



Saints And Sinners: Jimmy Swaggart  
By Lawrence Wright



A friend of mine, a psychologist and university professor, undertook a study of fundamentalist Christians in a small town in West Texas. Once a month he would drive from Austin to spend several days observing church services and interviewing informants. Like me, he was interested in the phenomenon of the growth of primitivism. There has always been, in America, a profound and curious duality between the impulse toward progress and modernity, on the one hand, and a yearning for the restoration of an earlier, ideal time, on the other. The Puritans, the Quakers, the Baptists, the early Episcopalians and Methodists, the Amish and the Mennonites, the Mormons, the Churches of Christ, and the modern-day Pentecostals are all expressions of this latter

sentiment. Perhaps because we are verging on the millennium, there has been an explosion of growth in primitivist churches, which seek a return to the simpler and holier days of the first church. But what was the nature of the primitivist appeal? And what kind of people are drawn to these Holy Roller—type churches? Those were the questions my friend sought to address through his scholarly study.

He is a gracious and intelligent man, and he quickly made himself welcome in the congregations of this small community. Most of the churchgoers were farm families and country people; they couldn't be more different from this learned professor who brought his tape recorder to their services. They were, in his eyes, fanatics. They represented another America, a country that until now he knew about only vaguely, through television documentaries and the occasional monograph. He himself was not a believer; like me, he was more a student of belief. Now that he was getting to know them, however, he saw that they were not fools. He came to appreciate the genuineness of their faith; he may even have felt a little envious (after all, what had motivated this study in the first place?). After two years of weekly visitations, certain barriers inside him that held him apart from the people he was studying began to dissolve.

And then it happened. One Sunday morning at a church service, when the congregation was singing and waving their arms overhead, praising God and shouting hallelujahs, a terrifying impulse came over the professor. He was seized with an urge to throw up his hands and run to the altar. He wanted to surrender, to give over his soul. But how could he? His panicked mind reminded him of his position in his own community, the esteem of his colleagues, his intellectual signposts of Freudianism and skepticism, and his whole ironic way of being in the world. Everything, everything he valued in life—or thought he valued—was at risk. He could not be a hand-waving, hallelujah-shouting Christian and still be the man his friends and family thought he was. Shaken, trembling, he stumbled out of the church and found his Volvo among the pickups in the parking lot and sped back to Austin, to his home and his job and the person he had grown into being.

He might have been me, I thought when he told me this story. I would have done the same—I would have fled from transformation. I too was drawn to the edge of what I think of as the wilderness, the place where sophistication and learning and the defenses of civilization become moot and silly. The wilderness is a savage democracy; perhaps that's why the poor and the unlettered go into it more readily—they have less to lose. The legend is that deep in the heart of this howling wild place there is ecstasy and holiness itself. There is no sign posted INTELLECTUALS NOT ALLOWED, but clearly one cannot think oneself into the wilderness; the entire point is spiritual abandon and unthinking acceptance of the absurd and the miraculous. It's no wonder that intellectuals stand on the perimeter, jeering and fretful.

I think this fear of the irrational accounts for the particular glee in certain quarters that accompanied the downfall of Jimmy Swaggart. No voice expressed the primitive urge more persuasively than his. Anyone who has come across his wide, fleshy face filling the television screen and heard his syrupy but nonetheless quite musical voice may have felt the gravity of this man and his apparently genuine sense of transport, which he expresses by dancing and crying and speaking in tongues. His is a voice from out of the wilderness, calling us—I could even say luring us—deeper into the places where the mind doesn't wish to travel. He was more than a threat to my identity; he asked me to leave my identity behind. Follow him, follow Jesus, into the dizzying labyrinth; hearken to the sounds of jubilation that come from the mysterious, irrational center.

On several occasions I had chanced upon Swaggart by skimming the cable channels. My memory is that I would click on past him, but even in this split second of exposure he had already made an impression of vitality and super-assurance. It was a sort of tug at my sleeve. If there was not some more attractive offering ahead, I would retrace my steps and settle on the honey-haired preacher with the Louisiana drawl who seemed to

be speaking directly from his unconscious, spewing himself into the audience and into the unseen, peeping eyes like mine on the other side of the television set. Even then, before the scandals began to break, I might have described his style as ejaculatory.

I told myself that it was curiosity that kept me from switching him off, but there was another emotion, which I hesitate to admit. It was fear. The basis of my fear was that Swaggart and the rest of his ilk were right—that the whole point of life was to plunge into the wilderness, joyfully throw aside the resistance and anxiety that characterize the skeptic, and become like Swaggart himself, bursting with spiritual power. If I failed in this, then I had missed everything.

I resented this (what seemed to me) emotional blackmail. But what if he was on to something? I didn't like to think that there was a right answer in life and a wrong one, but there was enough uncertainty and longing in my life that I was willing to believe that I was on a path to nowhere. Here was Swaggart saying that his way was a better way, the *only* way. Therefore his abrupt, spectacular self-destruction came as a relief, and I happily absorbed the details of his fall. At some levels, it was the Railey story redux: an overreaching preacher undone by his carnal nature. This is a morality play that repeats itself again and again in the scandal sheets and the daytime talk shows. Sex is the great leveler, the shadowy companion of the transcendent spirit. But there was a mystery to Swaggart's disgrace that I couldn't grasp. Why had he brought himself down?

\*

To understand clearly that Jimmy Swaggart plotted his own destruction, you must stand here in the courtyard of the Travel Inn, that squalid rendezvous on Airline Highway just across the parish line from New Orleans. A few hundred yards away looms the vacant brick building that formerly housed the largest congregation in the entire state, the First Assembly of God, which was pastored by the Reverend Marvin Gorman until the avenging finger of Jimmy Swaggart brought him to ruin. About an equal distance in the opposite direction is the Jefferson Parish sheriff's office. It was here, between his bitterest enemy and the law, that Jimmy Swaggart, dressed in jogging clothes, would cruise Airline Highway in his Lincoln, searching for cheap women and his own inevitable downfall.

Why? Why would the most popular television evangelist in the world, a man who once claimed a worldwide viewing audience of more than 500 million, whose weekly telecast was carried on more than thirty-two hundred stations (not counting cable outlets), whose show was seen in 145 foreign countries and "available," he could boast, "to more than half the homes on this planet"—a man, moreover, who saw himself as God's messenger, the only real hope for the evangelization of the world and the salvation of America—why would such a man sabotage his reputation and his career and perhaps his very soul for the guilty pleasure of watching women masturbate?

Hold that question in mind as we move seventy-five miles north, to Baton Rouge, to the 279-acre empire of Jimmy Swaggart Ministries, passing the immense headquarters building on World Ministry Avenue, framed by flags of the 195 nations reached by Swaggart's missions, passing the vast complex of his partly finished Bible college, his \$10-million teleproduction center, his printing plant, his private Christian school for grades kindergarten through twelve, until we come to the eight-sided family Worship Center, where off-duty policemen are waving traffic into the acres of parking lots. It's Easter Sunday, 1988. The azaleas are blooming. Inside the lobby of the church there are world maps on opposing walls, one indicating the countries receiving the Jimmy Swaggart telecasts and the other showing missions, churches, hospitals, and schools supported by his ministry. Both maps are clotted with dots. There is a concentration of missions in

Central America, the Caribbean, and the west coast of Africa. The television broadcasts blanket the United States, Canada, most of South America, and extend into the unlikely places—Mongolia, according to a red dot in Ulan Bator, and several atolls in the remotest stretches of the Pacific Ocean. All of this has come to pass since New Year's Day, 1969, when Jimmy Swaggart made his first radio broadcast.

He had erupted from the poor hamlets and lonely whistle-stops of the rural South. Uneducated and unexposed to the larger world, he was propelled nonetheless by an inner certainty that he called God's anointing. He had stormed the dirt-road churches and Holy Roller tent revivals in the piney woods, gathering force, learning how to sway the multitudes with his muscular voice and his boxer's body, dancing, crying, damning, beseeching the brokenhearted and despairing souls to come forth and be saved. He had known since childhood that God would lift him above all others. And God did. He led him out of the tents and backwoods churches and into city auditoriums, and onto radio, and then onto his ultimate instrument, television.

It was an unparalleled rise to power and prominence, beginning in 1973, when Swaggart taped his first television program in the "Hee Haw" studios in Nashville. His invasion of the airwaves started with UHF stations and spread to independent cable and Christian networks. And it was not just his Sunday sermons that went out to the world; at one time, Swaggart had seventeen different programs on the PTL ("People That Love" or "Praise The Lord") Network and a similar number running day and night on other stations. The casual cable viewer scanning the offerings of this flea market of American culture was perhaps more likely to see Jimmy Swaggart's face than any other.

"Monday morning, July the first, nineteen eighty-five, at about nine-thirty, God spoke to my heart that we should put the telecast on every station throughout the world," Swaggart has said on many occasions. "He said, 'Do this immediately, and do not fail!'" Later, Swaggart revealed other messages God desired his servant to deliver. "What he said was so strong I fell! I fell on my face! I said, 'God, I cannot say it—it's too hard!' And God replied, 'I will give you a face as flint! I will give you a head like steel! I will give you a tongue, I will give you a mouth, but you will say what I tell you to say!'"

What Swaggart has said includes statements that Catholicism is a "monstrosity of heresy" and a "complete contradiction of the word of God"; that all dancing, including aerobic dancing, is "sinful and harmful"; that "AIDS can be contracted by eating at a restaurant where food is prepared by homosexuals"; and that "all rock music . . . being aired today is demonically inspired." According to Swaggart, "The main problem in the free world today is that *there is no punishment for crime!*" He offers an answer for this uncurbed lawlessness: "In all honesty, I have two answers for it—the side-by-side answers of a double-barreled shotgun!" He has called homosexuality "the worst sin in the world" and has said, "I'm sick to death of words like *gay* being used to amass respect for people who don't deserve respect. Why don't we use words descriptive of their chosen lifestyle—such as *pervert, queer, or faggot?*" He is opposed to public education and has said that the "Newnighted" States Supreme Court and the Congress are "institutions damned by God." He resents the media for advocating "a system of atheistic socialism where all decisions are imposed by this small, elite, superior intellectual class who do the thinking for all common people." He has told reporters, "You can write your poor little old pitiful pukish pulp in your papers if you want to, but you can stop what I'm preaching about like you can stop a Louisiana hurricane with a palm branch."

These wild tirades are delivered as Swaggart waves his Bible overhead, his baritone voice rising into shrieks or falling into breathless whispers but always demanding, insinuating, taunting—an untamed, irresistible performance. He kneels, he struts, he dances, he sings, he bursts into tears; then he abruptly rains laughter on the thousands of worshipers waving their arms before him. Suddenly he breaks into the incantatory

language of the Holy Spirit! *Hun da sheek kulaba sone do roshay ketab dotundai!*" he cries. "I speak in tongues every day of my life."

