He That Believeth Not...

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Abstract

Matt fingered the fragile pages of the book. It was probably the most beautiful thing he had ever owned. His mother had given him the Bible just before he left to go into the army...
MATT fingered the fragile pages of the book. It was probably the most beautiful thing he had ever owned. His mother had given him the Bible just before he left to go into the army. It had gone everywhere with him and given him comfort in the hard and lonely times. Often, without even opening the book, he had drawn comfort from it, just sitting and running his fingers over the pleasant roughness of the leather binding and watching the light reflect on the gilded edges of the tissue-thin pages. The book was part of him. It had meant home and security. It was not understanding of its contents that had meant the most to him; it was a knowledge that somehow this book held the answers to all the questions in his heart. All he need do was find them.

Now that he was home again, it no longer offered security. It served only to increase his awareness of the many answers he had yet to find. The words before his eyes blurred and swam on the pages, offering nothing. Then, suddenly, those which he wanted most to avoid sprang out at him. "... he
that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents..."

He shut the book hurriedly and got up from the creaking bed. He looked around the dim room for something that would give him reassurance. He could find nothing. There was nothing in his surroundings that made him feel as though he amounted to anything. His whole appearance made people view him with something like pity wherever he went. His scrawniness was interpreted as a sign of weakness, and his backwoods manner of speaking gave an impression of stupidity. The war had been the only place he could prove himself to others, and even that was gone now. There was always something to make him feel worthless.

"They shall take up serpents..." No matter where he turned now, those words attacked him, in the book, on his mother's lips, and in his own mind. It was a strange thing, this religion that he had been raised in, this religion that demanded such a strange test of a man's faith. How many times had his feelings toward it changed? In the barracks, when his buddies had questioned him about it and shivered at his explanations, he had found himself defending it; but now, surrounded by it again, he felt the old inadequacy and revulsion that he had known for years. Still, he thought, the snake had been Eve's test, why should it not be his, too. This thinking was going in circles.

He walked into the kitchen-living room of the shabby house. His mother sat by the little stove, trying vainly to repair a wornout shirt. His father only sat and stared at the opposite wall of the small, dingy room, running his fingers, every so often, over the miner's head lamp that he hadn't used since a cave-in had crippled his right arm two months ago.

"I think you might as well forget about that shirt, Ma," said Matt. "I can wear my army shirt down in the hole."

"I figured maybe I could fix it to fit your brother," she answered. "Your other shirt's clean for you to wear to the meetin' tomorrow. You are comin' with us, ain't you?"
“Yeah, I’m comin’. You know that. Why do you have to
keep askin’ me?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hound you, Matthew. It’s
just that I’m a little anxious for you to come.”

He was immediately sorry that he had snapped at her that
way. She worried a lot, and he guessed he didn’t help any.
He’d just have to learn to ignore a lot of things. He had to
treat her gently when she was happy like this. There were so
few times when he saw her happy that he hated to spoil them.
If he upset her the coughing might start again, and he would
be powerless to help her. He had lain in bed for nights on
end, listening to the rasping sounds from the next room and
been able to do nothing. The sound grated through his
nervous system like a fingernail being drawn down a black­
board and stayed in his mind long after the paroxisms had
stopped. Once he had even thought of choking her to stop
the coughing, until, horrified that such a thing could even
occur to him, he had tried to shut his mind to any thought at
all.

“Matthew,” she said, “I don’t mean to make you mad, like
you said before, by harpin’ on this, but you’ve been funny
since you come back. You seem to shy away from the ‘saints’
at the meetins’, and when anyone talks about the serpents,
you kinda’ act funny. Don’t you want to be with us in the
faith anymore?” The look on her face made him wish that
he could stop this hurt that he was causing her, but it wasn’t
in him to stop it. Not yet. He thought of how happy she
would be if he could only become one of the “saints,” one of
the ones who could handle the snakes, unharmed.

“It ain’t that, Ma. It ain’t that at all.” His voice was plead­
ing with her to understand. “I’m all mixed up, Ma. I don’t
know what I want. I know what it would mean to you if I
could just come through and be what you’d like. Believe me,
I know that, but I just can’t make it.”

