. Now I really feel like a heel*, he thought as he accepted it.

"I may be late tonight Chrissy. We're going clear out to Blue Reservoir, and you know the guys will wanna stop for burgers and beers after."

"Ed, I hardly see you anymore. It's not fair." She frowned, and seemed to be thinking it over. "All right, but try not to be too late. And don't drive drunk!" she paused, then admitted, "The girls an I are going—"

"Not shopping!" he blurted.

"Uh... no. Why?"

"Well ... just ... you know ... watch the budget is all."

"Don't worry, of course I will. Anyway, the gals have something else planned. I think it might be a *surprise* baby shower." She giggled with pleasure.

She leaned in the car and gave him a wet, open-mouth kiss, tempting him to stay, but he didn't. Pulling out into the dirt road, Ed thought, *I should just tell her about the job. The one I lost and the one I am doing now.* He reasoned that having the money from this temporary gig would soften the blow of his being fired, again. *Yeah. I'll tell her tonight.*

The morning service was sparser than the previous evening's. Ed suspected that the faithful were at their own churches that morning. Jim ran the service almost like regular church with a longer sermon, fewer healings. Jim seemed a little subdued, not as intense. He reminded folks to come back for the late show, promising more: "Miraculous works of God's mysteries and powers." This didn't stop the passing of the buckets though. Ed suspected a hangover.

During the two hours between the morning and afternoon shows Ed lolled under a tree in the parking lot, and ate his packed lunch. He started awake from a nap with the crunch of tires on gravel. The afternoon crowd had begun to arrive. Music pumped from the sound system inside. Ed took his change of clothes around back of the tent.

Halfway through the next show, Ed limped, held his lower back, and tearfully told the story of fighting years of pain. Jim placed his hands on Ed's back slowly rubbing, and then did the same with his legs, repeating the familiar incantations. Heat radiated from Jim's hands. Ed's previous nervousness was all but gone now and he noticed that the manipulations actually felt good; relaxing. His back, which had been on the verge of a spasm from holding that stoop, stopped clinching. That could have been just the relief of straightening up, Ed figured.

As the healings continued the excitement in the tent ratcheted up to a frenzy. Individuals in the audience shot up from their seats shouted and, "speaking in tongues," uttered nonsense syllables that evidently made them cry, wave their arms and sometimes faint. *The real crazies have come out, today*, Ed thought. Reverend Jim worked the crowd

as he touched Ed and chanted the names of God. Ed repeated the chants automatically and as he did, he glanced out at the crowd and spotted her.

Chrissy sat with Pam and Monica from the store. She stared steely-eyed across the expanse directly at Ed. She wore an expression of surprise, but was not smiling. Before he finished his act by walking pain-free across the stage, Chrissy stood and bolted from the tent as fast as a woman eight-months pregnant could waddle. Ed jumped from the stage, and ran down the central aisle after her. Behind him Jim's voice echoed, "Lordy, looka that boy now! By God, we have seen a miracle today!"

"Amen!" Sang the congregation as Ed left the murky light of the tent into the sunshine after his wife. He caught up with her in the middle of the bare dirt lot.

"Fishing?" she shouted when he'd caught up to her. She slowed her labored progress, but continued across the parking lot. He steered her toward his car.

"Why did you lie to me? And, since when did you get religion?" Her tone mocked him.

"I thought you gave all this up!" He shouted back angrily. "Looks like I'm not the only one with secrets."

"It was Pam's idea." She began to cry, "I thought they were going to throw me a shower. I thought I'd be getting baby presents." She sobbed. "Turns out they just wanted to save my soul and the baby's."

Then she really let loose and wailed. Ed wrapped his arms around her and pulled her as close as the baby would allow. She pushed him roughly away and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

“Anyway, why shouldn’t I want to get the baby blessed? Don’t you care about him? Don’t you want him?”

“What? Of course I do. Jeez Louise, Chrissy, how can you jump to such irrational conclusions? It’s just, y’know I thought you were over it.”

“Over what? Needing a belief? Wanting God’s love? Or over *It*? I should *get over* that?” She began to pace around him angrily. “But that’s not what you meant, is it? Yes. I’m over *it*. And no, I’ll *never* be over it. I need help. I needed God’s help. I thought you knew. I know you don’t believe, but I thought you were OK with it.”

“I ... I am OK with it Chrissy. You know I want you to be happy, and if that’s what it takes ... I just didn’t ... Look ... this ...” Ed gestured toward the tent, “this isn’t the place, that guy ... he’s a fake—”

“Well, obviously. You’re here, and we both know that was an act.” She sneered at him in disgust. “But how was I supposed to know? Pam heard he was good. How... could you do that Ed? Why?”

Ed leaned back against the car door and blew out a long breath. “I ... we ... needed the money.”

She stared at him without speaking.

“He’s paying me.”

“We don’t need money that badly, Eddie. It’s horrible. It’s immoral.”

“Honey? We do. We do need the money.”

She crossed her arms under her swollen bosom. “Why?” She asked warily.

Ed turned facing the car and rested his chin on the doorframe. “Because, I lost my job.”

Seconds went, by but they seemed like hours. She didn't make a sound. Ed looked up to see that she stood there hugging her belly, while fresh tears ran silently down her cheeks.

“Oh Jeeze, Chrissy. I didn't want to tell you. I knew you'd be upset.”

“Upset?! Upset?!” He rested a hand on her shoulder, and she yanked herself violently away. “Oh, this isn't upset, Ed. I am furious! How could you? What did you do this time? You promised you wouldn't screw up again. Now ... of all times. Jesus H. Christ, Edward.”

“I'm sorry Chrissy?”

She walked around the car and got in. “Take me home.” She said flatly.

Ed got in behind the wheel.

“Well?” she prodded.

“I ... I ...can't.”

“You can't?”

“There's a third service tonight. I don't get paid until the end.”

“Well,” she replied, “you better get back in there then. Because you need a fucking miracle.” Chrissy leaned over to open the driver's side door.

“I'm sorry,” he said again.

“Go.”

Ed got out. Chrissy slid her bulk over, started the car, and pulled out of the lot jumping the low earthen curb. The tires spun on the gravel road sending up clouds of dust. He watched the car speed into the distance until it disappeared over a rise between the green cornfields.

Back at the tent the the gospel music cranked up. Ed shrugged, and headed back to his temporary job.

That woman could really sing.