

Confessions of a Born Again

It's Friday night. I'm sitting on the top bunk singing The Old Rugged Cross. I love that hymn, especially the part in the chorus where you get to sing up high. My younger sister, Karen, is asleep or she's being quiet and not talking for once. We don't call her Chatty Cathy for nothing. Mommy and Daddy are playing cards with Bernie and Lilly Fowler in the kitchen. I keep hoping they hear me. I can't sing too loud because that would seem prideful, but if I can get them to listen just a little, maybe they'll know how good I am, and that I'm ready to get born again. Once I'm born again then maybe they'll let me go off and be a missionary in China – just like Lottie Moon.

We go to church at Shields Boulevard Baptist. We've been going there for two years – ever since I turned six. That's where we met the Fowlers and most of our friends. Going to church is almost as good as going to the circus.

My Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Stevens, could be the bearded lady or maybe the super, super fat lady or maybe a Siamese twin – any one of those sad, awful freaks that people gawk at in the sideshow. But she isn't fat, and she doesn't have two heads, and she doesn't have a beard. Mrs. Stevens is covered in huge, red, welty spots, each one of the spots is at least the size of a quarter, and they cover all parts of her body visible to the world – her face and her scalp poking up from underneath her hair, her arms, her hands, her legs, her feet. Maybe they're even on parts of her not visible to the world, but that's too yucky to even think about.

At first I had a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach any time I was around her. I was afraid she might hug me and I might actually have to touch one. I thought it would be like touching one of the lepers I'd read about in the Bible. I remembered that no one could ever, ever touch a leper without becoming one, too. I was embarrassed for her, and I didn't want to look at the spots, but I guess we all have a little of Curious George in us, so I didn't want to do anything but stare at the spots.

It's strange, but even with her ugly spots, Mrs. Stevens is the only person I know who seems to like herself come rain or come shine. In fact, she is so perfectly comfortable with her spots, she makes everyone else comfortable with them, too. I don't even notice them any more; I think they must be some of God's beauty marks. Grandma always says, "God's ways are not our ways." So in no time at all I love going to Mrs. Steven's Sunday school class, and every week I listen for her honey-coated laugh.

We also have a giant named Mr. Jenkins who attends church sometimes. Bernie Fowler, Jr. says he's in a kind of traveling show, so he can't come every Sunday, but when he does, he's an amazing sight to see – at least ten feet tall, give or take an inch. After church when all the other adults are standing around yapping and drinking coffee, Mr. Jenkins picks us up and throws us in the air over his head, and we're all screaming and trying to keep our dresses down over our panties, and once, my sister Carol even puked.

We've got plenty of clowns in church, too. That's what I call the church ladies (but never out loud, I don't want Daddy to tan my hide). I like the church ladies my mom's age, but the older ones whose kids are all grown up wear white gloves and huge fluffy hats with feathers and veils, and it's easy to imagine them being able to squirt water out of the enormous flower brooches on their shoulders. And they wear so much pancake makeup their cheeks are an extra inch thick. I hate having to kiss the clowns, because they stink to high heaven. Mommy says it's Shalimar, but to me it's nothing but a disgusting old lady smell, and I pray to God that if I should ever live to be so old as 40 or 50, I won't smell that way.

The choir sounds like trained seals. Aarrff, aarrff, aarrff. I think it's because it's made up of church ladies and they warble like Jeannette MacDonald. Once I put my hands over my ears during the anthem, but Mommy gave me that evil eye look, and then I got a spanking after church for being disrespectful.

Pastor Harris is, of course, the ringmaster. He keeps the whole show running smoothly. The pulpit is in the front on a podium set off to the right side of the church, and he towers over us. With thick gray hair and a deep, booming voice, he stands for God, he is God, cracking the whip, and barking, "Trust in Jesus. Come to Jesus or face the fires of hell." He'll scare any one out of going to hell.

Hell is the fiery home of the devil and his angels, and I know I'm bound for there if I don't get born again. I don't worry about monsters under my bed; I know there's no such thing as monsters. But the devil's demons live under the beds of all bad boys and girls, and they're always waiting and watching to grab our legs and pull us under and take us down to hell where we'll be tormented day and night.

Tormenting is something my little sister does to me with her constant yapping and running around in circles. My mom is for ever saying, "Karen Deanne, stop tormentin' your sister." I can't imagine anything worse than an eternity of being tormented by my sister, burning in fire, and no Jesus.

