The Painter

Mavis and I did not have any money when we first married, and we had to live in an old apartment house where you couldn't shut out the cold and the big trucks went by rattling the windows. This was in Springfield, which was the big city for us. I had been in the United States Army, but really we were just farm kids.

I drove a forklift for a catalogue printer, working the graveyard shift. I would unload rolls of newsprint from the rail cars and stack them high in the warehouse, bring them down again and deliver them to the web presses. I made decent wages, and with what Mavis brought home from waiting tables, we were able to save some. Still, we were unhappy in our jobs, knowing that we had not found our true vocations before the Lord.

Around three in the morning, work slowed down, and the men wanted to play poker. I did not try to tell them that it was wrong to gamble, but I could not remain in the room with them while they smoked and took the Lord's name in vain. I learned in the United States Army that there is a time and place for the Lord’s witness.

So I took my New Testament out to the delivery bays where the empty rail cars sat. When I need strength I always turn to the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor, and blessed are ye when men do revile and persecute you.

But it was a cold night, and I could not sit still to read. I paced along the concrete dock, staring at the dark hills to the south. The starlight was almost magical, and the moon hung low and red, like some sort of sign if only I could interpret it. Suddenly, I stopped walking. I

thought I'd seen something scurry and run into one of the cars. It might have been anything: a piece of brush the wind had dropped, an armadillo, or one of my co-workers, playing a trick on me.

But somehow, I felt that the Lord was testing me, and I tried not to be afraid. I walked to the very last car, where shadows swallowed the starlight. I stared into the void of the rail car. And a great force pushed me to my knees.

"You!" a voice said. "Thomas Hovey!"

"Yes, Lord." I could not breathe. "I'm here, Lord."

I cannot say if there was a physical presence in that box car. The voice boomed like some big gun, but perhaps only in my head. That did not make the moment less real. The time has come, Thomas Hovey, the voice said. Find a church, bring the gospel, and help the poor.

God delivered us a church in Mountain Vale, a great cinder block building that once had been a farm implement garage. The long pit for working under trucks remained, as well as a continuous table, built into the walls, and covered with broken tractor parts. Everywhere you looked, on the floor and settled on the ceiling beams, lay half an inch of oily dirt.

In the back, long before, someone had built an apartment. It had electricity and running water, but Mavis did not want to live there.

"It's the Lord's will," I told her.

She found a job right away at the aluminum plant. Not out on the floor, but in the front office, which meant she had to dress well. Of course, for a bathroom, we had nothing but the stool and a sink streaked brown from parts washer, so I installed a new sink and hung a mirror

above it, and constructed some shelves from particle board. Mavis complained that she had no privacy, and so I hung a curtain.

I almost didn't recognize her when she left in the mornings. She looked like one of those women on magazine covers.

I scrubbed the apartment floor to ceiling, and found a man to bring a new electrical service from the pole. Then I ran wire through the building, all in conduit just as the city told me. I installed a new tub and shower. I laid tile in the kitchen and hooked up a second-hand washer and drier. Mavis complained there were no closets for her new clothes, so I built her two.

All of that took me three months, and I had not begun with the church. Sometimes, God seemed far away, and I doubted my purpose.

I hauled trash from the garage for a week. I took a high-pressure gun to the beams and then to the floor, to knock away those years of grease. I scrubbed it all down, disinfected it, and sprayed it white.

I made a platform in front and some altars from basswood packing boards that I sanded and filled. I drove back to Springfield, where a Catholic church had closed, and bought a podium, pews, and folding chairs. I asked Mavis to help with the windows, but she could not find time, so I made curtains myself from white muslin.

I placed an ad in the paper and a sign on the street. On our fifteenth Sunday in Mountain Vale, Mavis and I stood out front of the newest church in America, hoping someone would come.

Twenty good folk straggled in, the wretched of Mountain Vale. They were the panhandlers and the drunks and the mental cases. If their eyes were not glazed over, they were hostile.

“Jesus told the rich man to give all his money to the poor,” I told them. “It was the one thing he could not do.”

“Amen,” an old woman said.

“But, dear friends, none of us here today has that rich man’s problem.”

