

Vanni Fucci Is Alive and Well and Living in Hell

by Dan Simmons

Introduction

In America as we enter the "discount decade" of the Twentieth Century (\$19.90-\$19.95, etc.), one is so used to thinking that progress equals improvement that it is almost heresy to be confronted with the absolute refutation of that premise.

For instance, take current theology. *Please*.

One can view Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* section of his *Comedy* as a personal venting of spleen mixed with a lib-eral dose of S&M, but to do so would be to see it only from our current, somewhat obsessed point of view. Dante was also obsessed, but his objects of obsession—besides the lovely, lost Beatrice—centered around Virgil's *Aeneid* and Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. Little wonder then that the *Inferno* is a staggeringly complex theology, at once an exploration of cosmic structure and of the all too personal fear of death—that fear "so bitter—death is hardly more severe" (*Inferno*, 1,7).

Dante saw that fear of death as the one sure source of poetic and creative energy. In that respect, little has changed since the early 14th Century.

But let's turn on the TV and see what passes for theol-ogy these six and a half centuries later. In lieu of the po-etry of the *Aeneid*, we have the south-baked howl of the sweating televangelist. In the stead of the intellectual ca-thedrals of the *Summa Theologica*, we have the entire cathode-ray-tubed, satellite-relayed, hair-sprayed and cosmetic-troweled message boiled down -to two words: *Send money*.

Agreed, televangelists aren't the theologians of this century, and they are excessively easy targets after the rev-elations of the last few years—the Jimmy Swaggart vulgar-ities, the Rex Humbolt absurdities, and the Jimmy Bakker adulteries and breakdowns. If it's any excuse, the follow-ing story was written *before* these sideshows.

But the revelations were to be expected. As long as we live in a world where "theology" has become a mixture of P.T. Barnum and Johnny Carson, where we invite these parasites into our home via cable TV and satellite dish and radio ... well, as the kid said in the classic *New Yorker* cartoon, "I say it's spinach, and I say to hell with it."

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On his last day on earth, Brother Freddy rose early, showered, shaved his chins, sprayed his hair, put on his television make-up, dressed in his trademark three-piece white suit with white shoes, pink shirt, and black string tie, and went down to his

office to have his pre-Hallelujah Breakfast Club breakfast with Sister Donna Lou, Sister Betty Jo, Brother Billy Bob, and George.

The four munched on sweet rolls and sipped coffee as the slate-gray sky began to lighten beyond the thirty-foot wall of bulletproof, heavily tinted glass. Clusters of tall, brick buildings comprising the campus of Brother Freddy's Hallelujah Bible College and Graduate School of Christian Economics seemed to solidify out of the predawn Alabama gloom. Far to the east, just visible above the pecan groves, rose the artificial mountain of the Mount Sinai Mad Mouse Ride in the Bible Land section of Brother Freddy's Born Again Family Amusement Complex and Christian Con-vention Center. Much closer, the great dish of a Holy Beamer, one of six huge satellite dishes on the grounds of Brother Freddy's Bible Broadcast Center, sliced a black arc from the cloud-laden sky. Brother Freddy glanced at the rain-sullen weather and smiled. It did not matter what the real world beyond his office window offered. The large "bay window" on the homey set of the Hallelujah Break-fast Club was actually a \$38,000 rear-projection television screen which played the same fifty-two minute tape of a glorious May sunrise each morning. On Brother Freddy's Hallelujah Breakfast Club, it was always spring.

"What's the line-up like?" asked Brother Freddy as he took a sip of his coffee, his little finger lifted delicately, the pinky ring gleaming in the light of the overhead spots. It was eight minutes until air time.

"First half hour you got the usual lead-in from Brother Beau, your opening talk and Prayer Partner plea, six-and-a-half minutes of the Hallelujah Breakfast Club Choir doing "We're On the Brink of a Miracle" and a medley of off-Broadway Christian hits, and then your Breakfast Guests come on," said Brother Billy Bob Grimes, the floor director.

"Who we got today?" asked Brother Freddy.

Brother Billy Bob read from his clipboard. "You've got Matt, Mark, and Luke the Miracle Triplet Evangelists, Bubba Deeters who says he wants to tell the story again how the Lord told him to throw himself on a grenade in 'Nam, Brother Frank Flinsey who's pushing his new book *After the Final Days*, and Dale Evans."

