

Pastor Robert Atkinson tapped his black dress shoes and smoothed his perfect hair. This would be no quick trip into Save-a-Bunch to pick up a few groceries. The checker didn't seem to notice that her line, although the shortest, was moving the most slowly. *Couldn't she enter a single produce code into the register correctly?*

Her tag read, "Please pardon me. I'm a temporary employee on my first assignment." But Pastor Atkinson nearly ground his teeth with frustration. He had several meetings, and because of her incompetence he waited here instead of doing the Lord's work. *Yes, it takes a lot of administration to keep a big church going.*

He smiled, thinking about all the progress he'd made in fifteen years. He'd grown the church from fifty to a few hundred with thrilling Sunday school campaigns. The split ten years ago had hurt, but with lots of hard work, the church could now afford to buy the latest equipment and hire staffers. He had purged the old-fashioned dark wood and stained glass, leaving a clean and

narrowly-set eyes stared dully through stringy bangs. Her pasty, flabby hands dragged products lethargically across the scanner.

Behind the pastor waited the venerable Dr. Hubert Clark. He headed an old, mid-sized church on the other side of town. Dr. Clark loathed greeting Pastor Atkinson because his own church's attendance hinged upon the success of Pastor Atkinson's Sunday school campaigns.

Dr. Clark believed heartily in old-fashioned worship. Forget silly choruses on computerized overhead displays, Sunday school contests and children's church—it was all nonsense. His church needed no modern gimmicks. God wanted modest apparel, modest worship and modest living. Dr. Clark also became aware of the checker's fumbling. *I need to get back to my office to study for this week's sermon. Why doesn't her new-fangled computer help?*

Her brightly painted nails and gaudy rings irked him as well. *Is she some kind of hussy? Doesn't she know what she's advertising?*

That's exactly what his daughter, Linda, had done. Only when she told her parents that she was pregnant did they realize where their coddling had led. *Well, at least I made it clear that no daughter*

modern building to evidence the Lord's blessing.

Waiting so long in a grocery store line mocked his position as a successful minister. He should have sent his secretary.

The oblivious checker's pock-marked face was beyond plain. Her

# THE ASSIGNMENT

by Deborah Jeanne Sergeant

*of mine would bring shame upon our church and our faith!* Dr. Clark thought to himself.

The last time he had seen Linda was twenty-nine years ago. He had sent her out West to live with a distant cousin under the premise that Linda was a young widow. Dr. Clark had hoped that she would settle down somewhere away from his congregation, who believed Linda was attending a Christian boarding school.

Waiting several places behind the pastors, Patrick McClellan rubbed his goatee. Seeing the pastors together struck him as an unwanted coincidence. Patrick's mind drifted back to ten years ago when he and his wife were having trouble. He was a new believer then, and newly married to Renée, too.

She was an Amazonian with the personality to match. She had battered his body and, even more painful, belittled him constantly, regardless of how well he treated her. A few times, she had even tried to kill him.

When he approached Pastor Atkinson, the minister actually laughed and said, "You're kidding, right? Your wife beats you up? You let a woman hit you?"

"She...she won't stop hurting me," Patrick said sadly. "What should I do?"

Pastor Atkinson leaned over his desk and replied, "Young man, if you lead as Christ leads the church, your wife will happily follow." Then he turned back to his paperwork, dismissing Patrick's problem as petty.



Rumors flew quickly within the church. Renée denied the accusations and blamed Patrick. Half the church believed Renée and half believed Patrick. It was ugly.

After months of tension, Patrick left their home and church. The divorce Renée initiated inflicted hurt that gnawed at Patrick's soul and mind. It was even worse than when cancer had stolen away his mother. The law left him powerless to stop Renée from divorcing him.

Dr. Clark's church members shunned Patrick for appearing with a goatee, shaved head and without a suit. Once they learned of his divorce, their suspicions were confirmed. He didn't fit in and never would. So Patrick moved on.

While waiting at Save-a-Bunch, Patrick stared at his loafers, hoping neither pastor would notice him. The checker attempted to ring up Pastor Atkinson's items three times before getting it right. He huffed audibly.

"Thank you for shopping at Save-a-Bunch, where we try to save you time and money. Come again," the checker said perfunctorily as she handed him the receipt.

"I have lots of important meetings today and I can't afford a delay. Your errors have set me off schedule," Pastor Atkinson retorted with disdain.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience, sir," she said in the same mechanical voice.

Patrick noticed her fumbling, but also that she wore a wedding band along with her cheap, flashy jewelry. Her unkempt hair and faded clothing showed neglect. A

bruise on her right temple told him much more.

Dr. Clark said only a clipped "Thank you" as he left. He lifted his chin, thinking of how he had treated the lazy, sleazy-looking girl better than Pastor Atkinson had.

Then Patrick added a candy bar to his items. After receiving his change, he placed the confection on her register. "God still loves you," he said quietly, "and he understands." The girl looked up shyly. "Thanks. I needed to hear that."

Then Patrick walked out of Save-A-Bunch humming softly, "Jesus Loves Even Me."

The checker turned her light off and slipped out to the break room.

She folded her apron. She stood erect with her hands wide open at her sides, gazing upward in anticipation. The change began at her face, which glowed as it transformed into a strong, beautiful one without bruises or flaws of any kind. Her faded blouse and jeans melted into a luminescent robe. In less than a second, she sailed clean through the ceiling, through the roof, through the skies and past the stars, back home. The assignment was complete. □

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