

Todd Easton Mills

The Reverend's Tale

Mimi's, the local faux-French bistro, stood alone in the vast parking lot of the Pacific View Mall. The restaurant was *pittoresque* with checkered tablecloths, geraniums in the flowerboxes, and posters of the famous *chat noir*. Its garden, narrow as a boulevard meridian, had irises and iceberg roses. There was an olive tree, old and gnarly, and all was enclosed by a tidy boxwood hedge.

Piper came here to think about things and to daydream. She had selected a sunny booth by the window that overlooked a broken concrete sundial. It didn't matter that the waitress hadn't taken her order—she had a book to read and had eaten a big breakfast. Her husband, Mark, had said something this morning that wasn't true. She couldn't have *anything she wanted*.

Mark worked at home with the door closed, making long calls to cronies, and liked to travel to San Jose or Silicon Valley for meetings with other VCs. She volunteered at the Rescue Mission in Santa Barbara. She wondered if her good luck had changed her. That was an interesting question. Their house was a pristine Spanish Revival by George Washington Smith; when they traveled, they stayed at five-star hotels and resorts, and Mark always did the online research to find Michelin-rated chefs.

She was thinking about this when an old black man, tall and straight, appeared at the hostess' podium. He had a cracked leather cap and frayed satchel and looked like he had been on the road for a long time. He waited, standing back, while the hostess seated two ladies in business suits. "Can I use your restroom, ma'am?" he asked, his voice soft and deferential.

The hostess smiled warmly. "It's through the dining room and on the left, sir."

That's nice, Piper thought. A week ago the same hostess had told a surfer in a scruffy Pendleton to use the public restroom at the mall. Piper picked up the menu: French onion soup, coq au vin, hamburger with mushrooms, Silk Mud Pie. She looked up when the old man walked by—and he touched his hand to his cap.

Suddenly, as if remembering an appointment, Piper asked: "Would you like to join me for lunch?" Then awkwardly: "Don't worry, I was homeless myself. Well, homeless with a car, that's a separate category." She blushed. "My name is Piper."

“Nice to meet you, Piper. I’m Reverend James James—Father liked the name. I’m trying to get back to Mohave. My car broke down and I have been walkin’ for six miles. No one in this town wanted to give me a ride. Maybe you know where the bus stop is—somewhere on Telegraph?”

“Please sit down. Join me. Have something to eat.”

“You are blessed by God—I can see that. Broke down first time on Highway 14. Man put in two parts charged me \$167, left me with \$4. Broke down again in a place called Carp.”

“Carpentaria? How’d you get to Ventura?”

“A good Christian gave me a ride.”

“Well, don’t worry. I can drive you back to your car. I know a mechanic. We’ll get you back on the road.” She remembered how her old Camry used to break down. “Would you like something to drink, Reverend?”

“Well, yes, ma’am. Water, if it’s no trouble,” he said, sitting down.

“And you’re having a good dinner.”

At that moment, the waitress, tall and blond, arrived to take the order. Like the old man, she was almost six feet tall. She asked if she could move his bag to one of the chairs so that it wouldn’t be in the aisle. As she picked it up, Piper saw a Bible in the outside pocket. “I’ll have what she’s havin’,” said the Reverend.

It turned out, the Reverend traveled up and down the state, witnessing to gang members in Oakland, Salinas, Bakersfield, East L.A., Pomona, Compton, and San Diego. He had enormous hands that he displayed before he clasped them to bless Piper for her “Christian heart.” When the meal came, she was surprised by how fast he devoured it, ejecting tiny bits of mushroom-and-brie burger.

The Reverend said he had seen many miracles, like when he was witnessing to a gang leader who had killed a lot of men. “When I laid my hands on him, a black worm dropped out of his mouth.”

“What did you do? Step on it, I hope,” Piper asked, excited by the story.

The Reverend nodded in an odd way.

Piper, who had perfect pink fingernails and hair streaked by the best stylist in Santa Barbara, wanted to tell her story. “When I was living in my car, I didn’t have any money except what I could panhandle. Sometimes for dinner I would go to bars at Happy Hour. The good ones serve chicken or steak, but it’s usually too

spicy because they want you to drink. I would shower at the 24-Hour Fitness. I had a membership—”

“Another time,” said the Reverend, interrupting with a stronger voice, “I was witnessing in front of a liquor store in East L.A. There was a drug dealer in the parking lot who didn’t want me there. He said it was his street and I was bad for business.”

