

SUNFLOWER DOG

Dancing the Flathead Shuffle



KEVIN WINCHESTER

Sunflower Dog: Dancing the Flathead Shuffle
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*For Ava—may the laughter in your life
be exceeded only by love.*

Contents

1. Take the Next Left to Salvation.....	1
2. Never Saw It Coming.....	19
3. Opportunity.....	35
4. Do It for Love.....	43
5. Friday Night in America.....	55
6. An Itch That Needs Scratching.....	61
7. Landings.....	73
8. The Back Yard.....	87
9. Leverage.....	99
10. Pictures.....	109
11. A New, Comfortable Spot.....	125
12. Cowboys, Indians, and Serendipity.....	143
13. Cash Flow Mojo.....	151
14. A Job's A Job.....	163
15. Ambition, Education—Bingo!.....	183
16. Growing Up, Growing Old, and Dying.....	199
17. Over the Moon.....	217
18. A Job to Do.....	231
19. Flatheads.....	247
20. The Future, It's Right There.....	263
21. And the Sunflower Dog.....	275
Epilogue.....	285
Author Notes and Acknowledgments.....	291
About the Author.....	295
Share Your Thoughts.....	297
Our Southern Fried Guarantee.....	299
Also by SFK Press.....	302

“We’re all damaged. It’s a universal component of the human condition, like the stages of grief, déjà vu, and expired coupons.”

–TIM DORSEY, *Nuclear Jellyfish*

Take the Next Left to Salvation

When Salvador Hinson rounded the corner, he saw two men in matching suits, obviously employees of the funeral home, trying to restrain Bill's wife. It was a struggle—Jolene was an ample woman.

She bobbed between them, flailing her arms like a kid in a schoolyard fight. One swing connected with the usher on the right and when he stumbled, she lunged for the opening, throwing a roundhouse right at the equally ample female the men were separating her from. An unidentified arm shot from the knot of relatives behind Jolene, grabbing the back of her dress and slowing her, allowing the usher to re-grip. Sally's first thought was to keep walking, sneak up the steps and avoid the whole mess, but the sight of the other woman dodging Jolene's fists made him pause. Two more ushers stood between the second woman and Bill's wife, not physically holding her but feebly stretching their arms wide as if to corral her.

She looked to be about the same height as Jolene, a little heavier, maybe. She wore a matching outfit with the word "JUICY" stenciled across her ass in blocked blue letters. As he moved closer, Sally could see her jabbing a finger toward Bill's wife. A few more steps and Sally heard her yelling, "Sinner" and "Heathen" with each thrust of her finger, which only caused Jolene to swing harder and wilder, the blows from her thick forearms pummeling the two ushers as she screamed, "You killed my Billy. It was you."

A fat baby in a wispy bleach-blonde's arms started squalling. Finally, the usher who took one to the ear took another across the mouth and stepped up his efforts. He managed to push Bill's wife backward and yelled, "Everybody shut up. This is a solemn occasion, damn it. The man's dead, for God's sake."

Everything stopped. The pause hung in Sally's gut, like that moment of weightlessness when you're on a rope swing. Instead of bolting up the steps, he froze, and that was it. Caught. Bill's wife yelled, "Salvador Hinson, get your greedy ass over here," and the sensation of falling rushed over him. The crowd turned as one to look at him, and his moment of escape vanished.

"Hello, Jolene. Sorry about Bill," Sally greeted her as he ambled closer, both hands stuffed in his pants pockets.

"Don't start with me, Salvador Hinson. I am not in the mood."

"Paying my respects, Jolene. That's all."

Sally felt everyone staring at him, including the woman in the matching outfit. He rubbed the buckeye in his pocket between his thumb and forefinger.

"You know this, this—*her?*" Jolene thrust her chin at the other woman.

Sally looked at the woman, who grinned back at him. Beyond them, a steady line of people filed up the steps to the chapel, more cars pulled into the lot. Better turnout than he expected. What if it'd been him? Who would bother?

"No, Jolene, can't say as I do."

The woman stepped toward him with her meaty hand outstretched, a ring on each of her fingers. "Hi. I'm Mary, like in the Bible," she said. "Pleased to make your acquaintance—Salvador, is it?"

He let go of the buckeye and shook her hand. The lightness of her touch surprised him, not what he expected from a woman her size.

