3,808 Words

***The Transient Salvation of Buster Mitchell***

 The holy rollers are here again, two of them, an angular boy wearing a cheap grey suit and black high-top tennis shoes, and a fat woman in flip flops, a full length purple choir robe, and some sort of white cloth wrapped about her head like a turban. The boy is unremarkable in appearance. Ah, but the woman, she’s a sight to behold: a pale undulating mass of flesh barely contained by her flowing vestments. They were here once before, with fire in their eyes and an old leather satchel stuffed with religious literature. I made the mistake of trying to humor them last time—it won’t happen again.

I can see them plainly from where I sit on the screened-in porch upstairs. The boy is lugging the satchel today, the woman waddles along at his side, fanning herself with a handful of tracts. I watch as they work their way up the street, moving from house to house, not finding much of anyone home this time of day. Finally they turn in at my building, walk up the drive and disappear from view as they step onto the porch downstairs.

 You can hear the fat one laboring to catch her breath. She sounds asthmatic. A woman that heavy doesn’t need to be out trudging about in this heat. One of them begins rapping on the front door, the fat one I would imagine, for despite her infirmities, she seems to be the more

aggressive of the two. I pause over my laptop, afraid that the slightest sound, even the murmuring click of the keys, will betray my presence.

 I can hear them whispering but can’t quite make out what they’re saying. Probably putting the final touches on their game plan. They go to some sort of school before they turn them loose on the streets, you know, to learn how to put the hard sell on religion.

 I’m half-way tempted to go down and turn Ajax loose. I’d love to see how fast the fat woman could move with a snarling Airedale about to sink his fangs into her ample buns. But there would be legal consequences I’m sure, a thing I don’t need in my life just now. So I sit here, hoping that if I’m quiet they will eventually give up and go away. And, as I listen to them whispering back and forth, no doubt plotting the course of my redemption, I remember my boyhood idol, Buster Mitchell, and his transient call to salvation.

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 I grew up south of here, in a bucolic little town by the name of Vermillion. It was no different from a score of other hamlets scattered across the red clay hills of North Mississippi. Perhaps the only thing that set us apart from the surrounding communities was the fact that our courthouse did not sit on a town square, nor was there any memorial to the Confederate war dead rising from its lawn.

 It was a nice place to live, most of the homes modest but quite comfortable. The streets were paved and tree-lined, although they followed no discernible pattern, twisting and turning through the town as if they had been laid out along cow paths rather than according to a draftsman’s plan. Yet it was that very lack of symmetry which seemed to give the place a

special quality, a quaintness which will forever separate it from the antiseptic, foursquare subdivisions which would spring up about its periphery in years to come.

 Most of polite society was Methodist, Baptist, or Presbyterian. I was Presbyterian, not by virtue of any conscious decision on my part, but because it had been foreordained by my mother. She had me baptized as an infant, as is the custom in that denomination, and thus my spiritual status was a fait accompli, something I took for granted like my race and gender. I went to church and Sunday school each week at the behest of my mother, but by the time I reached thirteen, I had begun to view religion with a healthy dose of skepticism.

 Much of my growing disaffection with spiritual matters could probably be attributed to the natural urge for rebellion which begins to manifest in young people about the time they reach puberty. As the sap began to rise, my friends and I became distant, brooding beings, motivated more by glandular changes than logic or reason and anxious to throw off the trappings of mainstream society that seemed to smother our parents’ lives. But it wasn’t all glands.

 Buster Mitchell was a Huck Finn sort of character who lived with his mother in the hollow on the far side of the town cemetery. He was an amoral being whose concept of good and evil was strictly existential in nature—if it felt good, you did it; if it hurt, you abstained. It was just that simple.

 Buster’s mother was a woman of easy virtue who slept with any man who had five dollars and the inclination for the sort of love that paltry sum could buy. I doubt she even knew by whom Buster had been sired. As for Buster, he likely never gave the matter a second thought.

For his world seemed to encompass neither past nor future, but only the precise moment

in which he happened to be living.

Buster quit school in the fifth grade, spent most of his days hanging about town, passing time as an equal of the old men who sat on the loafers’ bench in front of Rose’s Drugstore, working at odd jobs now and then to keep himself supplied with tobacco and whatever else a boy of his station might need, and generally pursuing an aimless and carefree existence. He cursed with proficiency, seldom bathed and darkened the door of a church only once to my knowledge, living exactly the sort of life most boys my age truly longed for. And though that longing was destined to go largely unfulfilled, my friends and I emulated his bad-boy ways as best we could.

