

Honk, If You Love Jesus

What looked like a hearing aid was really an earphone to a small radio in Fran Murphy's pocket. He wasn't disinterested in old Father Healy's homily, but the vigil mass conflicted with the college football scoreboard. For a bookmaker, this was the equivalent of closing markets for a stock broker. In no way did he resemble the popular image of his trade. He was a clean cut, if slightly overweight, version of what he also was: a retired professional baseball player. His now somewhat lumpy frame did not hide his athletic past.

Church afforded the only unobstructed view of Fran's nearly bald head; the rest of the time it was covered by a Chicago Cubs baseball cap. His lumbering six and a half foot frame with shiny top brought to mind a lightpost. The avuncular priest's words always seemed to be directed at him; not only because of the physical prominence, but also to facilitate any lip reading that Fran's apparent hearing impairment might necessitate. Into his left ear came the incomplete scores from the west coast, while the priest's words on better living entered the right. "In Pac Ten action, Oregon State has jumped out in front of U.C.L.A., 7-0 in the first quarter." Fran needed the Beavers; he was almost a thousand high to the Bruins minus 20. "A reading from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians," Father Healy intoned; looking and sounding like Barry Fitzgerald, a resemblance enhanced through cultivation. Fran sat erect as he tried to absorb both channels simultaneously, and savored the faint smell of incense remaining from a funeral earlier that day.

Murphy saw no theological conflict between his gambling business and his religion. He paid his taxes and was generous to the church. If the yahoos in Baton Rouge wanted to single out sports betting as illegal, it created no strains on his conscience to ignore them. The state was full of casinos, video poker machines, and race tracks. That it was against the law to take the Saints and the points bothered him not at all; he was secure that he rendered unto Caesar and to God in fair measure.

By the time Father Healy had begun distributing communion, the U.C.L.A. game hung in the balance. As Fran rose from the communion rail, the voice on the radio spoke: "It's all over in Corvallis, U.C.L.A. comes back and tops the Beavers," Fran swallowed the wafer and held his breath, "U.C.L.A. 34, O.S.U. 15." He instinctively raised his fist in triumph, and unknowingly captured the priest's attention. The father smiled at Fran's sudden demonstration of spiritual fervor. An evangelical spirit, he thought, might be just what Our Lady of Old Hickory Church needed.

The parishioners filed quietly out of the small Victorian church; Father Healy greeted all, but saved special salutations for Murphy. With a wide smile, half closed eyes, and a two fisted grasp of Fran's offered hand; he spoke sotto voce, "God bless ya Franny, see the wife and kids in the mornini."

No fewer than twelve hundred souls resided in the village of Old Hickory, Louisiana; about two hundred bore the surname Tutwiler. The general and Tutwiler population was

almost equally divided between black and white. In fact the community was known as Tutwiler, at the time that Andrew Jackson camped there with his volunteers on the way to the Battle of New Orleans. Upon his

election to the presidency, the locals changed the name in his honor. The vote, 32-17, marked the peak of the Tutwiler ascendancy; a total of fifteen white men of property in 1830. It was an indication of their popularity that only two non-Tutwilers voted to keep the name. Those fifteen were antecedents of all of the

present day white Tutwilers and probably some of the black ones. Officially, of course, the black Tutwilers descended from emancipated slaves who took their former owner's name. Few of them possessed the Hapsburg chin that marked almost all of the white Tutwilers.

If Murphy's evangelical spirit was new to the Catholic church there, it was routine at the First Holiness Tabernacle. On Sunday, while Fran Murphy's phone rang busily with betting inquiries, across town the Reverend Early T. Tutwiler was attacking the devil in high dudgeon. He had been preaching only about ten minutes, but already his armpits showed dark perspiration stains as did the area

beneath his suspenders on his short sleeve dress shirt. Droplets clung from his long, black sideburns. His face reddened and the vessels on his nose expanded as he marched across the platform, microphone flush to his lips: "And mistuh listen heah. If you ain't been baptized in the Lord, amen, and you ain't accepted Christ in your heart, amen, you're gonna burn bruthah. It ain't no more complicated than that!" Then he regurgitated a string of incomprehensible noises that sounded like the dialogue from a Godzilla movie. This, he explained, was the Holy Spirit causing him to speak in tongues.

