

Saved By the Blood

The Faith Healer ~

Brother Jimmy Ray Boetticker looked down from the crude wooden platform at the rows of eager faces crowded into the stiflingly hot tent. They had filled both side aisles, as well as the wide center aisle, to SRO capacity. *Man, if the fire department shows up they'll bust me sure.* He couldn't escape the irony of the full tent, because his personal faith had reached its nadir. He could still pull them in with his florid, explosive rhetoric and animated stage-presence, but his empty heart could not infuse his performance with the old fire any longer.

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Fifty years ago, he had been a raging, barnstorming, teen firebrand.

COME AND SEE THE BOY PREACHER! the posters proclaimed in bold letters. *THIS WEEK ONLY! BRING YOUR SICK AND LAME FOR HEALING! COME SEE GOD'S WONDER!*
JIMMY RAY BOETTICKER!

In those days, people had a great deal of faith, linked with *a lot* of gullibility. They would flood into the tent; watch him work his mojo, then troop to the front for healing. After he wrought his so-called “miracles,” Jimmy Ray would have his staff send them back to their seats and make an impassioned plea for support of “his important work for the Lord.” Coming in one’s and five’s mostly, the bills filled the baskets to overflowing and, more often than not, Jimmy Ray would reap thousands on a good night.

Now, at sixty-three, still tall and rangy, with a mane of shoulder-length, dirty-blond hair, Jimmy Ray had become one of the very few remaining examples of a vanishing breed ... the blood and thunder, walk-the-sawdust-aisle, fell-‘em-by-the-Holy-Spirit, faith healer. These days, folks often lacked the faith—and the prerequisite gullibility—to buy into his line of hope, promise and just plain flimflam. They had become a cynical, lost generation to him. As a young man, he deluded himself into believing what he did actually helped people, but he harbored no such illusions these days. It had become a thinly veiled scam, a religious, dog-and-pony show designed to bring in the bucks. He suspected the audiences knew it too, but either they didn’t care, or they hoped for a genuine miracle in spite of who stood on stage.

To make matters worse, Jimmy Ray had been falling apart physically, as well as spiritually. All too often, he would experience nausea when he preached. A nagging cough, accompanied by a constant pain, plagued him and he didn’t know how much longer he could keep going. He barely scraped together a couple of hundred on a good weeknight, maybe five hundred on a Friday or Saturday night. Sundays, when he held two, maybe three services, he would occasionally top one thousand, yet it remained a pale reflection of the tens of thousands a night he pulled down in his glory days.

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Jimmy Ray could see those eager faces begin to lose focus, confusion replacing zeal, and he knew he needed to get it moving again if he hoped to pull in any kind of take. Besides, donations looked good this particular weekend and he wanted to keep the ball rolling.

“...And, as Je-sus-*ah* raised the whip made of cords-*ah*, He drove the unbelievers out of the temple!” Jimmy Ray screamed in his thick, East Texas accent. The crowd, revived by his antics, cheered in agreement. *Good, back in the swing of things.* “Brothers and sisters-*ah*, there

are folks like them right heah in this tent-*ah*! They don't believe God-*ah* can perform a miracle heah tonight, like y'all do!"

The crowd cheered and Jimmy Ray made it through the service. He managed to rake in a sizable fifteen hundred dollars—amazing for such a small, western town. Lester, his staff-of-one during these lean years, brought up the most eager and gullible and Jimmy laid his hands on them, praying like fury and—not waiting for the Holy Spirit to fell them—pushed them back so they fell into Lester's outstretched arms. The crowd ate it up, gulled by a conman, but uncaring of reality as long as they got their "show."

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Afterwards, Jimmy Ray sat in his trailer in his boxer shorts, in air-conditioned comfort, relaxing from his earlier exertions. Lester, a wiry, seventy-something black man, with a shock of luminous white hair, came in with the receipts.