 Buster is long since dead, having fallen off the back of a log truck about the time I graduated from high school. He’s buried among the weeds in the paupers’ section of the cemetery and the last time I looked, his grave was marked only by a small aluminum placard and a green Mason jar containing a clutch of badly weathered plastic daisies. Am I the only one who still remembers the shabby, amiable boy who ambled about the streets of Vermillion for so many years?

 Surely the Reverend Sanford Peeler would remember, if memory is a thing which survives man’s passage from this world to the next. He too is now dead, buried just up the hill from Buster beneath a massive granite marker which bears the inscription: *I Came Not to Call the Righteous, But Sinners, to Repentance*.

 For all of his bombastic ostentation, the Reverend’s view of life was only slightly more complex than Buster’s. All of mankind’s pursuits fell into one of two categories: those of the

flesh and those of the spirit. Exactly how he determined what qualified as spiritual was always

something of a mystery. But if a thing brought pleasure, it was carnal, a snare of the Devil. Life for Reverend Peeler was a never-ending battle against liquor, tobacco, gambling, pool halls,

dancing, rouge, lipstick, patent leather shoes, Ouija Boards, playing ball on Sunday and a thousand other simple pleasures of life.

 So given Buster’s profane, non-conformist lifestyle and his considerable influence on a sizable portion of the young boys in Vermillion, he was a definite stumbling block for the Reverend. And while Buster probably never recognized that he was involved in a battle for anyone’s soul, I feel certain Reverend Peeler saw the challenge as an endless Sisyphean struggle. Spring in Vermillion was revival time. And whether by design or happenstance, none of the mainstream churches ever seemed to hold these special services the same week. My mother had a peculiar affinity for these spiritual Chautauquas, which meant that I not only had to listen

to someone rant and rave over my soul for a week at the Presbyterian Church, I generally had to sit through it at the Methodist and Baptist churches too.

 No matter what church you happened to attend or who was preaching, you generally got one of two types of sermons—hellfire and brimstone or the sweet love of Jesus. Hellfire and brimstone was just that, a lot of talk about sin and the last days and the prospect of being condemned to hell, where there would be eternal weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth. It was scary talk and seemed real enough while I sat in the pew beside my mother, but when the moon and stars didn’t fall from the heavens that evening and I awoke the next morning to find that the sun was still shining, it seemed little more than an elaborate fairy tale and its power over me was

gone.

 The sweet love of Jesus sermons were just the opposite. They were weepy tales about how God had sent his only Son down to earth and how Jesus had gone around healing the sick and raising the dead and trying to convince people to love one another, and how he kept at it

until the Jews finally decided they’d had enough of his rabble-rousing and euchred the Romans into nailing him to a cross. And somehow out of all of this, you were supposed to see that even now, if you just accepted him as your savior and asked him for forgiveness, everything would be alright.

 Still, I could never quite figure out how loving Jesus was going to bring about any sort of change in me or how I could ask someone for forgiveness when I’d never known him in the first place. My mother’s response was simple—I could talk with him when I prayed and if I was patient and listened, he’d surely answer. So I prayed as best I knew how and listened as well. But the only thing I ever heard was the television playing in the next room and cars passing on the street. So, in the end, I figured the sweet love of Jesus was just a fairy tale too. And I let it go.

 Anyway, all of this is only to say that of all of these services I’d ever sat through, none had accomplished anything more than pushing me in exactly the opposite direction from what was intended. And it goes without saying that in the spring of 1957, I approached the coming revival season with anything but enthusiasm.

The Baptists were the first to open that year and, as usual, my mother insisted we attend. I was already so jaded that not even the promise of Jack McGonagill, a former high-wire walker

who’d left the circus to become an evangelist, could generate any excitement for me, and I told my mother I wasn’t going. Of course, I went, but only after an admonition from my father that he’d lay the belt on my young butt if I didn’t straighten up, which seemed doubly unjust since my mother had never been able to coax him to a revival, even the ones held at our own church.

 Only this revival proved to be like none I’d ever been to before. No sooner had the opening prayer been delivered that first night by Reverend Peeler, than the chords of a guitar rang out from the front of the sanctuary, and by the time they echoed off the rear wall and began to move back toward the point from which they’d emanated, they were met by the roll of a snare drum. Then a powerful voice, like a cross between Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis, began to croon *Just A Closer Walk With Thee*.

