

PROPHET

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Most people hate speaking in front of large groups of people. Jerry Delk loved it. It was a chance to show the world who he was and what he was. He loved the challenge of taking mud and molding it into something meaningful. He was an artist without a brush. To him, people were the mud that he could mold into a work of art. He heard his calling at a young age. He had gotten derailed for years from his true meaning in life. Wasted years on pointless, meaningless professions designed solely to make someone else rich. Jerry was a man on a mission. He had to make up for lost time. He was hungry, very hungry.

By chance, he was asked to speak at his church. The regular pastor had fallen ill and another member asked Jerry if he would deliver the sermon. He accepted, not realizing it would change his life forever. The sermon was recorded as most were in case the church members wanted to go over it again at a later date. In Jerry's case, it was solely responsible for reviving his career as a motivational speaker. He spoke for nearly thirty minutes. When it was over, he received a standing ovation. In less than thirty minutes, his life had been transformed.

Church politics can get messy sometimes. It seemed that God's disciples were more interested in politics and control than they were in actually spreading his message. Certain influential members of the church realized they had a gold mine in Jerry and asked him to make several more videos for the church. In reality, they were going to use Jerry and the videos to force out the current pastor who had fallen out of favor with the church clergy. Jerry's star was rising. It was rising so fast, it almost knocked him off.

Jerry was addicted to Oxycodone. He liked to drink as well, something that had nearly derailed him several times before. The pills and Jesus was what mattered to him most. Well, up until now that is. Now it was pills, Jesus, and success. The holy trinity of Jerry Delk's existence.

He believed that by its very existence that a Christian must be successful to resist the pitfalls of this world. Christians must be bred to achieve success. A failure as a Christian can have disastrous consequences. Jerry knew that if he could motivate Christians to become better Christians, he was in. There were far too many con men and other clergies who would use the bible as their only source of inspiration. They had no real-world experience to draw upon. Most of their lives had been sheltered and their only rock was the bible. Jerry knew better. People nowadays wanted to hear from someone who had gone off on his own and tried to do it his way. His message was simple but effective: failure was letting the devil win, plain and simple. Jerry's message was universal. He appealed to teenagers as well as the elderly. He was going places.

In just over a year, he had gone from earning 37,000 dollars a year working as a marketing analyst, to making over ten times that amount from his internet-based faith business. His videos were all over the web. He was speaking now at churches all over the country. He was even

putting together his marketing plan for a late-night infomercial to run on a Christian channel down south. It seemed like the sky was the limit at this point.

Problem was, he had hit a plateau, at least financially. His business had hit his first brick wall. Jerry was determined to climb over the wall. He had to take his business to the next level and that meant breaking into the megachurch scene. He just needed his big break and he would be in. He got the call one day from Pastor Jennings himself. He had over a dozen megachurches in the U.S. and beyond. Every Sunday, he filled them to stadium-like capacities of forty thousand or more. If Jerry could get his feet wet in Jennings church, he was in. Once you hit the megachurch level, you don't ever go back. Most of these mega-churches were run by the same families who were very hesitant to share the spotlight with anyone. Jennings was now in his 70s. He had taken his church just about as far as he could go. His son was now in politics and his two daughters were married to professional athletes. He had no one to take over the business. Jerry wondered if he was just filling in airtime, or if he was auditioning for something more. Either way, he had to hit a home run. Anything less would be simply unacceptable.

As Jerry's star was rising, so too was his reliance on pain pills. Little white devils. Death in a bottle. They were enough to kill a lesser man. He had quit them before, for years, but in the end, he always came back to them. He wasn't sure if he saw them as devils in a bottle or angels in a bottle. He figured time would tell. He had multiple prescriptions for Oxy and Vicodin. This was a felony in most states. Jerry had his favorite doctors who he visited when the bottle was running dry. Some were hesitant and made up stupid excuses about not being able to fill his script. Jerry would just start forking out the money and eventually, they would cave in. He had gone so far as to buy his favorite pill doctor a new car for his birthday. Success in Jerry's life meant success for his family and friends too.

He had just gotten his feet washed as part of a bible study college class he was leading when the strange tingling sensation started. He was getting ready for bed and noticed that his right ankle was red. He ignored it and finished his bottle of bourbon and went to sleep that night, not realizing just what had come into contact with his body.

Jerry's personal assistant was Paul Ichnon, whom Jerry and just about everyone else called "Icky". He was just out of bible school and eager to make his mark on the Christian world. Jerry had hired him simply because of the connections he had in the Church, particularly down south. His wife came from a prominent Christian family in Mississippi, who headed a congregation down there. Networking was everything in this business. He also knew how important perception was to Christians. You were expected to think and act like a Christian at all times. One wrong move and he could be back to selling auto parts. Everything Jerry did was carefully laid out and planned to make others think he was doing the Lord's work when in reality he was simply positioning himself for power. Sure, Jerry was as much a Christian as anyone else, but he was a special kind of Christian, the kind that God wanted. He knew that most people were never meant to play the game of life, they were merely meant to watch people like Jerry play it and they would just watch on the sidelines. Nothing against these people, they were good, decent, hard working people, just not the type of people who were earmarked for success. Jerry was more like their shepherd and they were his sheep. It was only natural for the shepherd to make more money than the sheep.

