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Sen-Sen

First my mother had a religious experience. Then she started in on my father about church, and their fights got worse. I kept quiet and listened because I'd get brought in soon enough once it began. If I listened long enough, I'd hear her say, "I'll put that child in a home if that's what it takes to save his soul."

"Leave the boy alone. He's okay if you'd just let him be a kid, for God's sake."

"I won't have swearing in this house." And no contradictions. There was a firm set to the corners of her mouth, as severe as the way she wore her hair in a net to keep the wisps from getting loose and giving the wrong impression. Her ears and neck got the same treatment, as if there was something too suggestive about letting people see them.

My father took and lost several jobs, the last a longshoring stint down at the port. There was no work without drawbacks, he used to say, but she blamed our misfortune on his defects, which she was apt to exaggerate.

When she got into a snit over something she didn't like, a rash of rosy heat pricks broke out on her brow and grew redder as her anger deepened. A good drubbing—words in my father's case, blows in mine—always cooled them down and brought her natural pallor back. In order to bring this cure about, she would give him a good dressing down in speech that was filled with so many pieties only God could put up with it for long. And she was a great believer in soap and water, which my father respected even if he didn't take a great deal of pleasure in them. Finally, my father left—or maybe he was sent packing.

Just the same, his leaving was a bitter trial that drove her deeper into the bosom of the church and me with her because I was a part, so to speak, of all her failings. As she saw it, the only way to save my soul, short of putting me in a home, was to drag me to every sawdust-and-tent revival meeting that came to town. First there was Harry Hodges, then the Pemberton Brothers, Modest and Garland. When Oral Roberts brought his big tent to town, we went night after night and saw people lining up to be healed. They suffered from crippling ailments, twisted limbs, incurable diseases. Patiently, hopefully, each one approached him. One by one, he struck the poor creature on the brow with his palm and commanded Satan to leave this vessel of the Lord.

One night in the middle of the service, just before the offering plates were passed around, a lady jumped up and screamed, “My baby! My baby’s dead!”

Oral threw up his hands and said, “God loves your baby, Sister. Bring him to the Lord.”

He turned to the faithful and asked, “Do you believe God loves this baby? Do you believe He can make the lame walk? Heal the raging spirit? Cause the deaf to hear and the blind to see?”

The congregation was ecstatic. You could hear “Amen” coming from every corner under the big top and “Thank you, Lord.” The smell of sawdust was pungent. Electricity seemed to crackle above the uplifted heads.

“Then raise your hands to the Lord and pray with me for this little child.”

Oral began praying before the lady was out in the aisle and kept at it until she reached the pulpit with the child. Putting his hands on the bundle in her arms, he had just ordered Satan to relinquish the innocent unto Him when an awful bawling came from the baby, filling the tent with joyous pandemonium.

Every time somebody threw down his crutches and ran up one sawdust aisle and down the other, my mother put a dollar in the offering plate and thanked God she had it to give. It got to the point that if she wasn’t at an old-time gospel meeting, she was hunkered next to the RCA Victor floor console my father left when he departed, her eyes glazed over as she listened to Brother Lester Roloff’s jeremiads. Every afternoon as soon as she got home from work and changed clothes, she turned on Brother Roloff. Every Wednesday night she put her hair up in a net and dragged me out to the bus stop to catch the Lawndale bus for Six Points, where we got off and walked several blocks north to the Tabernacle at Elizabeth and Alameda Streets.

There she ushered me in, driving me down the pew so I was wedged between her and the wall with no apparent escape. Before long, though, she would fall into a religious stupor. At the first sign of that state, I let myself down to the hardwood floor and stretched out under the pew.

It was another world down there. In front of me, all the way to the front, I could see rundown heels, rumped pants, unmatched socks and legs from the back of the knees down, skinny legs, fat legs, old legs, young legs. As soon as the Spirit came upon the congregation, filling folks with the Holy Ghost, they jumped up singing, speaking in tongues, stomping their feet in a primitive dance, and sending vibrations back along the hardwood floor. The ladies’ stockings would start to sag with all that dancing up and down, and I’d see nylons bunching around their ankles, black seams taking on a life of their own, writhing and curving in snakelike figures that seemed funny to me.

