was taking the idea of repentance too far.

At a quarter to seven, Carl said we'd better get on over to the church. When he got up from the table, he looked distracted and grave, like any other Southern preacher with a sermon on his mind. He thoughtfully put on his coat and picked up his Bible and looked around the place to see if he'd forgotten anything. The kitchen adjoined a large and comfortable living room with paneled walls, bookshelves filled with photos of his children and grandchildren, and a big TV and VCR. Nothing at all out of the ordinary.

Then Carl opened the door to the laundry room. Inside were three serpent boxes and two aquariums, containing a total of ten rattlesnakes, eight copperheads, and a cottonmouth moccasin. Carl opened the lid of a bright blue box with five timber rattlers in it. Three of them stuck their heads out. "Get on back in there," he said as he tapped each of them gently on the nose with his finger.

It had been almost a year since I'd covered Glenn Summerford's trial, and I'd gotten to know the handlers well enough by then not

to be too surprised when Carl tapped those rattlesnakes on the head. It was kind of a sweet gesture, I thought. I helped him load the snakes into the trunk of his car.

Outside, it was a clear, cold night.

"On New Year's Eve, you looked like you wanted to handle one," he said.

I didn't answer. That particular feeling had passed. But I was open to mystery in a way I had never been in mainstream churches. It was not beyond the realm of possibility that I would one day get the urge again to take up a serpent.

Carl smiled at me and slammed the trunk lid shut. "It's like nothing that's ever happened to you," he said. "You'll *know* then why we do it."

What I didn't tell Carl that night was that I had handled snakes all my life, but not, of course, in church. When I was a boy, I'd catch common water snakes in Village Creek, an open sewer that ran through the heart of Birmingham. These snakes weren't poisonous, but they had nasty temperaments. And they were exceptionally ugly. Their banded markings disappeared with age. The

older ones had dull, olive skin with keeled scales, and when they were excited, they emitted a bad-smelling fluid from scent glands at the base of their tails. Only their numbers recommended them. Village Creek teemed with these water snakes, and they were not that difficult to catch. I'd set out minnow traps in deep water under the Eightieth Street bridge. When I'd caught enough minnows to use as bait, I'd reset the traps in shallow water farther downstream, under the twisted willows or Tupelo black gum that grew along the banks. When the creek flooded during summer thunderstorms, these bushes would catch the city's refuse — soggy wads of newsprint and toilet paper, rubbers, used Kotex, wigs and nylon hose, children's stuffed animals, shoes, men's plastic raincoats, and, occasionally, a woman's brassiere.

The best time to set the traps for common water snakes was a few days after the rains had ended. By then, the water would have cleared. Sometimes I'd catch two or three snakes in a single trap. These were generally medium-sized snakes, ones that could fit

through the opening in the inverted cone-shaped end of the trap. The biggest water snakes, the four or five footers, basked in the hot sun on higher ground. My friend Beaver Morrison and I would hunt them with sticks and a shovel in the cauliflower field that fronted the creek. The field was owned by Italians. They lived in turquoise houses at the end of the alley, and pretty much kept to themselves. Most of the time, we'd forget the Italians even lived there, until it rained and the whole neighborhood smelled of cauliflower.

When approached in the open, these big water snakes would head for old rodent burrows deep in the weeds, and most of the time they would make it there before we could catch them. Sometimes, though, Beaver or I would get hold of a big, nasty water snake before it could completely disappear down the hole. I remember the thick, dry bodies, the uncanny strength. One of us would hold on to the snake. The other guy would use the shovel to dig out the burrow, and the freed snake, a blur of ocher and olive, would turn, charge out of the collapsing dirt like a bull. I've been

bitten by common water snakes. It's nothing, a humiliation more than a pain. But I know how snakes work, the physics of the bite. It's not something to take lightly, even among nonpoisonous snakes. You can never predict what a snake will do.

At certain times of the year in Birmingham, we could find baby water snakes under the rocks on the sandbar beneath the Eightieth Street bridge. They were bright and exquisitely detailed, with coppery, saddle-shaped bands and yellow jawlines, but they were also very quick. You couldn't stop to wonder whether they were baby copperheads or not. You had to grab fast, without really looking, or they'd be gone. If you caught one, though, you were just as well to let it go. Baby water snakes didn't do well in captivity. An adult, at least, though ugly, might occasionally eat a frog.

There were plenty of frogs, and turtles, too, at East Lake, a short walk down the alley from my house. Unlike the names of residential neighborhoods these days, ours referred to a real thing, a lake three blocks long and

one block wide. There had been an amusement park there in my father's day, with a roller coaster, a tunnel of love, and pedal-driven boats. All that was left by the time my childhood rolled around were man-made jetties and a rock balustrade. I'd go to the lake just about every day after school to hunt for turtles, but I was also on the lookout for snakes. Village Creek paralleled the lake, with more water snakes, but of a different kind. We called them queen snakes, and I thought for many years that we had invented the name, until I found it in a snake book and knew from the photos that they were ours. Unlike the common water snakes, the queen snakes had no visible pattern on their backs at all. They were a smooth and even brown, a light caramel. But underneath, along the edges of their bellies, ran two sets of paired stripes, one gold, one green, like ribbons, iridescent in the sun. The queen snakes were agile climbers. They could not be caught in minnow traps or on the ground with sticks and shovels. They always sunned in the leafy branches of the willows and Tupelo bushes along the banks.

