

Dominion · *Barry Targan*

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

I Corinthians 15:52

HE PLAYED ABSENTLY with the tiny party hat in his hand, a hat such as a leprechaun in a movie cartoon might wear, a truncated cone of metallic green paper board with a flat silver brim and a black paper buckle. He pulled at the thin rubber band that would hold the hat in place and listened carefully to what the men were explaining. Sometimes he would nod in comprehension. Last night he and Sandra had gone to the Balmuth's New Year's Eve party. And now, January the first, suddenly a lifetime later, he listened to the two men, the accountant and the lawyer, explain what had happened.

What had happened was that Poverman and Charney, a small manufacturer of lightweight women's clothing, was ruined, embezzled into insolvency by Charney, who even now sat in Florida in the noonday sun. Morton Poverman sat here, at his chilling dining room table cloaked with the fabric of his loss, the neat stacks of paper—bills, letters, invoices, bank statements, memoranda, and packets of canceled checks—that chronicled Charney's wretched course, his wicked testament.

Poverman said, "And all this could have happened without my knowing? Amazing."

In a corner off from the table, Poverman's wife, Sandra, sat in a stuffed chair with her right leg raised up on an ottoman. Her leg, up to the middle of the calf, was in a cast, her ankle broken. "Oh," she said like a moan, a curse, a threat. "Oh God." It was all she could say now, though later, Poverman knew, she would say more, her vehemence strident, hot, and deep. For twenty years she had disliked Phil Charney, distrusted him always, his flamboyance, his fancy women and his fancy ways, the frivolous instability of his unmarried state. And now to be right! To be helplessly confirmed! She put her head back against the chair and closed her eyes as she clogged with rage nearly to fainting. "Oh God."

"Not so amazing," Friedsen, the accountant snapped. "You never looked at the books. You never asked a question." He slapped at some figures on a pad before him. "Five thousand dollars for the material for the chemises? When is the last time you made a chemise? Who buys chemises any more? And this?" He looked down at the pad. "The bias tape? Forty cases? and here," he jabbed at the entry with his finger, his nail piercing at the numbers like the beak of a ravening bird. "The printing bill on the new boxes? You weren't suspicious of that?" Friedsen was angry. He had done their books from the start, had managed them well. And now he held them in his hands

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like smudged ashes. Like dirt. Like an affront. If one was a thief, then the other was a fool.

"I never looked at the books," Poverman told him, though Friedsen knew that already, knew everything. "If I had looked, so what would I have known? I did the selling, Philly did the rest. For twenty-five years it worked okay."

"The bastard," Friedsen said.

Poverman could not find his own anger. Perhaps he was still too startled. What Phil Charney had done, he had done quickly, in less than a year altogether, but conclusively in the last quarter before the Christmas season, when their money moved about most rapidly and in the largest amounts. Friedsen, for his own orderly reasons, liked to see his client's fiscal shape at the end of the calendar year. He had gotten to Poverman and Charney two days ago and, hour by hour, he had tumbled ever more quickly through the shreds that Charney had made of the once solid company. Friedsen had gone to no New Year's Eve party. And this morning he had pulled the lawyer, Kuhn, to this dreadful meeting. It had not taken him long to explain and demonstrate the bankruptcy and its cause. Now Kuhn explained the rest, the mechanism of foreclosure and collection, the actual bankruptcy petition to the courts, the appointment of the referee, the slim possibility of criminal action against Charney. He went on, but to Poverman, the intricacies of his disaster like the details of his success were equally abstractions. He could not contain them. He could understand the results, of course. He could understand purposes and conclusions. Consequences. But he had always been the man in front, the one to whom you spoke when you called Poverman and Charney. Morton Poverman, a man of good will and even humor who had put in his working years directly, flesh on flesh, voice against voice, eye to eye. Let Friedsen and Kuhn do what must be done in their rigorous and judicial way. But let him do what he could do in his.

"So what's left?" he asked, first to one then the other. "Anything?"

Of the business there was not much. He would lose the factory and everything in it and connected to it, including the dresses, housecoats, and nightgowns already on the racks. There were two outlet stores, the largest, the newer store in Fairlawn Shopping Mall, he would have to close. The older store in the business strip just off of North Broadway, he could probably keep. Where he and Phil had begun.

Personally, there was the paid-up life insurance, fifty-thousand. That was safe. There was also about twenty thousand in cash. There were things like the cars and all that was in the house. The house itself might be a question. Kuhn said the house would depend on too many variables to discuss now. And there was the trust fund for Robert's education. Twenty-five thousand dollars. Nothing could touch that. There were some small investments,

mostly stocks. Those would probably have to be called in, for one reason or another. For one bill or another, like Friedsen's perhaps, or Kuhn's. Or merchandise for the store. At this point who could say?

"So? That's it?"

"That's about it," Kuhn said.

"Well, it's not nothing, is it?" Poverman said.

"No," Kuhn said. "It's not nothing."

Sandra Poverman sobbed high and quietly at the top of her voice, still unable to open her eyes to what she would have to look at forever after.