Similar sounds had been uttered by Early before his saving, usually in the evening at Murph's Bar, the eating and drinking place Fran inherited from his father. It was there that the pre-reborn Tutwiler earned the nickname Early Times Tutwiler for his considerable fondness for that label. Appearance now kept him out of Murph's except for pastoral calls, but the brand still rested in abundance in the trailer he rented. Early saw no humor in his nickname, and pointed out that his middle name was Tithe. This provided a convenient link with the frequent financial appeals to his congregation.

The lifetime friendship of Fran and Early had never been threatened by their perpendicular religious beliefs. Nor had the agnosticism of Delbert Sims kept him from being the complementary member of the trio.

At the Pleez-Ur-Sef Quick Stop, proprietor Delbert Sims observed his dominion; clad in khaki, coin changer and hunting knife on his belt, service revolver holstered to his chest. He observed his two islands of gas pumps like a heron perched on the side of a bass laden pond. His leathered forehead was made

invisible by the brim of a year round straw hat, which joined the rims of his amber Ray-Bans. A pattern of acne scars was the only indication he had ever been young. His left leg from the knee down was a prosthesis from an industrial accident that had funded his retail venture. It also gave him a gait that, coupled with his weaponry, suggested that he was not someone to be messed with.

Sims was the town enabler; being the principal source of alcohol, tobacco, cigarette papers, lottery tickets, and condoms. He paid cash for food stamps; and kept a ready supply of soft pornography under the counter. Over the counter a sign read: "In God we trust, all others pay cash."

The sign was untrue on two counts. Delbert Sire's manifesto was clear, "Don't blame God for my bad luck, don't thank him for my good." He also kept a spiral notebook full of charge accounts of varying collectability. A permanent expression of hemorrhoidal pain greeted the customers, but with it an unwritten vow of silence. Purchases at the Pleez-Ur-Sef were as confidential as confessions

to Father Healy. All sports bets were likewise treated, as was their destination: the handbook of Francis X. Murphy.

There were always a few customers in holding patterns at the quick stop, waiting for a private moment to make a purchase. For Early Tutwiler, Delbert Sims provided home delivery and a charge account. They had been the double play combination on the high school runner-up state championship baseball team, way back when; Early at shortstop, Delbert at second base.

Fran Murphy had pitched them to the finals, taking a 1-0 lead into the bottom of the ninth. With two outs, Delbert lost a popup in the lights, putting the tying run on first. Then a sure double play ball went through Early's legs untouched. With the tying run on third and the winning run on second, the two collided behind second base on a routine fly. Both runners scored giving Fran his

only defeat of the season, and Early and Delbert lifetime notoriety.

"Tutwiler, Sims Miscues Spoil Murphy Gem," read the headline the next day. Fran had a professional future and knew it. He was disappointed, but not gripped with the despair that held Early and Delbert.

Delbert soon overcame the embarrassment of the incident and, in time, learned to joke about it. The game haunted Early every day of his life. It awakened him at night and interrupted him by day.

In private he would assume the ready position of the shortstop, glide to his left, and relive the path of the grounder. Each time he moved the imagined glove a little right, a little left, a little higher, or a little lower. How that ball got through, he did not know.

The muffed pop up was less perplexing but equally troubling. Early had called for the ball directly behind second base, but the crowd noise made his cry inaudible to Delbert. The two reached Up simultaneously, the ball tipped the tops of their gloves, and dropped to the ground. The scorer assigned the error to Early, and with it a life sentence.