Jerry liked to rehearse his sermons in front of a small audience. Namely Icky and his wife. Usually, they were silent and never interrupted. They would take notes and make suggestions. His message was usually the same but never delivered in the same way. He would pop a few pills before the sermon. When the opium finally hit him, it was Jesus who was slapping him on the back for a job well done.

Even though Icky and Mrs. Icky were half his age, their observations and suggestions were usually right on the money. He tried to ignore them at first, but there was simply no getting around it. They made him a better speaker and that was worth their weight in gold. Even minute observations like his choice of suit and whether or not to look like he was sweating came into play. You never get a second chance to make a first impression and Jerry knew the value of first impressions. For most people, it would be their last impression of you as well.

He got the call Tuesday morning from Jennings himself. It was the moment Jerry Delk had been waiting fifty-three years to hear.

"Jerry, can you be ready to go this Sunday in Dallas at my Church?" asked Jennings?

"Of course, sir. Not a problem, I'd be honored," said Jerry, trying not to giggle.

"Ok, great. My staff will meet you at the airport and you can stay at our guest house on the church property. I trust you won't let me down."

"No sir, you can count on me. I've been dreaming of this moment my whole life. Thank you for the opportunity. I won't let you down." said Jerry

He put the phone down and called Icky. It was early in the morning, but Jerry didn't care. He was behind the curve already.

"Hello?" said Icky, sounding like he had just woken up.

"Hey, get dressed. I'm speaking at Jennings's Sun Valley Church in Dallas this Sunday."

"What? Jerry are you serious?"

"As a heart attack. I'll be at your place in an hour. Be ready to go."

"Yeah, no problem," he said and hung up the phone

Jerry sat back and was almost shaking with excitement. His big break, the one he had waited patiently for all these years, was now so close, he could taste it. He was going to play in his first major league game. No more minor league teams for him. From now on, it was the big leagues.

His ankle was now throbbing. He took off his shoe and sock and could see that whatever weird rash he had was spreading. He went into his bathroom and sprayed it with anti-bacterial spray and put some lotion on it. He had no time for this crap. He had a home run to hit.

They decided to drive the six hours to Dallas, rather than deal with the hassle of flying. Jerry figured an appropriate hell for those TSA idiots would be having to go through a TSA checkpoint every day for a thousand years. They had once confiscated Jerry's Oxy because they told him by federal law, he couldn't have two current prescriptions of the same medication. Jerry asked the guy where he went to law school and just how well he knew the U.S. Code for controlled substances. The guy admitted to him that he wasn't 100 percent sure, but he would ask his supervisor. An hour later, after Jerry had missed his flight, it was determined that by law, it was actually possible. That twit had cost Jerry money, something that was the only unforgivable sin in his book. Jerry was not a guy you wanted to cross. He never forgot an asshole.

They were in Kansas when Icky noticed Jerry scratching and rubbing his right leg and ankle.

"You alright?" he asked

"I got some kind of rash on my leg. Thing hurts like hell."

"Maybe you should get it looked at."

"I'll be alright. Probably just nerves. I used to break out in hives when I was younger and stressed out. Now I just drink. It's much more adult-like." said Jerry

"If you say so Jerry." said Icky

He met Jennings's staff at the Church headquarters. He had never seen an operation quite like this one. The church employed over two hundred people at this one church alone. It looked more like a college campus than a church. He was led to his guest quarters by a lovely young lady who was studying at Jennings's Christian college and working as an intern. He wondered what Jennings was worth. It had to be over a billion. This guy had his own empire and now he was being asked to take over as one of its generals. Maybe Jennings had asked him to appear because he wanted Jerry to take over part of his empire. There were plenty of people who could speak at his church, but the old man had wanted him. No one had actually discussed money at this point and Jerry certainly knew better than to bring it up. He never sold himself short, but this was too good to pass up. He thanked the young lady and she gave him her cell phone number.

"If there's anything you need, please don't hesitate to call," she said when she left them.

"Jerry figured that probably didn't include anything sexual and the last thing he wanted was for some drama to derail his chances with the good Reverend Jennings.

"Man, this is someplace, huh, Jerry?" said Icky

"Yeah, it's alright," he said looking for the liquor cabinet and was shocked to see that there wasn't one.

"Look, we need to get cracking here, first thing in the morning. I can't stress how important it is here that we knock one out of the park. We only get one pitch, we can't afford to blow it."

"You'll do great Jerry. Right now, there's nobody in the world who can touch you right now. Remember, Jennings called you himself. He took the time to dial the phone and to speak with you. He's got more up his sleeve than he's wanting to admit."

"He's just old-fashioned, he likes doing things for himself."

"Right. I'll be ready to go at eight."

"Make it seven. We've got a lot of work to do."

"Right, see you then."

Jerry sat back on the sofa and popped a pill. He knew he was headed for great things. He was also beginning to get a little worried about that weird rash on his foot that seemed to be spreading like wildfire. He'd had rashes before, but this one was different. He lifted up his pant leg and was alarmed to see how fast it was spreading. It was now also bleeding, something that rashes shouldn't do when you haven't touched it. He put more lotion and spray on it, but knew if it got any worse he was going to have to get help. The last thing he needed right now was a trip to the hospital. He pooped two more pills and washed them down with a glass of bourbon. If Jerry took enough Vicodin, he too could get through almost anything.

