



SUZI Q. VARIN

# INCREDIBLE HULK SAVING SOULS

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**MY** father thought men who talked about being “saved” were weak, even feminine. Religion was the domain of women; he was too busy farming and working at the ceiling-tile factory to concern himself with salvation. My mother prayed and talked to me about God behind his back. Raised in coal-miner churches in Vigo County, Indiana, she kept a small white Bible stashed in the cupboard. We rarely saw Dad

at mealtimes — long hours in the field and factory made him an all-but-phantom father — and before we ate, our mother would whisper, “Dear Lord, bless these kids and this farm. Please watch out for those who are poor and weak.” Then she’d lower her voice until it was almost inaudible: “And give Dan the strength he needs in his work. Please save his tired soul. Amen.”

Our mother had given all five of us kids tiny Gideon Bibles. Mine was orange, and my name was written inside in elaborate cursive. Because they were girls, my two sisters could openly keep their Gideons next to their beds, but I kept mine in a drawer. Though my father never said as much, my brothers and I knew that once we hit puberty, we were expected to behave like full-grown men: farmers and union members who needed nothing more than their own strong bodies to save them. My tentative faith became a secret, a sinful thing to keep hidden away.

We lived in Wabash, Indiana, and my mother, my siblings, and I would sneak off to church in Terre Haute when we visited her family there once a year, but she wouldn't upset my dad by taking us to a service in our hometown. She often urged him to consider going to church, but he was too busy, he'd say. The ceiling-tile factory paid double time on Sundays. "What do you want to do, Doris: buy food for the kids or save my soul?" My dad would deliver this remark with a grin, confident of his alibi.

In 1981, when I was in eighth grade, a friend from school invited me to a meeting of his church's youth group. My mother dropped me off in the parking lot as if she were leaving me to commit a crime. The church basement was cold and smelled like bleach despite the spaghetti supper simmering in the kitchen off the main rec room. Teenagers gathered around an oval carpet while two sheepish-looking "peer leaders" placed folding chairs in a circle. I helped set out paper plates and plastic forks. The furnace kicked on, blowing hot air full force down on our heads. I'd asked my mother to "feather" my hair, and she had, spraying it with lots of AquaNet to produce winglike formations at the sides of my head. At the time I was infatuated with pop singer Olivia Newton-John — or, at least, with a poster of her dressed in "Let's get physical" workout garb. I'd recently discovered my mind could conjure up all manner of scenarios that brought her into my life, and into my twin bed.

Everyone filled plates with spaghetti and sat down for a rap session with the youth pastor and his wife. The topic was drugs and God. I tried to eat with some manners while making sure none of the watery tomato sauce splashed onto my white Izod golf shirt, which I'd bought at a thrift store. Underneath it I wore another golf shirt, and I had both collars turned up, like a stylish neck brace. With my winged hair and dual turned-up collars, my head looked like an aerodynamic contraption about to take flight.

The youth pastor was a bodybuilder who faintly resembled Lou Ferrigno, the actor who played the Incredible Hulk on TV. He didn't eat but just sat and thumbed through a workbook, his legs spread wide because the muscles in his thighs didn't permit a more polite pose. On the cover of the workbook was a photo of some needles and an assortment of colored pills. The title, set against a psychedelic background, was *Just Say No to Drugs!* The pastor opened and closed the book several times before finally cocking his large head and clearing his throat.

"How many of you teenagers here tonight feel pressured by your . . ." He turned to a page marked with a red tassel and

searched the text. "By your peers?"

My friend nudged me as he shoveled spaghetti into his mouth, the diluted sauce dripping rapidly from his plastic fork onto the paper plate. I ignored him and chewed my garlic bread. A young girl with severe acne spoke up: "I've not really been approached — I mean, I haven't been approached at all, but I know kids who have." I couldn't help thinking she had been planted by the pastor and his wife to get the rap session going.

The youth pastor tried to get the kids to spill their guts one by one, but each only shrugged. My friend nudged me again with his bony elbow, and this time the pastor saw it. "Doug, do you have something to share?"

I stopped eating. I'd confided to my friend that I'd been offered pot in the high-school parking lot after a basketball game, and now I was regretting it. (This same friend also knew about the Olivia Newton-John poster; would he tattle on me about that next?) I'd left the parking lot without taking a single hit, without even thinking about using drugs, but I didn't want to tell this group of strange kids some stupid story about how I'd said no.

The muscle-bound youth pastor's gaze was intimidating, though, and before I knew it, I was nervously explaining how I'd turned down the dope, like a good Christian teenager. I thought of my father, who at that very moment was at work, using his muscles to feed his family, and I felt the blood in my face rise a few degrees.

When I was through, the pastor seemed impressed. "That's excellent, Doug," he said, as if he were a coach praising a ballplayer. "Let's all give Doug a big hand. I mean, let's really let him hear how much we love him for the choice he made. Come on!" he yelled, getting fired up, clapping his strong, thick hands with thunderous effect. I wished I could flap my stiffly feathered hair and fly away.

The pastor told me to come forward and said, in his deep baritone, "I present this pledge to Doug as a challenge." He held out a piece of paper that looked like a fake diploma. "Doug, do you accept the challenge to stay drug-free, to not give in to temptation, and to not partake in any type of substance abuse that would harm God's temple?"

It was the first time I'd heard the word *temple* used for a person's body, and I was confused. I pictured someone spray-painting graffiti on the church. The pastor's bulging biceps stretched the short sleeve of his dress shirt, and I waited for the material to rip all the way up to his neck. Maybe, I thought, if my dad could have seen this macho pastor, he'd have understood that a man could have a Savior and still be tough.

*(end of excerpt)*