Still, strong enough that he was caught between the two women. “Likewise. Call me Sally. Everybody does.”

“Nice to meet you, Sally.”

“Oh, stop that,” Jolene grumbled. “You two aren’t fooling a soul. Salvador Hinson, you know well as I do, that—that trollop is Billy’s mistress. Or was. Look at her, all painted up, wearing them rings. *Pfft*. A common whore, that’s what she is, and you knew about the two of them.”

“Now Jolene, I haven’t seen nor talked to Bill in over two years.”

“Do I look stupid, Salvador? Do I? The two of you been covering each other’s tracks for years. Now Billy’s laying in there deader than four o’clock on Tuesday, so just stop your lying, for once.”

“Damn it. It’s been almost two years since I last talked to him, I swear.”

“That’s right,” Mary chimed in. “Bill mentioned it during our sessions. He missed you, Sally. Really, he did.”

Sessions? Missed him? Funny way of showing it. All those years speculating on real estate, flipping properties, hustling land deals. They’d been through a lot. Partners, best friends, Sally thought. Each knew plenty about the other, things nobody else knew. Shady business deals, hand-shake arrangements, back room promises. Then, after the real-estate bubble blew in 2007, Sally noticed a change in Bill. He didn’t talk as much, started leaving the room to take a call, acting secretive. He was up to something. There were still some deals to be had, mostly snapping up foreclosed properties (everybody and everything was shaky), but if Bill was working on something, Sally couldn’t imagine why he didn’t bring him in on it. Finally, one day when Bill had asked Sally to meet him at the Red Apple Bar & Grill, Sally decided to call him on it, demand an explanation. Instead, Bill began talking all that nonsense about finding Jesus and joining the church.

Sally hadn't bought it, but Bill had insisted it was genuine. "Sally," he'd said. "Think what you want, but—"

"I intend to."

"Yeah," said Bill. "I know, but listen. I'm a couple years older than you. My diet's for shit, I'm just saying, if I check out before you, there's a safety deposit box Jolene doesn't know about. Mason City Bank, Number 313. It's yours." He walked out the door without looking back and Sally'd not spoken with him since.

Sally took a hit when everything went south, they both did, but he had a little put by. He was far from well-off, but Sally knew he could make it without the income. For a while. He'd take some time off, a month, two at the most, and consider options for what might be next. Two months became three, then four, and Sally drifted. Nothing held his interest, everything bored him. He rumbled around his house, room to room, felt the walls moving in closer around him. He joined a gym, but after three weeks, stopped going. Started, and stopped, a long list of hobbies, habits, and causes. He wouldn't admit he missed Bill, missed chasing deals with him, wouldn't admit that he was more jealous than angry. Bill was always the face of the business, Sally was better working behind the scenes—he preferred it—and without Bill out front, there wasn't much left. He'd always thought Bill would come around, that things would go back the way they were, but now the finality of it hit Sally harder than he'd expected.

Jolene didn't give him long to contemplate it.

"See?" she said. "See, right there. He *talked* to her. During *sessions*. He, oh he . . ." her face grayed, her mouth gaped open for a few seconds before folding closed, her chins began quivering and tears rolled down her cheeks. After a few moments, she whispered, "He died in her arms, Sally. In her *arms*."

The usher cleared his throat and looked at his watch. "Uh, folks," he started, "it's almost time for the service. The minister would like

a few moments with the family. Could we go inside?” He placed his hand on Jolene’s back to herd her toward the chapel. Jolene and the rest of the relatives filed by, each casting their own unique and condemning glare toward Mary and Sally as they did.

Once the last of them passed, Mary turned to Sally. “Sally, I don’t want you to get the wrong impression. I’m forty-two years old, and never in my years have I even considered doing what she’s suggesting, especially not since I joined the church, but I forgive her for thinking as much. Would you like to sit with me during the service?”

Sally took a long look at Mary, took it all in. He suspected there was a lie in something she said, he just needed to find out what part. He didn’t know any of the details about Bill’s death, what if Jolene was right? She seemed certain about Bill dying in Mary’s arms, and when it came to wedding vows, Bill gave *love, honor, and cherish* an honest shot, and to a lesser degree, *in sickness and in health*. History’d shown he leaned toward the plus-sized. *Big women need loving, too*, he always says. Said. Mary knew more than she let on, maybe she knew about the deal Bill was working.

