

The Twelfth
Acolyte Reader

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Tully Curtis's Weakness

by Jared Bunda

Tully Curtis could no more have resisted Jess Pointer's costume than a horny hound could have ignored a bitch in heat. Fred Pointer sardonically acknowledged as much in his behavior on those mornings when he watched Jess come down for breakfast and smiled. A faint stirring in his own loins was complicit, certainly unacknowledged and unconnected, associated with self-righteousness. A yearning from the center of his own being for justice and retribution, which evoked peculiarly this palpitation and tightness in his throat.

On the surface it was no more than an unacknowledged coincidence which neither of them would have thought to mention. Certainly Tully had no "agreement" with Pointer that his son's slight misdemeanor would arouse the wrath of the serpent cane which Curtis swished menacingly and occasionally cracked on the tops of desks when the class was restive. The anticipation might almost have been worse than the beating itself. The class would cringe and feel a knotting in the pits of their stomachs when that cane made contact with wood. Surely it would have peeled the paint, creased the wood. How could so much noise not? Then to translate the thought of that impact onto human flesh, their own human flesh, was quite enough to restore order.

Did the other boys say to themselves when Jess arrived tightly bottomed in his overalls, "Jess is going to get it today"? Probably not.

Probably, being themselves innocent of such feelings as Tully's, they made no connection between the provocation of those overalls and the snap of the cane on denim. But Tully would be quite distracted until he could relieve the tension that he felt. It was really a sacrifice, seen from one point of view, the sacrifice of Jess's poor belabored bottom for the well-being of the class. For Tully was a good teacher and an amusing one, when the curse was off him.

Jess was a pretty boy. That was to his misfortune, of course. Was he ill-behaved? No more than others his age. He was sensual; that was his undoing. His lips pouted, his nose buttoned, his eyelashes ensnared the eye and dried the mouth.

And his perfume! How to explain the effect on Tully? An esoteric fascination. Jess peed his bed and he smelled like it. There was a Saturday's bath and in the summer the serendipity of the stream out behind the pasture where the boys swung and swam. But during school it was simply a matter of accumulation. Now Jess would have taken a good deal of mischief from the other boys had he been in this respect unique. He was not, I assure you. The odor in the room testified to the common occurrence of this very same circumstance against their wills of even the most sturdy and pugnacious boys. But it was Jess's misfortune to attract Tully in a way the other boys didn't.

I was saying before that it was not really an agreement between Henry and Tully that the latter could belabor the former's son with a cane. But it was known. To be beaten at school was in and of itself evidence of guilt. It was not something of which Jess complained to his father. Neither was it something of which he had to speak. The practiced observer, watching his movements, could easily surmise the presence of unhappy welts beneath his denim. And he squirmed at table. But of course nothing was said. And if, in some peak of

passion never spoken, his father laid out the same overalls for the next day, what could poor Jess do but hold back the tears until safe with his pillow. He knew but he did not know. Quite simply, Henry got more of a kick out of imagining the rape than committing it himself. He baited that twelve-year-old and sent him off to the slaughter.

Tully for his part tried to keep a sense of proportion about the whole thing. One day when Jess was so provocatively attired he restrained himself altogether, to Jess's total amazement and great relief. Nor did he ever whip him without provocation. A boy, for example, who wets his pants deserves whipping. None would argue with that. And of that sin Jess was grievously guilty. So what that he did not want wet pants? So what that he raised his hand at the first twinge of need? So what that the other boys were excused without argument? Conspiracy? Unfair treatment? Had not Jess himself chosen the front desk at the beginning of the year, the desk which was so often at Tully's back? Squirm therefore he might, eyes squeezed shut, legs desperately crossed, to be still ignored, until it was too late. We had to admire Tully's sense for the right moment. The look of helpless despair on Jess's face. The giggles from the girls. To move was to be undone. To stay frozen might give another few minutes. There was no recourse. He would stand, some days wetter than others, but never dry. Always the dark patch and the giggles. "Walk, don't run in the room, Jess." There really was no sense in the trip to the outhouse. Imagining him running there, undoing his straps, pulling his pants down while the flood overcame him, gave us amusement. We didn't care if he wet his pants. It was no sin in our book. But in Tully's it was cardinal number one.

You can imagine how long it took for Jess to decide that the better route was silence. He gambled for anonymity, hoped against hope

that there would not be a puddle on the floor or a horrible drip drip drip, and tried to absorb the sin as he committed it. Then the poor lad would sit praying not to have to get up, hunched forward when Tully came by, legs pulled under his seat, praying. The poor little baited fish. We would wait and wait for Tully to pounce. He would drag it out. Almost catch him, almost ask him to go to the board, almost turn and see him as he carried his small sack of lunch out to the playground. But not quite.

Then, in his own good time, Bang. Trapped and trussed. "Jess, pass out the note books." Yes, parade yourself, Jess, to the giggles, pray against the possibility that Tully is really as preoccupied with his grade book as he appears to be, that he won't hear the anticipation in the classroom, won't sense your terror. Well, you waste your time. You are the show, little boy, and the audience, all of us, are impatient for your defenseless and heartbreaking cries of pain, which we hear in the back of our minds even as you smile conspiratorially handing us back our books.

And we are not disappointed. At the very last moment. You have regained your seat, your heart beats so fast you can hardly find your voice and say that you have finished, when Tully acts. "Please do it and get it over," we think you might say some day. "Stop torturing me." But instead you sit and hope.

"Here's one more, Jess. I missed it." He holds it out for you to take and looks right at you, smiling. You snatch a glance at your lap, and dismay. You close your eyes and stand up. "I thought you had gotten over that, Jess. I'm disappointed. Did you ask to go to the outhouse?"

You shake your head, No.

"I think you must enjoy having your bottom warmed."

The understatement is quite remarkable. Warmed, indeed! You deliver that last paper and now we see the tears welling up in your

eyes and are sorry we are a part of this audience. But our hands are in our laps, too, and we are impatient for the drama to come to its climax. You hear the swish behind your back and a tear rolls down one cheek. Then you turn and walk to the front. You bend to his instructions and must look therefore at sin itself and be reminded that you really are guilty.

Even now Tully exercises his cane and makes you wait before delivering the first paralysing blow to your tight little bottom. Is it better for you, we wonder, that your seat is wet? Or worse? You cry out. Probably you shouldn't. He does ten. By the end you are bent over the library table, for you have fallen to your knees after five. He holds you by the back of the neck where we will see red marks for the rest of the afternoon. How you manage to stand and walk away we can't guess. It is not a lickin' you have just gotten. It is something else that none of us has ever felt. Just the sound of the cane on your bottom has made us squirm.

And you will squirm, all afternoon, in awful pain. He allows you to squat, kneel, stand at your desk. He is not a total monster. He allows you to go to the outhouse, knowing that you will sit there and cry and make mud to put on the welts.

Then he will be all sweetness. All help and admiration. He will flirt with you. It was not you but the sin that he punished. And you conspire, walking almost crippled from the pain to do the next task.