

## Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

*Joseph Ponepinto*  
**Missionaries**

I always turn these kids away, because why waste their time on someone who's not going to convert, but this time I come outside and stand on the doorstep as though I'm interested. I need a break from cleaning out the basement anyway.

They don't offer their hands to shake, like a salesman would. They don't drop empty compliments about my house or yard to try and get an edge.

They seem surprised that I want to talk to them, as though no one ever wants to talk to them. I've always thought the missionary thing was designed less to gain followers than to serve as a rite of passage—you have to go out into the community and endure the noes and the negativity, and maybe even the curses and threats of the people you hassle, before you can be full-fledged members of the church. I remember one time the old woman down the street called the cops on a couple of missionaries. It was right around sunset and almost dark, like today, so maybe she feared a home invasion.

Have you heard the good news? This is the shorter one talking, taking charge. The other one, the gangly one with acne, takes a step to the side, like he's the new guy and has been taught to defer. I'm tempted to ask if they mean the stock market went up again, but that would be unkind. Instead I ask if they have a purpose.

They stand there—black pants, white shirts, black ties and shoes—a kind of ruffled discipline about them, probably from having to go door to door all day and not having a mirror to check themselves, or maybe they're not allowed to check themselves because that would be vain. They both have my grandfather's haircut from the sixties, whitewalls around the ears and a dollop of product, so that when the wind catches their hair it leaves a few strands standing straight up, like exclamation points. I try not to stare at the tall one's pocked face by looking instead at his Adam's apple, but he sees what I'm doing and I shift my gaze to the pastels of the evening, the remnants of what must have been a beautiful day that I have missed by staying inside.

I have a hard time with anyone who still believes in the wondrous, although considering the evil and catastrophe in the world, and how powerless we've become to control our lives, maybe wishing for a miracle is all some people have left.

The short one finally answers my query. He tells me it's to share the word of God. It's still best done person to person, in simple conversation. He asks me what I've been searching for.

How do you know that I'm searching?

Everyone is searching, the tall one says.

For a sense of purpose, I offer.

I wonder if they planned to get me to say that.

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I look for traces of smugness. I look right at the tall one with the acne to see if he'll tip his hand and let on that their strategy was created by their elders in consultation with corporate marketing experts, and then rehearsed for weeks on end at whatever boot camp prepares these kids for their time on the streets. It's a psychology. A philosophical discourse. A sales technique. But their faces remain passive. These boys have the peace of uncluttered minds, the self-assurance of those who know only the black and white of issues, and not the grays.

I am tempted to invite them in for something to drink, although I only have beer and whiskey. I would love to talk. I would love to teach them about war and injustice, about cruelty, and the work that needs to be done to bring peace. I doubt it would do any good. Religion has a way of enflaming such urges.

They invite me to read some passages of their book along with them. This will illuminate the word, the short one says. This will open your eyes.

No thanks, I don't want to waste your time, I say. I apologize, although for what I do not know. I am a window shopper in their boutique, and I have merely changed my mind.

They ask me if I'm sure I don't want to continue, and I say that I am sure, and so they wish me a wondrous day and retreat from my door, walking backwards a few steps as if giving me a chance to reconsider. Finally they turn and head toward the house of my neighbor, the atheist, where I suspect they will find no welcome.

As they leave I close my eyes for a minute, and imagine myself up high, among the colors and the rarified air. Then I shut the door and head back to the basement, but I promise myself I'll get outside tomorrow.