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Brent Spencer

My father was a religious man, a pentecostal. His church didn't go in for saints and icons. No singing either. "Singing don't save," my father liked to say. His way was darker.

We moved to Indiana the summer before my eighth birthday. One hot Sunday in July, without telling my mother, he took me to a brush arbor revival meeting. My father didn't take us on outings, least of all me by myself, so this was something special. I knew this and I made a point of being on my best behavior, sitting in the exact center of the passenger seat, sitting silently, my hands folded in my lap. I didn't want to do anything that would unleash the animal in him. But more than that, I wanted my father to be proud of me. I wanted this to be the first of many times he and I went out by ourselves. Maybe the bad times—the hard hand and voice—were over. Maybe tonight was the first step in showing me that I was worthy of his love.

It was a hot night full of locusts and spinning with stars. The heat was worse inside the arbor, even though the thing was little more than an arrangement of poles with a roof of pine boughs. Wooden folding chairs were set out in the dirt to hold the thirty or forty people who had come. We came in at the back and took seats somewhere toward the middle on the right side of the aisle. In front of the seating area was a cleared space with a wicker trunk sitting in the center.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing. They were the first words I’d spoken since getting into the car. It looked like an old steamer trunk, as if someone’s grandma had left her luggage. Didn’t she know the sermon was about to start?

“Don’t point,” he said. And then the old woman sitting in front of us turned around. I could see makeup caked in the cracks of her face.

“You, little man, is too young to handle, too young to be bathed in the blood. But I tell you what. You ain’t too young to get right, boy. You hearin’ me? Get right right now!”

“Yes ma’am,” I said, not knowing what she was talking about but wanting to treat her with the respect my father said our elders deserved.

She turned her gaze to my father for a moment. “You raising him right?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m raising him by the Good Book and the good belt.”

She smiled. “I knowed that just looking at you.” Then she brought her eyes back to me, her gaze narrowing, boring into me. “Choose Jesus, boy. You hear?”

“Yes ma’am.” Insects whirled drunkenly in the air overhead. I liked Jesus. Jesus was all right with me.

To me, the preacher looked ancient, though he was probably only about fifty, a heavy man who already had big shadows of sweat under his white sleeves, even before he began huffing and puffing for Jesus. He wore a skinny black tie and black pants slick with wear. His collar was buttoned so tight his face was red, or maybe it was the Jesus coming on him already a little bit. He started talking before everyone had taken a seat. “They’s a seat up front,” he’d say quietly to a latecomer. He was just a normal person like a teacher. “Horace, you get them beans in OK? That’s good, that’s good.” As more people came into the arbor, he talked about the weather and crops and how the people were so good to come out to hear him when he was nothing but a sinner himself, but a sinner who had heard the Word and got himself right with Jesus. All this he said in a quiet, conversational voice, farmers talking over a fence.

About the time everybody was seated and settled down, he began to pace slowly back and forth in the bare space before the chairs. He’d stop and stare off into the trees outside, then shake his head and pace again. He began to talk to himself, low at first, like he’d forgotten anyone else was there, like he had a problem he was trying to work out, like he was trying to remember something.

Then he stopped and turned to us. He had a strange smile, a widening of

the mouth that had nothing of pleasure in it. His eyes were dead gray beams. If anything, the smile made him look as though he had smelled something bad. The stench of sin, I guess.

It didn't seem to bother him that someone's trunk was sitting right in the middle of things. In fact, as he talked, he walked around it, slapped at it, stroked it. The sweat stains on his white shirt deepened.

"It ain't the sinner God hates," he said. "It's the sin! But if you have not fessed up to your sinfulness, then, dear ones, you are nothing more than sin itself! *You* are sin! Walking, talking sin!" He loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar, giving relief to his rubbery neck. He shook his head. "But lay your heavy heart at the feet of the Redeemer, and ye shall know peace everlasting, glory everlasting! Repent, remit, and relax into the ever-lovin' arms of Jesus Christ!"

And then he waded in among the chairs. Heads turned, a flash of surprise swept the crowd. The wooden chairs creaked. "Faust Funeral Home"—I swear—was stenciled on the backs.