A snake noose attached to a broom handle was the only way to catch them. And even then, they were hard to snare. The rawhide noose had to be slipped over their heads without touching, and deftly pulled tight. The approach was the key. Slow and incremental, without vibrating a single leaf. Queen snakes could drop into the water in the intake of a breath. Hunting them, I learned to be patient. I also learned to accept the inevitability of occasional defeat.

On Saturdays, for variety, Beaver and I would hike to the city dump by the airport, the best place to find long, elegant green snakes and the tiny brown snakes called Dekay's snakes, after the guy who first classified them. Dekay's snakes could also be found in the flower beds of East Lake yards. When neighbors told stories about ground rattlers in the begonias, these were the snakes they most often were talking about. And then there were always ring-necked snakes and worm snakes, but these were so small and secretive, they most often went unnoticed by gardeners my parents' age. The best snakes, the abso-

lutely best snakes of all, came from Ruffner Mountain, a foothill of the Appalachians that overlooked East Lake. It was just out of walking distance from my house. We only tried walking it once. Other times, my father drove and dropped us off. We said we were hiking to the fire tower at the top of the mountain. But I always had my eyes peeled for snakes.

The first snake I caught on Ruffner Mountain was a corn snake I saw wrapped around the trunk of a pine tree. Docile and graceful, it had scarlet blotches and an intricately patterned head, as surprising as though it were a piece of Arabian carpet found dangling in the Alabama woods. The corn snake ate mice, but I couldn't bear to keep it long, even though my father had made me a first-rate snake cage with the power tools he'd bought after someone told him he needed a hobby. I let that corn snake go one day in the Italians' cauliflower field and always hoped that I would see it again. I never did.

My friend Bert Butts gave me my second Ruffner Mountain snake. It was a speckled king, big and black, freshly shed, with tiny

yellow splotches from head to tail, as though a paintbrush had been shaken lightly over it. King snakes are famous for their placid dispositions. Like marine mammals, they seem to wear a perpetual smile, and they happen to eat rattlesnakes. I named this king snake Kuebert Wood, after a track star at a local high school. He would sunbathe on my stomach. I swore I'd never let him go. But then I caught a gigantic gray rat snake, five and a half feet, a record, I thought. I gave the rat snake the cage my father had built and relegated Kuebert Wood to a number-ten washtub with a screen on top, held down by rocks. During the night, Kuebert escaped. Well, I prefer to think he wandered off. I have hated the memory of that rat snake ever since.

A final gift came from a friend named Galen Bailey, who lived closer to the mountain than I did. This snake was very delicate and rare, a scarlet snake, with alternate rings of red, black, and yellow. Except for the broken rings and the order of the colors, it looked exactly like a coral snake: quite perfect, but it wouldn't eat. I kept it longer than I should

have, because of its beauty. I hope it survived after I released it in the cauliflower field. With snakes, you never know.

The poisonous snakes came later, when I was an adult. I have caught only three, and I did not keep any of them overnight. The first was a pygmy rattlesnake I found sunning on a grave in a cemetery in southwestern Louisiana, where I was stationed while in the army in the early 1970s. The pygmy rattlesnake is a small, stout snake, rarely over two feet in length. It is ill-tempered and can deliver a painful bite. Its venom is as powerful as that of larger rattlesnakes, but since less venom is injected at a time, the bites of pygmy rattlers are rarely life-threatening.

This particular snake looked plenty dangerous to me, though. I was hung over. My first wife, Susan, and I had taken a Sunday drive to visit old cemeteries. It was spring. Tarantulas were crossing the road in droves. When I saw the pygmy rattlesnake on the grave, it seemed to be a sing. I had to conquer my fear of it. My heart beat faster. My palms ached. I found

a stick, pinned the snake behind the head, and picked it up. Susan was horrified when I told her what it was. She'd hunted nonpoisonous snakes with me, but this was a little much.

The problem, I discovered, was not in catching the snake, but in releasing it. How do you let a rattlesnake go without risking a bite? I wound up taking the steps in nearly reverse order: putting it on the ground, pinning it with the stick, and only then releasing my grip. It worked. I had accomplished something. The marriage lasted another four years.

The second poisonous snake was a copperhead I found stretched out on a road on Red Mountain in Birmingham, the last snake of the summer. I was married to Vicki by then and teaching at the university. Again, I was hung over. I brought the snake home, stretched between my hands, and told Vicki to find an empty ice chest to put it in. She, too, was horrified. Then we drove into the country to let it go. I wrote a short story about the way it looked coming out of the ice chest and disappearing into the dark woods.

