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( essay )

# the black saint and the best-selling writer

Joe Miller

When I first saw the “ABSTINENCE = FREEDOM” sticker on Jackie Story’s van, I wrote it down in my notebook, but I didn’t ask her about it. I wrote down “Scooby van,” too, and “light blue” and “rust.” And when I got home that night I opened my laptop and wrote from memory that it cost Jackie eighty-five dollars to fill the tank, and that she had to fill it often, and that she was having to turn down friends when they asked for rides home from church because she couldn’t afford it anymore, and that that’s not the kind of person she wants to be.



*Photo by Tatenda Nyamande*

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I wrote this story: Jackie went to San Juan Motors, a used car lot up the street from her church, to trade the van and sign a contract for a white Ford Escort station wagon. The guy who sold it to her went to her church. He said to her, "I'm going to put a brand-new radio in it just for you because you are so terrific." On the way home, she picked up one of her sons from church and another from school, and every time anyone opened the car doors the tuner would reset to the left-most position on the dial and the speakers would scream with static. The radio slid right out of the dashboard and onto the floor whenever she accelerated from a full stop. Then, a week later, the wagon broke down in front of the Hobby Lobby and Cracker Barrel on a parkway in the suburban Northland of Kansas City, three and a half miles from her house.

Jackie was the main character of a book about a mixed-race, inner-city Pentecostal megachurch that I never wrote. Several times a week I would follow her around, scribbling notes in a narrow notepad, asking her questions, trying to find a story and a shape to her life that would fit me and the rest of the world. She didn't have time to be without a car. Her two youngest sons, P.J. and Jonathan, were starting public school after years of home schooling. Cameron, her second oldest, was eighteen, jobless and carless, and he still expected her to provide everything he needed and most of what he wanted. She worked as a part-time hospice aide, did some sporadic work as a model and ran an as-yet unprofitable business venture that she described to me as "kind of like a direct-marketing business opportunity, except we sell phone service, and everybody needs that." Even when her car was working, she felt like she needed an extra hour each day and an extra day each week—a "Smonday," as her pastor liked to say. Without a car she had to take the bus everywhere, had to hoof it an hour and a half in both directions, on a hilly stretch, just to catch the nearest ride. It had been hot that fall, too, with a couple of days in the high 90s. At times it seemed like more than she could handle. When she felt overwhelmed, she said, she imagined herself a Sherman tank, slow but relentless, and strong—just like the motivational speaker had said a year earlier in a speech at a business conference she went to in Anaheim. It was the climax of his pep talk, the highlight of the whole convention, when he marched back and forth across the stage, imitating a tank, and the crowd went wild, knowing they had what it would take to make their prayers come true. I'd been around Jackie long enough to know that her prayers were for easy money and for the time it would buy. Jackie wanted to give every waking minute to her sons, to her brothers

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and sisters at her church, to herself and to God. But so long as she was poor, she had to trudge through life, and trudge harder still without a car.

I offered to drive her around for a day so she could take care of a bunch of short-trip errands that had piled up and so I could get more material for my book. She didn't mind sharing. When I picked her up at her townhouse, the right half of a double unit on a cul-de-sac in a subdivision that had been carved into a forest in the early '70s, her two youngest weren't home from school yet, and Cameron was out with his girlfriend. We headed off to the nearest library branch. Jackie needed to print a letter she'd written at home on an old IBM 786 that didn't have a printer, a polite but assertive missive to the used car dealer demanding a refund of the \$1,200 down payment she'd made on the Escort. "The car's obviously a lemon," she told me as she sat down at one of the library's computer stations. "But I don't want to sue him because I know he's trying to have a relationship with Christ."