As he moved among us, the preacher yelled, "A tree shall be known by the fruit it bears!" And then he charged through the chairs to the other side of the arbor. A wing of his black hair had fallen into his eyes. He flopped it back with a jerk of his head. "Did you hear me, dear ones? Jesus said, 'I am the Vine; ye are the branches. You cannot bear fruit in yourself, but I throw My Ownself into the branch.' And what kind of a fruit did it bear?" He darted quickly to another part of the crowd. "'These signs shall follow them that believe.'" As he spoke, as he worked himself up, his shirt tail came dangerously close to working itself completely out of his pants, a whipping offense in my father's eyes. This made it hard to concentrate on what he was saying, even if I could understand it. I tucked my own shirt tail in deeper. Let the preacher get the whipping, I thought, fully expecting my father to take him over his knee. But he just sat there smiling, my father, his eyes following the preacher, who swept back and forth among the crowd.

"A tree shall be known by the fruit it bears!" By now we were all turning in our seats, trying to follow him with our eyes, trying to swing our knees out of the way so he could come charging by. The chairs ached under us as we swung back and forth, and some closed their eyes and raised their faces, holding out their palms, swaying lightly. And then he ran to the back, where it was hard to see him at all, and his voice came booming, "A tree shall be known by the fruit it bears! . . . And honey, I'm a fruit picker!"

There was a chorus of "Praise Jesus." Someone somewhere began to weep. He made his way back to the front, yanking on his tie like he was leading an old horse back to the stable. But the closer he got to the front of the crowd, the slower he walked. He shook his head, and the air seemed to go out of him by the second.

"I'd be lying if I didn't tell you my thoughts are heavy tonight," he said. "There's a heavy hand on my heart. And I just don't know what to do about it."

There was a shuffling in the crowd, a current of whispering. One lady meekly said, "Try Jesus," but the preacher didn't seem to hear her, lost in his thoughts. My father sat next to me as stiff as steel, his eyes on the preacher.

The preacher circled the wicker trunk, stopped in front of it, shook his head, then kept walking.

He stopped and looked at us like he had just noticed us, like we were old friends catching up. He said, "You know that feeling when there's something keeping your spirit down? Like you're being bug-squashed under a heavy boot? Truth is, that's what I'm feeling right now." He started pacing again.

A man's voice shot up from the crowd: "Jesus'll he'p you!" A couple others agreed that He would, but the preacher wasn't having any of it. He sighed real heavy and slowly slapped his heart with a loose fist. He shook his head. "Ain't nothing for it," he said. "Time to face facts. This old preacher's gone bust."

A murmur of reassurance ran through the crowd. "No, no," people said. I turned to see a big old woman in a faded dress stand up, clutching the back of the seat in front of her. She was trembling, shaking. She just stood there looking at the preacher, her eyes all wet with tears.

The preacher paid no attention to any of it. "I'm telling you, dear ones," he said slapping his heart again, "it's time to face facts: nothing'll grow in dirt this dead." His shoulders slumped and it looked like it was hard for him to hold up his head. "I'm done for, folks." He started walking up the aisle toward the back end of the arbor. As he walked he buttoned his shirt and straightened his tie. He was leaving us. "You want my honest advice, you'll go get yourself a decent preacher," he said, "one's still got some sap in him."

More people protested, quietly saying, "No, no." A man in overalls stood up and began to mutter words I couldn't understand, his hands flying out like birds. When I looked up at my father, his eyes were still on the preacher, but he was shaking his head no, his movements measured, precise, strangely

without emotion.

A young woman moved into the aisle in front of the preacher, blocking his way. She was shaking, hardly able to stand. Her knees began to buckle, but an older woman caught her and lifted her back up. The young woman's head rolled onto her shoulder, her eyes rolled back in her head. I was frightened. I said, "Is she dying, Daddy?"

For the first time since we'd sat down, he looked at me. A long second passed, almost as if he were trying to remember who I was. Then he said, "The Lord's moving on her in mystery ways."