But the other thing I saw sometimes was what really got me going. If a pretty woman, young or even a little older, sat behind us it was possible to see some incredible stuff. I noticed, for instance, they sometimes kept their stockings up with garters and sometimes with a belt of elastic straps and snaps, but either way, there was always a patch of soft flesh between the top of the hose and their panties.

Naturally, the mysterious sight of thighs and panties stirred me and made church a lot more interesting than you would expect. I paid attention to the details, noticing

other differences besides the belts and garters. Some of the women wore their panties under the garter belt, for instance. Others wore them over it. Things like that, which I didn't understand.

One night Brother Hanzlicek's daughter, Candy, came to church with a sailor from the Naval Air Station and sat right behind us. She was proud of the tight curls of her Toni and pleased with the effect her blond hair, pomaded and glistening under the naked Mazda lights, had on the rest of us.

Even before my mother's religious experience, she refused to curl her hair or use pomade, always wearing it instead over one of those pads she called a rat, with a net that kept it in place. Then she got rid of the rat and her lipstick and rouge, but I could see color in Candy's cheeks and a touch of it on her lips. I could smell the fragrance of gardenias coming from her and the hint of apple blossoms in her pomade.

I think my imagination was my undoing. But who can say? I mean, how can you actually know something like that? Sometimes you never suspect you're tipping your hand. Sometimes you just do the wrong thing. The truth is, a fool, however you look at it, is still a fool. And habits have a lot to do with it.

I was used to my mother settling into her trance and had the habit of easing under the pew as soon as I saw that look come over her. So in the middle of a hymn, I slipped to the floor and turned my gaze toward Candy's sleek legs with those sheer nylons stretched snugly over them. I could imagine her sitting on the edge of the bathtub in her slip, one leg stretched out as she stroked it with an Enders Speed Shaver like my mother's. I could see her smoothing her nylons with her hands, then standing to check the seams in the mirror, maybe even admiring the curve of her hips and the fit of her panties. My eyes went right to the soft spot I was expecting at the top of her hose, and my breathing stopped.

Instead of a silk swell and dimple, I was surprised by a nook of tangled dark hair. Maybe I made a noise. Maybe my mother wasn't under the spell yet. I don't know because I wasn't myself right then, but something caused her to lean down, her eyes darting suspiciously.

Her face went dark and she yanked me up, marching me out under the stern gaze of the congregation. I felt Candy's eyes searing my little burl of shame. I'll never forget her mocking smile. It was the last thing I saw through the hot mist of humiliation. Then we were out in the night and I was being pulled toward the bus stop at Six Points. My mother's quick steps brought me back to an acceptable state, but I felt I was such a vile creature it was a while before I remembered the real color of Candy's hair.

That was the only muff I ever saw and my first lesson that things weren't always what they seemed. It was also the end of varicose veins and sagging nylons and the end of a world I could only fantasize about in the heat of confusion, frustration, desire, and pain.

After that I was held in a firm clasp through song, prayer, and sermon while Brother Tucks Hamel sweated and mopped his face, striking the air with his fat fist, damning sexual deviation as the foulest sin known to man. When he said there was nothing he'd rather do than discipline a naughty boy, I knew he was talking to me.

It was woman's place to spank little girls, but a man's hand on a ruffian's behind was the salvation of many a rough boy headed for a life of crime. He said it was so vital that he was never nearer God Almighty than when disciplining rowdies.

Brother Tucks was at the height of his disciplining phase when he announced that Little Brother Lazlo Albans and his mother were launching a Christian Crusade from the Temple of God in Los Angeles, working their way eastward from California to our very own Tabernacle for an old-time gospel revival.

There was a lot of fanfare the day the crusade began. As it gained momentum, Brother Tucks gave us the most recent dispatches from the campaign. Record crowds in Bakersfield, Barstow, and Needles, more of the same in Tempe, Arizona. They laid siege to Lordsburg, New Mexico, and took it by storm. He bombarded us with reports, updates, and late-breaking bulletins from Deming, Las Cruces, Tucumcari, Big Spring, Texas, Sweetwater. Week by week, town by town, mother and son drew closer. In each town, the assemblies grew larger. And back at the Tabernacle, we waited and our anticipation rose.