Sally didn’t want to admit the existential reasons that brought him to the funeral, so he convinced himself that going to the service might provide a clue about Bill’s previous silence, the lack of contact. Maybe he’d spot something, anything that might give him a clue why Bill had suddenly cut him off. Yeah, the crash had been bad, but not bad enough for Bill to start asking the baby Jesus for help, not bad enough to just drop their friendship with no explanation. And there was the question of the safety deposit box. Of course, he couldn’t lean over the casket, poke Bill a time or two and ask, “Hey asshole, do I still need to check the safety deposit box?” but he had no better starting place. He couldn’t expect any help from Jolene, either, especially not if she were right about Bill dying in Mary’s arms. Jolene didn’t know about the extra safety deposit box anyway. Mary would have to do.

“Sure, Mary. I’ll sit with you,” he answered.

The preacher kept the eulogy portion as short and impersonal as possible, moving quickly into a sermon that began with a vague mention of Bill’s giving up his ways of the past, how he was lost until he found the Lord. Sally drifted. Found Him? How’d that happen? MapQuest? GPS commanding, “Take the next left to salvation”? The Trinity on a milk carton? Sure, Bill had told him about his conversion, his moment of clarity, but Sally didn’t buy it.

Finding religion. Sally thought it as much vanity-fueled superstition as anything else out there. And he’d tried his share of what was out there, especially over the past two years. Shrinks, expensive entitlement cars, slow-witted and younger women, Xanax, coke, vegetarianism, and a long list of various other “isms.” The combined weekend of aromatherapy and colonics was a total waste of time and money. Oddly soothing and slightly disgusting, but Sally’s boredom returned while eating a four-cheese quesadilla a week later. Making a deal . . . that worked. Ferreting out an opportunity, working the angles, estimating margins. Buy low, sell high, count your money. It worked for P.T. Barnum, the Rockefellers, the Carnegies, a slew of tele-evangelists and snake oil proprietors. Sally loved it, same as Bill. For most of his life, the next deal had sustained Sally, pulled him along toward . . . There it was again. Pulled him along toward *what?* It had left him here, his best friend—his only friend—dead, and not much else. Nothing around him seemed any more real than googled images on the computer screen and that created in him a hollow longing for the past and an anxious, confused view of the future. Those feelings followed Sally around like a stray dog he’d tossed a scrap.

The preacher droned on, laying down a thick blanket of Baptist guilt, working into a pitch. He’d moved down from the pulpit, waving his good book in the air every so often. Bill lay behind him, ignored.

When the preacher gave the altar call, Sally leaned to Mary and whispered, “Let’s go.”

Mary’s hands rose to her jowls and tightened, causing her lips to pucker slightly as she spoke. “Oh, Sally,” she said. Sally grabbed the hock of her wrist, and quickly led her out the door toward his Lexus. She struggled to catch her breath as he helped her into the passenger seat. “But the altar call,” she huffed.

“Next time, Mary. You look like you could use a bite to eat.”

“But,” Mary stammered. “Well,” she glanced back toward the funeral home doors. “I do get light-headed when I don’t eat. And all the excitement with Jolene. Oh, this is nice.” She smoothed a hand across the leather dash, down the fake, burl mahogany console.

“Thanks,” he said as they rolled out of the parking lot. Mary didn’t strike him as much different than the folks he and Bill convinced to sell their land. They kind of people who wanted to believe, who needed to believe, what someone told them. She’d tell him what he needed to know, eventually, because she’d believe she was helping. He’d make sure of that. He was never comfortable being the front person, that was all Bill, but this, this he could do.

A FEW MINUTES past nine, James Flowers strolled out of the Mason County Detention Center, sat on the curb and thumbed Colton a text. Colton hadn’t responded to all the messages James had sent before they took his phone, but it was a new day and the sun shined bright.

Be there in 15, Colton finally texted back.

It had not been the best of weeks for James. Sunday evening, he dropped Brittany in front of her house and pulled away, knowing her parents waited inside. She was past curfew and at least one Smirnoff Ice past her limit. An hour later, James sat in his parents’ house with

the lights off, hoping they'd stop for ice cream after church and not come home until Britt's father, who was screaming about statutory and strangulation, had stopped banging on their front door.

