

GODHEAD

By Michaela Jeffery

Synopsis:

A backwoods televangelist. A bull rider. A secret exorcism.

This explosively powerful new work by award winning emerging playwright Michaela Jeffery marries the wild charisma of the iconic West with the visceral allure of contemporary fanatical evangelism in snake churches of the deep South.

...

Hoyt has a demon. At least, he believes so – needs Rev. Vaughn to believe so. There's something dark and slippery in him that makes him wild, furious – makes him drink too much and pull the branches off trees, scream, wreck things. On the worst nights it follows him home.

That's why he's here, really: Liz. Liz. Bold and resilient Liz has one foot out the door. But this time it's going to be different. Liz is pregnant – a new beginning. Hoyt is desperate. He needs to see to his demon – needs Vaughn – which is why he's come.

Of course, you can't know what's in a person.

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CHARACTERS:

VAUGHN	Late 50's. A rural televangelist.
HOYT	20's. A rodeo athlete.
LIZ	20's. She's tough as nails.

SETTING:

A backwoods Baptist church in ranching country, rural southern Alberta. Vaughn addresses the congregation.

While the primary action takes place in Vaughn's dressing room, we should never completely lose the sense of church pews.

From the darkness the compressed sound of televised organ music.

VAUGHN: I am not an orphan.
I am not an outcast

You've got to believe that God will hear you when you pray.

Light blooms around VAUGHN, who holds a microphone. He wears a suit and carries a plastic case under one arm. The organ music swells under his voice – both no longer sounding televised. HOYT watches from the shadows.

VAUGHN: There's just a mighty, mighty sweet presence –
Anybody feel that?
Sense there's just –
Something *moved* in this building
In this building tonight.
So I'm praying.
Hallelujah! Hallelujah, Jesus Lord, Amen.

If you ask, you shall receive.
He says –
We are his beloved.
He says –
"He that cometh to God must believe that God is,
and that God is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."

So I'm praying.
When things get too big for me.
When I'm overwhelmed, lead me.
God will make a way.
God will move.
His grace will shower down like a storm over the desert.

Oh, let it rain Lord. Let it rain here tonight, hallelujah!

HOYT steps out into the periphery of VAUGHN's light. He wears an unzipped parka. He is fixated on VAUGHN, expression dark. VAUGHN is the only one who sees him. VAUGHN places a hand on the plastic box.

VAUGHN (to the congregation): By God, in Jesus' name. Holy spirit... RAIN.

There is a swell in the organ music; VAUGHN's light spills outward, infecting more of the space.

I'm talking, tonight, about salvation. I'm talking about crawling out from under the shadow of sin and shame and into the light of redemption in his eyes, Hallelujah.

VAUGHN looks directly at HOYT.

I don't know what Hell is.

VAUGHN returns his gaze to the congregation. VAUGHN sets down the box and opens it.
Ain't no living person that can tell you.

He lifts out a large, live snake, holding it high. The snake writhes.

But we've seen it, haven't we? Felt it.
Hellfire licking up our spines.
Planting soft, sweet kisses on our souls.
Damnation is a pliant bedfellow.
Leads you with guileless grace into the night,
to the shore of the river, with coins for the ferryman.

The snake coils her way up VAUGHN's arm.

Ain't no living person can tell you what Hell is.

What's below, swirling in the dark water.

And Lord, God have mercy, sometimes I go to that place.

Follow the devil down to the riverbank and wait in the darkness for Hell to give up her secrets. For the damned to lean in across the void and whisper unknowable truths. "They will speak," I think. "Stop your heart for them. Open your veins for them. Hold your head under long enough, and you will *compel* them to speak..."

But then morning comes and God breaks over me like a wet, cold rain
and I am born again baptized and shivering in his love, and I pray. I pray.
I pray. By God, in Jesus name, I am saved this night, and saved again
every morning I wake in my living body, I am thankful.

VAUGHN plucks the snake from his person. He holds her out and up. She thrashes. HOYT steps forward. VAUGHN locks his gaze with HOYT's.

I imagine him sometimes - The Divine Christ, holds me...
HOYT puts a finger to his mouth- "shh".

...holds me and whispers, "God is love, God is love, God is love..."

He stares at VAUGHN another moment, then drops his hand, fading back into the shadows.
VAUGHN continues, rattled.

"You are not an orphan," he says.
"You are not an outcast. We are his beloved."

You've got to believe that God will hear you, when you pray.

VAUGHN slowly lowers the snake. He wraps his arm snug to his ribs.