In the evangelical community, Swaggart was an object of wonder and dread. "He was preaching on the edge," the Reverend Glen Berteau told me when I arrived in Baton Rouge. Berteau had spent four years as director of Swaggart's youth ministry. "There is something glamorous about being on the edge of anything. You always had the feeling with Jimmy Swaggart that he was going to the limit every time."

"Is it Jimmy's masculinity, his macho? What is it that makes him what he is?" asked Richard Dortch, past president of the PTL Network, who was once a close friend of Swaggart's but became one of the many people ruined by Swaggart's purge of his television competitors. "What is it that makes him what he is? His music has a lot to do with it, and his abandonment to the Holy Spirit. When he would preach, he would just kinda go into overdrive." "He's got a style that's perfected in terms of the words, the body language," added University of Virginia sociologist Dr. Jeffrey K. Hadden, co-author of the book *Televangelism*. "It's the dynamism of a Billy Sunday and the populism of a Huey Long."

That is a powerful combination. Indeed, until February 21, 1988, there seemed to be no brakes at all on the expansion of the Swaggart empire. His Baton Rouge office, which has its own ZIP code, handled more mail than any other entity in the state of Louisiana. Most of the fifty thousand letters received each week at 70810 contained money, an average donation of forty-five dollars, amounting to nearly half a million dollars a day in 1986.

Although Swaggart's ostensible goal was to evangelize the world in the last days before Armageddon—he claimed to be saving 100,000 souls per week—he also had allied himself with the Christian right and was vigorously pressing its political and social agenda. No other single person had ever assembled such a global television audience, and it was difficult to foretell what the consequences of such a supranational phenomenon might be. Already his telecast was being translated into sixteen languages, including Russian, Mandarin, Icelandic, Persian, and Swahili.

But now, suddenly, this soaring preacher was falling, falling, and no one could say for certain where he would land. He had been revealed as a sinner, and he had bravely admitted his sinfulness to the world, bawling as the translators rendered his remarks into the tongues of men, humbling himself before his wife, his congregation, his God, even the news media. "And to the hundreds of millions that I have stood before in over one hundred countries in the world," he cried, becoming almost incomprehensible, "I've looked into the cameras, and so many of you with a heart of loneliness that reached out to the minister of the gospel. You that are nameless—most I will never be able to see you except in faith—I sinned against you. I beg you to forgive me."

The fifty-three-year-old Swaggart delivered his confession on February 21, 1988, the first Sunday of Lent. In the six weeks that followed, Swaggart's fate became a matter of church politics. Here he would seem to have had an advantage. The state council of his denomination, the Assemblies of God, was controlled by Swaggart's close associates and relatives and by members of the board of Jimmy Swaggart Ministries. They met and announced that their repentant brother would be removed from the pulpit for three months of rehabilitation, not the usual full year. A more severe punishment threatened to put an end to the entire Swaggart ministry— not just the television show but the Bible college, the private school, the missions, and the one million dollars a month that Swaggart contributed to the national Assemblies of God. At once, the switchboard of the Assemblies' national headquarters in Springfield, Missouri, lit up with three hundred phone calls an hour, almost evenly divided between Swaggart supporters and those who wanted his punishment increased. The thirteen-man executive presbytery, which decides denominational matters, overruled the Louisiana district and imposed a two-year suspension that called for a complete absence from the television ministry for the first

year and a probationary period thereafter. The next day Swaggart rejected the Springfield ruling and said that he intended to abide by the original three-month ban. Two days later, however, even the Louisiana district reversed itself and called upon its most famous minister to remove himself from the television screen for a full year.

And so this Easter Sunday, April 3, was a crucial moment in the life of Jimmy Swaggart. Would he return to the pulpit and be defrocked? Or would he stand aside and watch the satellite bookings and time slots that he had spent so many years putting in place be lost to reruns of "I Dream of Jeannie" and "The Dukes of Hazzard," not to mention the highly competitive sulfurous evangelists behind him, who were waiting for just such an opportunity? And isn't this the predicament he had sought, even longed for, on those Saturday afternoons when he was supposed to be off rehearsing his sermons and talking to God but instead was sneaking down to New Orleans to pay women to take off their clothes?

The seventy-five-hundred-seat Family Worship Center was only partly full at 10:00 a.m. as the bass drum sounded and the curtain rose on the crumbling Swaggart empire. The choir, which formerly spanned the bleachers across the rear of the auditorium, was reduced by at least a third. The brass section of the Swaggart band was down to two horns and five empty chairs. The amen corner, where the fifty-four associate pastors usually sat, was also missing some notable faces—including, at this moment, Jimmy Swaggart and his wife, Frances.

There was a sullen air in the Worship Center, which on any previous Easter Sunday would have been overflowing with ecstatic worshipers singing the praises of God and his beloved deputy in Baton Rouge. Many here today had come only to gawk, and even the faithful rose grudgingly from their seats when the hymns began. We had all heard about the graduating seniors of the Jimmy Swaggart Bible College who were trying to get their diplomas changed, and about the defecting undergraduates, some of whom had just learned that the college was never accredited by the Assemblies of God, and about the hundred employees who had received their pink slips. The band and the choir were belting out a rollicking gospel number, but the faces of the mostly middle-class congregation registered No Sale. Indeed, the entire production had the atmosphere of a Las Vegas revue on its closing night. It had come to the end of its run.

During the second chorus, Jimmy and Frances slipped in from the rear of the stage—she in one of her sensational designer outfits, which have always been the talk of the Pentecostal world. This time it was a turquoise skirt with a sort of Joseph's-coat serape. Frances Anderson Swaggart has been a dominating force not only in Jimmy's life but also in his ministry, which has numerous members of her family in key positions. "If you can imagine a bull's-eye," a former aide said to me when he was describing the Swaggart hierarchy, "the inside circle is Jimmy, Frances, and Donnie [their then thirty-three-year-old son]. The next circle is the rest of her family, some thirty people." Her brother, Robert Anderson, treasurer of Jimmy Swaggart Ministries, was the subject of several exposes by Baton Rouge TV reporter John Camp, who has accused him of financial improprieties. In the past, when Frances suspected that staff members were talking to the press, she made them take lie-detector tests. A fit and stylish woman herself, Frances also supervised an effort to slim down the employees, requiring them to be weighed once every quarter to see if they were meeting the guidelines posted by the personnel department. Reporters and even scholars who have questioned Jimmy's ethics or theology often had to answer to a ferocious Frances angrily demanding a retraction. Until February, however, the Swaggart empire had never really been in peril. Now everything was on the line—not only the fortunes of Jimmy Swaggart Ministries but also the future of the entire Anderson clan.

Swaggart's suspension prohibited him from preaching—from appearing *at all*—so his mere presence on the stage this Easter Sunday was a technical violation. He and Frances

took their places at the head of the amen corner, Jimmy fiddling with the microphone in his lap, into which he occasionally sang counterpoint to the choir. Indeed, it was that gentle, Elvisy baritone in the background that alerted most of the worshipers in the congregation that the Founder, as he designated himself, was onstage.

The Reverend Jim Rentz, official pastor of the Family Worship Center since February, preached the service while the smoldering Swaggart shifted restlessly in his seat, like a bull in a rodeo pen. Bridled as he was, his energy seemed to expand and feed on itself. At last, after the choir had sung "I See a Crimson Stream of Blood," Swaggart could contain himself no longer. He leaped up and rampaged across the stage, imploring the choir to sing another chorus. "Satan says it's over!" he cried ecstatically. "Jesus says, 'Look at the blood!' The angels say, 'Look at the blood!' " It's this sort of passionate Swaggart riff that usually gets the audience to its feet, but today the response was leaden, the cheers hollow, and some in the audience appeared shocked by the Founder's shameless defiance.

"*Brother Swaggart!*" came the voice of a teenaged boy from the balcony. "*Brother Swaggan!*" The church grew quiet. Swaggart did not turn around. "Your hypocrisy is scornful of the government of God! Liar! Hypocrite!" Swaggart's plowboy shoulders hunched around him. Rentz asked the congregation to stand and "just praise the Lord" to drown out the rain of accusations as the ushers raced toward the youth and dragged him out of the sanctuary. In an instant he was gone; but his indictment hung in the air, a weird and penetrating moment of truth. Swaggart made a characteristic jutting gesture with his chin like a boxer shaking off a punch.

A few minutes later he was up again to sing with the choir, this time a tune of his own request. "I'll rise again," he boldly sang on this resurrection morning. "Ain't no power on earth can keep me down."

\*

Some of the reasons Jimmy Swaggart would destroy himself may be found in Ferriday, Louisiana—"my beleaguered little town," he would call the place of his birth, ten miles from Natchez across the Mississippi River Bridge. It has been rather routinely described by passing journalists as a "typical" southern crossroads town—an adjective weighed by the natives with a sense of disbelief, for even in the Deep South, Ferriday has the reputation of being one of the darker and more gothic pockets of humanity.

Here Swaggart grew up with his cousins Jerry Lee Lewis and Mickey Gilley; the three were born within a year of one another in the mid-1950s. Back then the town was run by their uncle Lee Calhoun, a "vile, vulgar, profane old man," as Jimmy later described him, whose name was carried forward by both Jerry Lee and Jimmy Lee. Although Uncle Lee made his fortune from bootlegging and cattle rustling, he seemed to float eerily above the world of law and consequence. "He was well respected in the community," Jimmy writes in his autobiography, *To Cross a River* (co-written by Robert Paul Lamb). "He never seemed to have the problems all my other relatives had. His house was constantly full of people looking for money, politicians asking for favors, and preachers hoping for some kind of contribution."

Uncle Lee's main moonshine still was busted by revenuers in January 1935. One of the men captured in that raid was W. L. "Sun" Swaggart, a fur trapper, pecan picker, and

occasional fiddle player. As the revenuers were leaving with a truckful of arrested men, they passed a heavily pregnant woman walking on the side of the dirt road. "Who's she?" one of the agents asked Sun Swaggart. "That's my wife," he said. "The agent paused, then shrugged," Jimmy writes. "Well, you get her out of here," he said to daddy. 'And if I see you around here a minute longer, you're going to jail.'

"Daddy grabbed mama and took off down the road, but all the other relatives, including five of my uncles, wound up behind bars.

"Two months later I was born."

Jimmy's aunt Mamie Lewis was also pregnant when the revenuers took her husband, Elmo, but she was not as fortunate. Elmo, however, soon escaped from prison and was back home when his son Jerry Lee was born, eight months later.

The following year, 1936, a woman called Mother Sumrall and her daughter Leona, from Laurel, Mississippi, wandered into Concordia Parish and began knocking on doors. They were inviting people to attend their "church"—an overgrown vacant lot with benches and chairs set among the weeds. Eventually they erected a tent.