Brother Freddy frowned slightly. "I thought we were going to have Pat Boone today," he said softly. "I like Pat."

Brother Billy Bob blushed and made a notation on his thick sheath of forms. "Yessir," he said. "Pat wanted to be here today but he did Swaggart's show last night, he has a personal appearance with Paul and Jan at the Bakersfield Revival this afternoon, and he has to be up at tomorrow's Senate hearing testifying about those Satanic messages you can hear on CDs when you aim the laser between the grooves."

Brother Freddy sighed. It was four minutes until air time. "All right," he said. "But try to get him for next Monday. I like Pat. Donna Lou? How're we doing with the

Lord's work these days, little lady?"

Sister Donna Lou Patterson adjusted her glasses. As comptroller of Brother Freddy's vast conglomerate of tax-exempt religious organizations, corporations, ministries, colleges, missions, amusement parks and the chain of Brother Freddy's Motels for the Born Again, Donna Lou was dressed appropriately in a beige business suit, the seriousness of which was lightened only by a rhinestone Hallelujah Breakfast Club pin which matched the rhinestones on her glasses. "Projected earnings for this fiscal year are just under \$187 million, up three per cent from last year," she said. "Ministry assets stand at \$214 million with outstanding debts of \$63 million, give or take .3 million depending upon Brother Carlisle's decision on replacing the Gulfstream with a new Lear."

Brother Freddy nodded and turned toward Sister Betty Jo. There were three minutes left until air time. "How'd we do yesterday, Sister?"

"Twenty-seven broadcast share Arbitron, twenty-five point five Nielsen," said the thin woman dressed in white. "Three new cable outlets; two in Texas, one in Montana. Current cable reaches 3.37 million homes, up .6 per cent from last month. The mail room handled 17,385 pieces yesterday, making a total of 86,217 for the week. Ninety-six per cent of the envelopes yesterday included donations. Thirty-nine per cent requested your Intercession Prayer. Total envelope volume handled this year is 3,585,220, with an approximate 2.5 million additional pieces projected by the end of the fiscal year."

Brother Freddy smiled and turned his gaze on George Cohen, legal counsel for Brother Freddy's Born Again Ministries. "George?" Two minutes remained until air time.

The thin man in the dark suit unhurriedly cleared his throat. "The IRS continues to make threatening noises but they don't have a leg to stand on. Since all of the ministry affiliates are under the Born Again Ministries exemption, you don't have to file a thing. The Huntsville papers have reported that your daughter's house has been assessed at one million five and they know that it and your son's ranch were built with a three million dollar loan from the ministry, but they're just guessing when it comes to salaries. Even if they found out ... which they won't ... your official annual salary from the Board comes to only \$92,300, a third of which you tithe back to the ministry. Of course, your wife, daughter, son-in-law, and seven other family members receive considerably more liberal incomes from the ministry but I don't think..."

"Thank you, George," interrupted Brother Freddy. He stood, stretched, and walked to the color monitor attached to the computer terminal on his desk. "Sister Betty Jo, you said there were several thousand requests for the Personal Intercession Prayer?"

"Yes, Brother," said the woman in white, laying her small hand on the console next

to her chair.

Brother Freddy smiled at George Cohen. "I told these folks I'd personally pray over their letters if they'd send in a love offering," he said. "Might as well do it now. I've got thirty seconds before Brother Beau goes into his intro. Betty Jo?"

The woman tapped a button and smiled as the list of thousands of names flashed by on the color monitor. After each name was a code relating to the category of problem for which intercession was requested according to the checklist provided on the Love Offering form: H-health, MP-marital problems, \$-money problems, SG-spiritual guidance, FS-forgiveness of sins, and so on. There were twenty-seven categories. Any one of Brother Freddy's two hundred mail room operators could code more than four hundred intercession requests a day while simultaneously sorting the letter contents into stacks of cash and checks while cueing computers to provide the appropriate reply letter.

"Dear Lord," intoned Brother Freddy, "please hear our prayers for the receipt of Thy mercy for these requests which are made in Jesus's name..." The list of names and codes flashed past in a blur until the suddenly blank screen held only a flashing cursor. "Amen."