When the men left he did some small figuring of his own. Immediately there would be no Florida vacation this winter. Perhaps he would sell one car. The membership in the country club? What did he need that for, he didn't even play golf? He started to write down numbers—mortgage payment, property tax, homeowner's insurance, the car payments, but after these he could not say. He did not know what his heating bill was, his electricity, food, clothing. And the rest. Did Sandra? Did anyone in this house know such things? Probably not. He had earned, each year a little more, and in the last five years nearly, though not quite, a lot. Yesterday the future was all before him various with pleasures just about to come within his grasp, the long-planned trips to Europe, to South America the year after that, Hawaii. The house in the semi-retirement village at Seadale, a hundred miles north of Miami. Gone. Today only the future itself was waiting, empty and dangerous. The little store on North Broadway with the old lighting fixtures and the cracked linoleum flooring from twenty five years ago. That was waiting.

He had earned and they all had spent what they needed, and each year they had needed a little more. So now they would need less. They would make an accommodation. Tomorrow he would go to the outlet store and take stock and make arrangements. Begin. He was fifty-three.

The phone rang. It was Phil Charney calling from Miami. He knew that Friedsen would find him in the year-end audit.

"Morty, this is Phil. You know why I'm calling?"

"Friedsen was here. Just now. And Kuhn. They just left."

"Morty, this is so terrible, I can't say how terrible."

Sandra stiffened. "That's him?" she hissed. He nodded. "Give me." She motioned the phone to her. "Give me. I'll tell him something. I'll tell that filth something. Give me. Give me." She waved for the phone, her voice rising. He covered the mouthpiece. She tried to stand up.

"Morty, I'm sitting here weeping. I didn't sleep all night. Not for two nights. Not for three nights. I couldn't help it. I still can't. She wants and wants and I must give. *Must!* Who knows where it ends. There's not so

much money I can go on like this. Then what? But what can I do? *Morty*, what can I do, kill myself?"

"No, no, of course not."

He scrambled for his outrage like a weapon, but a weapon with which to defend himself and not attack. He was embarrassed for the man sobbing at the other end of the line, his agony. He summoned his hatred for protection, but it would not come. But he had always lacked sufficient imagination, and what he felt now was more the loss of his life-long friend, the sloop and gaiety of his presence as he would click about the factory, kidding the women on the machines, hassling in mocking fights the blacks on the loading platforms. He had even picked up enough Spanish to jabber back at the volatile Puerto Ricans. Even the Puerto Ricans Phil could make laugh and work.

That would be gone. And the fitting elegance, the Cadillacs and the women. The clothing and the jewelry. The flights to anywhere, to Timbuktu. He would miss the women. They were an excitement, these strenuous pursuits of Phil Charney's, these expensive pursuits. He was a tone, an exuberant vibrato that pushed into and fluttered the lives of anyone near him. Battered floozies or sometimes women much younger, but often enough recently divorced or widowed women ready at last for madder music, headier wine. Sandra Poverman condemned it, but her husband could afford his own small envy, safe enough within his wife's slowly thickening arms to tease her with his short-reined lust. That would be gone. Tomorrow he would go to work as he had known he would even before Friedsen, but now in silence with no edge of scandal or tightly-fleshed surprise.

"Filth. Murderer," Sandra shouted into the phone. She had gotten up and hobbled over to him. "Liar. Dog."

"She's right, Morty. She's right. I'm no better than a murderer."

"No. Stop this, Phil. Get a hold."

"Die," Sandra screamed. "Die in hell. Bastard. Scum." She pulled at the phone in his hand but he forced it back.

"Oh Morty, Morty, what I've done to you! Oh Morty, forgive me."

"Yes, Phil. OK. I do." He hung up before either could say more.

What more? That time had come to take away their life together, abandoning Phil Charney more severely than himself? But if had said that, would he be certain enough himself what he meant? That only the sorrow was left, enough of that to go around for them all, so what did the rest of anything else matter?

"What?" Sandra demanded. "What did he want? 'I do' you said. You 'do' what?" He told her. And then she screamed, raised her fists to her ears to block his words, but too late. She fell against him, staggered by the shaking

that was bringing down upon her the castles they had built. And now he had even taken from her the solid and pure energy of revenge.

The large, good, sustaining thing that happened in January was that his son, Robert, received the report of his Scholastic Aptitude Tests: 690 in Verbal, 710 in Math. In the achievement tests he did comparably well. The rest of the month, however, was not unexpected as what he had come to do grew clearer. The store had made economic sense as an outlet for the factory, a nice way of taking some retail profit right off of the top. But without the factory as the primary supplier, the store was just another women's clothing store, in competition everywhere. That situation would be impossible. But Morton Poverman had his accrued advantages from twenty-five years in both ends of the business. He knew enough to know where he could get over-runs, returns, seconds from other manufacturers, small producers such as he had been. What credit he needed, at least with some cash down, he could still get from them.

By the end of January he could at least begin to think seriously about his spring line; various enough and inexpensive as it was, he had a chance to exist. Not much more. But already the stock was coming into the storeroom in the back faster than he could handle it. Still, that was not so bad. Better more than not enough. He would put in the time to inventory and price and mark it all.

