

TO DIE IS GAIN

Kenneth Andrus

“Do you accept the Lord Jesus Christ into your life as your personal Lord and Savior, Ms. Mary Anne?”

“Yes, Pastor, I do,” Mary Anne replied, wringing her hands and resisting the urge to scratch the back of her neck. The skin there was already red and splotchy. Her hair was dull and stringy, and her veins were rough and calloused. After her fourth miscarriage, Mary Anne was clean for the seventh time, and it had been thirteen days and seventeen hours since she had even seen a syringe. Or was it seventeen days and thirteen hours? Or thirteen hours and seventeen minutes? What year was it?

The Pastor looked upon the wired-up, wiry woman who couldn't seem to maintain eye contact. Before she could notice the look on his face, he regained his composure and cleared his throat.

He adopted a smile. “Mary Anne.” When he realized her attention was focused on some invisible distraction, he barked her name again. She shrunk a little at his tone, but forced herself to look at him.

“I need you to take this seriously, Mary Anne. This is your salvation at stake.” She nodded frantically. “Do you realize if you truly accept Christ into your life, you will be able to see your children in Heaven?”

Mary Anne was taken aback. How did this man know about her...problem? Maybe he truly was a God-send. As if reading her mind, and he probably could, the Preacher continued. “Yes, Mary Anne, I know a lot of things, but only what the Lord has allowed me to know. You too can have this knowledge if —” He was interrupted by the woman's sudden sobbing. His eye twitched. “What is the matter?”

It took a minute for Mary Anne to rein in her emotions. No one had ever treated her with such kindness and mercy. “It's just that...” she finally managed. “Do I deserve this? Could someone like me really be loved?”

Before she could break down again, the Pastor spoke up. “The truth is, Mary Anne, no, you don't deserve it.” She nearly swallowed her tongue. “But neither do I.” Her eyes searched his face for an explanation, but it was blurred by the tears. “You can, however, receive this love.”

She sniffled. “But how? I've never been a good person. Well, maybe I was before the addiction, but —” The Pastor silenced her with a raised palm.

“That's the beauty of Christ,” he said, his voice hitching slightly at his love for God. He blinked a tear away. “In God's mercy and loving kindness, He redeems us. All we have to do is believe and accept His Son as the One who died on the cross for our sins.”

Mary Anne stood up straight. Locking eyes with the Pastor, and with more conviction and strength than she had had in years she said, “I do!” Already she felt transformed, her eyes less baggy and bloodshot, her lips a little less chapped, and her body twitching a little less.

“Then you are saved. You will receive eternal life.” The Pastor smiled, looking upon Mary Anne compassionately. At that point, years of regret and shame

and self-hatred flowed out of her eyes, like her cup running over. She took the Pastor by surprise with a hug. He didn't complain about the tears on his Versace or the wrinkles she was setting in it. Instead, he was feeling blessed to have led someone to salvation.

"Mary Anne," he spoke gently. She gazed up at him, face reddening with embarrassment. She stepped back and grinned sheepishly. Without being too obvious, the Pastor checked his pocket, breathing a small sigh of relief — his wallet was still there. "Now," he continued. "Are you ready for the next step?"

She tilted her head, confused, but trusted the Pastor. After all, he had saved her life.

"Uh...yes."

"You don't seem too sure."

She spoke up. "Yes, I am."

The Pastor nodded. "I'll ask again. You do accept Christ, right?"

"Yes, I accept Christ."

"Perfect." He took Mary Anne's face in his hand and softly caressed her cheek. She smiled blissfully, and with a violent twist, the Pastor snapped Mary Anne's neck. Her body fell ungracefully onto the alley floor. The Pastor knelt down and closed her eyes with two fingers. "And all who love the Lord say Amen."

The Pastor cracked his knuckles with a flex of the hand. He had slain Mary Anne before she had the chance to commit any more sins and separate herself from Christ. Now she was guaranteed to go to Heaven. She was number forty-seven.

At home his wife was six weeks pregnant, but she was agnostic. He had been preaching the Gospel to her for years, but she hasn't accepted Christ yet. With God as his witness, the Pastor will lead her to Christ before their child is born.