

# IF YOU BELIEVE

*by James Quina*

an excerpt from *The King of Cups*

**M**ARTY NEEDED DIRECTIONS TO YAZOO CITY, but as he walked on, all he found were signs some preacher had planted alongside the dirt road: Jesus Saves, Repent and He Who Says Jesus is not God, Makes God a Liar. His shirt, wet from humidity and sweat, stuck to his body like an oily skin, and he could feel the sting of the Mississippi sun on the back of his neck. When he'd walked another half-hour, a gray sphere, the size of a hot-air balloon, rose up before him on the horizon. He cleared his eyes with rapid blinks, removed his snap-brim cap, and wiped the sweat from his brow with the palm of his hand. As he came closer to the sphere, he saw that it was a large tent some folks had pitched on the side of the road. Men, women, and children entered the tent and Marty heard shouting coming from within. Perhaps someone here could tell him how to get to Yazoo City. He hoped they wouldn't be hostile to an outsider; they'd know he was a city dweller. His cap and vest gave him away.

Marty stuffed his cap into his back pocket and followed a family through the tent door. He stayed close to the entrance, looking for someone approachable, someone who might give him directions. The place smelled of oiled canvas and fresh sawdust. Shaped like a circus tent, it reminded Marty of the elephant and tiger shows he'd seen as a boy, except here the feature attraction unfolded up front, not in the center of a ring.

Everyone's attention riveted on the man up front. Dressed in a white suit, the preacher pranced back and forth across the pulpit, shouting: "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, soften my hard heart, soften my hard heart." A woman in a white dress sat at a piano, banging out the rhythm for the preacher. "We'll feast at the table of the Blood of the Lamb," shouted the preacher. He threw his arms upward, his body jerking to the beat of the music. The congregation imitated his movements.

"Put your arms around one another," shouted the preacher.

"Now repeat after me: Jesus, Jesus...Jesus. Soften my hard heart."

The worshipers joined the litany and the preacher raced from one side of the pulpit to the other.

"Now," he shouted, "stomp your feet."

The stomping heightened the hypnotic rhythm that moved through the believers. The congregation moved as one, as a single primeval organism.

The preacher became motionless now. He looked upward toward the ceiling of the tent, his lips moving silently. To Marty, he appeared to be gazing at something invisible, and this strange behavior went on for several minutes.

Was he praying, Marty wondered, or was something wrong? Could he be having a seizure?

Suddenly, the preacher broke his gaze at the ceiling, and pointing directly at the congregation, spoke in a low deep voice, his face fierce, like a soldier keyed for battle. Gazing at the worshipers, he shouted: "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 upon the sick and they shall recover.” (1) The preacher paused and walked down the steps of the pulpit into the congregation. “Come now,” he said, “and receive the Spirit.”

Dumbfounded, Marty reflected that he’d never seen anything like this. But nothing prepared him for what he heard next. A thin, hatchet-faced man, his hair parted in the middle, stood next to the preacher. He shouted in a language that Marty didn’t recognize. His speech became metallic, an inhuman voice speaking through him. Marty imagined a rusty mechanical box inside the man’s throat, speaking for him. Other worshipers now took up shouting in this strange language.

Two men, wearing overalls and mud-splattered brogans, came from the sides of the pulpit, carrying wire-covered boxes. They placed the boxes on tables at both ends of the pulpit and removed the covers. Heads of snakes, flickering their tongues in the air, rose up over the edge of the boxes. Men, women and children, as though in a trance, walked toward the snakes.

Marty could hardly believe his eyes. The worshipers actually picked up the snakes. They held them with both hands, stretched out in front of them, displaying them to the seated congregation. Some of the men lifted them with one arm, high above their head. Others brought the snake close to their face, as though staring it down. Women draped cottonmouths around their necks, wearing them like necklaces. One woman framed her face with a rattlesnake. When they had sufficiently witnessed the presence of the Holy Ghost, they returned the snakes to their wire cages.

“Alleluia, alleluia,” shouted the congregation.

An old man standing near Marty turned to him. The old man had no teeth and when he spoke he swallowed his words and sprayed spittle on Marty.

“You should go up and receive the Spirit,” said the old man, grinning.

“What kind of snakes are they?” asked Marty.

“Mostly, they rattlers and cottonmouths.”

“Those are poisonous, aren’t they?” asked Marty, running his fingers through his hair.

“They poisonous enough if they bite you. But they won’t bite if you believe.”

”But I’m not worthy,” said Marty, thinking to provide himself with a graceful way out. “I’m a terrible sinner.”

“We all be sinners,” said the old man. “You believe in Jesus, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Marty.

“So you’re a Christian?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t you know Jesus said, ‘These signs shall follow them that believe?’”

Marty had often found his Catholicism strange, but this was even stranger. He found it puzzling that both religions were called Christianity.

