

1. Sister Mary

Sister Mary enjoyed driving her Lincoln Navigator around the twists and turns of the narrow Cohutta Trail during the day, but it would be dark soon, and pleasure was becoming anxiety. Lacking roadside shoulders next to the road's boulder-filled gorge, worn deep by eons of running water, made the drive precarious, one she wanted to avoid.

A sign up ahead read, "Welcome to Dicksburgh."

Rounding the curve, she couldn't help but see the stranded motorist on the side of the road. "This is no place to be stuck at night," she thought, and braked to a stop behind the car with hazard lights flashing.

A man, hands in his pockets, stood calmly, peering under the hood.

"Damn," she thought, "I'm late." Sister Leah hates for anyone to be late. I'm in deep trouble and now somebody's broken down. Her doors clunked to indicate "unlocked" as she shifted into park and rolled down her window, allowing ninety-eight-degree, humid air, mixed with the odor of decomposing vegetation and an unhappy skunk, to pour in. August in Georgia.

The black-haired gentleman sauntered toward her; casually, he gave her the once-over and grinned. "Good evening, Sister. Me tourist. No many people use road. *Pobre eu.*" The soft-spoken man's accent and words were Brazilian Portuguese. "Thank God, you come."

Rolling hills doused the last ray of sunshine as the green forest morphed to gray. Sister Mary figured the delay meant she would need to drive the rest of the way to the Sanctuary very slowly. "You could've been waiting a long time."

He smiled. "*Sim.* Please. You have telephone and call for help me?"

"I do," she said, feeling obligated to help. Leaning forward and slightly toward her right to retrieve her cell phone from the passenger seat, she momentarily took her eyes off the stranger.

In one rapid movement, the man grabbed her slender shoulder, and jerked her upright, causing her light brown hair to swirl around the tanned skin of her thin neck.

Her eyes caught the blue blur of the edge of his rubber-gloved right hand as it struck the center of her throat, shooting a jolt of pain, and making her gasp for air.

Quickly pulling the car door open, he immobilized her with another paralyzing blow to the throat.

Dazed and in pain, Mary watched as chemically-resistant, blue-gloved hands poured clear liquid on a small white sponge. She felt the container drop into her lap, spilling fluid over her sleeves and front. Her eyes and nostrils burned from the sharp, sweet fumes and widened

in terror as the man forced the cold pad over her nose and mouth, whispering, “God works in mysterious ways.”

Mary kicked the floorboards, strained against the seat belt, and tried not to breathe, but reflexively gasped, taking an involuntary, reflexive, desperate breath. She held it, gasped again, and choked. She felt his thumb pressed tightly against the notch in her throat, closing the airway. Her head was exploding; the world swirled like an inverted merry-go-round as everything faded from color to gray to shadows, to black—and chaotic fear became blessed unconsciousness.

Retrieving her phone, the stranger calmly pressed a speed-dial number and whispered, “Done.”

Tossing the Nokia into the car, he grabbed the container from her lap and doused the remaining methyl ethyl ketone on her habit. Moving to the rear of the car, he removed the gas cap, letting it dangle against the side, and then moved to the driver’s side window, reached in, and pulled the shift lever into drive. The Lincoln Navigator idled toward the ravine, and when the front wheels approached the precipice, the nonchalant stranger ignited Sister Mary’s sleeve with a butane stick lighter.

2. **Blasphemy**

Pastor Maxentius Zeno Constantine studied the closed-circuit video screen, which displayed attendees arriving for the evening’s Summer Sunday Sundown Services—all from the subtle and secure surveillance position of his Class-A diesel Allegro Zephr 45QEZ motor home, a vehicle specially manufactured to be a command center for events such as these.

His greeters were busily radioing information garnered from written Prayer Request slips—gathered from the faithful—to his program manager, who would then tell him who to select from the congregation, and, of course, enabling him to reveal each individual’s secrets in front of an amazed audience.

His eyes were fixed on the screen. He spotted David Stone. “That son-of-a-bitch.”

The system clock read 6:45:34 p.m. Deepening shadows reduced the day’s sticky humidity and gave way to a welcomed coolness. Crowd-control ropes closed off two-thirds of the thirty thousand-capacity arena, but left open one thousand higher priced seating—Seats-of-the-Lord—and the expensive one hundred Ring-of-Honor member seats, which were reserved for members who had Club Lounge access. The City of Dicksburgh’s Jefferson Park Stadium was now an outdoor church—at least for the evening.