After graduation Fran Murphy signed a professional contract with the Chicago Cubs; the aimless infielders joined the National guard. For Fran, it was the beginning of a twenty year pitching career spent mostly in the minor leagues. The notable exception for Fran and the Cubs was that he stuck with the big club during

that championship season, at thirty eight his last. In contrast for Early and Delbert, graduation launched adult lives lived at the margin: failed marriages to high school sweethearts, and paychecks computed by the hour and cashed by the week.

The three friends stayed close throughout Fran's professional career. He'd return home every winter and help his father with the place. He was good for business; even as a minor leaguer, his real life stories of a professional ball player were always in demand.

Fran was becoming known as a hard throwing left hander with a sore arm, when he developed a knuckleball which added at least five years to his career. His old New Orleans Little League coach, a bandy legged ex-catcher in the minors, taught him the pitch in the off season when Fran was on the verge of quitting the game.

The family had lived in New Orleans until he was fourteen. His parents sold their Irish Channel bar and restaurant, after the third armed robbery. They emigrated to Old Hickory which had no bar, no restaurant, and no armed robberies.

It was only after the elder Murphy's death and Fran's retirement from baseball that the family business expanded into bookmaking. Most of Murphy's betting action came from New Orleans over a toll free line. Fran's customers did not know his identity, but were comfortable with his working class New Orleans accent. An unknowing messenger service provided all collections and payoffs.

The clients knew him only as Mr. M., the successor to the business of Hooter Crowley, his Little League baseball coach and creator of the Murphy knuckleball.

Hooter's health was declining while his business was booming. His offer to Fran was too good to turn down: he'd teach Fran the ropes and turn over his clients in return for a small percentage. Shortly after the transition, Delbert Sims entered Fran's office at the bar, unannounced as usual. The visitor's eyes accidentally fixed on the bookmaker's betting sheets. The embarrassed friends

quickly reached an accommodation. Delbert's lips were sealed; in return Fran would take some of Delbert's betting action from the quick stop.

Their other common interest was the well-being of Early Tutwiler. Early's business, E.T.'s Hubcap Sales New & Used, had been the victim of the state highway program. Paving the roads in St. Tammany Parish visited a double hardship: not only did it reduce demand for hubcaps, it reduced the cheap inventory opportunities provided by the potholes.

Early was also earning less moonlighting as an Elvis Presley impersonator. Early's mellow baritone voice sounded remarkably like the king, and the wig concealed his balding gray pate. The problem was that even Elvis' girth, late in his career, was somewhat less ample than Early's; and a girdle had done all it could do. The Holiday Inn in Covington canceled his regular Saturday gig, and the

occasional party did not make up for the hundred a week he was used to. Worse, he had just dropped nearly three hundred dollars on a new, roomier, zirconia sequined jumpsuit for the act. It looked good enough that a lady spotted him entering the Holiday Inn in it and immediately called the National Enquirer, certain that she had sighted the real Elvis.

These two setbacks directly preceded Early's religious experience. Brother Ezekiel Evans of the First Holiness Tabernacle had heard Early perform once at the Holiday Inn. The gaunt preacher was visiting a gun show there dressed as always in his black frock coat, looking like some modern day Paladin. The music was very audible in the lobby; which was as close as Brother Evans was going

to get to the depravity going on in the bar. Now Brother Evans faced an ecclesiastical crisis. The Tabernacle's music minister had just quit to join a rock band, and Evans needed a replacement, fast.

At Murph's, two video poker machines were the only clue that it was the decade of the nineties not the sixties. The Rockola jukebox still contained Bing Crosby, Fats Domino, and Elvis Presley. A large jar of pickled hard boiled eggs rested next to Early's usual aperitif as he bemoaned his latest setback. "Don't

unnahstan, Murph. That dance floor's packed when I sing Love Me Tender. And the blacks? Why they love me. If I got a good number of'm, I get them lights down real low, turn the spotlight on an do In The Ghet-toe. An when I close, I giv'm that slow walk out with My Way, and they always want an encore. But that guy at the Holiday says they need to make a change."