There was no one like this boy evangelist, Brother Tucks assured us. There had never been anyone like him. There might never be another. When the Spirit was on him, the child had the gift, Brother Tucks said. Souls were being saved by the scores. A revival was sweeping the Southwest, in churches, rodeo arenas, outdoor amphitheaters, and it was coming our way.

I had never seen a kid in a suit before. I had certainly never seen a kid deliver a sermon or play the accordion. No matter how many times Brother Tucks described the events, I could not imagine them. How could he remember what to say? It was all I could do to remember the words of the hymns we sang at every service, but sure enough on the promised night, we beheld this pale child wearing a dinner jacket, short pants, shoes, and socks, everything white except for a black bow tie. Even his hair was peroxided white, permed, and shiny under the lights. I had never seen anything like it on a boy before.

The first night, Little Brother Lazlo accompanied the congregation's spirited "Victory in Jesus" on the accordion. That was followed by individual witnessing and Brother Tucks' welcome to our visitors. Then he turned the service over to Little Lazlo. The child evangelist wasted no time getting started while his mother sat behind him in a flowing white robe and watched with lowered lids his every gesture, crying out from time to time, "Oh, Jesus," in a moan that stirred me down to my loins. The smell of gardenias filled the air and I heard the rustle of Candy's dress as she shifted in her seat behind me.

Bible gripped in his left hand, a handkerchief balled up in the other, Little Brother Lazlo challenged the congregation. "My Bible says if you believe in Him you shall have everlasting life, but if you do not, you shall burn in everlasting fire. Now I stand before you with a heavy burden on these frail shoulders. If I don't show you the truth and the light, what will become of me? If you don't recognize the way and the life, what will become of you? It is a heavy burden to bear, for as I stand before you tonight, I feel someone is hearing His call for the last time."

“Oh, Jesus,” his mother moaned and I was sure I saw her quiver in a way I had never seen a woman behave.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. That white robe was clinging to her breasts and hips and thighs. Her eyes were no longer lowered. Her head was up and her eyes were bright with tears. The slightest motion of her hips or legs sent a stir through my body, and I reached out for the hymn book, slipping it onto my lap, listening for another rustle of Candy's dress. Every time she moved, I could smell her perfume.

“Someone here is feeling it down deep inside. You know who you are. I want you to have a picture of Hell, a picture of what Hell is like. Because this is your last chance. We have all felt pain in this life. We have all felt anguish. Our sensations can bear only so much. Then we have to take something to alleviate the pain and the anguish. But nothing in this life can equal the pain and despair of Hell. And in Hell there will be no relief. You will burn with an unquenchable thirst and a never extinguished fire.”

Another quiver passed through his mother, a ripple flowing along the line of her body, rising as a shudder to her breasts, and escaping as a groan from her lips. Her head fell back and her eyes rolled up in her head. Then her stomach visibly jerked, violently. You could see the contractions as her body tightened and relaxed, and she let out another “Oh, Jesus” that was the very voice of misery.

“Hell is a place of terrible memory. You will remember this night and the call you would not heed. You will remember other services and other calls to repent. You will remember each and every opportunity you had to ask for forgiveness, and you will gladly give the universe for one more chance, but it will be too late. Here on earth, you can escape the memory of your sins. You can take the edge off with drugs and drink. You can go to amusements. You can divert yourselves here on earth. Not so in Hell. There every memory will be as vivid as the moment you lived it. You will remember and remember and remember for eternity. And feel remorse.

“For Hell is a place of remorse. If you do not know it, let me show you remorse. Think about your mother, your son, your loved one. If your loved one died before you let her know how dear she is to you and you looked down on her unmoving lips that will never utter your name again, you would know remorse. If you saw it was too late—that, dear ones, is remorse. The knowledge that forever and ever you are separated—that too is remorse. A remorse that will gnaw at your soul like a canker.”

