

Introduction

Golbert watched his mother sleep. She looked harmless. A thin strand of drool connected the corner of her open mouth to her pillow. She looked peaceful. Her breathing was even and steady and quiet. As Golbert stood beside his mother's bed in his ragged pajamas, he thought how nice it would be if she could sleep forever. As serene as she looked in that moment, Golbert knew it was only an illusion, there would be hell to pay as soon as she woke up.

She would need someone to yell at. She would need someone to hit. She would need someone to blame for her being her. She would need someone to point a finger at. She would need to fuck with someone's head, and Golbert was forced to be forever in the wrong place at the wrong time. He had no choice, he was only ten.

Golbert clenched his fists and squeezed his eyes shut, he strained until he was shaking. He would force the Holy Spirit into his body, whether it wanted to be there or not.

When the church began to fill up, he'd been shoved onto a bench, next to a woman who reeked of baby powder and used cooking oil, by a burly fellow who looked to be some sort of guard in charge of the seating arrangement.

Before the choice was made for him, Golbert had been trying to locate an empty seat somewhere in the back. The Cloud Bus had been running late and by the time it had finally dropped him off at the church, the back was already full. He assumed, that on some previous Sunday, the sinners had been instructed to fill the room from back to front, worst transgressors to least because the only open seats were in the first two rows.

They say you're not supposed to judge a book by its cover, but Golbert recognized some of the men in the back, from his house, and he was sure the things they had done with his mother would be considered sins and then some.

In the front row, next to the baby-powder woman, was not where he wanted to be, he felt like a sore thumb. However, as it turned out, for what he was after, the Holy Ghost, it couldn't have

been a better spot. Throughout the length of the service, the powdered lady expressed often, and to no one in particular, that the Holy Spirit was moving within her. Lifting her arms high above her head, she'd exclaimed, "The Holy Spirit is moving within me, thank you, Jesus."

The smile that she wore, that seemed to be permanently affixed to her face, appeared genuine to Golbert. The honesty in her voice excited him, and he figured if he was going to find what he was looking for, the closer he was to it, the better. If indeed, what he was lacking inside him, was the Holy Ghost, it was only a short jump from the old lady to him. Besides, it had been promised to him earlier in the week.

No one between the ages of seven and seventeen wanted to be caught dead on a short bus, the stigma it carried became permanently affixed to those seen riding it and was harder to shake than a summer cold. Although the version of the 'Tard Hauler' parked out in front of Golbert's house had been brushed white, he was sure the power the vehicle had to destroy a kid, would not allow itself to be diminished by a few coats of house paint. It was there, lurking just beneath the pigmented surface, ready to label him as a helmet wearing drooler as soon as he climbed aboard and the bold red lettering down the side, "First Church of the Nazarene" would be incapable of stopping it.

Although, technically, it was no longer a school bus, but a blessed chariot ordained to transfer repentant children to and from the House of God, the other kids would only point out the fact that retards went to church, too.

Trying to avoid a verbal beat down from his drunk mother, Golbert had been hiding on his front porch when bright white 'tard hauler came trundling down his street. Before the monstrosity even had a chance to come to a complete stop in front of his house, it had spat a well-dressed man and woman out of its side. Had Norman been there, he would have said the two were 'dressed for success.' He also would have said that they 'stood out like a sore dick.' Nobody dressed up in Golbert's neighborhood, at least, not on a weekday, they didn't. With the woman spearheading the charge, they had marched toward Golbert with purpose, her gripping a small stuffed lion by the neck and him slapping a black Bible against his thigh. Had their smiles not been so wide and teeth filled, Golbert might have retreated into his house for safety. They moved like they had a warrant to serve, but grinned like they had something to sell.

"Hello boy, is your mama and daddy available"

"My mom's sleeping." lied Golbert.

"Well let me ask you this. Do y'all go to church?"

"No."

"Have you found Jesus, son?" The man poked hard at the cover of his Bible, emphasizing his words. "Have you walked with the Lord and been filled with the Holy Ghost?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Believe me, son, if you had, there would be no doubt in your mind, it's not something one can forget. Your cup has yet to runneth over, and we're here to help you remedy that shortcoming."

Wagging the stuffed lion in Golbert's face, the woman growled softly. "Grrr. We offer prizes to those who find Salvation at the First Church of the Nazarene. This here's the Grand Prize for this coming Sunday, but no one ever leaves empty-handed, even those who have to return to find the Lord, the following day of worship, receive a memento from Jesus. Grrr." The lion's head lopped from one side to the other, much like his mother's, after seven or eight Harvey Wallbangers. The woman smiled bigger and whiter than anyone Golbert had ever seen. "You don't have to bring your parents, honey, you can come all by your lonesome, but you should ask their permission first."

