

MARK BOURNE

MUSTARD SEED

Donnelly's hand rose high, hoisting the Bible like a trophy. Her forehead furrowed, and her voice rose with practiced inflection that echoed among the rafters and stained-glass windows. Her rhythms and cadences crested and rolled in waves, well rehearsed after years of roadside revivals in forgotten Southern towns. Thank you, Lord, for making me your instrument for one more day.

"Men of Earth are cavorting with creatures who never read the Gospel --"

She cast her gaze across her beloved flock.

"Who never heard the Word of God --"

They must hear her words if they were to be saved.

"Who never felt the guiding hand of our Savior --"

She was their lamp in the darkness brought from the stars, ever since those first faint signals were heard by the Farside Lunar Receiver. And those first vessels descended from the clouds.

"Who have no souls, for the Kingdom of Heaven was prepared by Jesus for Man alone."

Like a lighthouse on a rocky shore, she gazed down upon her congregation. A subconscious clock measured the dramatic pause, then her voice modulated to a preordained pitch. "We walk not with angels, but with aliens blind to Man's true gift to God's firmament -- our Savior Jesus Christ!" She thrust the Bible before her like a shield. "Jesus said..." She paused to catch the eyes of those before her; it was an easy haul. "Jesus said, 'No one can enter the Kingdom of Heaven but by me!'" She clenched her eyes shut and listened.

There had been a time, years ago, when the stained glass would have rattled with "Amen!" and "Hallelujah!" ringing throughout the sanctuary. And on Easter and Christmas Sundays (when extra fold-out chairs were brought in from the Fellowship Hall) the room had been so filled with upraised voices that the walls might have burst open and flooded the world with the Lord's holy praises.

Today, though, Donnelly heard the central heating clunk on. Far away bells in the courthouse clock chimed the hour. Old Ralph Hardin in the rear pews needed a Kleenex. No more than twenty souls here today. Fewer than last week.

She opened her eyes, lowered the Bible to the pulpit. Her brow lost its furrows, but not the thin lines like dried-up river beds. Her voice was almost inaudible over the heating system.

"Don't forget next Sunday's Christmas Eve candle-lighting service. Bring your friends." She despised the dead weight of defeat in her voice. "That's all." There was no organist to play the benediction and postlude.

She turned away, loosened her collar, and rubbed her eyes, keeping them closed longer than she really needed to. The sounds of shuffling coats and snuffling noses rose behind her. The exit door in the rear foyer groaned on its arthritic joints, and December's gray chill slid down out of the Ozarks and brushed the back of her neck. Winter's teeth nipped at Reverend Ardith Donnelly of the Central Presbyterian Church of Harper, Missouri.

She turned back to her pulpit to gather up the sermon. Gerald Morris was peering up from the floor below. The chicken farmer clutched his overcoat against his belly and stared at her with eyes that rarely blinked, two eggs pressed into a moist dough face.

"Revern' Donnelly?" His voice, like his brown suit jacket, was thin and faded.

"Yes, Gerald, what can I do for you?"

"M'mama wants to know when you're comin' out to the nursin' home agin. She says your services alwiz brighten her day. She says so alia time. She's real sick, and the doctors, they don't know how long " His voice thinned away to nothing.

She exhaled, then smiled. "The Lord's work keeps me busy all over, but He and I will be back at the home real soon. Tell your mama to keep a lookout for us."

He grinned. "Bless you, Revern' Donnelly. Jeannie and me'll have you over to the house for supper real soon. Thas a promise."

"Much obliged, Gerald." She smiled warmly.

"Revern' Donnelly?" He looked away from her gaze. "Jimmy Don Ledbetter says he saw two of them Seekers in St. Louis last week. He says they talked with just ever'body about how glad they was Earth was joining the Union. Then one of them helped Roy Capehart -- you know, the taxidermist? -- fly through the air. Without wings or nothin'! It was its Gift, it said. Then another'n made colors in the air and music came from the pictures they made. Said we could maybe do it someday. Ever'one had just the best time! Isn't that wonderful?"

Donnelly looked down at him. "Gerald, doesn't the Bible tell us that God gave Man dominion over all beasts through Brother Adam?"