In January he had let go all the workers in the store, three of them, and handled the front himself. Only on Saturday, dashing back and forth from customer to cash register, was it too difficult. The stock he worked on at night. At first until nine o'clock and now until midnight. But it was coming together, the store brightening with variety and loading up with goods. And people were still shopping downtown, he could tell. He would get by on his low pricing and his long hours. And now he was bringing in a whole line of Playtex girdles and bras, all kinds of pantyhose and lingerie. In a year maybe he would bring in sewing materials, fabrics, patterns. In a year. Or two.

It was easier to say that twenty-five years ago when there was still a year or two or three or five to invest. And two of them to do it. But he could say it now, nonetheless, again and alone. His flame burned, steadily if low, even by the end of January when, like fuel for the flame, Bobby's SAT's had arrived. 690/710. Fuel enough. Then Morton Poverman would crush back in the large cardboard boxes under the dim, bare-bulbed lighting of the storeroom with his supper sandwich and the last of his thermos of coffee and think that though he was bone-weary and hard-pressed, he was not without intelligent purpose and a decent man's hope. More he did not ask. Or need.

February, March—a time for clinging to the steep, roughly-grained rock

face of his endeavor, seeking the small, icy handholds, the cracks and fissures of little victories to gain a purchase on, by which to lever himself up an inch: he picked up one hundred assorted dusters for nearly nothing, garbage from South Korea with half their buttons gone. He would replace the buttons. Kurtlanger's, the largest women's clothing store in the area, was dropping its entire line of women's nylons. It was not worth the bother to Kurtlanger's to supply the relatively few women who still wore separate stockings. It was all pantyhose now. For Poverman the bother could become his business. He stocked the nylons and put an ad in the newspaper saying so. Seeds for springtime. He put money into a new floor, found bags in Waltham, Massachusetts, at a ten percent saving, joined the Downtown Merchants Association protesting for increased side-street lighting and greater police surveillance. He checked three times a day the long-range weather reports. Would winter freeze him shut, March blow his straw house down?

At first Sandra had gone mad with anger calling everyone to behold her suffering. She called her friends and relatives, *Charney's* friends and relatives, the police. Worse than the stunning death of a loved one in a car crash or by the quick, violent blooming of a cancer in the lymph, where you could curse God and be done with it, this that Charney had done to her was an unshared burden, separate from life and others' fate, and unsupportable for being so. If we all owe life a death and perhaps even pain, certainly we do not owe it bankruptcy and humiliation. She cried out, howled, keening in the ancient way of grief and lamentation.

And then she dropped into silence like a stone.

She would hardly speak to him, as if his failure to share her intensity of anger had separated them. Or to speak to anyone. She grew hard and dense with her misery, imploded beneath the gravity of her fury and chagrin. At first she had fought with her simple terrifying questions: Who could she face? What was the rest of her life to be like? But then, far beyond her questions, she grew smaller yet until at the last she atomized into the vast un-specific sea of justice and worth, and there she floated like zero.

Late at night Poverman would come home and get into bed beside her and chafe her arms and rub her back. Sometimes he would kiss her gently on the neck as she had always liked. But she was wood. Still, he would talk to her, tell her the good things that were happening, his incremental progress, prepare her for the future. But she would not go with him. The future, like her past, had betrayed her, had disintegrated. She would trust in no future again.

Robert Poverman said to his father, "I'll come in after school. You'll show me how to mark the clothing, and that will be a help."

"No," his father said. "By the time you come in after school, get downtown, it would already be late. What could you do in an hour?"

"What do you mean, 'an hour'? I'd work with you at night. I'd come home with you. If I helped, then we'd both get home earlier."

"No. Absolutely not. You're in school. You do the school, I'll do the business. In the summer, we'll see. Not now, Sonny. Not now."

"Are you kidding, Dad? School's over. I'm a second semester senior. It's all fun and games, messing around. It's nothing."

"So do fun and games. Mess around. That's part of school, too. Next year you'll be in college, with no messing around. And what about your activities, the Photography Club, the Chess Club, Current Events Club, Student Council, French Club, the math team. Your guitar. And soon it's track season. So what about track?" Poverman knew it all, remembered everything.

"Dad, listen. I'm a third string miler. Sometimes they don't even run me. I struggle to break six minutes. And the clubs are strictly baloney. Nothing. Believe me, *nothing*. Let me help you, please. Let me *do* something."

"No. NO. If you want to do something, Sonny, do school, *all* of it just the way you always did. Do it the way you would have before . . . *this*." He smeared his hand in the air.

His son took his hand out of the air and kissed it. "Ok, Daddy," he said softly. "Ok. And I'll pray for you, too."

That night, turning the handle of the machine that ground out the gummed pricing tags, Poverman recalled what his son had said, that he would pray for him. The machine clicked on: size, stock number, price. What could that mean? But Poverman had enough to think about without adding prayer. He had ten crates of L'Eggs to unpack by morning, two dozen bathrobes that had arrived that day without belts, and all the leather accessories that he still had to stick these tags on. He turned the crank faster.

