

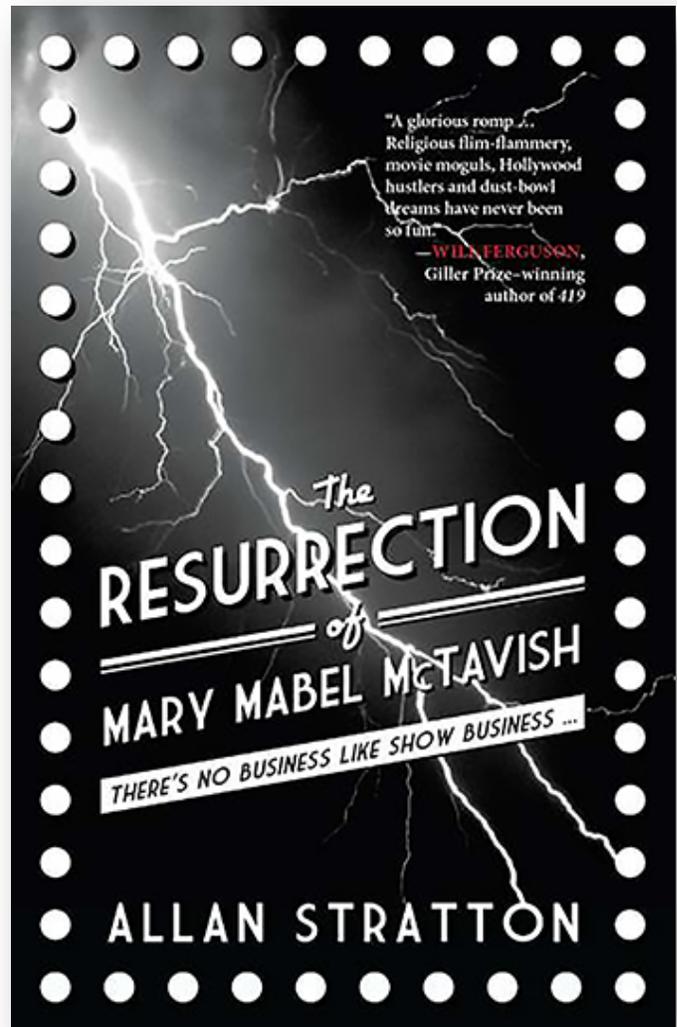
Excerpt –
The Resurrection of Mary Mabel McTavish

Chapter 1
THE VISION

Mary Mabel's decision to kill herself wasn't taken lightly. She'd considered it off and on ever since she was ten. That's when she and her papa, Brewster McTavish, had arrived on the doorstep of The Bentwhistle Academy for Young Ladies, a Gothic flurry of turrets, parapets, corbelled chimneys, gargoyles, dormers and widow's walks, more apt for the housing of bats than the delinquent daughters of the idle rich.

The Academy sat on a four-acre field in the west end of London, Ontario, a colonial outpost in the Dominion of Canada. Unlike the real London, London, Ontario was a reconstituted barracks town of retired farmers, accountants, and insurance salesmen, who fancied the place a city. At eighty-thousand souls it was certainly large enough and monied enough, with its army of stone churches, steel bridges and broad tree-lined streets of ample yards, each with a solid brick home sporting a Union Jack. It had its own fairgrounds, too, and a hockey rink, men's club, and a train station -- even its own east-end underbelly of unpaved, potholed roads and clapboard houses. What it lacked was imagination; Londoners were a practical, thrifty lot, who said their prayers, and saw the devil's work in anything that threatened the predictable.

Construction of The Bentwhistle Academy had begun in 1910 under the supervision of the town's greatest financier and leading citizen, Horatio Algernon Bentwhistle V. Horatio had conceived The Academy not only as a monument to his family's name, but as a hobby for his only child, Miss Horatia Alice, who'd become increasingly difficult since her return from school. Now, twenty-odd years later, Headmistress Miss Bentwhistle had halted improvements to The Academy in the wake of the Great Depression and her father's untimely death. This had left the moat half-dug, its clay basin filled with leaves and stagnant runoff. School brochures conjured "a magical lagoon, ideal for the contemplation of Lord Tennyson, Longfellow and Sir Walter Scott"; a breeding ground for mosquitos was more like it.