Looking at Early through the mirror that ran the length of the bar, Fran was polishing glasses with his back turned. He stood next to framed photographs of President Kennedy and Pope John XXIII, vestiges of the business his father had in the city. "It's a bum deal E.T., they don't know talent down there. Probly replace you with one of those guys with a organ." Fran's voice showed concern, but he had been offering Early sympathy for endless bouts of bad luck since high school. After thirty years the responses were uttered by rote.

Brother Evans overheard the conversation. He was checking the display, that Fran provided for the local churches, to make sure that his pamphlets were in adequate supply and visible at eye level. He crouched with hands on both knees to examine the competing brochures. "Mistuh Tutwilah," his voice boomed without taking his eye off of the church rack, "if you used yo talent for the Lord instead

the devil, yo luck'd change."

Early rolled his eyes and looked at Fran for support, but Fran was staying out of it. Brother Evans wheeled around, eyes darting left and right, and moved face to face with Early. "I need a music minister and you my man. Heard you singin that saytanic stuff down at the Holiday. You got the talent, just need to come over to the Lord. Amen. I can pay fifty a week, two services on Sunday. Brother Evans

eyes scanned the bar fixing for a second on the pictures of Kennedy and the Pope. Directly above was a display for a popular whiskey with the slogan, "smooth as satin" which he read as satan. This only confirmed to the preacher that he had landed in Lucifer's lair. Evans peered impatiently at his recruit seeking

a response.

Early leaned back, desperate but uncomfortable. "Make it seventy five and ya got ya a deal."

"The Lord can't afford but fifty, Tutwilah. You need to sacafice when you doin' God's work. How bout sixty five." Early gave him a reluctant nod.

"I assume you ain't been baptized, Tutwilah, judgin from that filth you was singin down at the Holiday," Brother Evans declared. "Matter a fact, my folks was pennycostals. They did, yessuh." Early replied confidently but really wasn't sure; but he was not about to be dunked in the Tchefuncte River, and was afraid a

submersion baptism might be a condition of employment. The preacher accepted the avowal and scurried out with Early's commitment.

After a very few impromptu rehearsals, Brother Evans presented his new music minister to the congregation. The Tutwiler brand of sacred melody quickly became the center piece of the services. His piano was a sanctified version of Jerry Lee Lewis, and his Elvis-like tones were a perfect complement to the gospel favorites. It also kept Early in shape for his occasional Elvis performances,

which he did not disclose to the preacher.

One thundery Saturday, Early was driving onto Brother Evans farm when it happened. He was thinking whether, if he had just knocked the ball down, he might still have had time for the double play. He could see bright sunshine to the west, but black clouds

churned directly over him. Suddenly he felt a chill in the air, the hair on his arms curled, and the sky flickered. His eardrums ached

from the boom that followed. Brother Evans and the tractor he piloted had not made it to the end of the soybean furrow; the pastor had been transported to eternity by a single bolt of lightning. Early had been the lone witness.

Early had just enough bible study and spirituality to glean a message from the event. "Lawd must want me to take over for PO Bruthah Evans else he wooden a put me here. Why'd he put me in fronta that double play ball?" He viewed the game and Evans tragedy as moments of equal definition to his being. Whatever spiritual mystery surrounded the grounder did not extend to the lesson of the

extinct Brother Evans. He had received a "sho nuff callin."

"Split'im open like a watermelon," he clinically explained to the congregation, trying to convince folks that Brother Evans' rapture was a positive message from heaven. A more popular view among the worshipers was that Brother Evans was struck down because of his frequent purchase of lottery tickets at the Pleez-Ur-Sef.

About a third of the hundred members quit in the wake of Brother Evans'

demise. Being unsure of what portent the event held, they were taking no chances. The rest, convinced of Early's reasoning, quickly elected him pastor. Preaching for a full hour was a new challenge but Early rose to it quickly.

"I ain't never been to college, but I ain't never been to jail neither. Praise God. But when I got this here bible in my hand, amen, the Holy Gose'll speak to yuh through me, amen. Do I have a witness?" A few amens came forth. When his still unhoneed message hit frequent dead spots, he'd grab his tambourine and head for the piano. What his conversion lacked in depth, it made up for in breadth.

