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The Rain That Falls

PAUL BOWERS

Ludy picked him up in the Jesus Mission bus on a cold Friday morning after watching him throw up what was left of a free Inner City Ministries cheese and pastrami sandwich. By the time his head stopped spinning and the cold sweats of nausea dried up, they were already chugging down Main, past the new mall and across the river bridge. Pooch said, "You know, I've never sat in the front row of a school bus. When I was a kid I sat in the back to grab a smoke."

"There's no smoking on the bus," Ludy said, and swung wide around a corner.

Pooch felt in his pocket. "I'm out anyhow," he said, eyeing a channel of white scalp that slipped like a pale rope down to her forehead, and was brought to an end by a tuft of red hair carefully combed in a swoop across one eyebrow.

"Do you know Jesus?" Ludy said, meeting his gaze in the broad overhead mirror.

"I sure do," Pooch said. "I suppose nobody knows Jesus better than me. I give him glory every day of my life, and then some." Pooch figured she wanted to know whether he was worth

working on before giving him an old coat nobody wanted in the first place, so Pooch tried to save her a little time by confessing to loving Jesus right off. “In fact, I’ve done my share of preaching in my life, reaching out to unfortunate ones like myself, telling them about how much Jesus liked supping with the sinners.” He liked the word supping. A fine meal was always supped, he thought. Would you sup with me tonight?, and the answer would have to be, I’d be delighted. “Yes, indeed,” Pooch said, “I’ve got the joy down in my heart.”

Ludy coasted across the river into the industrial district with its belching steam of petroleum refineries. Tall, thin pipes burned from their tips high in the sky and distorted the surrounding air with heat, and Pooch remembered how beautiful the flames were at night from across the river.

“You don’t know Jesus,” Ludy said flatly.

“I just told you I know Jesus.”

“But you’re not telling the truth.”

“How you know that?”

“Because I do know Jesus, and he’s telling me he don’t know you.”

“How do you know your talking Jesus is better than my talking Jesus?”

“There’s not but one, and I suppose since my heart is a little cleaner than yours with the stink of liquor about you, I must be hearing him right. That’s what the scriptures say in Matthew. ‘Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.’”

“I thought we were talking about hearing, not seeing.”

“You ever been bapitized?” Ludy asked.

“My folks were dry Lutherans. Real dry.”

“If you hadn’t been bapitized, then you don’t know Jesus.”

“Lady,” Pooch said, leaning on his elbows against the back of the driver’s seat, “that’s like saying you never drove a car unless it was a Buick.”

Pooch leaned back in his seat. He thought if he argued any-

more she might put him out and he'd have to sleep outside, with the threat of cold rain hanging in the clouds, and in a part of the city with a reputation for swallowing up people who slept in the streets. Wherever she was taking him, it would have to do for the night, because he couldn't walk back to the North Side Shelter before dark.

The bus was powdered in a gritty dust, inside and out, the windows barely clean enough to see through. There were streaks of mud on the floorboard from somebody's dirty shoes, and the silver railing that wrapped around behind the driver was cold and sticky and smudged with fingerprints. "This old tub could use a little cleaning, lady." Ludy stared straight ahead, as stiff in the back as ever. "By the way," he said, again moving closer, thinking that maybe she didn't hear well, "I don't believe I've ever heard of the Jesus Mission. I hope you've got more than two beds is all I can say. If there's three beds you can always move at least one away from the guy who saws logs."

"Only have one bed," Ludy said.

"One? Then we better step on it before some other Jake gets my spot. You don't have any more busses out prowling the south side do you? I hear there's at least fifty without beds over here every night. I don't relish the idea of a blanket on the floor much anymore. My back won't take it, I tell you. I'll be stove up for days if I have to sleep on the floor."

"It's a good bed," Ludy said. "And there's nobody else in it."

"I hope you're right, because my legs won't take a night on the floor."

"I thought it was your back bothering you."

"Ma'am, I'm all messed up in virtually every way."

*

Pooch had no intention of letting Ludy fiddle with his soul before at least getting one good breakfast out of her. That much he

decided before they arrived at the apartment complex. Even when Ludy got out, Pooch remained in the bus, thinking she was stopping to visit somebody before moving on. Then she came back to get him.