Mary Mabel had had a bad feeling about The Academy from the moment she and her papa were shown their quarters, a basement dungeon below the Great Hall comprised of two windowless, low-ceilinged rooms with cement floors, an icebox and a stove. Her papa'd been hired to do odd jobs for room and board, as he'd done for the past five years in towns throughout Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois and Michigan. She was to work in the laundry and kitchen, in exchange for which she could attend classes with the young ladies.

Her schoolmates were a nightmare, especially Clara Brimley, ringleader of the ruling clique. They'd taunt her for being poor ("What's your real name? Penny Less?"), for having lost her mama ("Where did you lose her? In a whorehouse?"), and, above all, for being plain ("Here comes Miss Potato Head"). At night, Mary Mabel would stare into the small mirror in her bathroom, praying for her mama to appear to tell her she wasn't as ugly as all the girls said.

It's true I have big features, she thought, large blue eyes, a mop of strawberry blond curls, high cheekbones and a mole. But an 'auntie' in Indiana had said once that she was lovely, the mole was a beauty mark, and her features were something she'd grow into, whatever that meant.

Mary Mabel refused to let anyone see she was unhappy. When the young ladies taunted her about her mama, her papa, or her looks, she didn't cry like they wanted. Instead, she spat in their soup and blew her nose on the inside of their pillow cases.

"Devil child." That's what Miss Bentwhistle called her the time she pitched a ladle of vegetable slop at Clara. The headmistress was of the opinion that a week spent scrubbing The Academy's toilets with an old hairbrush and lye powder would settle her down.

"Serves you right," Clara smirked. "You're a nobody's brat. I trust you've learned your lesson."

"Take care," Mary Mabel replied, "or I'll stuff your face in the toilet bowl where it belongs."

Clara snitched. Mary Mabel got a second week and her papa warned that if she caused any more mischief, Miss Bentwhistle would send them packing. "Well," Mary Mabel said, "if that's a promise, I'd better get cracking." He chased her down the hall and round the boiler, cursing her lip till an overhead pipe laid him out cold.

Mary Mabel would've gotten into greater trouble, if it hadn't been for play-acting. She started with puppets. One night, she drew a face on a finger and stuck it through the toe of a dead sock. Production standards soon improved, thanks to decorated thimble-heads costumed with a wardrobe of worn hankies. Alone in her room, she'd entertain herself with epics, switching characters with the flick of a thumb. It reminded her of when she was eight, living with 'Auntie' Irene, a mortician's wife who directed theatricals for the Milwaukee Little Theater Guild.

At fourteen, fancying herself a grown-up, the puppets were set aside and she acted the tales herself, performing the roles of Jo March, Little Nell, Dora, and, one memorable night, smothering herself on the sofa as Othello and Desdemona both. Inspiration came from her

library. She collected it in the middle of the night. Families fleeing the bailiff would take off after dark with whatever would fit in a borrowed wagon; leftovers were strewn everywhere. Mary Mabel would sneak out to front lawns and pick books like fishermen pick worms, then stack them in her closet on jerrybuilt shelves of boards and cement blocks that wobbled up to the ceiling.

These books were her best friends, her only friends if truth be known. To enter their worlds was to encounter possibilities wondrous and magical, certainly more so than any she could picture in the here and now. Her papa disapproved. “Get your head out of the clouds,” the beanpole lectured. “Life only gets worse. Accept your lot, or you’ll end your days weeping over your ironing board.”

His words went in one ear and out the other, though he was right about life getting worse. As she approached the age of seventeen, Mary Mabel thought about suicide daily. Not in the wild, hysterical way some of the girls did over boys, or examinations, but with a calm, quiet resolve. She no longer wondered whether to do it, but rather when and how.

Rat poison was her first idea. It was easy to come by, as The Academy had a large supply to keep down fall infestations. Still, she shuddered at the fate of the mice and squirrels who died in the walls and smelled for weeks. Next, she thought of hanging herself from the clock tower, like a character out of Victor Hugo; but however romantic, she hated the idea of letting the world look up her skirts. Leaping in front of a train like her heroine Anna Karenina, or shooting herself with a pistol like Hedda Gabler, were also out of the question; she was determined to die in one piece.