By Monday night, he'd read Britt's text saying her parents didn't want her to see him anymore, endured *his* parents' wrath for over an hour, during which they recounted everything Brittany's father told them over the phone. All before James stormed out with a handful of clothes and landed at Colton's house, where he settled into their converted garage. *But only for a night or two*, Colton's mom said.

This time would be different. He'd show all of them. James had a buyer lined up for his truck on Wednesday morning and was taking the Marine Corps test again that afternoon. Third time's a charm. Couple of months and he'd be in Afghanistan, killing towel heads, like *Tour of Duty* on the Xbox, instead of worrying about the curfew of a sixteen-year-old who couldn't hold her booze, or his parents insisting he grow up. He was nineteen, for Christ's sake, a man. How much more grown up could he be?

After selling his truck, James took the bus to the recruitment center, took the test, and then waited for the officer to return. The Marines needed him. He was one of the few, had always been one of the few. Not every orphaned kid got adopted. Most of them slinked from foster home to foster home, but not James. Adopted young. And proud? Well, yeah. He'd not really done anything yet to be proud of, school wasn't really his thing, not sports, not friends—but, well, that's what the Marines were for—he'd find something there, and be damn proud to do it.

The recruiting officer came back, shaking his head. "Hell-fire, son," he said, "two wars on and a hundred places in the world going to shit, needing us to bail their sorry asses out. We don't cull much, but . . . damn. Ain't got to be that bright to run toward the bullets," he looked at the test again, "but this? You thought about trade school?"

The air blew out of James in a low, steady gush and the rest of that day and then Thursday kind of ran together. Thursday night, well, early Friday morning, he got popped at the bus stop in front of Dale Junior's Whiskey River. Couple of cops saw him stumble into a middle-aged couple while trying to get on the bus. Several overnight hours at the County spa now left him on the curb, the morning heat already baking a crispy edge on his hangover.

At 11:30, James saw Colton's red Ford Ranger round the corner. He slumped into the passenger seat and stared out the window.

"Dude. You know Mom's not gonna let you crash at the house after this."

James shrugged but didn't look at Colton. "Figured." He tapped the dash twice. "Let's ride."

Colton eased onto the highway and asked, "DUI, underage drinking, or something new?"

"Public intoxication."

"Huh. Boring. You should try something new."

"Thinking I'll start smoking weed regular, this drinking thing's not working so well."

"You and weed? I don't know. If it wasn't a DUI, where's your truck?"

"Sold it Wednesday. I'm set, though. Got three grand for it."

"Thought you paid fifty-five hundred for it, not more than a month ago."

"That was a month ago. Market's changed. Gas is going up again."

The light caught them, and Colton turned toward James while they idled, his dark face split with a sardonic smile. "That was your sixth vehicle since sixteen, J. Four just since we graduated," he said. "I gotta admire that."

"Shut up."

"Three G's the last of the money?"

A few days after turning eighteen, James cashed in a stock trust account his grandfather had left him, seventeen thousand dollars' worth. The Wall Street geniuses had flushed the market by that time, but it was coming back around. Had James not blown through the money like a former debutante goes through merlot, there'd be nearly thirty thousand on paper now.

"For the most part," James answered. "Well, less what I spent at the Whiskey. And my fine. Where we headed?"

"Your house. Mom says it's best."

"That won't be pretty. Let's ride a while instead, I need to work on plan B."

The light changed. James scrolled on his phone: Instagram, CarMax, Craig's List—Apartments, Facebook, ESPN, NRA, Porn Hub, bored. Still no wheels, and no place to crash.

"Last I saw you, you were off to take the Marine test again. All you got to do is hang on until Parris Island, right?"

"Those assholes. Screw their dumbass test. What's a test got to do with killing camel jockeys? I got their *Marine material* right here."

"Racist much? And if Brittany hadn't of done all your homework the past two years, you could've passed, you know."

"It wasn't like what they wanted us to learn had anything to do with anything that mattered. Screw 'em all. Everything you need to know is on the Internet anyway."

"There's this song you should listen to." Colton made a right turn. "John Mellencamp. Something like, *I like to fight authority, but it always wins*. That's you, man. That's *you*."

