

*The Acts of  
Velmajean  
Swearington Hoyt  
and the  
New City of God*

She kept peeking through the blinds to see if they were still there, as if the situation had changed in a mere five minutes. Every time she would see the vans with their gigantic white mushroom antennas sprouting up toward heaven. CNN. NBC. MSNBC. FOX. BBC. CBS. BET. Piney View Lane had been clogged and coagulated with people and cars. The Orange Grove police had erected barricades and had taped off her yard with that yellow police tape Velmajean remembered from television police shows. But seeing the brethren—some full-time security, some volunteers from the church—made Velmajean breathe more easily. The sight of them reminded her that the Reverend was in charge. And he was going to make sure everything would be all right. Any minute now he would be arriving for the press conference where they would announce Velmajean's next miracle.

On one of her compulsive peeking trips she was happy to see the Reverend's sleek black SUV pull up, a miracle in and of itself the way the crowd parted before it like the Red Sea for the children of Israel. It was one of those bright autumn days in North Carolina where the leaves swirl about like roan pixies. At first the sea of reporters engulfed the arriving dignitary,

but thanks to the brethren a path was made, the tape was lifted, and an entourage from the church made its way to the house. Before he could knock, Velmajean opened the door.

"Oh, Reverend, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you."

The Reverend Jamie "Spike" Eggleston took off his shades, paused in his patented way, and opened his arms to the sixty-two-year-old widow. He flashed his cover-boy smile, which always made Velmajean more than a little giddy and wrong-feeling inside. It was the sort of smile that could cause her to write bad checks. "Sister Velma, how's our little miracle worker?"

As they embraced, and the Reverend whispered calming, dulcet-toned words into her ear, in filed five men: two lawyers and three equally suit-clad bodyguards. The Reverend himself was in his usual jeans and signature formfitting sweater. He was easily the largest man in the room, and his muscles visibly undulated underneath each time he moved. "Sister, the Lord's got big—big—things in store for you. Hallelujah." He slapped his hands together with a loud slap, as if he were about to close some great deal. "Hallelujah." That was one of the Reverend's favorite words. He used it the way gang members used the F-word. He looked into her eyes, expectant perhaps for confirmation or outburst or questions or doubt. But Velmajean simply smiled. She wanted to get this ordeal over with. *General Hospital* was coming on in ninety minutes.

The Reverend Spike ordered everyone to get down on their knees. The men encircled Velmajean Swearington Hoyt, placing their hands on her shoulders and back, the minister laid his hand on her forehead. He said: "Father God.

Please bless this endeavor into which we—your children—are about to embark . . ."

"Praise God," said one of the bodyguards.

". . . and please guide my tongue . . ."

". . . guide him, Lord . . ."

". . . for the further glorification of your kingdom. We ask a special prayer for your chosen vessel, our sweet sister Velma here, Lord. Hallelujah. That her heart remain pure . . ."

". . . pure . . ."

". . . and that you continue to use her as your sign upon this earth."

"Amen."

With that, the men helped Velmajean to her feet.

"Do I look all right, Reverend? I mean will this look okay on TV?" She wore a sky-blue dress of conservative cut from the collection of one of her favorite designers that she'd bought at Hecht's department store a year ago. One of the women from the church had come by and touched up her silver coiffure. Again the Reverend Spike looked at her as if she were the kumquat of his eye, the center of his universe. "You look positively radiant, sister."

With that, led by the Reverend, followed immediately by Velmajean, and then the five men, the group marched down the path from the split-level brick and beige house, built in 1976 and paid for in full by the death of Velmajean's husband, Parker Hoyt, in 1996, down to the horde and the lights in the middle of that Thursday afternoon, to the microphones feeding up to satellites informing televisions and radios and computers around the globe; and where the Reverend Spike Eggleston, the former Internet millionaire turned Christian

entrepreneur, announced that on the coming Sunday at a special service to be held at the newly completed Atomic Church of God and Worship Center ("congregation 20,000"), Mrs. Velmajean Swearington Hoyt of Orange Grove Township would be doing the Lord's work, "by performing her thirteenth recorded miracle live on an international broadcast sure to reach two billion people, to convince them of the Almighty's presence in the world and in their lives."

Just as the Reverend had instructed, Velmajean stood and smiled for no more than two and a half minutes for the flickering barrage of lights, never uttering a word, whereupon two of the bodyguards escorted her back into her well-guarded four-bedroom home, while the Reverend and his lawyers fielded questions for another twenty-seven minutes.