After a song softened up the assembly, he would slip in a financial appeal, "Remember Malachi Three, amen. The Lord says bring full tithes to the storehouse, amen. The floodgates of heaven will open in abundance, amen. Do ya hear me? I cain't preach if I cain't eat. Praise God!" The response was tepid at best and Early knew something was missing.

He had attended a tent revival given by a traveling faithhealer a few months back, and was awe struck by the miracles he witnessed; crutches thrown away, sight and hearing restored. He attached no relevance to the fact that all of the cured were visitors as well as the preacher. "If that s.o.b. can do that, I can too," he thought. Then as with all new goal setting, the game would return to his mind. The grounder with eyes that skipped over his glove, the collision with Delbert. "No, probly cain't do it. Ma faith jus ain't good enough." This was about to change thanks to a chance encounter with a black man named Tutwiler.

Early bore no rancor toward blacks but was genuinely puzzled by their place in the cosmos. "They ain't one word about the nigra anywhere in the scriptures. I know I've looked high and low." The absence of caucasian citations did not occur to Early since he assumed that all biblical characters were so. Revelashuns Tutwiler, he came to believe, occupied a providential role in his ministerial career. Certainly the common surname was a factor and, notwithstanding the spelling, the first name was as well. At least half of Early's preaching centered on the Book of Revelation; Apocalypse and Armageddon occupied much of his sober moments.

To Early their meeting was a sign heaven sent. Revelashuns was stopped in his pickup truck at Old Hickory's only traffic light, directly in front of the Pleez-Ur-Sef, when he was unexpectedly moved about thirty feet forward by an aging Lincoln Continental. The collision produced a reactive response on the remains of a cheroot nestled in the side of Revelashuns' mouth, upon which he nearly choked. The car was driven by its third owner, Early T. Tutwiler.

Revelashuns rotated out of his truck stiffly, discarded the cigar butt, and massaged his neck with a right hand that would have fit a body twice his size. Even in bib overalls, he had a distinguished demeanor that belied his diction.

"Oh my no, Lawd Lawd, my haid, my back, my arthritis!" Revelashuns was frightened and in pain. Early had drained about half of the pint of Early Times on the front seat of the Lincoln. While not falling down drunk, he was clearly impaired and in no mood for the police to arrive. He gobbled a packet of sen-sen as he jumped out of his car.

"You awright son? Damn, thought for sho that light had changed. Have to get that bumpa fixed; we can do that quick like. Yessuh, get ya over to the chiopacta and straighten out that crick in yo neck. What's yo name anyway?" Early clawed the last two Milk Duds from a rumpled box in his pocket. He offered one to the victim who quickly gobbled it up, leaving a mark of chocolate on his gold

tooth.

"Revelashuns, sub, Revelashuns Tutwilah. My neck sho hurts'n look at my PO truck." He peered at his "Honk If you Love Jesus" bumper sticker fixed to his amputated bumper.

"Lawd, Lawd. What'd I do to desuhv all dis. Who you, Mistuh." Even in pain, his compact work-hardened body stooped only slightly.

"A preacher, son, Brother Early T. Tutwilah, First Holiness Tabernacle just yonda the quick stop, back on Jackson St. But we gotta get you outta the street fo you git hit or sumpm. Feller me to my trailer house and we'll get ya all squared away."

"Yassuh. Gotta get dis bumpa up. Oh, my neck."

"Hang on, son." Early hitched his pants, leaned over with a grin, and lifted the bumper into Revelashun's truck.

"I seen yo bumpa sticka, you a Christian?"

"My mama went to church all da time. Dat bumps thing was on the truck when I got it. Ain't never moved it. Don't go to no church; they all the time axin ftmoney, and I ain't got none. She name me afta sumpm in da bible."

The two Tutwilers processed to the front of Early's trailer. The still air held the wind chimes on the steps motionless. Long weeds overgrew the stepping stones, but Early knowingly touched them all as his new acquaintance followed.