The preacher took the young woman by the chin and looked into her eyes. His voice was strained. "I can't he'p you, precious." He stepped around her and headed for the back of the tent, the clearing, the dark woods beyond. But some people from the back of the arbor stood up and kept the preacher from leaving, held him back, turned him toward the front of the arbor and the wicker trunk. The preacher's eyes were steamy with held-back tears.

"Don't you see, dear ones? I can't do it no more," he said. "I don't have it in me!" He slapped his chest again. Then he swept his arm out to include the crowd. "Maybe this tree has no more fruit? Maybe this field's been picked over?" The man in front was shouting out noises like coyote barks. The preacher looked around at us, trying to bring us into focus. "Now I ain't trying to get your mind going here, but maybe I'm not worthy to be your preacher! Maybe I've lost my fire!"

People had risen halfway to their feet now and were rattling their empty chairs, crying, "No, no!"

"If there was only somebody to he'p me," he said. "If there was only somebody to take this burden off'n me."

More faint cries. "Jesus. Jesus!"

He was edging back toward the front of the arbor now. "If I could just find somebody to do my work for me, why, dear ones, I'd be a happy man!"

"Jesus!" Louder now.

He was at the middle of the aisle now, and he bent over, leaning his head to the side. "What's that you say?"

"Jesus! Jesus!" the crowd hissed.

He held his cupped hand behind his ear. "Jesus?" he said matter-of-factly. "Is that what you're saying? You're saying there's a fellow name of Jesus who's willing to lend a hand to this old fruit picker?"

"Yes! Jesus!" It was the woman in front of us, the woman whose face was

caked with makeup. She stood up when he was near and held her hands out, clutching at the air. "Jesus'll lend you a hand!"

But he walked right past her, still puzzling it out. "Because I would purely love to have somebody do my work for me out here on this hot night."

"Let Jesus! Jesus will he'p you!"

He was back in front of his congregation now. He looked around at us. He thought about the offer. He swept his hair back in place with one hand. He loosened his tie again, yanked it.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I don't think so. No Jesus." He circled the trunk once and faced the crowd again. "Nope, no Jesus."

The chairs stopped creaking. No one spoke. Even the people waiting for the rapture opened their eyes a crack, afraid they'd stumbled into Satan's tent.

And then, louder, the preacher said slowly, "No. Jesus." And then louder still, his voice a raw blade, "Do you hear me, dear ones? I said, 'No Jesus!'"

The congregation began to stir. This was not what they had come for. Not at all what they had come for.

But the preacher seemed not to notice. He began to pace. "Now Jesus was sleeping on a coil of rope. And the wind was blowin', and the waves was goin'. To and fro the disciples ran. To and fro. 'Oh what are we gonna do!? Oh what shall we do!?' And the waves was goin', and the wind was blowin'. 'I know,' they said, 'let's wake up ole Jesus, the Son of God!' So they ran to Jesus. Do you hear me, dear ones? Are you listening? They ran to the Son of God, while the wind was blowin' and the waves was goin'! And you know what they did? They cried out to Jesus. They flapped they hands and pranced around." The preacher flapped his hands and pranced around, his knees pumping high. "They said, 'Jesus, you got to he'p us! Jesus, you got to he'p us!' And you know what ole Jesus did, dear ones? While the wind was blowin' and the waves was goin'? He stirred from his bed of rope, from his bed of sorrow, from his bed of pain. And he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and he looked up at the disciples gathered all around, and he said, 'Do I have to he'p you guys with ever' little thang?'"

The space inside the tent was a caught breath.

His voice now was a high whine. "Do you see, my precious ones? Do you feel the dawn coming on? Sometimes you got to do for yourself. Sometimes you got to bear your own burden, shoulder your own cross. Sometimes you got to leave Jesus asleep on his coil of rope!" He'd worked his way behind the trunk now and, with a sudden jump, flung it open.

“Only one way to know,” the preacher said, working himself up, slapping his heart hard now. “Only one way to tell.” Slap. His words now riding the back of a droning incantation: “And by these signs will ye believe. In my name you will cast out demons. You will speak in new tongues. If you pick up serpents, they will not hurt you. If you drink the deadly thing, you will not die. You will lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.” His words now a sharp shout: “So the Bible says! So the Bible says! So the Bible says!”