"Sounds about right." James stared out the window, where the buildings had changed to houses and now the houses to scrub oaks and pine trees interrupted every so often by a fresh gash in the earth where the red dirt waited for the next housing development. None of it seemed real. Cardboard cutouts of how life was supposed to

be. The buildings were empty, the housing developments sprung from the dirt but lacked even the shallow roots of the scrub oaks and pines they'd replaced. Somewhere past the boredom and the facades, James' real life waited, concrete and three-dimensional. All he had to do was find it.

He knew it existed, knew he had a place in it, had even seen a glimpse of it once, years earlier. It was during a non-descript baseball game most of his teammates thought important. Championship of Shitville or something. School had ended for the year and a couple of kids were out of town on vacation, so James swatted gnats in right field and took his obligatory three strikes batting ninth in the order, instead of his usual position as chief disrupter of dugout karma. The game was tied, last inning, one out. James wanted it to end. The pitcher walked a batter, then another. James kicked at the bare spot in right field, pounded his glove, kicked the dirt again. Then, he heard a low rumble coming down the street, growing louder. The motorcycle, a chopper, eased into view from behind the bleachers on the right field side. Painted orange flames curled down a purple gas tank and lapped across the front and rear fenders. Lots of chrome shining in the late day sun. The rider, an old guy, wore a leather vest and a black t-shirt, a faded USMC tattoo on his forearm, black cowboy boots resting on highway pegs, his gray goatee waving in the wind. It was a Harley, James saw that immediately, and he watched the machine glide past. The guy saw him and flashed a peace sign and a wide grin. A younger woman, the most beautiful James had ever seen, rode on the back. After the driver shot him the peace sign, he tapped the girl's leg, pointed again at James as he said something to her over his shoulder. She turned toward James, pulled down her tank top and swung her tits from side to side. As she did, the batter connected and the line drive bounced past James and rolled untouched to the fence. It didn't matter. At that moment, even if he

couldn't name exactly what it was, James knew he wanted it, and one day, he'd have it.

James stretched his arm back to the jump seat of Colton's truck, fished around beneath the clothes and backpack. "Your .22 back here?" he asked.

"Yeah. Somewhere."

"I need to clear my head, do some thinking. Let's go to the dump."

"A'ight. Wanna pick up a twelve pack first?"

"Colton the psychic."

DR. KATHERINE SARDOFSKY sat at the bar in Red's Pure Country Saloon, tearing her cocktail napkin into tiny bits. It was three in the afternoon, and the place held only a handful of scattered people: a few construction-worker types, some bikers, and three random women casting occasional glances in her direction. Kat evaluated her dictum that arriving on time was to be late, and arriving early meant being on time, thinking college professors meeting a local in a country bar might warrant an exception to the rule. Three-thirty came and went with no sign of a guy wearing a Carhartt jacket and a Braves hat. More people filed in, the first shift at the last mill in town had ended. Still no sign of Arlen Johnson, only an assortment of locals, ordering shots. She glanced at the mirror behind the bar and wondered how, exactly, she had slipped to this particular station in life.

The noise in the bar grew louder; Kat felt overdressed. She ordered a second glass of chardonnay, which the bartender—a skinny, tattooed man with a thin ponytail and no eyeteeth, delivered with a grin and a new napkin. "That wine alright?" he asked. "Bottle's kinda dusty." He nodded toward the door. "You waiting on somebody?" According to her mother, she should be.

“A gentleman named Arlen Johnson. Do you know him?” She ripped the first corner of the new napkin and glanced over her shoulder.

“Darling, you can do better than Johnson. He ain’t worth shooting and he sure as hell ain’t a gentleman.” He winked and flipped his ponytail off his shoulder. “I get off at six.”

“I’ll wait on Mr. Johnson, but thank you.”

“Suit yourself. He usually rolls in around four. That’ll be three-fifty for the wine.”

Kat waited. At 4:05, a short, fat man waddled through the door carrying a manila envelope and wearing a Carhartt jacket and a Braves cap. He stopped and looked around the bar. Kat’s breath caught, and she subconsciously touched her right index finger to the tip of her nose. For her summer, non-academic reading, she loved detective novels, a fact she hid from her colleagues, but the novels were no help now. She remained unsure of how *this* should unfold, which made her uneasy. The man approached and she touched her nose once more.

“Are you Arlen Johnson?” she asked.

“Depends. Who’s asking?”