We are in his dressing room – a small, intimate space. It is sparse and meticulously organized. There are neat stacks of religious readings and scripture notes, as well as a full-length mirror, simple sink setup and a cot – as though perhaps he’s been sleeping here. Long shadows – the light fixtures are free of dust, but distinctly of an earlier era.

VAUGHN begins unbuttoning his shirt. He examines his chest in the mirror, following his left ribs to the place where they meet his sternum. He is gaunt in this light. His bones are prominent. HOYT appears in the doorway. VAUGHN sees him reflected in the mirror and deftly re-buttons his shirt.

VAUGHN: Son, the gym is down the main hall on your left. We got some cots left, I think. Miriam will set you up with a blanket and a meal – should still be something warm on the stove ...

HOYT hovers uncomfortably in the doorway. Fraught.

HOYT: I saw your service. Last year. Saw you speaking near Claresholm– on Hell. You talked about God. God’s love. About how we gotta believe he’ll hear us? You talked about the devil as a lady, I remember, kissing our souls. I remember you talking about Hell most though... About what it’s like. About how we don’t know....?

VAUGHN: Soup’s going fast, I think you best –

HOYT: NO. That’s not – I mean – I’m not here for supper...Sir. Pastor.... I watch your show every week, I watch... when I can. You said those things that first time, and they stuck in me. About salvation. About Jesus Christ. About the river and the way Hell pulls you in with her sweetness, her soft mouth on you, until – you – you’ll –

I – I need – I need – I need....

I gotta get out and away from all the.... fucked up shit...
And I don’t got nowhere to go except...

Remembered you speaking at Claresholm.

VAUGHN smiles gently at HOYT.

VAUGHN: What’s your name, son?

HOYT: Hoyt.

VAUGHN: Hoyt. Well, Hoyt... How about you sit down.

He does. Still riled.

VAUGHN: You a bourbon man?

VAUGHN opens a cupboard and removes a decanter of bourbon and two tumblers.

VAUGHN: Don't know about you, but I'm not much a confessing type myself.
I like a little help when I gotta get something off my chest.

He pours two fingers and offers it to HOYT. HOYT takes the tumbler, doesn't drink.

HOYT: What happens to us, when we die?

VAUGHN swirls his own drink.

VAUGHN: I think it depends.

HOYT: I've seen it. You said no living soul could say what Hell is, but I've been there. I've been down there – to the river – and I didn't stop like you at the bank and pray and pray to Jesus to forgive me. I kept on into the dark until the water took me and drowned me and spat me back up with the devil still in me. In my bones. My blood.

VAUGHN: Do you go to church, Hoyt?

HOYT: No. No, Sir. Not regular.

VAUGHN: Words are powerful things.

HOYT: Don't know I follow.

VAUGHN: God's words - the words of the Lord – in His house, have power to change a person. Shine up his soul. There's a service here, in the building, Monday and Thursday nights. You could start coming by, let the words work on you, maybe see if that 'ol knot in your chest lets go some...

HOYT: NO! No. I don't... have time. I gotta start now. She's ... she's... and I've done some things – real, real mean things. Devil things. There's things I gotta fix but I gotta get him outta me –

HOYT pulls off his parka as though he's suddenly burning up, and tosses it. He scratches his arms and throat, pacing angrily.

VAUGHN: Sit down, son.

HOYT sits.

VAUGHN: Now – I'm going to pour you a glass of water, and we're going start over.

He pours a glass from the tap, brings it to HOYT and sits himself.

VAUGHN: What kind of Devil we talking?

HOYT has caught his reflection in the mirror. He swallows and swallows and swallows.

VAUGHN: Meth?

HOYT: I'm not a tweaker.

I'm a drunk.

I'm a fucking... drunk.

But that isn't... what this is.

I've got the devil in me. I know I've got the devil in me...

VAUGHN: What makes you think that?

HOYT: I know. I just – I *know*. It isn't me – any of it. Doesn't feel like it's me. I look at my face and I don't see me. Talk, sometimes, and it's like... it's like it isn't my words – or – my words but twisted, mean. And I'm screaming them – those words – like I want them to bust ribs – and I don't even recognize them, me, I don't...

I can feel him. I can feel him, squatting inside me – clawing his way up from my gut...

Jesus. God. Help me, please.

VAUGHN: You ever pray before, Hoyt?

HOYT: Yes. Yes, I –

VAUGHN: Like, really pray?

HOYT: Driving here, tonight – I pull over, get out onto the road – I don't know – I just – everything is closing in on me. The ground is falling away, sky coming down, and I ask Jesus... beg him... I say, I won't do another thing wrong, I say, the rest of my life, if...

He prays.

Help me.