Even with the other woman’s help, the woman in the aisle went down again, this time to the ground. She rolled around there, her back arched, digging at the dirt with her feet until her flat black shoes came off. And still she twisted and turned, her hands flying down between her legs and then up again, her neck sprung back, her eyes rolling.

The preacher pulled his tie clean off now and unbuttoned his shirt more, showing his swollen neck wet with sweat. “I ain’t *playing* church with you now, dear ones. I ain’t *schooling* you. I ain’t giving you no psalm-singing Sunday sermon. I’m flat out *telling* you. Sometimes there ain’t nothing for it but to grab the devil by the throat!”

He thrust his arm deep into the trunk and came up with a coiling handful of snakes, tails whipping, heads lashing.

I don’t remember much of what he said after that. I couldn’t take my eyes off the snakes. He held them in the air. He shook them. He clutched them to his chest, scrubbing himself all over with them.

The crowd cried out, “Yes! Oh Yes!”

He talked about Jeremiah in the pit, about being stuck in the pit and trying to climb the sides of the pit, “but the sides are too slick and you’ll never get out because the pit is sin and the pit is wickedness and you are trapped forever in the pit because you are an ungrateful sinner and they done digged a pit for thy soul and set snares for thy wicked feet!” And then, for a moment, his voice went all soft. “But precious, precious ones, you can’t never stop trying to get your name in the Lamb’s Book of Life!”

Then, with his free hand, he tore his shirt open and scrubbed his bare chest with the snakes. He reached into the box with his other hand, coming up with another handful of writhing, coiling death. He shook the snakes in the air and said, “‘In My Name they shall cast out devils.’ That’s what He said.” He pointed his coiling fists at the crowd. “Are you ready to do that, dear ones? Are you ready to do His work? Do *His* work. Don’t let Him do *your* work. My God is a do-it-yourself kind of guy! Are you ready for Jesus Christ,

the Son of God? Are you ready for Jesus Christ, the light everlasting? Are you ready? Are you ready? Are you ready?"

Hands were raised to the heavens. Tearful faces were raised to God. People fell to the ground, shaking and rolling and jabbering. The woman in front of us turned and, with tears in her eyes, said, "'They shall speak in tongues unknown.' He's open'n' up now. You never see nothing bad out of that man. He's fame known."

My father gave her a stingy little nod.

Some of the snakes were thick and brown, like things oozed up from the bowels of the earth. Some were smaller, only the diameter of jump ropes, but they whipped and twisted, bright with the sheen of evil.

Lots of people were up on their feet now, dancing, whirling, stomping, and calling out in wild, inconsolable jabber-songs. The woman who had been rolling on the ground was up now and moving toward the front, to a table off to the side, where she drank from a stoppered glass bottle. As soon as she did that, she staggered against one of the arbor poles, clutched it, scraped her face against the rough bark. Her eyes were closed but tears came pouring from under her lashes, and from her mouth came a mournful yodel.

A man from down our aisle stood up, his arms upraised and holding a long snake as big around as the inner tube on my Huffy. He must have brought it with him.

Until then, my father sat unmoved next to me, his head held high, the angle of his crew cut parallel with the earth. But now he jerked to his feet like a hooked trout and knocked chairs aside as he staggered toward the front of the tent. He leaned over the open basket and plunged his hand in deep, turning a dead-eyed gaze on me.

When his hand came out, he was holding a quick-coiling length of red fire. He took it in both hands, moving his grip to just below the head. The foot-long snake lashed itself around his wrist and then loose. When he raised the head to his face, the snake's jaws went wide, its tongue stabbing. And then my father took the whole head, the gaping jaws and flashing tongue, into his mouth. He held it like that, gazing at me with calm eyes. The snake went crazy, whipping itself against his face, a twisting, throbbing demon's tongue. My father didn't even blink.