The cliché surprised her. “Why . . . well . . . I’m Dr. Katherine Sardofsky. Assistant Professor of Botany at Mason University,” her voice wavered. Yes, maybe she should have been Associate by now, but she still wanted her job title to explain who she was in the same fashion that other titles for other people portrayed exactly who they were, but she remained unconvinced that it accomplished this. She continued, nonetheless. “My arrangements were to meet a Mr. Arlen Johnson here, at three-thirty.” She looked at her watch. “Again, are you the Mr. Johnson in question?”

“You don’t look like a doctor or a professor, not even the TV ones.”

“I don’t watch television. I find it obtuse, mundane, consistently derivative, and lacking in verisimilitude.”

“Hmm. Me, either. Except for TruTV, they’ve got some good shows. Course, I’ll watch a NASCAR race now and again. All the CSI shows, *Law and Order*. Oh, and *Celebrity Rehab*, that’s funny. And *Wipeout*, I love the big balls. I think they should combine *Wipeout* and *Celebrity Rehab*. Now that’s a show everybody’d watch.” He paused, then leaned closer. Kat leaned away. “Don’t tell anybody, but I watch *Oprah*, too. I’d be watching her right now, if it weren’t for meeting you here. I figure it’ll help me *evolve*.”

“So you are Mr. Johnson?”

“That’s me, two hundred pounds of twisted steel and sex appeal. I reckon you want to see these.” He pushed the envelope toward her.

Kat looked over both shoulders before opening it and sliding out the pictures. When she saw the first one, an “oh” slipped from her lips in a half-word, half moan, pre-orgasmic sort of way. Kat composed herself and whispered, “*Helianthus schweinitzii*.” For the first time she could recall, Kat felt herself balanced on the precipice of professional validation, not in the sense of her job, well, maybe that too, but to the world beyond academia. To her sister. To her mother.

Johnson nodded and adjusted his work pants. “Yeah, that’s what I’m talking about. Wait . . . what?”

“It’s Schweinitz’s sunflower,” she told him. “Where did you take these pictures? You’ve got to take me there.”

“Now hold on. That weren’t part of the deal.”

“Is it on your land? Where did you take these pictures?”

“It ain’t my land. I don’t know who it belongs to.”

“How’d you get the pictures, then?”

“What’s all the fuss? Sunflowers? Look like weeds to me.”

“They’re endangered, practically extinct, and extremely rare. I’ve been trying to establish them in the lab, both hydroponically and in soil mediums, but I’ve failed. This could make my career. You didn’t Photoshop these, did you?”

“Photo-what? Lady, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ll fess up, I didn’t even take the pictures.”

“Internet? You downloaded them from the Web, didn’t you? I knew it.”

“I don’t ride that superhighway. No sir, it’s a conspiracy, that’s how they track you. No, I got them from a friend of mine. His brother’s wife’s second cousin’s daughter took them.”

“I’ve got to meet her.”

“Well, I don’t know how you’re gonna do that, I don’t even know her. I told you, it was a friend’s brother’s . . .”

“Yes, yes, I know. We’ll start there.”

“Nope. That weren’t part of the deal. But you buy me dinner and we’ll talk about the future possibilities. Ain’t no such thing as a free lunch, I know that.”

The idea repulsed Kat, but not for long. “Fine then, tomorrow night.”

“Naw, tomorrow night won’t work. *World’s Dumbest* comes on TruTV, and *CSI*. I don’t miss those for nothing or nobody. Make it Friday night, Captain Steve’s Fish Camp. Where can I pick you up at?”

Kat shuddered. “I’ll meet you there. Seven-thirty.”

“Naw, seven-thirty won’t work. People bring lawn chairs to wait in line at Captain Steve’s. Take forever if we wait until then. Better make it five o’clock.”

“Fine, then. Five o’clock Friday it is.”

A BOWL of hushpuppies and honey-mustard butter sat on the table in the corner booth of the Brown Fedora Restaurant. Mary dipped hushpuppies in butter and popped them in her mouth, one after the other.

“So, how did you know Bill?” Sally asked.

“I’m sort of a counselor at church. For Preacher Mike.” Mary ate the last hushpuppy and took a long drink of her tea, then waved the empty bowl at their waitress. “Before you join our church, you meet with a member for several weeks. Bible study, life lessons, church history, stuff like that. I helped him see he had to give up his old ways, why they were wrong.”

“That’s what you meant when you told Jolene about the sessions?”