I-I don't know what to do.

I'm sacred. Jesus, God.

I messed up.

God forgive me, in holy Jesus' name.
Please.

I let the devil take me –
I – I let the devil move in me –
Let Hell kiss me
Kissed her mouth –
Drunk her in 'till I was hot and ready.
Strong.
And sometimes I'm not sorry –
Sometimes
God forgive me
Sometimes
Devil feels good

HOYT is flushed. Sweating. He swallows some more.

HOYT: At The Fish this one night, there's this guy. Big, tough. You can tell. Like, rig guy – like when I used to work the rigs – these guys, rough – and mean. He's messing with the waitress, like, grabbing her, and she – you can tell she ain't haven't none – and he goes in again and she pushes him off, and he keeps on, so I say – “This guy giving you trouble?”, and guy gets up like, “Fuck you, man”, grabs my shirt and– *bam* – in the mouth – I break his jaw.

And this guy – rig guy –
Is screaming
And I'm just –
Just washes over me
Like I don't *feel*
And I just think
Shut up
Fucking
Shut up
And I want to
Rip his throat out
Feel like I could

And I know
It's the devil
And I don't care
'cause I feel –
That night
Feel like the devil done more for me then God ever has.

VAUGHN: You prayed.

HOYT: Cause I don't want to be that –
Want to be better than a barfighting drunk.

Then a daddy who isn't there 'cause he –

VAUGHN: A daddy?

HOYT: Yessir. I mean – almost – I will be – soon.

VAUGHN: Ever think maybe God's already heard you? Blessing you with a babe. A life. A life to save your life. Life for a life? Best way I ever found to beat back the devil – care for someone else.

HOYT: That why you become a preacher man?

VAUGHN: ...

HOYT smiles.

HOYT: I'm glad I've come to you. Jesus brought me to you.

VAUGHN: Jesus isn't the one drove you here – did that by yourself.

HOYT: He lead me, when I prayed. I hadn't been thinking of nothing except drowning, except Hell closing in, and then I saw you – in my head – remembered your face– you preaching – and I knew it was God, whispering in my ear: This is where I'm supposed to be tonight.

You're going to pull the Devil out of me.

This sets VAUGHN on edge.

VAUGHN: Hoyt - thing about Devil is, you've got to be the one does the pulling.

HOYT: I know.

VAUGHN: Yeah?

HOYT: I know – I just –

VAUGHN: I can pray with you.

HOYT: You're not going to lay hands?

VAUGHN: No.

HOYT: You used to.

VAUGHN: Not for a long time.

HOYT: You saying you can't?

VAUGHN: I'm saying I don't.

HOYT: You don't believe I've got him in me.

VAUGHN considers this.

VAUGHN: No.

HOYT swallows. Swallows again.

HOYT: You got one. A devil.
Mine can smell it on you – eating you from the inside out.

VAUGHN: Lot of things can eat a man, Hoyt.

HOYT: I broke her ribs. Come home drunk – yelling. And she's yelling. Crying Shut up.
Fucking shut up. Push her into the counter hard enough to break two. *(soft)* You
can't tell me that isn't the devil.

VAUGHN says nothing, he looks at his drink . HOYT leaps to his feet, paces. He mops his brow.

HOYT: Jesus, it's hot. I think I'm dying. Christ –

VAUGHN: What kind of man you want to be?

HOYT: What?

VAUGHN: Laying hands is... a tool. Helps some folk. What matters more is what a person
thinks he's made of. What he imagines on the other side. It's how he sees himself
being. How he wants to be. What's that look like to you?

He thinks a moment.

HOYT: I'm riding.
Better than I ever have.
Holding, holding, holding
I'm –

Light and free

I come out of the gates strong
And I don't let go
And there's
All this good stuff
Hanging in the air
Waiting to happen
And I know

I'm scoring a perfect ride

This is it
Going to have enough now
Going to buy her a house
Anywhere she wants

Get out of the double-wide
Crossfield mobile home park.
Real house on an acreage.
Nicest outlying part of town
Kids can go to a fancy school

I'm going to ride and I'm going to hold
Going to win

And everything will be better

VAUGHN looks at HOYT – really looks at him – seeing him for the first time.

Help me. Please. I'm not good for them.
I want be... good for them. I want...

She doesn't feel safe, she said. She said, she doesn't... and God, that's just about
the hardest thing to hear.

VAUGHN's gaze has shifted to HOYT's reflection in the full mirror.

HOYT: Lay hands on me.

*The reflected HOYT sweats – rivulets run down his face and neck, wet spots
blooming through his shirt.*

VAUGHN: I can't do that.