Then I sobered up. We had our girls and

built a house in the woods on the side of Sand Mountain. The last poisonous snake I caught was a canebrake rattlesnake that was crossing the pavement at the bottom of our driveway. I brought it up to the house so the girls could get a good look and know what kind of snake to avoid. Then I said I was going to let it go in the woods. I killed it instead. I do not believe it is necessary for a man to allow a poisonous snake to cross his property while his children are young. It is the only snake I have ever killed like that. It still bothers me some.

There are two families of poisonous snakes in the United States, both of them native to our part of the South. The first, *Elapidae,* which include cobras, mambas, and other deadly Old World snakes, are represented in the New World by eastern and western coral snakes. Coral snakes are shy, beautiful, and extremely dangerous. Their venom is a neurotoxin that attacks the central nervous system, particularly autonomic functions such as breathing and heartbeat. Fortunately, coral snakes are

reclusive by nature. They seldom bite, and when they do, their small mouths and fixed fangs make it difficult for them to successfully latch on to humans.

The second family of poisonous snakes, the Crotalidae, contain the pit vipers — rattlesnakes, copperheads, and cottonmouths. The pits for which these snakes are named are infrared-heat-sensing organs that lie between the nostrils and eyes. With them, the snakes hunt their warm-blooded prey by seeking out body heat. The pit vipers are efficient killers, with large, flexible mouths; long, retractable fangs; and venom that attacks and destroys cells and tissue. Victims die of internal hemorrhaging, cardiovascular shock, or kidney and respiratory failure.

The least dangerous of the pit vipers to man is the copperhead, although its bite can, and does, kill children. The most dangerous is the eastern diamondback rattlesnake, which can grow to a length of eight feet and has a combative temperament and a large reservoir of venom. Somewhere in between lies the timber rattler, often called the canebrake rattlesnake

in our part of the country. Herpetologists disagree about whether the canebrake is a color variation or a distinct subspecies. The timber rattler is the snake seen most often in serpent-handling churches, because it is the poisonous snake most readily available on the rocky hillsides and grassy valleys of the Appalachians. It shares its range with the copperhead, but appears to be more sociable, often found in large numbers in dens or burrows. The timber is somewhat smaller and less aggressive than the diamondback, but it is still a dangerous snake, unpredictable and with venom that can easily kill an adult.

The timber rattler is also, to me, the loveliest of the rattlesnakes, varying in color from pink to straw to nearly uniform black, with sharp, dark chevrons on its back. Its neck is narrow and girlish, its head as finely defined as an arrow. Oftentimes the body of the snake is velvety in appearance. In such cases, the handlers will call the snake a "satinback." Encountered in the wild, a large timber rattler, *Crotalus horridus,* is an impressive and frightening sight. When cornered, it rattles energetically and

coils to strike. But its first impulse is to flee, and perhaps that, too, is a source of its beauty: a dangerous animal, exquisitely made, turning away from a fight.

In captivity, timber rattlers can live up to thirty years. Their tenure among the handlers is much shorter, rarely exceeding a season. I have seen timber rattlers die while being handled. They are not made to be jerked around like that. On the other hand, some of the snakes are well cared for, but simply released into the wild after a few months. Handlers don't like to keep snakes that look puny, and they are always in search of new ones, always trading specimens back and forth. It appears to be a ritual after services for handlers to give snakes to one another, like an offering of brandy or afterdinner mints or hand-rolled cigars in other circles. Some of the handlers regularly catch their own snakes, most of the time in conventional ways, with a snake stick and burlap bag or pillowcase. Occasionally, the Holiness hunters will fall under an anointing to handle right there in the woods. Others buy snakes from professional exhibitors at

prices the handlers complain are getting more outrageous every year, as much as forty-five dollars at last reckoning.

However the snakes are obtained, they often become objects of affection in the homes of the handlers and their families. The first rattlesnake that Aline McGlocklin took up, for instance, was called Old Crooked Neck, because of the injury it had received during capture. The big copperhead in the terrarium on the McGlocklins' kitchen counter used to be called Mr. Hog, Charles said, until it had eight babies and they had to start calling it Miss Piggy instead. And Darlene Summerford had testified at Glenn's trial that the photographs she carried in her purse were of her favorite rattlesnake.

But no amount of affection or care can insure that a rattlesnake or copperhead won't bite when handled. They do not tame in a conventional sense. They are not hamsters or gerbils. No one can predict what will happen when a handler reaches into the serpent box. And contrary to popular misconception, multiple bites do not result in immunity to snake

venom, but may even increase the risk of death because of allergic reaction.

Around eight thousand people in the United States are bitten each year by poisonous snakes. Of this number, only a dozen or so die. Experts advise that the best first aid is to keep the patient calm and get him to a hospital as quickly as possible. Based on the severity of the bite, doctors determine whether to use antivenin therapy. Sometimes the risk of an adverse reaction from the antivenin is of as much concern as the bite itself. Recent literature suggests electric shocks administered to the site of the bite may be helpful, but research about this therapy has been inconclusive.

