

Ellie

Jason Lester Atkins

It was Saturday and Ellie Mullins was bathing in a basin beside the kitchen sink. Her husband Bascom worked only half-day shift on Saturday and was always home by 2 o'clock. She had set the washtub filled with hot water, for his bath, right in the middle of the linoleum covering the living room floor. Beside the tub she had placed a small basin mirror for Bascom to shave. It took a lot of hard scrubbing to get the mine dust off. She has put the same tub on the same floor every work day afternoon for the nine years she had been married to Bascom.

As she stood and bathed, she could hear him splashing in the living room. There was water piped into the house but no bathroom. During her first marriage, she had a bathtub and could never get used to standing nude at the sink and taking a complete bath with a small basin and washcloth. Bascom could afford a big automobile and a color television, but could not afford a bathroom. She knew he watched the televangelist so he could copy them in his meetings. Most of the time she had to take a quick bath before Bascom got home from work and "Sonny" got in from school. In the past nine years, her son had forgotten they used to have a bathroom and thought of Bascom as his father.



This had been a bad week for Ellie, maybe one of the unhappiest weeks of her life. For the past two months she had been feeling ill and finally on Monday, Bobbie Sue, her sister had taken her to the doctor. She had to sneak off. Bascom believed in faith healing by prayer and rejected doctors and medicine. She also knew that, regardless of his faith healing belief, her husband went to the "Herb Doctor" for potions when he was ill. Since her Monday visit to the doctor she had been worrying, "How can I tell Bascom?" The doctor had diagnosed her as being in an advanced stage of diabetes and given her an insulin shot. Before she left the office he had trained her how to give herself the shots and supplied her with enough insulin for a week. She had been afraid to put the medicine in the refrigerator as the doctor advised but hid it in the spring house to keep it cool. He warned her she would die without the shots. Sometimes she almost wished she were dead. It was like being in prison, married to Bascom Mullins. She had gained so much extra weight and hardly went out except to church with Bascom and Sonny. This was faith Saturday and the meeting started at six o'clock. It would be impossible to tell her husband before that meeting. He would become violent. Something changed in her husband just before any service he held. Most of the time he was just hard working and indifferent to her, he treated her as if she were property, or a house servant. She knew he could be violent and cruel. There was no reasoning with him when that look came into his eyes. The congregation at Sinkum Church didn't know this. He was always the pious elder around them. She knew she would have to tell him because she had fainting spells and needed a Pepsi Cola quickly to bring her sugar back into balance. What was she to do? All week she had lived with this worry. It had given her an awful headache. The thought of killing herself was almost easier than having to face Bascom.

She had finished bathing and wrapped a big bath towel around her body. Taking the basin from the sink she turned and walked out on the back porch. With a quick toss over the rail she emptied the basin, turned and hung her washcloth on the porch clothesline, and stepped back through the squeaking screen door into the kitchen. She heard her husband's voice calling, "Woman, woman, come here!"

She began to shiver. He always called her "woman" as an order; never by her name. Only when he wanted her for sex did he call her "Ellie." She walked into the living room to answer his call. The damp towel was still draped around her and outlined her belly and breast.

Bascom Mullins stood naked in the wash tub. He was a tall man. Hard work kept him slim and muscular. Long years of mine dust stained his naturally dark skin. He appeared to have a permanent dark tan. Coarse black hair covered his head and over his chest down to his groin. His legs were covered in dark curly hair to the top of his feet. The most striking thing about Bascom was his eyes. They were deep brown and beautifully arched by black eyebrows meeting across his nose. Those eyes were mysterious and many people who knew him could not decide whether they were looking into heaven or hell. Women especially found Bascom attractive. Perhaps some intuitive sense told them he was dangerous.

He motioned Ellie to come closer and said, "Bring me another kettle of hot water, this tub is getting cold." She glanced up at him still wondering how she could tell him of her diabetes. His eyes were fixed on her nipples showing through the damp towel. She knew that look too well! Just as she started to turn away to get the kettle, he caught her left breast in his strong right hand. He said just one word, "Ellie."

Panic hit her for a brief moment, then she recovered. Giving him a stern look, she said loudly, "No Bascom, you know what you always told me. No laying down just before a faith meeting. You need your strength. Your father taught you that! Remember?"

The flame began to dance out of his eyes but not before he had squeezed her breast so hard the pain almost brought her to her knees. He released her. The pain was almost unbearable, but she managed to get through the door and into the kitchen. A kettle of hot water was on the coal stove. The heat in the kitchen was so oppressive Ellie held on to the table to keep from falling. Recovering slightly, she picked up the kettle and moved back into the living room. She poured the hot water into the tub around Bascom's feet. Almost afraid to look at his face, she darted a quick glance and saw the "meeting eyes." Bascom was staring as if neither of them were in that room. With a jerk of his head, he said, "Woman, go get dressed."