I was scared unto very death. I'd been scared from the minute the woman in front of us told me I had to take a bath in blood. And even earlier, when I'd heard the locusts whine. And earlier still, when after supper my father had

taken my hand and said, “It’s time I taught you something about sin.” And before that, more afraid than I had ever been on any of those nights when my father’s belt lashed the sin out of me, the pain second to the fear, his big voice booming, “Jesus *Christ*, the Lord of Heaven! Jesus *Christ*, the Lord of Hosts!”

By now the crowd was a swaying, screaming mob. Women tore at their clothes. Men jumped like they’d tasted lightning. The preacher kept preaching, his voice lilting, then loud. And through it all, my father stood there with the snake in his mouth, telling me things with his eyes.

The preacher said, “Oh, dear ones, oh precious things, when he comes back, when he comes back, he ain’t coming back as a little baby in a manger. No sir. When he comes back, precious, you’re going to know about it. You are going to know about it. And you know what? He ain’t coming back nailed upon the cross. No sir. And no, he ain’t going to come back as the one who laid in the tomb. No, sir. Lord of lord and king of kings, he’s coming back on a big white horse with a sword raised on high! Yes sir. He’s coming back to do battle on the Fields of Armageddon in the Valley of Jehosophat. He’s coming back to call down fire! And he will come charging with his sword held on high! Yes sir. And on that field the blood will run and on that field the blood will run as high as a horse’s bridle on that day, on that day. Is this the day? Is today the day? Is this the day the Lord is coming back? Is this the day the Lord is coming back? Is this the day? And are you ready, dear ones? Are you? Are you ready? Lest ye be tested by fire, tested by serpents, tested by the deadly thing, you ain’t ready! You ain’t ready! You ain’t ready!”

Just then it began to rain, first a shimmer blowing past like a curtain caught in a breeze, then big fat slapping drops that came pouring through the crossed branches overhead.

The preacher dropped the snakes back into the wicker basket and walked down the aisle. “Come on, dear ones,” he said, waving us along with him. “Come unto the anointin’.” When my father took the snake out of his mouth, it coiled around his fist. He had to shake it off into the basket. He came back to me slowly, his eyes on me and on me and on me.

We followed the preacher out into the rain, those of us who weren’t still jerking like live things on a spit. He stepped out into the clearing and raised his arms, his face, so the rain could hit him square. He turned slowly, his face raised to the night sky.

There were tears in his voice. “When we believe in the Rapture . . . when we believe in the Rapture . . . when we believe in the Rapture . . . well done, my

good and faithful servant . . . washed in the blood of the Lamb . . . well done.”

A flash of lightning lit our upturned faces, and the rain fell like cold blades. And then the preacher saw the rest of us as if for the first time. Even though the rain was coming down hard now, drumming against the ground, his face relaxed into a benign smile. His whole body relaxed. He was wet all over now—we all were—but he didn’t seem to notice. It was like the simple farmer had come back. He waved us toward him, his children, called us in, and we gathered close around him with the rain coming down so hard the spray bounced up off the ground as high as my knees, and my father’s big hands on my shoulder pushing me until I was right next to the preacher, right up against him. Everybody was crushing in on me, all the wet bodies. The preacher looked down at me and said, “That’s right, son. Git on in here close, and git you some of this anointin’ all over you!”

He gathered us close in and looked into each of our faces while the rain drummed and my father laid his heavy hand on the back of my neck.

“Jesus knows,” the preacher said. “Yes, Jesus knows. He knows the world. He knows this hard place. And he knows, he knows your heart is sore, sore from this hard place, from the world, and that’s a hard place. But can you lift your heart? Won’t you lift your heart? Won’t you lift your heart to Jesus and say I am here, Jesus Christ the Lord of Heaven. I am here, Jesus Christ the Lord of Hosts. I am here, Jesus Christ the Lord of Heaven. And of Earth. The Lord, I say, of this hard place. And Jesus won’t you take and Jesus won’t you take and Jesus won’t you take and catch me into the Life Everlasting.”

Chants and cries flew up into the stormy darkness. The rain came stabbing down. Lightning splashed across the sky when my father looked at me, his eyes bright with the mystery.