"Sit yourself on down, Lester and have a drink," he invited and poured two fingers of Wild Turkey 101 into a second eight-ounce tumbler. "Did you know you can't call it bourbon 'less it comes from Kentucky?" he asked.

"Jus' 'bout ever' time y'all pour me one," Lester answered with a wry grin and cranked his old frame into the chair opposite Jimmy Ray. He lifted the glass almost reverentially, took a big sip and smacked his lips. "Praise de Lawd," he said, as he tilted the glass toward the ceiling, "but this some mighty fine holy water!"

"Amen," Jimmy Ray finished and clinked his glass against Lester's. "We did good tonight, Les; one of the best takes in months."

"Got that right," Lester agreed and then a thought hit him. "Oh yeah, some feller standin' outside wants to talk wif y'all. I told him y'all was restin', but he said he'd wait. Should I go chase him?"

Jimmy Ray doubted old Lester could intimidate a shy prairie dog. "What's he want? What sort of fellow is he?"

"Looks like a Injun to me. Real tall, with long, white hair. Blue eyes too. Damndest thang to see on a Injun. Don't look like the law or nothin', though."

"Well, you can go out in another five minutes and, if he's still there, tell him I'll talk with him. I'm curious as to what he wants."

The Indian ~

"Thanks for seeing me, Reverend Boetticker," the tall Indian said in a deep, unaccented voice. "I promise it'll be worth your while." He wore faded jeans, a blue, cotton work shirt and moccasins, his platinum hair caught up in a loose ponytail.

"You've got me intrigued, Mr. ah"

"Eyes-See-Far, but you can call me Fargo."

"Well, Mr. Fargo—"

"Just Fargo."

"... er, *Fargo* then. What is it you wanted to talk with me about?"

"It seems to me your little sideshow here has fallen on hard times."

Jimmy Ray held up a hand. "I'm not so sure 'sideshow' would be the best—"

"Let's not kid ourselves, Reverend. Faith healing is not the big-time business it once was. Plus, I can see you're having a crisis of faith."

Jimmy Ray went to raise his objection to such frank speech, but Fargo went on.

“Pardon my bluntness, reverend. I’m simply calling it as it is. However, it doesn’t have to be that way. How would you like to do some *real* healing?”

Jimmy Ray looked at the Indian-serious face of the man sitting opposite him. He didn’t look like he had tried to make a joke, but seemed completely serious.

“Okay, so let’s say, for the sake of argument, I’m interested. What are you proposing?”

“Let me work with you in your healing services.”

“Work *with* me? How?”

“You’d have to modify your approach a bit; bring them through the back into an adjoining tent where I can work. Then take them back a few moments later, healed.”

“What makes you think folks will buy that? If I hide it, they’ll think it’s a hoax. How will *that* work out?”

“Because the audience will see genuine healing. You’ll pick the really bad ones, heal those folks no other faith healer would go near. You’ll be a sensation.”

“Well, if you have such power, why come to me? You’re a tall, imposing-looking man with a great speaking voice. Hell, I should be working for you!”

“I must work behind the scenes. I assure you, my healing is genuine, but no one can witness the method.”

“So you say, but how do I know it’s genuine?”

The tall Indian leaned forward. “Would you like a demonstration?”

The skin between Jimmy Ray’s shoulder blades prickled in fear for some reason. If what this man said turned out to be true, it would certainly infuse new life into his sagging ministry for sure, but it raised myriad questions as to how he accomplished it.

“What did you have in mind?”

“Lester’s blind in one eye; I can see that. What if I could make him to see out of that eye again?”

Jimmy Ray’s eyebrows flew up. “I’d say we had a deal.” He opened the door of the trailer and called for Lester. In a few moments, the old black man poked his head in.

“Y’all wanted me boss?” he asked.

Jimmy Ray looked at his guest. The Indian rose from his seat and beckoned to Lester. “This man wants me to prove I can heal. Would you like me to fix your eye?”

