

## Dark Curtain

LeRoy Gilhooly was in a bad mood: had been for weeks. Mama Bertha had run off. Couldn't take it anymore, she said. Just up and ran off and left LeRoy alone in the house. She threw her things into an old, battered suitcase that she carried to the bus station, bought a ticket and that was that.

Everybody thought she would come back: even got up a lottery on how long she'd stay gone. Shine Jackson won with his 'X' in the six weeks block, the longest time chosen, and collected the three dollars and eighty cents that Annie Crumpton held for the winner. Shine put it with the nickels, dimes and quarters he'd picked up on the street and bought a pint of Old American whiskey from Newt Birgans down on Church Street.

Shine Jackson was LeRoy Gilhooly's best friend. Shine was a simple-minded boy-man, the neighborhood idiot that everyone loved and feared, so they treated him like dirt. It gave them a sense of power and of magnanimity when they treated him bad and then hugged him or gave him a piece of candy or a drink of liquor. When anybody got mad, they could take it out on Shine and he'd forgive them. Or if they felt sad, Shine was always there, like a cur dog, to make them feel better. Shine's mother was in the Elmira State Hospital for the insane. The identity of his father was a question mark.

Shine lived in the streets and back alleys, in the abandoned or burnt-out buildings that cluttered the neighborhood. His fare was the handouts of folks who saw in him a sign from God. People believed that the simple boy-man had a special communion with the Creator. Some said that he was a saint, reincarnated to show sinful folks the true way. Only a Godly man, they said, could live the mendicant life so happily without a care and always with a smile. Shine smiled all the time, even when LeRoy beat him, which sometimes caused Leroy to beat him even more.

Some folks meant to talk to LeRoy about that: about beating the saint. Surely it made God mad, they said one night in a secret Christian conflux. Meeting secretly seemed to enhance their spiritual

powers and so they met often, talking about Jesus and Revelations and LeRoy Gilhooly. The book of Revelations was their favorite subject. Within its chapters, they found the symbols and meaning for all things. No mystery remained untouched by its holy, ghostly language. In the mouth of one who could interpret and expound the messages, it was like a bright and shining sword that cut through the crassness and tedium of everyday existence into the reality of promise and joy. Such it seemed to be in the voice of Reverend Oscar Jones. Reverend Jones was the shepherd of the tiny flock of brothers and sisters of the Mt. Zion Holy Saints Missionary Church.

Reverend Jones preached from a makeshift pulpit, rudely constructed of boxes, in the big room of his home. He was a bona fide minister, licensed by the county to administer all sacraments of his church from weddings to funerals in the name of Jehovah and the county clerk's office.

Reverend Jones liked performing weddings in which he felt a kinship with love and the universe. But he hated funerals. He did a few funerals because it was part of his mission, but he managed to get a stand-in for most of them. Some folks said that the Reverend had a problem with funerals, but no one knew the truth of the matter.

No one knew that when he was ten years old, some of the men in his town had played a mean joke on the little Jones boy that had left him with a terrible fear of the human corpse. His father had worked as an embalmer in the town's funeral home and had helped make young Oscar a figure of fun. That time had lived with him undiminished for forty years, emblazoned in his memory with the tenacity of the kudzu vines that clothed the county. And he hated his father's memory: the swirling flashes of a strong, tall man with a big smile who had carried him on broad shoulders through the kudzu infested forest to a trickling stream to hunt crayfish and salamanders on sunny afternoons. Somehow, Reverend Jones had forgotten his mother. He could not conjure up her face without first looking at her photograph. She seemed only a dream: a mist-shrouded figure who wove in and out of his fantasies

without substance. And yet he felt that he loved her, wanted to love her, needed to love her if only he could remember.

In the book of Revelations, Reverend Jones found the meanings that escaped him in life: the mysteries and profundities, the depth of spiritual feeling that seemed lost until his discovery of the book. With each new discovery – a nugget of wholeness that leapt unblemished from the pages of the Bible – he felt a greater insight into the essence of being. And he believed that if he could somehow transmit that insight into words and instruction, he could found a new dispensation and free his congregation from its cruel yoke of ignorance and the imprisonment of flesh. In his secret meetings and in his sermons, he tried to find the key, but it seemed always illusive:. The words, the language, were insufficient, tawdry tools with so vast a limitation as to be a hindrance, a block to human understanding. And so he taught his parishioners to speak in tongues, which he had learned while listening outside the window of a local Holiness Church. The maniacal gibberish that flowed from their lips he saw as a way of breaking through, of awakening the sleeping knowledge contained within each being.

