

AUSTIN SAMSEL [PREACHER JONES AND SWADE, THE LITTLE GAMBLING MAN]

FIRST PLACE JENNIE HACKMAN MEMORIAL AWARD FOR SHORT FICTION

FIRST PLACE EDWARD R. & FRANCES SCHREIBER COLLINS LITERARY PRIZE IN PROSE

Preacher Jones Hits the Highway

I can see angels all around me Lord! They sparkle and swim. They light my holy pass through the Utah desert night, Route 15 straight to Las Vegas. Bible on my dashboard, Bible on the seat, and I have a pocket-sized by my heart. I've got the Bible on my mind! Heck, I've got a trunk full of all types of bibles for handing out. Spreading the Word, my good man, the King James, Revised Standard, New American Standard, New International, Picture Book Bibles, Spanish Bibles, French, Italian, German, Swedish, even Latin Vulgate.

Suddenly, and just for a flash, I'm light-headed and totally convinced the dry, cracked, sandy land at the road side is the very earth Jesus walked, sandal heeled, through all Israel. The next second, I'm back to normal, but realize it's true: I'm a modern-day saint (or will be) traveling across the good earth to save souls from the furnace of hell. Too much work for one body, sadly, but I'm young and am now forever iron-willed against prostitution, alcohol, drugs, violence, greed, gutter sleep, the horrible foe Vegas.

I see through my mind's eye: 5:00 AM. Droopy-eyed and gray-lunged bodies are slouched over rainbow-bright tables. Eyes close, they're falling out of their bodies, eyes open, awake, *stay alert!* The binge is about up, they're penniless and begging for one more dry hump on the corpse that is the cold reality of the gambler's dream. The city is dead. Or worse it's alive, thriving on its inhabitants intoxicated blood, the sounds of dirty fingernails scratching, and the dripping grease from clueless drones with slicked back, styled hair. Their souls are fueling those electroshock, buzzing lights. The work ahead, the work now The Work! What is it if a man resurrects a city? It is nothing to the Work of one who resurrects the world. Let Him work through this body in the here and now.

Holy rolling in the white Ford, we're all alive, and all we've got is this book and this spirit. You have to realize heaven is this highway strip and everywhere all at the same time. Bodies are running around, running out of time. The people suffer amnesia; they forget the ecstasy of simple existence and the beauty of the natural world. Even the most barren dry

desert in the world was made with the gushing waterfall blessings of God's hand. And just as each grain of sand is blessed, and each cactus and every little stone making up this road is blessed, it is rightly so that I, Jones Baker, am blessed in the same fashion, and hopefully doubly blessed for these works, which I am soon to undertake.

Swade Needs Money

"Hold on, just listen, please understand, I know the odds, I know the risks, I know how to *read*...I know the game. If I focus for one hour, *one hour*, I'll double, even triple that money."

"Swade, no! Get a job for Christ's sakes! I don't understand why you can't make money the right way."

"This *is* my work. Six hours, and I'll come out with a thousand. I just need fifty to jump start me. You want a new dress? A new necklace? Some new furniture for the place? I'll buy you whatever you want...*anything*. It's simple. I'll buy you a new dress. Designer! No more Salvation Army. *Fine linens*! It's simple, all I have to do is play this game, which I know inside and out, and when it's over, I come out with everyone's money. Easy."

"How about you start working for one of the countless number of companies in this city and help me pay the bills?"

There are two things I know about in life: politics and poker. I used to study political science in school, but there's no better education than having an old-fashioned skeptical attitude towards any and every news article you can get your hands on. Question everything because the world is filled with selfish, vile, ignorant, greedy pigs and therein lies the principle that rules all motives; the beast in man resides at the base of his soul and has served as the subliminal guide in the course of human history. We're all dirty animals.

"Listen, nothing brings out the dog in man like poker. Simplicity: the average player has a mind no greater than the average eight year old. Take him to the laboratory; hook him up with wires and a brain scanner that measures brain activity and blood flow. You see this stuff on TV, like when they monitor a brain during sleep.

"But while playing poker, instead of seeing mixed up random activity, one will find a time relational deterioration of the intellect the critical, analyzing mind. These are all faculties necessary in differentiating man from ape. Watch those black-screened diagrams of the brain. By the end of the game, the temporal lobes are covered completely by red, while the rest of the brain is blank, void of activity. It's why they're having religious experiences."

“Oh, Christ. You and your *crazy* theories. Before poker, all I ever heard about was George Bush and Saudi Arabia, secret societies, oil wars! Who knows? There are other things in the world!”

“And then all of a sudden, they aren’t sitting at tables with other players. It’s become a game with God. That’s when the regular player loses. His moves are based on personal contracts with God, in some false notion of fate, or the delusion that he and God comprise ‘team good guy’ versus those four other sloppy bastards, sitting fat, and hoarding their cards. The bigger the pot, the greater the illusions; risks aren’t risks, he knows their cards. All he reads in their eyes are hallucinations—*bluffing!* Or they can’t beat his hand—*89% odds can’t lose!*”

“Why is it impossible to have a conversation with—”

“Finally, on that last golden pot, should a player make it so far, his mind is in a state of total degenerative psychosis. He truly, wholeheartedly believes he will win against a cold universe that is stacked up, piled up, odds against him. The misconception of the player is that he really thinks that *he* is the universe. When gamblers get going, they believe they’re God. That is, until they crash. This common poker player comprises the definition of what is commonly called a sucker.”