“This is it, mister.”

Pooch stood outside the bus for a moment, lolled against a rusting iron fence surrounding a row of sad brown apartments, then he followed Ludy down a sidewalk between buildings, around a dimly lit corner swirling with moths, and up a flight of wooden stairs to her door. He stood behind her as she worked her key through a series of locks.

“Is this the Jesus Mission?”

Ludy opened the door and Pooch followed her into the dark. “It’s not a mission place,” Ludy said, somewhere in the cave of the apartment, and then she found the lamp. “I’m on a mission for Jesus. It’s a Jesus *Mission*. Get it?”

The room glowed in a pale yellow light cast by a thin canvas lampshade, and Pooch saw a narrow hallway bleed away into more darkness. “That all depends on how you read, I guess.” Pooch looked around the apartment, at the sparse but neat furniture: a brown couch, oblong coffee table, a maroon recliner, another table in an alcove with a bowl of fruit and blue placemats. “But it don’t matter where you put the oomph if you still got that bed.”

Ludy heated vegetable soup and toast, poured a glass of ice water and another of milk, then slid it all in front of Pooch. He ate slowly, still feeling a little sick at his stomach.

He watched her carry bed-linens into a room down the hall. She came back, walked around the living room fluffing a big white pillow before throwing it on the couch along with a thick crocheted purple afghan.

Pooch felt better with the soup in him, and the milk settled the cramps in his stomach. Ludy came into the kitchen and fluttered around him, taking away empty dishes, offering him cherry pie, fresh coffee, and then she took out a piece of paper

and asked him what he wanted for breakfast.

"Lady, I don't appreciate being taken for a fool." Ludy held her pencil at the ready; her face, gray and sagging in the jowls, remained passive; her eyes, a pale green that reminded Pooch of cat's eyes, met his with a stare. "I mean, I don't know what you've got in mind for me, or why you hauled me all the way out to your place, but I won't trade just anything for hospitality. I hope you ain't thinking of robbing me or expecting any bedtime hugs. Not that you are offensive to my sight, but, to tell you the truth, I just ain't in the mood."

Ludy flinched a little, even loosened her grip enough to doodle a spiral on the piece of paper. Then she showed signs of movement, her thin lips spread into a meager smile. "All I want is to minister to you. That's all. I don't accept any payment for doing the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and if you was to offer any I'd put you back on the bus and drive you away and chastise you because you would've spoiled the whole thing. There's stories I've got to tell, straight from scripture, and all you have to do is listen to them for an evening, get a good night's sleep, eat something before you go, and I'll deliver you somewhere in the morning."

Pooch sat up straight, said, "I can do that," and drained enough soup from the bowl to cause Ludy to abandon her breakfast menu to get him a ladle-ful more. He ordered sausage and bacon. And toast with jam.

"Strawberry all right?" Ludy asked.

"Is it the kind with the little seeds?"

"There's seeds, I guess."

"I like that kind," Pooch said.

Ludy cleaned up his dishes while Pooch read about the Second Coming in a magazine published by Jews for Christ. On the cover was a painting of people wearing watery-looking purple and green robes, crouched and fearful below a rolling storm cloud, hands shielding their anguished and ugly faces against a bright

light that shot across the sky and struck the roof of a temple far in the distance.

He stared at the picture, at the agony of the people, until he was very nearly asleep sitting up on the couch when Ludy came in carrying a stainless-steel bowl. She knelt slowly at his feet and began to unlace his shoes.

“If you’re thinking of soaping up my socks, you’d be better off bringing a match.”

“Just sit still,” Ludy said. She tugged his boots free, and without so much as a wince went for the dirty socks. Even Pooch had to lean back to avoid the fumes, but Ludy never budged, never sniffed.

From the wash basin she drew a wet rag, and lifting Pooch’s foot, slowly pushed the bowl against the couch base. “You want me to stick her in there for you?” Pooch said, thinking he had found a real kook this time, and deciding, just at the moment his foot touched the warm water, that he was going to take full advantage of her. He tried to work the other foot in besides, but Ludy held him off, said the bowl was only big enough for one at a time.