His eyes narrowed, but never blinked. "Well, I s'pose so."

"And what does the Bible say about Satan tempting Jesus with miracles?"

He looked at his hands kneading his overcoat. "Jimmy Don Ledbetter says --"

Donnelly shut her eyes. "Gerald. There are new temptations out there among the stars. The Seekers know neither Christ nor salvation, even though all you need is the faith of a mustard seed." She replayed an old memory: a sanctuary filled with multitudes in her spiritual hug. She had been a pilgrim, a searcher for God's wisdom, sharing what she found with others. She had been young and strong of voice. And of spirit.

The memory faded, leaving only the floaters drifting across the insides of her eyelids. "Only God knows what is in their hearts," she said quietly. She opened her eyes. "You tell Jimmy Don --"

But he was on his way toward the exit, shrugging on his overcoat. The door whimpered shut behind him.

She knew as much about the Seekers as anyone else in these parts. Twelve years now after First Contact, dozens of assorted aliens -- "extrasolar emissaries" -- were on Earth, mostly in big cities like New York and Moscow, London and Tokyo, Beijing and Bombay. Their immense ships had followed their transmissions, offering humanity membership in a galactic trade Union that was opening new markets in the outer galactic reaches. The world was still knocked cock-eyed by it all. The cultural elite were declaring it the greatest event in human history. A new age on Earth. Peace and prosperity. Heaven on Earth.

But no heavenly trumpet had sounded. Just those first signals from out of Sagittarius, heard only by electronic ears. No salvation had come, for it arrived not on angelic wings and a fiery throne, but in huge vessels orbiting Earth and landers descending from the clouds, even in non-Christian lands. And more were arriving all the time.

She felt betrayed, but she wasn't sure by whom. She only knew that the invasion was complete. Wal-Mart was selling Seeker-inspired toys for Christmas. For Christmas! Hallmark's biggest sellers were miniature spaceships hanging from Christmas trees across the land -- "collect the whole set!" Earth would never again know a cosmos in which Man was adrift and alone. The fruit from the Tree of Knowledge had tasted sweet.

Donnelly turned her back again, stuffing the morning's text into a dog-cared file folder. This was the third go-round for this sermon. And the last.

The rear door complained and a cold breeze scraped across the back of Donnelly's neck. She sighed, but did not turn around. "Be right with you," she called. She listened for footsteps on the floorboards. Instead, she heard glass tinkling the sound a crystal chandelier makes when given a gentle swing. She turned. The room was empty.

"Who's there? Come out!" The tinkling stopped abruptly, as if someone muffled all the crystal droplets at once.

At the far end of the aisle, a knobby spike of colored glass reached out from behind a pew. Five faceted fingers grew at its tip and waved. To the tinkling of

tiny bells, a spun-glass sculpture walked into the aisle.

Donnelly's brain struggled to find analogies. A leafless bush in winter, crafted by a glassblower. Branches and twigs of fine crystal were shot through with blues and reds and golds flowing through icy veins. They reached up from a nest of dew-dipped spider webs where indefinable hues came and went, blending, shifting, sparkling in the sunlight slanting through the colored windows.

Donnelly stared across the room at the...the thing. A sour taste crawled up onto her tongue.

"I must ask you to leave," she said, struggling to keep the surprise and disgust out of her voice. "Keep your Satan-sent ways out of God's house."

The creature quivered. Two translucent twigs reached down into the glittering webs. They reappeared and held aloft a meaty ovoid sac. The bladder wriggled wetly, split open across the middle, and spoke to Reverend Donnelly.

"Hello. Pardon me, please," it said in a dead-on Missouri accent. "I wish to talk with God." The fragile-looking thing scuttled up the aisle on glassy insect legs, bringing the sound of windchimes in the rain.

Standing there with it approaching her, Donnelly felt a familiar bitterness burn in her chest.

The creature reached the steps at the base of the pulpit. Diamond glints danced across its surfaces. It raised the sac toward Donnelly's face. The Talker symbiote's humanform lips smacked open, flashing straight white teeth. "Please," the translator said. "Teach me to talk with God."

Donnelly wanted to spit. "God listens to our prayers. Can you pray?" She put as much venom into her voice as a good Christian could muster.