His mother's head lolled forward, and I saw her whole body shaking with sobs. Throughout the church I heard others weeping, and I was suddenly aware my mother was crying too.

“Hell is a place of shame. Oh, the heartbreaking agony of shame. All of us have come short of the glory and the kingdom of God. All of us have known shame, a secret known only to us, hidden, but shameful. You can hide it here on earth. You can keep it from strangers. You can keep it from neighbors, from your loved ones. You can keep it from the world. But in Hell there is no place to hide, no place to cover your shame. Oh, the shame that will fill your soul and torment you for all eternity.

“And with that shame you will find eternal loneliness. No one to share your hateful

burden and help you bear it. The unbearable heaviness of shame and loneliness. Because everyone in Hell will be so stricken with his own suffering, torment, and remorse he will have no time for anyone else. Yes, Hell is a place of loneliness. My Bible says *There shall be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.*”

The woman in white raised her head and gazed at her son with haggard eyes.

“Hell is a place of unsatisfied desires. Every passion, every desire will increase a hundredfold. Burning, tormenting desire will sear your soul and rage in your loins against the night, but you will not find comfort. You will not be able to satisfy that desire.”

I looked at his mother and she seemed on fire. Her face held the first true expression of burning desire I had ever seen. Her brow was creased, eyes pleading, the look etched in the features of her face, in the bones of her cheeks. Her lips seemed bruised and swollen.

“But there is hope. There is relief. There is salvation for you and for me. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.* Don’t let that lifeline fall helplessly by the way. Take it up. If you don’t, *the wicked shall be turned into Hell and all the nations that forget the judgment,* for the judgment is coming fast. Don’t be caught short. Don’t let this horrible eternity come upon you unprepared. Come to His safe arms. Come to His mercy and everlasting salvation. Someone is calling. Calling to you. Tomorrow may be forever too late. Don’t wait. Don’t hesitate. Come forward now, I plead with you for your eternal soul. Let us rise and sing “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound. . . .”

Brother Tucks was on his feet immediately, and as the congregation sang, the offering plate passed from hand to hand, from pew to pew, down one, up the next. I wanted to get my hands on it too, as near as possible to the bills and fingered profiles of Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln, spangles on a bed of green baize brightening the sound of nickel and copper against polished wood. My mother dropped a two-dollar bill into it, and as the money fell among the coins, I watched the plate move away and waited for the right moment.

When the time finally came, I sneaked out and went back to the rear of the church, messing around, trying to kill a few minutes. They were speaking in tongues, dancing, and waving their arms in the air when I left and would be for a while. Then some fellowship would follow. It always took some time for the service to break up.

I don’t know how long I had been outside when I noticed the light in the church office. Maybe I had seen it and paid no attention to it. In any case, I eased up to the glass and saw Brother Tucks bent over his desk, already counting the take, licking his thumb, a concentrated expression on his face as he separated the bills into piles and the coins into stacks.

From time to time, he slipped one of the bills into his pocket. I was so spellbound watching him in the act of doing this that a noise caught me by surprise, causing me to jump and spin around. There was Little Brother Lazlo staring at me. So I figured I was in for it again.

A silence passed between us as he watched Brother Tucks, and when he finally spoke, it was an explanation.

“Skimming,” he said.

“What?”

“He’s skimming the offering.”

“Why?”

“If he cuts the total, he won’t have to share as much.”

A new Brother Tucks began to take shape in my mind. He had always seemed a sort of holy clown with a high voice and odd mannerisms, waddling about on the pulpit, his fat neck floating in sweat, delighting the faithful with his passion for whipping boys and saving their souls, but I was seeing another side of him.

“What are you going to do?”

“Nothing.”

“Aren’t you going to tell?”

“No, she’d make a scene, he’d just deny it, and I’d end up getting the blame anyway.”

Suddenly it occurred to me to ask what he was doing outside.

“I came out for a smoke.”

“A smoke?”

“Sure, a cigarette, you want—what’s your name?”

“They call me Hooter.”

“Hooter? What kind of name is that?”

