The Shaman

Betty Lartius*

*Iowa State University

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Abstract

A SWIFT, chill wind rattled at Preacher Stahl’s windows, scattering dry leaves across the aggregation of tatterd porches and rooftops below. Radiators, turned on for the first time that Fall, belched and clanked throughout the sprawling, peeling conglomerate known as The Faith Haven School for Young Christian Men to the handful of souls which it sustained and sheltered against the elements and the outside world.
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The young girl fidgeted before Preacher Stahl’s desk, a paper bag of clothes clutched in her hand. Her eyes flickered between him and the calendar on his desk, never meeting his stern look. He sensed she did not want to be there anymore than he had wanted to be at Faith Haven fifteen years earlier when he had fidgeted before another desk, intimidated by the personage of Miss Belva Deaton, severe in a matronly black dress which skimmed the tops of her heavy dark shoes. He had begged his parents to allow him to stay at home, but his father, a zealous, suspicious man who viewed the public school system as the servant of the Devil, demanded that he go to Faith Haven. He had grieved for awhile, homesick for his mother's gentleness, but in time, under the tutelage of Miss Ruth and Miss Opal, Preacher Stahl not only came to believe his father had been right about the school and about the world, but made the decision to stay on after he’d finished his schooling, assuming the title of “preacher” and taking over for Miss Belva when her arthritis forced her to admit that she could no longer carry on.

Alarmed by the sinful condition of the outside world, Preacher Stahl resolved to make Faith Haven a fortress for the Lord and he carried on Miss Belva’s work with a hand as stern as hers had been. He restricted enrollment to boys in
the belief that to mix the sexes was to expose them to temptation. He allowed no child beyond the fence that circumscribed Faith Haven lest that child be corrupted.

He resented the girl who fidgeted before him now, considering her a threat to the piety of his charges. He had told Miss Belva so, but the girl was the grand niece of the old lady. So she had come, as reluctant to be there as he was reluctant to have her there. Preacher Stahl looked older than his twenty-four years as he watched her with hard eyes and prim face. An uneasiness stirred in him, disquieted him. The sight of the girl, still tender yet showing the first nuances of womanhood, evoked, against his will, memories he was ashamed of. Desires he had believed he had conquered.

He spoke to the girl the same litany he spoke to new students, but as he chanted the familiar words, another part of his memory returned him to the redundant corridors and storage rooms that were the milieu of the Faith Haven dining hall. He could see a girl half hidden in the dimness of the storage room. He heard her whisper his name just as she had then.

But it was not her whispering. It was Miss Belva's grand niece who had shyly spoken his name. He started, aware that he had stopped speaking, that the girl waited for him to dismiss her. The boy, who was still a part of Preacher Stahl, boldly focused on the girl's rudimentary breasts for an instant before the preacher, alarmed and ashamed, diverted his eyes to his watch and dismissed her.

When she had gone, he rose abruptly from his desk as if by quick movement he could leave behind the willful boy in him that had emerged to leer at the girl. "Dear Jesus," he moaned aloud. "Why do you torture me?" He stood by the window, oblivious to the leaves that scattered against it. The muscles of his face tensed, worked. His hands, unknown to him, fidgeted with the curtain. Then, against his will, he saw the girl in the storage room again. She whispered his name.
He had been thirteen when she'd come to Faith Haven. "Angie Lewis." He said her name aloud. She'd been cocky, sure of herself. He hadn't thought her pretty even then, but like Miss Belva's grand niece, she was only a sketch of the woman she was to become and he had watched her, fascinated, held by a terrible curiosity which he believed to be sinful. At night he lay in his bed, troubled and wakeful, aware that he fell short of the purity he aspired to. He prayed silently for strength, but it was not enough. He could not control his eyes.

She'd waited that afternoon for him after lunch, hidden in the dimly lit storage room. As he approached, she whispered his name. Furtively he looked around to make sure he was alone and then slipped into the room. He followed her around a stack of boxes full of canned goods. He watched, open-mouthed and breathless, as she boldly slipped off her smock and stood before him in nothing but a thin pair of white cotton pants. "Well? You've been watching me—is that what you wanted to see?" she said, mocking him.

It was what he had wanted to see, but there was a difference between the actuality of it and the imagining of it and he turned away, embarrassed. "Chicken," she whispered. "You're a chicken."

"It's a sin," he said.

"According to the Bible, it's a sin just to think about it, and you've done that already. You're already so deep in sin a little more isn't going to make much difference."

Preacher Stahl's face flushed as he remembered how they'd fumbled clumsily at each other in the dimness, she laughing at his ineptness. He hadn't slept all that night, afraid God would strike him dead in his sleep as punishment. He lay there, his body rigid, waiting for some blow, some punishment. From time to time he felt his pulse, sure that it was slowing, stopping. He thought about Hell. Finally, in panic, he'd slipped out of his bed and tiptoed down the hall to the chapel, and on his knees, in the quiet of
early morning, he'd promised God he would never sin again if He would give him another chance.

He had kept his word. He never looked at Angie in that way again, nor did he look at any of the other girls who came later. He had come to believe that he had conquered this willful, wild boy that was within him, but now—he slammed his fist against the wall. "It is not God—it is Satan who is doing this to me. Satan is working through the girl to tempt me, but I shall not give in. I will not look at her with lust."

But the stronger his efforts to resist the temptation to watch Sister Belva's grand niece, the greater the temptation became. His face declined into haggardness as he carried on his secret struggle against Satan. He slept little. When he did sleep, he would dream that he had raped the girl and he would awake shaken and pale. He came to believe he heard Satan laughing at him, although it was only the wind chattering in the chimneys of Faith Haven.

Later there were those who said they had sensed that Preacher Stahl had been under great stress.

It was November 29. A chilly Wednesday afternoon. Preacher Stahl had gone to the church to pray as he often did those days.

"Preacher Stahl." The girl spoke to him from the back of the church.

He turned, facing her. She walked toward him. The winter sunlight turned her dress to transparent gauze, revealing the girl's body to Preacher Stahl's hungry eyes.

"Sister Belva asked me to come and get the key from you for the pantry," she said. He stared at her with glazed eyes. He ravished her with his mind.

"Get away, Satan. Get away," he screamed at her, the veins of his forehead bulging, his hands clenching, unclenching, his eyes wild. Madly he turned and picked up the candleholder from the altar and flung it at the terrified girl. It fell short. Clattered against a pew and then rolled
along the floor. "Get away. Get away," he sobbed. She heard him screaming after her as she ran from the church and even later when they took him away in an ambulance. She sensed somehow that she was the cause of his pain, but she did not understand why.

Snapshot of an Old Man IV

by
Craig Rohrssen
English 3

his house and he
have aged together
with a crackling of paint
and a crinkle of skin
he drives a nail
and folds his hands
to keep his world from shaking