Mary Mabel weighed and discarded options until the week following her birthday. That night, out of the blue, she woke up to find her mama in glowing white robes, floating at the foot of the bed. She’d prayed for a visitation for as long as she could remember, but her mama had never come, and she’d almost given up hope. Her mama’s arrival now meant the visitation must be about something important: her entry into womanhood perhaps? “Meet me tomorrow at noon on Riverside Bridge,” her mama said, “and we’ll be together forever.”

Mary Mabel reached out to hold her, but the moment she did, her mama disappeared. What a peculiar dream, Mary Mabel thought. Yet the meaning was clear, and for the first time in ages she felt at peace. She knew when to die. And where. And how. The plan made such sense. Sunday was her one day of the week without chores; she wouldn’t be missed for hours. Riverside Bridge was perfect too, out of the way, private and beautiful. And the height of it and the rocks beneath -- it was a death that couldn’t be botched.

She got up. On the way to brush her teeth, she almost tripped over her papa, snoring on the floor of what passed for their living room, legs splayed out, back upright against the couch. Brewster tended to slide off when he passed out. As usual, his bottle was secure beside him, upright if empty. Mary Mabel stood for a moment and watched him twitch. He’d be upset when they gave him the news. Not because of her death, but because he feared scandal. She imagined his lament: “What will Miss Bentwhistle say?”

On that score, she knew he could rest easy. The headmistress was as skilled at deception as the Artful Dodger. She'd advertise the leap as a tragic accident. Privately, she might even rejoice, seeing as the funeral would provide her sympathy and attention. She'd see to it the service was a social event on the Middlesex County calendar, held at St. James with the reverend Rector Brice Harvey Mandible presiding, and herself in charge of the eulogy, a moving oration correct in all particulars.

Mary Mabel pictured Miss B., a monument brave in grief, declaiming from the pulpit: "Our Miss McTavish was a motherless child we cherished as our own. Despite her circumstances, her hard work in the laundry and kitchen earned her a desk at The Academy alongside our young ladies. Here she flourished, winning academic honors in English Language and Literature as well as The Bentwhistle Prize for penmanship. A flower nipped in the bud, God has taken her to His bosom to blossom by His heart." After the interment, Miss B. would arrange a memorial assembly in The Academy chapel at which her young ladies, decked out in black lace and crinolines, would be obliged to offer up prayers. Mary Mabel planned to give them all a good haunting.

Her reverie was interrupted by her papa, mumbling an order in his sleep. With me gone, he'll be up to his ears in dirty underwear in no time, damning my memory for the bother, she thought, and surprised herself with a laugh.

There was still an hour to sunrise. Mary Mabel had half a mind to go to the bridge then and there, while her determination was awake and the world asleep, but she held back. The vision had been specific as to the time, and as she knew from her books, "the constellations have purposes we mortals must attend."

Besides, the truer reason, she hadn't finished *A Tale of Two Cities* and was desperate to know how things turned out for Sidney Carton. He was a drunk, but a noble one. Mary Mabel couldn't imagine her papa risking his neck for anyone. Would she love him any better if he got his head chopped off? What a pity she wouldn't have the chance to find out.

She took her Dickens to the rocker, opened it to the page marked with the feather retrieved from one of Miss Bentwhistle's Sunday hats, and began to read, eyes darting as fast as Madame Defarge's knitting needles. She whittled down the pages till ten o'clock, when her papa woke himself with a loud fart, the explosion starting him bolt upright. "What time is it?" he blinked.

"Ten," she said. "Would you care for some porridge and toast?"

Brewster grunted, padded unsteadily to the john, peed, and poured his weekly bath. Following the Sunday morning service at St. James, he had a standing engagement to clear Miss Bentwhistle's drainpipes. She had, as she put it, "sensitive nasal capillaries, owing to good breeding and refined genes", and he took care to keep her nose in joint.

By the time he was spruced up, Mary Mabel had his food on the table. Her papa at feed made eating an adventure in nausea. She shot him a look. Sidney Carton was about to die, and all he could do was belch. She consoled herself that this was the last time he'd disturb her reading.