"Can we pencil you in for this coming Sunday, son? We'll have the Cloud Chariot, over yonder, stop and pick you up." The man cast his Bible arm through the air, encompassing the retard bus as if he were revealing a wonder of the world for the first time.

Golbert looked from the man to the woman, he knew, from as far back as he could remember, that there was something missing in him, a void which needed filling and the Holy Ghost might just be the ticket. It was obvious that the two in front of him had been filled with something. "Yeah, I'll go." He looked nervously at the short bus. "Can I just meet you there?"

"Heck fire boy, the church is more than six or seven miles from here, that's like a three-hour walk for a short-legger, like yourself. You'd be sweatin' like a demon before the throne of God, by the time you got there. We'll have the Cloud Chariot here bright and early on the Sabbath. Save yourself some shoe leather, son."

"I suppose I could duck down in the seat." From the curious looks on the churchgoers faces, Golbert realized he must have spoken the thought aloud.

"Well, we'll roll through this area around eight o'clock, rain or shine. Welcome to the flock, son." The man turned and trotted back to the short bus, his Bible slapping against his thigh. "Halleluja!" he shouted, shaking his Bible above his head.

“Grrr.” With one final shake of the droopy-necked lion, in Golbert’s face, the woman smiled big and followed. “Grrrrr,” she growled, shaking the lion at the bus.

“Grrr,” Golbert growled after her.

“You might want to do a test run on a random church. You don’t want to walk into one on Sunday and have it catch fire, or catch a lightning strike, that would be embarrassing as shit.”

“Why, what’s wrong with me?”

“Well, you’re not what I would classify as an unblemished sheep, you’re a full on sinner.”

“Isn’t church where sinners go to fix themselves?”

“Yeah, but some things just don’t belong together, no matter what. I see you and church, in the same category as orange juice flavored toothpaste.”

“You ever been inside a church?”

“Yep. The same exact one you’re gonna go to. My uncle told me, that retard bus has been coming around here, off and on for years, long before you and I came along. Whenever their membership gets low, they send the short bus out to round up some kids. They figure that once they get the kids brainwashed, then the parents will follow. A lady even gave me a Winnie the Pooh for showing up. Said it was the grand prize.”

“The grand prize for what? She told me that too.”

“For finding Jesus and getting filled up with the Holy Spirit.”

“What did you have to do?”

“I got up in the front of the church and ran in place. My uncle told me what to do, he said you have to put on a show if you want the stuffed animal, otherwise, you get a little Jesus statue, like an award for participating.”

“So you didn’t get the Holy Ghost in you?”

“Not that I know of. I didn’t feel anything, but I was concentrating on my running. Some girl, down the row from me, was slapping herself in the face, trying like hell, to beat me out of the Winnie the Pooh. I guess they called bullshit on her little act, ‘cause the Holy Spirit doesn’t make you kick your own ass, it’s like a law or something, a conflict of interest.” Norman looked carefully at Golbert, trying to gauge his level of seriousness. “You can do other stuff; you don’t have to run.

If you want, you can just roll around on the ground. It's too bad you can't cry, my uncle said that tears are the clincher. I poked myself in the eyes."

"I don't care about any stuffed animal; I want to get filled with the Holy Spirit for real."

"Good luck with that. I don't think kids like us get a shot at shit like that. Kids like Curtis, mainly because of their wheelchairs, get the Holy Spirit. And you can betcher ass, the Holy Ghost has felt every BB we've ever shot at ol' Curt."

There wasn't a cloud in the sky, yet, every now and then, the boys would cast a nervous glance skyward. "The weather's all clear, I think you're gonna be safe from lightning."

They'd been standing on the sidewalk in front of St. Paul's Catholic church for twenty minutes, gathering courage. Golbert was the only one actually in need of courage, but Norman was helping him gather it, just the same. In the past, Norman had been across the threshold of a church without incident, so he had nothing to prove or test. Even though he'd admitted, a lot of unclean water had passed beneath his bridge since he'd been inside a house of worship, he still felt like he held onto an eighty percent edge, that he wouldn't be struck down if he had to go to a funeral or something.