He didn't sleep very well that evening. It was a combination of the infection and bad dreams. He was close now and the Devil knew it. Nothing pissed off Ol' Scratch more than seeing someone succeed. In his dreams, his father was standing in the audience, watching, waiting for him to screw up. The old bastard was hard on his only son. He didn't want him to waste his life in shit jobs for shit wages like he had done. There was a lot of tough love in the Delk house, but it was there, underneath the surface of everything Jerry had ever one in his life. He got up early and made a pot of coffee. He wanted to get a head start on his sermon. Icky showed up a few minutes later carrying a coffee cup and Danish. He was going to rip Icky for not getting him anything, but he wasn't really hungry anyway. His hunger was for something else. Something you couldn't buy at a coffee shop. They sat down and got right to it. Jerry was already behind the curve.

"Most of us today are here, seeking something we need, but don't know exactly what it is. Jesus is the ultimate salesman. The ultimate team player. He sold humanity everything they ever wanted and needed and none of us even knew it existed. He was only on this Earth for a little over 32 years and when he left, the planet would never be the same. Two thousand years later, we are still trying to digest just what this man was trying to tell us. He led by example, without every saying "be like him." Now my background is in economics. I deal with dollars and cents. So did Jesus, he just didn't see dollars and cents in the same way you and I do. He was always looking at the big picture, getting us to see the big pictures as well. The big picture is always and will always be your relationship with Christ. My relationship with Jesus affects everything I do, everything I say, and everything I think. Not just because he is the son of man, because Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the most successful human that has ever walked the face of the Earth. We in America are built to worship not just our God, but to worship success as well. When you succeed, you make it possible for others around you to succeed as well. Being successful is being Christian. You cannot be unsuccessful in your personal life and be a successful Christian. Something is clearly wrong. Sure, you will have setbacks, that's only natural, but it should never

stop you from becoming the person you've always wanted to be. If something is failing in your life, you're career, you're marriage, you're personal relationships, you must ask yourself: what would Jesus do in this situation? How can I apply his teachings to my personal life? Now, that question, I can't answer, but I can tell you with certainty that you will now have the correct answers when you start succeeding. Jesus suffered his setbacks as well. But he never took his eyes off the prize, neither should you. When you have that fire burning inside of you to achieve. To make your mark on this world, to shape the planet as you see fit, only then my friends are you truly living the Christian life. God did not put you here by mistake. You are not here to take up space. You are here for a reason. What is that reason? Only you and God know that. But I can tell you, you will find that reason once you find success. Success is God's path to him, one dollar, one mansion, one dream vacation at a time." said Jerry as he closed his eyes.

Icky was stunned. This was Jerry's best work yet. Even at his age, he was always stepping up his game. That's what it took to stay on top and to be number one. Jerry was always evolving.

"It's a hell of an intro Jerry, but you've got to fill almost half an hour of airspace," said Icky

"Not to worry my dear boy. That's only my opening monologue. Part two is how to go about achieving success. Part three is protecting your success using the word of God."

"Great, let's hear it," said Icky

Jerry turned to move his chair and that's when the bolt of pain ran through his leg. It was like somebody had just rubbed off part of his skin with sandpaper. He let out a whimper and wince at the same time.

"You ok, Jerry?" asked Icky

"Yeah, I'm fine, I just got this rash on my leg. It's nothing," said Jerry rolling up his pajama pants leg to inspect his rash. It seemed to have turned a darker shade of red and was now covering most of his lower leg.

"Jerry, that doesn't look like any rash I've ever seen. I think you might want to get that looked at." said Icky sounding worried. Jerry was worried too. Icky never sounded worried.

"The church has its own doctor. Maybe I should give him a call and have him look at that. It looks pretty nasty."

"No, Icky. He's just reported it back to the old man. No telling what he might do. We can't afford to take any chances here kid, not when we're so close to the finish line.

"Don't you think that not calling the doctor would be taking a chance?" asked Icky

"If it gets any worse, you can call him. Now let's get back to the task at hand," he said. He poured himself a drink and got right back to it.

Jerry spent the next twenty minutes going over his plan, step by step, verse by verse, trying to tie it all together. He gave an example of his own life and how he had spent so many years in the

spiritual wilderness until he had finally found his calling. He gave a story about a man who had spent years dealing with failure and missed opportunities, only to read the bible and realize just what God was trying to say to him. Failure was God's way of saying that you are on the wrong track. Nothing more. It's not saying don't do it, just don't do it that way.....do you understand? Failure should be nothing more than a time out for us to look back and think, should I have done anything differently? And 99 percent of the time, if we do this, we will see the error of our ways. Not the error of God's ways."