My first reaction was to puff up. Nobody with a name like Lazlo Albans had a right to sneer, but I kept my head because he was who he was and said, “It’s just a name. It’s what they call me.”

“Hooter then. Come on, I’ll show you.”

He led me to a row of salt cedars that marked the church property line, reached into one of the trees, and brought out something I couldn’t see because of the dark. Returning to the light, he showed me a buff-colored pack of Fatimas, its red crescent moon and star on the front catching the light from the window. He also had a little envelope about the size of a matchbook with a name printed on it.

Sen-Sen  
confection

“Confection? What’s that?”

He opened the flap, took out a tiny chip about the size of a dandruff flake and handed it over, saying, “This keeps the secret. Put it on your tongue and don’t swallow it. Just keep it in your mouth.”

It was so small I could have lost it forever by dropping it. So I was careful to put it on my tongue and shut my mouth. “It tastes like soap,” I said. “Tastes like soap and licorice.”

Striking a match to a cigarette he had stuck in his mouth, he drew a deep breath and said, “Here, take a drag?”

I had never smoked before because the counter clerks at the drugstore refused to sell cigarettes to kids, even when we told them they were for our folks. The kids at school always accused me of smoking. They thought I did a lot of things, and I had

actually thought about picking up gutter butts. But for some reason I never did it. Maybe because everybody said it would stunt your growth. Thinking it couldn't do any harm now, since I had stopped growing in the third grade, I tried to inhale, but ended up coughing.

He took another drag, inhaling deeply, then blew a plume of smoke at the window, where it spread out like fog rolling across the bay.

"How'd you do that?"

Brother Tucks, down on his hands and knees, was searching for something under his desk. His rear was toward us, and his pants between his hams were dark with sweat. Just then the door opened and Little Lazlo's mother swept into the room in her flowing white robe. Brother Tucks looked up, then got heavily to his feet and offered her a chair.

"I have to go in now."

"What about showing me how to inhale?"

"Tomorrow after the morning service if you want. Meet me here." I was nodding, but trying not to sound too eager. "I could do that. Sure, I'll look for you here, back in the salt cedars."

He slipped off as I watched Brother Tucks and his mother talking, then the inner door opened and I saw him come into the room. Brother Tucks went over and started stroking him, petting him like a poodle while his mother looked on, her face serene and nothing like the way it was during the service. I wanted to stay and see what happened next, but I knew my mother would be looking for me. So I went to find her.

It was Sunday. My mother called me and came into the living room where I was asleep on the sofa. She took one look at me and started in. It was disgusting, she said. If I didn't keep my mind out of the gutter, I'd end up criminally insane. I was half asleep and too groggy to tell her I needed to go to the bathroom, but she had seen all she needed to see. I was just like my father. Whatever that meant, it was bad.

I got up, trying to cover myself until I could get to the toilet as she followed, yelling about dirty thoughts. I hadn't been there very long when she came around again, knocking on the door, wanting to know what I was doing in there.

She ordered me to clear out so she could get ready for church, which was all right with me. I wanted to go under the house where I kept my best stuff between the floor joists and the concrete piers. I had a package of Trojans there and the magazines she didn't like. After I had lost the underworld of the pews, I had only the world under our house, where there was room to move around and be alone. But before I could get out of the house, she told me to get ready too.

I tried to talk to her, but she was preoccupied with her hair net. When I asked why Brother Tucks was always talking about spanking boys, she ignored me and kept on arranging her hair. So I decided to make some toast. I was spreading butter and sugar and cinnamon on two pieces of white bread when she called me again. So I left all the makings on the sink board and went to see what she wanted.

"What are you doing in there?"



“Making toast,” I said.

“We’re late, and I don’t want a scene when we go in. You can wait to eat.”

“I’m hungry,” I said.

“You should have been thinking of that instead of dirty things. Now you’ll just have to wait.”

I guessed I could. Since she was talking to me for a change, instead of ignoring me. I wasn’t that hungry anyway.

She was right. We were late, but nobody noticed because Little Brother Lazlo’s words—accusing, imploring by turns—had folks in a trance. Coming in late like that, she left me to my own devices. So as soon as she got caught up in the *hallelujah’s*, I ducked out and went back to the windbreak of salt cedars.