Built with large blocks of limestone back when men were made of iron and masonry hammers were made of wood, with its tall steeple and stained glass depicting various scenes from the olden days, the building did seem, at least to Golbert, to have the potential to strike down a child with evil in his heart.

Norman had chosen St. Paul's, because of all the rules and regulations the Catholics had. "The preachers aren't even allowed to touch their peckers," said Norman. "on account, they have a direct connection to God. If you can survive this church, any other church will be a piece of cake."

"It's probably locked up tight," Golbert said, a slight crack in his voice. He had no desire to be struck down on that day, or any other day. He'd gone this long without the Holy Ghost, he decided he could go a little longer.

Norman could sense Golbert's apprehension, "I smell pussy."

So there it was, the challenge. Golbert would be hard pressed to back out after the challenge had been issued. He really couldn't care less what Norman smelled, nor did he care what Norman thought, it was what he didn't want to hear repeated, over and over for the next week. "I smell fish." "I smell tuna." "Is there a bait shop nearby?" The pestering would be non-stop. Once, when Golbert had refused to steal a pack of sunflower seeds from the Loaf-N-Jug, Norman's olfactory

had kicked into high gear for almost two weeks. The kid had been able to smell all manner of sea and fish related items, no matter which way the wind was blowing.

Without a word, Golbert turned and marched up the sidewalk, he was in no mood to be pressured by Norman's nose. Halfway to the big oak doors, something in Golbert clicked, the trepidation he'd felt about being smote by God took on the feel of a challenge, in and of itself. The challenge Norman had issued had become meaningless and was replaced with Golbert's own mumbled dare. "Go ahead God, shock the turds right out of me. I imagine you've probably been waiting for this for some time." Golbert turned back to look at Norman, who had moved fifteen feet further out, to the safety of the curb. Still, he was grinning like a shit eating possum, his hands clasped together in anticipation of a sudden electrical storm. "What are you doing way out there?" Golbert sniffed the air, "I think I smell pussy."

The large brass handle on the door did not produce a deadly jolt of electricity, nor was Golbert smited as he crossed the threshold into the foreboding building. Instead, he found himself smothered in an unsettling quiet. The ridiculous cliché of being able to cut the silence with a knife was true enough inside the church.

At the front of the building, Jesus hung from the cross. A bloodied, mostly naked statue, nailed to a cross, seemed completely out of place displayed against the backdrop of beautifully stained glass and fine woodwork, yet, somehow, Golbert felt it didn't belong anywhere else, more than it did there.

Holding his fists out in front of him. Golbert gave himself a ten count, popping up one finger at a time, if he was going to get smote he figured ten seconds was plenty of time for God to say yea or nay, or flip a coin, however Gods choose between life and death. As his tenth finger popped out, Golbert traded out the breath he'd been holding in his lungs, for some of the quiet church air. Norman had gotten him worked up for nothing, there was nothing scary about the church, in fact, it was the most peaceful place Golbert had ever been inside. As he turned to grab the brass door pull, a voice stopped him. "I'll see you on Sunday."

Golbert looked cautiously around the church, hoping he wouldn't get busted for trespassing. "Is someone in here?"

"It's just me and you, right now."

Looking up at wooden Jesus on the cross, Golbert was sure he saw him wink. A voice in a church, with no one in sight, wouldn't qualify as a smiting, as far as Norman was concerned, but it was enough to give Golbert every reason to leave.

As he left the tight atmosphere of the church and stepped back into the sun, Norman danced a little jig. “Hot damn!” He shouted. Golbert found it unsettling that Norman actually looked surprised that he hadn’t been struck by lightning. “You get to live another day, weirdo. I thought for sure you’d roll out those doors on fire, electrocuted to a crisp. Hot damn!”

Golbert’s attention was torn away from the woman’s Holy Spirit filled smile and redirected to the barrel-shaped, hyper-animated, fast talking preacher with Elvis Presley sideburns, who suddenly appeared at the front of the church. From the slightly elevated area, which spanned the width of the church, the preacher stalked the congregation from one side of the church to the other. Spittle sprayed his microphone as he solicited “amens” and “hallelujahs” from the back-sliders and fornicators, located throughout his audience. “Can I get an Amen?” he yelled, as much a statement, as it was a question.

“Amen!” the congregation shouted back.

“Back-sliders, sinners and fornicators, are you ready to open your hearts to God? Give me an amen!”

“Amen!” the back-sliders, sinners and fornicators all shouted.