Velmajean considered watching the show on TV, but reckoned it would be on—in an edited version—in heavy rotation well into the night.

As she took off her dress, looking forward to relaxing, to trying to put all this hoopla out of her thinking, she realized with a start that she recognized a face in the crowd. That strange, beautiful man she had seen that day in the parking lot, the day she brought the little girl back from "the other side."

THAT DAY had been a Thursday too, and she had gotten to the supermarket early. She was feeling particularly proud of herself, for with the judicious and meticulous use of coupons, she had purchased \$201.29 worth of food for \$79.82 (\$25.25 would be in rebates).

As she labored to put the groceries into her six-year-old Oldsmobile—once upon a time bag boys offered to help, but

those days were long gone—a young man walked up. "Please," he said. "Allow me."

"Thank you, young fellow." She was pleased and flattered. He was black—an African, blue-black—and basketball-player tall. He was smartly dressed in a black suit, over which he wore a long black coat that almost touched the ground—odd on a pretty spring day. And he wore shades. His head was clean as an eight ball and just as dark. For some reason he reminded her of the Secret Service agents who surround the president, and for that reason, or so she reasoned, she felt safe around him.

When he was done he closed the trunk. The grocery cart was gone.

"Where—"

"You are blessed among women, Velmajean Swearington."

At first, so perplexed by the disappearance of the cart, she had not registered what he had said. She looked at her African chieftain in his expensive suit. "Yes, young man, I know. Have we met?"

"No," he said, "I mean you are truly blessed."

With that, he reached out and took her hand. The feeling was warm at first, then noticeably hot, her hand tingled, her face flushed. She could not move, only stare at the stranger. To this day she could not swear on exactly what it was she felt, only that it felt better than sex, sweeter than love, stronger than the will to live. Or maybe it was just the spring air and his warm hand and smiling face.

Just as quickly the man let go and stepped back. He spoke only one sentence after that, before he walked off into the highway to melt into the traffic as if he were some human sports car.

He had said: "His wonders to behold."

Looking back on it, Velmajean marveled at how easily she had brushed the entire incident aside. Laughed it off. Thought nothing of it. Straightaway. *Good Lord*, she had told herself, *there are some crazy folk walking around here*. As for the touch: He sure was warm-blooded.

Perhaps, again in hindsight, she might have thought on it more had she not, no more than twenty minutes later, turned onto Kensington Road: a beige Suburban SUV overturned. An ancient Dodge Dart on its side, the wheels still rotating. A man, distraught, standing, pacing. A man and a woman on their knees. Lying prostrate and motionless before them a child, bloody and twisted.

Velmajean rushed from her car and toward the people as if by instinct. "Oh, no. Oh, no."

Both the woman and the man were crying and clutching each other, a portrait of kneeling sorrow; pitiful, tear-soaked visages, bodies quivering with sobs. The standing, hippie-looking man, his long hair flaring out in all directions, was possessed by a wild look of despair. "I didn't see your turn signal, man. I didn't—Oh God. I didn't—"

Velmajean had been ordered to take rudimentary first aid and emergency skills classes as part of her job as office manager at Deco Furniture long before she retired. She asked if an ambulance had been called. If the girl had been moved. No one answered her.

She knew to check for vital signs: the eyes, the breath, the pulse. At first things seemed dire. There was a lot of blood. She could not see where the blood was coming from. But as she touched the girl, by and by, the little one began

to stir. First her leg, and then a piercing cough. With flutters the girl's eyes opened, and she lifted her head, at first tentatively, and then with the full strength of youth. "Daddy!" She began to cry.

"Oh my God!" The woman grabbed the girl up into her arms. The man literally yelled.

"She must have just been knocked out. But don't move her," Velmajean said.

"No," the man finally said, as he too rushed to his daughter. "She was dead. She was dead."

"You must have been mistaken. See. She's right as rain."

Down on her knees next to the father, both smothering their daughter in hugs and sobs, the mother finally raised her head and said: "You don't understand. My husband's a dermatologist. She was dead."

Still and all Velmajean drove off that day convinced that things were never as bad as they looked.

VELMAJEAN SWEARINGTON HOYT had belonged to the St. Thomas Baptist Church of Orange Grove Township all her life. In her youth the church, just outside Durham, had been thriving, the center of a small crossroads community not even listed on most maps. The minister, the Reverend T. T. Bryant, had been a theology professor at Wake Forest Seminary, and had as much charisma and warmth as he had theological knowledge and wisdom. Folk always said his sermons were like an angel's home cooking. Velmajean had been baptized in that church, she had been married in that church, and both her parents, and finally her husband, had been funeralized in that church.