“You probably were,” Piper said.

“That’s right. He told me to move on and I told him: ‘This is where God wants me to witness.’ We had a standoff for a week, then somebody threw a Molotov cocktail in my face. I had a clipboard and I blocked it, but it exploded all around me. The sound it made was *whooooooooosh!* When I woke up, I was in the hospital on the drip—seventy percent of my body was burned. They gave me so much morphine, I was out of my head. I called my son who’s a doctor and I told him the hospital was tryin’ to kill me. I could feel pins in my blood.”

“My son said: ‘Dad, you’re in a very good hospital. They’ll take care of you.’ He was in Mombasa workin’ at a hospital over there. In Mombasa they’ve got ivory tusks that cross over the streets. My son sent me the picture. I could handle the pain; but when they cut me back, it felt like lightning. I begged for more.”

“I can’t imagine. How awful.”

Reverend James removed his leather cap to show uneven patches of pink and white on his scalp. He rolled up his shirt sleeve, showing faint vertical lines. “That’s where they did the skin graft.”

“How long were you in the hospital?”

“Four months. I told them I needed to get out of here. My son helped me transfer to a rehab center. That was worse than the hospital. The pain got real bad.”

“Did your son come back from Africa?” Piper asked.

“He was helpin’ with Ebola. He works for the CD—”

“The CDC?” She paused. “Are you sure you don’t want me to drive you to your car? I’ll call the Auto Club and they will help you.”

“I have Christian friends in Mohave. They’ll tow me back.”

“Let me call the Auto Club.”

“I just need to get to the bus stop on Telegraph. I’ll take the bus back tonight. I don’t worry about money. When I witness, money comes. Excuse me, I gotta go to the restroom again. I got pros-tate cancer. When you got pros-tate you need to go all the time.”

“Are you getting treatment? Did your son tell you about watchful waiting?”

“I heard of that—watchful.”

There were facts in the story that troubled her. Living in the street you acquire a sense. She tried to remember how many years ago she was homeless. It would have been before she met Mark. That night she was scrounging food at Happy Hour and Mark never guessed she was living in her car. Mark was a software engineer when his company went public. He cashed in at thirty-eight, bought a house in Montecito, and was a member of an angel investor club. Recently, the club had made investments in virtual reality.

Her curiosity burned. Why did the Reverend drink so little water? Just a few sips. At the hostess station, she remembered him standing up straight. Now when he walked, he was bent over and very slow. Why wouldn't he accept her help to get his car back on the road? It would take him eight hours to get home by bus. She decided she needed to look at his Bible.

As soon as he turned the corner to the men's room, she jumped out of her seat and plucked the good book from the outside pocket of his bag. In *Timothy* she found a slip of paper with the handwritten words: “PROSTATE.” In *Ezekiel* she found a receipt from a pharmacy for drugs she didn't recognize, but there was with no patient name or address. It was a large-print Bible of impressive size, inscribed to somebody named Gretchen Anderson. Reverend James was suddenly beside her.

“I was looking for the part where Moses says ‘I am that I am.’ You hear it a lot in songs and different places.”

“I gotta get to the bus stop, Piper.”

A large man, about forty-five, who looked like a retired fireman, had been listening to the conversation from the table behind them. As he got up to leave, he nodded to the Reverend. “Hello, brother, are you a Christian man? Reverend James James.” The Reverend put out his hand. “My father liked the name. I'm tryin' to get back to Mohave—my car broke down and I've been walkin' for six miles. No one in this town wanted to give me a ride. Maybe you know where the bus stop is—some-where on Telegraph?”

“This poor man is trying to get back to Mohave,” Piper said.

“Mohave? That's a long way. Excuse me for listening in: is it: ‘I am *that* I am, or I am *who* I am’? There's a difference.”

“Are you finished?” asked the Reverend.

"I just have a few more bites," Piper said.

"Can I have my Bible? Bless you, sister."