Golbert was thankful the sweaty man of God didn’t identify the guilty parties specifically. Though he had no knowledge of ever back-sliding or fornicating, he could tell by the frequent glances he was getting from the preacher, that the sweaty man had him on his list for some transgression. One thing was for certain if getting filled by the Holy Ghost took more than one Sunday, he wasn’t sitting in the front row, ever again.

“Adultery, fornication, lust and sodomy! The sexual Revolution has drug us all down into the depths of depravity. The good Lord has chosen me as his instrument to lift us up and set us back on the path to glory! Give me an amen!” the preacher screamed at the top of his sweaty lungs.

A sudden gasp traveled through the congregation, the preacher had ripped the front of his shirt open. Buttons danced and skipped across the hardwood stage. He juggled his microphone from one hand to the other, in a move that Elvis would have coveted, as he stripped off his shirt and flung it to the floor, falling to his knees beside it. Several women, Golbert would later learn, had swooned at that point.

“Oh, my!”

“Lord have mercy!”

“Help me, Jesus!”

Here and there, Golbert saw ladies fanning themselves with their church programs and fluffing their blue perms. Glazed eyes peered out from beneath lazy eyelids, the look in their eyes was the same one his mother got when she watched Davey Jones sing, “Daydream Believer.”

From his knees, the preacher was pointing up and to his left, as if he had positioned himself at the right hand of God. “Help me Lord. Help me help you!” The portly man struggled to his feet, struggling against the weight of his massive pork chop sideburns, keeping his finger pointed at the God that only he could see. “Direct me Lord, show me those in need of Salvation.” With two quick steps toward the woman with the Holy Ghost smile, he dropped again to his knees, sliding to a stop directly in front of her. She also gasped. He returned her Holy Ghost smile with one of his own.

Slowly, the preacher’s hand lowered. Golbert was no longer anonymous, the preacher was no longer pointing up at God, but directly at Golbert, he could feel accusations and judgments burning into his back from all the people sitting behind him. The back-sliders, sinners, and fornicators had turned on him. He knew, with a single word from the preacher, the villagers would light their torches and drive him from the church. It was not necessary for him to look over his shoulder, he was quite sure, evil was the indictment in all of their eyes.

“Come up here boy.” The preacher’s finger was now leveled at Golbert’s chest, like a pistol. “Come up here and claim what has been purchased for you. Bought and paid for by the blood of Jesus Christ!”

Mesmerized by the nicotine stained finger aimed at his heart, Golbert slowly rose and moved forward. Other kids were already lining up on their knees along the wooden rise, eyes closed, hands clasped together at their mouths, with secret prayers for salvation moving their lips.

Just as Golbert reached the step, a kid with a crew cut stood up and began to jog in place, he had stolen Golbert’s plan for Salvation. Golbert hadn’t planned for the possibility that someone else would jog. He feared he would be called out as a copycat and a fraud if he were to run, also. He’d made no contingency for such a deviation in his carefully planned salvation.

A girl fell backward from the rise, rolling to and fro on the carpet, tears welling in her eyes. Desperation gripped Golbert, he knew he needed to act fast.

Suddenly, his hand went to his hip, and the other rose above his head. Without conscience thought and as natural as drawing breath, Golbert started going through the motions of “I’m a Little

Teapot.” He moved his lips, reciting the poem. It had been a while, but it was like riding a bicycle, he felt as cute as a curtsy. This would get the Holy Spirit's attention, he thought.

The kid who had stolen his plan to win the Holy Spirit contest pumped his knees faster and faster, the girl's head lolled from one side of her shoulders to the other in a spastic fit, forcing Golbert to put everything he had into his Teapot. Again, he clenched his fists and squeezed his eyes shut tight. His rendition of Little Teapot became rigid and robotic as he strained for the Holy Spirit, his body began to shake with muscle fatigue and he could feel pressure build behind his face as he strained. He almost crapped his pants as he danced the dance of Holy Spirit desperation.

On the ‘tard hauler, the kid with the crew cut was happy as a pig in shit, with the lippy-headed lion sitting in his lap. Golbert watched him closely for any indication that he might have been filled by the Spirit. He wished he'd paid closer attention to the kids on the way to church, that way, he would have a before Spirit and after Spirit comparison, but he had been ducked down in his seat, hiding from any stigmata he might pick up from a ‘tard bus ride. One thing was for sure, whoever was judging theses salvations was partial to runners. Golbert looked down at the plastic Jesus statue he gripped in his hand. His prize. “The Little Teapot just doesn't buy what it used to.” He told the tiny Jesus. Plastic Jesus winked.