

## WINNING SOULS

JANICE KAI CHEN

Victor Dube does not believe in the lottery tickets he sells at his general store in Etna, New Hampshire. His customers buy tickets with milk, with packs of cigarettes, with meals from the food warming cabinets, breakfast on the way to work, dinner on the way home. Bacon breakfast sandwich, shepherd's pie, mac & cheese. Or they buy them à la carte, muttering "Powerball" as they step up to the counter, deciding—after scanning ticket after ticket—to try their luck for yet another day. Dube doesn't like to see his customers put so much faith in chance. Faith, he believes, is for Jesus. He will save you. Lottery tickets won't. A few months ago, a woman—one of Victor's regulars—came in and asked for a lottery ticket. She said she was about to lose her house. Maybe now it was her turn to win. Victor said to her, "What are you doing?" She handed him two dollars and bought the ticket. Victor prayed for her.

I first came across the Etna General Store on Google Maps. I was looking for places around Dartmouth to explore, my cursor tugging at fluffy green trees and shorn green fields, and I saw the label for the general store on the side of Etna Road. I am a transplanted urbanite from Hong Kong, and I had a curiosity about the goings-on at a rural general store, a curiosity spurred on by some sort of bucolic ideal where the store played out as a hub for the local community, smiling people who bought coffee and stood around the store talking about their chickens. So I set off on my bike.

It was the first Saturday of April last year, when wet snow was still sliding off the store's slouching metal green roof in sheets, melting and puddling in muddy pools at the foot of the white shingled walls. The wheels of my bike jolted and stalled as they ran over the wide and jagged potholes in the parking lot. Red lottery digits peered out through the scratched store window. Inside, the smell of toasted coconut and cinnamon wafted from a narrow, open kitchen on the left, curling around the shelves of factory packaged snacks. The fridges and freezers that lined the walls on the right droned. Three cream-cheese filled pumpkin muffins sat in a cardboard tray in front of the beige cash register.

I didn't meet Victor that day—he was, I'd later learn, at a Christian theme park in Florida, the Holy Land Experience, where one can tour a recreation of biblical Jerusalem and watch a bearded Jesus in Gospel plays. But I met Kristen, Victor's daughter, who helps out at the store a few times a week. She told me business is slow on Saturdays, but I was more than welcome to stay. Kristen is 32. That day, she wore a pink sweater, a maroon apron, and her shoulder-length, pin-

straight dark brown hair pulled back tight into a half ponytail. I spent the afternoon chatting with her at the kitchen counter as she hurried around the store, making chocolate covered macaroons and stocking the shelves with baked goods.

Early in the afternoon, an older man appeared at the front of the store, and Kristen made her way to the cash register. Standing in front of a wall of cigarette packs, she smiled. Two front teeth, big and round.

“Hi Drew!”, she said, almost singing. Her sentences flicked up at the end like check marks.

“How ya doing?” Drew said.

I noticed a few Christian tracts resting in an old cardboard container for 99-cent energy shots, next to packets of Heinz marinara sauce. I picked one up. A pale blue sky with ethereal clouds was printed on the cover, with the words “Are you sure?” Inside, each page featured a checklist on the dos and don’ts of getting to heaven.

“So what do you think?” Kristen asked me, returning from the register. “Are you a believer?”

“Well, I’m not a person of faith, but I try to be a good person and what not,” I said, thinking it would be an adequate answer. I told her my parents were Buddhist, for some extra spiritual capital. She nodded. Later in the afternoon, she would tell me that there are many religions in the world, but there is only one truth.

Jesus.

“Okay? Does that make sense?” she kept saying, her eyes wide as she nodded seriously at me, chin dipped toward her chest. I found myself nodding back, not wanting to challenge her world view, to ask whether, if there was in fact only one truth, were my Buddhist parents living lies? Before I left, she drew out two copies of the Bible from behind the counter, one with a red paper cover and the other with a black faux leather jacket and embossed letters. She wanted me to take one. I chose the black, faux leather one. “People like that one more, with the fancy cover,” she said, laughing. She had bought them in bulk at the dollar store.