"Sho sorry bout that bumps, son. How's the neck?" Early flipped on the air conditioner and sunk into his recliner, the only comfortable piece of furniture he owned.

"Still hurtin Mistuh Oily. Hope it get better soon. I'm makin too much for the Medicaid and cain't afford no pay doctor." Revelashuns spoke as he sat onto the edge of a straight backed chair like a man who would not be staying long.

"Revelashuns, what you need is a healin'. You need to get yo faith together, accept the Lord, and by God, I'll heal ya right here and now!" He nodded in the direction of a plastic relief of the Last Supper on the wall. His confidence was growing.

"Tole ya I ain't got no money. What'd you say bout da chiopacta? Oh my neck."

Early rocked out of his chair. "Son they ain't no charge. How bout a drink?" He took out two glasses and put half of the remaining pint into each. About a minute and two empty glasses later, he went to the cupboard for reinforcements.

"What you need, son, is faith. With the faith, you see, you won't need no chiopacta, no pay doctor, no nuthin'. Jus bow yo head an start a prayin."

Revelashuns did as he was told while Early put his glass down, freeing his hands up for what was to come. He placed his hands softly around Revelashun's neck in a mock choke hold.

"Son, this healin's serious stuff. Be prayin' hard cause I'm fixin! to commence." With that Early closed his eyes, began to mumble, and tighten his hold.

"Lord, take this evil crick in this man's neck and drive it from here, amen. In the name of Jaysuz, I drive out the demon crick!:" With a howl Revelashuns moved from Early's grasp, lurching into Early's display of Elvis Presley limited edition porcelain collector's plates which miraculously fell to the floor unharmed.

"Don't know bout no demons, but you like to choke me to death, Mistuh Oily. Dem plates okay?"

"They awright, son. " He gathered them carefully and restored them to their position of honor. "Son, I told you this healin's serious stuff. How yo neck feelin now?" The whiskey had begun to do the job.

"Don't feel that bad come to think of it. Guess I'm o.k. This mean I'm saved too?"

"Reckon it does son. We both had to have the faith for this healin to work. You should join the church; it'd set a good example, you bein' healed and saved all at once."

Early saw the possibilities. He was now batting a thousand on healings and had the makings of his first testimonial.

"Mistuh Oily, can't afford to join no church. But I'm sho glad you fix dat neck a mine. If'n you get my bumpa back on, I'll jus get back home."

"Son, I'll fix da bumps and it won't cost you nothin' to join the church. I just need ya to give testimony that you been healed.

Revelashuns eyes grew wide at the mention of the word testimony.

"Ain't goin to no coathouse. No sub. Ain't been there in a long, long time."

"No coathouse son, I mean in church. You know, tell all the folks you been healed, been saved. Unnahstan?"

"Yassuh. I'd do that, specially you put that bumpa back on."

The screen door of Early's trailer slammed shut behind them. Revelashuns ambled down the steps to his truck with his preacher close behind with his toolbox.

Early hitched his pants again, but this time bent with a grimace not a grin. Even at sunset September in Louisiana was steamy; and his ration of bourbon whisky contributed to the perspiration flow. He dragged his bandanna from his left ear across his forehead to his right, as he studied the place of the missing

bumper.

"Just hold that bumpa right theah, son, I'll git it right on the backa yo truck." After a few bangs and several turns of the wrench, the bumper returned to its original place; neither noticed that the message on the bumper sticker was now upside down. To all appearance both Revelashuns and his truck had been repaired. The white Tutwiler reminded the black Tutwiler of his spiritual commitment.

"Ten o'clock Sunday son? First Holiness Tabernacle. You get there bout nine or so, and we'll go over what you need to do. If the love offrins come in pretty good, there might be a l'il sumpm left over for you."

