

FAITH

By Jean Harper

In the greenhouse, where I cut roses for a living for only four short months of my life, but long enough to be changed forever, I learned about the men and women in my crew during our breaks from the day's work. We broke three times a day: in the morning and in the afternoon for fifteen minutes; at noon for thirty. Each break of the day we sat together as a crew on makeshift seats of overturned ten-gallon white plastic buckets. On hot days, we sat on the loading dock, out of the heat of the greenhouse, in the wake of whatever paltry breeze we could find. On cool days, we retreated inside the greenhouse, sitting along the walkway between two houses. Most breaks, every one of us ate; every break, most of us smoked. In my crew, of the seven of us, three of the four women were Christians, two of them born-again. At our breaks in the morning, at lunch, and again in the afternoon, the women talked, and they often talked about Jesus.

Lil, fifty, short and doughy, had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. "I was brought up in a Christian home," she would remind us, often. Joy, seventeen, wore shiny red lipstick, and came to work every day carrying a tiny blue purse that swung at her hip, a purse that she retrieved at breaks and rummaged in, meditatively. She had been saved at a revival two months before she had started at the greenhouse. "I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior," she would say. Sammie Jo, seventeen too, translucent as a Barbie doll, was raised a Christian and had been a true believer since birth. Of these three women, Sammie Jo was the only one who smoked.

"If He wanted me to quit, He would show me the way," she would say.

Lil and Joy would nod; the rest of the crew, the men and I, would listen in silence. It sometimes seemed to me that the men, with their noncommittal quiet, believed that religion, God, Jesus—all of that—was women's work. For my part, I kept quiet for other reasons: I knew if I

spoke up and asked questions that arose out of my transplanted, East Coast naiveté about all things Midwest—whether I asked about Jesus or Christianity or God or what it really meant to be “saved” or “born again”—Lil would pounce on my questions, taking my idle interest as dawning faith. So I too ate and listened in silence every day while the three women talked.

It was talk about Jesus that was curiously intimate. Lil and Joy and Sammie Jo talked about Jesus as if they knew Him personally, as if He were a distant, be-loved uncle living some kind of important life in a big city—Manhattan, Chicago, L.A. Somehow, wherever He was, their Jesus always kept tabs on everyone. Jesus, according to Lil and Joy and Sammie Jo, was intimately aware of the lives and troubles of everyone, no matter who or where they were.

Did you wake up with a headache? Jesus felt it.

Last night, did you have a fight with your husband? Jesus heard it.

Was your rent overdue? Your son in trouble with the cops? Your ulcer flaring again? He knew these things, felt what you felt. And He cared. He cared about all of us, kept track of all us, all of the time.

“He is by your side,” Lil would say.

And Joy and Sammie Jo would nod. But even though Jesus knew us intimately, and seemingly kept elaborate ledgers of our constant troubles and intermittent triumphs, it was clear, the three women said, that we couldn’t always count on His intercession.

When and how and who He helped was up to Him. Your headache, your husband, that looming rent, that restless son, your burning ulcer—sometimes He would answer your prayers for intercession and relief. Sometimes He would not. You never knew.

Lil and Joy and Sammie Jo not only talked about Jesus, but they protected Jesus and they worked for Jesus, doing the things they knew He liked, avoiding the things they suspected He did not. At the greenhouse, they carried out His work in many small ways, in all of their tasks.

There was one task that tested the particulars of their faith. Every six weeks, we worked in our crews pinching back the roses to encourage new and predictable growth. To pinch back meant that we cut off vegetative shoots on the roses down to a good five-leaf; every shoot pinched off would be the site of a new rose within another six weeks.

Pinching back was both science and faith. It was based on the knowledge that the rose would respond to the pruning by producing a shoot which, if properly watered and fed and sprayed and kept in a temperate environment, would flower on schedule. That was the science. The faith was in the timing. Roses are animate beings, growing and flowering by way of complex systems of cellular response. Along the way to their full flowering, roses have preferences and irritants. They like good steady light, enough water but not too much, the right brew of food; they don't like mildews and fungi, aphids and spiders, persistent cloud cover, dampness and chill.

