The Laying on of Hands

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Abstract

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MISS SARAH sat with her legs in an undignified spread, straddling the porch bench, while balancing her tea-cup on one knee. Miss Rose occupied the rocking chair, which was battered with wear, but still musical in its rhythmic motions. She kept its creaking going a slow pace as she sipped her tea. The morning sun had caught the leaves of the magnolia, casting filtered patterns on the porch. They sat quietly for a moment, watching the random play of shadow and light.

"Well," Miss Sarah said finally, "another day older, and another day closer to death."

"Closer to thee, Sweet Jesus," Miss Rose offered, fanning herself.

Miss Sarah sloshed her tea in her cup without the aid of a spoon. "Lord, it's going to be a sweltering day. A right hot day a'coming. Suppose Brother Johnathan'll be along in a bit. You told Cissy what you're up to, have you?"

Miss Rose leaned forward with a confidential air. "I have prepared her. She's been told to search her soul for the smallest sin, so's to make it easier for Brother Johnathan."
Miss Sarah leaped to her feet to greet the aging hound, who was making his way painfully up the steps. "Hey now Tray-boy, poor old dog," she said, pounding him lovingly on his underside. "I still don't know if it's right, Rose, a faith healer coming right here to the house like that."

Rose flushed. "Well of course it's all right, Dear," she said cheerfully. "It's the very least we can do for our sister's child, now that she's taken poorly. And Brother Johnathan's such a powerful, wonderful man of God, Sarie. Sunday last at the tent, how he moved the spirit to fair leap right out of this body and soar up to Jesus. Sarie, I was in the presence of the Lord. The presence of the Lord! I know he can heal Cissy. I can just feel it in my bones."

Miss Sarah sniffed suspiciously, plopped herself down again, and looked Miss Rose straight in the eye. "I heard tell how he healed the Crowley boy. Well, I saw that boy afterward. I saw his arm. If the Lord had a'healed it, it would have been straight. The arm's crooked yet, and it'll be crooked still, till they get him up to Jackson to see the doctors."

Miss Rose placed her teacup carefully on the porch railing, and drew herself up in injured dignity. "That boy can move his arm now, Sarie," she said. "Can move his arm! Now he couldn't move it an inch before. It's Brother Johnathan that healed him with his blessed hands, and I won't have you bad-mouthing a holy man."

"Fiddlesticks," Miss Sarah grumbled. "Sarie, you'd just have to see him when he gets to going on hell-fire. You couldn't help but love that man! What a feel for words he's got. How he can make 'em purr and sing, and then, when he's got you fair moaning with delight, how he flares up into a stomping shout, calling on the devil to show hisself, vowing he'll wrestle him with his bare hands! To watch him a'sparring around, roaring and perspiring—dear Lord, but it's a beautiful sight!"

Miss Sarah laughed softly. "Sister Rose, you're taken by him, and that's a fact. If you could just see your face!"

"He's a man of God, Sarie," Miss Rose gasped. "Nobody'd think of him that way."

"It doesn't seem to hurt none that he's better looking than any man has a right to be," Miss Sarah countered.

Miss Rose ignored her remark, her eyes glowing. "He's
a fascinating man, Sarie. Just a remarkable man! When he gets to the part where he takes the devil by the tail, why then he just smashes him to the ground! I saw him do it with these very eyes! I saw something, I swear, something squirming and writhing around right there on the floor of the tent. Then he lets cry with a 'I got you, Satan!', and tromps the daylights out of him with his holy boots! What a fine man he is, Sarie. What a fine, magnificent man!"

Miss Sarah shook her head in disbelief. "I grant you he's every inch a showman," she said sourly, "but if he's God's chosen, I'm the Queen of Sheba."

"And when he gets to going strong, Sarie, he has them pouring up the aisles to give their souls to Christ," Miss Rose said, clasping her hands together. "Crying lots of 'em. Just begging to have his healing hands laid on 'em. Oh, it's a moving thing to see, a soul lifting thing. He can purify the fevers and drive 'em out of Cissy's body. I just know it!"

"I'm still against it," Miss Sarah said, pursing her lips. "I'm wanting to help Cissy, but I think we best take her over to Jackson. Brother Johnathan seems just a little too close to the devil for comfort. Appears he keeps him in his back pocket to trot out on special occasions."

Miss Rose sighed unhappily; then, just as suddenly, her eyes lighted, as she saw Brother Johnathan making his way up the path to the house. "Sarie, sh-hh . . ." she said, nudging her sister. "He's coming."

"Morning, Miss Rose, Miss Sarah," Brother Johnathan beamed. "Fine day to shake the devil from his moorings."

"Brother Johnathan, I'm just so proud to have you here. Just so proud!" Miss Rose stammered.

"Miss Rose," Brother Johnathan demurred, "the Lord Hisself has called me here, and I am sworn to follow His voice."

"Wasn't the Lord that called," Miss Sarah bristled, "was more like Sister Rose's ten dollars."

"Sarie!" Miss Rose gasped. She turned again to Brother Johnathan, who was standing in silence with downcast eyes. "It's just such an honor to have a great man like yourself here in our home. I saw what you did for the Crowley boy, how you raised him up and healed his soul."