As it happened, Mother Sumrall's lot was across the street from the Ferriday Community Hall, where Sun Swaggart and his wife, Minnie Hell, would play community dances, he on the fiddle and she on the rhythm guitar. In that same hall, Sun's amateur boxing career had come to a sudden halt one night when a professional slugger rudely separated him from consciousness. By then he had raised enough money to purchase a small gas station a block away, on the main highway. Sun had been to church only one time in his life, for a Catholic funeral; but as he sat in his gas station, the music from Mother Sumrall's gospel tent came tugging at his sleeve. One evening Sun and Minnie Bell picked up their instruments, and the Swaggart family entered the Assemblies of God.

That night they became a part of a religious movement that already was profoundly changing the country and much of the world. The great Pentecost revival began on New Year's Eve, 1900, in Topeka, Kansas, when a young Bible student named Agnes Ozman prayed aloud in a language she had never heard before. Some syllables were later identified as Chinese, and for the next three days she was unable to communicate in any other language. Soon other students began speaking in tongues; their words were variously identified as French, German, Swedish, Czech, Japanese, Hungarian—twenty-one languages were counted in total.

Glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, was already known to anthropologists, who have cited accounts of American Indians who talked to animals or spoke in languages they never could have learned, and even of Tibetan monks who quoted Shakespeare in English. Ecstatic religious utterances similar to glossolalia are mentioned in early Egyptian accounts as well as by Plutarch and Virgil. In the nineteenth century, spiritual mediums often claimed to speak in foreign or unknown tongues, such as the famous case of Helene Smith, reputed to speak and write in Martian.

Until Agnes Ozman spoke Chinese, however, glossolalia was practically unknown in the major denominations of the Christian faith. Ozman's vocalizations were performed during a prayer experiment, the object of which was to see if the students at Bethel Bible College might receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit as it is described by Saint Paul in his epistles. For the believers who would later be known as Pentecostals, the significant passage is the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, which recounts the day of Pentecost, fifty days after Easter. The apostles were gathered in an upper room in a Jerusalem inn when "suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind." The apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit "and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." Charles Fox Parham, Agnes Ozman's teacher, also received the gift of speaking in tongues, as did a dozen other preachers of various denominations. They planned a coast-to-coast evangelical tour to spread the

message of the "full gospel"—a message that the powers of the early church fathers, which included healing and prophecy and other "gifts of the Spirit," were available to modern-day Christians. To Parham it was a signal that the end times were coming. He called it the Covenant of the Latter Rain, a reference to the passages in Deuteronomy 11:14, Joel 2:23, and James 5:7, which speak of God's bounty being provided in an early rain, which prepares the crops, and a latter rain, which brings them to fulfillment. For Pentecostals, the reappearance of these gifts of the Holy Spirit means that the human harvest of Apocalypse is near.

Parham's tour fell apart on its very first stop, in Kansas City, where the preachers were met by the incomprehension and derision that would always accompany the Pentecostal movement and mark it as a refuge for the credulous and the ignorant. Broke and dispirited, Parham drifted away and began preaching on street corners. Eventually he established another school in Houston, Texas.

One of his students in Houston was William J. Seymour, a black minister who carried Parham's message to Los Angeles. Seymour arrived in April 1906 and set up a church in an old livery stable on Azusa Street. What followed was one of the great revivals of American history. It went on day and night for more than three years. People of all races and classes passed through, shouting hallelujahs and singing gospel music and speaking in tongues. Indeed, it was this radical fusion, especially of the races, that would give Pentecostalism its particular primitive fire. It was born of the same mixed marriage that later produced rock and roll.

And because Pentecostalism was an interracial phenomenon, even in the Deep South, there has hung about it the taint of broken taboos. Of course, this has always been a feature of ecstatic religions. It is a legend of those early camp meetings and tent revivals that a population boom would follow nine months later. In the twenties, the first voice of Pentecostalism to capture the national airwaves was that of radio evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson, who scandalized the country by staging her own kidnapping, which appears to have been a cover-up for a five-week sexual escapade.

Derided as Holy Rollers, the Pentecostals nonetheless represented a powerful and growing counterforce to the ascendancy of scientific thinking and the belief in social progress that had taken over the cities and universities. The Pentecostals lived instead in a world of miracles. They longed for a return to the primitivism of the early church; indeed, the gift of speaking in tongues was proof enough that modern science had been turned on its head by the triumph of primitive faith.

Science, for its part, looked upon Pentecostalism as a kind of mass psychosis—although research seems to indicate no personality differences between glossolalics and nonglossolalics. Linguists who studied these prayer languages easily demonstrated that they were not French or Japanese, as a speaker might claim, but a linguistic facade, like Sid Caesar's French or John Belushi's samurai Japanese. On the other hand, these sounds were not mere gibberish; they had the shape and form and sound of languages and could readily be distinguished from arbitrary noises. Oftentimes the speaker himself assumes no knowledge of the meaning of his utterance, although other Pentecostals who hear the sounds can interpret them and agree on their meanings. Perhaps more important from the speaker's point of view is that once he gives voice to such noises, he crosses a social barrier. It is a "bridge-burning experience," as social scientists would say; the speaker has left the world of accepted values and entered a separate community. He has been born again in the Holy Spirit.

The legacy of the Azusa Street revival is manifested today in more than three hundred Pentecostal denominations in the United States, with 10 million adherents. By far the largest of these is the Assemblies of God. Founded in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1914, the Assemblies has become the fastest-growing denomination in America. The church has seen its population swell from 300,000 members in 1950 to approximately 4 million

by 1990, outstripping such established groups as the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians. (The Assemblies also claims 14 million believers outside the United States, most of them in Brazil.) Moreover, the number of mainline Protestants and even Catholics who claim to be charismatic Christians—who have received the *charms*, or gift of the Spirit—has grown steadily, even as the overall population of many of those denominations has declined. Swaggart estimates the true number of "Spirit-filled" Christians in the United States to be closer to 30 million. And although today many of the more than 11,000 Assemblies churches are glistening suburban tabernacles, radiating prosperity and respectability, the roots of the denomination are in the rural congregations like the little white church in Ferriday that was built on Mother Sumrall's lot and paid for by the old reprobate Lee Calhoun.

In the Pentecostal world, that little church on Texas Street in Ferriday has become a kind of shrine to the movement's most famous preacher. Here the Swaggarts, the Lewises, and the Gilleys came to find God. The women were particularly fervent. Eventually Mamie Lewis and Irene Gilley and Jimmy's grandmother Ada Swaggart would all become evangelists, as would Jimmy's own father. The cousins, Jimmy, Jerry, and Mickey, were in the same Sunday school class, which was taught by Sun Swaggart, and they each carved their names into the pew in the back of the church. Jimmy was quiet in church, but he enjoyed the Bible stories. "David and Goliath were my favorite," he would later recount. "Many times I sat pretending it was me hitting the giant with the rock."

Minnie Bell Swaggart had been saved for about a year when she began praying for her son. Jimmy preferred to spend his time with Jerry and Mickey, going to see Hopalong Cassidy or Johnny Mack Brown movies at the Arcade Theatre. "You really shouldn't go," Minnie Bell pleaded. She herself had given up going to movies when she became a Christian. Jimmy went anyway, defying his mother and the will of God. But his mother's prayers would affect him nonetheless. As Jimmy stood in line to buy a ticket, "an entreating voice suddenly spoke to me. 'Do not go in this place. Give your heart to me. I have chosen you a vessel to be used in my service.' " Jimmy began to weep. He was eight years old.

Still, he resisted the call. Once during a revival, both Irene Gilley and Mamie Lewis fell to the ground and began speaking in tongues. These demonstrations offended Minnie Bell. "This shouting and hollering is ridiculous. I'll never do it." But the Spirit seized her during that same revival. One morning when the young evangelist J. M. Cason was playing Ins accordion and singing "By and By When the Morning Comes," Mamie suddenly leaped out of her pew and began rolling in the aisle, speaking once again in tongues. Irene, who had been praying at the altar, was also slain in the Spirit. And then it hit Minnie Bell. She began to dance and shout, and soon the sounds that came from her lips were strange to her, but eerily natural.

Jimmy had not gone to the meeting that day; he was playing with Jerry Lee and some other boys several blocks from the church when they all heard someone shouting at the top of her lungs. "A dread swept over my heart," Jimmy writes. "I knew it was my mother." He ran home in shame.

But that summer the Spirit found him as well. A woman named Thelma Wiggins came from Houston to preach. "The last night of the services something finally released within me," Swaggart records. "Kneeling at the altar, praying as usual, I became aware of what seemed to be a brilliant shaft of light descending from heaven and focusing on me. Moments later I was speaking in tongues.

"For days afterwards, I spoke very little English."

The little church where Jimmy met the Holy Spirit still stands on Texas Street among the pecan trees. When I arrived in Ferriday, however, the family of a visiting evangelist was packing up and leaving the parsonage under a cloud much darker than the one hanging over Jimmy Swaggart. "We call it the Crime of the Century," said Frankie Jean Lewis Terrell, Jerry Lee's sister. "This poor little Assemblies of God man was arrested over here. He raped his four children and the animals that he had there—two sons, two daughters, two dogs, and they're lookin' at the parakeet."

On Frankie's dining table was a copy of the *Concordia Sentinel*, with a photo of the forlorn pastor on the front page.

"But the real tragedy," Frankie Jean continued, "is that he sent his last five dollars to Jimmy Swaggart."

Frankie Jean is a female photocopy of her famous older brother, with his small, delicate mouth, sharp chin, and high Indian cheekbones. She lives in the five-bedroom brick house that once belonged to Lee Calhoun and then to Elmo and Mamie Lewis. It has been carefully preserved, at her brother's insistence. "Jerry didn't even want me to put a microwave in the kitchen," she says. "He won't let me vacuum in her old bedroom because it's got Mama's heel prints in the carpet." Both Jimmy and Jerry were born in this house.

They were closer than brothers—more like twins, Jimmy would say— and indeed, the lives of Jerry Lee Lewis and Jimmy Lee Swaggart were destined to be intertwined in complex ways. It was almost as if they were opposing halves of a single person, neither of them complete without the other. Jimmy was serious and fiercely shy; Jerry was hilariously boisterous. Jimmy was afraid of girls; Jerry was a teenaged Casanova. Jimmy was a frugal, sanctimonious teacher's pet; Jerry was a profligate, untamed hellion. Anyone in Ferriday could assemble a list of such personality traits, marking Jimmy at one extreme and Jerry at the other. The only characteristics they had in common were an intense competitiveness with each other, a boiling need to get out of Ferriday, and a tendency, as the world would see later, to lead symbolic lives.

