

Hit Man

“Not with murder, Joe,” I answered emphatically. “With cigarettes we let you taper off. Not with murder.” I leaned back in the chair in a thoughtful pose, hiding amazement at the confessions I just heard.

I had met assassins before, but none who considered murder an annoying habit to break by tapering off gradually.

Joe did it for a living, and that was part of the problem.

His question had been, “What if I were to do one hit, say, this month?” Then another the next three months, and so on? The hopeless tone in his voice showed he suspected I might get stubborn about this.

He leaned forward with a pained expression. “Are you absolutely sure?” he asked. “Doesn’t your religion make exceptions for special cases like mine?” I paused, not because of doubt, but from the shock of realizing he was deadly serious. “Absolutely, Joe,” I responded, “no exceptions.” He cleared his throat. “I thought you were going to say something like that. The problem is, they’ll kill me if I stop.”

The value of human life varies from culture to culture. In Joe’s country, it was exceptionally low. But Joe had a conscience. And God was working in it, or he would not have shown up at my door.

Joe was a hit man for the leading political party in his country. “I never expected to get into this,” he said forlornly. “I was hired as a courier to transport important documents. Then one day the bosses said to several of the guys in the office, ‘Let’s go out to the field for some target practice. We’re going to issue you pistols in case you need to defend yourself. We have enemies, you know.’”

Joe described how this ‘target practice’ continued once a week for about a month, until the bosses summoned the employees into the office one day with startling news. “There’s going to be a big political rally next month in such-and-such a town. The key speaker is a danger to our regional plans. He’s got to be eliminated. You, Joe, will drive the car. The others will do the hit.”

“Only one of the boys objected and asserted that he would not participate under any circumstances. The bosses warned him it would be preferable if everyone participated. Beyond this, they said little. But the boy’s body was found in a ditch the following week, full of holes. There were no more objections after that.”

“The hit went pretty well,” Joe said. He didn’t actually do the shooting, at least not that first time.

The few times Joe showed up at church, he stood in the back with other men, leaning against the wall, afraid of being noticed by his peers outside. He had been seeing one of the girls of the congregation. When the service ended, he would leave with the young lady.

I tried to talk to him a couple of times about the Lord. He was always polite but somewhat distant. So I was surprised when he showed up at my door that day.

As we discussed his dilemma, a plan evolved. Why not talk to the bosses in the language they understand? Instead of Joe telling them he wouldn’t do hits anymore, he would ask them for an alternative. He would explain that he wanted to marry a girl that goes to an evangelical church and that ‘hits’ are forbidden by that religion. He could explain that he had no intentions of leaving the

party (for the moment) and would rather be assigned to another branch of the party if that was all right with them.

The glitch in the plan was the possibility that they might pretend to go along with Joe and then knock him off later. But Joe said he could pretty much tell by now what they were really thinking. So we came up with an alternate plan to help him escape town if necessary.

Two weeks later, he showed up at my door again.

“Oh, how I thank God!” he exclaimed. “He answered our prayers! I did as you suggested. I talked honestly with them and asked for another assignment. Now I don’t have to do ‘hits’ any more!”

We rejoiced together over this victory until it occurred to me to ask about his new functions. I assumed he was back at his old courier job. Indeed he was, sort of. He replied, “I’m running marijuana to the border for the bosses!”

We left Joe’s country some weeks later. But just before, Joe and I agreed that if some day he freed himself completely from his bosses, he would write or call me and say a secretly agreed phrase. About 6 months later, I got the call. He spoke the phrase and a lot more. He and the girl were married and owned a large tract of land. “If we were to return,” he said, “he would build us a house and let us live there free.” We did not accept this offer, knowing he really didn’t expect us to.

In Joe’s culture, that meant, “Thanks.”