“Them’s boats, ain’t they?” Pooch said, admiring the size of his foot in Ludy’s small red hands. “You know, my sister has feet a half-shoe-size bigger than mine? I’m telling you, that girl lopes.”

Then Ludy said, as if she were taking up a conversation already in full swing, “There was a Pharisee that invited Jesus to supper, and a sinful woman was there, and when she saw Jesus she washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. Then she rubbed them up with precious oils.”

Pooch looked at Ludy’s thin red hair, knew right away it wouldn’t soak up but a drop or two off his big feet. “I’d rather you didn’t do that part,” Pooch said.

“And the Pharisee,” Ludy went on, “came in and said Jesus was being dirtied by the sins of the woman who was touching his feet. And you know what Jesus said?”

"No, ma'am."

"He said that what she had done was the best anybody ever done for him."

Pooch said, for lack of anything else, "Well, what do you know?"

Ludy was gentle, took her time washing each foot with great concentration. As she was toweling him off Pooch said, "Tell me, what sin did the woman who did the washing commit?"

"I thought you said you did some preaching?"

"That's right," Pooch said.

"Then how can you be a preacher if you don't know the gospel stories?"

"I preached from my heart," he said defensively. "I spoke with the tongue of the Holy Spirit. Ever heard of inspiration?"

Ludy carefully folded the towel into quarters and dropped it into the bowl. "I believe in the Holy Spirit," she said, "but the scriptures give us stories to live by, and those stories was written by the hand of man with the Holy Ghost guiding their pencils."

"But," Pooch interrupted, "what if you don't have a pencil or paper when the Spirit comes on you?"

Ludy paused with the heavy bowl of water. He saw her arm quiver under its weight. "Then I suppose you talk."

"That's all I'm saying," Pooch said, and he leaned back and spread his arms proudly across the spine of the couch.

*

He was nearly asleep when Ludy nudged him on the shoulder and told him to get up and go down the hall to the bedroom. He stood up and watched her spread a thin bedsheet and fold the afghan neatly on the couch arm.

"Go along, now," she said.

Pooch picked up his shoes and socks and left her sitting quietly on the couch, her hands folded in her lap.

The bedroom was dim but for a circle of light from a faded lamp on a nightstand. The bed was turned down neatly, and there was a glass of water on the table next to a big black Bible with gilded pages. Pooch went into the bathroom and filled the sink with water to soak his socks.

In the corner of the room by the door was a straight wooden chair with a square pillow. Pooch sat down, dug his toes into the carpet pile and dozed. He thought he should probably just get undressed and hop in bed, but the quietness of the room seemed to freeze his joints. He had slept in dozens of beds that didn't belong to him, beds that held a different man every night, sheets that smelled of sweat and dust and liquor and cigarettes, worn blankets rough as sandpaper and always ragged around the edges. And now that he had a bed made up with care, with bleached sheets and a thick comforter, he couldn't convince himself to crawl into it, not with Ludy holed up on the couch.

He roused himself from the chair, wrung out his socks and stuffed them into the pockets of his army jacket. He washed his face, the back of his neck, cleaned his ears with wet toilet paper, and finger-combed his hair.

The hallway was dark but for the square of light that bled out of the bedroom when he opened the door. There was no light in the living room and he wasn't sure he could make it out without running into something. He felt his way along the wall until it ended and he knew he was in the living room. The front door was to the left somewhere, but before he had taken two steps in its direction he heard Ludy whispering in the dark. He froze. Surely she would think he'd come to do her in if she caught him sneaking around, so he stood still and hoped she was just talking in her sleep. But Ludy was awake, and praying, and she was saying something over and over again, and he held his breath and heard, "You make the rain fall on the just and the unjust, Sweet Jesus. You make the sun to rise on the righteous and the sinful, Sweet Jesus."