February, March, and now, somehow, April. Already the first wavelets of Easter buying had lapped at his shore, eroded slightly the cloth of his island. Good. Let it all be washed away in a flood of gold. Poverman walked about. He was working harder than ever, but accomplishing more. The hard, heaving work was mostly done, and there was a shape to everything now, his possibilities limited but definite, and definite perhaps because they were limited. So be it. He had started in quicksand and had built this island. The rest now was mostly up to the weather and the caprice of the economy. At least it was out of the hands of men like Phil Charney.

Poverman seldom thought of him even though he had to meet often enough with Friedsen and Kuhn. He had even made a joke once that he had to work for Charney twice, before and after. Friedsen had not laughed. But what did it matter? What mattered was what *could* matter.

It was six o'clock. He walked about in the crisp store, straightening a few boxes, clothes loosely strewn in bins, the merchandise hanging on the racks. Tonight, for the first time in months, he was closing now. Tonight he was going home early. To celebrate. Let the three hundred pairs of slaps from the Philippines wait. Let the gross of white gloves wait. Tonight he was going home to celebrate. Today, all on the same day, Robert Poverman had been accepted at Yale, Cornell, and the State University of New York at Binghamton, a university center. He had until May fifteenth to make his decision and send in his deposit. They would talk about it tonight. And everything.

Poverman turned out all the lights after checking the locks on the back door. He walked out of the store pulling the door to and double locking it. He looked up at the sign recently painted on the door, the new name he had decided upon: The Fashion Center. Nothing too fancy. Nothing too smart. But what did he need with fancy or smart? He had Robert Poverman of Yale or Cornell. *That* was fancy. *That* was smart.

After supper Poverman spread out on the diningroom table the various catalogues and forms and descriptive literature from the three colleges. He had also added to that, clippings from magazines and newspapers. They had seen most of it all before, when Robert had applied, but now it was to be examined differently as one seriously considered the tangibilities of life in Harkness Memorial Hall or Mary Donlon Hall. Here, this material, was what they had from which to read the auguries of Robert Poverman's future. Even Sandra leavened as they discussed (As always. Again.) what he would study. Which school might be best for what. Neither Poverman nor his wife knew how to make their comparisons. It would, now as before, be their son's choice. But who could refrain from the talking? The saying of such things as law or medicine or physics or international relations? Poverman again looked up the size of the libraries. Yale: 6,518,848. Cornell: 4,272,959. SUNY at Binghamton: 729,000. 6,518,848 books. How could he imagine that? Still, it was one measure. But what did Robert Poverman want? His interests were so wide, his accomplishments so great, what could he *not* decide for? What could he not illimitably cast for and catch?

They drank tea and talked. In two days Sandra would go for a small operation on the ankle to adjust a bone that had drifted slightly. Even with his medical coverage it would cost him a thousand dollars. But okay. Of course. Let her walk straight. Let their life go on. He had hoped that she would be able to help him in the store now that the Easter push was happening, but instead he had hired someone part time.

He looked at the pictures in the college catalogues, the jungle of glass tubes in the laboratories, the pretty girls intensely painting things on large

canvases, the professor standing at the blackboard filled with lines and numbers and signs like a magical incantation, smiling young men like Robert flinging frisbees across the wide Commons, the view of Cayuga Lake, the wondrous glowing cube of the Beinecke Library at Yale (*another* library, a *special* library for the rare books alone). Yale. Yale began to creep into Morton Poverman's heart. He would say nothing. What did he know? It was up to Robert. But he hoped for Yale. 6,518,848 books.

"I don't know," Robert said. "What's the rush?" He turned to Sandra.

"This is an important decision, right? And he's got a month. Think about it, that's the smart thing," he said to his son. "Sure. Don't jump before you look." He gathered up the evidence of what was to come, the scattered materials about one of Robert Poverman's schools, and put it all back into the reddish brown paper portfolio. He took the letters of acceptance and the letters to be returned with the deposit and put them elsewhere. He wished that he could have sent one back in the morning with a check enclosed, a down payment on his son's happiness, a bond, a covenant.

That night in bed he held his wife's hand.

"Which do you like?" he asked.

"Cornell, I think."

"Not Yale? Why not Yale?"

"The bulldog," she said. "It's so ugly. What kind of animal is that for a school?"

The weather was warm and balmy. Good for light cotton prints. Easter did well by him and spring, too. Business was beating through the veins of the store. Sandra's ankle was fixed for good now, mending correctly, though she would still need more weeks of resting it. This Sunday he had asked Robert to come to the store with him to help him catch up on some stock work. Also he wanted to describe what Robert would do in the store that summer, his job. Robert would work in the store and his pay, except for some spending money, would be put into a bank account for his use in college. And today Poverman would push his son, slightly, toward his decision. Time was now growing short. Ten days till the deadline. He would like to have this settled.

At three o'clock they sat down to some sandwiches that Sandra had packed for them.