“No-o-o-o,” came a chorus. And everyone laughed.

“We have a place to meet. We serve the Lord. We have riches greater than earthly treasures!”

“Praise the Lord!”

They had not among them enough money to pay the church’s electric bill. Prosperous folks attend prosperous churches. A prosperous church must keep the poor at a certain distance, or its congregation will go elsewhere.

Mavis understood this, and to my sorrow I began to lose her. Or, to be perfectly honest, I had probably lost her long before.

She could have dealt with our situation had she thought that one day we would own a beautiful home and a fine car. Instead, it seemed that I had doomed us to the same, eternal poverty that our followers knew. And that both of us had grown up with—in her case, on a little hilltop ranch, with a drunkard for a father. I did not drink, but I couldn’t offer the escape she hoped for.

"Maybe God didn't lead us here at all," she said. "Maybe you just *thought* he did."

"I heard a voice."

"You heard a voice. Did you ask this voice about your wife? Did your voice say anything about living in this dump?" She paused. "I'm sorry, Tom, but that's what it is."

"There's not much more I can do with it, Mavis."

"You've done everything a man could. We need a real home, Tom. Could we bring a child into the world here? Would the Lord—would the Lord *want* that, Tom?"

She had been riding to work with her boss, which seemed kind of him, but now I understood that it was more than kind. She filed for divorce, and soon after that, married the man. Seven months after moving out, she bore his daughter.

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In the summer I hired on to make hay, and later to run a big John Deere corn picker, all to support the church. I would not enjoy such a life on a permanent basis, but I was still young, and it was good to work long hours under the sun.

Sometimes, I saw Mavis downtown. What a lovely, worldly woman, I thought, then realized that I had been married to her. At first, she smiled awkwardly, and we exchanged a few words like distant cousins. Later, I ducked from sight before we could meet—and I believe she did, too.

I knew that we had married too young, and that we were not suited. True, both of us were raised on farms, but her ambitions were different than mine. I rushed into my church for the poor, and perhaps, if I had waited, and found a building not quite so run down, she could have risen to the same call. Often, thinking of her, I was beset with doubt, and lonely. I wondered if this path the Lord had taken me down could content any woman. Paul said that it is better to marry than to burn, and without Mavis my nights were long, and I burned.

My little community rallied around me. The women—sad widows of broken men, and retirees whose government checks never stretched far enough—took my part, and I was not noble enough to dispute their opinion of Mavis.

In winter I shifted from the fields to a lumberyard, but there were weeks when the church almost supported itself. A reporter from West Plains wrote about us, saying how the clothes on your back were just fine in this particular house of God, and how some newly homeless family could spend the night, and how the big churches sent us their homeless—and sometimes, their checks.

Four years passed, and Mavis moved to a fine new house in Poplar Bluff, and bore a son. Then the painter came.

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His name was Abraham Sawyer, and when he shook my hand and said hello I felt I knew him somehow, that he was my lost brother or even a kind of father. He had just returned from a trip across Montana and down through the Dakotas to Iowa, where he was raised.

We were tacking on a new roof and painting the exterior. The women scraped and filled the big metal windows and scrubbed the cinder blocks while the men tore off the roll roofing and laid new tar paper. Some were sick or old, and worked only an hour before having to stop. Others could manage no more than to make sandwiches and lemonade.

But Abraham arrived at dawn and worked all day. He outpaced me, and I was thirty years younger. He repaired the soffits and painted the high, difficult places. You could tell that he had done this kind of work all his life.

He had retired from the aluminum plant the year before. "When I came home from Vietnam I settled right here in Mountain Vale," he said. "They made me a welder. It ain't easy to weld aluminum, but I was good at it."

He married the first girl he saw, and never lived a happy day. His wife bore him a son with Down Syndrome, and the years of coping with the boy sapped her energies. When the child

died, at sixteen, she took to her bed and didn't leave it again, living out her days in a fog of alcohol, antidepressants, and soap operas. "'Get up!' I'd tell her," Abraham said. "'Woman, where is our life?'"