Lester looked up at him with his one good and the other, milky-white one and then cut a glance over to Jimmy Ray. “I don’t see on harm in y’all tryin’. Go ahead.”

“Come with me.” The Indian guided Lester toward the trailer’s bedroom and Jimmy Ray made to follow. “No. you wait out here.”

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Jimmy Ray watched Lester follow the tall Indian into the bedroom. He closed the door. Jimmy Ray leaned forward, straining his ears for the slightest sound. Nothing. Ten minutes passed in silence and, when the door burst open, it startled Jimmy Ray.

“Pa-raise de Lawd!” Lester bellowed. “I’m startin’ to see out’n my bad eye!”

Sure enough, when Jimmy Ray looked, the eye—once a dead, milky color—looked much clearer. In fact, Lester’s other rheumy old eye looked clearer as well. They changed color, too, even as he watched—from dull brown to clear, amber irises, rimmed with gold—proving the Indian’s claim!

“Well, I’ll be a son of a bitch” he muttered under his breath.

“As you can see, I told the truth. So ... will we be working together?” the Indian asked.

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Weeks later, Jimmy Ray sat across the table from Fargo. Around them, the sides of the small tent luffed like sails in the constant wind of the desert night. At well past midnight, Jimmy Ray reflected on the fact he had never seen Fargo during the day. He wondered about that.

“You’ve decided to meet with me after all this time?” Fargo asked quietly.

“Yeah, probably only because I don’t think I can go on like this.”

“Why not? Your ministry is booming. You’ve been raking it in like there’s no tomorrow.”

“Yeah and that’s part of it. You never ask for anything. What’s your story?”

“I told you; I have reasons of my own.”

“That’s my point. Up ‘till now I haven’t wanted to know how the healings take place, but I can’t help but wonder what you get out of it? While we’re on the subject, just what *is it* that you do out back?”

“Are you sure you want to know?”

Jimmy Ray looked up into the Fargo’s eyes as if trying to fathom what lay behind them.

“Yeah, I want to know, dammit! Let’s stop doing this dance. I lost what little faith I might have had years ago. Call me cynical, but I realize my whole life’s been a sham; a show for the masses. Any real healing I expected to take place was to my bank account. Then you come along and do something even I can’t dismiss as a hoax. We bring in the sickest of the lot and they go home whole and chock full of faith in the Almighty, praise the Lord! Yeah, I want to know.”

“Did it ever occur to you that, once you know the truth, it may be harder to believe than *real* faith healing?”

“Is there even such a thing?”

“Faith healing, you mean?”

“Yeah. Are you trying to tell me that people are really healed through faith?”

“If you mean through so-called ‘healers’ like yourself, no, but you have no idea what can take place in the world, what wonders and horrors exist outside the range of what we can see and hear.”

“Get to the point, for crissake!”

Fargo leveled his disconcerting, cerulean gaze on the phony faith healer. “That’s a curious choice of words you just used.”

“Stop it, goddammit, and get to whatever point you’re trying to make!”

Fargo smiled. “When I came to you, I had decided to do something more with my wretched existence. You accepted my offer, yet you never asked why I wanted to work with you and, to be frank, I’m glad you didn’t. I don’t think I could have explained it to you then, but, I’ve had awhile to think it through and these are my reasons.

“One, I chose you because, like me, you have lost your faith. You also have advanced cirrhosis of the liver and stage four lung cancer. You didn’t see me sitting in the back of many of your meetings, for I was just another anonymous face, but I saw a man just going through the motions of living. That I could identify with, for it was pretty much the story of my life for the past century.

“Second, as corny as—”

“Wait a minute. Did you say ‘for the past century’?”

“Yes, I did and all will soon become clear. Second, as corny as it sounds, I just wanted to do some good. I could see you didn’t pick the really sick people in the tent because you could do nothing for them. Occasionally, I would waylay one or two in the parking lot and heal them.”

“You were healing some folks on the sly? What for?”