"So? What do you think?" he asked his son. "Do you think you can last the summer? Listen, this is the easy part. The stock don't talk back. The stock don't complain. You think you can explain to a size twelve lady why she don't fit into a size ten dress? Hah? Let me tell you, sweetheart, everything to know is not in books." Then he reached across and stroked his son's softly stubbled cheek. His oldest gesture. "But Sonny, all of this is

nothing to know. What you're going to learn, compared to this, you could put all this into a little nut shell." Then, "Did you choose a college yet?"

Robert Poverman said, "I don't know."

"There's only ten days," his father said. "What can you know in ten more days that you don't know already? What do you want to know? Who can you ask? Sonny, maybe you think you have to be certain. Well let me tell you, you can't be certain of nothing. And with any one of these schools, you can't go so far wrong. You can't lose anyway."

"It's about college," Robert Poverman said. "I'm not so sure about that." His father did not understand.

"Maybe college isn't for me. Just yet, anyway. I don't know."

"Know?" his father said. "Know what? What is there to know? You think you want *this*?" he indicated the store around them. "Maybe you want to go into the Army? Shoot guns? Maybe you want to be a fireman and ride on a red truck?" He was filling out.

"Don't be angry, Dad. Please." But it wasn't anger ballooning in Morton Poverman now, it was panic.

"Then what are you talking about? *What* don't you know? You go to college to find out what you don't know. Ah," it occurred to him, "it's the money. Is that it? You're worried about the money, about me and your mother. But I told you, the money is already there. Twenty-five thousand and that will make interest. Plus a little more I've got. Plus what you'll earn. Don't worry about the money, Bobby, please. I swear to you, your mother and I are going to be okay that way. Look, look. The store is working out, Sonny."

"Daddy, it's not that. Maybe there's another way." They were silent.

"So?" Poverman finally asked. "What other way?"

"I've been thinking about religion." He looked at his father evenly. "There's a religious retreat down at this place in Nyack this summer, from the middle of July to the middle of August. I think maybe I should go there." He looked down away from his reflection in his father's brightening eyes.

"Why?"

"Yes, *why*. I need to find out the meaning of things. Not *what* I want to do or where I want to go to college, but *why*. Is that unreasonable?"

But what did Morton Poverman know about reasonableness? What he knew about was hanging on, like a boxer after he has been hit very hard.

"So what has this to do with college? Why can't I send in the deposit?"

"I might not go to college right away. I can't honestly say now. Or I might not want to go to one of those colleges. Where I was accepted. I might find out that I want to go to a . . . a religious type of college. I just don't know. I've got to think about it. I don't want you wasting the money."

If I change my mind, I can probably still get into a good college somewhere.”

“Money again,” Poverman roared. He stood. “I’m telling you, money is shit. I know. I’ve lost money before. That’s nothing.”

Driving home from the store Robert told his father that for the past six months he had been attending weekly meetings organized by the Society of the Holy Word for high school age people. Driving down Pearl Street, he pointed to a store with many books in the window and the name of the organization neatly lettered on the panes of glass.

“So everybody’s in business,” Poverman said as he drove by. “Do they belong to the Downtown Businessmen’s Association?”

“They’re not selling,” his son said.

“Oh no? Aren’t they? So what’s that, a church?”

“No, Dad. It isn’t a business and it isn’t a church. It’s a place for people to meet to discuss things.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“Religion, meaning in life, ethical conduct. The Bible, mostly. The Bible as the word of God.”

“Is that right? The Bible tells you what college to go to? Yale or Cornell? Amazing. I never knew. But then, there’s so much I don’t know.”

“Daddy, please. Don’t be angry. Don’t be bitter.”

“No? So what should I be, happy? For eighteen years I’m thinking Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and now my son tells me he’s thinking of becoming a monk. Wonderful. Terrific.” He drove faster.

“Ah Daddy, come on. It’s not that way at all. We sit and talk about how religion can give a full and wonderful meaning to our lives. It’s raised some important questions for me about my future. And it’s offered some possible answers and solutions.”

“Solutions? Why? You’ve got problems?”

“We’ve all got problems, Daddy.”

“Like?”

“Like our souls,” Robert Poverman said. “Like the fate of our immortal souls.”

“Souls? *Souls*? You’re eighteen and you’re worried about your soul? What about your body?”

But his son closed down then, as did he, each caught in the other’s orbit as they would ever be, but as silent now and awesomely distant as Venus to Pluto. And what could the earthbound Morton Poverman breathe in such empty space?

“Yes? Can I help you?” the tall man asked. He was very clean, scrubbed so that he was pink and white. He did not seem to need to shave, his skin as

smooth as thin polished stone, nearly translucent. His steel gray hair was combed straight back over his head. He wore small octagonal rimless glasses.

“Just looking,” Poverman said. He walked about in the converted store. Converted to what? All he saw were arrangements of books with such titles as *Satan in the Sanctuary* and *Which Will You Believe*. There were piles of small folded tracts and pamphlets on different color paper, pink, green, blue. Newspapers called the *New Word Times* and *Revelation Tribune*. On the walls were large, poster-sized photographs of people, mostly healthy young people, working at good deeds in foreign countries, in ghettos, in hospitals, in old folks homes. Even Poverman could quickly see that the young people in the photographs were shining with pleasure in the midst of the misery and needs they were serving, gleaming and casting light so that, behold, their light warmed and illuminated the rheumy-eyed old woman in the wheelchair smiling toothlessly; the bloated-bellied excema-scabbed children in the jungle clearing; the slit-eyed hoodlum sucking deeply on his joint of dope. All down the wall—growing, building, feeding, helping. Hallelujah.