She slid a floppy disk into the computer, and the computer spit it back out. She laughed and shook her head. It was the only copy; she'd saved it to the disk, not the hard drive, like Jonathan, her baby, had told her to do. She stared at the screen for a long moment, smiling. If it had been me, I'd have been consumed with rage and self pity. When I first interviewed Jackie, at a Christian coffee shop in a storefront between a payday loan shop and the license bureau in a strip mall, she told me she found satisfaction in hard times. Contrary to her dreams of work-free wealth, she said things were more valuable to her if she had to overcome obstacles to get them, and I knew then that she would be my lead character.

I'd started my project during the insufferable stretch between the completion of the final draft of my first book and its publication, a period of six or seven months of casting about to unearth a story big enough to impress the big publishing houses in New York. My first book had sold when I was still working as a newspaper reporter, for four times my salary at the time. I quit my job before the first check arrived. It was the start of a new life: less work, more money, greater respect. I'd sell a book every couple of years, and through them I'd live on forever in libraries all around the world. I got the idea for the second book after Bush won reelection, thanks in large part to Christian voters. The nation was deeply divided, as it still is today, and I wanted to tell a story about why, so I went off exploring the roots of the Christian right. I zeroed in

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on the Pentecostal movement, which was in its hundredth year at the time. With half a billion members, it had become the most populous and fastest-growing segment of Christianity on earth. It had begun as a mixed-race, grass roots movement in 1906, under the leadership of William Seymour, a one-eyed son of former slaves who gathered a group of whites, blacks and Hispanics in a former livery in the slums of Los Angeles. Together they sought to recreate the earliest days of Christianity, as described in the book of Acts, when, on the day of the Pentecost, “a mighty sound” and “cloven tongues like as of fire” descended on the fledgling Christians and they “began to speak with other tongues” and they were “all with one accord.” That part resonated with me: All with one accord. I thought it would be a good title for a book.

Jackie’s church was Pentecostal—Assemblies of God, a white-only denomination formed in acquiescence to Jim Crow laws by the nation’s leading white Pentecostal pastors in 1914. In 2006, Jackie’s church was one of its largest and most dynamic congregations and, in defiance of history, it was evenly mixed with blacks and whites. On Sundays, they came from all over the Kansas City metropolitan area, from the most distant suburbs to the poorest and most run-down neighborhoods in the urban core. It seemed to me a miracle in a city as segregated as mine. Their motto and theme song was “We Are Family,” and I liked that, the same way I liked the idea of all with one accord. I liked that Pentecostals call themselves “saints.”

I’d been to the church several years earlier, to attend their annual apocalyptic Christmas pageant with my girlfriend. The play was famous around Kansas City for its outrageous plot, pyrotechnics and flying Jesus with a flaming sword. We went to laugh at the campiness, but we walked out feeling disturbed—Allie for the portrayal of gays as sinners bound for hell, me for the prophesy that Satan would rise up through the United Nations. But the book potential outweighed my disgust. Not long after I returned as a journalist, one of the pastors pulled me aside and suggested I write about their singles ministry—“It’s the future of Christendom,” he said. He introduced me to Jackie. That very week I had watched a debate on C-SPAN between two black men, a conservative and a radical, and both had lamented the number of black children born out of wedlock, raised by single moms. So here was Jackie, I thought, part of a huge problem. She’d had her first son, Cory, when she was still a teenager, and now she was divorced and raising four on her own. What’s

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more, Jackie's mom had had her as a teen, so that made her even more firmly part of a problem, one that extends across generations, at least in the world of ideas that I was hoping to impact with my book. In fact, in America, where the divorce rate is so high, the Storys aren't a problem; they're normal. Single moms—black single moms in particular—are the least among us, the ones Jesus told us to love the most, the heirs to the Kingdom of God. That they're disdained by the left and right alike—in a Christian nation, no less—seemed to me an incredible opportunity, an invitation to step up and say, “Everything you think you know is wrong,” and those kinds of books sell so well.

