

James Beach

“Number Nine”

FOR his ninth birthday Jesus vowed to do whatever anyone asked of him. This was his year to grow up. Even if someone called him Jesus (Geez-Us) instead of Jesus (Hey-Zeus), he promised himself he'd pretend they were right.

Since it was a Sunday, and no one told him to rise and shine, he slept in late. He ate cold cereal and a muffin, drank juice-from-concentrate, then went back to his room to brush his teeth. He took off his pajamas. He wetted and combed his hair, parting it the way his mom liked. He studied his image.

He put on a white collar shirt and khaki pants, dress-socks, and the silver clip-on tie he got for Easter (instead of a candy basket; his parents' casual way of peripherally dealing with his pudge and general listlessness). He gave up his usual church fuss — his parents wanted him to attend peaceably — to uphold his birthday promise.

Again he looked in the mirror, combing, seeking physical signs of age nine in his face. His forehead was taller, he decided. His chin and eyes and nose and mouth all looked the same as when his baby teeth fell out and his adult teeth grew in crookedly.

He kept practicing smiles. Then: those taps on the horn signaling his family was in the drive waiting for him. One quiver of hair on his crown stuck out and he rewetted it, added a gooey curl of toothpaste to smooth it in line.

He carried still-stiff tie-up loafers down to the car, where his coiffed-looking parents reverberated petulance between themselves. How long had he been up there? He gave the apologetic smile.

His sister Belle, staining the hem of her dress green in the weeds of the boulevard, dropped the fistful of dandelions when she saw him. She offered to shut the door for him, “like a chauffeur”. Okay, sure, he agreed.

The boy kneeled on the back seat. Yet the shoes in his hands ate up his ordinary spatial or senses thoughts as he considered where to put them on, how to sit his body so as to be able to tie them. Meanwhile, Belle shut the door on the right pinky toe.

Shock kept the boy from yelping in pain. When his sister figured out what happened she started to bawl. His mom demanded to know what happened, his dad already knew.

Jesus fused the hurt with his birthday resolution and managed an “I’m still alive, right?”

With an icepack retrieved from the garage freezer, his mom got into the backseat to remove the dress-sock and examine the boy’s foot. Belle rode up front, blubbing for a minute; when the sedan reached the main road she quit that noise, started singing “Jesus Loves Me” softly.

The pack burned like frost and the toe throbbed and swelled during the drive, throbbing but causing the boy very few actual tears. It was bruised, not broken.

None of them would worship together in the sanctuary until later that morning: the boy’s parents each attended a discussion group first, divided by sex, while he and his sister were signed up for Sunday school classes separated by age. Dad’s plan to drop off the kids and the wife at the door, and find a parking spot, suited Jesus; it was easy to accept “helps” on his birthday.

“See you soon,” said his mom, leading Belle by the hand to her Bible class.

Jesus limped in the stark corridor, right shoe in hand, the ice-pack inside the shoe. He buoyed his mood by meditating on doing whatever others asked of him. For months his Sunday school teacher had instilled that very thought into his whole class: be selfless.

The classroom door was open; he was late. Jesus showed off as many teeth as he could crowd into his smile.

Ms. Steffa looked from Jesus’ stretched open mouth to his shoeless foot to the loafer in hand, then to his eyes. “Are you all right, Jesus?”

“I’m okay,” he managed to say with a smile on. “I’m still alive, right?”

“Oh, sure he’s alive,” said Jason, the spiky red-head who could expand and contract his abdomen like a frog could bubble up its throat.

“Thank Jesus for that,” said Ms. Steffa.

Ms. Steffa kept a datebook and always celebrated when someone had their “nine-day”. (Once, a boy turned ten, but no one made a big deal about him being older since he’d come from a state with “different learning”.) Jesus got to cut the angelfood cake-with-sprinkles, and choose a helper to dish it out onto paper plates with cartoons of Jesus Risen on them, while his teacher poured apple juice into dixie cups with jokes on them.

The boy did feel popular, with everyone smiling and telling the dixie-cup jokes; he was the cause of this party. And Ms. Steffa winked when she put the ice-pack in his sock and set it over the top of his bare foot — no one ever got to go barefoot in church.

Except for Belle, who'd looked so apologetic that he just knew it wasn't on purpose, his big day was progressing all right, even well. Besides, she was barely six, had slammed the door pretty timidly.

"Hey Jesus," asked the ten-year-old, "What did the acolyte say to the candle flame?"

Jesus grinned and shrugged.

"That's s'nuff."

Nonsensical, that dixie-cup. Jesus forced a laugh. He picked up sprinkles by squashing them among the sticky tines of the plastic fork.

The three most popular kids in class — Jason, and two girls with shiny bobbed hair, both named Monica — descended on Jesus when Ms. Steffa took her morning "potty break". Others in the class massed round the cake to sugar-binge.

"Jesus, hey," said Jason. "Oh — I mean, hey, Jesus. You've got cake on your tie."