“I’m lost, sir,” said Marty. “All I want is directions to Yazoo City. I have to find my brother, Steve McKinstry. He lives with his foster parents, the Carlton’s. You know them?”

“No, but we’ll tend to all that in a little while,” said the old man. “Right now, the Holy Ghost is with us. Come with me.” He grabbed Marty’s wrist and led him closer to the pulpit. “Up here,” he said, “we can be closer to the Holy Ghost when He enters the faithful. You need the Holy Ghost to anoint you before you pick up those critters. So pray for the anointing.” The old man was glaring at him, but Marty’s attention to the old man was broken when he saw a little girl move past him. A six-year-old girl in a blue calico dress skipped toward one of the boxes of snakes.

“My God, isn’t anyone going to stop her?” shouted Marty.

Something about the way the little girl skipped reminded him of his sister.

“She’s witnessing for the Holy Ghost,” said the old man. “Just let her be.”

One of the men on the pulpit moved a box of snakes to the pulpit floor, so it would be easier for the girl to reach them.

The young girl stepped forward, thrust her hand into the box and grabbed a rattler. Her face beamed as she lifted a snake from the box. With both hands, she held the snake at arm’s length and in front of her body, as though offering it up to the congregation. The believers shouted in unison.

“Alleluia! The Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost is with us.” She began a slow but rhythmic dance, holding the snake even closer to her face, talking to it, caressing it.

Marty watched the little girl bring the snake toward the opening of the box and place it inside when it began its rattle, a high-pitched, incessant ringing. Startled by the rattle, the girl let go of the snake, and for just an instant her hand froze above the opening of the box. Marty saw the flash of the snake striking her hand and he feared the rattler had injected her with its deadly venom.

As the young girl cried out, the preacher rushed to her, taking her into his arms.

“Bring a blanket,” he shouted.

One of the men with the mud-splattered brogans brought a blanket and spread it out on the floor of the pulpit and the preacher placed the girl on the blanket.

“My baby!” screamed a young woman rushing toward the pulpit.

She displayed a birthmark that looked like a splash of purple ink covering one side of her face. Scrambling onto the pulpit, she ran to the child, took her into her arms and kissed her face. Then she seized the girl’s wounded hand and covered the swollen area with her mouth.

“Was she sucking out the poison?” Marty wondered.

By now, a crowd had formed around the girl and it was difficult for Marty to see clearly through all the bodies, but he did get a glimpse of the preacher grasping the woman around her waist and pulling her away from the girl.

“She’s in God’s hands, now,” shouted the preacher.

The woman with the birthmark shrieked and clawed at the preacher, but many women crowded around her and led her from the pulpit.

Murmuring passed through the congregation. Shouts of “Bitten! Bitten! Bitten!” echoed through the tent.

“Are they saying the girl was bitten?” asked Marty.

“She doubted,” said the old man.

“You’ve got to believe,” yelled the minister. He pointed to the small girl lying on the pulpit floor. “This girl doubted the power of the Holy Ghost and that’s why she was bitten. Pray for her.”

“Jesus! Jesus!” shouted a few worshipers on the front row, and the invocation spread through the worshipers.

Humming, like the buzz of a thousand bees, coursed through the congregation. Two women gathered the girl into a blanket; one picked her up and carried her out.

“You have to have faith,” said the old man.

“But she’s just a little girl,” said Marty. He was thinking of his sister, Maggie, and how he had to protect her against hurting herself when she climbed too high in trees.

“Jesus don’t care how young or old you are; you got to believe just the same,” insisted the old man.

Marty had heard enough. All he’d witnessed so far seemed to him a form of madness. He had to become more insistent on getting help to find his sister.

“I have to leave, Sir,” said Marty. “I have to get to Yazoo City. Can you help me?”

“I can get you to Yazoo City. Just show me you believe in Jesus.”

“What? You mean?”

“They won’t bite you if you’re a true believer.”

At that point, men in overalls with sun-baked faces gathered around Marty.

“You from out of town ain’t you, boy? Where from?” asked the hairy-armed man nearest him.

“New Orleans.”

“New Orleans? That’s Sin City.”

“Now boy, you got to go up and show us you saved,” said the old man.

“But I need to get to Yazoo City to see my brother,” he repeated.

“We’ll take you to your brother, but you got to go up first,” said the hairy one.

“Never mind, I’ll find directions on my own,” said Marty, throwing up his hands in exasperation. He stepped past one of the men and into the aisle and walked toward the exit, but when he got to it, he saw that two men in overalls stood in front of the door with their arms crossed. The exit was blocked, but there was a small opening near the tent door flap and Marty lunged for it. He shoved one man aside and wedged himself through the opening, but just as he was breaking away, he felt himself choking. When he stopped struggling and turned, he saw that the hairy one had him by the back of his collar and was using the collar as a noose.