Brother Freddy turned on his heel and led the suddenly scurrying-to-keep-up retinue on the thirty yard walk to the Hallelujah Breakfast Club studio just as the program's opening graphics and triumphant music filled the sixty-two monitors in the Broadcast Headquarters' corridors, offices, and board rooms.

Brother Freddy knew there was a problem eighteen minutes into the program when he introduced Dale Evans only to watch a tall, dark-skinned man with long, black hair walk onto the set. Brother Freddy knew at once that the man was a foreigner; the stranger's long hair was curled in ringlets which fell to his shoulders, he wore an expensive three-piece suit which looked to be made of silk, his immaculately polished shoes were of soft Italian leather, his starched collar and cuffs dazzled with their whiteness, and gold cufflinks gleamed in the studio lights. Brother Freddy knew that some mistake had been made; his born again guests—despite their personal wealth—went in for polyester blends, pastel shirts, and South Carolina haircuts if for no other reason than to stay in touch with their video faithful.

Brother Freddy glanced down at his notes and then looked helplessly at the floor director. Brother Billy Bob shrugged with a depth of confusion that Brother Freddy felt but could not show while the red eye of the camera glowed.

The Hallelujah Breakfast Club prided itself on being live in three time zones. Brother Freddy smiled at the ad-vancing intruder and wished they had gone with the tape-delayed programs his competitors preferred. Brother Freddy usually prided himself on the fact that he wore no earphone to hear the booth director's instructions and comments, trusting instead on Brother Billy Bob's hand signals and his own

well-honed sense of media timing. Now, as Brother Freddy rose to his feet to shake hands with the swarthy stranger, he wished that he had an earphone to learn what was going on. He wished that they had a commercial to cut to. He wished that *somebody* would tell him what was happening.

"Good morning," Brother Freddy said affably, retrieving his hand from the foreigner's firm grip. "Welcome to the Hallelujah Breakfast Club." He glanced toward Brother Billy Bob, who was muttering urgently into his beard microphone. Camera Three dollied in for a close-up of the swarthy stranger. Camera Two remained fixed on the long divan crowded with the Miracle Triplets, Bubba Deeters, and Frank Flinsey grinning mechanically from beneath his military-trimmed mustache. The floor monitors showed the medium close-up of Brother Freddy's florid, politely smiling, and only slightly perspiring face.

"Thank you, I've been looking forward to this for some time," said the stranger as he sat in the velvet guest chair next to Brother Freddy's desk. There was a hint of Italian accent in the man's deep voice even though the English was precisely correct.

Brother Freddy sat, smile still fixed, and glanced toward Billy Bob. The floor director shrugged and made the hand signal for "carry on."

"I'm sorry," said Brother Freddy, "I guess I've mixed up the introductions. I also guess you're not my dear friend, Dale Evans." Brother Freddy paused and looked into the stranger's brown eyes, surprised at the anger and intensity he saw there, praying that this was only a scheduling mix-up and not some political terrorist or Pentecostal crazy who had gotten past Security. Brother Freddy was acutely aware that the signal was being telecast live to more than three million homes.

"No, I am not Dale Evans," agreed the stranger. "My name is Vanni Fucci." Again the hint of an Italian accent. Brother Freddy noted that the name had been pronounced VAH-nee FOO-tchee. Brother Freddy had nothing against Italians; growing up in Greenville, Alabama, he had known very few of them. As an adult he had learned not to call them wops. He presumed most Italians were Catholic, therefore not Christians, and therefore of little interest to him or his ministry. But now this particular Italian was a bit of a problem.

"Mr. Fucci," smiled Brother Freddy, "why don't you tell our viewers where you're from?"

Vanni Fucci turned his intense gaze toward the camera. "I was born in Pistoia," he said, "but for the last seven hundred years I have lived in Hell."

Brother Freddy's smile froze but did not falter. He glanced left at Billy Bob. The floor director was frantically making the signal of a star over his left breast. At first Brother Freddy thought it was some obscure religious symbol but then he realized that the man meant that Security ... or the real police ... had been called. Behind the wall of lights and cameras a live studio audience of almost three hundred people had

ceased their usual background murmur of whispers and shiftings and stifled sneezes. The auditorium was dead silent.