He figured it was worse to listen in while she talked to God than to take her bed for a night, so he started backing his way into the hall, but before he had taken two steps Ludy was saying something else. "Thank you, Jesus, for coming to me in the disguise of the wretched. You was thirsty and I gave you water. You was hungry and I gave you some food. You was tired and I gave you a place for you to sleep. You was dirty and filthy and I washed the dust of the road from your feet."

Pooch made it back to the bedroom and eased the door closed, the sound of Ludy's prayers fading into the dark. Without thinking anymore about it he undressed, folded his clothes neatly on the chair, and climbed into the bed. The sheets were cool against his skin, the pillow like laying his head on a cloud, and he went to sleep thinking there was nothing he could do but enjoy himself.

*

Ludy had the table set by the time Pooch woke and washed up. He spent a good half hour in the bathroom, knowing it might be his last chance to clean up for at least a few days. He'd forgotten about his socks balled up in his jacket. They were still wet and he had trouble getting them on and tore the heel out of one of them in the effort. Before he left the bedroom, he drank the glass of water, opened the Bible to make it look like he'd spent time reading it, and made the bed as best he could.

She made sausage and bacon and toast. There was a butter dish and round pan of flour biscuits and two kinds of jelly and a jar of sweet apple butter. Pooch sat down at the table and Ludy, who was wearing the same clothes she wore the day before, poured him a tall glass of pulpy orange juice, then black coffee in a cup with a saucer. It had been a long time since he'd had coffee in something other than Styrofoam. More than anything he liked the soft clink of porcelain against porcelain, so he raised and low-

ered the cup every few seconds, taking small sips, forcing himself not to hurry.

Ludy said nothing beyond a quick “Morning” and scurried around the kitchen as if she were looking for something else to lay in front of him.

He shook the cloth napkin and smoothed it on his lap. Not that a little butter or grease would show up on his already filthy pants, but with the saucer and the two kinds of jelly he wanted to go the whole nine yards. He gripped a fork in one hand, a butter knife in the other, and paused over the meal. He knew the sooner he started, the faster it would all be gone, and he wasn't quite ready to disturb the food. He had never thought of food as beautiful, but there it was, all arranged in front of him like a picture, and he hesitated to make a mess of it.

“What you waiting for?” Ludy said. She was leaning against the counter with a dishrag wadded up in her hands, watching him. “You see something you don't like?”

Pooch shook his head. Then he thought there was no way he could eat with her standing there, so he got up and pulled the chair opposite him away from the table. “I'd appreciate it if you would sup with me this morning.” And although she didn't say it out loud, the way she sat down and rested her hands in her lap, she looked like she would have said “I'd be delighted,” if such a thought had ever come to her mind.

*

After breakfast, Ludy ran water in the bathtub while she sat on the commode and read scriptures out loud. Pooch stood with his head bowed, hands held solemnly together at his waist, and listened. Every few seconds he lost his concentrations on Jesus and had to adjust the big green bathrobe that slipped off his narrow shoulders.

“And Isaiah says, ‘A voice in the desert cries out: Prepare the

way of the Lord; make straight his paths.' Amen."

"Amen," Pooch said.

"And that voice was the voice of John the Babtist," Ludy said, looking up at Pooch, "and he says he comes to babtize with water, and he was filled with the Holy Ghost. Amen."

"Amen," Pooch said, then Ludy put her Bible down like a great black brick on the dusty commode tank and said, "Get on in," and Pooch stepped into the yellow tub with the water still running. It felt good on his feet and legs, like slipping into a big vat of coffee.

"You want me to sit down?"

Ludy looked at Pooch's tall, rail-thin body swamped in green cotton, then at the tub. "I don't think you'll fit full-length. Better drop to your knees." She helped him off with the robe and held his hand while he folded his sunless legs under him. He felt his underwear grow heavy with water. She put a red washrag over his face with one hand, palmed the top of his head with the other. "Dear Father, this man has come to be washed in the blood of the Lamb. I thank you for letting me find him and allowing me to bring him into the fold, being one of the lost sheep you are forever looking for. Pooch, what do you ask of the Lord?"

Pooch mumbled from beneath the cloth, "To have myself babtized."

"Do you confess yourself to be an awful sinner?"

"I do."