Revelashuns assured Early he'd be on time Sunday and made his way home. His ten year old twin daughters, Joyce and Rejoyce, were playing jacks in front of the house as he pulled up. Their co-victory in the L'il Miss Louisiana beauty pageant had provided the family with the down payment on the house. It mattered little that over three hundred monthly payments remained on his avocado Jim

Walter rancher; Revelashuns Tutwiler was a proud homeowner.

He approached the front door with a twin in each arm. His tongue discovered and removed the Milk Dud particle as he sniffed the smoky, bitter essence of collards and bacon coming from the kitchen.

He dismissed the daughters with a kiss at the foot of the stairs. Then as he reached for the front door, it opened as if by remote control. He stumbled slightly, directly into the abundant bosom of Mrs. Tutwiler.

"Revvv, where you been? Thought sumpm happened. I was about to call the po-leece. You smell like whiskey. You shouldn't do me like that!" Revelashuns related the whole story with special emphasis on the saving, inasmuch as Mrs. was a never miss churchgoer.

She was highly skeptical, especially of the religious experience. Her lecture was especially effective, as her stature was considerably greater than her husband's in every dimension.

"Never heard a no one bein saved in a whisky bottle. Why didn't you call the poleece and git a lawya. They got a eight hunnad number on the teevee that the lawya give you money if you hit from behind. You been tricked worse than when you bought that gravel truck. You gonna be payin the ressa yo life."

Revelashuns slumped his shoulders penitently and shook his head in confusion. He was particularly sensitive to criticism of the gravel truck that pridefully bore the logo, "Revelashuns Tutwiler-Old Hickory, La." on both doors. He might be paying for the truck and the house for a long ways, but then he'd come a long ways too.

"Don't be talkin bout my truck now. It's feedin you, me., an de chirrun!" His tone of voice had changed to one of authority, and with it peace was restored.

On Sunday Revelashuns departed to quizzical looks from his wife, and reported as promised in suit and tie. Early gave him a quick run through of the service; and placed him in a chair, in the corner opposite the piano. He sat uncomfortably on the edge as he

had in the trailer. He was unused to associating with whites in their homes, much less their churches. The inadequate window air

conditioner imparted some cool air in his direction and dripped cold water steadily on his head. As the all white church members entered, they couldn't help but notice the only black person there, seated alone.

"I'm pleased to innaduce our most newest memba, Mr. Revelashuns Tutwiller," Early announced over the banging of the air conditioner.

Then with his head bowed, eyes heavenward, and a grin added, "A course no kin." He had the astonished assembly's attention and began to relate the healing and the saving that had occurred.

"An if da lawd'll heal and save dis po black man, jes think what he can do for you!" Revelashuns gave out a loud amen, and began rotating his neck repeatedly; indicating its soundness while slapping the tambourine. "Yessuh, Brah Oily cure me good. Neck don't hurt stall no suh . " His testimony over, he returned to his chair, wiggling uncomfortably on the cold wet spot created by his departure.

Early, meanwhile, resumed his description of the hereafter.

"Now it says right here, you gonna get a white robe, amen. You'll enter a city of pure gold, amen. Exactly twelve, count'em twelve pearly gates by God." He had just about memorized the most appealing passages of Revelation.

The members were convinced, but burdened with sundry ailments that demanded Early it's curative powers. The incident with Revelashuns had convinced Early that "if the Lord'll just keep them miracles comin," the church and Early could prosper.

The healing of Revelashuns Tutwiler proved to be a case of beginner's luck. Not a single blessing of a member produced another cure. Early concentrated with all his might, and always the result was the same. True, Miz Bertha Mae Eddy did report contraction in the size of a goiter on the front of her neck, but all agreed it

had returned to its former size. After a couple of weeks, Early gave Revelashuns twenty dollars, thanked him, and relieved him of his service. He concluded that whatever future his ministry had would be outside of healing.

"Sho cured me, Brah Oily Tie, sho did. It'll come back, you watch." Revelashuns, still a believer, shook Early's hand pumping over and over.

"Don't know, Revvy, don't know." Early hung his head, eyes down; another groundball was rolling through his legs. He relaxed his hold on Revelashuns hand, and with a resigned pat on the back said goodbye.