One chapter would begin with Jackie in the narrow kitchen of her town home. She opens a cabinet, takes out two tall cans of salmon, and hums a hymn as she peels and picks the shreds of skin and spine from the meat. The sky grows pink beyond the trees outside the window, and Jonathan, her youngest, lies on his belly on the floor by the kitchen table, a thin biography of Jackie Robinson spread before him. He reads aloud, as she has asked him to. When he got home from school, he had thrown down his books and turned to run outside and play, but she'd grabbed his collar and said, “You are not in that big of a hurry.”

P.J., her second youngest, saunters in and opens the fridge, grabs a package of string cheese. “I got into an argument with my biology teacher today,” he says. He brushes his skinny dreadlocks away from his eyes, unwraps his snack, takes a bite. At issue was the question of when life begins and whether or not the use of stem cells for research is murder. P.J. claims he won the argument when he opened his biology book and pointed to pictures of fetuses with peaceful faces and tiny fingers and toes, proof of precious life.

“Isn't that interesting you got that out of your biology book,” Jackie says.

“Yeah,” P.J. says, “and my biology book is watered down to hide creationism as a logical explanation for the creation of the earth.” He pulls off another thread of cheese and dangles it into his mouth. “Then we got into it about gay rights,” he says, still chewing. “He says homosexuals have a right to get married. And he says he's a Christian. I told him the Bible says it's clearly a sin. He said, ‘Who am I to take away their rights?’ It's not natural. Sex organs are created for relations between a male and a woman.”

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“Well, they’ve found other uses for it,” Jackie says. “It’s gross, but.”

She rinses her hands in the sink, and as she dries them off she says, “I struggle, because I know it takes the Holy Spirit to change a heart. I don’t know, for him to call himself a Christian, I would say, ‘No you’re not.’”

“But the Bible says even more clearly that divorce is a sin,” I say, stepping out of my role as observer, knowing that I’ll regret it later but unable to resist. “Jesus himself says it. By your standards, how can you or anyone who condones your divorce be a Christian?”

P.J. says nothing, stands still and blinks. Jackie leans against the counter and twists her face in concentration. “These are things I puzzle over,” she admits. She pulls a skillet from a lower cabinet, places it on the stove, turns the burner to five.

“God knows what’s in your heart.”

Another chapter takes place at the Clarion Hotel across the highway from Kauffman Stadium, where the Kansas City Royals play. I meet Jackie in the lobby. She’s dressed in a sharp skirt suit, navy blue, snazzed up for her weekly business meeting. A few paces away, by the sliding glass doors, stands a man in a dark blue six-button suit and a fedora, and he’s yelling into a cell phone: “When are you going to take a chance and make something of yourself? Now’s the time to step up. You’ll never have another opportunity like this!”

“This guy is absolutely phenomenal,” Jackie nods in the man’s direction. “He’s responsible for something like 50 percent of all the revenue in ACN.”

ACN is a business venture she bought into a few years earlier, at the urging of another member of her church, for \$500. I follow her into one of the hotel’s conference rooms, where a hundred or so chairs are lined up facing a podium and a large screen. Most of the seats are filled. We watch a video with animated dollar signs flowing from customers into bank accounts; if you get enough customers, and your customers, in turn, get even more customers, the money will just pour in, as much as \$8,000 a month. “Now, imagine if you could have half of that, or even a tenth of that,” the narrator says. “Would you like that?” Jackie and others in the audience exclaim, “Yes!” And then Donald Trump comes on, scowls and jabs a finger at the camera, says the secret to success is knowing when to seize opportunities.

Afterward, dozens of people fill out the paperwork and write \$500 checks, and I’m surprised to find myself impressed. I have a vague sense

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that changes in the telecommunications industry have opened new possibilities for entrepreneurship and profit skimming, but when I get home that night I tell my girlfriend about it, and how impressed I am, and she frowns and says, “Doesn’t sound right to me.”

A week later, I’m back at the Clarion, and Jackie is leading the proceedings. We’re in a smaller room this time, two-dozen chairs, and nine people, including me. Jackie moves to the front, clapping her hands. “Welcome, welcome, welcome,” she says. “I am delighted that you are here. Well, listen, my name is Jackie Story and I’m glad to be here tonight.”