Jesus lives in heaven and if I want to live with Jesus, I need to get born again. When that happens I'll be washed in the blood of the lamb. I will be a new person, the best person I can possibly be, and I want it so desperately. That's why I'm singing up here on the bed. Maybe Mommy and Daddy will hear me and know I'm ready. And then I can get baptized, and never have to worry about anything ever again. Unless I grow up and become a backslider (like my Uncle Roger, heaven forbid), but I love Jesus so much, I don't see how that could happen.



It's Sunday night. I'm sitting in church, fifth row from the front. Our family takes up the whole row. My dad sits next to the outside aisle. Next to him is Mommy, and she's holding my baby brother in her arms. Then it's us four girls. Janie is next to Mommy. I'm between her and Carol. Karen is on the end. I've been listening closely to everything Pastor Harris's been saying. I think I hear Jesus talking to me, so maybe tonight is the night. Pastor Harris has come down from the pulpit. He's standing at the front of the center aisle and the church deacons are in the front pew, watching and waiting to see if anyone wants to get saved. This is an altar call – my altar call. We're singing "Just as I am without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me. And that Thou bidst me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come."

Yes, they're singing for me. Jesus wants me to come on down to the front, kneel with the deacon, and ask Him into my heart. That's the only way to do it – the only way I can get born again.

I crawl over my little sisters and make my way out to the aisle. I look over at Mommy. Why is she crying? Everyone is still singing, but I can't make out all the words – there's a roaring in my ears and I think my heart is bursting inside my chest. I don't have far to go, but this walk down the aisle feels like it's taking hours. Deacon Tyler is coming up to me. I whisper that I want to be born again. He can't hear me over my heartbeat; I've got to speak up louder: Deacon Tyler, I want to be born again.

“All right, child. repeat after me. I want Jesus”

I want Jesus

“to be my Lord and Savior.”

To be my Lord and Savior.

“Amen.”

Amen.

That's it? I'm born again? Are you sure? I don't feel different. I'm supposed to be as white as snow. Why do I still worry about the devil? What is it that Pastor Harris says, “God said it, I believe it, and that's the end of it?” I don't know – I just have to trust in God, I guess. At least now I can get baptized and maybe then I'll stop fearing hell and the devil's wrath.



The baptismal font is at the front of the church – like a fish tank the size of our pickup truck. Usually a heavy red curtain covers the font and the choir sits in front of it. But after the church service, when it's time for a baptism, the choir sits in the pews with the rest of the congregation, and the curtain is pulled to each side just like we're at the movie theater. There is a small dressing room on each side of the font – men on the right, women on the left. I go to the left side and wait my turn. One of the church ladies helps me put on a white robe. She says I can keep my underwear on, and my mom made sure I had clean panties and an undershirt. I don't have titties yet, but I do have little nipples, and I wouldn't want anyone to see them.

My baptismal robe is whiter than my dad's Sunday dress shirts. It's like the piercing white of a lightning strike on a humid July night. Mrs. Clark hugs me, whispers, “Jesus loves you,” and the robe

takes on the smell of Shalimar. As I climb the half dozen steps down into the water I feel like I'm choking. I want to look for my sisters and wave to them from the top step, but I know I'm not supposed to act like that any more. The water is so warm it makes me want to pee, just like in summer when we're swimming down at Sulphur Springs. The water is deep, and I'm afraid my feet won't touch the bottom. I can see my little bare feet dangling under the robe while I clutch at Pastor Harris's arm. Dear God, please don't let me drown, and please, please don't let me pee.

Pastor places one huge hand the size of a first base mitt tightly under my neck, and the other hand completely covers my nose and mouth. In a booming voice he says, "Ruby Mae Spencer, I baptize you in the name of the Father." Then he pulls down with the hand under my neck and pushes down with the hand covering my face until I am under the water. He pulls me up sputtering, and then pushes me down into the water again. "And of the Son." He quickly draws me back up through the water only to push me down again for the third and final time. "And of the Holy Ghost." Thank God there's only three of Him 'cause I can't hold my breath much longer.

Finally Pastor Harris brings me back up out of the water, and he guides me to the steps leading to the dressing room. I can hardly move; the heavy, wet robe is plastered to my skin and I feel like a mummy entombed forever. I get dressed, and afterwards we go out for ice cream. Mommy and Daddy tell me how proud they are of me. My Grandma gives me a new Bible with my baptismal date written in the front underneath my name. I'm not sure why, but I start crying, right in the middle of eating my black walnut ice cream cone. I think it's probably just relief that I didn't drown while I was in the font, because if I had I might still have fallen into the devil's clutches.