Each was fanatically devoted to his mother, and this would affect the twisted relationships with women that awaited the boys when they became men. "These boys were mama's babies," Frankie Jean told me, as she sat at her baronial dining-room table with a rack of ironed shirts behind her and a police scanner crackling in the background. Frankie Jean "may or may not" be an occasional correspondent for the *National Enquirer*, and she tends to speak in that publication's exclamatory style. "I loved my mother, and I loved my aunt Minnie Bell," she says. "They didn't mean any harm. These were two wonderful ladies! But they had a way of just pulling you in. They would sit around and talk about what they were going to say to Jimmy and Jerry—'He must do this,' 'He must do that'—you see? Their little cult! They brainwashed the hell out of 'em! All of a sudden this religious thing came over them. They just became so righteous. I mean, these were moonshiners! It was just church, church, church! Jimmy's been programmed! Jerry's been programmed! Mother would tell Jerry that every hair on his arm was perfect. Aunt Minnie Bell would tell Jimmy, 'You're going to be completely perfect.' Jerry was the bad one. Jimmy was going to walk with God. Well, look at 'em! These boys were robots!"

Catty-corner from Frankie Jean's house in Ferriday is the forty-five-foot trailer where Jimmy's father lives with his fourth wife. Sun Swaggart was seventy-three years old when I visited him, and despite his thick plastic bifocals and a nervous cough, he still carried the frame of an amateur heavyweight. Although he lives poor, Sun is a wealthy man,

according to his relatives—"a millionaire several times over," says one of his nephews. His frugality is a matter of legend. "He still gives me his leftover tea bags," says Frankie Jean.

There has existed between the Swaggarts and the Lewises an ancient antagonism over how the children were raised. "Jerry has a good heart," Sun says of his nephew, "but it would take a miracle to save him. Jerry's mother and dad—they was Christian maybe for a few months, and then they'd go cold on God, y'see. So naturally he didn't have the rearing most Christians have." Frankie Jean says of her uncle Sun, "This is a very domineering man. Uncle Sun had the only word in his house, and I think this has made Jimmy very insecure. Everything was so damn tight. Sure, I know Jimmy has giggled a bit and had a tiny bit of fun, but Jimmy has not been allowed to think, act, or breathe like a normal human being. Jimmy's been held—I'm gonna cut the namby-pamby—Jimmy's been held down. He's been so deeply suppressed—this guy has never been allowed to be anything. No talking at the table. 'Yes sir' and 'no sir.' This kid has had a difficult time. If he challenged his father, Uncle Sun would put on boxing gloves and just deck him. Now we would call it child abuse."

In their tenth year, the lives of both boys would be forever changed. During Christmas, Jerry Lee sat at the piano in Lee Calhoun's parlor and picked out "Silent Night," mostly on the black keys. Jimmy and Mickey would also play their first notes on that piano—a small historical oddity, since the three cousins would one day rise to separate peaks of musical prominence in rock and roll, gospel, and country music. Jerry Lee must have made an impression, because three months later his father mortgaged his house for nine hundred dollars and bought his son a used Stark upright. Eventually the bank foreclosed on the house, but Jerry Lee kept the piano. By then he had worn the ivory off the keys.

Jerry's formal musical training ended after four lessons when his teacher slapped him across his face. The rest of his education came from Haney's Big House, a black nightclub in Ferriday's "Chocolate Quarter." Jerry and Jimmy would slip in on Friday and Saturday nights to hear the Devil's music. Later, Jimmy would claim that "my family started rock and roll," but the roots of the music were already there in Haney's Big House, in the driving blues of B. B. King and Muddy Waters and a local piano player named Old Sam. "We'd go down there and sell newspapers and shine shoes and everything, and we'd keep on doin' it till nobody was lookin'," Jerry told an interviewer many years later. "And man, we'd sneak in there and old Haney, he'd catch us. He'd say, 'Boy, yo' Uncle Lee come down heah and *kill* me and you both!' And he'd throw us out. But I sure heard a lot of good piano playin' down there. Man, these old black cats come through in them old buses, feet stickin' out the windows, eatin' sardines. But I tell you, they could really play some music—that's a guaranteed fact."

Jimmy was drawn to the piano as well. He had been moved by the performance of Brother Cecil Janway, a traveling evangelist who came through Ferriday and lifted the roof off the little frame church with his righteous piano style. Jimmy sat as close as he could to Brother Janway, and while he watched, he prayed aloud. "Lord, I want you to give me the gift of playing the piano," he said over and over, sometimes so loudly that his father punched him. "If you give me this talent, I will never use it for the world. . . . I will always use the talent for your glory. If I ever go back on my promise, you can paralyze my fingers!" As soon as Brother Janway stepped away, Jimmy boldly approached the piano and began to pick out simple chords.

"Jimmy wasn't very talented," Frankie Jean says, "but he prayed all day and night for that talent, and it came to him. I was about as shocked as the rest of them. I thought the days of miracles were behind us."

On the contrary, miracles were abundant during that summer of 1944. Mickey's mother held prayer meetings in her home above the pool hall. The war raging in Europe and the Pacific seemed far, far away, but it grew suddenly closer when little Jimmy Swaggart began to prophesy in tongues. Jimmy spoke for five days in German and Japanese (the

languages were verified, says Sun Swaggart, by war veterans who were drawn to the meetings) and then gave his own interpretations in English. "It would make cool chills run up and down your spine, because he's speakin' in the supernatural, he wasn't speakin' like just an ordinary person," his father recalls. "He was a child in the third grade, y'see, and yet he spoke as a college graduate."

It's a small detail, but I think a relevant one, that the languages in which little Jimmy Swaggart expressed himself were the tongues of the enemy. Moreover, if one were to examine the incident strictly through the lens of psychology, what a clever coup this was on the part of this "deeply suppressed" child, who had been so mortified by his parents' conversion. Now this child who was scarcely allowed to speak in his own house was preaching to the multitudes while his amazed parents stood aside.

"I didn't know what was happening," Jimmy writes in his autobiography. "I felt like I was standing outside my body. Then I began to describe exactly what I saw '. . . a powerful bomb destroying an entire city . . . tall buildings crumbling . . . people screaming.' " Each day more prophecies poured forth. The crowds that gathered to hear this entranced, flaxen-haired child grew large and forced the meetings to be held in the church. Word spread across northern Louisiana as far as Alexandria and Monroe. "Many outsiders, wandering into the little church on Texas Street, were saved after hearing the prophecies," Swaggart writes. "Some dismissed the whole matter because I was only nine years old. But a year later, when the two Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed, nobody thought the prophecies were childish anymore."

There were other prophecies issued that week that were not recorded in Jimmy's memoirs. Sun Swaggart says there were ten divinations altogether, of which nine already have come to pass. "Of a hydrogen bomb, of a cobalt bomb, of an atomic bomb—they're all here, y'see. And many other things that were stated about the affairs of nations and the entire universe." More than that he won't tell, especially about the unfulfilled tenth prophecy.

"The last one's water," Frankie Jean says. "Something about water covering this town. It's never clear. Something about Ferriday being wiped out."

After the prophecies, Jimmy's future seemed sealed. God had claimed him. Jimmy resisted the call, however; instead, he turned to crime. He and Jerry began to break into local stores. "It was a lark to us," Jimmy writes. "We even stole some scrap iron from Uncle Lee's own backyard and sold it back to him." Jimmy's only interests then were playing the piano and boxing—his ambition was to become the heavyweight champion of the world. His big frame was filling out. Already he sensed the power inside himself, the raw force that could dominate the world of men, both physically and spiritually. The only opponent he couldn't conquer was God.

"I no longer considered myself a Christian," he has said of this period, despite the fact that everyone in his community saw him as a spiritual prodigy. He and Jerry worked up a stage act, where Jimmy played the bass line on the piano and Jerry played the treble, and together they swept talent contests around the state. One night they played separately, and Jimmy began a romping version of "Drinkin' Wine Spo-dee-o-dee," one of Old Sam's numbers at Haney's Big House. "A strange feeling came over me," Jimmy writes. "I was able to do runs on the piano I hadn't been able to do before. My fingers literally flew over the keys." The frenzied crowd in the school auditorium stomped and cheered. "For the first time in my life, I sensed what it felt like to be anointed by the Devil." Remembering his promise to the Lord never to play for the world, Jimmy felt a sudden rush of fear.

At this juncture in their lives, in their early teens, the future careers of Jimmy and Jerry might have changed places. Each saw the choices of life as being all good or all bad. The roads out of Ferriday led only toward good or evil, toward God or Satan, and each boy was standing at the crossroads. At the age of fifteen, Jerry got a job playing piano in the

notorious Blue Cat Club in Natchez, "the meanest, lowest-down, fightin'-and-killingest place in the world," he said later; but on Sundays he was preaching in Ferriday. When he was sixteen, he married the first of his six wives, a preacher's daughter named Dorothy Barton, and dropped out of school. Uncle Lee paid to send Jerry to a Pentecostal Bible college in Waxahachie, Texas, but he lasted only three months. He was booted out for playing a boogie version of "My God Is Real" during chapel. He came home and started preaching at the church on Texas Street.

Jimmy would remember this period as the darkest time of his life. God had called him to preach, he believed, but Jimmy wanted less and less to obey him. One day, to Jimmy's horror, his father declared that he was giving up his successful grocery business to go into the ministry full time, along with Minnie Bell. Jimmy began to cry and plead for them not to do it. For the first time in the history of the Swaggart family, they had become financially comfortable. Now all that was being thrown away in the pursuit of a pulpit in a little Holy Roller church in the dismal neighboring town of Wisner. Jimmy was profoundly ashamed. "For years after that," he writes, "when I had to fill out a school form listing my parents' occupation, I left it blank." Whenever his father and mother and sister, Jeanette, went to preach revivals in the little towns around Ferriday, Sun would ask Jimmy to come along. "We need you on the piano," his father said, but Jimmy refused. Jerry went instead.

There is a pattern here, isn't there? God calls, Jimmy resists. As why should he not? God wanted his soul, but Jimmy wanted his identity. His mother had told him repeatedly that he was going to "walk with God," that he would be "perfect." His cousins thought he was close to perfection already. "He wouldn't put on a bathing suit and go swimming in public," Mickey Gilley would recall years later, after the scandal broke. "Jimmy to us was like Jesus walking on the face of the earth again." To be perfect, to be Jesus, was a role Jimmy wasn't quite ready to play. Later, when he was a middle-aged man trapped inside this holy persona and God was making one dramatic demand upon him after another, what was left of the real Jimmy would conspire to break free. It was no accident that the route of his escape was through women.