To date, at least seventy-one people have been killed by poisonous snakes during religious services in the United States, including the man said to have started the whole thing, George Went Hensley, who died vomiting blood in a shed in North Florida in 1955. Hensley had started handling around 1910 and had been bitten more than four hundred times before the fatal blow. Scholars attribute to him the spread of snake handling beyond

Grasshopper Valley to other parts of Tennessee, and to Kentucky, the Carolinas, Virginia, Ohio, and Indiana.

But snake handling sprang up independently on Sand Mountain around 1912, the work of a former Baptist preacher named James Miller. By 1934, poisonous snakes were being taken up in outdoor worship services in the eastern part of Birmingham, among racially mixed congregations. The only recorded injury from these early days was sustained by a man named N.C. Brownlee, who fell off a roof while trying to get a better look at a rattlesnake brought to a service in a glass bread case. The rattlesnake's name was Pete.

"The first place that I ever heard of people handling serpents," Charles McGlocklin once told me, "was just the other side of New Hope, Alabama, when I was seven or eight years old." That would have been in the late 1940s. "In those days," Charles said, "they kept the serpents in lard cans in the smokehouse."

The Alabama legislature apparently got wind of the practice and passed an act in 1950 that made it "unlawful for any person to dis-

play, handle, exhibit or use any poisonous or dangerous snake or reptile in such a manner as to endanger the life or health of another." The crime was described as a felony, with a prescribed punishment of one to five years imprisonment. But the handling continued in spite of the law.

In 1951, a New Hope farm wife named Ruthie Craig, fifty, brought a glass jar containing a large rattlesnake into religious services at her home. "I'm going to handle the snake and anyone who doesn't believe had better leave," she said. Then she tried to extract the snake from the jar. It wouldn't budge, so she broke the glass. The rattlesnake slithered onto the floor and toward an open door. Mrs. Craig tried to catch it, but it turned on her and bit her four times on the right forearm and shoulder before it escaped. Asked later if she wanted a doctor, Mrs. Craig said, "Anything for ease." But someone in the congregation said she would lose her faith if she called a doctor, so Mrs. Craig rejected help, fell into a coma, and died four hours later. The Madison County coroner ruled it an accident.

The death of Ruthie Craig was the first in a string of highly publicized fatalities among handlers in North Alabama and Georgia during the 1950s. Sawmill worker Jim Thomas Gifford died in Fort Payne, Alabama, in 1954; lay preacher Reece Ramsey died two months later at a brush-arbor meeting south of Rising Fawn, Georgia; and Lee Valentine, a father of seven, was bitten at the Old Straight Creek Holiness Church on top of Sand Mountain in August of 1955. He died a few hours later. All had refused medical help.

In 1956, Lloyd Hill of Fort Payne, the first man tried and convicted under the Alabama snake-handling law, came to Birmingham and was bitten on the hand by a rattlesnake at a church on the outskirts of East Lake, at the foot of Ruffner Mountain. He was taken to the old Hillman Clinic emergency room, where he refused treatment. Charged for a second time with snake handling, he discovered his next stop was the city jail and then the county jail, where he made his threehundred-dollar bond and promptly disappeared.

Lloyd Hill survived that bite. Another

preacher who handled snakes in Birmingham didn't. David Henson, a retired coal shaker operator who had been preaching and handling for thirty years, died in 1959 less than an hour after being bitten by a twenty-four-pound rattlesnake in Robinwood, a working-class neighborhood just the other side of the Birmingham airport from East Lake. Henson's death was ruled a suicide, although members of the congregation at his Free Holiness Church knew otherwise. Close to a thousand people filed by his open coffin to pay respects. On our side of the airport, in that same year, a black man was kidnapped and later castrated by members of the Ku Klux Klan. I cannot help but believe there is a connection between the two events. Henson's funeral was conducted at Roebuck Chapel, where my father's funeral would be held thirty years later. My father was not a snake handler, but he was a segregationist.

There are snakes, and there are snakes. Some are literal, some not. While I was handling common water snakes in a sewer at the end of our street in East Lake, people were tak-

ing up rattlesnakes in a church a few blocks away. We didn't know them. They didn't know us. We might as well have occupied parallel universes, except for one thing: we had come from the same place. We were border dwellers. We had sailed for the promised land. We had entered the mountains and come down from them again. We were the same people. And all of us were handling one kind of snake or another.

The literal snakes are the easiest to identify: my water snakes, their rattlesnakes. The metaphorical snakes are another matter. One of them, I see now, must have been our uncertain past. When I was growing up in East Lake, among families reaching for the middle class, the past was problematic and embarrassing because it contained poverty, ignorance, racism, and defeat. This legacy of Southern history was as dangerous as any rattlesnake. No one wanted to claim it. No one wanted to take it out of the box. No one, of course, except the Klansmen who paraded past our house on Eightieth Street in the 1950s, their lead car bearing a cross made of

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light bulbs. How strange those processions at twilight seem to me now, how out of place on the quiet streets of East Lake. I wonder why my father didn't sound the alarm. During World War 11, he had been a civil defense warden for our neighborhood. My older brothers said that during air raid drills, he would stand on the darkened street corner in his white pith helmet with the civil defense insignia on the front and smoke a cigarette as he looked for low-flying enemy planes. Where was he when the Klan motorcades came down Eightieth Street?