HOYT: Don't.

VAUGHN: What?

HOYT: Thought you 'don't', now you 'can't'?

Reflected HOYT's shirt is now saturated. Water drips from his reflected fingertips.

HOYT: Lay hands on me.

VAUGHN: Else what?

HOYT looks at VAUGHN looking at the mirror. HOYT looks at the mirror. His reflection is normal.

HOYT: Else I go home and use a rifle to blow the devil out the back of my head.

VAUGHN: Who's that going to help?

HOYT: You a farm boy, Pastor? Sometimes, you don't have a choice. With dogs, say: they get bit, end up foaming. Nothing you can do for that, once the rot gets to their brains.

I'm sick.

VAUGHN: You're afraid.

HOYT: *You're* afraid.

He's right.

HOYT: S'okay hoss. I mean, scary stuff. You're not superman.

Pause.

VAUGHN: I don't think
I don't –

HOYT: You worried I'm going to catch what you got?

VAUGHN: What I got?

HOYT: Yeah. Whatever's eating you.
Cause I'm not.

I'm not you.

HOYT sits and rolls up his sleeves.

HOYT: So how's this work? On TV you tied them up. Want me to get some rope?

VAUGHN: Makes you think I'm going to do this?

HOYT: Look on your face. I told you what I'm thinking otherwise, and you had this look like death come up behind you and make a grab for your soul.

VAUGHN: You always get what you want?

HOYT: Don't have time to ask nice.

Pause.

VAUGHN: There are risks I'm not willing to entertain.

HOYT: Worse than the alternative?

VAUGHN: Blowing your brains out isn't the only alternative.

HOYT: Says you.

VAUGHN: Why'd you come here?

HOYT: Told you.

VAUGHN: God whispered in your ear.

HOYT: Yessir.

VAUGHN: Why'd you think he done that?

HOYT: Wanted me to come to you.

VAUGHN: That right? You think so?

HOYT: Yessir.

VAUGHN: Said you were driving, when you pulled over, stopped to pray?

HOYT: Yes.

VAUGHN: Driving from where?

HOYT: Don't know.

VAUGHN: I think you do.

HOYT: Well I don't.

VAUGHN: Hoyt.

HOYT: You don't know shit about me.

VAUGHN: Man thinking of shooting himself means something scares him worse than dying.

HOYT: She...

She should have gone to bed.

I was trying to do something... right .

Make things right.

But she...

I'm having a son.

Well, we don't know yet.

That's what I hope.

Liz – that's his momma – my wife, Liz – is...

She's – I mean – she's crazy smart. Like, some people's smart but Liz has got entire worlds in her head. All the time. Always coming up with ways to see things I ain't thought of...

I - I was making it right.

VAUGHN: Getting the devil out isn't the fight. It's getting up the next day, and the next. It's fighting like Hell *every* day for the rest of your life to keep him from sneaking back in –

HOYT: She shouldn't have waited up.

VAUGHN: You got that in you?

HOYT: What's the worst thing you've ever done?

VAUGHN: ...

HOYT: Worst thing. Just – just worst.

VAUGHN: I don't know.

HOYT: That's a load of shit.
Everybody knows the worst thing they done.

VAUGHN: ...

HOYT: Put a different way, hoss:
You drain that tumbler
Two, three more
Whose face you thinking about?

Whose hurt do you try and swallow
And swallow and swallow
And end up spitting back up?

VAUGHN: I don't know.

HOYT: Yeah? Yeah. Okay.

HOYT shifts in his seat. Looks at the mirror.

HOYT: We going to do this thing?

VAUGHN: No. We're not.

HOYT swallows and swallows. VAUGHN looks at his hands. The skin is thin as tissue.

HOYT: Do they know you're not what you say?

VAUGHN: What?

HOYT: Those women out front, making soup?
Or
Or
Kids coming in Sundays for bible study?
Folks
All over this place
Falling on themselves
Yelling
Rubbing
When you talk in public
Squirming
With the spirit?

Do they know *you* don't have it?

Or are they like me? Wanna believe you got the keys to the eternal hereafter so bad, they ain't really looking too close.

VAUGHN: How I keep faith
My relationship –

There's nothing more personal
Then how we –
Each of us –
Talk to God.

HOYT: 'Cept he's been mighty quiet lately
With you

VAUGHN: ...

HOYT: You have sex with someone?