“To get word around that you made good on your promises.”

“But ... why?”

“Patience, Jimmy Ray, you’re about to find out.”

Jimmy Ray heaved a heavy sigh, resigned to allowing the enigmatic Indian to relate his tale in his own way.

“Okay, here it is. I’m a vampire.”

Jimmy Ray’s face creased into a wide smile. “Oh, this is rich. Get me all fired up and hit me with an urban legend. You’re as much a scam artist as I am!”

“Am I? Are you interested in knowing the truth, or not?”

Jimmy Ray sat back. “Okay, I’m game. I’ll play along. Proceed.”

“A long time ago, our tribe of vampires discovered the healing properties of our blood, quite by accident. If we only ingested about a pint or so of a victim’s blood, the usual amount of a routine blood donation, allowing the victim to drink of our blood moments later, it didn’t make them a vampire, but healed them of any disease they may have had in a very short time.” Fargo could see the skepticism etched on Jimmy Ray’s face. “When you send the sick ones back, I simply drink a pint or so from them so their disease is in my body. No disease can harm me. Then, I open a vein and let them drink some of my blood, which has neutralized the sickness, and it heals their diseases.”

“Why would they even consider drinking your blood?” Jimmy Ray asked.

“Because the myth of a vampire being able to mesmerize its prey is true. I simply put them under, after saying the proper faith-words first, and, when they wake up, they have no memory of the actual event, imagining it was their faith in God Almighty that performed the miracle. Even the small punctures over their jugulars are all but invisible in fifteen minutes.”

Fargo stopped his narrative and met Jimmy Ray’s gaze, as if challenging him to dismiss his explanation. Jimmy Ray stared back. A seed of doubt germinated, infecting his certainty that Fargo had been playing with him. Yet, the simple fact remained. *Something* happened to heal those who came forward.

“Well, you’ve given me a lot to think about,” Jimmy Ray admitted. “When I asked for the truth, I’m not sure what I expected to hear. Now, I don’t know what to think.”

“What *is* there to think? Consider this. We’re doing some good here. Sick people are going away, genuinely healed and people donate large sums to you for that gift. What’s wrong with that?”

“But it’s a fake, a fraud. God isn’t healing them.”

Fargo surprised Jimmy Ray by throwing back his head and laughing. “Is it a fraud, my friend? Maybe it isn’t God reaching down in answer to your call, but those we select go home healed. Then again, who’s to say *I’m* not the answer to their prayers? What we’re doing here isn’t a fraud; it’s *real*, not some sideshow act. There isn’t one other, so-called ‘faith-healer’ in the whole world who can make that claim.”

With a suddenness that startled Jimmy Ray, Fargo got up and left the tent.

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Jimmy Ray sat at the table with Lester, counting the night’s receipts. Lester, a man he knew to be in his mid-seventies at least, looked the picture of vibrant health. No one would guess him to be older than his early thirties. He now had a head of platinum blonde hair that seemed to glow from some inner light and startlingly clear, amber eyes. For the first time, Jimmy Ray could see how handsome Lester must have been in his youth, the very model of African, esthetic good looks.

He, on the other hand, looked terrible, his complexion sallow, almost gray, his hair thinned to the point one could see the shiny skin beneath. He had dropped fifty pounds, his loose skin sagging on his big frame, his once-florid features now looking haggard, skull-like.

A half-empty tumbler of bourbon sat on the table before him and a cigarette smoldered in the butt-filled ashtray next to it. He had been hitting the bottle heavily and smoking even more than before after hearing Fargo's bizarre diagnosis and explanation of how he healed.

The evening's receipts had been good, the take higher than ever. There seemed to be no bottom to the fountain of giving. After all, who wouldn't prefer to donate once and go home healthy than to see their hard-won savings vanish as the medical profession plied its allopathic, ultimately short-lived and futile treatments?