She seems uncomfortable to me. Her words come out all bunched together, as though she’s forgotten to breathe: “Let me tell you a brief little bit about me. I am just a person who saw an incredible opportunity and thought there is no way that I can pass this up. I have four sons and they’re handsome and they’re the main reason why I’m here. Unfortunately my fairy tale did not have a happy ending. I had a divorce. But I still want to be there for my beautiful young men.”

This time around, I’m not as keen on ACN. At my girlfriend’s urging, I’ve done a little digging and found that the company lost a class-action suit in Australia for running what amounts to a Ponzi scheme. We watch the video again, the dollar bills circling around the screen, and as the other guests fill out their applications and open their checkbooks to buy in, I read the fine print. As I do, one of Jackie’s business associates sidles up beside me and asks, “Can I help you with something?”

“Yes, actually,” I say, polite but firm. “This form refers to ‘the terms of the Contract Agreement.’ Is that a separate document? Do you have one? Can I see a copy?”

The man digs into a briefcase and pulls out a photocopied sheet of paper covered on both sides with very small print. I hold it close to my eyes and read. Another business associate approaches me and whispers, “Is there anything I can help you find?”

“No. Thank you.”

The document is a tangle of legalese, but when I focus on the numbers it doesn’t take long to figure out that the big money ACN promises, those flowing dollar signs, upwards of \$8,000 a month, are based on a ten-percent commission that kicks in only when a business associate has amassed an impossibly high number of customers. Before that, the commission is less than .2 percent. So when the video suggests that someone could bring in \$800 a month with just a few customers, it’s a lie. The real



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money comes with acquisition bonuses. If you can get a half dozen or more people to sign up and pay the franchise fee, you get a check, a commission on the sale of nothing.

My first book came out in October of that year, and for a while I couldn't follow Jackie around because I was on book tour. I funded the tour myself, with the dwindling money from my advance. I gave readings in book stores and at book fairs and universities, and I was interviewed for newspapers, radio and TV. Despite the abundance of press and good reviews, sales were slow. Still, when I got to New York and met my editor for a cup of coffee and to tell him about the new book I was working on, he said the story and idea was "tantalizing," and I felt confident in myself and my future.

One day when I was far away from Kansas City, Jackie recorded a live spot about health for an AM gospel station, a weekly gig that paid her twenty-five bucks a pop. With her car still in the shop, she borrowed her mom's to get to the station, and she was in such a hurry she forgot to lock it up. When she came back out to the parking lot, she found a note on the front seat that read, "Jackie you are so beautiful, from haircut to freckles. Maybe we could have lunch or dinner sometime." There was a phone number, but no name.

This is kind of spooky, she thought. I'm not calling. But she did, and she got his voicemail: "You've reached Reverend D. R. Johnson." She vaguely recalled striking up a conversation with a man in the station's lobby while she was waiting to go on air, but she couldn't picture him. He'd said he was a preacher. As the message played, she thought, OK, now I've called, what do I do? She didn't want to seem eager. The tone sounded. "So now I know who left me the note," she said. "OK, so I guess you're welcome to call me back."

Her phone rang five minutes later. They met at a park in a neighborhood full of mansions just south of the Country Club Plaza in Kansas City, at 8:30 on an Indian summer night, and they walked around and talked. They sat in the grass near the top of a knoll and watched a **Great Dane** and a Jack Russell terrier fight over a floppy frisbee, and they laughed and laughed. She asked him how he came to know the Lord, and he said he grew up in a Christian home, but he'd fallen away as a young man and nearly died drunk driving. It was long past dark, and she asked him what time it was. He looked at his cell phone. "You don't want to know," he said. It was ten after one in the morning.