---

Like many evangelical Christians, Victor and his family believe that we come into this world as children of the devil, as descendants of Adam, who fell into sin after Eve bit the apple in the Garden of Eden. We inherit Adam’s sin, Victor says, just as babies born to opioid-dependent

mothers inherit addiction. “It’s not their fault, but they have to deal with it.” Adam’s punishment was death, the removal of eternal life he was granted when God created him. Once we confess that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, we are born again as God’s children. We must say it aloud. Otherwise, we are destined for hell and perennial suffering, no matter how good we try to be.

Victor wears rectangular, silver-framed glasses pressed up against his wide, bulbous nose. His grey-green eyes are small, rounder near the inner corners and slightly dropping at the outer corners where they meet the crinkle of crow’s feet. A thick ring of fat connects his chin to the collar of the Etna General store t-shirt that he wears when he’s at the store. On the back, in the shape of a rainbow, is printed “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. (Matthew 22:39)”

The Etna General Store is God’s plan for Victor to share the truth of Jesus Christ, a ministry of sorts. Two thirds of Victor’s customers are from out of town: people who pick up a paper cup of coffee en route to work and a box of beers on the way home. During lunch hour on weekdays, the workers drive up a long strip of Etna Road sandwiched between low-rise office buildings—Hypertherm Fujifilm, Weight Watchers, Unifirst—until the forest thickens and then yields to pretty houses with sprawling lawns. One house has a red golf cart parked out front. The workers filter into the store and fill their stomachs with burgers and chicken chunks, their pockets with pale yellow lottery receipts. A Bible with a burgundy cover and thin yellow pages sits in a rack on the counter next to a row of creation science DVDs. By the coffee urns, a sign reads: “COFFEE is proof God loves us and wants us to be AWAKE, ALERT, and ATTENTIVE!” Every other Wednesday, Victor’s pastor from his church, the Benton Bible Chapel, drives an hour to the store. Pastor Wayne sits in the office upstairs from ten in the morning to two in the afternoon. Sometimes, business gets too busy for Victor to run the store and teach his customers about Jesus at the same time, so two years ago, Pastor Wayne offered to come down once every other week to answer any questions a customer might have about God. Bible study starts at two.

One Wednesday, a customer tells Victor that his 88-year-old mother is in hospice; his father passed last year. The customer flits about the store, his royal-blue ironed dress shirt stark against the store’s stained ceiling and walls. He fishes a bun out of a Tupperware container perched on a steel rack and fixes himself a hot dog, squirts ketchup. He pays, forgets to collect his change. Victor leans against a door frame, listening to the man speak about his mother, about how you think you’re ready for death until it comes.

“What’s your mother’s name?” Victor asks.

“Joyce.”

“We’ll pray for your situation,” Victor says. He looks kindly at the man. “I know you don’t believe in that stuff, but we’ll pray for Joyce.” The man thanks Victor, eyes averted, still fidgeting.

Victor and his staff keep an eye out for the regulars, make sure they get what they need. When they don’t come around, they get worried. “You got buns there, Phil?” Betty, one of Victor’s employees, says to a customer’s back; Phil towers over the hot dogs, lying limp in the metal basin. Betty works three days a week, on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. She’s 66. She was saved at the store a year ago, when she confessed out loud to Pastor Wayne that Jesus had died for her sins.

“Oh yeah. Ohhhhh yeah,” Phil wheezes. His wrinkled hands, mottled with age spots, quiver.

“Did Phil buy lottery tickets?” Betty asks, after Phil leaves. “He hasn’t been doing that lately.”

Victor looks out at the street. “No, he’s been having challenges.”

“Is he okay, though?”

“Well, he’s been puking up blood, so I don’t think so.”

Powerball is popular with general store customers. The jackpot is the biggest, hovering around 90 million dollars on any given day. One in a 300 million chance of winning it all. Victor sells upwards of 2,000 tickets a week. On Wednesday afternoon, a man walks up to the counter, hands jammed in the front pockets of his jeans. “Powerball,” he says, barely a whisper. A woman in a pink neon jacket buys 28 tickets. After her, another customer hands over a few soft bills and places his tickets in the inner pocket of his jacket. Crossed fingers.

“Just one?”

“Just one,” a customer says.

“That’s all it takes, right?”

They laugh.