"Do you ask for the cleansing water of Heaven to cure you of your sinful habits and evil ways?"

"I do."

"Do you wish to walk in the newness of life everlasting?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, Lord," she corrected.

"Yes, Lord."

"Then grab a good breath," she said, and Pooch felt her press

against his neck, and he fell forward into the warm waters of salvation.

*

It was the least he could have done for her, Pooch thought, as they made their way back across town on the bus. In fact, he would let himself be baptized on a regular basis for a good night's sleep and a hot breakfast, and he was already planning to track her down in a day or two and claim the first dousing didn't quite take.

She let him off at the North Side Shelter and drove away in a hurry, as if she didn't have time to wait in finding someone else to carry across the river.

Walter T. and Rolly sat on the curb in front of the shelter sharing a cigarette when Pooch stumbled off the bus. The last thing he wanted to do was waste the morning away with those two, but Walter T. kept calling him over, so Pooch sat down on the curb just to get him to shut up.

"Where you been?" Rolly asked, nursing the last scraps of smoke from the cigarette.

"Across the river," Pooch said, although he didn't want to tell them too much, afraid they might get the notion to head for Ludy's place and mess up any chance he had of going back there himself in a few days.

"I thought maybe you was off to Sunday school," Walter T. said, grinning and showing the gaps in his brown teeth, gesturing with his dirty fingers in the direction the bus disappeared.

"What do you know about any kind of school?" Pooch said, already wishing he had walked on down the street to a quieter place to sit.

"Enough to stay clear of it," Walter T. said.

Rolly sucked on the cigarette until there was nothing left to draw, then hung the cold butt from his lips. "You giving old

Ludy Barnes the business over there?" he said.

Pooch stiffened, and he wasn't sure if it was the mention of her name or the sudden disappointment that he didn't have a secret after all that made him angry, but he turned on Rolly like he was going to level him. "What do you mean by that?"

Rolly pulled back. "I was just asking a question. You got off Ludy's bus, that's all."

Pooch looked down at his shoes, at the flesh of his ankle showing through the torn sock. "A man can't move an inch around here without somebody's nose being in his business."

Walter T. was laughing. "Jumpin Jesus," he said. "That's what they called her, ain't that right Rolly?" But Rolly didn't answer. He remained stone-faced and chewed on the cigarette butt until it unraveled in his mouth.

"What nonsense are you talking?" Pooch asked.

"That's what they called Ludy Barnes back in the days. Jumpin Jesus. For ten dollars she'd do anything you wanted and she'd say 'Jesus, Jesus' while she was doing it, so they got to saying she was Jumpin Jesus. Course, that was a long time ago before somebody finally figured out she really meant it."

"Meant what?"

"Saying you was Jesus is what. Bums is Jesus, the real McCoy. Course, the fact that she was nuts didn't stop fellas from forking out ten bucks, but it got to where she wouldn't swap for anything. She'd give you a coat or a pair of shoes or something to eat, but no more poontang, and hell, we can get that stuff on this side of the river without all the bother. Silent Nellie over across Bryant Street is still in the business and she don't talk at all. Ain't that right Rolly?"

Rolly snickered, nodded his head with some embarrassment.

Walter T. talked about his last trip to Bryant Street and how he fooled Nellie into taking a stray pup for payment, but Pooch was tired of looking at their ugly faces and dirty hands. Most of all he was tired of hearing Walter T. carry on, so he got up with-

out a word and started down the sidewalk.

“Where you going?” Rolly shouted before he could get far enough away, but Pooch only waved his hand in the air and moved at a slow, easy pace.

Walter T. said, “He’s going to cross the Jordan, ain’t that right Pooch? And he ain’t even going to use the bridge, are you Pooch? Why, that’s Jesus H. Christ himself, Rolly. Didn’t you know that?”

Pooch wasn’t about to hurry. He didn’t want to make it look like they were getting under his skin, so he stopped, bent down, and carefully rolled the bottom of his pant legs up to his calves. “Just in case it don’t work,” he said, and he heard Walter T.’s barks of laughter bouncing from the blank walls of the buildings until only the cold wind off the river whined in his ears.