By that time the congregation had dwindled almost to the point of extinction. The community had been engulfed by building, and what had once been a village on the outskirts of a small North Carolina city had become a bedroom community full of apartment complexes and strip malls and oil change shops, grocery stores, fast-food restaurants, movie theaters, and gas stations. When, at the ripe old age of ninety-three, the Reverend Bryant passed on to his reward, the board of trustees were faced with a sad fact. They only had seven members left. All of them sitting in the same room with a lone real estate agent who had a bad hunger for land, the land under their church. Now, seven years later, where St. Thomas Baptist Church once stood loomed a vast car dealership shaped like a hog.

For several years Velmajean wandered from church to church on Sunday mornings looking for what people called a "spiritual home." She preferred to call it a church. She had tried the high-toned, Sunday-go-to-meeting Baptists, the speaking-in-tongues Holy Rollers of the Pentecostal, the casserole-toting Methodists, the choir-besotted AME Zionists, the hat-happy Church of God in Christs—but none of them felt right to her, felt comfortable. Each was like a pair of shoes she admired until she tried them on.

One fine Saturday morning there came a knock at Velmajean's door. There before her stood that nice couple who lived five doors down, Philip and Amanda Witt. He was black, she was white, both so young and handsome, she thought, they should be ashamed of themselves. And they had a toddler too cute for words. Simply adorable. She had offered to look after the child if they ever needed a babysit-

ter. She thought they had come to ask for her services. She looked forward to having a three-year-old around, even if it were only for a few hours.

"How are you two today?"

That was when she heard about the Atomic Church. In truth she had heard of it before. It had been all in the news when it first opened, and she remembered scoffing at the notion. A failed shopping center refurbished and rebuilt as a single mammoth church with just as mammoth a congregation. The "New City of God," their minister liked to call it.

"We'd love it if you came with us on Sunday. We think you'd enjoy it."

They were oh so nice, so gentle. She couldn't tell them that was not her sort of place.

Nothing could have prepared her for that odd gathering. More like a nation under one roof. Never in her sixty-two years had she been among so many human souls at once. The rumblings alone sounded like thunder. The main auditorium held ten thousand people, and was sandwiched between two vast wings containing, among other things, a nursery the size of a small school, a "worship gym" where one could work out while watching the sermon on jumbo monitors, four small theme chapels, several suites of administrative offices, a bookstore and record store, a gift shop, a café and a restaurant and a sandwich shop, an infirmary, and a children's recreation room that resembled Disneyland. The Atomic Church of God and Worship Center boasted a credit union, an employment agency, a marriage counseling service, and a culinary school ("learning to cook for Jesus!"). There were six choirs, four Christian rock bands—the Rolling Tongues of Fire, Loaves N' Phishes, the

Adam and Eve Project, Psalmismack—and an inspirational rap group, *Boyz 4 da Cross*, that had a best-selling CD entitled *Gangbanging 4 da Lord*. There were four services on Sunday, and at least one major one every day, not to mention endless Bible studies and support groups, and a flotilla of outreach programs and lectures and encounter gatherings and forums that resembled activities aboard a luxury liner. In fact that's what the entire operation reminded her of: one vast ocean liner on land, afloat from the rest of the world. She would get through this service.

Then, after musical numbers and skits that made her think she was first at a rock concert, and then a Broadway play, and then a stadium-sized group therapy session, with the uproar and flash of a rock star-cum-head of state, onto center stage rushed the Atomic Reverend himself, Reverend Spike ("Are you ready to get nuclear for Jesus?"). Aside from having the physique of a professional wrestler and the good looks of a movie star, and a platinum tongue, the Reverend had a mystique that was bound up in his past. His father had been a famous African-American physicist, and his mother, part Japanese, part Hawaiian, a concert pianist. He had gone to excellent schools, and at a tender age made a fortune in computers, which he lost, and then another one with an Internet company, which was in turn wiped out like so much goofer dust. All before he was thirty. But did that stop Spike Eggleston? No, brothers and sisters. The Lord had an appointment for him stored in his great celestial PalmPilot. Hallelujah! The Lord told him to build him a city, a City of God, just as Saint Augustine had written about. And the Atomic Church was that city.

