



The Preacher

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ANNE DUNN WAS SCRAPING down the grill, getting ready to close up the Skyway Drive-In’s snack bar. The doors were locked and the snack bar’s lights were already off, but images still flicked up on the screen. She looked out the door and

could see the couples in the closest row of cars making out, but she guessed the little kids, up front in the station wagons and big family sedans, had probably fallen asleep; it was almost 1:00 a.m. and the double-bill creature-feature was drawing to a close.

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Normally, Karen worked the snack bar with her, but she’d called in sick at the last minute. Anne wasn’t mad; Karen had confided in her that she felt like a broken typewriter—Anne guessed her friend had skipped two periods in a row. Either she was telling her boyfriend or her parents. Anne knew she wouldn’t feel like working if she had that sort of news to share. Jimmy, who normally did cleaning and maintenance, had been pressed into service on the till, so at least Anne wasn’t working alone.

At twenty, he was older than Anne or Karen, but you’d never know it from how he acted. About six feet tall, he wore his dirty-blond hair flipped up in the front and a DA (Duck’s Ass) in back. He’d just taken the trash out back and sauntered in through the back door as the phone rang. He picked it up.

“Skyway Drive-In, home of the foot-long tube steak. Showing nothing but pornography seven nights a week,” he said, winking at her and grabbing his crotch, lewdly. Anne rolled her eyes and was about to say something when she saw Jimmy go pale and a serious expression appeared on his face. “Oh! Sorry Mr Lancaster . . . Yes, sir, that was a stupid thing to say, sir. No, sir, I wasn’t thinking. It’s just . . . I only . . . Yes, sir, I’ll put Anne on.” He handed her the phone with a look of relief. It was hard not to laugh.

“I hope that baboon hasn’t been

giving you any trouble,” Mr Lancaster said. Anne made a non-committal sound and he continued, “How did it go, Anne? Good night?” She turned around as she spoke, and her high, blonde ponytail bobbed. Jimmy looked her over as he grabbed the mop and bucket. She was wearing her jeans under a white boy’s tail-shirt; he liked her shape. She was a good six inches shorter than him—the perfect height, he thought.

“So-so, Mr Lancaster,” Anne replied. “It wasn’t a big crowd. There were more families than couples, and I think the parents must have fed the kids before they came.” Anne knew there was another big strike on, and it was lucky there was anyone there at all. The people couldn’t afford burgers and hot dogs at concession prices, but she didn’t say that to her boss.

“What was the take?” Mr Lancaster asked. Anne gestured to Jimmy and he pushed the button on the register to get the total. He handed the tape to her.

“I haven’t had time to count the drawer, yet, but the register says we made \$42.65 in sales.” On the other end of the line, she could hear Mr. Lancaster swear.

“Well, just clear out the cash drawer and put the register tape in the deposit bag, and lock it in the bottom drawer of my desk,” Mr Lancaster told her. “I’ll check it tomorrow.”

Jimmy was mopping the floor, lazily, the last chore before they closed. Anne gathered the bills and change from the



till, put them in the zippered canvas bag, together with the tape, and locked it in the drawer in Mr Lancaster's office. When she came back out, Jimmy was leaning on the mop.

"So, how you getting home?" he asked her. "Don't you normally get a ride with your friend?" Karen's folks usually let her have their car, and Anne relied on her to get home safe; it was the only reason her parents let her work this late.

"I guess I'll have to walk," Anne said, not relishing the idea.

"Ah, don't be a dope," Jimmy said. "You can ride with me." Jimmy had a souped up '32 coupe he called the Passion-Pit; it was purple, with whitewall tires. His friend Larry had done red pinstripes

on the doors and fenders for him. Jimmy had frenched the taillights and chopped the roof, lowering it a good four inches, giving the car that lean-and-mean look. He'd put Thrushes on it to make it roar, and he told the little kids that hung around the concession stand to admire it, and that he drag-raced.

Anne didn't buy that; nobody in Durrand drag-raced, really, not on the street. "I'm wise to your lies," she told him once when he was bragging about it to some twelve-year-olds. Still, an offer was an offer, and it would take her an hour to walk home in the dark.

