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## Ministry

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# Ministry

## **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"He shouted "Hi!" over the music, extending his hand to the young man getting into the car."

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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**Death and Resurrection**

**Ciprian Almonte**

## Ministry

by  
Michael S. Merry

He shouted "Hi!" over the music, extending his hand to the young man getting into the car.

"Jesse. Thanks."

"No problem. Where you headed?"

"Far as you're willing to take me, or New York."

"That's where I'm going. What do you think of this storm?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"I like it. Makes me think that something is still more powerful than the arrogant human being."

"You weren't walking in it."

"Got a point, there, Jesse," Chris laughed. "What happened, your car break down or something. I've never seen a hitcher on the Thruway before."

Jesse was bending over a towel he'd pulled from his backpack, wringing out long, wavy brown hair.

"No. I've been hitching since I left Cleveland three days ago. Been walking most of the way; it's hard to get a ride."

"Yeah. A few weeks ago, I tried to pick up some guy. He took one look at me and ran screaming."

"What do you expect, looking like you do?"

"Excuse me? I **couldn't** have heard you right."

"Come on. Lot's of people look like hippies. Not a lot of people look like they're into bondage and self-mutilation."

"You've got a lot of nerve. You don't even know me. Even so, what difference does it make?"

"Good question, considering that you'll probably never see me again after you drop me off. Besides, I was only making an observation. So, what difference does it make?"

"I hate being judged without a fair trial."

"Then maybe you shouldn't dress like that."

"It shouldn't make any difference how you dress."

"Oh, please don't tell me that you never do the same thing."

"Try not to."

"Ah, I see. You **try**."

"And you?"

"Chris, aren't you being a bit defensive?"

"Shouldn't I be?"

"Your choice."

Chris drove in silence, listening to the music that barely blocked the noise of the engine.

"Why are you going to New York?" Jesse asked.

"Ever hear of 'Crosses on Golgatha'?"

"Of course!"

"My God! Someone has heard of us!"

"What?"

"I'm the bassist. The rest of the guys are already down there. We got a gig at some club I've never heard of, but, hey, I'm not complaining. It's exposure. I figured it would never happen. I mean, we're good, but no one ever gave us much of a chance. Must be somebody upstairs likes us," Chris chuckled, "or maybe the music."

"Wait--you're talking about a band?"

"Yeah."

"Then I haven't heard of you."

"Oh. So, why are you going--family?"

"You could say that."

"Say what?"

"Aren't we all family? Aren't you my brother? Isn't everyone?"

"Right, and war's just sibling rivalry."

Jesse shrugged.

"So you're going to visit your extended family."

Jesse said nothing.

"Don't be conversational."

"Nosy, huh?"

"Jesus! I would just like to talk. That's why I pick up hitchhikers."

"Oh, I understand. You want to hear my life story?"

"Look, if I'm offending you, don't tell me. I don't care."

"Sure you do. You're a voyeur, looking into other people's lives, trying to figure them out."

"I like being exposed to different kinds of people, different ways of life."

"Right. In other words, you're a voyeur."

"If you say so."

"How do you tell if someone is telling you the truth about their life?"

"It doesn't make any difference if they tell the truth. As you pointed out, I'll probably never see any of them again. Even so, any story I tell about my life isn't true any more than any story you can tell about yours. There's no such thing as objective reality."

"A philosopher, even. You have a college education?"

"Graduated last year. English major."

"So you probably write. Is this how you get ideas for your stories? Oh, yes, you play in a band. You write song lyrics."

"Who's the voyeur now?"

"In other words, 'Yes.' So, you wanted to know why I'm going to New York. I'll tell you then. Because people need me."

"Why?"

"Because everybody needs somebody."

"Right. I'll drop it."

"Come on, Chris, I was just getting warmed up."

"Fine, then you can keep talking. I don't want to play games."

"No, I'll tell you what you want to know, not that you'll believe me, but, ask away."

"Why are you going to New York?"

"Because I want to help those who need me. Before you stop me, I'll tell you. The ill, the uncared for, the homeless and the hungry. I -"

"Wait. You're going to help all those people? Get real. You missed the 60's by about thirty years, dude. If you're going to tell a story, at least try to make it plausible."

"But I'm telling the truth."

"Fine. Then, how are you going to save the world?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you've taken a few too many doses. But tell me anyway." Chris reached for a cigarette. "You smoke?"

"No. You shouldn't smoke, pot either. That stuff's no good for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Come on, Chris, you think it doesn't smell in here? Besides, your bowl's on the dash."

"That would explain it. You want some?"

"Thanks." Jesse reached for the pipe and lighter. "Very potent," he coughed. "But why do you smoke

it? There are easier and better ways to get high."

"Yeah, and most are more dangerous. No thanks. So why do you smoke it, if you got other ways, and if it's so bad for you?"

"Oh, I don't. This is only the third time in this life I've tasted the stuff."

"In 'this' life. Right. Has that got anything to do with saving the world? You know, there's been plenty of people, mostly religious idiots, who've tried. Is it a better place now?"

"Oh, I'm the first to admit that it's not, but, that's why I came back."

"You came back."

"Yeah."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Come on Chris, use that great analytical, imaginative mind of yours. That's what you paid all that money to go to college for, isn't it?"

"Like I said, I'm not into playing games."

Jesse sat with his arms folded, looking over at Chris, a smirk on his face. Chris was silent.

A dead man was singing "I heard God screaming through His tears/ I ain't coming, save yourselves!" when Jesse started laughing.

"What's so funny?" demanded Chris.

"I haven't heard anything so true in years. What band is this?"

"The Lords of the New Church."