Porridge guzzled, Brewster wiped his toast around the bowl, mashed it into a ball, popped it in his mouth, chewed twice and gulped. Then he pushed back his chair and gave his tummy a pat. "What mischief will you be at while I'm out?" he asked, as he went for his toolbox and plunger.

"I'm going to jump off a bridge," she replied.

"Mind you don't make a mess," he snorted. And left.

The heroines in her books would have cried out, "Farewell, Papa, I love you." Not Mary Mabel. She returned, dry-eyed, to Mr. Carton's redemption. At last, the final page, the final paragraph, the final sentence, the final word. It was then that she cried, rocked for a bit, and thought that like brave Mr. Carton it was a far far better thing she was about to do than she had done, and a far far better rest to which she was about to go than she had known. A curious peace descended.

With great calm, she returned the book to its friends on the shelves, closed the closet door and went to the teacup on the apple crate beside her bed. The cup wasn't much to look at -- late Victorian, green, with gold trim about the rim and handle -- but it was the only thing of her mama's she'd managed to grab the night she and her papa had fled Cedar Bend.

Mary Mabel held it tight, closed her eyes and saw the large woman with big, warm breasts who sang to her and read her stories. She remembered how she cuddled next to her mama for afternoon naps. And about the three days that her mama lay very still at the end of the parlor, the house full of grownups, while she ran around getting lost in a sea of black skirts and saying to anyone who'd listen, "My mama's in that box," without quite knowing what that meant, except that when she said it, it made the grownups cry.

She remembered times after that, too. The visits of the women from her mama's sewing circle who brought baskets of food; and of other women, strangers, who tucked her papa into bed when he was lonely.

One night, a man with big red ears barged in when her papa was out. He came from the lodge, and smelled of raw meat. The man turned the place upside down yelling for someone called Marge to come out and face the music. When he realized the little girl was alone, he said, "When your pa gets back, tell him Slick Skinner dropped by, and he'll be round again to gut him clean."

Mary Mabel passed on the news. In a heartbeat, she and her papa were on the run with no more than they'd tossed in a pair of bags.

“Who’s Marge?” she asked.

“A mistake,” he wheezed, dripping sweat so bad the suitcase handles slipped his grip.

They hopped a freight at Peak’s Gully and hit the Sault border by dawn, fleeing into the States, west to Wisconsin. “Know why Skinner’s got elephant ears?” her papa asked. “He never forgets. As long as you live, you see them ears, you head for the hills.”

From that night on, the pair wandered as gypsies through a wilderness of small towns. Sometimes Brewster got odd jobs, and when he did, they’d stay, and when they’d stay Mary Mabel would meet a new ‘aunt’. It seemed that aunts were like dandelions: a common nuisance found everywhere, and you couldn’t get rid of them.

They, however, could get rid of *you*. Inevitably, they’d complain of her papa’s late nights abroad, the upshot being that they’d be out on the street by daybreak. To hear him tell it, it was always her fault -- she’d got on their nerves with her games of pretend -- that’s what he’d grumble as they’d hitch a ride to the next town and the next aunt. It was like that from north Wisconsin around Lake Michigan, and back into Canada at Detroit -- like that all the way to London, Ontario, where they happened upon The Bentwhistle Academy for Young Ladies, and its headmistress, the illustrious Miss Horatia Alice Bentwhistle, B.A., a.k.a. her Auntie Horatia.

Mary Mabel checked the clock on the wall. It was time for her to put away the past and end the future. She gave her mama’s teacup a little rub, and replaced it on the apple crate.

There were a few loose ends. She figured she owed her papa a clean start, so she did the dishes, wiped the ring from his tub, sewed the small tear on the underarm of his plaid shirt, and put a fresh bottle and a tumbler on the table. Finally, she took pen and paper and sat down to compose her note. She wished her last words could be as beautiful as Mr. Carton’s, but he went to a Paris guillotine to save the husband of the woman he loved, so how could he not be eloquent?