The standing applause took a while to die down, as the great tree trunk of a man strode back and forth across the immense stage, white teeth flashing, eyes manic with glee.

"Praise be to God, saints," he said as the crowd finally took their seats, though the mass of worshippers never quieted. Always there the hum and the occasional rally ejaculation of agreement, communication back and forth between the high-tech high priest and the pulsing Army of the Lord. The spectacle made Velmajean smile despite herself. This wasn't church, this was a movement.

"I'm happy this morning, saints. I've been talking to the CEO, the Chairman of the Board, the President of the Universe—hallelujah! And do you know what he told me?"

The response was akin to a thunderclap.

"That's right, children. Hallelujah! Our annual report's good. Our soul-stock is up! Our major asset—our Atomic faith in Christ Jesus our Lord—is through the roof! Hallelujah!" With that, balloons and confetti fell from the air like manna, and the response was seismic. The band struck up a disco version of "Soldiers of the Lord," and people not only leapt to their feet but danced, and for a time there was rejoicing in the aisles. Velmajean spied the frenzy the way a rabbit watches foxes frolic.

"Hug your brothers and sisters. Amen. Amen. Amen!" The Reverend led the worship pep rally for a good twenty minutes or more, before the lights dimmed, the stadium hushed, and the hulk from Honolulu settled down to his sermon, "God's 401(k) for You!" (which would be available at the next service on audiotape, videotape, CD, and DVD). By and by, somewhere in the midst of his message, long after the cute

catchphrases had subsided, and the laser lights took a break, Velmajean found the Reverend downright moving. It was not his ocean-deep, river-smooth voice—the sort of voice that made you want to believe, to follow; after a spell it was hard to conceive that this voice did not know what it was talking about, did not come from another place; nor the fact that he was simply riveting to watch. But his words, tender, healing, inspiring, touched her. (“God’s retirement plan is a Welcome Table of love, dearly beloved. The meek, the weak, the halt, the lame, the peacemakers and the sinners—hallelujah—will all be fed. Cleansed. Wrapped up in his bosom . . .”) This, Velmajean thought, is how a sermon should make you feel.

At the end of the sermon Velmajean was on her feet along with the crowd crying “Hosea.”

Make no mistake, Velmajean Swearington Hoyt was as levelheaded and as sensible as they come, not easily swayed by a good-looking man no matter how well he filled out a pair of jeans. Yes, she liked the Reverend, could listen to him all day, could watch him for the rest of her natural life. But it was not the Reverend’s swell looks and sermon that convinced her in the end, that swept her along—it was the people. The overwhelming sense of fellowship, of belonging, of congregation in the truest sense: she felt as if she were becoming a member of a new nation, something fresh and wonderful, and she wanted to be a part of that new happening.

IN FACT she had been a member of the church for close to two years before she personally met the Reverend Spike. That occurred the day after the turkey barbecue incident.

He had actually been scheduled to be there that day—the

Annual Thanksgiving-in-May Celebration to feed the homeless at a strip mall in Durham—but on paper the Reverend Spike was always overbooked, double-booked, as if, one fine day, the Lord would see fit to actually split him into eight men to accomplish all the works necessary in his ministry.

Velmajean arrived at the parking lot early that day. There were to be fifteen other workers from the church to dispense the food. A poultry processing plant had donated turkeys galore, and the women and men in the Reach Out program had spent days roasting turkeys, frying turkeys, making turkey casseroles and turkey salads and turkey soup—gallons of turkey soup, as the chairperson reasoned, depending upon the turnout, the soup could be stretched (and ultimately frozen), yet remain filling and nutritious. Four fat gobblers had been left over. Velmajean volunteered to take them home to barbecue. She’d spent hours that night and the next morning slowly grilling the butterflied birds, deboning and hacking the meat into two large plastic tubs of delicious chopped barbecue with a strong vinegar-based sauce sure to please a crowd. Her wrists and forearms were still sore from the work. She had also stopped by on her way to pick up a gross of bread loaves donated by a local, upscale French bistro. Her car smelled of toasted sesame seeds, and new barbecue.

Thirty minutes before the appointed hour, a small group of men had gathered, smoking and milling about, talking loud. There was no sign of her fellow church members. Velmajean sat in the car, her mouth watering from the smells of piquant barbecue sauce, and the loaves of bread pungent even from the trunk. She listened to the all-news radio station.