Dad had no use for the Klan. He was a gentle, principled man. But he must have sensed even then that the past he seemed bent on avoiding was bound to be claimed by someone, somewhere along the line. He was, as I've said, in theory if not in practice, a segregationist. Some of his arguments seem tamer now in retrospect, tempered as they are by time. But he was still a segregationist, in an era when legal segregation was our greatest shame. The bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham in 1963 broke my fa-

ther's resistance, and his heart. The girls who died in the bombing were about my age. We heard the news on a small brown radio in the kitchen after church that Sunday. It was the first time I ever saw my father cry. The bombing seemed to seal a permanent judgment on the city. "The shame will be ours forever," editorialized a local newspaper at the time. But Martin Luther King, Jr., foresaw ultimate salvation in the tragedy. At the funeral for three of the girls, he said, "The deaths may well serve as the redemptive force that brings light to this dark city." And it did. What happened in Birmingham in 1963 not only redeemed the oppressed. It also redeemed my people, although we haven't been able to accept that yet. We haven't yet taken that particular snake out and lifted it aloft in the light — the dangerous, unloved thing about us: where we came from, what we did, who we are.

I don't know exactly when it happened, but sometime during the spring of 1993, the idea must have started taking shape that in order to conquer the metaphorical snake that was my cultural legacy, I'd have to take up the

thing itself.

8

SALVATION ON SAND MOUNTAIN

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us.

— Acts 16:9

That spring, Charles McGlocklin told me that Glenn Summerford's cousins, Billy and

Jimmy, had started a new church on top of Sand Mountain, near a place called Macedonia. Charles didn't worship with them, though.

"Why not?" I asked.

Brother Charles took a deep breath and surveyed the land around him, yellow and gray in the afternoon light. We were on the deck behind his and Aline's trailer in New Hope, Alabama. Beside the trailer was a doghouse for their blue tick hound named Smokey, and behind it was a corral for their horse, a buckskin mare named Dixie Honeydew.

"I know enough about some of those people to know I ought not to worship anymore with them," Charles said. As a snake handler, he had set himself apart from the world, and sometimes he even set himself apart from other snake handlers. It was part of the Southern character, I thought, to be always turning away like that toward some secret part of oneself.

"You know how much I love you," Charles said. He put one of his big hands on my shoulder and shook it. "You're my brother. But any-

time you go up there on Sand Mountain, you be careful."

We could hear the sound of the wind through trees, a soughing, dry and hesitant, and then Dixie Honeydew neighed.

"You might be anointed when you take up a serpent," Charles continued, "but if there's a witchcraft spirit in the church, it could zap your anointing and you'd be left cold turkey with a serpent in your hand and the spirit of God gone off of you. That's when you'll get bit."

We walked around the corner of the trailer, where Jim Neel was waiting for me in a truck that had belonged to his brother.

"So you really watch and remember what Brother Charles tells you," Charles whispered. "Always be careful who you take a rattlesnake from."

This sounded like solid advice.

I got into Jim's truck, and Charles motioned for us to roll a window down. "Y'all come back any time," he yelled. "And, hey, it's not us that's messed up, Brother Dennis. It's the world."

. . .

My journey had come back around to the congregation on Sand Mountain, the remnant of Glenn Summerford's flock that had left the converted service station on Wood's Cove Road in Scottsboro and then met under a brush arbor in back of J.L. Dyal's house until the weather got too cold. After worshiping for a while in the basement of an old motel, they finally found a church for sale on the mountain. It was miles from nowhere, in the middle of a hay field south of Section, Alabama, home of Tammy Little, Miss Alabama 1984. The nearest dot on the map, though, was Macedonia, a crossroads consisting of a filling station, a country store, and a junk emporium. It was not the kind of place you'd visit of your own accord. You'd have to be led there. In fact, Macedonia had gotten its name from the place in the Bible that Paul had been called to go to in a dream. Paul's first European converts to Christianity had been in Macedonia. But that

was, you know, a long time ago and in another place.

Glenn Summerford's cousins, Billy and Jimmy, negotiated the deal for the church. Billy was friendly and loose limbed, with a narrow red face and buck teeth. He'd worked mostly as a carpenter, but he'd also sold coon dogs. Jimmy was less amiable but more compact. Between them, they must have been persuasive. They got the church for two thousand dollars. A guy down the road had offered five thousand, Billy said, but the owner had decided to sell it to them. "God was working in that one," he concluded.

It was called the Old Rock House Holiness Church, in spite of the fact that it wasn't made of rock. But it was old in contrast to the brick veneer churches out on highway 35, the ones with green indoor-outdoor carpet in the vestibules and blinking U-Haul It signs out front.