She got to the point: “Dear Papa, Forgive me. Please don’t blame yourself or worry. I’ve gone to a better place. Your loving daughter, Mary Mabel. Postscript. For supper, you’ll find a plate of macaroni and cheese leftovers in the icebox .”

It was all done but the crying; that, she’d leave to others. She propped the note up against the bottle. Then, before procrastination could cool her heels, Mary Mabel took a deep breath, rose smartly, and set off to be with her mama.

Chapter 2 *THE WICHITA KID*

Three days before, Grace Rutherford had stood on her front verandah across town, and peered down her long nose at the little rascal tethered to the railing. “Timothy Beeford,” she’d said, tapping the right toe of her black hobnailed boot, “do you honestly expect me to believe that after a morning’s church service and Sunday school at First Presbyterian, you’ll be of a mind to attend an evening gospel revival?”

“Yes ma’am,” her nephew replied, with all the innocence his ten-year-old eyes could muster. “Billy and me, we’ll be with Billy’s Mom and Dad. I aim to get saved.”

Aunt Grace was having none of it. Since arriving on her doorstep, Timmy had been the very devil. Neighbors shook their heads and muttered, “There goes that Wichita kid.” Well at least they didn’t call him “that Rutherford kid.” She and her husband Albert had had the good sense to steer clear of children; they hadn’t wanted any, and the good Lord had answered their prayers. That is until they’d received that late night telephone call from Kansas.

It was Albert’s sister Belle on the line -- Belle, who’d been sent as a youth delegate to the International Assembly of Presbyterians in Wichita eleven years before, and made hay with the first farmer she set eyes on. Aunt Grace shuddered to think of the missionary funds squandered on her sister-in-law’s disgrace; it had been hard for the Rutherfords to live it down. Now here was Belle, calling from her neighbor’s farm at three in the morning if you please, begging her and Albert to take in her mistake.

“It’s about Ralph,” Albert whispered, his hand over the mouthpiece. “It’s serious this time.”

Grace crossed her arms. It was always serious with Belle. She knew about Belle’s begging letters, the ones Albert hid in the shoebox under his side of the bed. If the Beeford farm wasn’t being eaten by locusts, it was dying of drought, or suffering dust storms so ferocious they buried livestock whole. Could Albert send a little money? Just a little? For seed? To fix the tractor? To replace the henhouse carried off in the last twister? “Please, Albert, I beg of you. Ralph and I will be eternally in your debt.” Wasn’t that the God’s own truth.

Albert always gave in. “Times are tough,” he’d say. Well except for the likes of Rockefeller, life hadn’t been a cakewalk for anyone since the Crash, now had it? Besides, what was the point of buying seed, or repairs, or a henhouse, when Ralph Beeford couldn’t pay his mortgage? Sure enough, three months ago Ralph and Belle had lost the farm, and all the savings that Albert had shoveled their way had gone up the flu with it. Now as the prodigals sat waiting for the bailiff to evict them, scarce a day went by without Belle scribbling even more letters; letters which, after much prayer, Grace had been led to intercept and misplace in her wood stove. With Belle so hard up, Grace wanted to know how she could afford so many stamps. And now this telephone call.

“It’s serious,” Albert repeated. “Ralph’s taken to reading *Revelation*. Tonight he brought the shotgun in from the barn. Belle’s with Timmy at their neighbors. There’s enough in the cookie jar to send Timmy here before Ralph does something we’ll all regret.”

Grace tightened the belt of her housecoat: How could he lay that guilt on her shoulders?

“The Lord never gives us more than we can bear,” Albert said.

Grace had her doubts.

Her suspicions were confirmed the morning she and Albert met Timmy at the station. Despite the long journey, he'd bounced from the train the image of mischief incarnate: dirty hands, smudged face, and clothes fit for the oil drum.

Grace recognized him from the Brownie snapshot Belle had sent the previous Christmas. “So you're Timmy,” she said. “I'm your Aunt Grace and this is Uncle Albert. Let's save the hugs till we get you washed up, shall we?”

A scrub with a lather of soap and a rough facecloth had revealed dimples the size of dimes, like the dents of baby fingers plunged in pastry dough, and a mass of freckles -- a spill of cinnamon on rice pudding Aunt Grace sniffed. Oh yes, this was a face that spelled trouble; the acorn doesn't drop very far from the tree.