She didn’t get worried until fifteen minutes before the meal

was to be served. The two vans with the Atomic Church of God and Worship Center logos were nowhere to be seen. A crowd of men and a smattering of women had gathered now. For the first time in many months, Velmajean regretted that she had not knuckled under and gotten a cell phone.

There came a knock to her window. There stood a youngish man, chestnut brown, in a frayed-collar shirt and green fatigues. He had several days' growth of beard and his teeth were ivory snow white. He smiled at Velmajean as she rolled the window down.

"Miss, some of the guys were wondering if we got the wrong day for the Thanksgiving thing."

"No, no," Velmajean said. "It's supposed to be happening right now. I don't know where everybody is."

The man licked his lips. "Ummmm, that smells good. Barbecue?"

"Yeah, turkey barbecue. Made it myself."

The man paused and stared at Velmajean. To this day, of all the things that occurred that day, the look on that young man's face abided with her. Not a look so much of hunger, or of longing, or of weariness, though, to be sure, these powerful ingredients stewed there; but there understood, not pitied. Most powerfully there was a sense of a man clinging to his dignity, not to be melted for barbecue.

Later when asked what had moved her to get out of her car, take out the two tubs of barbecue, retrieve the 144 loaves of bread from the trunk, and begin, one by one, to serve the throng, she could only shrug and sigh. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

She knew the real reason, but felt she could never find a

way to properly articulate it, to make anyone understand: she did not want that young man to have to ask.

Ninety-minutes later the two vans from the church arrived, heavy-laden with their cornucopia of turkey cuisine and condiments and Kool-Aid. They saw Velmajean Swearington Hoyt, alone and armed only with a spoon and a knife, cutting open loaf after loaf of bread, scooping up a decent amount of turkey barbecue, patiently feeding an entire tribe of men and women.

Perhaps that would have been the end of the matter, people might have spoken of the incident with warm hearts and glowing tones in that way one speaks of dedicated teachers, but she kept on and on and on. Despite the brothers and sisters hurriedly arranging the tables and turkey salad, turkey sandwiches, and now-tepid soup, for some odd reason the crowd gravitated around Velmajean, wanted to taste and be fed by the woman who had been serving them solo from the beginning. The loaves did not run out; the tub of barbecue never went empty. Each and every person in the crowd was filled.

A gentleman was quoted as saying: "That's some of the best barbecue I've ever tasted in my entire gall-durned life."

Later accounts put the number of people at over a thousand, which was unrealistic; the program had never served more than five hundred people at one time. Mrs. Frederica Stanforth and Mrs. Nellie Mae Washington both reckoned the crowd at more like a hundred and fifty to two hundred. But how the barbecued flesh of four turkeys and a big bag of bread could feed such a number escaped even their eagle eyes. Moreover: Velmajean never opened the second tub.

Velmajean understood that something had occurred but tried not to name it. She went home, tired, and fell into a cotton-candy sleep, gauzy, sweet, luscious, buoyed, and serene.

At first the rumors and talk percolated only among the Atomic saints, but, given the number of witnesses and the sheer size of the congregation, soon a new urban legend arose: a woman—her unfamiliar name, thankfully, had been lost in the retellings—had fed an entire crowd of men with a tub of barbecue and a basket of bread at the Quail Dale Square at Broad and Hollywood in Durham, North Carolina, a legend now being repeated all over the state. It was on Bingo Night that Velmajean first heard the word “miracle” applied to the incident. That was the first time Velmajean Swearington Hoyt began to feel, instead of blessed, afraid.

DEPENDING ON the scholar one asks, the Christ performed somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty-five miracles. By the time the Reverend had contacted Velmajean, inadvertently four more incidents had befallen her: dancing with her nephew on the pond at Abendigo Park; delivering a nonagenarian woman from Alzheimer’s with a hug; touching the cheek of a young man who suffered from acute paranoid schizophrenia and watching him walk away smiling and whole of mind. She shook hands with a woman who suffered from carpal tunnel syndrome and the shooting pains vanished. By and by, her name had been divulged and crowds appeared along Piney View Lane. The doorbell rang constantly. After six people—a blind man, a woman with kidney failure, a deaf boy, a quadriplegic man, a woman with breast cancer, and another with multiple sclerosis—had been