“Matt, you ain’t got no choice,” his father said, bringing
his attention to what was being said. “It’s either take up them
serpents or Hell! Now I’m already well on my way to Hell
anyway, so it don’t matter so much with me, but you can get
saved. You gotta take the hard way, instead of takin’ the easy
way and followin’ me. You just got no choice, boy.”
“Pa, stop talkin’ like that. You’re makin’ light of my faith, and you’re givin’ the boy the wrong ideas. If the Lord sees fit, nothing will happen to Matthew. There ain’t nothin’ hard about it. All he’s got to do is believe.” She was getting excited, and Matt waited with his eyes closed for the coughing to start.

“Ma, don’t you see?” he said. “It’s the faith that comes hard to me. I just don’t have it.”

“But you used to have it, Matthew. What happened?” He could tell by the way she asked the question that it would be hard to explain.

“I don’t know, Ma. Maybe the guys in the army knocked it outa me with all their questions and their jokes about it. There weren’t a one of them that would believe what I told ’em about my religion. We’d get to talking about stuff like that...”

“Don’t call it ‘stuff’, Matthew. That ain’t proper.” He had hurt her feelings again.

“All right, we’d get to talkin’ about God and religions and different things like that. I tried to tell ’em how we believe that God won’t let the snakes hurt a man that’s got enough faith, but somehow it didn’t come out right. Instead of them gettin’ convinced, they had me wonderin’ if there was anything to it at all. I’m just not sure again yet. Give me a little time, Ma. Maybe I can do it. Maybe the faith is in me, but I just don’t know.”

“You’ll know when the time comes, Matthew,” his mother said. He was a little surprised at the calm way she said it. He had expected her to feel bad or maybe even cry, but he accepted this new attitude with relief.

* * *

People had been drifting down the surrounding hills for hours, and nearly all the benches under the trees were filled. Only a few sat on the benches set on the platform for the “saints.” The rest sat on the benches where Matt had always stayed, on the safe side of the rope, a good distance from the platform.

The tuneless clangor produced by cymbals, tambourines, and guitars had been going on for quite a while, and the crowd was swaying to the heavy, pounding, one-two beat.
This was the music that would, before long, bring the power to the "saints." More people came, until the faded denims and shapeless dresses overflowed the arbor of trees, and they stood in the sun, waiting for the moment to come.

The preacher mounted the platform and began the blood and thunder sermon that he gave at all the meetings, with very little alteration. Matt's eyes and thoughts were centered completely on the two lanky youths who were making their way down the hill, carrying — in two padlocked, wooden boxes — the supreme test of faith. He could see the creatures, even though the wood was between them and his eyes. He could feel the twisting and writhing of their shining bodies in the pulsating of the music. As the two young men with the cages approached, the hand-clapping began. The preacher took the cages from them and lifted them high over his head as he damned the faithless sinners.

"A-men!" someone shouted. It was followed by other and louder shouts, some of them indistinguishable.

The key had been set since early morning, and everyone built up to high pitch quickly. Before the preacher had finished his sermon, convulsions had already begun to shake several of the "saints" on the bench. One very young girl sat among them, and she watched timidly as some of the men reached emotional peak. Those watching from the benches on the safe side of the ropes were stamping their feet and clapping their hands in eagerness. The hammering, hypnotic repetition of the preacher's chant was lifting the preacher and his congregation to the brink of hysteria.

When he heard a long, howling "Hallelujah," Matt could scarcely believe that it had come from his own throat. Looking around, he found himself standing at the edge of the "saints" platform. Convulsions shook his body, and his head snapped back and forth, threatening to take leave of his neck. The place where he found himself, and the feelings that surged through his body, confused him. They confused him, and yet with them came a strange sense of strength and power. He realized that the time his mother had spoken of had come, and he knew. It was different from anything he had ever felt. In the war, he had faced danger and death countless times, but at no time had the dangers held that
fascination which now overshadowed everything else. The
racing turmoil in his mind might have made him turn back,
had he not looked into the open cages and seen the glistening
bodies of the serpents. The rippling movements of the
smooth bodies drew his eyes and held them as a magnet draws
and holds two steel balls.

One of the "saints" came toward him, holding a snake
out before him, offering to Matt the supreme challenge. He
took it from the man's hands and was vaguely surprised at
the warmth of its body. He watched the perfectly shaped dia-
monds on the creature's body as it once, and then again,
circled his arm. It was several seconds before he heard the
hissing rattle set up by the snake's tail.