“Don't judge a book by its cover,” Albert said.

From what Grace could make out, the cover was the least of their tribulations. Bullfrogs, cowpies, firecrackers and stink bombs fascinated the Wichita kid, especially in combination and indoors, as did bodily functions and any hair-raising experiment involving fire and combustibles. When she and Albert demanded that Timmy explain why he had done this or that, he had two cheerful all-purpose replies: “Because” and “To see what would happen.”

“Why did God create little boys?” Aunt Grace wondered. Give a girl a doll and she'd sit happily under the dining room table all afternoon and play house. Give Timmy a doll and within two shakes its limbs were clogging up the toilet.

Aunt Grace tried to curb Timmy's instincts. When she caught him playing cops and robbers she confiscated the toy gun he'd swiped from Kresge's. Without batting an eye, he replaced it with a stick. When she forbade him playing with sticks, he used his finger, cocking his thumb like a regular gangster.

Aunt Grace blamed it on the picture shows. Naturally, she refused Timmy permission to attend, but with or without her say-so she was sure he snuck into the Capital on Saturday afternoons with his little pal Billy Wertz. It frightened her to speculate on the sights he saw therein. If it wasn't James Cagney shooting up the town, it was Boris Karloff robbing graves or Bella Lugosi sucking blood. What kind of example did that set the nation's youth? Certainly not the kind found in the Good Book. At least when God ripped Jezebel into a thousand parts the better to be consumed by wild boars He provided young people with a cautionary tale of sound moral instruction.

Things came to a head the day Timmy blew up the tool shed in a chemistry experiment gone bad. He spent the next two weeks tied to the verandah by a rope. If the Rutherfords thought this punishment would curtail the mortification he caused them, they were mistaken. Passersby watched as the Wichita kid stood at the lip of the top step and practiced long-distance spitting, self-induced belching, and the host of other skills with which little boys endear themselves.

Small wonder Aunt Grace was suspicious of his desire to attend the upcoming revival. She knew all about The Tent of the Holy Redemption Tour. Run by a pair of American evangelicals, it breezed through town each fall before heading south to over-winter in the Florida panhandle. Folks praised the preaching of Brother Percy Brubacher, and the charm of his partner, Brother Floyd Cruickshank, but the good reverends weren't what drew the crowds, not in a month of Sundays.

Aunt Grace sucked her teeth. "Timothy Beeford, don't tell tales. You've no intention of finding Jesus. What you really want is to get inside that tent. That tent with its history of horrors."

"All right, okay," Timmy confessed. "So can I? Please? I'll be good for a whole week. I promise." Timmy'd heard about the tent the previous Saturday after seeing *The Mummy* with Billy Wertz. They arrived back at Billy's to find an impromptu party in full swing. Mr. Wertz and a few of his friends, big hairy men like himself, were hunkered in a circle out back, while their wives were indoors exchanging cookie recipes. The way the men snickered, Timmy figured they were drunk.

Billy set him straight. "Us Pentecostals don't drink," he declared. "We just have apple cider."

A whoop from the men. Cries of "kaboom, kaboom".

"What're they talking about?" Timmy asked.

"The revival tour. It's coming next week."

Timmy looked puzzled.

"You know, the tour, the tent?"

Timmy still looked puzzled.

Billy rolled his eyes. "Daddy," he called out, "tell Timmy about the Tent of the Holy Redemption!"

The men blinked, then let out a collective guffaw. "Go on, Tom. Tell the kid. Make a man of him."

Mr. Wertz cocked his head at Timmy. "If I tell, promise you won't let on to your Aunt Grace?"

Timmy could hardly breathe: If this was a grownups' secret, it must be important. "Cross my heart and hope to die." He plunked himself cross-legged at the foot of the oracle.

"All right then." Mr. Wertz took a glug of apple cider, and leaned forward. "Next week, a couple of preachers are coming to town with the Tent of the Holy Redemption. But before the reverends got their hands on it, it wasn't a revival tent, see? It was a den of iniquity. Belonged to the Bennetts, rich folks from Pittsburgh, made their money in coal."