VAUGHN: *What?*

HOYT: Don't know if that's allowed
 For you
 Maybe it is
 But
 I figure you done something.
 That devil you've got in you
 And being scared of God
 I figure
 Not likely something
 Big, violent
 But maybe
 Enough
 Something
 Enough
 Chews at you
 Wastes you
 And I figure
 It's sex

 You got a loneliness to you
 Staining you so deep
 That
 I think
 He would understand
 God
 I think –

VAUGHN: You figure that because I won't exercise your devil?

HOYT: Can't. Don't. *Won't.*

VAUGHN: What?

HOYT: Won't.
 You *won't* exercise my devil.
 Not enough faith
 To believe
 I got one.

HOYT has begun to tremble. His shirt appears damp.

VAUGHN: You've got a lot of anger in you, Hoyt
 And fear
 And maybe not too much sense.

I've been at this a lot of years
And I still don't know
Never know
What's in a person.
Can't.
Not really.

What I do know is:
There's not a lot of good comes out the false sense of having fixed something
that, deep down, is still broken.

In this case –
Case of Hoyt versus Hoyt's devil
That's something you're going to work on all your life.

I'm not prepared –
Wouldn't be right
Let you walk out of here tonight
Thinking something's solved that isn't.

HOYT nods, his head seems heavy. Sweat beads on his forehead. He shakes harder.

HOYT: I was making it right.

HOYT stands suddenly. He lurches to the sink and retches. He pulls at his shirt again, more forcibly, as though it's constraining him. He tugs the shirt off. He retches again. It sounds like he's choking. VAUGHN moves to the sink, he places a hand between HOYT's bare shoulders for a moment, then recoils suddenly. Something is moving under HOYT's skin – weaving, serpentine, between the ribs of his back. HOYT straightens, panting. He looks at VAUGHN.

HOYT: Oh, Christ.
That's not a good look.
What?
Jesus.
What's wrong?

VAUGHN: Nothing.

HOYT: Fuck 'nothing.'
That's not a 'nothing' look.

Something's wrong with me.
Something's...

VAUGHN: No.

HOYT: Jesus.

VAUGHN: I – I –
No.

HOYT: Sound real convincing there, hoss.

VAUGHN: Stay still

VAUGHN moves closer to HOYT. He flicks on the dressing room mirror lights. He examines HOYT's torso.

HOYT: What?
What is it?

VAUGHN: It's nothing.

HOYT: What are you looking for?
There's something in me
You saw it
There *is* something

VAUGHN gently examines HOYT's side ribs and back.

What do you see?
Please
Please

(to VAUGHN)

What's wrong with me?

VAUGHN looks at HOYT for a long time. He clicks off the light.

VAUGHN: Nothing. Just the light, maybe
Or

HOYT: Or?

VAUGHN: Nothing.
Nothing, I thought...

VAUGHN: I'm sorry.

HOYT: Thought maybe
You saw

VAUGHN: I imagined –

HOYT: What?
 You imagined what?

VAUGHN: ...

HOYT: I imagine it too.
 Same thing as you
 But I imagine it so hard
 I make it real
 You think that's possible?

VAUGHN opens a drawer, he begins taking out some of its contents.

VAUGHN: I don't know.

HOYT: Say that a lot.

VAUGHN: "I don't know"?

HOYT: Yeah

VAUGHN: Well, I don't know a lot.

HOYT: Thought that was the point of God
 A life full of God
 Means always knowing
 Being sure

VAUGHN keeps working.

HOYT: They think you got a gift
 Those people
 Ones... making soup
 Think you got some kind of special
 Direct line
 Think you know
 More than the rest of us

 That's why I came here
 Came back

 Thought maybe
 You do your thing
 Put in a good word for me

 I shed the devil like a skin
 Walk away

But you
You don't shed it
Walk around with it
On you
In you

Do they know you're dying?

VAUGHN stops removing items from the drawer, he looks at HOYT.

VAUGHN: Man picks at a piece of yarn that's come loose
Picks and picks
Before he knows
Whole sweater unravels

Idea is
There's a reason
Illness
Reason it's you
Your body
Reason you're sick
You pray
Stay sick
That's God's will
Something to learn from it
And I haven't
Figured out yet
Haven't
Let go
Or
Pursued
Whatever truth
Is in that

And not knowing
Not knowing

Is the most honest I can be

HOYT: You're scared?

VAUGHN: Yes.

VAUGHN takes the final item from the drawer: ropes.

HOYT: You're going to lay hands.

VAUGHN: You still want that?

HOYT: You're scared.

VAUGHN: I am.

HOYT: You're going to do it anyway?

VAUGHN: Yes.

HOYT: Okay. Okay, hoss. It's okay. Lets do it.

HOYT picks up the rope from the counter, he hands it to VAUGHN.

HOYT: Hey.... Don't fuck up.