cured, her neighbors declared they had had enough, and put a stop to the steady stream with a barrage of calls to the police department and the sheriff. By that point Velmajean had already become more and more disturbed. People turned up asking her to pay their Visa bills, to cure them of sexual addictions, to provide winning lotto numbers and to palliate penile dysfunction. When she heard the sirens and the official barking on electrified megaphones, she felt two things: relief and a shame, more than she would care to admit. To be sure, there was a great joy, a deep, exhilarating sense of awe at the works being performed through her—not once did she take responsibility for the changes—but with each new face, with each new plea, she had experienced a creeping sadness and confusion. “I’m looking for a miracle,” the song went. For as long as she could remember, Velmajean believed she believed in miracles. Small and large. Mysterious and home-grown. She believed angels walked among us. She believed that folks were inexplicably healed of dread ills. That prayers were answered. Only now the purpose of miracles among men was less clear to her. Were they to demonstrate God’s love, the power of faith? Or to do good? Was one better than the other? Was it more important to have faith than to be made whole? She had not reckoned on the differing views—if indeed there was a difference. And frankly, the contemplation made her head hurt.

The police and state troopers set up barricades and stood guard, and Velmajean was left to worry and fret. Part of her, roaming about the empty house, vacuuming, dusting, defrosting the freezer, was secretly terrified, though she did her best to hide it from herself. Theretofore she had been

successful in not asking questions about what was happening to her. But no longer: Why me? What have I been chosen to do? What have I done to deserve this? That night she did not sleep well at all. Her dreams were beyond baffling: she dreamt of being in a choir of gorgeous, multicolored, naked angels, singing hip-hop songs in a language she did not understand; she dreamt of frantically trying to finish a supper for Jesus and a party of twelve who were going to arrive at any minute, and the damn turkey was raw; she dreamt she was watching television with a roomful of long-dead people—her mother, her father, her cousin Agnes among them—but everyone ignored her and left her to watch *60 Minutes* by herself. She missed her husband as if he had died the day before.

Demonstrating that he was well brought up, the Reverend Spike had the good manners to call first. Overwhelmed by calls, Velmajean had broken down and purchased an answering machine, so she was lucky to pick up his call.

She served him tea on her sun porch and was bemused and delighted by her pastor, the pastor, curiously enough, who had paid her no attention in the twenty-four months since she had joined his behemoth church.

“You aren’t getting bored in this big house all by yourself, are you?”

“No more than usual, Reverend. And I have all these nice men you sent to watch over me to play pinochle with at night. Not for money, of course.”

They chitted and chatted. Velmajean found it difficult to put her finger on what made this gigantic figure so attractive (“More tea, Reverend?”), not merely the composition of his

face, the symmetry, the rich salmon complexion, the intimidatingly white and well-formed teeth, the ink-black eyes (“Thank you, sister”). No, it was the way he insinuated himself upon the individual you (“Did I ever show you pictures of the new baby?”), the self-possession, the self-power, the self-projection of self into yourself (“Isn’t he a little cherub? Look at that”), the way yourself was locked into himself when he spoke with you—it was a presence that told you: *Don’t worry. You’re with me.*

“Tell me about your husband,” he asked, holding a framed portrait of Parker.

“Oh, I think he would have liked you, Reverend, and you him.”

They spent a time talking about her family, the old township, her years alone. He told her charming stories about his own family, and meeting the president. They prayed together. When they were done, the Reverend Spike Eggleston became a little more businesslike. “I was wondering, Sister Velma, if you would feel more . . . well, secure. More comfortable in a hotel. You know, we have nice guest suites down at the church. You might—”

But Velmajean demurred. She felt better at home. “Honestly, Reverend, I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have a floor to mop or some dusting to do. Keeps me in my right mind, if you know what I mean.”

“Okay. For now, Mrs. Hoyt. I understand completely. But you might start thinking . . . There may come a time when you absolutely have to be in more secure quarters.” With her permission, he had enlisted members of the church and a professional security team to guard her home. He could not

stress enough, he told her—her hand resting in his palm—how much he was concerned about her safety.

With finesse, he pulled from his leather valise a sheaf of impeccably typed pages—itineraries, schedules, flowcharts, contracts—and he told her about the Plan. It was a dizzying outline of the church's, i.e., the Reverend Spike Eggleston's, plan to help Velmajean Swearington Hoyt "manage" her miracles. There was talk of power of attorney, profit sharing ("with the church, of course"), of media deals and S corporations. "I'm certain, Sister Velma, that this is the Lord's plan for you. To show that his power is here among us. And we must act quickly. The telecast is already scheduled for next Sunday."

"Telecast?"