"Robber barons," interrupted the man on Mr. Wertz's right. Timmy pictured a family in Zorro masks sitting on shiny black thrones.

"Robber barons is right," nodded Mr. Wertz. "Now these Bennetts, these robber barons, they had themselves an estate near Hornets Ridge, a village 'bout a slingshot east of Mount Pawtuckaway, off in the Merrimack Valley of New Hampshire. And they'd get their richy-rich pals to come up by sleeper train to join 'em on pleasure trips. By day, they'd hunt. By night, they'd party in the tent. Stuff themselves sick on game, French pastries and booze. Oh yes! And dance to jazz bands bused in from New York!"

"Never mind about that," the man said. "Get to the good part."

"I'm getting there, I'm getting there," said Mr. Wertz. He had another glug of cider. "Now the Bennetts had this son by the name of Junior. The worst of a bad lot. He had slick hair, silk ascots and wiggled his eyebrows at every gal in the county."

A chorus of hoots: "A walking erection!" "Doubled the town birthrate!" "Wore out the back seat springs on his Daddy's Hudsons!"

"At least he was good for something!" said the man with the mole.

"Who's telling the story?" Mr. Wertz demanded.

"You, Tom, you," the men cackled.

"Right, so anyways, this Junior, he finally bites off more than he can chew. Starts making time with Nellie Burns, wife of the sheriff's deputy, Reggie. Reggie gets wind of the hanky-panky. Late one night, he grabs his shotgun and heads to the Bennett tent. There he finds his wife and Junior naked as jay birds 'cept for their party hats. What happened next wasn't pretty."

The men fell silent. Timmy's eyeballs were out of their sockets.

"The wages of sin is death," the man with the mole observed.

“Amen,” said Mr. Wertz. “That’s Brother Percy’s very text. Adultery happened in that tent, lad. A double murder/suicide to boot. To this very day, you can see the holes where the lovebirds had their skulls blasted through to Kingdom Come. And if you look real hard, you can even see some brains.”

Timmy nagged his Aunt Grace for days. He nagged his Uncle Albert too. “I gotta see inside the tent. I just gotta.” The couple discussed their nephew’s request into the wee hours. Aunt Grace was inclined to say no. As a Presbyterian, she found the idea of tent evangelists embarrassing. “Too much singing, clapping and general mayhem, not to mention those tambourines.”

But as Uncle Albert pointed out, the Wertz’s were pretty respectable for Pentecostals. “Maybe our Timmy could learn something from a God-fearing sermon on the wages of sin.”

Aunt Grace counted to ten; Albert gave in to everyone, except her. She wrung a concession. “We’ll give you our blessing,” she told the boy, “providing Mrs. Wertz promises you’ll be home for tuck-in by nine o’clock.”

Billy and his mother arrived at five to collect Timmy for the twenty-block walk to the fairgrounds. Mr. Wertz had gone ahead to help raise the tent. They planned to meet for a potluck picnic with other families from Bethel Gospel Hall, following which the revival, and Timmy’d be home by nine as promised.

Uncle Albert and Aunt Grace were waiting with Timmy on the verandah, Uncle Albert clutching the family Bible, Aunt Grace cradling a container of her special potato salad.

“Sorry we’re late,” Mrs. Wertz hollered from the street.

Aunt Grace smiled primly. Pentecostals could carry on like pig-callers in a barnyard, but Presbyterians knew better than to make a ruckus. “Why Betty,” she said when Mrs. Wertz was within speaking distance, “aren’t you looking festive.” This was in recognition of Mrs. Wertz’ pleated navy dress and string of imitation pearls. For herself, Aunt Grace wore only black on the Sabbath -- as Christ had died for her sins, it was the least she could do -- but she understood that in fashion, as in most other things, Pentecostals had their own notion of the appropriate. Ah well, who was she to judge, God would let Pentecostals know what was what in the fullness of time, and in any case it wasn’t as if she had to invite Betty Wertz inside.

Mrs. Wertz showed off the frock with a spin. “Thanks muchly. It’s nearly new from my sister Bess, out Ingersoll way. Lucky for me, she’s been enjoying her suppers of late. Heavens, I wish I could put on some flesh, but there you are.”