Icky sat back in awe of what Jerry had become. It wasn't what he was saying. Icky had realized that life just was not as simple as Sunday school pastors had made it out to be. Jerry was one of those people that actually believed his own bullshit. He had seen enough con men in the cloth during his time. He could spot the real from the fake, pretty easily. Most of them were no more Christian than anyone else. Icky and his wife had spent five months in war-torn Syria, helping the Christians in that country. He had seen so much horror and devastation, it had permanently stained his soul forever. People like Jerry were simply oblivious to the horror that his way of thinking causes throughout the world. Not that it mattered. He was now hitched to Jerry's wagon and there was little doubt that Jerry was going places. He was old enough to be taken seriously, but still young enough so that anyone could relate to him. He stopped listening to Jerry. Jerry hated being interrupted, except for one thing.

"Time." said Icky, holding up his phone.

"How'd I do?"

"Grand slam material Jerry, but we have to get it cut down to half an hour."

Said Icky.

"Alright. That shouldn't be too much trouble."

Icky had discovered that working with giant talent meant working with giant egos as well. He didn't manage Jerry so much as he just kind of steered him. Jerry was old enough to be his father and most people that age had little regard for younger voices, even when those younger voices were right. Icky however had connections in the Christian world and was very Social Media conscious. He had introduced Jerry to some very influential people and had made some very influential decisions for him.

He was beginning to get a little concerned about Jerry's pill-popping and drinking. As long as he kept it under wraps, it wasn't a problem, but Jerry was now going through almost an entire bottle of booze a day and popping pain pills like they were candy. It was not a good combination, not at all. That rash on his leg was definitely going to have to be looked at. He just wasn't sure quite how to play it yet. The last thing in the world he needed was for Jerry to be hospitalized. It was the last thing Jerry needed as well.

"Look, let's take a long lunch break and meet back here this afternoon. Make damn sure those idiots working the cameras know that I don't use a teleprompter either. Never have, never will. They're for lightweights and the weak."

"I'll let them know," he said. He left the room and went back to his room. The more Jerry drank, the more obsessed he became with being the most successful and the strongest person in the room. Jerry had some serious demons in his closet that came to the surface when he drank. As screwed up as he was, when the cameras were rolling, Jerry was as good as they came. He thrived under pressure. The bigger the stage, the more he had to lose, the better he was. That's why he stayed with him. Jerry might have his flaws, but he was damn good in a pinch and that was really all that mattered. Jerry swung for the fences, all the time, every time.

Icky met with two repetitive from Jennings Church and they went over every minute detail of Jerry's appearance. They had planned everything right down to the very last detail.

"It may seem like we're micromanaging here, but the bottom line is we want Jerry to succeed. We want him to go to the next level and the next level beyond that. We know what the viewers respond to and what they don't."

"Well, I'll have to run it by him. It shouldn't be a problem," said Icky

Jerry as brilliant a public speaker as he was, really was pretty lousy with people one on one. It was either Jerry's way or no way. He always handled the "small stuff" as Jerry liked to call it. As Jerry got bigger and bigger, there was more and more small stuff to be dealing with. He had suggested to Jerry numerous times that they hire or contract a media consultant to handle Jerry's professional and online image."

"That's what I pay you for," Jerry replied

"You pay me to make you better. This is how you get better," replied Icky

Jerry had reluctantly agreed. It was now going to be a battle between Jerry's ego and the Church to see who would hold the rights to Jerry's appearance at the church. They might want Jerry to succeed, but they want to help themselves along the way. He knew how Jerry was going to react.

"I don't own the rights to my own sermon? Are they crazy?" he shouted

"Jerry, we're in the big leagues now. This is normal. Besides, they can flood the Christian websites with it. They will do a better job of promoting you than we can, it's that simple."

"Icky, you're a good kid, but your main flaw is that you trust people too much. You're too damn nice. You can't make it in this world being nice to people all the time."

"I'm a Christian Jerry, so are you. We're supposed to be nice. That's why people want to become Christians, so they can be around nice people."

"Icky, they're scamming us. If they want the rights to my sermon, they've got something much bigger up their sleeve. You just got to find out what it is, can you do that? I know you can. That's why I keep you around because you're smart.

"We don't hold any good cards here Jerry. Just do what they want. We're in no position whatsoever to negotiate with them."

"And that my boy is the difference between somebody your age and somebody my age. You are always in a position to negotiate, always. People my age know this, that's why nobody ever wants to deal with us. That's why the church people wanted to talk to you. They figured you're too young to realize this simple fact."

"I don't want you talking to them with booze on your breath. It's not even noontime and you're sloshed already. Remember it was you who said you never get a second chance to make a first impression." said Icky

Jerry stopped when he realized the kid was right. He was too drunk to speak to anyone. This sobering realization seemed to almost crush him.

"After this Sunday, I'm going to stop drinking. I think it might be doing more harm than good," he said softly.

"I think that would be an excellent idea, Jerry. Now I need you to sober up here. We have a meeting with Jennings's staff after lunch. Stay off the pills and sauce, understood?"

"Yeah, no I understand, of course. I'll be ready. I'll sign whatever they want me too.

Icky was half tempted to take Jerry's pills and booze away from him. He promised he would be there, sober and he figured Jerry knew the consequences of a screw-up. They were both so close to the finish line here, he could almost see it too.