"OK," she said. "I guess a ride won't hurt. Thanks." She locked up—Mr Jackson never let boys have the keys to the snack bar—and they walked over

to his wheels. The Good night! Drive safely! message was playing up on the screen. Jimmy honked the horn to let the projection guy know they were leaving. He'd lock the gates when he was done rewinding the last reel. Annie waved up at the booth before she got into Jimmy's car.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing at the pivoting eight-ball attached to the wheel on the upper left side.

"A necker-knob, cutie," Jimmy said. She gave him a look she usually reserved for annoying ninth grade boys.

"I don't think so. You keep both hands on the wheel, Clyde!" Jimmy grinned, and he spun his tires on the gravel as he pulled into the queue of departing cars. Anne turned on the radio. Jimmy hadn't tuned it to any of the Durrand stations or even to one of the stations from York or across the border, in the States. The Durrand stations were 900 and 1150 on the dial. In between you usually could only hear static and distant, indistinct voices. Whatever station this was came through loud and clear, though. It was playing some good songs—rhythm and blues, and Top 40 mixed up.

"This here is the Preacher, 1090 on your radio dial, my children," the DJ said. His gravelly, raspy voice was wild—nothing like the local radio hosts. "I'm gonna bring you the word here aaaalllll night!"

"Who's that?" Anne asked Jimmy, but before he could answer, the radio did.

"I am the Preacher," the DJ said. "You got a direct line to Jay-Zus, children. Let's hear from our first caller."

He even sounded like a revival preacher, Anne thought. It was different from anything she'd heard before on the radio. He bantered with a girl on the line before spinning her request—Screamin' Jay Hawkins, "I Put a Spell on You," one of the wildest songs Annie knew.

"A guy who calls himself the Preacher spinning the devil's music?" Annie said, laughing. "That's so crazy, Jimmy!"

"It's this station in Mexico," Jimmy said. "XERF. It's, like, totally illegal, so powerful it blasts everywhere. The DJ's name is Jay Zusskind, but he calls himself Jay-Zus the Preacher. He's the wildest, and spins the best wax." Anne heard Jimmy, but she was much more focused on the Preacher.

"I can't stand when you put me down, Lord have mercy!" The Preacher said over Screamin' Jay. "Sweet Jay-Zus takin' you home!"

Jimmy pulled out of the Skyway's drive, turned right onto Highway 8, then left onto Grey's Road, a block away. Anne was listening to the radio, so he tried to slip his arm along the back of the seat and onto her shoulder.

"I told you, none of that!" Anne said. "Keep your hands on the wheel." She swatted Jimmy's arm away—not too hard, but enough to let him know she meant it.

"Just a little sugar, Sugar," Jimmy

tried his “little-boy” look—his lower lip sticking out in a pout.

“Just because I let you drive me home doesn’t mean I like you,” Anne said. “How many girls have you been with since I started working at the Skyway? I’m not about to be another notch on some greaser’s comb.” Jimmy had to admire her resistance to his obvious charms; it made her much more interesting. He turned onto Nelson Street and peeled away from the red light as the Preacher came back on, introducing a song by The Essex.

“It sure is easier said than done, children!! Hallelujah!” he intoned over the opening notes.

Jimmy reflected that, usually, if the fact that he was older with his own apartment and a car didn’t loosen the thighs under a skirt, the way he drove did. He knew lots of girls got a thrill from speed and the roar of the Passion-Pit’s engine. But Anne pushed his hand away as he slid it across the seat toward his knee.

“Cool your tool, fool!” she said. “I want to listen to the radio.”

“You need to listen to the words of Saint Ricky Nelson, my child,” the Preacher announced as the song came on: “Fools Rush In.”

Jimmy gave his best, lopsided grin. It had always worked before, but Anne’s eyes were fixed on the radio dial. He sighed and turned into the intersection with the highway; maybe some real acceleration would

loosen her up. At first Anne didn’t notice the speed; it wasn’t until she felt her butt sliding across the seat as Jimmy took the traffic circle fast that she looked up.