There was a breeze blowing through the branches. I settled down and tried to think since it would be a while before the service ended. I could see Little Lazlo’s life was wonderful and terrible at the same time. He was in all the papers and had people fawning over him, but he had to pretend he was something he wasn’t, always having to talk and act like a grownup. I tried to imagine that sort of life. It must have been lonely.

I was feeling a little depressed when I saw Little Lazlo and his mother come out in a hurry. She had him by the hand, dragging him quickstep the way my mother had when she caught me taking an interest in Candy Hanzlicek’s legs. Then I saw Brother Tucks waddling frantically after them, gesturing, his stubby fingers spread as if pleading with her.

She yanked open the back door of their Hudson and half pushed, half flung, Little Lazlo into the car. It didn’t take her any time to slam the door and get around to the driver’s side with Brother Tucks still after her in a panic. He was trying to get her to listen to reason, but you could see—when she got in, threw the car into gear, and took off—she was having none of his reasons.

We never heard why the revival was cut short, but the last I saw of Little Lazlo was that golden curly hair framing his pale little face as he pressed it against the glass, his eyes looking desperately at me. I had never seen a lonelier face.

Brother Tucks stood there wringing his hands. Then he trudged slowly back to the church, a picture of defeat. I got the Fatimas, matches, and Sen-Sen, hiding them on me, and took the long walk with my mother to catch the Lawndale bus.

At home after lunch, I tried to talk to her again, but she was already caught up in Brother Roloff’s Gospel Hour. So I headed for my place under the house to smoke one for Little Lazlo, wherever he was right then, riding in that long sleek Hudson with his mother. I puffed and coughed, my throat on fire, till I’d had enough. Then I stubbed it out and took a Sen-Sen, leaving it on my tongue, like a licorice mint, before going inside and sitting across the room from my mother and the RCA Victor.

I stayed there watching her. She seemed a long way off, but suddenly she turned and looked straight at me, staring. A frown started at her eyes and went to her mouth, which tightened as she got up and came over, pushing her face down close to me, sniffing. I saw the rosy rash break across brow and tried to duck, but it was too late.

When she straightened up, she had me by the neck and was shoving me toward the bathroom, yelling, “Get in there, you little sinner. Get those filthy clothes off and wash yourself.”

She cuffed me on the back of the neck, sending a starburst against my eyelids and setting off a ringing in my ears to go with the light show.

“Get those clothes off this minute.”

She cuffed me again as I reached for the doorknob. By this time, my eyes were smarting with hot tears.

“God hates the sin, not the sinner.”

A third whack sent me reeling into the bathroom. My shirt was off, my pants were undone and down around my ankles before I realized what was happening. She opened both faucets all the way and water poured into the tub.

“Get in,” she ordered, “and start scrubbing. There’ll be no sinners in this house. Get to scrubbing, young man.”

I plunged into the scalding water, glad to escape her whacks. She pushed my head under and soaped my hair and face, not caring how much she got in my eyes. When she jammed a soapy washcloth between my teeth to wash out my mouth, I thought I would suffocate.

“Finish this,” she said, “and get into some clean clothes.” She gave me a look of disgust and gathered the clothes lying on the floor. “Shame on you. I don’t know what’s got into you.” Then she was gone.

Little by little, my senses came back. Something had gone wrong. I eased down until the water was up to my chin and stayed like that, trying to figure things out. As I relaxed, I started putting the pieces together. One thing was clear—if you wanted the attention of someone you cared about, just misbehave. That was something to know.

I inched down until the water was over my mouth. Steam rose from the water. I could feel the heat soaking in, my pores opening, the nicotine tars and humiliation oozing out. I was starting to feel cleaner. The bath was already making me feel reborn, but what really took the sting out of it was remembering Brother Tucks’ claim that he was never nearer God than when he was disciplining rowdy boys. And I felt a glow, knowing I had just brought my mother nearer to God—and a sense of power, knowing I could do it again, any time I wanted.