The store runs on miracles. Victor grazes the poverty line every year; for the first seven years of business, he barely broke even. “But somehow the bills get paid.” Victor takes a sip of coffee from his black mug with the words “Blessed is a Man of Faith” emblazoned on it in white curlicues. “Now that’s a miracle,” he says, right index finger jabbing the air. Behind me, the food cabinets are

humming, the grease-stained, white-and-red striped paper boxes of mozzarella sticks and fries warm under the light.

Before Victor bought the store fifteen years ago, he was delivering in the area for Pepperidge Farm. He'd drive down to Dartmouth in his big pickup, loop back up to Woodsville, lift heavy pallets of bread. The store was on his delivery route. One day, he found out that the store-owner was selling, and he decided to buy. His business with Pepperidge Farm had been more lucrative—he didn't have to pay employees like he does at the store—but he wanted to build relationships out of his work, and delivering was always rush-in, rush-out, hello, goodbye. It was hard on his body, too. He had a bad habit of jumping out of his truck, landing first on one foot. He threw out a hip. Busted a knee. Whenever he stopped to talk to me during the many afternoons I would come to spend at the store, he'd fold sideways and rest his right elbow on a short refrigerator. Nestle his hip against the cool grey metal.

In the first few years of the store, Victor was just there to lend an ear to the people who came in and poured their lives onto the counter. After a while, he started telling his pastor at the church he went to back then—Pastor Dan at the Calvary Baptist Church, in Woodsville—about his work at the store. Pastor Dan showed Victor that there was a reason for his work, that God had a purpose for him. Victor had only recently been saved and he wasn't as familiar with scripture then as he is now, so he would take his customers' stories to the pastor, and the pastor would tell him how to advise them. Pastor Dan was a soul winner. "A person who really likes to witness for God," Victor tells me. "I kind of related to that."

Victor hasn't always been Christian. He was raised Catholic, but for him—now that he's been saved—Catholics aren't true Christians. All the Catholicism of his youth chalked up to, as far as he's concerned, was mindless people filing into pews on Sunday morning, children after their parents, drinking in the words of the homily but never reading the Bible themselves. "That's just religion," he often says. "Religion," he says, is man's attempt to reach God. Victor says he's not religious, because he has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He says Catholics don't know Jesus like he does.

When Victor talks to his customers about Jesus, the first thing most of them usually say—as if to deflect the conversation—is, "I go to church."

"What's that got to do with anything?" Victor says. It has nothing to do with your relationship with God. "I go to church. All my family goes to church. I've always gone to church with my family." Victor speeds up and he grows out of breath.

“Like what does that mean? What does that gotta do with anything? What’s your personal relationship with God? Do you have a personal relationship with God? Have you asked Jesus as your savior? There’s a guy who came last week. He’s been bleeding for twenty days.” Victor pauses. “Out of his rectum.” Victor’s eyes are pinned on mine. “And he needs surgery. Darmouth-Hitchcock doesn’t have anybody to do his surgery for three weeks. He’s been bleeding for twenty days. He’s bleeding a lot. So they’re monitoring him, but in the meantime, he’s really scared. And to be honest with you, what an opportunity to talk to somebody like, ‘This is what you need.’” Victor’s finger pounds the counter with every word.

At the time, Victor had pointed to the customer’s heart—he reaches out to point to my heart now—and said ‘Heart. Is Jesus in your heart? Because He died for you. He’s a savior. He’s here to help you.’” Victor prayed with the customer. To heal him.

“He felt the power,” Victor says. “After I prayed with him, he said, ‘Well, you know, I’ve never felt so good in weeks.’ And I was like ‘Well I didn’t do anything, I just prayed to God.’”

I ask Victor if the man is doing okay now.

“I haven’t seen him since. I don’t know how things worked out. But maybe he didn’t bleed the next day. I don’t know. God’s going to deal with him.”

“Yeah,” I say.

“He’s not just my savior”—Jesus—“He’s my friend. I know Him. I don’t have to see Him here. I know He’s here. It makes a big difference in my life.”

The front door slams.

“*Oh my goodness!*” Victor yells. “*Two strangers!* How ya doin’ Larry?”