“Where the hell are we, Jimmy?” Anne asked, looking around, alarmed. They were on the big highway, heading toward York.

“The wise man knows,” the Preacher said. “Gotta open up your hearts to Joy-Zus, children! MmmmHmmm... You listen to the Preacher.”

“Come on, I thought we’d take the long way home,” Jimmy said. “It’s a beautiful view from the top of the bridge.” Sometimes it was; sometimes it smelled like rotten eggs from the steel mills. It depended on whether they were burning the tail gas from the coke ovens or just letting it off—like Durrand was taking a huge fart, Jimmy thought to himself.

“You clown!” Anne said. “My parents will kill me if I’m not home soon. It’ll take an hour to drive all the way round Lake Macassa!” Jimmy grinned; he knew it would. It gave him a whole hour to persuade Anne to loosen up a little.

“Oh, relax chicky! If you’d walked home it would have taken longer than that! Just enjoy the ride,” Jimmy said. She was a little cheesed at him, only because he’d assumed rather than asked her. To be honest, the delay meant she could listen to the radio, and she wanted to hear more from this Preacher guy.



Jimmy tossed a dime into the automatic toll collector, then put the coupe in gear and floored it. The speedometer needle moved up the dial, past 65 mph and edged toward 70, as they raced up the almost deserted bridge.

At the top, Anne looked to her right; she could see Wellington Square’s streetlights, curving along the shoreline, and York away in the distance. The cities made the sky glow above the inky depths of Lake Ontario. The radio blared “Surf City” as they reached the crest of the bridge and the road dropped away on the far side. For a moment they were weightless, airborne, before the wheels slammed back down

hard. Jimmy was grinning.

“Hear the gospel of Rock’n’Roll: ALL my children gotta have some fun!” Preacher told them.

Jimmy laughed like a little kid on a roller coaster and Anne rolled her eyes.

“Watch it,” she said. “Go slower!” But, secretly, she enjoyed Jimmy’s controlled recklessness. Her father never drove like this. None of the boys she’d been on dates with would have dared drive their parents’ cars this way.

On the far side of the bridge, Jimmy veered off onto North Shore Boulevard and burned some rubber as they got to the end of the ramp. Up ahead the road twisted a bit and, even though he was



sure he could take it at speed, there were usually cops around; the rich people who lived there hated joyriders with a passion, and Jimmy didn't think getting a ticket would impress Anne that much.

The Preacher was laying down some patter, pushing something called Florex. "Jay-Zus wants you guys to get some Zing for your Ling," he said.

Anne looked at the radio, confused, and then at Jimmy; he patted his crotch and grinned.

"Long Ling, you know?" he said. Anne punched his arm, and the car swerved a little. Coming around a bend in the road, a vista opened up across Lake Macassa; they could see the lights

of the city and flames rising up from the big blast furnaces reflected in the still waters.

"Wow, it's pretty," Anne said. Durrand looked very different from this side of the lake. The smoke from the factories and steel mills glowed as it rose up into the dark sky, and she could see the lines of lights, like glowing pearls, where the roads snaked their way up the Mountain. "Wouldn't it be nice to live here, with the lake just coming right up to your backyard?"

"I don't know," Jimmy said. "You might wake up one morning and find a dead gangster washed up in your yard." He laughed.

"Eewww! You're disgusting," Anne said. "What do you mean?"

"They say Vinnie Rizzo ended up taking a swim in Lake Macassa," Jimmy said, referring to a long missing mobster. "A swim wearing cement shoes." He laughed at his own joke, but Anne turned the radio up louder and gave him a look.

"That's so not funny."

Out of the speaker the opening notes of "In the Still of the Night" came on. Finally, the Preacher was playing a make-out song.

Jimmy tried once again to put the moves on her.

"Quit it!" Anne said.

"You're the one I've been searching for, Anne," Jimmy said. It was a line that had always produced results for him before.