“I would’ve never done the sort of thing Jolene suggested. Never. *Never*. I’ve been praying for her though.”

Sally wanted to believe her, but the way she insisted caused some doubt.

The waitress brought a new bowl of hushpuppies. “Ready to order, hon?” She looked at Sally. Mary grabbed two puppies on her first swipe.

“Oh, I’ll just have the salad. Extra ranch dressing,” Mary said.

“Burger and fries,” Sally ordered. “Giving up his old ways—I can’t wrap my mind around that. Not Bill.”

“It bothered him you couldn’t accept his being saved. He wanted you to see the Light, too. I thought you had when you said, ‘Let’s go.’ Bill would’ve been smiling down from Heaven if you’d walked down that aisle.”

“I have enough imaginary friends, Mary. Tell me more about the old ways Bill needed to give up.” She knew something, Sally was sure of it.

“I can’t. That’s between a parishioner and their counselor. Well, them and Preacher Mike. And the deacons, I could tell them about anything from a session, too.”

“Jesus, Mary. You can tell all them, but you can’t tell me? Me and Bill were best friends, you said that yourself.”

“Don’t blaspheme.”

The meals came as Mary finished the hushpuppies. No help on what Bill was chasing nor the safety deposit box. Bill had been up

to something, though, Sally was sure of it. They'd talked for years about churches having the biggest source of untapped cash, just hadn't found the right way of getting to it. But why didn't Bill share it with him? Something to do with Mary, or what she knew, no doubt. They finished the meal in silence.

Bill pushed his plate to the edge of the table and leaned back in the booth. "So tell me about how Bill died. I only read it in the paper."

"Oh, Sally. It was beautiful, in a way. Like the Rapture."

What was it with Jesus groupies? All that longing for heaven stuff made no sense. Getting there meant you were dead, and dead's dead any way you look at it. Sally shook his head. "Beautiful, huh? Go on."

"Bill talked about you a lot, what the two of you did over the years. Especially taking advantage of all those old folks. That was Satan's work, Sally. The Devil had his talons in both of you, Bill realized that. You should too, before it's too late."

"Yeah, I'm gonna work on that. How'd he die, Mary?"

"Last Sunday, we were on the campground side at the lake, holding a baptism service. Bill was last in line. He waded out to Preacher Mike. You should've seen it. When the water got deeper, his white baptism robe spread out like the wings of an angel. Since I was his counselor, I stood next to Preacher Mike. Preacher Mike said the words, placed his hand on Bill's forehead and pinched his nose while I wrapped my arms around his shoulders to support him as he went under.

"Preacher Mike said 'in the name of the Father,' and we leaned him back the first time. When Bill came up, he coughed and sputtered a bit, then sucked in a big breath as Preacher Mike said 'in the name of the Son,' and lowered him again.

"When we brought him up that time, he didn't make a sound, didn't even take a breath, but we didn't think nothing of it. Preacher Mike said 'in the name of the Holy Ghost,' and dunked him good,

one last time. Bill twitched just a little while he was under the water, but he relaxed soon enough. I figured maybe it was the excitement of it all, the Spirit filling him, like when a sudden shiver runs all through your body. Then he just went limp. I almost dropped him he grew so heavy, but Preacher Mike helped me raise him back above the water. He fell back into my arms with the most peaceful smile a body's ever seen. Never took another breath in this world, got baptized and went straight to his mansion on high."

"Drowned?"

"No, they said it was a heart attack. Massive."

"Damn." It was like hearing about a car crash or a tornado destroying houses or something. You didn't really want the details, but it created an odd sense of satisfaction knowing it happened to someone else, not you. But this was Bill. They were practically the same age. Sally rubbed his left arm.

"Sally, watch your mouth."

"Sorry, Mary. Now much as I've enjoyed this, I need to stop by the bank before five."

"Me, too. Enjoyed it, I mean. I don't need to go to the bank. We should do this again."

The conversation with Mary didn't answer any questions or provide anything about the safety deposit box, but Sally realized, for the first time in months, all those other questions of his didn't seem as loud. He even felt pangs of his old self returning, a shoot of excitement about tracking down Bill's motives had appeared, frail as the first spring bud. Still, there was more he needed to know. "I'll call you," he said.

"That won't work, not right now. I forgot and left my cell phone in my dress pocket during the baptism. I'm on Facebook, though. Friend me."

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