"Ah," said Brother Freddy and chuckled softly. "Ah. I see your point, Mr. Fucci. In a sense all of us who were sinners have spent our time in Hell. It's only through the mercy of Jesus that we can avoid that as our ultimate address. When did you finally accept Christ as your Saviour?"

Vanni Fucci smiled, showing very white teeth against dark skin. "I never did," he said. "In my day, one was not—as you Fundamentalists put it—'saved.' We were baptized into the Church as children. But I made a slight mistake as a young man and your so-called Saviour saw fit to condemn me to an eternity of inhuman punishment in the Seventh Bolgia of the Eighth Circle of Hell."

"Uh-huh," said Brother Freddy. He swiveled around and gestured toward Camera One to dolly in closer for an extreme close-up on him. He waited until he could see only his own face on the floor monitor and said, "Well, we're having an enjoyable conversation here with our guest, Mr. Vanni Fucci, but I'm afraid we're going to have to take a break for a minute while we show you that tape I promised you of Brother Beau and I dedicating the new Holy Beamer we installed last week in Amarillo. Beau?" Below the frame of the close-up, out of sight of the viewing audience, Brother Freddy drew his right hand repeatedly across his throat. On the floor, Billy Bob nodded, turned toward the booth, and spoke rapidly into his microphone.

"No," said Vanni Fucci, "let us go on with our conversation."

The floor monitors showed a long shot of the entire set. The Miracle Triplets sat staring, the bottoms of their little shoes looking like exclamation marks. The Reverend Bubba Deeters raised his right arm as if he was going to scratch his head, glanced at the steel hook that was the reminder of the Lord's Will during his Viet Nam days, and lowered his arm to the divan. Frank Flinsey, a media pro, was staring in astonishment at the three cameras where no lights glowed and then back at the monitors which definitely showed a picture. Brother Freddy was frozen with his hand still raised to his throat. Only Vanni Fucci seemed unruffled.

"Do you think," said the Italian guest, "that if Dale had passed away before Trigger, Roy would have had *her* stuffed and mounted in the living room?"

"Ah?" managed Brother Freddy. He had heard very old men make similar sounds in their sleep.

"Just a thought," continued Vanni Fucci. "Would you rather I go on about my own situation?"

Brother Freddy nodded. Out of the corner of his eye he saw three uniformed Security men trying to get on stage. Someone seemed to have lowered an invisible Plexiglas wall around the edge of the set.

"It actually has not been seven hundred years that I have been in Hell," said Vanni Fucci, "only six hundred and ninety. But you know how slowly time passes in such a situation. Like in a dentist's office."

"Yes," said Brother Freddy. The word was a little better than a squeak.

"And did you know that one condemned soul from each Bolgia is allowed one visit back to the mortal world during our eternity of punishment? Much like your American custom of one phone call allotted to the arrested man."

"No," said Brother Freddy and cleared his throat. "No."

"Yes," said Vanni Fucci. "I think the idea is that the visit sharpens our torments by reminding us of the pleasures we once knew. Something like that. Actually, we are only allowed to return for fifteen minutes, so the pleasures sampled could not be too extensive, could they?"

"No," said Brother Freddy, pleased that his voice was stronger. The single syllable sounded wise and slightly amused, mildly patronizing. He was deciding which Biblical verse he would use when it was time to regain control of the conversation.

"That's neither here nor there," said Vanni Fucci. "The point is that all of the condemned souls in the Seventh Bolgia of the Eighth Circle voted unanimously for me to come here, on your show." Vanni Fucci leaned forward, his cuffs shooting perfectly so that gold cufflinks caught the light. "Do you know what a Bolgia is, Brother Freddy?"

"Ah ... no," said Brother Freddy, derailed slightly from his line of thought. He had decided on a verse but it seemed inappropriate at right this instant. "Or rather ... yes," he said. "A Bolgia is that duchess or countess or whatever who used to poison people in the Middle Ages."