"That's your problem, daddy-o. I'm not playing back-seat bingo with you," Anne replied. It might have been his best bait, but it was clear Anne wasn't biting. Jimmy was subdued for a whole five minutes after that. They came up to Wabasso Park, where a few cars were parked, and Jimmy started to slow down. With the view across the Lake, the parking lot there was a favorite late-night destination for hotrodders from all around. The mist on the windows of the other cars reflected the Passion-Pit's headlights with a pearly gleam as they drove by. One look over at Anne told him a stop at Inspiration Point was not to be, however, and he sighed.

They drove on in stony silence for a few minutes. "Rhythm of the Rain" came on.

"Got to mend your ways my child, you been a fool," said the Preacher. "No pitter-patter of little feet unless you listen to the Preacher!"

"You know, you're probably the first girl who got a ride in the Passion-Pit that didn't put out," he told her, admitting defeat at last. It occurred to him that everything the Preacher had said so far had been mirrored in the car that night. That seemed crazy, though.

"Even Mickey Mantle strikes out sometimes, big boy," Anne said. "I'm just not looking for a boyfriend."

Jimmy was going to say something glib, but he hesitated. Hadn't the Preacher just told him to mend his ways.

"Why not? You're going to graduate next spring. Don't you think it's time to get serious with someone?" Jimmy was surprised at himself for asking something so serious.

"I don't know," Anne said. It was the first time Jimmy had ever said anything halfway sensible in the two years she'd known him, and it made her pause a little. "I was hoping to go to university."

"You don't look like a nerd," Jimmy said, flippantly. "Or you're just planning on getting your M-R-S degree from some college boy?"

"What's wrong with college boys?" Anne asked, and looked upset. Jimmy didn't answer for a minute; he was thinking, comparing Anne's reactions

to the last two things he'd said. It was interesting.

Leslie Gore's *"She's a Fool"* drifted from the speaker. *"Little girl don't know what she's missing!"* the Preacher said out of the speaker. *"Sweet Jay-Zus, gonna send some in-spir-a-tion!"* Jimmy knew what he had to say next.

"My mom wanted me to go to college," Jimmy told Anne. There was a different tone in his voice now. The cockiness was gone. "After she died I lost interest. Latin and calculus just didn't seem that important any more, you know?"

Anne swallowed. Her grandma had died when she was little and Grandpa Brody a couple of years back, but losing your mother had to be terrible, she thought.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I never knew."

"It was pretty hard," Jimmy admitted. "Especially when my father hooked up with the lady next door. He sold our place and told me to hit the road."

"Oh Jimmy!" She actually turned down the radio a little. "That's why you didn't finish school?"

Lou Christie began singing. *"Got one face to laugh, another to cry, children!"* the Preacher said, quietly. *"You hear the word, now."*

Jimmy gave Anne a sheepish look. "Mom would be mad. I took part of the insurance money I got and bought the Passion-Pit, fixed her up. There was enough left to afford first and last month's rent on a basement apartment. Maybe I was wrong,

though; she really wanted me to do something useful."

"What are you going to do then? You can't work at a drive-in forever." The Silhouettes came on the radio.

"You need that dough, daddy-o. Get a job!" the Preacher said from far away Mexico.

Jimmy laughed, uneasily, as if his future had been weighing on him. "That's only in the summers," he said. "Last winter I worked up at a Christmas tree farm in November and December. Cutting the trees, bundling them up, waxing the stumps. Hard work but you're too busy to think much. I liked it." Imperceptibly, he'd slid his hand down onto Anne's jean-clad thigh. He caressed it, gently.

"Cut it out, buster!" She said, moving away from him against the door. "Was that all a line? Did you make it up?"

"No, but . . . it's the first time you didn't seem like an ice-maiden," he said. It was a last flare of the usual Jimmy sleaze. "I thought I'd give it a shot."

"You know, if you weren't always hitting on every skirt you see and being a clown, you might not seem like such a jerk to everyone." Anne wasn't being cruel, just truthful. It hurt more than he expected, though. He discovered he wanted her to like him.

"I'm sorry," Jimmy said. "I'll just drive you home." The car turned off onto Plains Road, and they drove past the Catholic Cemetery, along past the Shamrock Inn, then around the bend with the tall Imperial Oil sign shining in the night.