Women became spiritual metaphors for his relationship with God. They were holy vessels of God's love, and the holiest vessel of all was Minnie Bell Swaggart. It was she who had led Jimmy to Jesus, and Jimmy's estrangement from his mother made him feel his separation from God most acutely. Minnie Bell and Sun would be off preaching out of town and would come home late at night; then she would slip into Jimmy's room. "I would not open my eyes when she kissed me on the cheek," Jimmy writes, "but after she left, I would remember the prayer she whispered over me. Many nights I would lay awake for hours, crying." Other nights this haunted child would awaken "in the wee, still hours of the morning. The house would be quiet, and I would not hear a sound. I would suddenly be assailed with a terrifying thought: 'Jesus has come, everyone is gone, *and I'm left!*'"

Where had everyone gone? They had been raptured. They had risen to meet Christ in the clouds of heaven. Those who were left behind, the unsaved, would, according to the Book of Revelation, endure the seven years of the Great Tribulation, a period marked by the appearance of that dark figure of prophecy the Antichrist. This was the very core of Jimmy's belief. "When I was a boy," he writes, "every other sermon that was preached from behind our pulpits was based on the rapture. We were continually cautioned to be *ready*. Jesus was coming at any minute." Had he come and left Jimmy behind? "More than once, I slipped out of bed and crept to my parents' bedroom door. There I would kneel and put my ear to their door in the hope that I would hear my mother breathing or, as she would so often do in her sleep, say the name of Jesus out loud. . . . I knew if I could hear them, the rapture had not as yet taken place—and there would still be a chance for me."

At the age of seventeen, Jimmy followed Jerry's lead and dropped out of high school, then married Frances Anderson, a pretty girl with dark hair and a crafty face who sang in the choir in Sun's church. "She was fourteen," Frankie Jean says. ("She was fifteen," Swaggart contends, "and not pregnant.")

"I couldn't believe Jimmy made the fatal step," says Frankie Jean. "He got married for sex. We were all laughing about it. Of course, I had gotten married myself when I was twelve. We're all kind of earthy, to say the least."

Until he met Frances, Jimmy had never expressed interest in girls. Thirty-five years later he was still describing her as "the only woman I ever kissed." Given the nature of his relations with other women, that sad boast might actually be true.

Through Frances, Jimmy found the Spirit once again. He began preaching on street corners around the state. Once when he was sermonizing in Ferriday, he spotted Mickey and Jerry standing in the back of the crowd. Tears were streaming down their faces. "I wish I had the guts to do that," Mickey told him. Jerry Lee said, "Jim, I just want you to know, me and Mickey are going out and hit the big time—and help support you in the ministry."

That prophecy would soon come to pass. In 1954 another young communicant of the Assemblies of God, a nineteen-year-old truck driver from East Tupelo, Mississippi, named Elvis Presley, cut a record titled "That's All Right," and the age of rock and roll was born. Soon after that, Jerry's dad drove him to Memphis to audition for Sam Phillips, who had produced not only Elvis but also Roy Orbison, Carl Perkins, and Johnny Cash at the suddenly legendary Sun Records. Jerry sang "Crazy Arms" on a demonstration record. Two months later the song had sold 300,000 copies.

Jimmy was digging ditches at the time. He was eating lunch in a diner when he first heard his cousin's voice come over the jukebox. He thought about all the times he and Jerry had played piano together and the plans they had made to leave Ferriday and hit the big time. For Jerry Lee Lewis, those dreams were coming true.

Why weren't they coming true for Jimmy Swaggart? Despite his talents and his prayers, he seemed paralyzed, unable to get out of the ditch he had dug for himself. Years later, he would learn that his mother and her sisters were spending hours of their time asking God to block his path. The women in his life were praying that the Lord instead would permit Jimmy to preach to thousands, "just like Billy Graham."

Although it wasn't evident at the time, the lives of Jimmy Swaggart and Jerry Lee Lewis were already linked in a curious seesaw in which the fortunes of one would rise as the other's fell.

While he was in Memphis, Jerry prayed to God for "one hit record." With the profits he pledged to establish a church and spend the rest of his life preaching the word. God granted his wish. By 1957, Jerry had sold 21 million records. When "Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On" came out, two more record-pressing plants were built to handle the demand. He was becoming a coast-to-coast sensation. Sam Phillips had a new song he wanted Jerry to record, titled "Great Balls of Fire." For Jerry, the Bible student and part-time preacher, that phrase could mean only one thing. It occasioned a weird and passionate argument between him and Phillips, which the sound engineer inadvertently recorded. Phillips was contending that a person could play rock and roll and still save souls. "How can the devil save souls?" Jerry cried out. "Man, I got the devil in me—if I didn't I'd be a Christian." When Phillips tried to reassure Jerry that the song's title did not refer to the Devil, Jerry replied, "It ain't what you believe, it's what's written in the Bible!" "Then how do you interpret the Bible?" asked Phillips. "H-E-L-L," Jerry said dismally, then struck the opening four notes of the song that would become his trademark, which would make him an international superstar, and which would, he devoutly believed, doom the "Ferriday Fireball" to eternal perdition.

Back in Louisiana, Jimmy was still draining swamps. He was a father now, preaching the backroads churches, living in a house trailer with Frances and the baby, and driving a crummy old Plymouth with faulty valves that he claimed to have "healed" with an anointing of oil on the hood ornament. What a contrast it was when, one Sunday in early December 1957, Jerry wheeled into Ferriday driving a new Cadillac. He seemed to be on top of the world; but that night in church he held the pew so tightly his knuckles turned white. "I preached that morning to be factual with you," Jimmy later told an interviewer, "and God dealt with the boy [Jerry]. I mean dealt with him to such an extent that he sat there and wept as if though his heart was shattered. . . . Of course, then there was nothing but the roses, nothing but the grandeur, nothing but the glory. There was no bitter pill to swallow then."

After the service, the cousins stood in front of the church, and Jerry began to boast about how much money he was making, how many cars he owned, how he was going to be "the biggest thing in the world." "I said, 'Yes, Jerry, but what about your soul?' " Jimmy recalled. "He never answered me. He dropped his head, his eyes once again filled with tears, and he got in his car and drove away."

Soon Jerry would taste that bitter pill. A crowd in Boston rioted following one of Jerry's performances. Police arrested the concert promoter and charged him with inciting anarchy. The reaction against rock and roll was just beginning. A few weeks before the Boston concert, Jerry had married his third wife, his thirteen-year-old second cousin, Myra Gale Brown, a wide-eyed seventh-grader who still believed in Santa Claus. The following spring Mr. and Mrs. Lewis flew to London for a series of performances, but when the British press uncovered his "child bride" and the fact that he had never been divorced from his previous wives, he was chased out of England as a bigamist and cradle robber. He got home to find his bookings canceled. Disc jockeys had dropped his songs from their play lists. Barred from television and most concert halls, he was reduced to one-night stands in the beer halls and ballparks of Waycross and Sulphur Dell.

In the meantime, Jimmy's career as an evangelist was picking up— thanks to Jerry's notoriety. He had posters made up saying, COME HEAR THE FIRST COUSIN OF JERRY LEE LEWIS. Despite his burgeoning popularity, Jimmy was still driving his rattletrap Plymouth. He had begun to pray that God should instruct Jerry to give him an Oldsmobile. Eventually Jerry did, bowing to the pressure his mother brought on him to share his bounty with God's anointed one in Ferriday.

With the gift of the Oldsmobile 88, the jinn of success passed out of Jerry Lee's hands and into Jimmy Lee's. Jerry would never again know the wild popular acclaim that had once been his. He watched Mickey Gilley, whom he would deride forever as "an imitator," become a popular country singer, with three number-one records in a single year (a feat Jerry never accomplished), and the owner of a colossal nightclub in Houston that was the setting of the movie *Urban Cowboy*. Jimmy, too, was becoming a recording star. To date he has issued forty-six albums and claims to have sold 15 million copies. (Since most of them have been sold through his mail-order business, the Recording Industry Association of America has no figures to support the claim.) "I have sold more long-play albums than any gospel singer on the face of the earth," Swaggart liked to brag, as he pointed to the walls of his office, which were lined with gold and platinum records that he had printed and awarded to himself.

As the decades passed, Jerry's success continued to pale. He seemed to be trapped in a horror-house ride. He would see two of his children die, one in a car accident, possibly under the influence of drugs, and the other by drowning in Jerry's own backyard pool. Jerry was drinking steadily, raking pills by the gross, wrecking cars, going through women. The turbulence inside him was impossible to contain. One night he shot his bass player in the chest with a .357 magnum. (The man survived.) In 1973 he got arrested outside Elvis Presley's mansion with a gun in his hand. The IRS seized his property for

unpaid taxes. (He was acquitted of charges of tax evasion because the jury ruled that he was too ignorant to do his own taxes.) In 1981 his stomach burst open and he was rushed to the hospital. It was as if some demon inside him were trying to break free. Doctors didn't expect him to survive, but Jerry's hold on life was prodigious. He returned meaner than ever.

Jerry had a history of beating his wives, and many people would suspect him of murdering his fifth wife, a bouncy twenty-five-year-old blonde named Shawn, who was found dead in Jerry's guest bedroom in 1983, with blood in her hair and bruises on her body. (After a quick inquest, the authorities in DeSoto County, Mississippi, where Jerry lives, attributed her death to a drug overdose; Jerry denies any involvement in her death.)

All this time he would watch Jimmy Swaggart grow mightier and more censorious, until he appeared as some volcanic prophet from the Old Testament. Jerry might be sitting in another anonymous hotel room in another dimly perceived city, and he would see Jimmy on television thundering like a new Isaiah, clothed with the garments of salvation and covered with the robe of righteousness, proclaiming the coming day of vengeance. Where had he gotten this terrible authority? Jimmy's faith had seemed, until now, somehow unearned. He did not have to seek belief. From the time he began speaking in tongues and delivering prophecies, faith had been thrust upon him. He resisted, but he never doubted. There had been moments of struggle in his life, moments when he had fallen into the abyss of despair—without ever sinking very far. Faith kept him afloat.

By contrast, the story of Jerry Lee Lewis was one of endless doubt, anguish, and struggle. Indeed, there seemed to be no bottom; there was only this endless fall. His life was a form of living damnation, but he endured it with a certain integrity. It was as if he were paying the price for Jimmy's belief.

They had each discovered the power of the erotic. Jerry's life and music was a trail of broken sexual and social taboos, possibly even to the point of murder, the most forbidden of the erotic appetites. He was a hero of the libido. From the beginning of his career he had been ringmaster of a wild generational urge toward chaos, destruction, sexual excess—in a word, ecstasy—no matter what the cost. He stood defiantly outside the borders of convention; the lyrics of his anthem were "I am what I am, not what you want me to be." Would they also form his epitaph? Who could say that he would stop short of the grave, for, after all, wasn't he imprisoned in the metaphor of his own life? He was a fallen angel, falling from salvation, falling from the Jerry who once had preached and spoken in tongues himself, falling from the Jimmy who had called to him so many times to repent, to come home.

This dissolute life had taken its customary toll. Although Jerry was a few months younger than his cousin, he had aged in such a way that a stranger would no longer have placed them within a decade of each other. Jerry had always been loose and wiry, until his belly blew open, and after that he became hunched and brittle. His hair, once so blond and flowing, had thinned and turned the color of a tobacco stain. And although in his middle fifties he was still a hellcat, there was a new note of uncertainty in his performances. The anger was still there, but it was coated now with caution, and perhaps with a sense of boredom, even of duty.

