The Snake

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Abstract

LUNCH hour at St. Benedict’s lasted from twelve until one. At twelve the pupils stood and chanted a Hail Mary, an Our Father, and Grace for the noon meal which most of them went home for though some stayed at the school with packed lunches and bought milk and soup and candy in a small room across from Sister Superior’s office...
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Near the head of the fifth grade file Harold Capocio and Lyle Ragan dared Primo to put the snake in Sister Bernetta's desk. Primo was the first in line going into the room. He opened the drawer where the nun kept the pitch organ, letting the snake slither from his palm into the drawer and then very quickly closing the drawer and putting the chair
Sketch

back against it just before the end of the line came into the room and Sister Bernetta closed the door after it. She scowled at Primo because he was still out of his seat; so Primo got the window pole and opened wider the windows.

Lyle Ragan finished the reading assignment quickly and then sat staring for a long while at the park trees in the afternoon sun. He was reading *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* at home when he should have been doing homework; whenever his mind wandered in the classroom he thought of the time and place in which Tom Sawyer lived. Sometimes he half-wished his parents were non-existent so that he could live with someone like Tom’s Aunt Polly. Looking over heads bent on tracing fingers, Lyle watched the stirring trees and remembered the description of Cardiff Hill in *Tom Sawyer*; like Tom he wanted to wander off that afternoon to explore beneath the trees even though he had already done so dozens of times and he knew that there were no mysteries hidden by the trees, that only from a distance were trees enchanting. He turned his eyes from the window and slouched, sighing, in his seat.

The room was silent except for lip-reading sounds and noises which came through the open windows, of things growing, stretching in the sun; so Lyle Ragan’s sigh sounded more loudly than he had meant it to, and Sister Bernetta looked up, distracted from her office which, red-edged, lay open before her, her forefinger, white, round and soft, pointing the place where she was interrupted by Lyle’s sigh. She rose with the fifth grade reader and walked, thumbing the book, to the windows as if for better light.

“The fast readers may begin the next story,” she said.

Lyle turned to the next story, but after reading the first paragraph he recognized it as one he had completed. He slouched, silently this time, and his eyes retreated again to the windows. Sister Bernetta, her arms full length holding the fifth grade reader behind her, leaned on an edge of the wall at the window, her feet together, toes toward the class, but with her head turned and tilted, looking at the green promise, listening to the sibilance of spring, her brown robe filled with slim loose roundness, her black veil behind shoulders slacked.
One by one heads were raised from books and the room grew less quiet. Sister Bernetta returned from spring and unlatched from her brown rope belt a ring of keys which she gave to Primo Biasi.

"Primo, you and Harold go get the music books, please."

On their way out to the music room for the books, Primo and Harold smirked at Lyle. There was a clatter of books put away, and very shortly Primo and Harold came back with the music books and went from row to row passing them out. Primo gave one to Sister Bernetta and she went to the desk for the pitch organ. She opened the drawer, her face grew red, and she raised the snake wriggling by its tail. A girl tittered in the silence of the room. Lyle and Primo and Harold sped looks to one another from beneath brows lowered on their music books. Looking nowhere but serenely at the snake hanging straight limp from the forceps her fingers made, Sister Bernetta carried it to the window and let it drop outside. Then she got the pitch organ from the drawer and named a song they sang, Lyle and Primo and Harold studiously with their eyes on words and notes. That was all of the snake.

When Lyle looked up at Sister Bernetta she was looking at him with smiling eyes above a singing-smiling mouth. He strained but burst through the singing with laughter that caught the nun's breath, too, so that she couldn't sing and had to turn her back before the end of the song. When it ended, without turning to look at him until she had made her face stern, she said:

"Lyle Ragan, get to the music room until I come for you."

"But I didn't do it, Sister."

"Lyle, please leave the room."

He went out of the room, his shoulders still shaking, and walked down the hall to the music room. The door had been left half-open by Primo and Harold. He stood in the middle of the small sunlit room hearing in the distance muffled singing from the fifth grade room. There were a table and a piano in the room. Around the walls there were tall, half-empty book cases, and standing on the floor was a large oil painting of a red-robed monk in his gray cell at a
desk laboriously copying; behind his desk and to one side, a staircase wound down to a dungeon and up to a tower through the monk's cell. The singing ended, began again, swelled, filled the hall, then was still with the closing of the door. He heard the wooden jingle of her rosary grow louder; then Sister Bernetta was in the music room, softly closing the door.

She swished past Lyle to the window and then turned, frowning at first; but her red-pocked face cracked at the sight of his bent laughing head. They laughed together, the nun and the boy, started laughing where they stopped in the classroom. She left the window, went to him and knelt, laughing, crushing Lyle to her brown-robed slim loose roundness and so held him, neither of them breathing for the instant. At the end of her arms she held his shoulders and again her eyes were stern at first, resisting, yielding, laugh lines forming in anticipation, then joy swelling in both the nun and the boy again; she knelt and he stood looking, laughing. Her face, squared by starched linen, was ugly; smooth, but red-pocked as if with lighted matches a pattern had been made on her skin; but when she laughed: the square of linen around her face seemed yearning to fully release the laughter flowing softly from lips parted, full, stretched ovaly around white-linen-matching teeth; and lines, which made his face ache whenever he thought about her afterward, ran from her chin to join more lines sprinkled from the corners of laugh-closed eyes.

Sister Bernetta rose ad turned to leave Lyle standing alone, laughter aching in his face and stomach, becoming quiet, waiting.

"Lyle, you must try to be good."
"Yes, Sister."
"You must try to be good, Lyle. No more laughing and no more snakes in the desk."
"Yes, Sister."
"And Lyle—" she turned, lifting his chin with her forefinger white, round and soft.
"Yes, Sister?"
"Try to be good."

—Richard Carroll, Eng. Sr.