Larry’s small, with a white beard and frail shoulders. The other man—a regular—disappears into the back of the store.

“Well, not good. But still living,” he croaks. “Where’s all the coffee?”

“Coffee’s out back now.”

“Haven’t been here in so long, you know.”

“We’ve moved everything around on ya, yeah.”

Larry moves slowly around the store, looping around the aisles, slipping into the side room for coffee.

“You get your license back, Larry?” Victor calls.

Larry doesn't hear. He used to be one of Victor's regulars, but he hasn't been by the store for over a year now. He comes to the counter to pay for his coffee, grabbing a steak breakfast bagel on the way. Victor asks him how he's been.

"What are you doing? Still the same thing?"

"Just being a slimy dirtbag," Larry says.

"You a dirtbag?"

"I am."

"You're a child of God, buddy!" Victor's voice rises half an octave in encouragement.

"You're not a dirtbag!" Victor laughs. "Hm?"

"Oh, Victor. I am." Larry says, his words arid. "You know, you gotta suck it up."

"You gotta find your best friend. It's Jesus."

"I know."

"Brian's rejoicing right now. What do you think about that?" Brian is Larry's brother. He's in heaven.

"Well, I think he's looking down on me and saying, 'He's a dumbass.'"

Victor laughs, a high wheeze, and shakes his head knowingly.

"He'd probably say that to you, wouldn't he?"

"He's saying it right now," Larry says.

They catch up for a bit and Victor asks Larry for his phone number.

"We're gonna come up and talk to you sometime. You wanna do that?"

"Okay."

"Okay? God bless you buddy."

Larry shambles out the door.

"That fella there was—his brother used to work for me here. His name was Brian. Brian had really bad car accident and had a brain injury. He literally lived in guilt. He killed somebody. DWI. He killed somebody in the car accident. And he lived with that guilt. Twenty-five years. Until he got saved. He got saved here. I mean, he still had some challenges with his brain injury, but his heart definitely changed."

Victor stops talking to help a customer. Then he picks up as if he hadn't paused.

"It was neat because Brian had a relationship, had a child with somebody else. Wasn't married to her but his name as Travis, his son. They'd come up to church every other weekend. And

he got saved. They'd come up to church together. Then with his brain injury, he'd get these—what do you call 'em?"

"Seizures?" I say.

"Seizures, yeah. Seizures, yeah."

A man bursts in the door, says, "One bag of layer pellets!"

I sit and wait at the counter for Victor to come back.

"So anyway, Brian had a seizure and I guess he was walking out by his property in rural New Hampshire, walking along the side of the road when he collapsed. But again, he got saved. We know where he is. He was trying to reach him—his brother—before he died. He never had the opportunity to talk to him. So that is the evidence of witnessing to somebody. Sharing the truth with somebody. And then he dies, and all of a sudden, he's in heaven. It's kind of a big thing. If nobody had said anything to him, he wouldn't have known."

---

It was eleven o'clock on a Saturday morning when Victor told me about the Rapture, why it is important, now more than ever, to be saved. Victor is making egg salad. He unbuckles the grey egg carton and places the eggs, two in each hand, into a pot of cold water. He turns the knob on the stove. The burner clicks on, blue flames fanning out and tickling the bottom of the shallow, scratched pot. Microbubbles snake up in the gaps between the eggs piled on top of each other. The Rapture is coming, Victor tells me. Any moment now, he says. His lower back rests against the short refrigerator next to the stove. His arms are crossed. The water boils. Bubbles expand and snap around the rim. Vapor rises. The smooth white shells emerge on the surface like the bellies of floating pregnant women.

Victor, like many evangelicals, believes in the Rapture, the day when all believers of Christ, living and dead, rise up to heaven to join Him. Only your spirit goes, Victor says. Your body stays behind. He smiles. I imagine a crevasse opening up in Victor's forehead, his spirit, a spectral wisp, drifting out through the dark and gaping crack. The slit lengthens, like a zipper undoing itself. His skin peels back. Yellow-white flesh tumbles to the ground in round folds, the mound of skin and fat and muscle sitting on the cold green and white tile floor like a pair of discarded pants. Victor's spirit seeps through the black-speckled ceiling panels, through the slouching green metal roof, through the heavy blanket of light-grey clouds, and then finally into heaven, where the streets are gold and flanked by towering mansions filled with jewels. Victor will get his own mansion. I imagine sitting



alone in Victor's store after he's one, enveloped in the never-ending drone of the refrigerators. The pot of eggs is still boiling.