Vanni Fucci leaned back and sighed. "No," he said, "you're thinking of the Borgias. A Bolgia is a word in my native language which means both 'ditch' and 'pouch.' The Eighth Circle of Hell has ten such Bolgias filled with shit and sinners."

The silent audience was silent no longer. Even the cameramen gasped. Brother Freddy glanced at the monitors and closed his eyes as he realized that his very own Hallelujah Breakfast Club, the top-rated Christian program in the world except for the occasional Billy Graham Crusade, would be the first program in TEN and CBN history to allow the word "shit" to go out over the airwaves. He imagined what the Ministry Board of Trustees would say. The fact that seven of the eleven Board members were also members of his own family did not make the image any more pleasant.

"Now listen here..." Brother Freddy began sternly.

"Have you read the *Comedy*?" asked Vanni Fucci.

There was something more than anger and intensity in the man's eyes. Brother Freddy decided he was dealing with an escaped mental patient.

"Comedy?" said Brother Freddy, wondering if the man were some sort of deranged standup comic and all of this a publicity stunt. On the floor, the cameramen had swung the heavy cameras around and were peering in the lenses. The monitors showed a steady shot framing only Vanni Fucci and Brother Freddy. Brother Billy Bob was running from camera to camera, occasionally tripping over a cable or coming to the end of his mike cord and jerking to a stop like a crazed Dachshund on a short leash.

"He called it his *Comedy*," said Vanni Fucci. "Later generations of sycophants added the *Divine*." He frowned at Brother Freddy, an impatient teacher waiting for a slow child to respond.

"I'm sorry ... I don't..." began Brother Freddy. One of the cameramen was disassembling his camera. None of the remaining cameras was aimed at the set. The picture held steady.

"Alighieri?" prompted Vanni Fucci. "A dirty little Florentine who lusted after an eight-year-old girl? Wrote one readable thing in his entire miserable life?" He turned toward the guests on the divan. "Come on, come on, don't any of you read?"

The five Christians on the couch seemed to shrink back.

"Dante!" shouted the handsome foreigner. "Dante Alighieri. What's the deal here, gentlemen? To join the Fundamentalists Club you have to park your brains at the door and stuff your skull with hominy and grits, is that it? Dante!"

"Just one minute..." said Brother Freddy, rising.

"Who do you think you..." began Frank Flinsey, standing.

"What do you think you're..." said Bubba Deeters, getting to his feet and brandishing his hook.

"Hey! Hey! Hey!" cried the Miracle Triplets, struggling to get their feet to the floor.

"SIT DOWN." It was not a human voice. At least not an unamplified human voice. Brother Freddy had made the mistake once on an outdoor Crusade of standing in front of a bank of thirty huge speakers when the soundman tested them at full volume. This was a little like that. Only worse. Brother Billy Bob and others with headphones on ripped them off and fell to their knees. Several overhead spots shattered. The audience leaned backward like a single three-hundred-headed organism, whimpered once, and adopted a silence unbroken even by the sound of breathing. Brother Freddy and the guests on the divan sat down.

"Alighieri did it," said Vanni Fucci in soft, conversational tones. "The man was a mental midget with the imagination of a moth, but he did it *because no one before*

him did it."

"Did what?" asked Brother Freddy, staring in fasci-nated horror at the madman in the crushed velour chair next to his desk.

"Created Hell," said Vanni Fucci.

"Nonsense!" cried Reverend Frank Flinsey, author of fourteen books about the end of the world. "The Lord God Jehovah created Hell as He did everything else."

"Oh?" said Vanni Fucci. "Where does it say so in that grab-bag of tribal stories and jingoist posturings you call a Bible?"

Brother Freddy thought that it was quite possible that he was going to have a heart attack right there on the Brother Freddy's Hallelujah Breakfast Club hour going live into three million three hundred thousand American homes. But even while his heart fibrillated and his red face grew redder, his mind raced to come up with the appropri-ate Scriptural verse.

"Let me tell you about an experiment performed in 1982," said Vanni Fucci, "at the University of Paris-South. A group of quantum physicists headed by Alain Aspect tested the behavior of two photons flying in opposite di-rections from a light source. The test confirmed an under-lying theory of quantum mechanics—namely, that a measurement made on one photon has an instantaneous ef-fect on the nature of another photon. *Photons*, gentlemen, traveling at the speed of *light*. Obviously no information could be transmitted faster than the speed of light itself, but the *act* of defining the nature of one photon *instanta-neously* changed the nature of the other photon. The con-clusion drawn from this is obvious, is it not?"