Past the main room, behind a partition, was another room. He turned and walked back to the pink and white man.

“I’m Morton Poverman,” he said, and put out his hand.

“I’m George Fetler,” the pink and white man said, and took the hand.

“I’ve got a son, Robert Poverman. He comes here.”

“Oh yes. Robert. A wonderful boy. Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. I’m very pleased to meet you. You must be very proud of such a son.”

But Poverman did not have time for this playing. Even now, four blocks away in his own store, United Parcel trucks would be arriving with goods he must pay for and he had not yet made the deposit in the bank that would cover them, and Francine Feynmen (now working fulltime) would be on two customers at once (or worse, none), and the phone would ring with the call from Philadelphia about the slightly faded orlon sweaters. And what had he come here for, this man’s opinions?

“Yes,” Poverman said. “Proud.” But he did not know what to say, nor what to do. What he *wanted* to do was dump five gallons of gasoline over everything—the books, the newspapers, the green pamphlets—and put a match to it. But there were too many other empty store fronts downtown for that to matter. So he was stuck.

George Fetler said, “You’re probably here because you’re worried about Robert.”

“Yes. That’s right. Exactly.” Poverman beat down the small loop of gratitude.

“Robert’s such a thoughtful fellow. He’s quite uncertain about college

now, about his future. I suppose you and Mrs. Poverman must be concerned.”

“Yes,” Poverman said again, eagerly, even before he could stop himself. Oh this guy was smooth. He was a salesman, all right, as soft as Poverman was hard.

“You’re probably upset with the Society of the Holy Word, too.”

Poverman clamped his lips but nodded.

“You must think that we’ve probably poisoned your son’s mind.”

Poverman nodded again. What else?

“Let’s sit down, Mr. Poverman, and let me tell you about us. Briefly. You’re probably anxious to get back to your business.”

Oh good, good. Oh terrific. All his life Morton Poverman wished he could have been so smooth with customers—buying, selling, complaints, but with him it had always been a frontal attack. A joke, a little screaming or a quick retreat into a deal for twenty percent off. But never like this, quiet, slick as oil, full of probabilities, the ways so easily greased. Yes yes yes where do I sign?

He took Poverman into the back room. Half the room was set up like a small class, rows of metal chairs facing a small table and blackboard. The other half of the room was soft chairs drawn around in a circle. They sat there.

George Fetler described simply and directly what the Society of the Holy Word did as far as Robert Poverman was concerned. On Thursday evening it conducted, right here, right in these soft chairs, discussions about religion generally, Christianity specifically, and most of all the idea that the Bible was the exact word of God.

“That’s it?” Poverman asked.

“Let’s be frank. Let *me* be frank. If you believe that the Bible is the exact word of God, then that can certainly raise some important questions about how you lead your life henceforth. I think this is what has happened to Robert. He came to us six months ago with two friends. I’m sure he came because his two friends, already Christians, wanted him to come. Like many before him, he came more as a lark, skeptical and doubting. But he read the Bible and he discussed what he read and the questions arose, Mr. Poverman, they just arose. And Mr. Poverman, I just wish you could see him, his openness, his honesty, his intelligence. It is very gratifying. Very.” Fetler sat back and locked his hands together in front of him.

“You’ll pardon me for asking,” Poverman asked anyway, “but how does this all get paid for?”

George Fetler smiled, unlocked his hands, and stood up. “Here. This will explain it in detail.” He went out to the tables in the front and returned with a booklet. “This will tell you what you probably want to know, including a

financial statement. The Society of the Holy Word is but one arm of the Church of the Resurrection, Incorporated. We're based in Chicago. We've got our printing operation there and headquarters for our evangelical units. The Church also has two colleges, one in San Diego, the other . . ."

"In Nyack?"

"Yes. Has Robert mentioned that? He's thinking of going on our summer retreat there."

"But sooner or later, it all comes down to them—what do you call it?—coming out for Jesus? Right?"

"One need not declare for Christ, but that is what we hope will happen." George Fetler and Morton Poverman were coming closer now to what they thought of the other. "Yes. That is what we hope and pray for."

"Why?"

"It is," George Fetler said, not such a soft guy anymore (no sale here), "the only way to avoid the everlasting torments of Hell."

Morton Poverman had never been able to handle the Christian's Hell. It looked to him like the answer to everything and to nothing. And what did they need it for, this endless knife at the throat? Besides, about Hell—here, now, right away—he had his own ideas. No. Not ideas. Necessities.

His week went on, all his life become a tactical adventure now, no crease in it without its further unexpected bend, no crack that might not open up suddenly into an abyss from which he could not scramble back. This is what he slept with now. Battle. War.