"Where is your mom buried?" Annie asked.

"Back there, in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery," Jimmy said.

"My Grandpa Brody is in Rock Bay," Anne said. "With my grandma."

"I guess they're neighbors," Jimmy said; the two cemeteries were adjacent. Anne smiled.

"The Night has a Thousand Eyes" came on.

"I like that one." Anne said.

"Me too," Jimmy replied. She slid a little closer on the seat as she reached for the volume. They drove over the High Level Bridge and into Durrand down the York Road.

"I thought I might get a job at the steel mills," Jimmy said. "Once I turn twenty-one. Maybe get a job driving one of the big trucks, you know? They won't hire younger 'cause of insurance."

"That sounds like a good plan," Anne said.



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"Does it? But a college girl isn't going to date a dirty truck-driver from the steel mills."

"No, but a secretary might," Anne said.

"I thought you were going to university?"

"I said I wanted to. I didn't say I could afford it. My parents aren't rich."

"So did you take collegiate or commercial?"

"Commercial," Anne said. "But I could always get the collegiate classes at night school, you know. Work and save up enough for university . . . or for a wedding." The last words were so quiet that Jimmy wasn't sure he heard them, but it gave him a glimmer of hope. He turned past the Catholic Cathedral that was lit up in the night.

"I didn't know they did that," Anne said. "It's pretty." She couldn't help imagining what it would be like to get married in a big church like that.

"They just started doing it since the new highway goes right by," Jimmy told her. "It really stands out when people drive past at night." Jimmy didn't say anything for a few minutes. They drove past Durrand's new city hall; its cool, white marble shone in the night.

"*Raining in my Heart*" came on the radio. "*Don't get all wet, my child,*" said the Preacher. "*You gotta stay dry if you wanna be cool! Plan ahead! Build an ark.*"

"Anne," Jimmy said. "Do you think, if he asked nicely and everything, that a girl that's maybe gonna be a

secretary would go out with a guy who might end up driving trucks?" She didn't answer right away; it was clear she was thinking, and Jimmy let her. At least she hadn't shot him down right away.

"I don't see why not," she said. "But she wouldn't be interested in a make-out king, you know? She'd have to know she was his only girl." Jimmy swallowed; this girl was asking a lot.

"*The Truth shall set you free my child and, Truth is, you're gonna want that girl,*" said the Preacher, solemnly. "*That fine day is just around the corner!*" he added, as the Chiffons came on.

Was Anne asking for a lot? Jimmy wondered. Sure he'd dated a whole gaggle of girls, but they always drifted away pretty fast; some other guy with more money or a newer car came along and they lost interest. Maybe he needed something different.

"What if he promised?"

"She'd think about it." He was driving way slower than normal, under the speed limit, but Anne didn't seem to mind. A police car came by, and the officers shone the searchlight into the Passion-Pit, but Jimmy knew he'd been driving carefully. He just waved at them. Anne waved too. "Little Deuce Coupe" came on the radio.

"*What HAVE you found, my children?*" the Preacher asked.

The two of them listened to the music as they drove on through the night.



The sound of the Beach Boys gave way to Nino Tempo and April Stevens singing "Deep Purple." "One last altar call, my children," said the Preacher. "Find salvation on your rock'n'roll station, and breathe your sweetie's name with a sigh, like sister April told you."

They pulled up to Anne's house on Rennie Street. She leaned over and gave Jimmy a peck on the cheek.

"Thank you for the ride, Jimmy" she said, climbing out. The porch light came on behind her, and she looked at it over her shoulder; her parents were

up, waiting. "Call me, OK?" Jimmy felt his heart pound.

"Sure thing," Jimmy said. "See ya later, Annie-gator." He pulled back out of the drive and sped off. Anne could hear the Preacher, as Jimmy turned the radio up loud.

"*Heed my call for the rest of your life, my children,*" she heard the Preacher say as the car drove away down the street. "*Don't you wanna be happy?*"

The sounds of Jimmy Soul faded as the coupe drove away in the darkness. *