Matt swayed also, as the slender body before him swayed.
The head moved a very little and the ringed tail shook vio-
lently as the snake continued its warning. He felt the warmth
of its body in the palm of his hand and around his arm. The
graceful movements fascinated him to the point where he
could no longer look away. When the strike came, it hap-
pened so quickly that, except for the briefest instant of pain,
he would hardly have noticed it.

A gasp escaped the throats of those who noticed the strike.
Matt only stood, slightly bewildered at the speed with which
his strength and power had left him. His arm hung at his
side, and he watched the snake lower its yellowish body grace-
fully to the boards of the platform and slowly make itself way
between the feet of the "saints," bothering none of them.

The bed groaned under his weight as Matt tried to shift
to his other side. His eyes would no longer focus on the two
tiny holes in his wrist, but he saw them as plainly as he had
when he had stepped from the platform, dazed by the sudden-
ness of his failure. He could vaguely see someone standing
over the bed. He supposed it was his mother, but the image
seemed to have two heads, and he preferred not to look at it.

"Ma," he said tentatively.

"Yes, Matthew, I'm here," she answered in a very quiet
voice.

"Ma, I want a cigarette." She lit it for him and held it to
his lips. He took a deep drag that brought tears to his eyes
and made him feel a little dizzier. He thanked her, but he wasn't sure she heard him. His voice seemed to come from another corner of the room. "Hold it for me, Ma. My arm doesn't seem to work so well anymore." He tried to laugh a little, but it was a feeble attempt. He had an idea that he had said that before, but the repetition didn't bother him. He retched, but it was a dry, hard retching, because there was nothing left in his stomach. It served only to make him feel a little weaker.

"Ma," he said. "It was so warm. I thought it would be cold, but it wasn't. Did you know it would be warm? You should have told me; then I wouldn't have been so surprised. Then I wouldn't have looked so silly. Guess I looked. . . pretty silly, didn't I, Ma? I didn't want to feel silly." He tried to look at her, but the two heads were still there, and he shut his eyes again. "I'm sorry, Ma. I didn't want to look silly. I wanted to make you proud."

"I was proud, Matthew. I was very proud. Don't talk like that." There was a catch in her voice.

"Don't cough, Ma. Please don't cough. I couldn't stand that. Please! Ma, where are my legs? I can't feel them anymore. Where are they?" His voice had risen to almost a scream.

"I sent Pa for the doc, Matthew. They'll be comin' back soon."

"I don't want the doc. Tell Pa not to get him. I don't want him! God sent that snake for me, Ma. He sent him for me 'cause I didn't believe. . . and it was warm, not cold like I thought. I tried to believe, Ma, but I couldn't. I couldn't make you proud." He had a vague feeling that his body was moving, but he felt no connection with it. He tried to talk, and knew the convulsions must have started again, because he couldn't make any words come out. There was only a groan that he tried hard to stop. There were other voices now.

"Why did it have to be for this?" his father was asking. "Why for this? I would have rather had him get killed in the war. Then he would have gone for something that he really believed in and wanted, not just something that we wanted him to believe. It ain't fair that he should go like this. All
those months and nothin’ happenin’ to him, and now he has to go for this. It ain’t fair.”

Matt wanted to say something to make his father stop talking like that, but no words would come. He wouldn’t have known the right words if he could have said them. He heard the sounds from the next room. He thought it was crying. He wished it could have been crying. The rasping sound broke through all the other sounds that were converging on his brain. He couldn’t stand to listen — not to that.

“Don’t cough, Ma,” he whispered. “Don’t cough, please. . .”

Small Talk
by Jan Kahn

“. . . A T THE genetics laboratory . . . I see. — And just what do you do there?”
“I take care of dead rats.”
“Uh huh. — And are these some special rats?”
“Sure, they’re ‘Violet’ rats. They’re really brown, but you’re supposed to call them ‘Violet’.”
“Violet rats that are really brown. . . Yes. . . I see. — Tell me, what do you do with these rats?”
“It’s like I said, I take care of the dead ones. Only the experienced help gets to work with the live ones.”
“Yes — But what do you do with these dead rats?”
“I pick them up and spread their toes apart.”
“You spread their toes apart. . . I see. — Why do you do that?”
“So I can see which toes have been cut off.”
“Oh — some of their toes have been cut off — how interesting. . . Why?”
“Why what?”
“Why are some of their toes cut off?”
“So I can tell what number rat they are — or were. (They’re dead as I said.)”
“Yes. . . You say rats have numbers?”
“Uh huh. Each toe on the fore and hind paws stands for a