In the greenhouse, we interceded as we saw fit. We sprayed, watered, fed, turned on heaters, pulled back overhead curtains. We cut, we pruned, we pinched back. We made judgments about which plants would bloom, and when. When I cut off a vegetative shoot to a good five-leaf I would hear the clip of the cutters on the shoot, that quick juicy snap of blade on stem. I would toss down the slender shoot of the plants on the path between the benches of roses and step over it, feeling it ever so softly crush beneath the sole of my boot as I walked forward, reaching for the next shoot and the next.

As part of our work of pinching back, we kept count of the shoots on our mechanical counters. We tallied our counts; from them, we would project out six weeks and estimate production. In a single day, pinching back more than a thousand shoots was nothing unusual. In a week of pinching back, we tallied up numbers in four and five digits.

One morning in September, during a break, we sat on our overturned buckets on the loading dock and compared our counts. That day, I remember we read out our precise numbers to each

other. The exact numbers are gone, but I remember how we measured up to one another. Hank had the highest count, something near nine hundred. Bo was next, then Lil at about eight hundred, then me, followed by Joy, Sammie Jo, and finally, dead last at only three hundred, Eddie.

It was Lil's count that was different, not for the number, but for the way she had arrived at it. She had added two counts: first six hundred and sixty-five and then another couple hundred.

I had to ask. Why two counts?

Lil smiled patiently at me, a What Would Jesus Do kind of smile, and then she explained. When she got to six hundred and sixty-five on her counter, she said, she would stop, turn the counter back to zero, and start again. I remember her nodding sensibly and Joy and Sammie Jo nodding too, and the men, who were smoking and listening and watching the toes of their boots, even they were nodding. Everyone seemed to know something I didn't. I remember asking again, even as I suspected I was treading onto hallowed ground:

“How come you go back to zero? Is your counter broken?”

Lil smiled at me again, with even greater patience. “No, honey. It ain't that,” she said. “It's that next number. That's the Devil's number. I don't want no Devil's number on my hands. So I don't go no further than six hundred and sixty-five.”

It was Sammie Jo who explained further. “You gotta just get by that number,” she said. Her approach was to go over it fast. “It,” I slowly gathered, was more than simply a number; it was the mark of the Beast, the signature of the Devil, that Biblical warning: 666. When Sammie Jo got to six hundred and sixty-five, she clicked twice and got to six hundred and sixty-seven, seemingly before the Devil had time to register that the verboten 666 had appeared on her counter. She shrugged as if to say: not perfect, but better than nothing.

I gazed at my counter. I rolled the numbers back to zero again; four 0's winked up at me. I looked at Lil. Our fifteen-minute break was almost up. "What would happen if you stopped at six hundred and sixty-six?" I asked.

There was a moment of silence. Sammie Jo pulled out a second cigarette. Eddie flipped his cigarette butt off the loading dock; Bo lowered his ball cap and exhaled a long stream of cigar smoke.

Lil turned to me. "I just don't go that far," she said. "I just don't tempt no Devil."

I imagined I saw Him nodding sagely, wherever He was—Chicago, a five hour drive to the north; New York, nine hundred miles to the east, L.A., almost two thousand to the west. I clicked my counter carelessly, ticking through digits one after another. I thought about clicking the counter six hundred and sixty-six times and letting it sit, there in my hand, like some kind of tiny time bomb for Jesus. Would anything happen?

Would anything change? Would the world as I had always known it end in fire—or ice? Would the rapture commence in a resounding flash and only the blessed and saved be transported upward through the searing heavens to dwell forever by Jesus's side kindled by the warmth of His lambent skin? Would the rest of the trammled masses—those of us resolutely unsaved, obstinately unrepentant, dim and unschooled in the ways of Jesus—would we now howl in mortal agony, our feet rooted to the ruined earth, our flesh torn and scorched by the flames of the ascending Lucifer, our haunches burned with his irremovable brand: 666.

I did not know about these things. Yet—I was alone in my ignorance. I clicked forward through the numbers on my counter—578, 579, 580, 581. The white digits paraded inexorably onward across its silver face. 623, 624, 625. Then, at last, the greenhouse whistle blew, a long, mournful, nearly human wail I have never forgotten, not even now a decade away, that cry

summoning the end of our morning break. Lil and Joy and Sammie Jo got up; the men slowly rose in turn; everyone began to gather their gear.

I crumpled the paper sack that had held my lunch and stood up. We all went back to work. What else, what else, would there have been to do.