Why do I feel so bad about this? Fargo asks for nothing, Lester is the very model of health and thousands think I can do no wrong.

Even as he thought these things, Jimmy Ray knew the answer. All his life, all during his "career" as a faith healer, he had done nothing but dupe the public. He became the ultimate sideshow huckster, making a living based on the gullibility of his "marks." He had purveyed the miraculous, but delivered smoke and mirrors. For the first time in his phony life, he had the real goods, but, even now, he just performed sleight-of-hand tricks to mask the real reason for the "miracles" he offered, miracles that Fargo accomplished.

The inevitable stared him in the face on two fronts. He knew he would soon be too weak to go on. Yet, to continue, he needed to visit Fargo so the vampire could heal him. He could return to the early days of his ministry—a charismatic figure, the picture of vibrant health—dispensing healing in the name of the Lord. Fraudulent or not, he longed for that.

Why did he hesitate?

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Jimmy Ray visited the small tent Fargo occupied between meetings. "Fargo, you in there?" "Yes."

"Can I see you for a minute?"

"Did you come for healing?"

"Yes."

"Enter."

Jimmy Ray entered the tent. Fargo sat in a folding chair next to a simple canvas cot, reading a book, illuminated by a Coleman lantern that hissed out its light. The vampire looked up at him and that chilling, ice blue stare caused him to shiver.

"Why is it that you want to be healed?"

"What do you think? I don't want to die. Come on, let's get it over with! Do whatever it is you do!"

Though Jimmy Ray's voice vibrated with irritation, the look he gave Fargo had pleading in it as well.

"Will it hurt?" he asked in a small voice.

"No. I'll put you under before I ... do what I have to do." he gestured toward the cot. "Sit."

Jimmy Ray complied. "Now, what?"

"Just look into my eyes"

The Vampire ~

Jimmy Ray floated deep, down in a pool of pure, cool water, completely at peace for the first time in his troubled life—total, all encompassing, soul-soothing peace—and noted that his body held no pain at all. Above him, Jimmy Ray could see the sun shining strongly upon the surface toward which he rose. The light rippled and flowed down in liquid waves to touch his searching eyes. Though under water, he felt no urge to breathe and realized he hadn't been holding his breath. *If only this euphoric feeling could last forever.*

Suddenly, he sensed a presence below him. He twisted his head around to look into the Stygian depths below and his body rolled with it to move him into a facedown position. He saw something rise underneath him and couldn't make it out distinctly, but he plainly saw its large mouth and sharp teeth. His mind whirled in a panic. How could he escape what rose to meet him? Lethargy seemed to possess his body and he couldn't will his limbs to move. Even as he struggled, he felt his loins respond in a powerful arousal.

The shape below continued to rise toward him. He had no doubt of its malevolent purpose. It intended to attack him! Try as he might, he couldn't move his arms or legs. He knew he would die. In the next second, an inexplicably strange, feral consciousness suffused his body. Jimmy Ray ceased struggling and awaited this intruder. He saw the huge jaws ascend toward him, yet remained calm, unafraid, unconcerned. As his arousal intensified, he felt his head and body change—providing the tools he needed to fight—and he felt his own jaws gape to meet them.

“Huh!” Jimmy Ray's breath exploded from him as he started awake. His eyes popped open and he looked in confusion at Fargo's face above him.

“Wha ... where ...?”

“It's done. Our bargain's complete.”

“What do you mean? Why do I feel so funny?”

“You'll get used to it. I've left you some written instructions. My work is done here.”

Jimmy Ray sat up. “Wait! Used to what? What instructions?”

The Indian lifted a hand mirror from the table. “Look into this and you will know.”

As Jimmy Ray watched the tall Indian exit the tent, his mind whirled with unanswered questions. Remembering the mirror in his hand, he raised it in front of his face. A pair of ice blue eyes stared back at him and a shock of thick, platinum hair rested above his now, youthful countenance!

His scream followed Fargo out into the desert night.