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She felt like a hypocrite. Here she was, out at an ungodly hour with a person she didn't even know, and for years she'd been telling her sons and her sisters in the singles ministry to not even give the appearance of evil. She left the park right away. After that, she and D. R. talked on the phone every day, sometimes twice a day—so often and for so long that her second oldest, Cameron, whom she often scolded for hogging the phone, was getting on her about it. They went out at least once a week, on cheap dates. One night it was a tour of Kansas City's fountains. Another time they went to the art museum, which is always free. They made a cute couple, Jackie with her station wagon that was back up and running for the moment, and D. R. with his "Kansas City Cadillac," as she called it—a sharp-angled, late-model Pontiac with chrome spoke rims. Almost every time he crossed the river to pick her up in Kansas City's mostly white Northland, he got pulled over. D. R. was short for D'Wan Rodney, a name that infuriated her sons whenever it came up on the caller I.D. because it was so ghetto. But she didn't care. She hadn't been kissed by a man in six years.

They'd been dating barely a month when D. R. asked, "So, do you think you could handle being a preacher's wife?"

Jackie turned forty that fall, and she threw a party for herself. Dozens of people showed up, most from her church, and I wandered among them with my notebook, marveling at all the diversity crowded into her little living room. She hadn't asked for any gifts, though she'd included with the invitations a wish list that ranged from a hug to a brand-new Subaru Outback. Her only requirement was that each guest say something nice to her, which, coming from her, a woman with no wealth to speak of who had helped each and every one of the guests at one point or another, seemed a perfectly reasonable thing to ask for: not at all self-absorbed.

The warm spell had passed, and the November air carried a bite. Jackie's friends filled the few chairs she owned and sat on the floor with their backs propped against the wall, and some leaned on the kitchen counters. Jonathan scrambled about the crowd and lifted packages from the kitchen table and shook them next to his ear. As night fell, Jackie's friends stood one after another to praise her. I had hoped to meet the Rev. D. R. Johnson, but he wasn't there. Jackie told me she'd let him kiss her one night after they'd watched a video she checked out from the library, but then she smacked him when he slid his hand beneath her panties.

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I felt charged as I drove home from the party. In Jackie's life, in her church, in its diversity and its embrace of the divorced and single, I saw a blockbuster, a story that would push me over the top. I wrote to my agent, "While groups like Focus on the Family push an early 20th century archetype of a nuclear family, this church exposes this as a myth that's no longer universal in an economy and culture that has long since changed. In America, more than 70 percent of marriages end in divorce, and children are often raised by one parent, most often a woman. Rather than disparage, much less vilify, these heads of family, this church welcomes them in, celebrates them, indeed heralds them as, in the words of one pastor, 'the future of Christendom.' This is an allegory, a template for a shift this nation ultimately must undertake."

My agent wrote back, "This is a big statement. And what does it mean?"

A couple nights later, I went with Jackie to the apartment of her friend Tiffany for a little ACN party where they hoped to persuade one of Tiffany's friends to sign up. The apartment was on the top floor of a duplex in downtown Kansas City, Kansas—an old building on a weedy block, with a sagging porch and cracks that ran up the brick walls. Inside it was cozy and clean, with warm lamplight, plants everywhere and many framed photos of Tiffany's daughter. Like Jackie, Tiffany strung together several part-time jobs to make ends meet, and her dreams of an easier, more prosperous life lay in ACN.

This gathering followed the same script as the meetings I'd attended earlier, only it was more intimate and personal. The three women sat close together on a couch. Tiffany had set a plate of cheese and grapes on the coffee table. Her friend perked up during the video when the dollar signs flew into a bank account that could be hers, and she nodded when Trump gave his endorsement. But when Jackie and Tiffany told her she needed to pay \$500 to join, her face fell.

Tiffany and Jackie leaned in and urged her to make an investment in herself, in her future, for her children. She sat with her hands clasped between her legs and stared at the grapes. I sat in an armchair, watching. I could barely stand it, but I said nothing.