Jimmy, on the other hand, had stayed unnaturally young and vigorous; in fact, he appeared to grow in vitality year after year. Despite the bifocals he sometimes wore, he remained eerily baby-faced. His entire being testified to good health and good living. But there was something else as well. When he was younger there had been a kind of gelded prissiness about him; he had been so cloaked in goodness and denatured sanctity, despite his powerful frame, that one could not help thinking of the mama's boy, the teacher's pet. Gradually, however, that soft layer gave way. As his empire magnified, so did Jimmy's confidence. His preaching took on an edge, a razor edge. Now, when he

stood in his "poolpit," he seemed to lose awareness of who and where he was. Gradually the hands of restraint would let go; he would sink deeper and deeper into his subconscious; he would journey past reason and conscious meaning into the slashing emotions and buried fears and unnamed desires that bubble below. His voice would rise and tremble, his grammar would fall away, but still he stumbled toward that cowering raw nerve of longing. He knew where it was. One watched him with both dread and desire, because this is the nerve that is attached to faith. Longing to be loved, longing to be saved—it is when he finally touches this nerve that the tears flow and the audience stands with its hands upraised, laughing, wailing, praising the Lord, speaking in unknown languages and quivering with the pain and pleasure of this thrilling public exposure.

At the peak of his success, Jimmy Swaggart had become the erotic phenomenon that Jerry had been thirty years before. To see him strut and dance on the stage, full of juice, his voice rippling with insinuation, was to be reminded of the young Jerry Lee, his wavy locks flying, as he gave himself up to ecstasy.

Now, in his middle years, despite the confusion of narcotics, Jerry trembled in the sight of his cousin's judgment. He was constantly tortured by the idea that he was playing Satan's music. "A man can't serve two masters," he would often say. "Satan has power next to God. You ain't loyal to God, you must be loyal to Satan. There ain't no in-between. Can't serve two gods. I'm a sinner; I know it. Soon I'm gonna have to reckon with the chillin' hands of death."

In February 1982, Jimmy preached a sermon at the graveside of Mickey's father. Jerry was there, a bitter man. At the end of the sermon, Jimmy asked of the mourners, "Whosoever among you believes you wouldn't go to heaven with Uncle Arthur if you died today, come forward." Jerry walked up and stood right in Jimmy's face. "Will you accept Christ as your savior?" Jimmy asked. Jerry just stared at him, then turned away.

Their paths would cross again in Dayton, Ohio. Jimmy was there on a crusade. He had forgotten that Jerry was going to be there as well and was surprised when Jerry's fourth wife called him. She was sobbing and hysterical. Jerry was in serious shape, she said. "You've got to do something," she cried. "There's nobody else that can."

After his service, Jimmy went over to the auditorium where his cousin was performing. When he came in, Jerry was playing "Meat Man," a dirty honky-tonk ditty, but his words were scarcely intelligible; he might as well have been speaking in tongues. Jimmy walked onstage and took the mike out of his hands. Jerry was astonished—flabbergasted—but he didn't resist. Jimmy had always been more than a match for him physically. The crowd sat stunned, and the music drifted to a confused halt. "Jerry Lee's my cousin, and I've come to get him," Jimmy announced. When the promoter protested, Jimmy pulled out a wad of cash and paid him off on the spot.

He flew Jerry to Baton Rouge in his private plane and fed him malted milk and shrimp for the next seven days. Jerry left there sober, for the first time in decades, but it didn't take. Nor did Jimmy's plea to join him in the ministry. By now the cousins had been absorbed by forces much larger than themselves.

One summer night in Los Angeles, high again, Jerry was mumbling through a radio interview about serving Satan. "He got power next to God," Jerry said. "He'll drag you ... to the ... depths of... of agony."

"How does Satan benefit from your entertaining people?" asked the puzzled interviewer.

" 'Cause I'm draggin' the audience to hell with me."

In the meantime, God was courting Jimmy. He came to him in a dream. There was an enormous field of cotton below a gloomy sky. God told Jimmy that the field needed harvesting before the storm came. Then he said, "If you fail, there is no one else to do it. I have many laborers, but none to reach the masses, *and you must not fail!*"

No one else! This was the stark commandment that Jimmy lived with. He had become the new Messiah. "I must do it," he writes. "God has called me to do it. He has laid His hand on my life to do it. . . . If you think there are many others out there—or even one other person—who can do it, you are so sadly mistaken. . . . So if I do not do it, it will not be done. I know that to be the truth."

It was this awesome responsibility, the very fate of the world itself, the salvation of humankind, that would lead Jimmy Swaggart to ruin himself on Airline Highway.

\*

*Therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts concerning the prophets; Behold, I will feed them with wormwood and make them drink the water of gall: for from the Prophets of Jerusalem is profaneness gone forth into all the land. JEREMIAH 23:15*

"May I help you?" the receptionist asked the ragged blond man who had just wandered into the lobby of WBRZ-TV in Baton Rouge.

"I am a prophet of God," the man informed her.

"And what do you want me to do about it?"

"I've seen visions," said the prophet. "I want to talk to a reporter."

The receptionist pressed a buzzer. In a moment a security guard appeared and, without a word, grasped the man under the arm and steered him outside.

"I don't like that sort of thing," the receptionist confided when the lobby was cleared. "I hate having those weirdos breathing down my neck."

"Does it happen a lot?" I asked her.

"You'd be surprised. All the time."

In a moment the door opened again and John Camp, WBRZ's award-winning investigative reporter, greeted me. For years, Camp had been following the Swaggart Ministries; indeed, during Swaggart's confessional sermon, he had singled out Camp, "my old nemesis," for a particular apology.

Until the recent scandal, Camp had spent a considerable amount of time inquiring into the finances of the Swaggart Ministries. He exposed the "children's fund," one of Swaggart's most successful fund-raising appeals, which purported to provide food, education, and shelter to needy children around the globe, although in fact there was no such designated fund for children until Camp asked for an accounting. Even then, says Camp, only four cents on the dollar actually went to children's projects.

He told me a story he had heard from a disaffected Swaggart employee who had been in charge of spiritual counseling. Two elderly sisters had contributed everything they had to support Swaggart's ministry. They wrote a letter asking if it would be a sin for them to commit suicide and give the insurance money to Jimmy Swaggart. This was at a time when Swaggart was adding on to his million-dollar, nine-thousand-plus-square-foot mansion, with its floors of Italian marble. He and Frances also enjoyed a vacation retreat in Palm Springs, new Lincolns every year, diamonds and Rolex watches, a personal jet, and a two-story, air-conditioned playhouse for the grandchildren. At one point Frances decided that she didn't like the shape of the pool and had it entirely reconfigured. All this while Swaggart was making one desperate claim after another that the ministry was failing and more dollars were urgently needed.

"We're talking about people who I believe are inherently evil—particularly Frances and her son, Donnie," said Camp. "They've developed an opulent lifestyle based on the hopes and dreams of people like those little old ladies who offered to commit suicide. We all have to answer for ourselves, either here or in the hereafter. I think that Jimmy, at least, realizes this—and that is the conflict that underlies his personality."

Camp set a spool of tape on the editing machine. It was an interview with one of the prostitutes who claims to have had sexual relations with Jimmy Swaggart, a redhead who calls herself Peggy Carriere. (She would later fail a lie-detector test administered by a Swaggart employee.) The raw version of this tape had become a sort of underground classic in the newsrooms of Louisiana. "I was in the washroom of the Texas Motel with another girl," Carriere's story begins. She is a thin woman with a sharp face and small eyes. She said she had noticed a tan Lincoln Town Car pulling up by the dumpster in the back of the motel. "I looked and I looked and I said, 'Girl, that's Jimmy Swaggart. Maybe he needs some directions or whatever.' So I walked over to him and said, 'Hello, Jimmy Swaggart. How are you doin'? What do you think about this Jim and Tammy Bakker stuff goin' on?'... And he said, 'I'm not Jimmy Swaggart.' And I laughed and I said, 'Yes you are.' And then he started doin' like this with his pants, and I realized he had an erection when he drove up. . . . He was tryin' to get it to go back down, and I kept talkin' about Jim and Tammy Bakker and how was he makin' out with his own congregation and all that. He kept insistin' he wasn't Jimmy Swaggart, that he was just there to meet a man and two little boys, that he was supposed to help this man adopt these little boys. The back of the Texas Motel is an empty lot and a garbage dump. So I jus' tol' him, 'Yeah, all right,' and he drove off."

Several days later she saw the same tan Lincoln parked in the back of the motel. She looked inside to make sure. "He had the telephone in there, the same color seats, plush-velvet brown seats." Then she saw the man she claims was Jimmy Swaggart coming downstairs. "He had on red joggin' shorts with a white V-neck shirt and the white sweatband and the tennis shoes and white socks." As he left, Carriere said to a man standing downstairs, "You know, that's Jimmy Swaggart." And the man replied, "He just gave my old lady twenty dollars for a head job."

At this point the reporter asks Carriere what sort of sex Swaggart had had with her. "He watched me play with my pussy while he jacked off," she said. "He was slumming. That's what he wanted, ten- and twenty-dollar tricks. It was like he wanted to see how low he could go."

\*

The secret that burned inside Jimmy Swaggart was that he had been a slave of sexual perversion since the age of ten. This he confessed in February to the elders in Springfield and to a small group of his own aides. And yet God had lifted him above all others. This was the terrible paradox of Swaggart's life: he had been chosen by God to evangelize the world in the last days, but his own soul was losing ground in a desperate battle with Satan. "Once the individual indulges in pornography, bondage is sure to follow," Swaggart has preached. "He must now wallow deeper in perversion to satisfy the demands of a mind that is rapidly becoming warped by this disease of hell." According to Frankie Jean, Swaggart told his father, "There were demons hovering over me; they came from every direction. . . . It was in my every thought, my every thought was this lust."

Does this account for his rage in the pulpit? For his savagery in bringing down the ministries of his competitors and his feverish jeremiads over the sexual transgressions of other preachers in his denomination? He began by attacking the ministry of the

elderly radio evangelist Herbert W. Armstrong, who had proclaimed that his Worldwide Church of God was the only source of salvation in the world. "This is always the first mark of a cult," Swaggart wrote in his denunciation of Armstrong, although Swaggart himself would soon be making similar claims. He quoted I John 4:1: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world." Next he turned to Oral Roberts, his main rival among the Pentecostals, who had claimed to raise the dead in his revivals, and who was now begging his supporters to send him \$8 million or else "God is going to call me home." "It's abominable," said Swaggart, "and tragically, all in the name of God." He called Roberts a false prophet as well. "Somehow," the wounded Roberts replied, "Satan has put something in your heart, that you're better than anybody else."

And then Swaggart brought down Marvin Gorman.