At Murphy's, Delbert was dividing money and worrying to Fran about Early.

"That boy's actin mighty strange, Fran. Been hooked up with them holy rollers a while now. Brought Early his whisky last week, told me he'd cured a nigger. Said he's got the faith to cure anything. Told him if he could, he oughta cure hisself and stop askin me about that goddamn baseball game."

Fran winced at Delbert's racial pejorative but knew it was hopeless to try to change him.

"Early's fuckin sick. That's the bottom line Del. He ain't never gonna get over that game. With that they went back to reconciling the week's football action."

The failed healings devastated Early's ministry and his psyche. The church folded and he found himself in a familiar place: unemployed, in Murph's Bar, drinking on credit, and reliving the game.

Early needed a job, any job. Fran told him of a friend in Franklinton, who was looking for a tractor salesman. The dealer had begun importing a new Chinese line, and needed someone to go on the road to demonstrate it to farmers. Fran had actually already spoken to the guy about Early, and asked the dealer to hire him as a favor. Early jumped at the opportunity: a paycheck and a chance to get out of town.

His first assignment was a large cotton farm in Mississippi. The appointment made, he headed east with the tractor towed behind on a flatbed trailer. Leaving town, he spotted Revelashuns' gravel truck parked at the Pleez-Ur-Sef.

"How's that neck doin, son? Sayin yo prayers?" he yelled.

"Yessuh, Brah Early Tie, yessuh. Neck doin o.k. Thas right, Yassuh, sayin ma prayers. Gotcha new tracta?" Revelashuns asked.

"No , no son. Sellin' em. Goin' on the road. Say a prayer I do good, Revvy."

"Yassuh, I'll do that. Sho will." They smiled and waved; Revelashuns sounded his air horn in salute to his healer.

Just leaving Old Hickory calmed him. He was as relaxed as the dairy cattle he passed on the Washington Parish landscape. Entering Mississippi the view suddenly changed to red clay hills; surely the Lord had made Louisiana and Mississippi different on purpose.

As he drove on, not once did he reach for or think of the flask in his bag. The game had not crossed his mind all day; the zone of peace lasted the entire ride.

Two hours later he pulled up to the office at the cotton farm. He yawned and stretched as he applied the emergency brake. The manager walked out, Early dismounted and extended his hand. "Mistuh Givens? I'm Tutwilah, Ear. . ."

Before he could get his first name out, Givens interrupted: "Tutwalla, huh. Mus be from Looziana roun' Ole Hickry. Onliess Tutwalla I heard tell bout was that boy made them two erras in the championship toonamint. Twiced in one innin. Lissent to da game on the radio. Two erras-let the winnin run in. You any kin?"

Early tensed; here he was in another state, over a hundred miles from home, and it wasn't far enough. There was a buzz in his head that he knew only he could hear. The demons were back. His mind flashed first to the ground ball, then to the pop up, the collision with Delber'r Fran collapsing in disbelief.

"In the name of Jaysuz, " he prayed inaudibly, his eyes clenched. "Drive these demons out. Heal this man! Gaxxamumbum, sparifalid, innawowee. Amen."

He slumped to the ground like a knocked out prizefighter, fainting momentarily. The manager heard only the cadence of Early's attempt at tongues.

"You awright theah, Tutwalla. Heat getcha? You awright?"

He rose to all fours, squinting into the sun with a smile. Bringing himself erect, he hitched his pants, and nodded that he was fine. He jerked his bandana from his rear right pocket, dabbing his forehead confidently.

"Guess you'd say I was kin; it's my own self, Early T. Tutwilah made dem erras. Drove in the onliess run we scored too. Don't normally point that out; guess that counts for sumpm. Now lemme tell ya bout this Chinese tracta. You know them Chinamen, they been farmin' a million years!"

Back in Old Hickory, an afternoon thunderstorm gathered, Early's wind chimes sang, and in his trailer a phone call from the the Holiday Inn went unanswered.