Jackie and Tiffany gave up, and the woman asked if she could catch a ride home with us. She directed me down side streets across downtown, past houses with boarded windows and storefront churches with hand-painted signs, until we wound up in the Quindaro, a neighborhood of

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plain postwar four-room bungalows that's often on the ten o' clock news for shootings and fires.

As the woman stepped out of my car, I caught a glimpse of her face in the rearview mirror. She wore a look of deep loss and shame, as if she'd just blown the only opportunity she'd ever have to improve her lot in life. She climbed the broken steps and went inside.

I finished my proposal for a book about Jackie and her church just before Thanksgiving, and my agent sent it to the publisher of my first book. I hoped for a quick sale because I was almost out of money. While I waited, I went to California to give a reading in a black bookstore and to follow Jackie as she attended an ACN convention. Only two people came to the reading, the last of my tour, and they were friends who'd already bought copies. When I arrived at the Anaheim Convention Center, I felt as though I'd walked into a rock concert. All around the arena, people stood and danced as "We Are Family" played and laser lights cast crazy patterns across their faces and the rafters above. Jackie was somewhere among them, though I couldn't spot her from the balcony. The song ended, and the company's president and co-founder strode onto the stage with a thin microphone attached to his ear and said, "Our job is to pour back into you what your job and society have drained out of you. And once you're freed, you have to share it with others. You have to have a ministry mentality. Make your success in ACN an outflow from your life into someone else's life. It's a gift." He was the same man who had given the Sherman tank speech a year earlier, the one Jackie had found so inspiring. He paced as he spoke, and after pause, a long scan of the faces in the crowd, he said, "Instead of looking at people, you look at people as walking, talking customers and acquisition bonuses."

Afterward, I met Jackie behind the stage area, where she'd gathered with a dozen or so other ACN reps from all over the country to plan a church service for the final day of the conference. They stood in a circle, and Jackie said, "ACN does everything with excellence, and we need to, too. It's gotta look like, Wow! What are these guys on? I want some of that!"

Then Jackie and I went to the "Success Store," a line of booths near the main entrance of the auditorium where ACN souvenirs were for sale—umbrellas, windbreakers, fleece jackets, polo shirts and T-shirts, all with some variation of the ACN logo. There was a briefcase for \$29.95,

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a baseball hat with ACN in gold across the front for \$14.95 and a men's jogging suit for \$98.99. Jackie strolled past the merchandise slowly. If she could afford it, she told me, most of her wardrobe would be ACN gear. She rubbed the silky sleeve of a pink jumpsuit between her thumb and forefinger. It cost \$78.99. "Oh, well," she sighed, let go of it, moved on. "One thing at a time."

We walked back to her hotel to meet up with Tiffany and another friend named Andrea, with whom she'd tripled up in a double. As we made our way through the convention center's lobby, we passed the man who was at the first ACN meeting I'd attended at the Clarion in Kansas City. He had a crowd around him, and they looked up at him and listened as though he were a prophet. "Stop drinking, stop smoking," he told them. "Put all your energy into your success and you will achieve success." On the wall behind him hung a banner that read, "It's more than a weekend. It's a way of life."

As we moved along the palm-lined walkway to the hotels, Jackie told me, "This is like my revival four times a year." I looked at all the people bustling about with their ACN badges dangling on lanyards around their necks, all of them dressed for business—suits, casual slacks and knit pullovers, designer jeans—and all of them looked poor and desperate to me, and I felt sick inside.

Earlier that day, my agent had called to tell me that the publisher had rejected my proposal. I was disappointed but not surprised. In fact, I was relieved to not have to write the story because I didn't believe in it any more. Or rather, the story had changed. In the coming weeks, I would recast the idea. I'd open my laptop, create a new document and type an aphorism about Christianity so bold and unusual that it would stun even a New York editor. I'd spend weeks trying to craft a proposal around it. But as the last of the money from the sale of my first book ran out, so too would I run out of confidence in my own ideas and skills, in my ability to deliver something big enough to deliver me.