Victor says we know the Rapture is coming soon because of the riots in the cities: early signs of the lawlessness that will pelt down after Christians are transplanted to heaven. Protests against police are pointed affronts to authority, God's authority. *For there is no power but of God: the power that be are ordained of God*, opens Chapter 13 of the Epistle to the Romans. *For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil*. To reject the legitimacy of police, to resist the barrel of the gun, the jolt in the officer's shoulder as he fires once, twice, twelve times, is to turn a back on the ordinance of God. "That's lawlessness," Victor says. His head tilts down a fraction, his eyebrows are raised, and his small eyes look at me through the top half of his glasses.

Earlier that day, Victor had told me—for the nth time—that we have two choices. The devil's family, or God's family. There is no middle. We cannot be servants to two masters. According to Victor's beliefs, I had, in my devout atheism, willfully positioned myself as putty in Satan's hands, pulled into sin and away from my own salvation at every corner. It was a closed epistemological loop; for him, my disbelief was not a product of my agency to opt out of an absolutist world-view with the knowledge that there were other ways of living; no, I would always be the devil's fool. And even if I was to choose God, the devil would still be there, yanking me back into my sinful self. We will always have two natures: our old nature—physical, sinful, and in Adam's image—and our new one after we're saved—spiritual, perfect, in God's image. In a booklet Victor once gave me, a kind of how-to guide on salvation, it says: *Both natures are present constantly. The one that will control you is the one you feed the most.*

A year ago, a middle-aged woman came into the store and showed Victor videos on her phone of black mist floating out of her floor vents and across her apartment. He told him that the burners on her stove were turning on and off without anybody touching them. She had fed the devil too much, Victor says. The woman had been experimenting with Ouijia boards and tarot cards, toys Victor says will invite demonic energies from the spiritual world to dwell in your body. Because she had not been saved, her body was empty. Primed for the devil to decant her spirits into her. Victor and Kristen explained this to the woman. Pastor Wayne went to visit and help clear her apartment of demonic paraphernalia. A few weeks later, she descended from the upstairs office in the store with Pastor Wayne, beaming. Pastor Wayne said, "Tell Vic what you just did." She had welcomed Jesus into her heart. Victor tells me that she looked like an entirely different person. Lighter, less beat-down. But not a week had passed when she came in again, frantic and frenzied, cursing at

Victor and Kristen. The spirits had come back. She brought the Ouija board back. She fed the wrong master.

“It’s a battleground out there,” Victor says, before going to help another customer.

Victor tells me that the devil has been busy. He’s a partitioner. “You’ll see division. All this division, over division, over division. And strife.” Victor says “strife” a lot, just like he says “heart” often, his words sticky residues of Biblical teachings. “He’s winning, you know. He’s winning over.” He sees it in the ways political fights in Washington play out. Republicans and Democrats yelling at each other from their camps, nobody putting their heads together. He spots division in the signs along Etna Road that say *Black Lives Matter*, and then underneath, *We don’t believe in God. Science is Real*. I have never seen such a sign on my bike rides to the store, but I know what he is referring to. Victor’s talking about the *Kindness is Everything* signs, visible on a few lawns in my college town, that assert a commitment to race and gender equality, to anti-discrimination. “The devil knows how to deceive,” Victor tells me as he inventories the milk. “They don’t know”—Victor cuts himself off, pauses. “They haven’t embraced—” Again. “They think they’re good people.”

I ask him why he thinks the signs are there. The refrigerator is deafening and I have to raise my voice a little.

“Cause they’re looking at individual needs. If we’re talking about Black Lives Matter, you start labelling people with people with individual needs. Not that it’s a bad thing. But we all have needs.”

“So the division, that’s because of the devil?” I ask again.

“He likes that.”

“He likes that?”

“He likes that.”