On Thursday evening at seven o'clock he went to the discussion meeting at 183 Pearl Street, to the Society of the Holy Word. And he had studied. From the array of pamphlets and tracts on the tables in the Society's store he had taken copiously. And he had read them, late at night in the back of the store, later than ever, he had read slowly in the bad light, bent to this new labor as the unopened cartons piled up on each other and each morning Francine Feynman would complain of empty this and unreplaced that.

THE BIBLE SAYS YOU HAVE SINNED!

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God (*Rom. 3:23*)

THE BIBLE SAYS YOU DESERVE HELL!

For the wages of sin is death: but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (*Rom. 6:23*)

THE BIBLE SAYS YOU HAVE A CHOICE!

And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve . . . (*Joshua 24:15*)

THE BIBLE SAYS JESUS DIED FOR YOU!

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (*Rom.5:8*)

THE BIBLE SAYS YOU MUST BELIEVE JESUS!

For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (*Rom.10:13*)

THE BIBLE SAYS YOU HAVE ETERNAL LIFE!

And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life. (*I John 5:11*)

Poverman got himself a Bible and checked it out. It was all there.

There were ten people at the Tuesday night meeting, all as young as Robert or a little older, all regulars, except for the new member, Morton Poverman, who was introduced all around. Also attending were George Fetler and the Reverend Julius Meadly, who more or less conducted things.

It went well enough. After Poverman explained to them that he had come out of interest in his son's interest and his talk with Mr. Fetler, the discussion picked up where, apparently, it had left off last week.

The point of concern, always a tough one Reverend Meadly told them, was whether those born before Christ, before, that is, the opportunity to receive Christ, would go to Hell. The Reverend drew the distinction between Pagans, who had not had the chance to embrace Christ, and the Heathens, those born since Christ who did and do have the opportunity but reject it. Heathens were unquestionably doomed to Hell, but about Pagans there was still some serious debate, for surely Abraham and the Prophets were in Heaven already, and Moses as well as Adam.

They all discussed at length the fairness of this, that those who had had no choice should be so grievously punished. The Reverend said that indeed the ways of the Lord were not always apparent to Man, and they were certainly unfathomable, but it did no good to question what was *not* going to happen to the Pagans, and one should concentrate instead on the glory of what *was* going to happen to the Saved. And he concluded, "You know, sometimes I think that the last chapter and verse isn't completed. That on Judgment Day, God in his infinite wisdom and mercy will raise up even the unfortunate Pagans." They closed on that high note. Through the evening Robert Poverman had said nothing.

Driving home he said, "What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?" his father said.

"You know what I mean. Why did you come tonight?"

"What's the matter, suddenly it's not a free country. A man can't worship how he wants anymore?"

"Cut it out, Dad. You know what I mean."

"You go to this place because you've got questions, right?" Poverman said. "Well, I've got questions too."

“Like what?”

“Like have you declared for Jesus, or whatever you call it?”

“No.”

“Are you going to?”

“I don’t know. I can’t say.”

“Do you believe in all that . . . stuff?”

“I think about it.” They drove on in silence. “Are you going back? To another meeting?” Robert asked.

“Yeah. Sure. I still got my questions. What about you? Are you going back?”

Robert did not answer that. “You’re not sincere,” he said.

But there, Morton Poverman knew, without any doubt at all, his son was wrong.

He hacked at his store and grew bleary with fatigue. What he sold in front he brought in through the back and touched everything once, twice, thrice in its passage. Slips, underwear, dresses, bandanas, now bathing suits and beach or pool ensembles. From passing over all that plastic, his fingertips were sanded as smooth as a safecracker’s. And doggedly he studied the Word of the Lord. Bore up his wife. Bore his son.

At the second meeting that Poverman attended, Fetler understood. Robert Poverman, once so animated and involved, would not participate, not in the presence of his father. And the blunt intensity of his father’s questions caused the Reverend Meadly to veer about, put his helm over frequently to avoid the jutting rocks of Morton Poverman’s intent, not that he was making an argument. He was polite enough, whatever that cost him. But his questions, they were so fundamental.

Almost all of the group had been together for months and had already covered the ecclesiastical ground that was new to him. It was not fair to the group to have to pause so often while the Reverend Meadly (the soul of patience) answered in detail what they all had heard and discussed before. This is what Fetler explained to Poverman after the meeting.

“You’re throwing me out?” Poverman said. “You’re telling me to go elsewhere with my soul in danger of eternal perdition?” He had studied well. He had the lingo, like in every line of work.

“No no no,” Fetler said, growing more pink than ever. Close to him, Poverman could see the blue fretwork of his veining. His whole face was like a stained-glass window. “That would be unthinkable, of course. What I had in mind was our Sunday afternoon group for older people.” Poverman shook his head at Sunday afternoon. “Or private instruction,” Fetler followed up. Perhaps you could come to us, the Reverend Meadly or me, on another evening? Then we could give you a ‘cram course,’ so to speak?”

“Ok,” Poverman said. They agreed on Tuesday night.

On Tuesday night Poverman met with Reverend Meadly and after two hours of explaining—starting with Genesis (oh it would be a long time before he would be able to rejoin the young group already well into Corinthians), Poverman leaned back and said,

“But it’s all faith, isn’t it? All this reasoning, all this explaining, if you’ve got the faith that’s all that matters.”