The Old Rock House Holiness Church had been built in 1916, a few years before Dozier Edmonds first saw people take up serpents in Jackson County, at a church in Sauty Bottom,

down by Saltpeter Cave. I'd met Dozier during the brush-arbor meetings. A rail-thin old man with thick glasses and overalls, he was the father-in-law of J.L. Dyal and the husband of Burma, the snake-handling twin. Dozier said he'd seen men get bit in that church in Sauty Bottom. They didn't go to a doctor, just swelled up a little bit. He also remembered a Holiness boy at the one-room school who would fall into a trance, reach into the pot-bellied stove, and get himself a whole handful of hot coals. The teacher would have to tell the boy to put them back. There was a Baptist church in those days called Hell's Half Acre, Dozier said. They didn't take up serpents, but they'd do just about anything else. They were called Buckeye Baptists. They'd preach and pray till midnight, then gamble and fight till dawn. One time a man rode a horse into the church, right up to the pulpit. Out of meanness, Dozier said. Everything was different then. "They used to tie the mules up to a white mulberry bush in the square," he said. Why, he remembered when Scottsboro itself was nothing but a mud hole. When the carnival came

through, the elephants were up to their bellies in mud. There wasn't even a road up Sand Mountain until Dozier helped build one. And it seemed like the Civil War had just occurred.

Dozier came from a family of sharecroppers who lived on the property of a famous Confederate veteran named Mance. He had a bullet hole through his neck. He'd built his own casket. Every Easter, Colonel Mance invited the children of the families who lived on his property to come to the big house for an egg hunt. One Easter, he wanted the children to see what he'd look like when he was dead, so he lay down in the casket and made the children march around it. Some of the grown-ups had to help get him out. It was a pine casket with metal handles on it, Dozier said. Colonel Mance eventually died, but he wasn't buried in the casket he'd made. He'd taken that thing apart years before and given the handles to the families who lived on his property, to use as knockers on the doors of their shacks.

That was the kind of place Sand Mountain had been when the Old Rock House Holiness Church was in its heyday. By the time the

Summerford brothers bought it in the winter of 1993, it had fallen onto hard times. Didn't even have a back door. Paper wasps had built nests in the eaves. The green shingles on the outside were cracked, and the paint on the window sills had just about peeled off. Billy Summerford and some of the other men from the congregation repaired and restored the church as best they could. It'd be another year, though, before they could get around to putting in a bathroom. In the meantime, there would be an outhouse for the women and a bunch of trees for the men. The church happened to be sited in the very center of a grove of old oak trees. Fields of hay surrounded the grove and stretched to the horizon. As you approached the church along a dirt road during summer heat, the oak grove looked like a dark island in the middle of a shimmering sea of gold and green.

That's the way it looked to me, anyway, on a bright Sunday morning in late June, six months after the Summerfords had bought the church, when Jim and I drove up from Birmingham for their first annual homecom-

ing. Brother Carl had invited us by phone and given us directions. He was scheduled to preach at the homecoming. Other handlers were coming from all over — from East Tennessee and South Georgia, from the mountains of Kentucky and the scrublands of the Florida panhandle. If we hadn't had Carl's directions, we'd never have found the place. The right turn off the paved road from Macedonia was unmarked. It was one of several gravel roads that angled off into the distance. Where it crossed another paved road, there finally was a sign, made of cardboard and mounted at waist level on a wooden stake. After that, the gravel turned to dirt. Dust coated the jimsonweed. The passionflowers were in bloom, and the blackberries had begun to ripen in the heat. There were no houses on this road, and no sound except for cicadas, a steady din, like the sound of approaching rain.

For once, Jim and I were early. We stepped up on a cement block to get through the back doorway of the church. The door itself was off its hinges, and none of the windows in the church had screens. There were no cush-

ions on the pews and no ornaments of any kind, except a portrait of Jesus etched into a mirror behind the pulpit and a vase of plastic flowers on the edge of the piano bench, where a boy with a withered hand sat staring at the keys. We took our places on a back pew and watched the handlers arrive. They greeted each other with the holy kiss, women with women, men with men, as prescribed by Paul in Romans 16. Among them was the legendary Punkin Brown, the evangelist who I'd been told would wipe the sweat off his brow with rattlesnakes. Jamie Coots from Kentucky and Allen Williams from Tennessee were also there. They sat beside Punkin on the deacons' bench. All three were young and heavyset, the sons of preachers, and childhood friends. Punkin and Jamie both wore scowls, as though they were waiting for somebody to cross their paths in an unhappy way. Allen Williams, though, looked serene. Allen's father had died drinking strychnine in 1973, and his brother had died of snakebite in 1991. Maybe he thought he didn't have anything more to lose. Or maybe he was just reconciled to losing

everything he had. Within six months of sitting together on the deacons' bench at the Old Rock House Church, Jamie, Allen, and Punkin would all be bit.

The church continued to fill with familiar faces, many from what used to be The Church of Jesus with Signs Following in Scottsboro, and the music began without an introduction of any kind. James Hatfield of Old Straight Creek, a Trinitarian church on the mountain, was on drums. My red-haired friend Cecil Esslinder from Scottsboro was on guitar, grinning and tapping his feet. Cecil's wife, Carolyn, stood in the very middle of the congregation, facing backward, as was her habit, to see who might come in the back way. Also in the congregation were Bobbie Sue Thompson, twins Burma and Erma, J.L. Dyal and his wife and in-laws, and just about the whole Summerford clan. The only ones missing were Charles and Aline McGlocklin. Charles was still recovering from neck surgery on an old injury, but I knew from the conversation we'd had in New Hope that even if he'd been well, he wouldn't have come.