Besides, the Bible teaches us to love our enemies. Vengeance, it says, is not in our hands, but in God’s. As analogy, Victor tells me that he has always been overweight, and all throughout his childhood, he was bullied. “I was bullied, yes. But I’m happy how it turned out. We can’t just be victims.”

Victor claims there were slaves that were content, too, those who stayed on plantations after they were freed. “They had their family. They worked on the farm. They were fed. They were provided for. They brought in the joy. They were content where they were. Everybody can [choose to] be a victim.”

It was loss that brought Victor to Jesus. I lean back against a counter and listen to Victor tell me the story of his salvation. The back of my arm bumps up against a cake stand stacked with used-to-be frozen doughnuts. Victor's by the cash register, his upper body framed by hanging bags of candy on the left, the counter at his belt, and the acrylic case of lottery tickets on the right. It's dark behind the counter. Sunlight streams through the parts of windows not covered by soda refrigerators, and carves a blurred line of light and dark from his temple down to the collar of his grey t-shirt. At the time he was saved—almost two decades ago now—he was separated from his wife and living in a one-room apartment in Bradford, Vermont. The apartment was small; in the mornings, he would sit on the edge of his mattress to get dressed, and his feet would kick up against his desk as he put his pants on. He was running two businesses at once—his Pepperidge Farm delivery route, and a direct distributorship with Amway—and had been spending almost no time at home with his wife and three young children. Kristen was thirteen then, his youngest son, one. He would work his Pepperidge Farm route during the weekdays, leaving home just as the sun rose. Victor would stop at home for dinner, and then head out in his truck again to connect with others new Amway entrepreneurs. Strife was rife between him and his wife. So he moved out.

Victor and his wife, Kim, decided to see a Christian marriage counsellor. As to why he was compelled to do so, Victor supposes it was all in God's plan for him. The marriage counsellor sent them to a church in Barre, Vermont and the pastor there waded into the thick of it with Victor and his wife. The pastor—Pastor Stephen Doe of the Covenant Presbyterian Church—would visit Victor a few times a week at his apartment, forty minutes away, and he'd visit Kim too. They would pray together. Victor wasn't convinced. Money was funneling in; food was on the table. He was in control; he did not think he needed anything else. And then one night, Victor says, Pastor Steve came to his apartment, and said "Why don't you just let it go, Vic. Let it go. Just give it to God. Accept Him. Accept Jesus. Let go of it. Give it to Him." And that's the day I got saved. I let it go, and I just bawled my eyes out and Janice"—I look up at my name, surprised to feel a tingle creep up the muscles in my lower back—"there's not a greater feeling."

Half a decade later, he opened the store with his wife. He says it was important that they did something together.

---

Victor's story of salvation was the hardest to write. I wrote it first a day after he told it to me—and of course even then, it was a rewriting of his words—and then I wrote it again deep into the summer, several months after I had already said goodbye to the Etna General Store. And then

again now, exactly a year after I first sat on that stool by the kitchen under that sagging green roof. The road to Victor's belief in Jesus, as he divulged it, ran along that tidy narrative arc of conflict, climax, resolution. Neatly wrapped and tied up in a bow, as these testimonials, ultimately meant to persuade, often are. And I did find myself persuaded, if only just for a moment, wondering after the spiritual awakening that for Victor seemed to so miraculously mend ripped seams and frayed hems, wondering if it would do the same for me. I suppose that was what made it so difficult to document, the simple magnetism of that narrative arc that wills the switchback-laden stories of our lives into hopeful resolution, knowing full well that to resolve is to snip at a story's triangulation with reality. Trying to write Victor's tale into the backdrop of all that I knew about him, was to tangle it up in his blips and contradictions, to puncture the story that has kept him afloat.

One afternoon at the store, I watched a man in a red baseball cap use his right hand to sign a cross over a pale-yellow lottery ticket. Victor grimaced. In all odds, the ticket would not win the man much the next day, nor would the ticket he'd buy the day after that. Yet perhaps the kernel of salvation is not so much in that yellow slip of paper, but in the paradoxical comfort of chance. Chance—and faith—that which is sometimes altogether unknowable, and yet is transformed into a kernel, or an ounce, or a subsuming totality of security, thinking that somebody out there, a benevolent author writing the stories of our lives, might decide that this is the time to win.