"I have practiced the prayer rituals of six hundred forty-four worlds," said the translator. As it spoke, lights like golden fireflies chased through its master's branches. "I have perceived no response."

"What can you know of God?"

"I have worshipped the deities of many cultures, often at the cost of emotional or physical pain. Occasionally, enlightenment was gained. But none offered what I desired."

"Why come to me?"

"I enjoy the quiet places of your world. Trees. I enjoy trees. I was strolling nearby and recognized the religious symbol at the summit of this building. I meditated, then chose to seek out the religious leader here. That, I perceive, is you. Your species has developed religious expression with great complexity and ritual. Humans have many god-forms. Perhaps one has the answer I seek."

Perhaps you do."

The thing tweaked Donnelly's curiosity. The Talker's perfect human voice softened its master's alien appearance. "What do you seek?" she asked.

The alien sparkled and its Talker took in a gulp of air. "I am old for my kind. And an aberration. As a whole, my people dislike travel. We are --" the translator's lips curled upward in a wry smile, "-- home-bodies. I, however, enjoy the company of other species and have lived for centuries in many cultures on many worlds. I have experienced ... marvels that cannot be spoken of in your language, which has neither words nor concepts to describe them."

The Talker frowned for its master. "I have reached the limits of life-prolongation techniques useful to my species, and now approach the end of my biological processes. Once I believed that I had experienced the known universe to its fullest. But the long journey to this galactic arm revealed many more ... wonders beyond my experience. Oh, if only I could share them with you! But your language cannot convey --" Flecks of light whirled, changing their hue. "You have no --" The translator's rubbery features mimicked human frustration well. "And still there are uncountable galaxies beyond this one. I fear that I will not live to experience all..." The sentence withered away.

It stood silent for slow seconds, then climbed the three steps to Donnelly's side. Crystalline arms lifted the Talker closer. Its voice was edged with hope and desperation. "I wish to never die."

Donnelly studied the tiny fires and woven geometries of the alien. This creature hoped for the salvation promised by the Son of Man. Could it even have an immortal soul? Would God create mind without soul? These beings sailed the stars long before Eve sealed Adam's fate. What sins did they know, and were now bringing to Earth?

Donnelly remembered the hot smells of musty tent cloth and road dust, of sweating sinners who wept at her feet and begged for salvation. She had saved souls by the dozens at each town and farm. Now, perhaps, a greater flock was being offered.

With proper guidance, this reborn creature and its gifted symbiote could preach the Word in churches, in cathedrals throughout the world. Millions would travel far to hear an alien proclaim God's message. And not just on Earth. Imagine the Good News spreading throughout the heavens! A million worlds cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ. With this disciple at her side, Reverend Ardith Donnelly could take up the sword and see to it that Christ died for the sins of a galaxy.

This must be her true calling, the reason God guided the Seekers' ships out of the darkness to Earth, where the light of Christianity could dim a million suns. The Lord led this poor emissary to Donnelly's pulpit, to the one true faith, to the feet of Christ's own lighthouse. If Donnelly's Earthly flock chose to stray from the path of righteousness, well then she and the Lord would carve a new path that spread for light-years in all directions. Thank you, God. Thank you,

dear Jesus.

She smiled down at the alien. Her voice was robed in maternal patience.

"Eternal life is offered only to believers in Christ." She opened the Book of Matthew. "I'd like to share with you --"

She felt as though her skull had vanished and warm water flowed over her brain
--

-- She is a tremendous crystal bathing in cold acid pools beneath the spectrum-flecked radiance of a star cluster. She sees without eyes and feels without flesh, and she sings without sound in perfect harmony with ten billion others like herself on a hundred worlds. She sings of birth, of hunger and mystery, and of the deepest yearning she has ever known...

-- She leaps, joyously laughing, from a cliff of black glass into an ocean lit by a bloated red giant sun. The hot sea engulfs her, and the Joy rushes like fire across her front fins, down her long spine, and into her hindbrain. Broadcasting exaltation to all who listen, she plunges deeper into the First Mother Who Gave Us Life...