Gorman, like Swaggart, was ordained by the Assemblies of God. He had risen in the denomination to become the assistant superintendent of the national presbytery. In many respects, the Marvin Gorman Ministries was deliberately modeled on the Jimmy Swaggart Ministries—all too successfully. Recently Gorman's church, the First Assembly of God in New Orleans, surpassed five thousand members, becoming the largest church in Louisiana and eclipsing Swaggart's Family Worship Center congregation of forty-three hundred. Although still a small-time televangelist by Swaggart's standards, Gorman was rising fast. He was a regular guest on Jim and Tammy Bakker's "PTL Club." His own show, "Marvin Gorman Live," was broadcast over thirty-seven independent stations. He operated two television stations of his own and was in the process of purchasing a third, but the big news for Gorman's ministry was that he had just secured a satellite uplink, which would make his program available internationally.

On July 15, 1986, a fellow Assemblies minister confronted Gorman with the charge that Gorman had been carrying on an affair with the other man's wife. Late that evening Gorman drove to Baton Rouge to confront the aggrieved husband in Swaggart's home. Swaggart's lawyer and two other Assemblies preachers were present. After hearing the complaint, Swaggart handed his Bible to Gorman and asked him to read from the fifth chapter of I Timothy, where Saint Paul prescribes the conduct of the Christian ministry. "Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses," Gorman read. "Then that sin rebuke before all, that others may also fear."

"Rebuke before all"—that was the text of the sermon Jimmy Swaggart preached in his home that night before Marvin Gorman and his witnesses. According to Gorman's \$90 million defamation suit, Swaggart demanded that Gorman confess his sins, step down from his ministry, and seek rehabilitation (the same procedure Swaggart himself would refuse to follow). Gorman refused, claiming he was innocent, but by the time he arrived back in New Orleans, well after midnight, Frances Swaggart had already called Gorman's associate pastor and several prominent members of his congregation to tell them of the allegations. The next day Gorman resigned from the Assemblies of God. That Sunday a statement prepared by Jimmy Swaggart and several others was read aloud to the stunned parishioners in Gorman's church. In it, Swaggart accused Gorman of having had numerous adulterous affairs. Although Jim Bakker took Gorman's side and actually pleaded for his forgiveness, Swaggart muscled Gorman's show off the PTL Network. The Gorman empire, such as it was, quickly collapsed. His church, his television stations, and especially his reputation were lost to him. He was reduced to preaching in a drafty warehouse in Metairie to a congregation of folding chairs. There he began to consider his revenge.

By now Swaggart had turned his attention to Jim Bakker, the boyish host of the "PTL Club" and president of the PTL Network. Bakker was the darling—as Swaggart had never been—of the Assemblies of God hierarchy. With his amusement park and talk show, his four Mercedes-Benzes and two antique Rolls-Royces, his several mansions, his prosperity

gospel and psychological counseling, Bakker represented the status and acceptance and air of sophistication that the Pentecostal movement had longed for since its founding.

Swaggart lived splendidly too, but not so garishly. Moreover, there still hung about Swaggart the taint of Mother Sumrall's weedy lot. There was still something hungry and deprived about Swaggart, something resentful and savage, some blind urge toward chaos. "I don't fit in with anybody, I really don't," Swaggart concluded. "I don't even fit in with the Pentecostals anymore. Because, you see, most Pentecostals have 'grown up.' We've gotten on the right side of the tracks now, and that's what's ruined us. They used to throw rotten eggs at us and laugh at us, but now, you know, we can go to those old movies and we can drink . . . our wine with our meals, just like the Baptists and the Methodists and the Presbyterians can. Am I *bothering* you? Am I *offending* you? Somebody said, 'Don't rock the boat'—I'm trying to turn a rotten thing over."

Like many Assemblies preachers, Swaggart had heard rumors that Bakker was bisexual, and lately Swaggart had been tipped by a defrocked evangelist named John Wesley Fletcher about a tryst he had arranged between Bakker and a then-unnamed young church secretary. Swaggart aired his suspicions before the executive presbyters, but they ignored him. It would be nearly a year before Swaggart would have the proof he needed of Bakker's involvement with Jessica Hahn, but when he had the information, he knew what to do with it. "Jimmy took on Jim Bakker like a pit bulldog taking on a French poodle," one of Swaggart's former aides told me. "Just ripped him to shreds, destroyed the man."

Swaggart was now the scourge, of television evangelism. Who could tell what was in his mind as he drove to New Orleans to preach in Marvin Gorman's vacated pulpit on Airline Highway? It was there that he told the congregation about his dream, how *no one else* could harvest the fields of the Lord. Neither the demons nor "all the corrupt preachers they could get on their side" would stop Jimmy Swaggart from doing God's bidding.

And yet it may have been about this time, Palm Sunday, 1987, with Jim Bakker in exile and Gorman destroyed, that Swaggart began to consort with prostitutes. Marvin Gorman received the first of several anonymous calls claiming that his nemesis was cruising his neighborhood. After a while the police began getting similar reports.

Why? Why would Swaggart return again and again to Airline Highway, where he was well known and easily recognized? Consider the thoughts that must have been in his mind. God had commissioned Jimmy Swaggart to blanket the globe with his message. The minister's power continued to multiply. He was on his way to becoming the most visible man in the world. Whether he was walking on the beach in Africa or through slums in the Philippines, he would be recognized. Rulers hailed him, as well as the drifting masses. Such power could only come from God's hand. But at the same time, Satan had gained control of Swaggart's soul. The seed of sexual perversion, which he said had sprouted at the age of ten, had now grown and matured and was terribly ripe. Compared with that of the men he had brought down, the men he had publicly excoriated as false prophets, Swaggart's behavior was even more obsessive and bizarre. So who was he really serving—God or Satan? Was he a false prophet as well? Or had his power grown so great that he was swelling into the mighty Prince of Darkness, of whom Jesus had warned, who would be received as the Messiah but would be revealed in the Great Tribulation as the Antichrist?

The Travel Inn is one of several deteriorated motels along Airline Highway that rent rooms by the hour. NO REFUNDS AFTER THE FIRST 15 MINUTES, reads a sign in the manager's office. Outside their narrow rooms, facing the muddy courtyard, women sit in molded fiberglass chairs waiting for customers. Many of them kill time by watching evangelists on television. Across Airline Highway, poking above the privacy fence, a large billboard proclaims, JESUS SAID UNLESS A MAN IS BORN AGAIN HE CANNOT SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD: JOHN 3:3. YOUR ETERNITY IS AT STAKE. Perhaps it is not surprising that Jimmy Swaggart would

chose this spot to give himself up to his enemies. Here, in this highly charged battleground between God and Satan, he found a twenty-six-year-old mother of three with a crucifix tattooed on her right arm. Her name was Debra Murphree.

"Sometimes I would see him drive down the street every week, and he wouldn't stop unless he knew I was there," says Murphree. (Like Carriere, Murphree failed a lie-detector test, although she was identified in a photo taken with Swaggart. She believes the polygraph results were affected by her heavy drug use.) "He told me to get naked and maybe lay on the bed and pose for him. . . . **To me, I think he's kind of perverted, or, you know, talking about some of the things that we talked about in the rooms, you know, I wouldn't want him around my children.**" Several times Murphree commented that he reminded her of the famous Baton Rouge evangelist. "A lot of people tell me that," she says Swaggart replied. He told her his name was Billy and that he lived in St. Louis.

Despite reports of his frequent sightings on Airline Highway, Swaggart admits to only a single instance of what he called moral failure. So what are we to make of the detailed descriptions Murphree gave to *Penthouse* (for a sum reported to be in six figures) about their multiple encounters?

Swaggart had been a leading figure in the attack by the Christian right against newsstand sales of teen and rock and especially men's magazines. *Penthouse* alone was losing \$1.6 million a month in lowered sales after such major outlets as 7-Eleven stores removed the magazines from their shelves. No doubt this accounts for the sanctimonious pleasure with which *Playboy* and *Penthouse* and *Gallery* and the like chronicled the fall of Swaggart and the Bakkers. To underline the seediness of Swaggart's trysts, *Penthouse* assigned a news photographer to shoot Murphree in the various postures she supposedly assumed for Swaggart—in stark black and white, without the customary airbrushing that their more "wholesome" models receive.

Swaggart has admitted a lifelong obsession with pornography, so one can assume that there is more to his story than he has told. One might say that this entire battle for Swaggart's soul, outwardly manifested by his verbal war against harlots and dirty magazines, inwardly by his struggle against his own yearning for the same, is a particularly Christian phenomenon. Pornography and Christianity are necessary opposites, and it is not surprising that, for instance, the vilest publisher of them all, *Hustler's* Larry Flynt, would become a Christian convert—no more than that Jessica Hahn, the church secretary who slept with Jim Bakker, would wind up living in the Playboy mansion. The same gravitational pull that would cause Debra Murphree to tattoo a cross on her arm and watch Jimmy Swaggart on television brought Jimmy Swaggart to Airline Highway to watch Debra Murphree.

If we accept Murphree's account, Swaggart visited her twenty or twenty-five times—often enough to set off alarms in Marvin Gorman's neighborhood. Eventually he was bound to be discovered. His enemies would have their day. Gorman and the pornographers would triumph. But there was another inevitable consequence of Swaggart's self-destruction. That was the fact that others who had cared nothing about his ministry until now would suddenly be drawn into the drama of his life. It's a small matter, and probably it never occurred to Swaggart when he entered room 7 of the Travel Inn, that people like me would eventually follow him here, even to this same room, to pick up the miserable details of his ruination.

I thought about this as I sat on the slumping double bed and stared at the orange carpet and the nubby green chenille drapes, the purple walls, the vaulted ceiling with a pink crossbeam, the pale yellow tiles of the bathroom. There was a television, of course, and a telephone ("He was so cheap he would call and try to get me to get him off over the phone"). The coffee table was illuminated by a suspended lamp on a gold chain—the characteristic "classy" touch that filled the room with despair. Above the bed was a mock-Picasso-blue-period print of mandolins and a typewriter.

The moment Swaggart entered this gloomy little compartment, he made a date with me in his future. I am not trying to innate my importance; he had made the same date with dozens of other reporters who were at this moment filling up the bar at the Sheraton in Baton Rouge or chasing the increasingly reticent whores up and down Airline Highway. I was merely a part of the press mob that was prying into the catastrophe he had made of his life.

I felt an unhappy kinship with this man. In his church, I had experienced that familiar longing for transcendence; yes, even in his disgrace he had managed to touch me. He had built that giant structure as a theater to contain his belief; and although it was crass and showy, it was also thrilling and defiantly emotional. It seemed to me a more spiritual place in many respects than the arid intellectual refinements of the church I had grown up in, precisely because it was so untamed. At least in Swaggart's church, one could sense the raw and sometimes dangerous expansiveness of the human spirit. His was not a religion I could believe in—but then, mere belief was not what he was after: it was surrender, total, abject surrender of the spirit. And of course a part of me longed for exactly that, the ecstatic abandonment of my own busy, judgmental, ironic mentality.