Jerry was in his regular top form when he met with the church's media director and staff. They were polite and professional. Jerry could be too when he needed to be. It was as if he could simply flip a switch and change his personality when the moment called for it. Icky's mother would have politely referred to Jerry as a "Classic Yankee Carpetbagger." A title Jerry would probably have worn with honor.

He read his sermon from notes he had made over the last few hours. Everyone in the room, including Jennings's right-hand man was very impressed. Icky could tell just by the expressions on their faces that Jerry had impressed them. When it was over, everyone in the room looked at the media director, who smiled and shook Jerry's hand.

"Outstanding Mr. Delk. Our church members need to hear something like this. It's a very welcome change of pace from what they normally hear. We believe that to stay on top, you have to be constantly evolving, but remaining true to your beliefs. That's why we're the largest church in America and beyond."

"I couldn't agree more sir," he said and shook the man's hand.

The meeting adjourned a few minutes later. Icky and Jerry walked across the campus back to their rooms.

"You were outstanding in their Jerry. Nobody can work a crowd like you. You really do have the gift." said Icky

"You know for a while there kid, I think you were beginning to have doubts that I could pull this off," he said confidently

"Did you see yourself this morning?"

"It's all part of the show kid. Don't ever doubt Jerry Delk, not now, not ever."

"Okay, Jerry, I'm sorry, I should have trusted you. You got us this far."

"Damn right I did. I'm going places kid. A year or two from now, we could have a place just like this. They didn't ask me here to help my career. They don't give a rat's ass about my career."

"So, why did they ask you to speak at their church?"

"Keep an eye on the competition. It wouldn't surprise me if they gave me a permanent position after this Sunday. Not as a reward, just to keep me in check. Keep your friends close but your enemies closer. There's a lot of truth in that statement."

"Well, I've got a bible study class online, so I'm gonna have to cut you lose," said Icky

No sooner had he said that when Jerry winced in pain and grabbed his leg. He almost collapsed. Icky braced him and sat him down on some nearby steps. He lifted his pant leg and could see some blood. Whatever was on his leg was spreading and spreading quickly.

"Jerry, we need to see the doctor. This thing is getting worse."

"No, no doctors, we'll get through this, I just need to get to my room," he said

"Jerry, you're hurt. If you don't want me to go to the doctor, then at least let me put something on it. It's spreading."

"Fine. Just get me back to my room," he said

He walked slowly with Jerry, who was now limping. He was hobbling as he got to his room. Icky put him on the bed. Jerry grabbed a bottle of pills and popped a few. He laid down on the bed and painfully put his leg on the bed.

"I'll go to the drug store. You just wait here." said Icky

Jerry mumbled something about his leg being on fire before drifting off into sleep. Icky left and drove the car to a nearby pharmacy. He told the pharmacist what was happening and the pharmacist seemed very concerned.

"Look, your friend could probably get to a hospital. It could be Staph or MRSA, they can be fatal if left untreated." the man said

"I'm afraid going to a hospital would be fatal to Jerry."

The pharmacist gave Icky some antibiotic ointment and bandages.

"The only thing that is going to make him better at this point is antibiotics. Probably something like CIPRO or LEVAQUIN. You can only get those at a hospital." he said

Icky thanked him for his assistance and rushed back to see Jerry. He got back to the room to see Jerry still sound asleep. He knew it was do or die time. He didn't want to cross Jerry, but he also knew Jerry was not going to get better on his own. He checked online for Staph and MRSA infections and was alarmed at what he saw. He needed to get Jerry some antibiotics and fast, or this could be his last sermon forever. He then remembered he still had half a bottle of Amoxicillin leftover from when he had a crown put in his tooth. It had gotten infected and the dentist had prescribed it for him. He had stopped taking them when they upset his stomach. It might be Jerry's only chance. He hoped it would be enough to kill the infection. He just needed to make it a few more days until Sunday. He was dragging Jerry to a hospital the moment the Sermon was done. Right now though, he figured it was best to let Jerry sleep. He could be asleep for hours after mixing the pills and booze.

Icky was walking back to his room when his phone rang. It was the kind of call we all dread. His brother had been shot while doing mission work at a church in Chicago. He was in the ER, fighting for his life. Icky was shaking as he packed his things and ran back to Jerry's room. Much to his surprise, Jerry was awake and making a pot of coffee.

"Jerry, my brother's been shot. I've got to fly to Chicago."

Jerry seemed to snap out of his stupor.

"Ok, bud.....is there anything I can do?"

"Pray.....that's all we can do right now."

He checked left the campus ten minutes later. Jerry was on his own at this point. He had bigger fish to fry.

Jerry was now completely sober. Sometimes, even an addict grows tired of their addiction. He sipped his coffee and looked at himself in the mirror. He saw the man his father was proud of. He saw a man that had risen above his circumstances. He saw a winner. There were so few winners left in this world, he could barely recognize himself. The world needed winners. Winners are what make the world go round. The world was jealous of people like him. Seeing someone like Jerry was like holding a mirror up next to you. Most people were ashamed of the person they saw in the mirror. Not Jerry.

"Winners are born. Winners aren't made," he said to himself in the mirror.

He continued to stare at himself. He could see the reflection of Jesus staring back at him in the mirror. He fell to his hands and knees and began to sob.