 It was the high-wire walker, Brother Jack McGonagill, who was playing guitar and singing and as he was bellowing out the last lines of the hymn, he raised his hands above his head and began to clap. Then the whole congregation was clapping along with him.

 “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord!” Brother McGonagill shouted, as he laid his guitar aside and moved to the pulpit amidst another roll of the drum. This brought on a whole new round of applause and, as it began to die, he raised his hands above his head once more and, like a prize fighter in victory, shouted: “Praise Jesus!”

 And the congregation thundered back in unison: “Praise his name!” And from that point on they were in his hands. I say “they” because I’d not yet fallen under his sway.

 He ranted and raved and reeled about the pulpit as if he intended to personally wrestle

Satan to a standstill before our very eyes. At the end of his sermon when he called for those who wanted to receive salvation to come forward, over fifty people, led by the town half-wit, Willie Ganella, who endlessly re-dedicated his tortured, syphilitic soul to the Lord, trooped down to the front of the church.

 I still remember how my mother tugged at my arm as she started to rise. I jerked away, dropping my head and stared at the floor. But my reticence didn’t deter her in the least and

when I looked up again, she was headed toward the front of the church with the rest of the true believers.

 The following day, word of the revival was all over town, people talking about some friend or relative who’d been saved. And though none of my own friends had succumbed, two boys in my homeroom now counted themselves among the redeemed, which prompted me and a couple of my friends to seek them out at lunch and subject them to the cruelest sort of abuse our adolescent, blaspheming minds could devise.

 I was sitting at the kitchen table after school that day, eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich when my mother walked in. She’d been upset at breakfast over my refusal to accompany her to the front of the church the night before, but her pique had manifested primarily as the silent treatment. Now she was in tears.

 “Will,” she blurted out as she walked through the door. “Will,” she repeated before I could reply, and then her words were choked with sobs.

I looked up sheepishly, figuring this was simply a somewhat more demonstrative

exhibition of what I’d been subjected to that morning. Then she sat down across from me,

put her head in her hands and began to cry so hard the table actually shook. “Momma, what’s wrong” I asked, hesitantly.

 She lifted her head and stared at me as tears streamed down her cheeks. “Reverend Peeler phoned a little while ago, Will,” she replied, her voice beginning to rise as she spoke. “He says that you and your friends, John Claymore and Hardy Graham, beat up Willard Seeger and little Truman Rodgers at school today because they answered the call to salvation last night.”

I dropped my head. Those little piss-ants, I thought, but I didn’t reply.

“Is it true?” she screamed, slapping the table.

“Well, we didn’t exactly beat ‘em up,” I lied. “We just sorta shoved ‘em around a little. And it didn’t have nothing to do with church.”

She was totally riled but checked her anger, electing to go with a variation of the old ‘just wait until your father gets home’ threat—a far more deadly thing than any physical violence she could have visited upon me just then. Our conversation ended with her telling me she’d give me until the end of the week to redeem myself and although she didn’t specify what was required to keep my father out of the picture, given the fact that her deadline coincided with the last night of the revival, I had a pretty good idea as to what she had in mind.

So that same night I was back at the First Baptist Church with the sinking feeling that I would soon join the ranks of the saved, despite my personal feelings about the matter. The

high-wire walker walked again and, if anything, surpassed his performance of the night before.

He played the guitar, pranced and shouted so fervently that when the call for salvation finally

came he pulled an even larger crowd down the aisles than he had the night before.

But I was not among them. I was sorry for having grieved my mother and I feared the wrath of my father, perhaps even more than that of the Almighty. Yet when I looked down the pew and saw the smirking faces of John Claymore and Hardy Graham, I quickly decided that neither a butt-whipping by my father nor God’s eternal damnation would be near as bad as being labeled a candy-ass by my friends at school. So I kept my seat.

The revival went on night after night and by Saturday, close to two hundred souls had made their way to the front of the church. I approached the final night with dread, knowing that the moment of truth was now at hand.

At the close of the service that last night, the high-wire walker started to pray: “We thank you, Lord,” he said, stretching out his hands toward the audience as he spoke. “We thank you for the miracles you have wrought this week, for the souls that have been saved. But I sense there are those among us whose hearts are still hardened, who are in need of salvation and it is for them that I pray. I pray your hearts will be softened, that you will hear the voice of the Master calling, for he is calling, calling …” Then he picked up his guitar and began to play as he sang: “Jesus is tenderly calling today, calling today, for there’s no other way…”

The guy definitely knew how to work the crowd and the aisles were already starting to fill even before he finished his song. Still, I hesitated.