On Sunday morning, I met Jackie in the Grand Ballroom of the Marriott near the convention center, a vast carpeted space with a crystal chandelier hung at the center of its arched ceiling. Several hundred chairs arranged in long, straight rows faced a stage with two video monitors on either side of it, both alive with images of a Christian revival, both with the sound turned down. The scene on the screens looked like the ACN conference, with concert lights and people on their feet clapping,

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dancing, beaming, ecstatic. On stage, a band tuned up, and the bass player played the opening notes to “Money, Money, Money.”

I found a seat near the front. A woman took center stage and asked everyone to stand and join her in prayer. “Gosh, Lord, there is so much to be thankful for,” she said, eyes closed, face turned toward the chandelier. “We pray for our country. We pray for the whole world, Lord. For the soldiers who are protecting our nation. We pray, Jesus, too, for our president, George Bush, to continue to make good decisions. And that our country supports him. And we pray that he will continue to look to Jesus as his number one counsel. And we pray for the founders of ACN, for giving us such a blessed company, and to continue making good opportunities.”

She introduced the preacher, who was from a church in Simi Valley, a wealthy suburb of Los Angeles, an Asian man in his late thirties, dressed comfortably in a knit-collar shirt and tan Dockers. “I’m so excited to be here,” he said as he adjusted the microphone stand. “I knew this was going to be an ACN event, where you’re trying to get some information just to get fired up about your business. And I’m like, wow, this morning you can get so much more. This is much more important.”

He spoke with an air of awe, like someone who once took a lot of acid, or a preschool teacher. He talked about the earth, how enormous it is compared to the size of the ballroom we were gathered in, and yet how tiny our world is compared to the sun. And how our sun is small in comparison to Sirius, the Dog Star, brightest star in the night sky, and Sirius is much smaller still than Eta Carinae, which is, in turn, smaller than Betelgeuse, which is smaller than VY Canis Majoris, a star a billion times the size of our sun.

“And we’re here on this little planet called Earth,” he said. “What is more important than knowing the God who made all of that? That’s it. There’s nothing more. What else is there to know but to be secure in the God who made it all?”

His sermon returned from the outer reaches of the universe to his boyhood bedroom, where, he claimed, after a series of family tragedies, God spoke to him and he answered the call.

“Think about it,” he said after the climax of his story. “If you were to die today, would God let you into heaven?” He paused to scan the crowd. “If you ask most people in the world, most would say, ‘I think so.’”

He feigned incredulity.

“You think so?”

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He stepped away from the podium, moved closer to the crowd, raised his arms as if to lure us into a hug. “None of us is perfect,” he said. “God has every right to punish us. But He looks down on us in this little ballroom, on this little planet, and He still says, ‘I love you.’”

The preacher invited us to come to the edge of the stage, where a half dozen volunteers were lining up to receive us and lead our prayers for Jesus to enter our hearts, so that we might be saved. Jackie stood among them, dressed in an ACN shirt and jeans, her hands pressed together. I went near to hear as she talked with a woman, but it was too noisy. The band played a gentle song, and on the other side of the stage a man shouted in tongues. Jackie took the woman’s hands in hers and listened as the woman whispered in her ear; then they closed their eyes and prayed as a crew of hotel workers made their way toward the front of the ballroom, stacking chairs as they went along, piling them onto carts that were filled up and wheeled away, and by and by the room emptied, and someone dimmed the lights, as if nothing had ever happened there.

\*Some of the names in this essay have been changed.



### Joe Miller

Joe Miller is the author of *Cross-X*, winner of the William Rockhill Nelson Award and the Harry Chapin Media Award in 2007. His essays and short fiction have appeared in *Salon*, *New Letters*, *Pleiades* and *Decomp*. He’s an assistant professor of writing at Columbus State University in Georgia.