An outdoorsman, he spent many days away from Mountain Vale, camping in the deep woods and along the Piney River, and once trekking all the way to Idaho to explore the same wilderness Lewis and Clark had. I think that many times his loneliness nearly drove him insane.

He'd found no solace touring his origins in Iowa. The farmhouse where he grew up had been gutted and abandoned. He did not recognize the town where he had gone to school, and the school itself was gone. His relatives were dead except for cousins and their children, and they did not know his name. The beautiful girl he almost married before the war had made a bad marriage, divorced, and fled to California.

Abraham took me to his house one night and it was like entering a museum, with all the bucks and bighorns he'd mounted, and rifles bristling on the walls. He hadn't touched his wife's things. He lived between the kitchen and the living room, where he watched television, ate, and slept.

Abraham brewed coffee and we sat, two lonely men, talking until midnight. "I'd take the boy with me sometimes because he liked the outdoors," he said. "He'd sit by the fire and sing Beatles songs."

I wondered how many times he'd had this conversation with himself, blaming himself for his dead family. "I wanted him to be strong, to stand on his own two feet! I made him try to fire the rifle, but he couldn't even hold it right. And he couldn't take the kick." He stared at me angrily. "Reverend, I screamed at him. I said he was a runt, and an idiot."

My own father, who died when I was a child, would have been Abraham's age. It was odd to counsel an older man. "We are not saints," I told him. "You should not—"

He drew a rifle from the rack. "I shoved this against his shoulder and I said, 'Don't you cry! Don't you cry!' And he didn't. He held it like this. He held it *right!*" Abraham shouldered the rifle and aimed toward a window. I was afraid that he'd fire it.

"I meant to tell him, I meant to say rest it on a tree limb if it's too heavy, and then you breathe in, and breathe out, and hold your breath, and squeeze the trigger. But it went off! I don't know if somehow he brushed the trigger, but it went off, and he fell down backwards kind of, and hit his head on a tent peg. He never woke up."

Sometimes men bear such awful burdens that nothing you can say is adequate. Perhaps it helped simply to tell his story. Weeks passed, and I grew used to finding him sitting in the darkened church, reading the Bible. He wanted to know of prophecy.

"When the Rapture comes, Reverend, and some don't go. Do you read that those who hold to the faith can still be saved?"

"Yes." It was a strange question, though I appreciated his interest in religion. "But it will be a terrible time."

He made a steeple from cypress he had planned to use for still another gun rack. It was the last thing needed to make the garage look like a church.

"Beautiful," I told him.

"I could have been an artist."

"Yes."

"A painter. I was accepted at the Kansas City Art Institute before I went in the army."

I didn't know if this was impressive or not. "What happened?"

"My dad wouldn't let me go. He needed me on the farm, and he thought drawing pictures was a lot of foolishness. I stayed home for two years, and then ran off to the army."

"Well, you have done the Lord's work, Abraham. It's a wonderful steeple."

And then he was gone. He had no phone; I dropped by his house, looking for his truck, but found no sign of him. Down along the Piney, I thought, fishing. Off maybe as far as West Texas, where I believe he had a friend from the war. I left a note on his door: "Everyone at Mountain Vale Full Gospel loves your steeple. We miss you at service! Pastor Tom Hovey."

And then I had no time to be lonely, for someone else took over my thoughts. A dark-haired woman in expensive clothes began attending, and I am not so dense about these matters that I could not understand why. It was the pastor who interested her, not his sermons.

Dear Lord, I was vulnerable. I still thought about Mavis, and sometimes I found myself staring at women on the streets. They'd stare back in amusement, occasionally in outrage—bringing me to my senses. I must be above this, I would think. I am not a priest, but I am a man of God.

But a man, still, who still was burning.

Melinda attended faithfully for six weeks, but I might never have said more to her than "Good morning, Sister." One Sunday as I stood beneath Abraham's steeple, shaking hands, she leaned near enough I could smell her perfume. She pressed a note into my hand: "Come to dinner Tuesday."

And soon, it was dinner every night. She was a lawyer's ex-wife, and I did not know what she saw in me, unless it was that our church had begun to succeed, and she admired our work.