Bascom broke his stare for a second and glanced at Ellie as she went into the bedroom. He would finish what he had started tonight in the bedroom for sure. He washed his feet and stepped from the dirty water onto the living room linoleum. As he dried himself, his mind returned to his religious duties. He needed at least an hour to be alone and quiet. During this hour, he would drink the potion the herb doctor supplied him. She supplied the same potion to his father and grandfather as elders before him. He didn't know the "conjure woman doctor" used jimson-weed roots. About an hour after drinking the liquid, Bascom's faith was clear and at its highest peak. He was visited by faith visions and could speak tongues. Should the effect be too strong, his father taught him to take two Goody headache powders and this would hold his mind even and steady.

There were times when Bascom wished his father had not laid his hands on his head as anointed elder. He remembered the night his father lay dying in this very house and called him to his bedside. Six deacons

were standing around his father's bed. He did not expect to be called, in fact, he had stayed away from his strict father as much as possible. The heat from his father's fingers, as he knelt beside the bed, would never leave his mind. Even at work he didn't get it altogether out of his mind. He had never been the same since. It was his duty now, he couldn't escape. Putting on only his undershorts, Bascom took the "potion" jug and sat in the big chair by the window.

It is 6:00 p.m. The June heat hangs over Sinkum church as people enter for the service. The building is a white rectangular clapboard that stood in the need of paint for the past twenty years. Over the large front door hangs a hand lettered sign reading,

"Church of Jesus - with signs following"
- Elder .. Bascom Mullins.

A cold mountain stream whispers close by on the right side and a small unpaved parkway lot is on the left. Laurel blossoms are in their peak. The moisture from Sinkum Creek creates an ideal growing spot in this hollow between the mountains. No other place in the Blue Ridge has so large an area covered with a display of blood red blossoms. There are walls of blossoms, almost up to the church door, filling the air with soft fragrance. The sky is the color of apricots. It is a perfect setting for the Saturday faith meeting.



The small church is filled when Ellie enters through the front door. Bascom walks around to the back entrance. Friends share quick greetings and small talk with Ellie, but there is a strange sense of hushed expectation in their manner. It is the same type of quiet they share before a funeral service. Ellie seats herself in her old place in the second row center. Her young son is seated beside her and she puts her arm over his shoulder and strokes his hair. Two deacons sit on the front bench before her. The heat in the church has caused Ellie's white blouse to be wet with perspiration. The church smelled of camphor and cheap cologne. Outside, near the rear door, the other two deacons were waiting with Bascom.

Ellie glances up to the left of the stage. The musicians are seated in a semi-circle with two very tall amplifiers standing behind them. She knows them all. Kirby and Lydia Elkins play the acoustic guitars as a husband and wife team. Both of them work at Kroger's, over in the Richlands, in the produce department. Their son, Bobby Elkins, plays the bass guitar and Dewey Nickels set the beat with cymbals. The men wear long sideburns and cast flirtive eye glances at the audience. All the tambourines stacked at the front door have been picked up by the regular players now, seated in the church. There is no organized choir or choir leader. Ellie continues to glance around. She has known most of these people in her years of attending Bascom's church and loved them. There is a sweet innocence about them but it is never really comfortable. In their belief, to prove their faith, they have to handle serpents.

The whispers stop. Two deacons enter the back door near the pulpit. Each carries a wooden box stained the color of coffee. The tops are half solid and half covered with a hinged wire cover that can be lifted. On the box sides are carved the words, " Jesus Saves". The deacons place boxes beside their brothers on the front row. Almost on their heels, the Elder Mullins strides in and seats himself in the chair on the stage. With his bible cradled in both hands and his head bowed he looks only at the floor.

As if on cue, the band begins to play. The loud amplified instruments fill the small church with sound. The music is a cross between salvation army and acid rock. It carries from one note to the other like the

instruments are being sawed in half. The congregation stands without any other direction and begins to sway and sing a gentle known hymn.

***" I shall not be I shall not be moved
Just like a tree planted by the water ----
Oh ! ---- I shall not be moved! "***

Then the guitars take a dark and dissonant turn. The sound is like a fretted wail. Tambourines in the congregation pick up an elevated beat. The people begin to move into the aisles with their heads thrown back shouting, " Praise Jesus. "

They sing a different song now with voices becoming as raw and tortured as Janis Joplin. Suddenly, abruptly, the lunatic music stops and everything seems to go into slow motion. Bascom raises his head for the first time. He stands with his dark eyes fixed over the head of the audience. He takes two steps to the pulpit and utters a cry, " Great God ! Great God Almighty ! This is real ! This is real ! "

Except that it was in church it might have been a blasphemous oath. The wild strangeness in his voice and look in his eyes make chills run down the spines of the congregation. They know this is going to be a fine meeting. Bascom is in top condition. The " potion " he took early in the afternoon was working.