“Just stop talking, I don’t care anymore, you’re impossible,” The fatigue in her voice tells me she’s about to fold. “Can’t you listen to me for once, and what *I’m* saying?”

“You remember! How many years did I study politics and everything having to do with it? You remember don’t you? Since I was eleven, I’m an expert, I’ve studied it more than half my life, so when I tell you of the interconnectedness of politics and poker, you then have to understand by reason that I’m pretty much an expert poker player. I hate to sound arrogant but I’m just trying to get my point across.”

“Christ, take the money, it’s the last time, Swade. I swear it.”

“That’s fine. Because it’s the last time I’ll need it.”

“Here’s fifty. Now give your mother a kiss.”

Preacher Jones Sermonizes Casino Royale

What a dream last night to prepare me for a new day. Like being electrified by the messengers of Heaven, the flashes of orange and white shocked my mind to wonderful clarity. My mind was filled by the brick and mortar of God’s paradise, his light. I awoke to the sparkling gates of morning, enchanted by an inexpressible happiness. A hop in my step, whistling, fingers out and danced at my sides gleefully. It’s true that those filled with the Holy Spirit can be spotted on any street in the world. Their happiness shows on their faces. I attained a soul consuming joy

based in pure humbleness. Thank you, Lord! And it served me well, as the morning's beauty was shattered by the corruption of my congregation which is truly the people of Las Vegas. A day long Sermon, and I thank Him for the strength and freedom of tongue.

At this point, however, it is late and my energies have vanished. I wash the sweat off my face and tell those around of my thoughts as they come to me. "Las Vegas with pure bathroom porcelain and automatic faucets and automatic towel dispensers and automatic urinal flushers. Heaven is the only place so pure there's no point in a bathroom at all, no, not even a sink runs in heaven. All the impurities are washed away in a glorious shower before one can enter. But, believe me, there's automatic towel dispensers and they dispense towels of silk because you're going to need it to wipe the tears pouring out of your eyes due to the beauty heaven hath and forever shall hold! Amen!"

I wash my face to cleanse myself of the accumulating and dripping sweat and scrub my hands furiously too, because isn't every action symbolic? "You know why I wash my face and hands here at this sink?" I ask it to all who might hear, expecting no response.

"You've probably got some fucking O.C.D." I pick up my head, trying to find the voice with blurred vision. I grab my glasses from the sill and put them on quickly. "I've seen you around here before." I look down, not a midget but still a little, little man. If it wasn't for his thick beard I'd think he was fourteen or fifteen years old, too young for a casino. Dressed in large boots, jeans, and a worn down tank top holes at the bottom. "No one wants to listen to all that Jesus talk, man," he turns from the mirror towards an open stall and continues the conversation, "People come to Vegas to have a good time, gamble, drink maybe even a few other things. Religion only exists in some sick government mind control scheme. It's dead for the people. God is dead. It's all about controlling the people, see? And you've been turned all inside out by it."

"The man died two thousand years ago on the cross, but God lives on forever and for infinity, and you'll be thankful for that. It's necessary for the sun to rise every day. Don't you know the beauty of nature is due to Jesus? He created it. And Holy Hell if the earth isn't still alive."

"Listen, if God isn't dead, how do you think Bush got re-elected?"

"Leaders have been corrupt since the first days. Man can't have two masters and serve them both, so give what's due and be done with this world in due time."

"Hey man, I didn't mean to get into some religious freak-out with you, I was just trying to pass some time while taking care of some business before I can get on to some more important business, if you know what I mean."

"I don't know what you mean unless that business is heading out of town and finding yourself a decent church to attend. You see me, washing my hands? That's washing away the impurities, the sins; do you see what I'm saying?"

"Bro," he says in his raspy voice, too deep for a man his size, "You're not saving anyone by washing your hands, and really, you're just losing your mind down that drain. That's all. You wanna try and save the world? Go run for President. We don't have much time left anyway. It's going to get all blown up and then you tell me how alive Jesus' Earth is then. The name's Swade Denning, good to meet you Preacher Man."

Flush. He leaves without washing his hands.

Swade Heads Back To the Tables

"Hey guys. Thanks for waiting. Is everyone all ready to start?" I say it as innocent as possible. Can't let them know about today's winnings. Two hours, total focus, I turned fifty into three hundred dollars, minus five for coffees. Most players like to drink beer before or during the game to get some perfect super-cool, relaxed poker face, but all it does is make them less aware. Real players know themselves. That means they know their giveaways. Flaring their nostrils, a furrow of the eyebrow, licking your lips, the little subconscious things you do every time you're bluffing or have some unbeatable hand. *89% odds can't lose!* It can only be given away. Watch the sniffles. I play alert. If I wake up feeling self conscious, those days are the best. Days where everyone thinks I'm some eighteen-year-old freak, with the beard and all. I might be scared to look someone in the eyes if I didn't know they were the ones about to get suckered. "Who's dealing?"