-- Buoyant, balloonish, she floats high above eternal storms that stir the Depths below. The Sky cracks with lightning that would shatter a lesser world, flashing and branching through the infinite layers of creation. She waits a calculated interval for the air to slap with thunder. The Old Winds are angry. It is time to drift higher, toward the tiny glows that are so far away where the Sky grows dark...

NO! I AM NOT THIS! I AM --

-- happy to be needed here inside my God. We help each other, or we die together. I feel my God's thoughts. There is a minor infection in a main ventricle wall. I swim there, against a pulsing tide, knowing what to do. There can be no greater purpose...

-- gliding above a new world, beneath a billion suns in the galaxy's bulging belly. Hard radiations are warm and tingly on my sails. Life is there, its unique power irresistible. I shall reach out to it and...

I am --

-- making food for my children as I watch them hatch in silicate sand.

-- home from far traveling, telling tales of worlds built on light and song.

-- an artist, sculpting nebulae to express my awe at being in this Universe at this time.

I AM --

-- on the floor, shouting in a large room. The air is cold.

Donnelly found herself on the carpet in a fetal position, shouting nonsense syllables. She felt as though a cord had been cut, a connection severed, her brain detached from an infinite communion. She was adrift. Alone.

She sat up. Her skin felt like someone else's ill-fitting clothes. Every movement was wrong in ways she could not describe. She was sore in her arms and legs. And in limbs she never had.

Somewhere nearby, a chandelier jingled in a breeze. She turned. The Talker was frowning down at her. Below it, crystal webs glimmered kaleidoscopically. The Talker wriggled. "Many apologies! I did not wish to cause discomfort. Please forgive. I thought you wanted to share. The experiences are impossible to express fully in your language."

Donnelly wrapped her brain around a vocal apparatus that was now strange, unfamiliar. She grunted and focused her eyes on the...no, not "alien" anymore. She was now...

The Seeker stepped closer. "The Gift of my species is a specialized telepathy. We, I, collect the life experiences of non-self species. We share these with other non-self minds. This way all life knows what it is like to be all others. A prized Gift in a Union of many worlds, yes ? I wished you to understand my problem."

Donnelly, or the part of her that was still merely Donnelly, understood. She had sung of mysteries in a cold acid pool. She feared the angry Winds in the clouds of an immense Jovian world. She had told untellable tales brought home from far stars. Wave after wave washed over a flickering flame of belief in ... what? Created in God's image? How could we have gotten it so wrong? But in each experience, one truth was common. Life was precious. And too short.

The Seeker stepped away. "You cannot help me. I have shared your mind. You believe in a non-body self that continues beyond the end of physical life functions. A common belief. Yet you have no evidence to support it.

"Also --" The Talker frowned as if it were tasting something sour. "Your species has thought itself alone in the cosmos. This I have never experienced. It was not a pleasant sharing. I will carry the memory with me and share you with other non-self forms. In this way you --" It poked a glassy finger against Donnelly's chest. Fireflies flew within its wintery branches. "-- may be immortal, in a way, according to your belief system."

The alien lowered its Talker back into its body. The meaty mouth spoke through a nest of ice. "I regret that I may not live long enough to find my answers. There is much to see and very little time."

With the murmur of windchimes, the alien -- no, the pilgrim, the searcher --

scurried backward down the aisle. The rear door keened on its hinges.

A chill breeze ran along the carpet and curled around Donnelly. She tried to sing a song born beneath a heaven far richer than the barren skies of Earth. She yearned for something wonderful she could not name. Her skin remembered the hot embrace of a red sea and the electric prickle of a stellar wind. The insides of her eyelids, she knew, would never again show merely darkness.

All it takes is the faith of a mustard seed, she had told her flock. Lifetimes ago. But a mustard seed tossed into an infinite orchard...

Silently, Donnelly offered up a prayer.

After a long while, she stood, massaged stiff muscles, and slowly walked down the aisle to the door. It moaned a last lingering lament as she opened it.

There were glints of light in the graveyard across the road. The Seeker was there, studying the ornate headstones. Donnelly wondered if it really enjoyed traveling alone. It couldn't hurt to ask.

She locked the door behind her and followed the prints through the fresh mantle of Christmas snow.