"Do you need a ride to the bus stop, Reverend?"

"Thank you, brother."

After he left, she thought about "I am that I am," which he said means "the ugliest man filled with the spirit of God will think he is the most handsome man in the world." That morning she had eavesdropped on a handsome man making a phone call in front of Peet's Coffee on State Street in Santa Barbara. He was talking about how you can borrow from certain Swiss banks who charge zero percent interest "for loans up to billion dollars because Swiss banks have too much money and are required by law to lend it." She wanted to hear more, but the man moved away. Across the street she saw a woman holding two dollars in her hand. She was dressed in a black skirt and shawl and held a baby swaddled in a pink blanket with silver stars. When Piper got closer, she heard: "Do you have change? I tried to get change at Starbucks, but they wouldn't let me because babies aren't allowed." "Can I see your baby?" Piper asked.

"She's sleeping," said the woman.

Piper saw a rectangular bulge under the blanket. She touched it softly and could feel a shoe box.

"She's sleeping," said the woman, unfazed.

"Sleep tight, little shoe," said Piper. She had forgotten the incident until just now. *Funny how one thing reminds you of something else*, she thought. There were other things about the Reverend's story that didn't add up. *Wouldn't he have terrible scars?* He said the man who threw the Molotov cocktail "was just tryin' to scare me." *That's all?* she thought. *Just scarin' him by burning off his face?*

Was it a story, his hustle? It doesn't matter. You do what you have to do. She was happy to live and let live. She looked out the window and watched a seagull land on the sundial. Beyond the hedge stretched new blacktop with freshly painted stripes. It was twilight and you could see the silhouette of palm trees in front of the Ford dealership. It was the time of day when you start to look for a place to park for the night.

Her mind went back. That was the day she had found a piece of new shag carpet sticking out of a Dumpster. It was so new, she could smell the rubber backing and scent of lanoline in the wool. Her doorway was one of the side entrances to the Santa Barbara Superior Court; it was Friday so the doorway was *hers* until Mon-

day morning.

I have time to get my tires rotated before they close. It's free, she thought. It had only been five thousand miles since the last rotation, but Mark liked her to do it. *Anyway, Pacific Tire is next door to Macy's, and I can do some shopping.* She remembered the last time it took several times to align the Mercedes on the hydraulic lift. *They made a big deal out of it, funny guys. When you're not working, you have time to enjoy the joke. Was that it?*

She was sitting at the wheel, lost in thought. She drove past the tire store and continued past Macy's to the back of the mall where there was a row of Dumpsters. She remembered a tree—a bushy pepper with branches low enough to hide her car. Years before she had slept in this spot until a security guard discovered her. He banged on the door and shined his flashlight into her face. Now, Piper felt tired. She crawled into the backseat. She folded her sweater to make a pillow and drew up her legs. After a minute, she curled over on her side.

The night it happened, I showered and shampooed at the gym. I know because it's what I do if I'm going to Happy Hour... so I would be wearing lipstick and eye makeup. It was cold, but I had my good blanket and a double-layer of cardboard under the carpet. The arch over the door hid the stars and I fell asleep right away.

She was breathing heavily now. *I was fast asleep when somebody shook me. I had never seen him before. I don't think he was from around here, maybe New York. He didn't say enough for me to pick up the accent, but I think New York. His cologne made me sick. He said: "I'm cold, can we share the stoop?"*

She turned over on her back with her knees up and held tightly together. *He hurt me and I saw flashes of light. He put his hand over my mouth so hard I couldn't bite him. I tried to push him off but there was no way I could fight--he was too big. When he was done, he flopped on his back and lit a cigarette. That's when I screamed and he ran off. I never called the police. I'm sure of that. And I never used the story when I was panhandling. I screamed once, I'm pretty sure. I pushed it out of my mind. I push it out and here it is again. I'm going to think about something else. No, I never hustled my story like the Reverend, even if his story is true. It's a beautiful sunset tonight. I'm not going to fight the traffic. I'll just take a little nap.*

It was nearly dark. The palms were purple and the mall looked like an indigo fortress—in the poor light it was hard to tell if Piper was driving a Mercedes or a Camry.