“Will,” my mother whispered, touching my arm. But before she could say more, there

was an audible gasp from the congregation and when I looked up, down the aisle marched Buster

Mitchell.

The whole congregation was on its feet now as Buster stood before us, smiling and

nodding in his affable, disheveled way. When the noise finally died down a little, the evangelist put his arm around Buster and held the microphone before him. “Son, is there anything you’d like to say?”

 “Well-it’s-a-wonnerful-thang-to-know-the-Lord-and-I-hope-if-there’s-anybody-out-there-who-ain’t-been-saved-you’ll-come-on-down-right-now-and-accept-Jesus-Christ-as-your-savior,” Buster rattled off.

His words were flat, almost wooden, as if they weren’t really his own but had been spoken by a ventriloquist. And though I sensed something wasn’t quite right, I soon found myself standing at the front of the church alongside Buster and a host of others, including my

friends John Claymore and Hardy Graham, rededicating our lives to Christ, but no clearer myself than I’d ever been about what that might really mean.

 By Monday morning, when the emotion of what I’d experienced Saturday night began to wear thin, I couldn’t really see that I was any different than I’d ever been. Still I held my tongue, hoping that in time the true nature of the experience would gradually make its way to the surface.

And that truth wasn’t long in coming, no longer in fact than that very afternoon when one of the sages on the loafers’ bench in front of Rose’s Drugstore asked Buster what he was doing packing a wad of chewing tobacco into his jaw, had he already lost his religion?

 Buster worked his cud for a moment, then pursed his lips and shot a stream of tobacco juice out across the sidewalk and into the street. “I don’t know ’bout the religion part,” he said,

smiling. “But I damn sure still got the ten dollar bill them preachers give me to walk down to the

front of the church last Saturday night!”

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 On the porch below, the fat woman and her young companion grow bolder. They no longer whisper, but speak openly now. “He’s here,” the boy says, “See his car sitting there in the driveway?”

 “We got ways of dealing with his kind,” the woman replies in an ominous tone.

 “Yeah, but the last time we done that they called the law.”

 “Well, they locked the apostle Paul up in prison didn’t they? He didn’t let it slow him down none. Nobody ever said this was gonna be no cake walk.”

 “But momma…”

 “Don’t ‘but momma’ me. Hush up and gimme them matches.”

This does not sound good, so I stand up, ease over to the edge of the porch and press my nose against the screen, hoping to see exactly what the two of them are up to down below.

“There he is,” the boy crows. “I told you he’s up there.” He has somehow managed to slip off the porch and is now standing out in the front yard, shading his eyes against the sun with one hand and pointing toward me with the other.

 “Haw, haw, haw,” the woman rasps, then lapses into a fit of coughing. “What’d I tell you, Darvis,” she wheezes, fighting for breath. “That one gets ’em every time.”

 “You can’t run from the Lord, mister,” the boy shouts up at me from the yard.

I want to explain that they’re too late, that the Reverend Sanford Peeler and the high-wire walker taught me all I’d ever need to know about this sort of salvation years ago.

 “You ain’t never met nobody like us, mister,” the boy continues. “We got the gifts of the

spirit. Mahlish te mahan nimosh colar redun,” he wails, his eyes rolling back in his head, his body beginning to twitch as if an electrical current is passing through him.

 “He’s prophesying in tongues, mister,” the woman says, leaning out from the porch below and looking up in my direction. “Ten dollars and I’ll interpret it for you.”

 The boy’s on the ground now, writhing about like a wounded snake. “Talu ennu res nodom walahani…”

 That’s it, I’ve had it. “Lady, you got ten seconds to get yourself and that boy off my property.”

 “Five dollars,” she proffers. “Where you gonna get modern day prophecy for five dollars? Ain’t nobody, not even them television preachers, give you a better deal than that.”

 “Out,” I shout down at them. “And I mean right, by-god now!”

Then, for a moment, there is silence. Even the boy lies still in the yard. Finally, the woman speaks.

 “Come on, Darvis, get up,” she grunts, as she steps down heavily from the porch into the drive. “This cheap son-of-a-bitch ain’t worth saving no how!”

The End.