"I gave my life to you.....I gave my life to you," he said sobbing

"They killed you because you couldn't break you.....if this world can't break you it will kill you.....if it can't break you, it will kill you." he said sobbing on the floor.

He passed out on the floor in the fetal position. Sometimes even winners needed a break from life.

It was the knocking at the door that woke him up. He had been asleep for almost an hour and a half. He stumbled to the door and opened it. He saw a man holding a large bag. Jerry knew he better wake up and quickly.

"Can I help you?" asked Jerry

"Jerry? My name is Peter. I work for the church. I'm a registered nurse. I'm here to give you your medical exam."

"What?" he said rubbing his eyes

"Your medical exam. You consented to it when you signed the paperwork the other day.

"I don't understand.....why do I need a medical exam?"

"May I come in? I can show you," he asked

Jerry let him in and the man put his duffle bag on the table. He showed Jerry the part of the agreement with the church that specified he must undergo a medical examination and pass it before he is allowed to speak to the church audience. Icky had done all the signing. He never even mentioned it to him. Jerry knew he was in trouble here. That rash was getting worse and worse. He had a fever and felt like crap. The only way he could still function was to pop the pills and stay stoned all day. He knew if this guy saw what was on his body, he would be done. He had to remain cool.

"I consented to a medical exam?" asked Jerry

"A few months ago, we had an elderly pastor speaking to a live church audience when he began having chest pains. He was in full cardiac arrest after he completed his sermon. You can imagine the damage to the church's image if it were to happen in front of a live audience. Pastor Jennings just wants to make sure his next guests are in good health, just to ensure it doesn't happen again. It's a very basic exam. It won't take long." said Peter

"Look, Peter. I'm not feeling very well. Is there some way we can do this at a later time?"

"No, Jerry, I'm afraid not. I was supposed to do this two days ago, but I've been so busy. I forgot.....Jerry, are you alright, you don't look very well."

"I've got this rash on my leg. The worst rash I've ever had."

"Well, let me take a look at it," said Peter putting on his nitrile gloves.

As soon as Jerry dropped his pants, Peter's face went almost white. Peter tried to remain calm, but Jerry knew he was in trouble.

"Jerry, how long have you had this?"

"Couple of days maybe, why?"

"Jerry, I don't think this is a rash. I don't even think it's a Staph infection. This is something else."

"Like what?"

"Necrotizing Fasciitis....also called Flesh-Eating Bacteria. Jerry, you have to get a hospital immediately. This disease can be fatal."

"Can't you just give me some antibiotics or something? I just need to make it to Sunday, then I can go."

"Jerry, this is a very fast-moving bacteria. You could be dead by then. That fever you have? That's the bacteria releasing toxins into your bloodstream. It's eating away your skin and tissue. You need immediate medical attention."

"So, you're going to have to tell Jennings about this aren't you?"

"I have to Jerry, this is serious. I'm going to call an ambulance first. We need to get you to a hospital and on some intravenous antibiotics."

"Ok, Peter, if you think that's what we have to do. You know best," said Jerry.

As soon as Peter's back was turned towards Jerry, he took a large vase and smashed it over the back of Peter's head. He collapsed on the ground.

"I'm sorry Peter. I didn't come this far just to have Satan pull the carpet out from underneath me," he said

He took his laptop and smashed it over Peter's head. He kept hitting him and hitting him until Peter was not moving, then he hit him some more. He had to make certain Peter was dead.

Sweet Merciful Christ Jerry, what the hell have you just done?

He collapsed in front of Peter's lifeless body. He began to sob. The full weight of what he had just done hit him like a punch from a heavyweight boxing champ. He had killed this kid. He looked up and saw his father standing over him.

"Daddy?" said Jerry sobbing

"Quit your goddamn crying and clean up this mess. We've got work to do." said the man sternly.

"Daddy, I killed him. I killed him. I'm a murderer!"

His father knelt down next to him and got inches away from his face.

"He was going to tell on you. Do you think that old bastard was going to let you go on stage? Hell no. It had to be done. You did the right thing. Now get to work on your sermon. I want you to hit one out of the park. This is it, kid. You blow it here and you're finished."

"Okay.....you're right.....thanks dad, you're always there for me."

"I didn't raise a quitter. Now suck it up and get going. Move the carpet over the blood on the rug." said his father

Jerry was shaking. He had killed another human being. He had committed the worst sin of all. The kind of sin that gets you a nonrefundable ticket on the Satan Express.

He cleaned up the scene of the crime as best he could. After about half an hour, it looked like nothing had happened. If someone came to his door looking for the kid, he would just say he got a call and left in a hurry. Simple as that. He just needed two more days. Two more days and he'd be done. He just had to make it two more days. Jesus lasted for forty without breaking. He could suck up two more days.

He popped more pills and drank some whiskey he brought with him. His body was now so used to the abuse, it barely registered. His leg and back were now on fire, even with the pills. When he looked at himself in the mirror, he saw it. The rash had spread to his face. He took a shot of whiskey and struck a match. He pressed the match onto his face and burned the devil off. Satan was going to have to do a hell of a lot better than that if he wanted to stop Jerry Delk.