Two of these guys wear sunglasses, and the other two are wearing hats, and they're all a little too overdressed for the weather. They're hiding themselves. They sense their giveaways, but still have no clue as to what they are, easy win for me. I've only got two queens so I get rid of any old card number card, hardly even matters. "One, please."

I'll probably buy a nice carton of cigs with this money, oh, a nice dinner tonight too. But the goal is really to quit blowing all the money on CDs, stereos, computers, TV's, gadgets. I've got to save up and move the hell out of the crap-hole apartment and have myself a life supported by poker winnings. It's possible to do too, maybe even too easy. "I'll raise."

Now, it's down to the two guys with sunglasses and me, the rest have folded and I've already laid out two-fifty on this pot. High roller wannabes, this game here is going to be better than I thought. I feel something like a warm heat on my shoulder like an overbearing presence behind me, strange.

“Swade, stop your sinning, if you take one step away from this game, The Lord will take two toward you. And the name is Jones, by the way. You’re the only one that paid any mind today, and I’ve got here a book I’d like to tell you about.”

“The game, kid,” says the dealer impatiently.

“Raise.”

Then, to Jones, I say, “Listen man, I promise you, after this game we’ll talk.”

“The time is now,” he pressures.

“Raise or fold?” asks the dealer.

“Raise, dammit!”

“Alright, we’re at pot’s limit, lay out your cards.”

“Already?” I ask. “Jesus!”

“That’s right!” says Jones. “The Game is over! Hallelujah!”

“Halle-fucking-lujah, you jackass! Now, I don’t even have enough for a cab home. Jesus!” I push the chubby son-of-a-bitch out of my way head out for home.

Preacher Jones Has God on His Side

“Hey buddy, nice going, we need a player, you want in holy man?”

Yes, I think. “Yes, I will play.” I have never played poker before. Yes, I do have a rough idea. But most importantly, I realize my debts to Swade. It was my fault he lost. What does one more game matter in God’s eyes as long as somewhere down the line he atones for the sin? The first will be last and who’s to say why he was gambling, and maybe he really needed the money. Let the Lord see my good heart and forgive my weak mind. Hear my prayers and let me win the game Swade lost. For this is no longer gambling or sin, but what’s properly due. This is making right. I’m sorry, Lord.

Swade’s Dissatisfaction

Look at her sweet face as she sleeps. It’s just as sweet as it can be, with a few wrinkles and jagged shadows formed by the yellow light protruding through the crumpled blinds. Did she even bother to take off her make up? She’s trying to hide the toll of her life’s suffering even in her dreams. She fell asleep, tired, frail, her hands lying at her sides. Supporting her son, these past twenty-one years, every step of the way without a husband. He died. If she dies right here tonight in the midst of sleep, what was it all for, and where did it get me except the present moment staring forlornly into her room, worthless. No point in shutting the door either, it’ll creak and wake the whole damn building anyway.

Don't let anyone tell you anything different about Vegas, it's a dirty town. Even the Jesus freaks are doing Satan's work, but not to say I believe in the devil, but I do believe in Hell. It's already here. On the way to the casinos, the blinking, buzzing lights, electrify your entire soul and you believe you're feeding off it. On the walk back home, broken, and penniless, you damn sure realize those lights have been feeding off you your whole life. Not just Vegas, but everywhere. It's the next big slight of hand down the road and I just fell for it again as the ultimate sucker.

The carpet's ripped up at the walls edges and has bubbles popping up all over in the middle. The wallpaper is peeling, and just about all that's nice in here is what I blew my money on like the big screen TV and DVD player. Buy everything in a store, and the second you leave it all begins to lose value. And the only reason the couch is worthwhile is it's so damn comfortable because it has slowly grown up with me the past twenty-six years and slowly depressed and conformed perfectly to my ass.

Its 11:00 PM and I've finally woken up. It's time to go back to school, get a loan, and finish what I started to finally get my mom out of here. Twenty-six years of suffering and she deserves better. Hell, I'll get any regular job that'll pay enough to support two. I always knew in the back of my head I'd end up back in a classroom and probably go to graduate school or get right into politics. Maybe you have to die before you can really grow up and start helping others, serving others. This world is a mess, really. Its time I clean up my act and do my part to clean up all the other crap in it too. I've helped make it dirty enough.

Preacher Jones Makes a Phone Call

"Hey, Mom? Am I waking you up?"

"Jones? Hi, yes but its fine, what's wrong?"

"I'm alright, but I need a favor. I've gone to Las Vegas again, and I don't have enough money for gas to make it all the way home. Could you meet me half way with a can of gas, so I can make it the rest?"

"I'm getting tired of this, Jones, but yes."

"Thanks Mom."