"Yes, both network and cable."

"I know I shouldn't ask this question—shouldn't ask it ever—but do you have any idea why me?"

"The Lord works in mysterious ways, his wonders to behold."

Velmajean simply fixed him with a cold stare, more than a little weariness knit across her brow.

To his credit the Reverend cast his eyes down and sighed, as if to acknowledge the fact that Velmajean Swearington Hoyt was in no mood for easy biblical quotations. "Sister Velma, I have no idea. Maybe a reward. Maybe a curse. Maybe it will be revealed to you, to us, one day. Maybe it will go down as another of his mysterious manifestations. Another episode of *Unsolved Mysteries*."

He gave her that underwear-catalog smile, and she felt better. Not due to the charisma, but to his seeming honesty. She felt a smidgen less alone.

THE DAY didn't approach quickly. It seemed now she was a prisoner in her own home, which was at least now spotless. There was no doubt in her mind that the Reverend Spike had her best interests at heart, and was about God's work. A panel of doctors and scientists and skeptics had been invited to examine the infirm in advance, and to testify to the global public afterward as to their states, followed by the laying on of hands, and the reevaluation of their situations.

"And what if the Lord is offended and decides not to heal them?"

"I have faith he will, Sister Velma."

Was it better to quietly work miracles, to heal the sick, fix the wrongs of the world? Or lead the masses to the Holy of Holies? That was the debate roiling through the late-night radio talk shows and Internet chat rooms and cable programs. No doubt it was in the mind of the Deacon Wilford Brown, late of St. Thomas Baptist Church, when he came to call.

Dusk had just inked the air when one of the bodyguards told Mrs. Hoyt there was an elderly gentleman out front who said he was an old friend and insisted he had to see her.

He was in a wheelchair and rolled by his niece, Hettie, whom he had called from the bed of his nursing home in Raleigh, telling her she had to take him to see the woman he had known from the cradle.

Wilford Brown was now eighty-seven and had lost a leg to sugar diabetes. Velmajean had known him all her life, and for as long as she could remember, he had been chairman of the deacon board of their now-erstwhile congregation.

"Sister, girl," he greeted her with wide-open arms. He felt

frail in her arms, all his life a tall, sturdy, bullish mechanic of a man. His fingers were still sausage-thick, though she could never remember them being so immaculately clean.

Over decaf he inquired about her family and her health, while his niece watched TV. He seemed loath to jump right into the business that had brought him to Piney View Lane, Velmajean could see. But could it be more obvious?

"I'm a little worried about you, baby girl. Looks like you got ahold of something—or something's got ahold of you one—and it's running away with you. Is all this talk true?"

"I can imagine you've heard a bunch of mess, but a lot of what they say is true."

"That little girl? The one in the car crash?"

Velmajean nodded.

"The barbecue?"

Again she nodded yes.

The old gent took a long silence, rubbed his face, and looked away. Velmajean felt more than a bit uncomfortable. Requests always made her feel uncomfortable.

But what he said next took her off guard: "And what do you reckon old Reverend Barden back home would say about all this foolishness?"

"Foolishness?"

"Oh, come on, Velmajean. All this mess with the TV, and that jack-legged, wrassler-looking, no-good, lying, car salesman of a preacher got his claws all up in this. What do you think I'm talking about, baby girl? I've known you all your born days, and the Lord knows I figured you to have more sense than to let yourself be *used* like this."

"If anybody's using me, I'll tell you: it ain't Reverend Spike."

nice  
147

"Listen at you. 'Reverend Spike.' Is you blind?"

"The Reverend might be . . . unconventional, but he's sincere. I know it in my heart. He's for real. I really do believe that."

Wilford snorted. "'Unconventional.'" It was as if the word were a sour taste on his tongue.

The crash through the window was not what Velmajean would remember. She heard the glass sunder and tinkle on the floor, the wood split and crack and splinter as the body hurtled through her kitchen door. But the way Mr. Wilford first jumped, and then tried to get out of his wheelchair, and the look upon his face when he realized he was trapped, made her want to cry. Velmajean did not scream, but the deacon's niece did—how did she get to the kitchen so quickly?

The man was wearing the same black overcoat, now slightly torn, though it was his face, sans sunglasses, that she fixed upon. Where before he had a kindly visage, he now seemed to be frothing and his bloodshot eyes leered. He smelled awful, like spoiled milk mixed with overcooked cabbage. In fact Velmajean soon realized he was wearing the same suit as well, now torn, leaf- and straw-mottled.