When Marty was back inside, the men formed a circle around him.

“You got to go up,” said the old man.

Everything became silent for Marty. It was as though he was watching a play without speech, without sound. Everything appeared in slow motion. He could not believe that he was actually walking toward the pulpit, toward one of the boxes of snakes. He saw his feet moving along the sawdust path leading to the snakes, but he felt that his feet were moving of their own accord.

Did he believe in Jesus? Suddenly, he didn't know what that meant anymore. He certainly believed in God. But to be on the safe side, he prayed to God the Father, to Jesus, the Holy Ghost, to the Virgin Mary and all the saints. He prayed with all his might that he would come through safely.

The box of snakes loomed ever larger as he approached it. He felt his heart pounding and could sense the eyes of the congregation upon him. The preacher's mouth moved, and he appeared to be screaming something, but to Marty no words came from his mouth. It was all silence.

Marty now stood before a box of snakes. A rattlesnake held its head up and Marty looked at the pupils of its eyes, two black vertical slits against a murky yellow background. It flicked its tongue and slowly, hypnotically, moved its head backward about three inches, coiling its body, warning of a strike. Marty wondered what the snake saw with those expressionless eyes and if it felt anything.

Slowly, as if in a dream, Marty stepped closer, into the snake's striking range. He remained motionless, but felt himself stepping out of his own body. Calmness passed through him--calmness he had never known before.

When someone's movement in the congregation broke the rattler's attention to him, Marty shot a hand behind the snake's head and seized it. The snake began to curl, but became slack as Marty raised it in a smooth upward arc above his head. Fear left him, and he brought the snake closer to his face, gazing into the eyes of the rattler. The congregation stood, flailing their arms, embracing one another. And still for Marty there was silence. As he returned the snake to his cage, Marty felt a strange power rush through his body.

There! The rattler was back in its box. Marty turned back to the congregation and screaming exploded in his ears.

"Alleluia! Jesus! Jesus! He believes in Jesus," bellowed a woman in her forties. Her face was so fat it looked swollen, her eyes puffy slits. She shouted in a high-pitched voice to what sounded to Marty like gibberish. Others joined her. The frenzied congregation danced around Marty as he moved along the aisle. He noticed their flushed faces, their glazed eyes, and wondered if he too looked like that.

Marty didn't know what to make of what he saw next. More of the congregation walked up to receive the Spirit and the preacher moved among them. He seized a frail woman's head, pressed his thumbs into her forehead beneath her gray hair, and shouted in his mysterious language. His body pulsed as though he was sending bolts of electric current thorough the small woman. She screamed and fell backwards, and was caught by a three-hundred-fifty-pound man standing behind her.

"Jesus is inside me," proclaimed a freckle-faced redheaded woman rolling on the sawdust floor. "The Holy Ghost is inside me." She held her stomach and her body jerked in spasms.

In a little while, Marty looked around him. All over their place of worship, men and women writhed on the floor, witnessing the presence of the Holy Ghost. Their moans reverberated throughout

the tent. The preacher climbed back onto the pulpit. He stretched his arms over the congregation.

“We give thanks to the Holy Ghost for driving out Satan,” said the preacher. “We praise God for our anointing.”

The formal part of the service had come to an end. Some folks left the tent. Others milled about, witnessing for one another. Marty took one last look at the pulpit. Men were carrying away the boxes of snakes.

Outside, several men offered to take Marty into Yazoo City, but the old man with no teeth broke through the circle surrounding Marty.

“No! I’m taking him. We’re not through with our talk yet.”

Marty rode on a buckboard loaded with burlap sacks of grain. The old man sat beside him, driving the buckboard, giving signals to his white mule, not just with the reins, but in little grunts and whistles that sounded to Marty like yet another secret language.

Even after they’d been on the road for while, Marty could still hear the shrill cries of the congregation ringing throughout the countryside. But one cry rose above all others--a plaintive, penetrating cry of utter abandon: “Dead, dead! Jesus, help me. My baby’s dead.”

“You hear that?” asked Marty, turning to the old man.

“We’ll have to backtrack,” said the old man, ignoring Marty’s question. “You took the wrong fork past Tilman’s farm. But it’s no matter. You sure whipped Old Satan today. Showed him the power of the Holy Ghost. Boy, if you ever in these parts again, you look me up. The name’s G.W.”

“G.W.?”

“That’s all you got to say. This ain’t no metropolis. They’ll know where to find me. You welcome to come eat with me, my wife and young-uns. We’ll go to church together.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Marty counted his blessings. He could not imagine repeating his episode with the snakes. Yet he still couldn’t fathom the calmness he’d felt when he moved into the snake’s striking zone, nor the power he’d felt surge through his body when he picked up the rattler, held it high overhead and then returned it to its box. He did all that without being bitten. Could it have been his prayers, he wondered? Could it really have been that?

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