"Ah?" said Brother Freddy.

"Ah?" said the five guests on the divan.

"Precisely," said Vanni Fucci. "It confirms in the physical world what we in Hell have known for some time. *Reality* is shaped by the first great mind which focuses on measuring it. New concepts create new laws and the universe abides. Newton *created* universal gravity and the cosmos rearranged itself accordingly. Einstein defined space/time and the universe retrofitted itself to agree. And Dante Alighieri—that neurotic little whimshit—created the first comprehensive map of hell and Hell came into existence to appease the public perception."

"That's ridiculous," managed Brother Freddy, forget-ting the cameras, forgetting the audience, forgetting every-thing but the monstrous illogic—not to mention blasphemy—of what this crazy Italian had just said. "If that was ... true," cried Brother Freddy, "then the world ... things ... everything would be changing all the time."

"Precisely," smiled Vanni Fucci. His teeth looked small and white and very sharp.

"Then ... well ... Hell wouldn't be the same either," said Brother Freddy. "Dante wrote a long time ago. Three or four hundred years, at least..."

"He died in 1321," said Vanni Fucci.

"Yeah ... well ... so..." concluded Brother Freddy.

Vanni Fucci shook his head. "You understand nothing. When an idea is strong enough, large enough, *comprehen-sive* enough to redefine the universe, it has tremendous staying power. It lasts until an equally powerful paradigm is formulated ... and accepted by the popular imagination ... to replace it. For instance, your Old Testament God lasted thousands of years before it ... He ... was actively redefined by a much more civilized if somewhat schizo-phrenic New Testament deity. Even the newer and weaker version has lasted fifteen hundred years or so before being on the verge of being sneezed out of existence by the al-lergy of modern science."

Brother Freddy was certain he was going to have a stroke.

"But who has bothered to redefine Hell?" Vanni Fucci asked rhetorically. "The Germans came close in this cen-tury, but their visionaries were snuffed out before the new concept could take root in the mass mind. So we remain. Hell persists. Our eternal torments drag on with no more reason for existence than could be offered for your little toe or vermiform appendix."

Brother Freddy realized that he might be dealing with a demon here. After almost forty years of preaching about demons, teaching about demons, finding the spiritual foot-prints of demons in everything from rock music to FCC legislation, warning against demons being in the schools and kids' games and in the symbols on breakfast cereal boxes, and generally making a fair-sized fortune by being one of the nation's foremost experts on demons, Brother Freddy found it a bit disconcerting to be sitting three feet from someone who might very well be possessed by a de-mon if not actually *be* one. The closest he could recall to coming to one before this was when he was around the Reverend Jim Bakker's wife Tammy Faye when her "shoppin' demons were hoppin' " back before the couple's unfortunate publicity.

Brother Freddy clutched the Bible in his left hand and raised his right hand in a powerfully curved claw over Vanni Fucci's head. "I abjure thee, Satan!" he cried. "And all of the powers and dominions and servants of Satan ... BE GONE from this place of God! In the name of JE-SUS I *command* thee! In the name of JE-SUS I *command* thee!"

"Oh, shut up," said Vanni Fucci. He glanced at his gold wristwatch. "Look, let me get to the important part of all this. I don't have too much time."

As the Italian began to speak, Brother Freddy kept his pose with the raised hand and clutched Bible. After a minute his arm got tired and he lowered his hand. He did not release the Bible.

"My crime was political," said Vanni Fucci, "even though that Short Eyes Florentine put me in the Bolgia re-served for thieves. Yes, yes, I *know* you don't know what I'm talking about. In those days the political battles be-tween we Blacks and the dogs-pittle Whites were of great importance—a third of Dante's damned *Inferno* is filled with it—but I realize that today no one even knows what the parties were, any more than people seven hundred years from now will remember the Republicans or Demo-crats.