Keep it together Jerry boy. We didn't come this far just to back out now.

Jerry thought back to the wasted years of his life just trying to survive and make a living. Problem was, he wasn't living.....he was just existing. He didn't just want to exist. No one ever told him how hard it is to be a Christian in the is day and age.

The phone rang. It was Jennings's media manager. He asked about Peter. Jerry told him that he had to cut their exam short when he got a very urgent phone call. The manager seemed perplexed but told Jerry to be ready to go at exactly seven-thirty Sunday morning. Jennings's staff would meet him in his room and then drive him over to the church personally. Jerry thanked him and told him he would be ready to go Sunday morning.

What the hell am I going to do with Peter's body? It's going to start to stink here pretty soon?

He heard Peter's cell phone buzzing a few times. He knew he had to get rid of the phone and the body. He scooped up Peter and threw his corpse into the bathtub. He grabbed his cell phone and car keys and headed outside. Going down the stairs was getting almost impossible. His legs were in no such shape to even think about going downstairs. He put on Peter's plastic gloves and figured his car would be the only one in the small parking lot next to Jerry's building. He hit the car alarm and the lights flashed. He just prayed no one would see him and thankfully, no one did. He drove the car back to the crowded main campus building where everyone had their offices and parked Peter's car. He checked over it before getting out and discovered a 9mm underneath the driver's seat in a small holster. Guess the nurse had some pretty rough patients. He took the gun and put it in his pocket. He figured it might come in handy at some point if he had to deal with any more unplanned *interruptions*. He stayed in the car until he couldn't see anyone around him and got out. Throwing the cell phone and car keys inside the car. He didn't even bother to lock it. He just needed to make it till Sunday. Whatever happened after that, didn't matter.

It was a very long walk back to his room. He tried to avoid any people or groups as he walked very slowly on the footpath. He had his cell phone with him and pretended to be talking on it. He passed by a few people, but no one even looked twice at him. He had to sit down on a large rock near a pond. He wasn't even sure he could make it back to his room. He saw two girls carrying their bibles walk past him. One of them looked at Jerry. He held the phone up to his ear and seemed to be having a conversation. She just smiled and walked by. Jerry made it back to his room in one piece, but he was in no condition to do anything. The devil was killing him, that much was certain. He had never been this sick in his life. He always thought poor health and sickness was a sign of weakness. He was so weak, he could barely make it up the stairs. He was wincing from the pain with each passing step. It was the Lord's strength that got him through it. He collapsed on the sofa and poured himself a drink. He passed out a few minutes later.

Satan always plays dirty.....always.

In his dream, he was speaking to the church audience and they were in awe of him. At the end of his speech, the lights fell onto him and he got a standing ovation. He was their new king. Their new prophet, their new messiah. He had finally arrived in all his glory. God was doing his work through people like Jerry. Heaven was for winners. Heaven was for those who achieved. Heaven was for those who didn't turn the other cheek. Heaven was for those that hit the son of a bitch back, twice as hard. Jesus wasn't perfect, even he messed up every now and then. Jerry closed his eyes and took in the holy spirit. He could almost feel it swimming through his veins. He was closer to God now than he had ever been in his whole life. He was so close. He couldn't turn back. He looked over at Peter's lifeless body. He knelt next to him and said a prayer for him.

"Our Heavenly Father. Please welcome Mr. Peter into your heavenly kingdom and grant him all the graces he so richly deserves. I've done a terrible thing. A necessary thing, but a terrible one. Please grant Peter's family and friends some kind of relief during this dark time in their lives. We pray this in Jesus's name.....amen."

He lay down on the floor. He was asleep a few minutes later.

He woke up when the phone rang. It was somebody from the church looking for Peter. Jerry quickly came to and the pain almost stopped him in his tracks. He reached over for his bottle and popped a few more pills.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Delk, my name is Marsha Carrington. I'm with the church. We're trying to get a hold of Peter Crisp. He was supposed to have given you a medical exam this afternoon?"

"Yeah, he was about to, then his phone rang and he kind of ran out my room. Very strange. You might want to have a strong word or two with him about his professional demeanor. I was less than impressed."

"I would if I could find him. I've gotten two calls from his wife who says she hasn't heard from him since he went to your room?"

Jerry looked at his watch. He had been asleep for almost six hours.

"As I said, he left here in a hurry. I'm sure he'll turn up. Just give him a little while."

"Yes, well if you hear anything, please call the church. We're a little worried about him. We found his car in the parking lot with his phone inside. It's not like him to be without his phone."

"If I see him, I'll let you know."

"Please do," she said and hung up the phone

Jerry stumbled into the bathroom and looked at Peter's lifeless body in the bathtub.

"Christ, you're barely room temperature and already people are looking for you." he said

He thought about taking a shower and stripped naked and almost started crying when he saw what the rash had done to his body. It was now everywhere. His ankles were now almost completely exposed and part of his femur. He started sobbing and looked at himself in the mirror.

"I can walk on water too.....I can walk on water too," he said sobbing

This is it, Jerry. Bottom of the ninth with two outs and the bases loaded. This is where winners shine.....you're a winner, aren't you?

"Goddamn right I'm a winner," he said as he began coughing up blood.