Jesse laughed wildly and turned up the volume, tapping his foot to the beat. "Good tunes, Chris, good tunes." As the song ended, Jesse said, "You still haven't answered my question."

"You haven't answered mine."

"Why do you smoke pot?"

Chris stared ahead, watching the rain in the headlights, and sighed.

"I like the effects. Especially when I'm listening to music. There are worse things to do, you know?"

"Don't you know you could be impairing your driving? Isn't that a bit dangerous?"

"I want to choose the way I die."

"You call that choosing? My idea of choice is when I have control over the circumstances. What if a deer ran out in front of your car right now? Would you have enough motor response to avoid dying?"

"It's as good a way to die as any."

"What about after death?"

"If there's enough of me left, it goes to science."

"That's not what I mean."

"That is what I mean."

"What about your spirit, your soul?"

"I guess you didn't pick up on the fact that I'm not one for religion."

"What if I told you there really was an afterlife?"

"I'd ask for some proof."

"If that's an offer, I'd rather decline."

"Just a question."

"Who besides Jesus --of whom I'm rather skeptical-- ever came back to life?"

"What if I told you I am Jesus."

"I'd know that you're either lying or crazy."

"I am. You know it, too."

"Damn straight."

"Oh, I know what you're thinking."

"Bullshit."

"Not at all. Anyway, the only drugs I've taken, besides my three experiences with pot, were on an involuntary basis."

"That's not what I was thinking, but, explain?"

"I spent the last five years in a mental institution. When the doctors realized words were getting them nowhere, they tried drugs. At least now that I'm out, I understand myself a little better."

"So, uh, when did you get out?"

"About four days ago."

"And you're headed straight for New York? Trying to test your new found sanity?"

"I was never insane."

"Hmm." Chris lit a cigarette.

"Chris, do you realize that you have two cigarettes burning?"

"Yeah." He rolled down the window a crack and threw one out.

"Tsk, tsk. You shouldn't be polluting like that."

"Big fucking deal. One cigarette ain't gonna make any difference at this point."

"Oh, you're right. I guess it doesn't matter. Even if everyone just threw all their cigarettes out the window, the world wouldn't be harmed. Everything's just peachy."

"Do you want to start walking again?"

"After I just dried off? No thanks."

"Then just stop right now."

"Stop what?"

"I didn't pick up a conscience. I've already got one."

"Really?"

"Look, stop questioning me. I felt sorry for you but now I'm beginning to wish I had just left you on the side of the road."

"Often, the best things in life are the ones that are the most difficult to accept."

Chris' hand dropped to the knife in his back pocket as he stopped the car and looked over at Jesse.

"Do you want to get out?"

"Not really."

"Then stop."

"Am I really that annoying?"

"Yes."

Jesse chewed on his lower lip, stared at Chris. "I'm sorry. I just don't know how to act, yet, I guess."

"Yeah, I guess not. Just who the hell do you think you are, anyway. And don't tell me Jesus either. From all I know about Jesus, you ain't him. So, just stop trying to fuck with my mind! I don't like it. Got it?"

Jesse nodded. His hands were folded neatly on his lap, trembling slightly. "I'm sorry. Please don't yell at me."

"Damn," Chris muttered and pulled back on the highway behind a small knot of cars.

"Look," Chris said. "I'm sorry. It's just, you pissed me off. I try to be nice and give you a ride and you start analyzing me. I don't find that to be a very thankful act."

"It's been so long," said Jesse, too low for Chris to hear.

"All my life," Chris continued, "I've tried to be nice to people, picking up hitchers, hell, even walking old ladies across the street. Most of the time I don't even get a sincere 'Thank you.' People take it for granted. And then they turn around -"

"You are beautiful." Again, too low.

"- and fuck you over without so much as a second thought. I mean, what difference does it make anymore? Why -"

"Thank you."

"- bother? What?"

"Nothing. I didn't say anything."

"I did all the right things, but I felt more comfortable looking like this than like some preppy - do they even exist anymore, or is it just yuppies? - preppy jerk. And so - poof!- I'm an outcast. I had a reputation in high school as the biggest druggie -"

"No one ever understood me, either."

" - in the whole school. The ironic part is that I didn't even drink, let alone do drugs. Not until I got to college. And of all the assholes who were sure I was heading straight for the gutter, most of them didn't even finish college. One of them, Sarah, for lack of money and hope, I guess, became a topless dancer. I almost feel sorry for her. Almost. I graduated cum laude."

"I died at your age."

"And now I'm talking to a hitcher who thinks he's Jesus. This is too weird. I'm just waiting to hear a Rod Serling voiceover right about now. So, what do you think, Jesse?"

"About what?"

"Never mind. Huh, take away your argumentativeness and there's nothing left."

"I stopped. There's no need to take shots."

"Sorry, human nature."

"Father, forgive him for he knows not what he does."

"Still?"

"I do not lie."

"Depends on your perspective."

"I suppose you may be right."

"So, you're going to save the world."

"I can only try."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"You're avoiding the question."

"So? You don't believe I'm Jesus and to be honest, I don't have any better reason than that. Do I really need a better reason? Do I even need a reason? Do you care about the world?"

"Of course. I'd be crazy not to."

"But you know there's plenty of people who don't give a damn."

"So, what's your point? That's life. Not everyone has enough guts to care. I do my best to make up for those people. But I keep my perspective. I don't think I can, or even think about trying to, save the world. Just what I touch."

"Through your music?"

"What else have I got? I tried being an activist. That really didn't work. Have you ever bashed your head against a brick wall? It hurts."

"Guess what."

"What."

"I'm Jesus."