"In 1293 two friends and I stole the treasure of San Jacopo in the Duomo of San Zeno to help our political cause. The Duomo was a church. The treasure included a chalice. But I didn't go to Dante's Hell just because of one little robbery about as common then as knocking over a convenience store today. *No*. I have prime billing in the Seventh Bolgia of the Eighth Circle because I was a Black and because Dante was a White and the unfairness of it all *pisses me off*."

Brother Freddy closed his eyes.

Vanni Fucci said, "You'd think an eternity of wallow-ing in a trench of *merde* and hot embers would be enough revenge for the sickest S&M deity, but that's not the half of it." Vanni Fucci swiveled toward the Breakfast Club guests on the divan. "I admit it. I have a temper. When I get mad I give God the fig."

Frank Flinsey, Reverend Deeters, and the Miracle Trip-lets looked blankly at Vanni Fucci.

"The fig," repeated the Italian. He clenched his fist, ran his thumb out between his first and index fingers, and thrust it rapidly back and forth. Based on the mass intake of breath from the crowd, the symbol must have been clear enough. Vanni Fucci swiveled back toward Brother Freddy. "And then, of course, when I do that, every thief within a hundred yards—which is everyone *in* that god-damned Bolgia, of course—turns into reptiles..."

"Reptiles?" croaked Brother Freddy.

"*Chelidrids, jaculi, phareans, cenchriads*, and *two-headed amphisbands*, that sort of thing," confirmed Vanni Fucci. "Alighieri got *that* right. And then, of course, every one of these damned snakes attacks *me*. Naturally I burst into flame and scatter into a heap of smoking ashes and charred bone..."

Brother Freddy nodded attentively. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Sisters Donna Lou and Betty Jo help-ing the three Security men use a chair as a battering ram against the invisible barrier that kept them off the set. The barrier held.

"I mean," said Vanni Fucci, leaning closer, "it's not pleasant..."

Brother Freddy decided that when all of this was over he would take a little vacation at his religious retreat in the Bahamas.

"And being *Hell*," continued Vanni Fucci, "the pieces, my pieces, don't die, they

just reassemble—which is the most painful part, let me tell you—and then, when I'm back together, the *unfairness* of it all gets me so pissed off that ... well, you can guess ..."

"The fig?" guessed Brother Freddy and clapped a hand over his own mouth.

Vanni Fucci nodded dolorously, "Both hands," he said, "And off we go again." He looked directly into Camera One. "But that's not the worst part."

"No?" said Brother Freddy.

"No?" echoed the five Breakfast Club guests.

"Hell is a lot like a theme park," said Vanni Fucci. "The management is always trying to improve the attractions, add a more effective touch to the entertainment. And can you guess what the Big Warden in the Sky has provided the last ten years or so to add to our torment?" The Italian's voice had climbed the scale as his anger visibly grew.

Brother Freddy and the Breakfast guests vigorously shook their heads.

"BROTHER FREDDY'S HALLELUJAH BREAK-FAST CLUB!" screamed Vanni Fucci, rising to his feet. "EIGHT TIMES A GODDAMNED DAY. 90-INCH SYLVANIA SUPERSCREENS EVERY TWENTY-FIVE FEET IN BOLGIA SEVEN!"

Brother Freddy pushed back in his chair as Vanni Fucci's saliva spattered his desk top.

"I MEAN..." bellowed Vanni Fucci, his wide, glaring eyes fixed on something above the catwalks, "...IT'S ONE THING TO SPEND ALL OF ETERNITY BURN-ING IN HELL AND BEING RENT LIMB FROM LIMB EVERY FEW MINUTES BUT THIS ... *THIS*..." He raised both arms skyward.

"No!" screamed Brother Freddy.

"No!" cried the Breakfast guests.

"THIS REALLY PISSES ME OFF!" bellowed Vanni Fucci and gave God the fig. Twice.

Things happened very quickly after that. To get the full effect, one has to play back the videotape in Extreme Slow Motion and even then the sequence of events can be confusing.

Brother Freddy went first. He doubled over the desk as if an Invisible Force were vigorously practicing the Heimlich Maneuver on him, opened his mouth to scream only to find that three rows of long fangs there made that highly impractical, and then grew scales and a tail faster than one could say "born again." The metamorphosis was so fast and the movement afterward was so quick that no one can say for sure,

but most observers agree that the Reverend Brother Freddy looked a lot like a cross between a giant bullfrog and an orange python in the brief second before he—it—leaped across the desk with one thrash of its powerful tail and lashed itself around Vanni Fucci from crotch to throat.