The next day and a half were a blur of pills and alcohol. Jerry nearly died. He was in and out of consciousness. He had only a few of his magic babies left and had to use them sparingly. He called Icky to get an update about his brother, only to get a text back saying that he would call him as soon as he knew anything. Icky asked him to pray for his brother. Jerry prayed for himself instead and for all the other winners in this world.

"God, grant me the strength to be who I am. My life for you....my life for you. I am the eagle, but you are my wind. I am your son....I am your son." he said in a stupor in front of the mirror. He passed out when he saw that the rash was now on the other side of his face and neck.

Sunday morning, Jerry used every last ounce of strength he had to put on his suit. He couldn't put on his Sunday shoes, his feet were a bloody mess. His skin was bleeding through the suit. He just hobbled around in his black socks and waited for the church staff to show up. Sure enough at exactly seven-thirty that morning they did. It was two kids who looked barely old enough to shave. Jerry had the 9mm in his pocket just in case. He opened the door and could tell by the looks on their faces, he was in trouble. His fever was so bad, he was barely conscious. He had to dig deep. He was so very, very close now.

"Are you Jerry Delk?" one of the kids asked

"I am. Let's go. I've got greatness to spread." he said hobbling his way out the door

"Whoa, dude. What's wrong with you? What's on your face?" the other kid asked

"You want to know what's on my face?" asked Jerry coughing up blood. "You want to know what's on my face? Weakness, kids. This is what weakness looks like. Take a good hard look. You won't ever forget it. I've been battling Satan my whole life. I'm not about to quit now."

"Shit, we can't take him anywhere. Call Mary." one of the kids said to the other kid.

Jerry didn't hesitate. He pulled out the gun and shot the kid in the face. He turned to the other kid who was frozen in shock and shot him as well. Jerry was frozen, both from the shock of what he had done and the fact that his vital bodily functions were beginning to shut down. Jerry knew he was in trouble, but he was going to die a winner, no matter what the costs.

He stumbled down the stairs and was amazed to see the kids were actually going to pick him up in a large golf cart. Jerry couldn't believe it. He should have a limousine, or maybe even ride an elephant into the church. Something only a winner would think of. He got in the golf cart and drove the mile or so to the main building.

The main building was packed with cars and people. He drove up to the main gate and stopped the cart right in front of the main doors. The ushers looked at each other then looked at Jerry.

"I'm Jerry Delk.....I'll be speaking here this morning. Where's my room?" he said nearly falling down. The ushers said nothing to him, not wanting to get too close to Jerry who was now bleeding. They moved out of his way and began frantically calling on their phones. Jerry made it to the main hallway and saw the old man Jennings and his wife shaking hands with the churchgoers as they entered the main church. He had never seen a church so massive in his life. It was a building fit for a king. A king like Jerry Delk.

As soon as Jennings saw him, his face went as white as a ghost's. His wife recoiled in horror as she saw him approach.

"I'm here Pastor. Just tell me what to do," said Jerry covered in blood and puss.

"Dear God in heaven.....what on Earth is wrong with you?" asked Jennings

His cell phone rang and he answered it. His expression changed completely.

"Yes, he's standing right here in front of me.....What? Somebody shot them? Oh, Jesus.....well call the police!" he shouted and took off down the hallway. His wife was still standing there and she moved against the wall to let him by.

"This is it. My whole life has been building to this moment," he said and began stumbling towards the main stage of the church.

Several ushers tried to stop him, but once they got a good look at Jerry, they stopped right in their tracks. They began to slowly back away from him.

"That's right boys. One little drop on your skin and you'll be infected too. You get to join the party. We can all meet Jesus together." he said

"STOP HIM!" shouted his wife.

"Lady, I'm not going near him." said one of the ushers.

"What's wrong with him?" asked one of the ushers.

No one else came near Jerry as he walked up onto the stage. The church should have started a few minutes ago and everyone in the church sat down and took out their bibles. Jerry grabbed the microphone and began speaking.

"Can everyone in the back hear me ok?" he said coughing. He collapsed, then quickly recovered himself and began speaking.

"Millions of years ago, our planet was nothing more than mud and shit and dinosaurs. Out of this primordial ooze, God began creating man in his image. He began creating winners....because as we all know, they don't let losers into heaven. Why would they? They're losers. Nobody wants to be around a loser, even Jesus himself. I want to talk today about winning. Winning is what separates the Christian from the nonbeliever. Winning is what makes us human.....winning is what makes us Christian."

Jerry noticed several police officers surrounding the stage. He stumbled and collapsed. Two of the officers rushed the stage. Jerry pulled out his gun and shot both of them. The church erupted in chaos as everyone fled at once. The police returned fire, striking Jerry. As he lay on the stage floor looking up at the bright lights over his head, he just waited for it to be all over. He had done it. He looked up and saw his father standing over him. He gave his son a thumbs up. Jerry tried to respond in kind, but couldn't move his arm. He had done some terrible things over the past week, but it was all worth it. He had finally made his father proud. He had shown the world what a true winner really looks like.....and Jerry's corpse looked like something straight out of a horror movie.

Jerry Delk had finally arrived. This was the biggest moment of his life and he liked to think he delivered.