She lived on a high hill above a fast-moving creek, and below that the town. We sat on a patio beside the sunken hot tub the lawyer had installed.

"This fall I'll be teaching school again," she said.

"That's good, Melinda!"

"Yes. I don't want to waste any more time, you know, *acquiring* things. I want to give something back. And I look at those poor women—the ones you help, Tom—"

"You help just by coming, Louise."

"Excuse me for a moment," she said, and slipped into the dim interior of her house, while I sat contemplating the sunset, grateful for this lovely woman's fellowship.

She returned wearing a robe. She let it fall, startling me with her nakedness, and then slipped into the tub.

"Melinda! This is—!"

"Sin?"

I could barely speak. "I . . . think so."

"Then you'll have to marry me, Tom Hovey."

"Oh," I said, nodding. I rose and looked down on her there in the water. It had been quite some time since my divorce.

One night as my new wife and I were returning from dinner I saw a light in the church. "Stay in the car," I told her, but she was right behind me.

I entered through the abandoned apartment—which we'd transformed to a day care center—so that I could creep up on the intruder. I crawled behind the pulpit, feeling like an intruder myself.

But we had no reason to call the police. It was Abraham, his shadow dancing down the long wall that I had painstakingly scrubbed and painted. He'd trained a floodlight stage center, where he had painted our Lord and Savior. To the left and right of Jesus, the remaining disciples sat at a long table, exactly like DaVinci's original except that Abraham's painting was twelve feet high, and almost forty long.

I walked among the pews, angry, but for the moment unable to speak. Melinda, who had kicked off her shoes and seemed quite short, suddenly, slipped from behind and put an arm around me.

I had some idea, of course, what my poor friend had been through. "Abraham is crazy," I whispered. "We can . . . paint over it."

"Paint over it!"

"This is God's house, Ruth."

"And isn't that—that wonderful painting—an act of worship?"

Perhaps so. The painting was only a copy of a great idea, and Abraham was an amateur, though the way he'd mixed colors was startling, and the expressions on faces were, well, like the expressions you'd see on the streets of Mountain Vale. Jesus wasn't DaVinci's Jesus. A man of many burdens, surely, but an ordinary man with gray hair.

He had been painting for three days. He did not see us; he did not see anything but his work. He held up his hands like claws in the harsh light, and made a devilish shadow.

It became clear why the Lord spoke to me that night by the rail cars. Our little church of the homeless was famous. Abraham's painting interested not just the local paper, but papers

across the Ozarks, and a network television show. As if I had something to do with it, I was interviewed again and again.

The church was full every Sunday, and donations come in so heavily that we bought another abandoned building and refurbished it into apartments for the poor. Melinda showed great ability with our finances, and we looked for new church sites in West Plains, Poplar Bluff, and finally even Springfield.

And yet there was no end to sadness, because Abraham had disappeared yet again. Every day I drove by his house, but only God could say where he had gone.

Eight months after Abraham finished his painting, I had a call from Sergeant Giles Moore of the Mountain Vale police. Abraham had been arrested for driving on the wrong side of the road. He was sober, and yet insisted that the wrong side was the right side. Some weeks before, the sergeant said, Abraham had called to complain that he had a prowler, and that he had discharged a firearm. But a neighbor had seen him breaking into his own house, in which he had not lived for months. He had been sleeping in his truck in a campsite on the Piney—living on the fish he caught. Perhaps cold weather drove him to town.

I could understand why, in Abraham's mind, he was an intruder in his own home. "He's so lonely," I told the sergeant.

I went down to the station but Abraham could not talk to me. He had withdrawn inside himself, and was never truly Abraham again. In the weeks afterwards I visited him at the VA hospital, and I felt that he knew me. I left him my New Testament and the Louis L'Amour novels from his house, but he never spoke.

He died in January, and when I preached his funeral I finally allowed myself to see, from the way the light filtered down out of the beams cut from those old trees, that the Judas in the

painting—an ordinary man, trapped, miserable—resembled Abraham. "Jesus and Judas," I said suddenly, interrupting my eulogy, but the congregation, which included every minister in town, the city council, and a reporter from St. Louis, did not notice that I had paused, or see what I saw.