Frank Flinsey turned into something altogether different; in less than a second the middle-aged Armageddon expert evolved into something resembling a six-armed newt with a jagged tail-stinger straight out of *Aliens*. The thing used its tail to plow a path through the carpet, floor, divan, and crushed velour to the hapless Vanni Fucci, where it joined the Brother Freddy python-thing in a full-fanged attack. Experts agreed that Flinsey was probably the *pharean* to Brother Freddy's *chelidrid*. There was no doubt about Bubba Deeters transmogrification: the street preacher who had found God in a foxhole deliquesced like day-old fungi, reformed as a green-striped *amphisband* with a head at each end, and slithered toward Vanni Fucci to get in on the action.

The Miracle Triplets instantly changed into slimy, dart-shaped things which shot through the air, leaving contrails of green mucus, and embedded themselves deep in Vanni Fucci's flesh. Scholars are certain that the Triplets had become what Dante and Lucan had described as *jaculi*, but most viewers of the videotape today merely refer to them as "the snot rockets."

While these creatures threw themselves on Vanni Fucci in a roiling, writhing, snake-biting mass, there was more action on the set and elsewhere.

Brother Billy Bob had put his earphones back on just in time to turn into what a nearby cameraman later described as "...a thirteen-foot-long garter snake with lep-rosy." A second cameraman, since relieved of his duties by the Born Again Ministries, was reported to have said, "I didn't see no change in Billy Bob. All them directors look the same to me."

Sisters Donna Lou and Betty Jo fell to the ground only to slither onto the set a second later as two immense pink worms. Much has been written about the phallic symbolism inherent in this particular set of metamorphoses, but the irony was lost on the three security guards who emptied their service revolvers into the giant worms and then ran like hell.

The audience was not untouched. Vanni Fucci had said that all thieves within a hundred yards of his blasphemy traditionally were transformed. Out of 319 audience members present that morning 226 were unaccounted for the next day. The auditorium was filled with screams as those who stayed human watched their husbands or wives or parents or in-laws or the stranger next to them transform in a flash into snakes, fanged newt-things, legless toads, giant iguanas, four-armed boa constrictors, and the usual assortment of *chelidrids*, *jaculi*, *phareans*, *cenchriads*, and *amphisbands*. A University of Alabama study done a month after the incident showed that most of the thieves-turned-reptiles in the audience had been in sales, but other occupations included—lawyers (8), politicians (3), visiting ministers (31),

psychiatrists (1), advertising executives (2), judges (4), medical doctors (4), stock market brokers (12), absentee landlords (7), accountants (3), and a car thief (1) who had ducked into the auditorium to get away from the Alabama Highway Patrol (2).

In less than ten seconds, Vanni Fucci was the center of a mass of scales and fangs representing every reptile-thing in the Bible Broadcast Center auditorium. The Italian struggled to get his hands free to get off another fig.

Brother Freddy sank its bullfrog-python *chelidrid* fangs deep into Vanni Fucci's throat and the blasphemer burst into flame.

The studio filled with a stink of sulphur so strong that thousands of cable subscribers later swore that they could smell it at home.

The entire mass of reptiles exploded into flame along with Vanni Fucci, disappearing with him in a napalmish, orange-green flash that left the vidicon tubes of the RCA computerized color cameras with a 40-second after-image.

The Hallelujah Breakfast Club set was suddenly empty except for the flaming wreckage of the divan, desk, and crushed velour chair. Overhead sprinklers came on and the "bay window" imploded with a shower of sparks and glass. The sunrise did not survive.

Later that night, the *Nightline* video replay drew a sixty-share. On the same show, Dr. Carl Sagan went on record with Ted Koppel as saying that the entire event could be attributed to natural causes.

That week Brother Freddy's Hallelujah Breakfast Club Prayer Partners sent in Love Offerings totalling \$23,267,894.79.

Except for the occasional Billy Graham Crusade, it set a new weekly record.

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