Jesus unclipped his tie to study while the trio laughed.

"Joke's on me," he said amicably, then set his tie on his plate.

The trio stepped back, motioned for Jesus to follow. They lured him out of his seat and through a folding canvas room divider to an adjacent classroom, which was dark, the blinds drawn on the window, the door locked from inside. A Monica closed the room divider.

"I want you to put this in that, Jesus," the spikey red-head said, holding a paperclip in front of his penlight before swinging the beam to showcase an electrical outlet.

The birthday boy sensed something was off, about the request. Keeping his vow suddenly took on a bit of weight. If he did what they wanted he might get in trouble; if he didn't do it he'd ruin his integrity.

Running his penlight on the floor, Jason found a bitten-up (no. 2) pencil; he bent open the metal clip and stuck one end in the eraser. "Now it's ready."

"We dare you," the girls chimed as one.

"Jesus, the graphite will protect you," Jason insisted; "it's an insulator."

"Will it, really?"

The girls nodded as if they believed so.

Next door, someone put on a disc of Bible songs.

With his toe smarting again, Jesus limped over to the adorned pencil dare. He examined it, thinking of it and spinning the hexagon, the crooked clip glinting in the light of Jason's beam. "Promise you won't tell anyone? I don't want to get in trouble."

The three of them promised.

"Okay," said Jesus. He and the others huddled round the outlet solemnly.

"Do it do it do it," the girls chanted, their bodies moving like conjoined twins, in the shadows.

The boy remembered how he tore up a chapter of science homework (on electricity and conduits) last winter, and then lied to that teacher about having completed the assignments. He'd done it to catch the snobby class ace, who always managed to stay a chapter or two ahead —

"Do it!"

And then Jesus did. A hot yellow-white arc sizzled into the air, trailing like a sparkler at night — some stray jaggedy sparks jumped clear across the room. In real-time the show lasted a split-second, but the birthday boy saw it in slow-motion, the blips of light flying so fantastic —

The paperclip twirled up out of the eraser and fused itself to the metal outlet plate. His body electric, Jesus let go the pencil.

Next door, the disc stopped.

Muffled scolding and questions from Ms. Steffa until she yanked open the room divider. Her wrinkly hands shook on the canvas and her face drew together in the middle like it had a drawstring.

"What are you all doing?" she said.

Jason flicked the penlight.

Ms. Steffa strode into the room, a silhouette, found the light switch. She sniffed the air, scrutinized the spittle-like burns on the tile beneath her feet. "What's going on in here?" she demanded. "What's that burnt metal smell from? Who did these marks on our nice floor?"

By now the remainder of the Sunday school class had filed in behind the teacher, curious, accusatory.

A Monica said immediately, "The birthday boy did it."

To which the other Monica dropped her jaw and turned her head to check out Jason, who shrugged; she cupped a palm over her mouth.

“Oh, did he?”

“Yes.”

Jesus closed his eyes.

“How did he,” probed Ms. Steffa.

His stomach frozen at half-frog, the Jason said, “There was a pencil on the floor, and the paperclip was pushed into it, and the graphite worked as a ground. He stuck the clip in the socket.”

Catching a breath, the teacher rushed to Jesus and grabbed his small hands, checked them for burns, ran her fingers over the boy’s toothpaste-crusty crown. For a moment she breathed sharply, studying the clip fused to the outlet plate.

“Do you know what this is?” she asked, not of the boy, or the other children, but of the dimpled pencil. “The graphite in here is a conductor!, of electricity.”

At last she faced her class. “Do you all know what a conductor is? It’s the wood that insulated you, Jesus, the wood and the rubber eraser. The wood saved you from getting electrocuted. Now thank Jesus this pencil wasn’t mechanical.”

The boy did thank Jesus, and looked with fear-of-the-almost at Jason and the Monicas, who averted their eyes. Subdued, afraid, they trailed the others into the other room.

The teacher remained in the room with Jesus. “Why would you do this?”

Jesus replied, “They wanted me to.”

“What kind of answer is that? Would you throw yourself off a cliff if everyone wanted you to?”

The boy remembered a story about a solitary house that was scheduled to be demolished... the owner invited everyone in the neighborhood for an art day. What fun! They painted the clapboards with doodles and spatters, signatures and caricatures... Then the owner of the house received a phone call. Oh, no! He had to keep his house! His friends from the neighborhood left, then... Alone, the owner rented ladder and scaffolding, bought the brushes and plain boring paint to whitewash the graffiti.

“I think we need to find your parents. I think we should tell them what you did,” said the Sunday school teacher.

She collected his loafer and dress-sock with the ice-pack, closed the divider to the dark classroom, took Jesus by the hand.

With a passive nod, Jesus allowed himself to be led down the corridor to the narthex. He forgot to smile, cringing when he limped, numb while considering his lesson, in science. No one went barefoot in church. Besides, the tiles were clean and cool and he wanted to please his teacher by keeping stride.