Room 7 was another sort of theater. Here Swaggart sought ecstasy of another kind, that of degradation. After all, it was not sex he was seeking, exactly, but obscenity. "He'd always try to talk me into pulling my pants off and facing him sideways with my legs spread apart," Murphree says. Sometimes he would ask her to undress in his car and run outside, which she wouldn't do, because she didn't trust that he would not drive off and leave her. When they were here in her room at the Travel Inn he would get her to use a dildo while he sat in the green fiberglass chair and masturbated. **Several times he asked if she would let her nine-year-old daughter watch them, but she refused.**

If her story is true, then again I could only stand in awe of Swaggart's willingness to go to extremes. Only once, she says, did Swaggart ever enter her. "I was on my knees, doggie-style, with my feet hanging off the bed." Let us stop here, for a moment, and consider this scene. There is a woman stripped of everything—not merely her clothes and her dignity and her personality but also, one might say, her humanity. She has been reduced—"doggie-style"—to animal status. But isn't there, in her subjugation, in the very lewdness of this scene, something sacred? Her utter surrender is perversely like the surrender of the *penitentes* who abase themselves before the majesty of the Lord. The shame, the submission, the degradation of the ego, are the same, and in this sense we can see how obscenity both mocks and mirrors the divine.

Jimmy Swaggart stands behind her, pants down, staring at her ass. No doubt he thinks he is staring into hell itself. Perhaps he sees a vision of himself, humiliated before his enemies and his loved ones and indeed before the entire electronic world. There is a power inside him—he thinks it's a demon—that has dragged him to this low place and now draws him closer. But there is also the noble urge to destroy himself. This immensely public man, this almost universal symbol of righteousness, has repeatedly brought himself to a place where his discovery and disgrace are so likely that one could say he was playing Russian roulette with his reputation. It is a game no one plays for very long. Swaggart himself had been the agent of destruction for other men just like him, priestly men brought to ruin by their animal desires—one of whom was searching for him right here on Airline Highway with revenge in mind. "He stuck it in and pumped a couple of times and pulled it out," says Murphree. Then he cried out, "Oh, God, I don't want to come yet, but it's coming already!"

On October 17, 1987, Gorman would have his revenge. His son Randy worked part-time for the Jefferson Parish sheriff's office and had spent some time with Debra Murphree himself. Both the father and the son had been waiting for Swaggart to reappear, and they were ready. While Randy snapped photos from behind a curtain in another room in the motel, Swaggart went into room 7 in the company of a woman who, according to

church officials who have seen the photograph, resembles Murphree. Shortly after that, Marvin Gorman drove into the courtyard and found Swaggart changing his tire. Someone had cut the valve stem. The two evangelists spent the next two hours talking in Gorman's car. Gorman says that Swaggart asked repeatedly, "What do you want, Marvin?" and that he replied, "Jimmy, I want you to just get your life straight and to love me."

The following day Gorman met with Jimmy, Frances, and their son, Donnie, at a Sheraton in the New Orleans area. Gorman gave Swaggart a grace period of four months to "clean up his act." What that meant, according to a friend of Gorman's, was a public confession and apology from Jimmy Swaggart. Some people in the Swaggart camp suspect that the bankrupt Gorman was actually angling for a significant settlement in his defamation suit against Swaggart.

But four months passed with an eerie silence from Baton Rouge. Swaggart continued his telecasts and his crusades, traveling to the Ivory Coast and Liberia and then swinging through Central America. At times his despair would break through, and he would ridicule himself as a "poor, pitiful preacher," even comparing himself to Judas. "Let me tell you this," he cried out in a Thanksgiving camp meeting. "Demon powers, fallen angels, work more in religion than they work anyplace else. I pray constantly: 'God, don't let spirits get in Jimmy Swaggart.' "

It was, no doubt, an awkward time in his marriage.

In January of 1988, nearly at the end of Gorman's four-month deadline, Jimmy and Frances went out to dinner with several of their top aides, including Jack Pruitt, who was director of financial development. Pruitt and Frances were both serious joggers, and at dinner they were talking about their training regimens. "Something I've been using lately that has helped me is bee pollen," Pruitt said. "I have some candy bars with bee pollen in them and they're a great energy boost. They help your endurance; they even say they will increase your sex drive." Everyone laughed, especially when Pruitt produced a candy bar from his pocket and tossed it to Swaggart. "You eat that, Jimmy, and Frances will thank you for it," Pruitt joked.

Swaggart sat quietly, staring at the candy bar, as the laughter subsided into confused silence. "Well, Jack, I'm trying to think of a gentlemanly way of answering you," Swaggart finally said. "I don't need something to speed me up. I need something to slow me down."

That same month of January, according to Peggy Carriere, Swaggart returned to New Orleans. She says she saw him "cruising, looking for ladies," once again dressed in his tennis clothes but this time driving a white Lincoln. (Swaggart owned a tan Lincoln, his wife a white one.)

In February, the deadline passed. Gorman sent a note to Swaggart, reminding him of his terms. Again he received no response. Instead, Swaggart traveled to Managua to preach to forty thousand Nicaraguans in the Plaza de la Revolucion. Gorman flew to Springfield with his package of photographs. Jimmy Swaggart had accomplished his sad task. He had brought himself down.

\*

SWAGGART: HE THREATENS DIVORCE AS MARRIAGE CRUMBLES, read the headline in the *National Enquirer* in the supermarkets and convenience stores in Baton Rouge. "She treated him like a little boy, and like a little boy he rebelled," an unnamed family member told *the Enquirer*. The actor Dennis Quaid had just checked out of the Sheraton on Interstate 10, where he was staying while working on a movie, to go on to his next role, that of Jerry Lee Lewis in *Great Balls of Fire*. Jerry's career seemed about to

rise out of the rock and roll archives, an ominous development for his cousin on the other end of destiny's seesaw. One wondered if there was not a sense of relief—perhaps on both the cousins' parts—that Jimmy had fallen from his throne. After all, how exhausting these roles must have become for them, good boy and bad boy, what a tiresome pair of roles to have to play day after day, night after night—two lifetimes spent in the service of opposing mythologies, now suddenly rendered counterfeit by Jimmy's spectacular self-destruction.

And here came the reporters. For it was Pentecost Sunday, May 22, 1988, the day Swaggart chose to return to the pulpit. A month earlier he had been officially defrocked by the Assemblies of God. In the course of his self-imposed three-month suspension, Swaggart had to lay off about five hundred workers; he had been booted off the two major Christian television networks; his worldwide television coverage had been reduced, according to church officials, to only four or five countries; missions had been closed down; students had deserted his Bible college; every minister on his staff was forced to choose between working for Swaggart and keeping his Assemblies credentials; IRS agents were poring over his books; and Marvin Gorman's defamation suit was marching toward trial. "Maybe there is no other man in history more humiliated than me," Swaggart cried out, with his usual breathtaking perspective on his own importance.

The death knell was sounding for Jimmy Swaggart, or at least for what Jimmy Swaggart could have been. He promised to come back more contrite and less accusing than he had been in the past. "I believe my message will reflect a deeper compassion and love," he wrote in his monthly column in the *Evangelist*. But it was unclear if that was the message his audience wanted to hear.

"I preached to some of the largest crowds in the world, but I guess that I stand today with more fear and more trembling than I ever stood before in all my life," he said as he surveyed a crowd of about five thousand. He spoke of two dreams. In one he was "in a church. The church was empty—it was not this one—and I was tied or held down to the floor flat against the far wall. I remember wanting to get to the platform, to the pulpit, but I could not." In the other dream he fought a serpent with a sword or club. . . .

"*Halabi man ni kasaba man!*" A middle-aged black woman interrupted with a chant in tongues.

"Sister, give your utterance just a few moments from now," Swaggart requested. Two ushers led the woman out while Swaggart continued.

"I fought this thing, fighting with all the strength I had, and I finally subdued and killed it. . . . I was standing exhausted with this club in my hand," Swaggart continued, unself-consciously relating this marvelously revealing masturbatory dream. "Then I looked to my right. I thought at first it was a huge concrete pillar standing a hundred or so feet high, but it moved, and I saw it was another serpent. . . . And I remember my knees buckled. I awakened from the dream and said, 'God, do I have to fight this, and I don't know how to do it?' " But God showed him. He did not have to fight the serpent. Jesus had already slain the leviathan.

"I have suffered the fire of the eternal Lord!" Swaggart cried, suddenly breaking into a jig. "CNN is going to be taking a picture. . . . CBS and ABC and NBC! I want to serve notice on all the demons and devils and hell itself: the best is yet to come!" The crowd stood and praised him. Some of them were sobbing. It seemed obvious that Swaggart would never be reduced to "sweeping out a little mission house across the tracks," as he put it; he would always have an audience. And yet he said God had told him, "You'll be a cripple the rest of your life."

"*Malala manigoboso maniki!*" The black woman was back in the sanctuary. This time her voice was louder and more insistent. As she gave her utterance, she rocked back and forth, and her hands shook in front of her face. When she finished, Swaggart asked if anyone in the audience was moved to interpret the message. Abruptly a slender white

woman rose and in a quaking banshee voice related the following: "Yea, I am a God of purpose. . . . Yea, I say unto thee, go forth in my name for I am with thee, I shall never leave thee or forsake thee. . . . I will flow like a river through you, and I will preach to the Holy Ghost's fire . . . and they will not be able to deny my power and my spirit!"

At the end of the service, the worshipers came to the altar to hug Swaggart and, as they often do, stick love offerings in the pockets of his suit. I got in line. Swaggart had refused to see me, or any other reporter, during this time. I knew I couldn't change his mind; I didn't really know why I even felt the need to speak to him. Perhaps, like everyone else here, I just wanted to spend a moment in his embrace. When it finally came my turn, he put his arms around me and whispered "God bless you" into my ear.

When I identified myself, he jumped back as if he had touched a snake. He said he was sorry but he didn't want to be interviewed.

"I just want you to know that I'm not your enemy," I blurted out.

"Why—why—I can see that," he sputtered. "Yes, there's a good spirit on you."

That felt oddly like a benediction. I accepted it gratefully, with no clear idea why I had sought his forgiveness. Swaggart was still smiling at me when the next person in line, Marvin Gorman's private investigator, stuck a subpoena in his pocket.

Outside the Family Worship Center, summer had returned to Baton Rouge with a damp embrace of its own. The drama that was playing out in the soul of Jimmy Swaggart was coming to a close. He had defeated his demons, for the moment, at least, by crippling himself forever—and for that we must be grateful. No one else could have done it. Yet it would not be long before the public catastrophe of his life would open another chapter. (He would be caught with another prostitute in California two years later.) One has the sense that it is not damnation but obscurity that causes Swaggart's knees to knock. In the meantime, he will still be waiting for us, on the Airline Highways of cable TV, asking us to pay him for his precious love.