"Ah, Miss Rose," Brother Johnathan said modestly, "you're too kind." He raised his eyes to the heavens. "But
it's the Lord Hissell, that gives me the power to send Satan skedaddling with his tail between his legs. And it's the Prince of Peace, that gives me the strength to crush the devil's vile infamy with these two ordinary hands." He turned his hands over, examining them with pleasure.

Miss Rose waved her handkerchief before her face, providing a welcome breeze. With the excitement of Brother Johnathan's appearance the heat seemed more intense. "Such a humble, sweet man," she panted. "It does you proud to take none of the credit, but there's many are called, but few are chosen. It's a fine thing your doing this for our little Cissy."

"How is Miss Cissy this morning?" Brother Johnathan inquired.

"Feeling poorly," Miss Rose replied. "Can't even rouse herself out of the bed. Three days now, poor thing. She's just wasting away. She's got the fevers something awful. Sarie says it's just the flu, but that girl is truly wasting away!"

"Uncommon sins will always sap the strength of the body," Brother Johnathan declared. "The larger the soul, the greater the agony in the bones."

"I can't think how she could have sinned, Brother Johnathan," Miss Rose said, her voice shaking with fright. "Cissy's never taken to harsh ways. Never a bitter word or a cross thought. She's just sweetness itself."

Brother Johnathan placed one hand across his eyes, furrowing his brow, as if in intense thought. "There's sins so deep and hidden only God can see," he said. "Young girl's bound to have lustful thoughts, even against her will."

"Our Cissy?" Miss Sarah exploded. "Why she's barely a child! A fourteen year old with lustful thoughts? You're funning us, aren't you, Brother Johnathan?"

Brother Johnathan met his adversary with burning eyes. "In Biloxi I drew the devil out of a girl but twelve. The raging fires of hell were moldering her limbs. That girl had thoughts would of burned your cheeks for their wickedness. The devil crawls into the body when the mind's asleep, and lays there quiet-like just waiting to strike his victim unawares."

"Sweet Jesus, save her!" Miss Rose said with a little startled cry.

Brother Johnathan stared into space, pressing his Bible
to his heart. "You-all wait here," he said. "I feel the spiritual fires working their way into my hands. I feel the powers a'flowing."

"The front bedroom," Miss Rose said in a hushed voice. "Save her sweet innocence, Brother Johnathan."

After he left, Miss Sarah began to pace nervously. "You going to trust that charlatan alone in there with our Cissy?" she asked. "We ought to be in there. We ought to be with her."

"Sarie, you just don't understand," Miss Rose sighed wearily. "You just have to trust in him, believe in him, or it won't work. Let yourself believe this once," she begged. "For Cissy's sake."

Miss Sarah continued to pace. "He's in there alone with her," she repeated. "A man alone in her bedroom."

"A man of God," Miss Rose said softly.

They waited, watching one another in silence. Suddenly a muffled cry came from the direction of the front bedroom. "What was that?" Miss Sarah started. "I'm going in there! He's torturing her. He's killing her!"

"Don't go, Sarie," Miss Rose pleaded. "You'll ruin it, Sarie. Please, please don't go in!"

"I'm goin,'" Miss Sarah said firmly. She marched into the house, her eyes fixed and stern. When she reached the door of Cissy's room, she flung it open without knocking. Brother Johnathan's knees were on the bed. He sprang up awkwardly, as Miss Sarah stormed into the room.

"Sarie—Sarie," Cissy cried weakly, pulling herself over against the wall.

"What are you doing to this child?" Miss Sarah screamed.

"Now, now, calm down," Brother Johnathan said, composing himself as well as possible under the circumstances. His breathing was heavy and his face flushed. "It isn't what it looks like. It isn't what you think," he croaked. "I got to touch the flesh all over, so's the bad blood will come boiling to the surface, so's to rout the devil out!"

"Well, the Lord sure works in mysterious ways, Brother Johnathan," Miss Sarah said coldly. "I never saw such mysterious ways! Now you get yourself on out of here before I call the sheriff! Skedaddle, you scoundrel, and take the devil with you!"
Brother Johnathan exited hastily, tripping on the bedspread as he fled. When he reached the porch, Miss Rose was still rocking, her hands in prayer position. "Is she healed?" she asked breathlessly, as she saw him approach.

"It's going to take some more time, dear lady," Brother Johnathan said thoughtfully, adjusting his tie. "Now I don't know how to tell you this, Miss Rose, but I confess it's my Christian duty to warn you."

"What? What?" Miss Rose gasped, holding her hand over her heart.

"Demons will sometimes rise right out of one body and sail smack into another," Brother Johnathan said, smoothing his dark hair back with his hands. "Miss Sarah opened that door at just the wrong time. She's caught some of that corruption gnawing at Cissy, full in the mouth. You best stop your ears to her evil words, and keep your mind to it, it's not her that's spewing the filth, but the awful voice of Satan!"

"Merciful heavens!" Miss Rose cried.

"You best bring both sick'ens to meeting next time," Brother Johnathan warned. "Now you-all come, hear?"

"Sweet Jesus, preserve us," Miss Rose said, her eyes round with terror, "We'll be there, Brother Johnathan! We'll be there!"

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**Haiku**

*by Deborah Pui Young*

*Child Development, Soph.*

Silently dimming
Dusk; summer night deepening
Villages of stars