One woman I didn't recognize told me she was from Detroit, Michigan. This came as some surprise, and her story seemed equally improbable. She said her husband used to work in the casinos in Las Vegas, and when he died she moved to Alabama and started handling rattlesnakes at the same church on Lookout Mountain where the lead singer of the group Alabama used to handle. "Didn't you see the photo?" she asked. "It was in the *National Enquirer.*"

I told her I'd missed that one.

Children were racing down the aisles. High foreheads. Eyes far apart. Gaps between their front teeth. They all looked like miniature Glenn Summerfords. Maybe they were. He had at least seven children by his first wife, and all of them were old enough to have children of their own. I started to wonder if there were any bad feelings among the Summerfords about the way Brother Carl Porter had refused to let them send the church offerings to Glenn in prison.

About that time, Brother Carl himself walked in with a serpent box containing the

biggest rattlesnake I'd ever seen. Carl smelled of Old Spice and rattlesnake and something else underneath: a pleasant smell, like warm bread and apples. I associated it with the Holy Ghost. The handlers had told me that the Holy Ghost had a smell, a "sweet savor," and I had begun to think I could detect it on people and in churches, even in staid, respectable churches like the one I went to in Birmingham. Anyway, that was what I smelled on Brother Carl that day as he talked about the snake in the box. "I just got him today," he said. "He's never been in church before." Carl looked over his glasses at me and smiled. He held the serpent box up to my face and tapped the screen until the snake started rattling good.

"Got your name on him," he said to me.

A shiver went up my spine, but I just shook my head and grinned.

"Come on up to the front," he said. I followed him and sat on the first pew next to J.L. Dyal, but I made a mental note to avoid Carl's eyes during the service and to stay away from that snake of his.

Billy Summerford's wife, Joyce, led the singing. She was a big woman with a voice that wouldn't quit. *"Remember how it felt, when you walked out of the wilderness, walked out of the wilderness, walked out of the wilderness. Remember how it felt, when you walked out of the wilderness ..."* It was one of my favorite songs because it had a double meaning now. There was the actual wilderness in the Old Testament that the Israelites were led out of, and the spiritual wilderness that was its referent, the condition of being lost. But there was also the wilderness that the New World became for my father's people. I don't mean the mountains. I mean the America that grew up around them, that tangled thicket of the heart.

"Remember how it felt, when you walled out of the wilderness ..." My throat tightened as I sang. I remembered how it had felt when I'd sobered up in 1983. It's not often you get a second chance at life like that. And I remembered the births of my girls, the children Vicki and I had thought we'd never be able to have. Looking around at the familiar faces in

the congregation, I figured they were thinking about their own wildernesses and how they'd been delivered out of them. I was still coming out of mine. It was a measure of how far I'd come, that I'd be moved nearly to tears in a rundown Holiness church on Sand Mountain. But my restless and stubborn intellect was still intact. It didn't like what it saw, a crowd of men dancing up to the serpent boxes, unclasping the lids, and taking out the poisonous snakes. Reason told me it was too early in the service. The snakes hadn't been prayed over enough. There hadn't even been any preaching yet, just Billy Summerford screaming into a microphone while the music swirled around us like a fog. But the boys from Tennessee and Kentucky had been hungry to get into the boxes. Soon, Punkin Brown was shouting at his snake, a big black-phase timber rattler that he had draped around his neck. Allen Williams was offering his copperhead up like a sacrifice, hands outstretched. But Brother Carl had the prize, and everyone seemed to know it. It was a yellow-phase timber, thick and melancholy, as big as timber rat-

tlers come. Carl glanced at me, but I wouldn't make eye contact with him. I turned away. I walked to the back of the church and took a long drink of water from the bright yellow cooler propped up against a portrait of Jesus with his head on fire.

"Who knows what this snake is thinking?" Carl shouted. "God knows! God understands the mind of this snake!" And when I turned back around, Carl had laid the snake down and was treading barefoot on it from tail to head, as though he were walking a tightrope. Still, the snake didn't bite. I had heard about this, but never seen it before. The passage was from Luke: *Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you.* Then Carl picked the snake back up and draped it around his neck. The snake seemed to be looking for a way out of its predicament. Carl let it nuzzle into his shirt. Then the snake pulled back and cocked its head, as if in preparation to strike Carl's chest. Its head was as big as a child's hand.

Help him, Jesus! someone yelled above the

din. Instead of striking, the snake started to climb Carl's sternum toward his collarbone. It went up the side of his neck and then lost interest and fell back against his chest.

The congregation was divided into two camps now, the men to the left, with the snakes, the women to the right, with each other. In front of Carl, one of the men suddenly began jumping straight up and down, as though he were on a pogo stick. Down the aisle he went and around the sanctuary. When he returned, he collapsed at Carl's feet. One of the Summerford brothers attended to him there by soaking his handkerchief with olive oil and dabbing it against the man's forehead until he sat up and yelled, "Thank God!"