During the increased shouting the rattle and scratching of the serpents in the boxes could be heard.

With a quick turn of pages in his bible, Bascom starts to read a passage. The same passage is read at every faith meeting. He reads from Mark 16:17 The Foundation of their faith.

***"And these signs shall follow them that believe;
In my name shall they cast out devils;
They shall speak with new tongues;
They shall take up serpents; and if
they drink any deadly thing, it shall not
hurt them; They shall lay hands on the
sick, and they shall recover. "***

Laying the bible on the pulpit lectern, he turns his hypnotic eyes on his flock. They eagerly respond with, " Amen, Amen, Praise Jesus ! "

Bascom speaks again, " This thing is real ! ---- Aaa - Baa, - Jo - Ba, To - Kee, To Ko, Aaa - Ba, Jo - Baa. " Speaking in tongues has begun.

Two women from the third row begin to shout in tongues and jerk their bodies in simulated sexual ecstasy. They move into the aisle and fall prone on the floor. Children stare, half in curiosity and half in fear.

Shouts come from all parts of the congregation " Everything's gonna be all right ! "

Some leave their standing spots and move up to the pulpit. They kneel and pray in screaming voices. Each prays a separate prayer as if not conscious of one another. All the while the music is continuing like some waco, amphetamine dirge. The facial expressions of the musicians and the congregation has changed as

though something or someone was being innocently taken away from them. Their movements are almost like erotic sexual ecstasy, where the first thing to go is self in surrender.

Bascom is dancing around in a tight circle shouting in tongues. One of the deacons is dancing in a jumping motion up and down in place with the key ring fastened to his belt keeping time in a jingling tune.

The other deacon on stage moves to the first wooden box. He slides the lid back and picks up a wriggling mass of copperheads. They cling, winding together in a mass as he holds them up. Their small copper heads glint like gold in the overhead light. The jumping deacon stops and takes the snakes in his hand and places them on his head like a hat.

The guitars scream and the congregation is wild with the anointing of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost has descended like a hurricane and all are in danger of being swept away. All are being caught up except Ellie. She is standing by Sonny and swaying. Her throat burns with extreme thirst. For long moments she is dizzy. Then her head clears and she glances at her husband dancing and shouting on stage. As her mind clears, her word thoughts feed her awareness. She begins to know herself again.

Bascom has moved to the other box. He opens the lid and removes a huge black timber rattlesnake. Like a sleepwalker he picks it up. Another wave of silence over the audience. They have never witnessed such a huge serpent in their services. The snake is so limp it drapes over Bascom's shoulder down to the floor at his back. It is one of the most deadly species of serpent with a straw pink belly and perfect black chevrons on its back. The neck is narrow holding a huge triangular head as wide as a woman's hand. It tests the music sounds with its tongue and cocks its head around as if trying to find a way out of its predicament. Bascom holds the serpent with both hands. He has been anointed with faith and has no fear. His shirt is drenched in sweat and he is stuttering in tongues. The hypnotic eyes he uses to transfix the congregation are now rolling in his head like a horse who smells smoke.

Ellie thought, glancing at him for a brief moment, " Doesn't he look absurd. "

Just as quickly a warm calm feeling comes over her body. A strange light of freedom and purpose replaces confusion and servitude in her mind. She quickly moves out of the pew. The amplified music is circling the room like fog. She moves down the aisle and past the deacons. She takes the one step up on the stage next to Bascom. He does not seem to be aware of her even though his eyes are staring in her direction.

All the lights in the church seem to change for Ellie. They soften into liquid amber, her eyelids close. Her fingers extend into a curiously splayed pattern that suggests desire in process of being remediated. With both hands she takes the heavy snake from her husband and drapes it over her shoulder to support its weight. For a moment her left breast that, Bascom had bruised that afternoon, hurt. The pain soon was replaced with a smile on her face. The snake stopped testing the music with its tongue and cocked its ugly head back. For a moment, Ellie's eyes open and meet the hooded eyes of death. The snake created a warning rattle that could be heard over the music and shouting. For an instant its long yellow fangs are visible before they sink in Ellie's throat. The curved fangs lodge in her neck muscle as the venom sack empties into her carotid artery. She is still standing. The smile of choice is



still on her face. The music stops. The shouting stops. For the congregation a climatic ecstasy has peaked. Blood mixed with perspiration on Ellie's blouse as she drops the serpent and crumples to the floor.

Now, all the pains she ever had are melted into peace.

The End

" Ellie "