

FICTION

brown sweater stayed in her seat. The blonde girl got up and unsteadily walked to their front. The preacher got out a little bottle of oil of camphor from his pocket, dabbed his finger then put it on her forehead. Then he put the palm of his hand on her forehead, while holding the back of her head with his other hand. He started praying and shaking her head in his grip when he shouted different words. "Lord, you know the need!"

Some other men stood around the preacher and the girl. They all got at least one hand on her, and in a few seconds she dropped to the floor, limply.

From where the boy was sitting, he could see her cotton dress had been kicked up past her knee. Her legs were pointing toward him and he could see her inner thighs.

His eyes searched up and down her legs. It was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. He thought of how he would remember her legs. He felt his heart begin to beat faster as she shifted her legs and afforded him a more daring view. He never had made out with a girl but he had heard some guys at school talk about it.

A woman got up from her kneeling on the front pew and pulled the girl's dress down then put a white handkerchief over her legs. The woman then went back to the pew, but only sat there and watched the others praying.

Almost everyone was up front except the boy and the girl in the brown sweater. She was still tugging at it, trying to get

it around her now slightly rounded shoulders. Her gaze was still and unmoved.

After a half hour, the blonde girl got up and came back to the seat with her greasy-haired escort. She had been crying hard, and did not look the least bit comforted by her experience.

The preacher waited in the front, then ascended to the pulpit when everyone was in their seats. He wiped his face with a white handkerchief. The people were giving little thanks and murmurs of praise. He asked for Brother Outland to close the service.

While the benedictions were being said, the preacher came down to the aisle without a sound and placed himself in the vestibule, a narrow, stale air hallway that led to the sultry summer night through the unlatched door.

Everyone slowly headed toward that door. The intense mood of hell-fire, damnation, and salvation was gone.

Several groups of men were clustered around the aisles and vestibule area. They were talking and laughing as one would tell a story and another would add a comment in a hushed voice.

The women were talking to each other in twos or threes about how so and so's child was doing and how hot the weather is going to be next week right on through September.

The boy was waiting in the aisle to introduce himself to the girls, but the lady came up to him and started asking him questions about school and what he was going to do after graduation. The

boy didn't like being grilled—especially not after the last hour and a half of verbal attacks. He got in a line in the vestibule to go outside.

When the boy got to the preacher, he gave the man a big grin, like he always did and said, "Enjoyed your sermon."

He never had shaken the preacher's hand. If it weren't for his parents, he never would have come on Sunday nights, anyway. The no handshake was just a rebellion the boy thought he would do.

From the open door, he looked back into the church. The girls were coming in front of the greasy-haired man. Almost no one was on the porch, except for two small children. They were playing tag and a game of jumps off the side of the porch. The little boy and girl seemed unaffected by the spectacle they had just witnessed.

The preacher whispered something in the blonde girl's ear and put his hand on her shoulder. He shook the hand of the girl in the brown sweater. The girls went on outside, followed closely by their escort.

A man in the church called after the escort. The men gazed at the girls as they continued down the yellow porch lit steps.

The escort called out to the girls that he would be right there. They both turned and nodded, then hurried around the side of the church to the darkened parking lot.

The boy walked on further up the street, then turned and came behind

the two lines of cars. He could see the girls in a late-model Ford. The boy had intended to casually strike up a conversation, but he stopped short of them with only a few feet between him and their open car windows.

The younger girl said, "I don't like this place. What did it feel like up there?"

"I don't know. I don't feel good." "You know why he brought us here don't you?" the younger girl snapped, "It's because of those boys you went off with the other night."

"Well you went off with them, too, two weeks ago," whispered her saved friend.

"I know. Arthur is nice. I wanted to just go out with him. It was the only way I could see him."

"You don't think those boys told anybody what we did, do you? I mean all of it, do you?"

"OK, I don't know. They didn't tell you what I did with them."

The boy stepped back away into the deeper shadows, then turned and walked down the street away from the parking lot, away from the church.

He thought, so those are the girls the boys in the school are talking about. He swallowed hard and nearly walked into a telephone pole that was placed on a curbing.

He stopped and turned back to the church. Should he tell the girls what he knew? What if they just thought it was fun? What if? What if?

He was walking back briskly to talk with them when he saw their car bright lights come on. The car turned off the driveway and slowly picked up speed as it headed the other way, out of town.

The boy slowed his pace and dejectedly got into his parents' car and waited in silence till they got in.

"Why didn't you go to the alter tonight," his mother asked him. "Don't you feel good?"

The boy said, "No, I don't feel good." "Is it your stomach again?"

"Yes—it's my stomach."

"Well, we'll get your daddy to stop at the ice cream store to get you something to settle it."

"Pa," she said, "have you got some money?"

"I think I have some change," he said.

The boy looked out his back seat window. He rolled the glass down. The houses were small in this part of town. There weren't many street lights. It was quiet except for the bark of the dog somewhere off in a darkened backyard. The boy's stomach felt hot so he loosened his belt. The dog's bark turned into a sharp yelp, then a mournful howl.

"I wonder what's wrong with that dog," the boy's mother said.

The father didn't say anything. The boy rolled up his window, and covered his ears. He could only feel his stomach churning and the howl of the dog that echoed what he felt inside himself.

Drawing by Sean Parrish and Catina Wood