“Yes,” the Reverend said. “Faith more than anything else.”

“And if you get the faith, then what?”

“You must declare it. You must stand forth and join God through His Son, Jesus Christ.”

“Yes, but how? I mean could I just say it to you now? Is that enough? Would God know?”

“If you declare yourself through us, the Church of the Resurrection, there are certain formalities.”

“A ceremony?”

“Yes, that’s right. You must answer certain questions, take certain vows before a congregation.”

“What about this?” Poverman produced one of the pamphlets that the Society of the Hold Word published. “Wherever I look, I’m always on trial. Some trial. Listen.” He read the fiery, imprescriptible indictment through to the end. “Verdict: Guilty as charged. Appeal: None. Sentence: Immediately eternal, conscious, tormenting, separational death in a burning lake of fire and brimstone.”

“Well?” Reverend Meadly asked. Nothing else.

“So that’s it for me? For Robert?”

“Unless you embrace the Lord Jesus as your Savior, that is your fate and Robert’s fate, yes.”

“No either/or huh?”

“Either Love or Damnation,” Reverend Meadly said. Kindly.

On Thursday Poverman showed up at the meeting. Fetler called him aside. “I thought we agreed that you would work privately?”

“I wouldn’t say a single word,” Poverman promised. “I’ll listen. I’ll watch. I can learn a lot that way, and I won’t interrupt. Not one word.”

But there were no longer any words to say, for Morton Poverman had decided that at long last the time and event had come for God to stand forth and defend Himself, make good his terrible threat and vaunt or scam. He had paid enough with good faith and would not bargain now. He had reached his sticking price. Take it or leave it. What was his, was his, and what belonged to his son, the legacy of his life, for all his—Poverman’s—own clumsiness on this earth, *that* he would not let be stolen easily. And whosoever should raise his hand or voice against his son must answer for that to him.

Thus girded, midway through the meeting Poverman suddenly stood up. The Reverend Meadly had just finished an intricate restatement of Paul's words:

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

Poverman stood up and said:

"Me too. I have seen the way and the light. I want to declare for Jesus." There was commotion.

"Mr. Poverman!" George Fetler said, standing too, quickly in his alarm.

"Now," Poverman said. "Right now. The spirit is in me." He stepped away from the group of seated young people and then turned to them. "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ" he intoned, trying to get it right. One of the group clapped. "I've been thinking and so this is what I want to do, thanks to Reverend Meadly." Reverend Meadly smiled, but Fetler curdled, his pink now blotched redness.

"So what's next?" Poverman asked. "What do I got to do?"

There was a happy excitement in the young people at this immanence of spirit, all the thick words of the past months come true like a miracle. Fetler urged a later time, a more appropriate time for the declaration, but "Now," Poverman insisted. "Between now and later, who knows what could happen? And *then* what about my soul?" He looked at Fetler. "Now."

Robert Poverman, stiff and frozen, watched his father don white robes (cotton/polyester—60/40, not silk) that drooped to the floor and take in either hand a large Bible and a heavy brass crucifix. The classroom was turned into a chapel, the lights dimmed. The Reverend Meadly took his place behind the table. From a drawer in the table he took out a paper.

"Wait," Poverman said. "I want my son Robert to stand next to me. He should see this up close." He motioned Robert to him.

The Reverend said, "You must be delivered to Christ by one who has already received Him. Robert has not yet."

"That's okay," Poverman said. "Let Mr. Fetler deliver me. I just want my son to stand by. This is a big thing for me." And so it was arranged, George Fetler, crimson and his eyes like thin slivers, on Poverman's right, Robert Poverman, cast into numb darkness, on his father's left. "Okay," Poverman said. "Let's go."

It was simple enough. The Reverend would read statements that Poverman would repeat. After a brief preamble in which Reverend Meadly explained the beauty and importance of this glorious step toward Salvation, the ceremony began.

“Oh Lord I have offended thee mightily,” Poverman echoed the Reverend Meadly flatly.

“Oh Lord I am an infection of evil that I ask you to heal and make clean,” he went on.

“Oh Lord I ask you to break open my hard and selfish heart to allow your mercy into it that I might learn love.”

“Oh Lord I have made the world foul with my pride.”

“Oh Lord I am a bad man and stained with sin.”

“No,” Robert Poverman said out of his darkness.

“Sha,” his father said. He motioned for the Reverend Meadly with his cross to go on.

“Daddy, please. Stop this. Don’t.” He wept.

“I am an abomination in Your eyes,” the Reverend read from his paper.

“I am an abomination in Your eyes,” Poverman said after him.

“NO!” Robert Poverman shouted. Demanded. “NO!” He stepped forward, but his father held out his Bible-loaded hand like a rod.

“Don’t you be afraid,” he said to his son. “Don’t you worry *now*, Sonny,” he said. “I’m here.” And unsheathing the great sword of his love, he waved it about his balding, sweaty head and advanced upon his Hosts in dubious battle. And fought.

Not without glory.