Mr. Wilford hollered at first. Then said, "Get," as if he were shooing away a puppy.

The knife sliced through the air, not with a singing sound, but with a bat wing's flap. Twice he swung at Velmajean, who just stood there, at first, afraid to leave Mr. Wilford, and fighting the overwhelming need to pee, and pee bad.

The other thing that surprised her was the sound the gun made. Nothing like the loud bang she had heard at

the movies or on TV. More a pop, like a firecracker. On the floor, the stranger convulsed and held his wounded shoulder, the blood—prune-juice dark—fanning out caterpillar-speed onto her yellow tiles.

The security guard told her to stay away, but it seemed so patently, so lightbulb-clear, what she had to do. As she bent over him, her hand moving toward the bleeding spot, her former African chief, her fantasy Secret Service agent, stared at her and mouthed: "Who said . . . Who said . . . who said . . ."

"What? What are you saying?"

\* "Who said it was from God?"

ENDING #2: [from *The Book of Velmajean Hoyt*]

Wilford's niece's high piercing scream seemed to go on forever—how did she get to the kitchen so fast? Velmajean had only seen the knife flash, once, twice. And then he stood still, staring at her. That pain was on the outside, as if she had received a long paper cut on her belly. On the inside was only a dim pressure, and a throbbing, and then a pouring. In some dull, still-functioning, stubborn place inside her brain, she understood in a crystalline way that she was in shock. She had taken a course on emergency medicine, years ago, back when she was an office manager. And she had to pee, and pee bad.

He stood there staring at her, and she wondered why she had ever judged him as being beautiful. His jet lips, now parched, ashy, and cracked, moved, but it was only after the pop of the security guard's gun brought him to his knees that she finally made out what he had said to her: "Who said it was from God?"

ENDING #3: [from *The Pentecost of VSH*]

The security guards—the paid one, Fletcher Cross, a fat white man with cherry cheeks, and a young man from church, Buzz Terrington, bear-big and the color of a fine leather jacket, and with a penchant for video games—tackled the intruder simultaneously. Velmajean soon turned away. Mr. Wilford's niece had wheeled him from the kitchen as he called out to Velmajean in confusion and fear. "Are you okay? Velmajean? Velma?"

After wrecking the dinner table, two chairs, the coffeemaker—the glass carafe simply exploded—and the cabinet door under the sink crashed in, the two men subdued the smelly man.

His face bloody, tears wetting his face, he snarled and struggled to get away. It was not at all clear to Velmajean that these two men could hold him down.

"Call the police!" Buzz said. "911!"

"I already did," Mr. Wilford's niece said from the doorway. "They'll be here any minute. Hold him!"

Velmajean took a step forward, trying to see the man's face clearly, to understand. He fixed her face with a glare so intense it almost made her cry. He spit at her, making her jump back.

"Who said it was from God?" he hollered. "Who told you that lie?"

ENDING #4: [from *The Gospel of Velmajean Swearington Hoyt*]

Mr. Wilford snorted. "Unconventional." It was as if the word were a sour taste on his tongue.

Later Velmajean would remember the sound of the gun firing to be more like the pop of a firecracker.

"What the hell?" Mr. Wilford began rolling his chair toward the back door, toward the pop.

Apparently the guards had warned the man. They would later tell the police they had called to him as he ran toward the house, but he would not stop. Fletcher Cross, licensed to carry a gun, fired only once.

Now the floodlights were on, and in the middle of Velmajean's deck lay writhing her Secret Service agent, her black angel-helper, her once-vision, now nowhere near angelic: he wore the same thick coat, the same suit, tattered now, smelling like rotten cabbage and piss. Buzz Terrington held him down, but he gave little resistance, instead growling like a wild animal. "Shut up," Buzz yelled. "Keep still. An ambulance is on the way, you dumb shit." Velmajean could smell the fear on the other two guards, who had come round to watch.

The man had been shot in the shoulder, and was clutching it with his right hand. The hand was wet with blood, and between grimaces and snarls, the strange man sucked air as if it were hard to breathe. Heedless of any potential danger, in fact convinced of some plan, divine or otherwise, Velmajean made her way to the fallen trespasser.

"Don't touch me!" The man's words were distinct, clear and loud. "Don't you come near me, you whore."

"Wha—"

"I know who you are." The man winced, but tried to slide back from Velmajean. He began to cry. "It was not meant to be like this."