At five-foot eleven and one hundred seventy-five pounds, Pastor was not physically daunting. His full head of dark brown hair, brushed straight back, made him look taller, and with his sideburns grown even with the bottom of his ear lobes, he had a bit of an Elvis look, to fit with the redneck citizens of Dicksburgh, Georgia—a town well within the ever-lengthening Bible Belt.

As the pre-show routine began, Sister Leah stood next to Pastor. Her eyes focused intently on the monitor and the assembling crowd.

The sound manager tested the Shure wireless microphone, taped a transparent voice tube over Pastor's ear and down his left cheek, and placed an almost invisible radio receiver discreetly into his auditory canal.

Pastor placed his flip-phone into a desk drawer to prevent interruptions. Fingering the camera's remote, he zoomed in and followed one person walking past the infield's sea of folding chairs, and selecting a seat on the lower-main seating, third row. The cosmetologist did a final application of Pastor's smudge-proof, soft-brown makeup.

Pastor sneered at David's face, "I'll kill the fucking bastard."



David selected a seat near an aisle in order to leave without being noticed. He wanted to be unobtrusive in the crowd of believers as he settled in and looked at the upper level circumference, which held forty luxury suites. Only the half of the stadium with a good view of the stage was illuminated and had people in them. Those folks did not need the Club Lounge—each suite had a bar and a bartender. Too bad soccer attracted fewer fans to this multi-use facility.

Not counting the closed areas, the arena was almost full. David squinted to make out the details on a hand-carved teak pulpit sitting atop the large proscenium stage, placed between home plate and the pitcher's mound of what had been a baseball field four hours earlier. A black domed fly-loft blossomed over the motor home concealing the roof-mounted laser projectors. The cross-shaped pulpit, its cross-horizontal arms supporting the reading platform and two, nearly invisible, 15-inch, flat-panel color LCD teleprompters facing inward from the base of each arm of the cross, dominated center stage. David was impressed.

A large piano organ sat in the bed of a draped two-ton, flatbed truck, parked at a right angle to the motor home. The robed choir was seven deep. Attendants assisted the sick and wheelchair-bound congregants to the front row, their occupants' forlorn faces anxiously awaiting the Great Healer.

David checked the time—6:55 p.m. Sister Flossie Belle, an obese blonde, sporting a 60's style, two-foot beehive coiffure, took up

position beneath a large, red-lettered banner, demanding: "Read Your Bible." He met her a year earlier at a debate on campus. She wore a "Sisterhood of the Saved" robe, without the pure gold embroidery reserved for the Church's three Sisters Superior.

The motor home door opened. David's gaze fixed on Pastor, who stepped onto the stage beside Flossie Bell, wearing a robe of deep purple, accented by bright silver, gold, and red panels running from the bottom to a point on each shoulder. The ends of his blossoming sleeves bore embroidery in strands of pure 24-karat gold in his silk pulpit stole and chainette gold fringe, which hung from three-inch hemmed cuffs. An eight-inch Jesus, nailed to a solid gold cross, looped on a gold chain around his neck, swung pendulously. God liked gold.

A crescendo of kettledrums joined the organ music, drowning all conversation until one final clap of thunder rang from the stage. Instantly, all sound stopped.

In the silence, Pastor raised his hands. "Hallelujah." He paused and cast a smile of gentleness. "God said the wicked shall be turned into hell." His voice trailed off as he lowered his arms, "Psalms ninety-three." Again, he raised his hands, sleeves quivering in the wispy air. "Praise Almighty God, to whom all praise is due, the Lord of the world, the beneficent, the merciful, the gracious, and the master of the Day of Judgment. Thee do we serve and Thee do we beseech for help. Thee who will keep us on the right path. Hallelujah. Amen."

David wondered if those who shouted "Hallelujah" knew Pastor just quoted the Koran.

Pastor fell to his knees. "Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the sole and only sin that can never be forgiven. Never. Read Matthew, chapter twelve, verses thirty-one and thirty-two. Get on your knees and listen to Pastor."

The audience fell to their knees, filling the walking space leading to the exit isles, hands up, as if surrendering to an armed assailant; except one: David.

Pastor raised his head and met David's eyes. Inflating his lungs opulently, "I ask each of you: Do you believe in the Lord Christ Jesus?"

A sharp toot from the organ cracked the air, and the crowd answered, "We believe."

Kettledrums began, gradually increasing both tempo and volume. "I ask are there any among you who do *not* believe in the Lord and that the Bible is the Word of God Almighty?"

The organ held one long note, the drums raged in frenzy, then stopped abruptly.

Silence reigned.

Overcoming an instant of trepidation, David, startled by a spark of over-confidence, yelled, "I do not believe!"