“And here *you* are,” said Aunt Grace, presenting Mrs. Wertz with her special potato salad before the conversation could descend to body talk.

“You shouldn’t have,” Mrs. Wertz replied, packing it next to the bologna sandwiches and celery sticks in her picnic basket.

“No trouble,” Aunt Grace allowed. “I make it with olives and pimentos, you know. With a speck of pepper for zest.” Aware of a wriggling at her side, she glanced at Timmy, and faced an unspeakable horror. “Timothy! Get your hands out of your pants!”

“But my nuts itch.”

“Timothy!”

“Well they do!”

Aunt Grace gave him two quick spanks. “That’s for scratching. And that’s for sass.” She pivoted back to Mrs. Wertz, red as a beet. “If Timothy gets himself into any mischief, give him a good smack. It’s the one thing he understands.” Timmy made a face. Aunt Grace grabbed him by the ear. “If we hear of any hijinks, there’ll be more where this came from.” With that she gave Timmy a third and final spank that sent the lad scooting down the verandah steps.

“I’m sure he’ll be just fine.” Mrs. Wertz said, as the boys ran laughing in circles to the street, the picnic basket swinging between them. The Tent of the Holy Redemption was a forty-by-sixty foot, blue-and-white monster. Timmy fell silent the moment it came into view. As he approached, all he could think was: “Once upon a time, a man was *naked* in that tent. With a *woman*. And now they’re dead. And in Hell. Both of them. Together. I wonder if they’re still naked?”

“Hi there.” It was Mr. Wertz, fresh from securing the last support. He gave Mrs. Wertz a sweaty bear hug and she didn’t even mind. Timmy bet they did things that would make his Uncle Albert and Aunt Grace drop dead of a heart attack.

Mr. Wertz turned to the youngsters. “What would you kids say to a tour?” The boys were in heaven.

Their first port of call was the portable generator and trailer-truck at the rear. The truck was bright enough for a carnival caravan, covered in colorful curlicues, squiggles and capital letters. “She’s quite the beast, eh?” Mr. Wertz enthused. “Everything you see -- tent, poles, generator, the whole shebang -- folds up and fits inside.”

“Are those the eyes of God?” Timmy asked, pointing at the trailer wall. Circling the command, PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD, were a dozen gigantic bloodshot eyes, more scary, all-seeing and all-knowing than even the eyes of his Aunt Grace, who claimed to have an extra set in the back of her head.

“Sure thing,” said Mr. Wertz. He gave them a knowing wink: “So what do you want to see next?”

“Blood, blood,” Timmy squealed.

Mr. Wertz tousled the little ghoul's hair and threw him in the air. "You got it." He trooped his charges up front, lifted the tent flap and hustled them into the sanctuary of horrors. Ahead stretched a wide center aisle, flanked by twenty rows of benches and chairs, which led to a platform with a pulpit on its left and a piano on its right. Above the stage, shards of light entered where brains had once blown out.

Timmy was beside himself. He imagined naked people running back and forth dodging bullets like mechanical ducks in a penny arcade. Bang! Bang! AAA!!! Bang! Bang! AAA!!!

What he loved most were the gore stains radiating from each hole. Ten years of rain and sun had failed to wash, weather or bleach them away, as if God had decreed the tent's taints would never fade, but remain an eternal warning to sinners. (Brother Floyd prized this effect, which made worthwhile his periodic efforts with slaughterhouse guts and a paintbrush.)

Outside, Mrs. Wertz and the women were calling the menfolk to supper. Timmy made a beeline for the food lineup, appetite whetted no end. What a spread! The fairground tables bowed under a weight of roast and boiled meats, fresh vegetables, salads, sandwiches, and pies of every description.

Timmy was a prize piglet, even gobbling a scoop of his aunt's potato salad, except for the olive bits. These he stored in his pants pockets, where he hoped they'd dry into ammunition for his peashooter.

"You're like a little oinker fattening up for slaughter," Mr. Wertz laughed. How he'd regret those words, wish to gobble them back as surely as Timmy did butter tarts. For if the Wichita kid was as stuffed as a mounted deer head, within two hours he'd be as dead.