In the meantime, in the corner where the women had gathered, Joyce Summerford's sister, Donna, an attractive young woman in a lime green dress, was laboring in the spirit with a cataleptic friend. She circled the friend, eyeing her contortions carefully, and then, as if fitting her into an imaginary dress, she clothed her in the spirit with her hands, an invisible tuck here, an invisible pin there, mak-

ing sure the spirit draped well over the flailing arms. It took her a while. Both of the women were drenched in sweat and stuttering in tongues by the time they finished.

"They say we've gone crazy!" Brother Carl shouted above the chaos. He was pacing in front of the pulpit, the enormous rattlesnake balanced now across his shoulder. "Well, they're right!" he cried. "I've gone crazy! I've gone Bible crazy! I've got the papers here to prove it!" And he waved his worn Bible in the air. "Some people say we're just a bunch of fanatics!"

Amen. Thank God.

"Well, we are! *Hai-i-salemos-ah-cahn-ne-hi-yee!* Whew! That last one nearly took me out of here!"

It's not true that you become used to the noise and confusion of a snake-handling Holiness service. On the contrary, you become enmeshed in it. It is theater at its most intricate — improvisational, spiritual jazz. The more you experience it, the more attentive you are to the shifts in the surface and the dark shoals underneath. For every outward sign, there is a

spiritual equivalent. When somebody falls to his knees, a specific problem presents itself, and the others know exactly what to do, whether it's oil for a healing, or a prayer cloth thrown over the shoulders, or a devil that needs to be cast out. The best, of course, the simplest and cleanest, is when someone gets the Holy Ghost for the first time. The younger the worshiper, the easier it seems to be for the Holy Ghost to descend and speak — lips loosened, tongue flapping, eyes rolling backward in the head. It transcends the erotic when a thirteen-year-old girl gets the Holy Ghost. The older ones often take time. I once saw an old man whose wife had gotten the Holy Ghost at a previous service. He wanted it bad for himself, he said. Brother Charles McGlocklin started praying with him before the service even started, and all through it, the man was in one attitude or another at the front of the church — now lying spread-eagled on the floor, while a half dozen men prayed over him and laid on hands, now up and running from one end of the sanctuary to the other, now twirling, now swooning, now collapsing once

again on the floor, his eyes like the eyes of a horse that smells smoke, the unknown tongue spewing from his mouth. He got the Holy Ghost at last! He got the Holy Ghost! you think, until you see him after the service eating a pimiento cheese sandwich downstairs. His legs are crossed. He's brushing the crumbs from his lap. He agrees it was a good service all right, but it sure would have been better if he'd only gotten the Holy Ghost. You can never get enough of the Holy Ghost. Maybe that's what he means. You can never exhaust the power when the Spirit comes down, not even when you take up a snake, not even when you take up a dozen of them. The more faith you expend, the more power is released. It's an inexhaustible, eternally renewable resource. It's the only power some of these people have.

So the longer you witness it, unless you just don't get into the spontaneous and unexpected, the more you become a part of it. *I* did, and the handlers could tell. They knew before I did what was going to happen. They saw me angling in. They were already making room for me in front of the deacons' bench. As I said,

I'd always been drawn to danger. Alcohol. Psychedelics. War. If it made me feel good, I'd do it. I was always up for a little trip. I figured if I could trust my guide, I'd be all right. I'd come back to earth in one piece. I wouldn't really lose my mind. That's what I thought, anyway. I couldn't be an astronaut, but there were other things I could do and be. So I got up there in the middle of the handlers. J.L. Dyal, dark and wiry, was standing on my right; a cleancut boy named Steve Frazier on my left. Who was it going to be? Carl's eyes were saying, you. And yes, it was the big rattler, the one with my name on it, acrid-smelling, carnal, alive. And the look in Carl's eyes seemed to change as he approached me. He was embarrassed. The snake was all he had, his eyes seemed to say. But as low as it was, as repulsive, if I took it, I'd be possessing the sacred. Nothing was required except obedience. Nothing had to be given up except my own will. This was the moment. I didn't stop to think about it. I just gave in. I stepped forward and took the snake with both hands. Carl released it to me. I turned to face the congrega-

tion and lifted the rattlesnake up toward the light. It was moving like it wanted to get up even higher, to climb out of that church and into the air. And it was exactly as the handlers had told me. I felt no fear. The snake seemed to be an extension of myself. And suddenly there seemed to be nothing in the room but me and the snake. Everything else had disappeared. Carl, the congregation, Jim — all gone, all faded to white. And I could not hear the ear-splitting music. The air was silent and still and filled with that strong, even light. And I realized that I, too, was fading into the white. I was losing myself by degrees, like the incredible shrinking man. The snake would be the last to go, and all I could see was the way its scales shimmered one last time in the light, and the way its head moved from side to side, searching for a way out. I knew then why the handlers took up serpents. There is power in the act of disappearing; there is victory in the loss of self. It must be close to our conception of paradise, what it's like before you're born or after you die.

I came back in stages, first with the recog-