Shine Jackson clasped the pint of Old American close to his chest, casting sidewise glances to see if anyone had discovered his treasure. He wondered if Newt Birgans had told anyone. The street was the home of shadows and fear. Shine smiled, unknowingly, unperceptive of himself, only of the dangers of the street. He opened his jacket and looked closely to make sure the bottle was safe. The dark liquid sloshed in the neck of the bottle under the golden cap. He tore at the tax seal, shredding away its barrier and looked quickly up and down the street. A wave of panic seized him and he ran into an alley and hid in an abandoned coal bin, crouching in a corner and staring into the dimness of the dark room. His brain reeled with a fear that seemed to prick at the inside of his skull, making little pin points of light flash in his vision and a dark curtain seemed to descend. He shut his eyes tightly and watched the light, feeling his heart thumping and his breathing coming in gasps.

He waited until his heart had slowed and his breathing eased and opened his eyes to see if any of the Revelation beasts Reverend Jones talked about had come into the room. He wanted to taste the liquor, but he did not give in to the urge and held the bottle tighter.

Shine pulled the shell of an old wallet from the pocket of his jacket. From a secret compartment he took a tiny photograph and his smile broadened. The picture had been made in a curtained booth with a coin slot. The photograph was sepia-hued and faded, its shiny finish dulled by thousands of touches of damp fingers. He had never shown the picture to anyone else, not even to LeRoy. It was his secret treasure that he prized above all else. The little piece of paper was his greatest security in an uncertain world, the one thing that gave meaning to his twilight existence.

He passed a finger over the face that looked out at him. In the darkness of the coal bin he could barely distinguish the features of the face. But the mere presence of the picture conjured up the visage that was burned into his memory. He formed a silent word with his lips and returned the photograph to its hiding place. He felt better and the ghosts of his terror receded to the dark corners of his mind and the curtain lifted. He moved quietly into the alley and down the street smiling and shielding the bottle inside his jacket.

LeRoy Gilhooly sat in his broken chair staring at the television screen. The chair's broken front leg caused the whole thing to list forward and to one side. LeRoy leaned back, adjusting his weight to the awkward angle. A broken spring from the seat pricked his calf and he winced and cursed as he shifted away from the pain. The face of the television was a phosphorescent blur, casting a dim glow in the dark room. He had found the television set downtown atop a pile of junk behind the repair shop and carried it for two blocks until its weight wrenched the set from his hands and smashed down onto his big toe. Afterwards, his toenail inflamed and filled with pus. He sharpened his pocket knife to a fine point and drilled a hole in the nail until a bloody effluence spewed out, giving him some relief. He hid

the television in a growth of weeds until his toe was better during which time two violent storms ravaged the town. The cardboard box with which he had covered the set became a mushy slime that stuck to the cabinet with the tenacity of glue. He borrowed a child's wagon and hauled his prize home and installed it on his kitchen table below the drop cord light bulb that had an electrical outlet. When he plugged the thing in, it blew his main fuse and filled the house with acrid smoke. He turned the set onto its side and left the fan blowing on it for a week.

LeRoy watched the luminous face of the television as it seemed to bubble with life: the dark and bright spots twinkling, interchanging: growing brighter and darker like a pulsating, expanding galaxy. The moving points of light fascinated him and he would watch the screen for hours, now that Mama Bertha was gone with her sharp tongue. That woman had made his life miserable, buffeting him with her tirades and upbraiding; poking fun at him for watching a television that had neither sound nor picture. He wanted to tell her that it made no difference, that he had pictures in his head and that all he needed was the glow of the screen, that it was even better that way. But he didn't tell her. He let her laugh and chide and menace him until he had his fill and he got his revenge. She could stay away if she wanted, and good riddance. Thirty-five years of that woman was enough and more.

If only, he ruminated, he knew how to cook. He was tired of sardines and Vienna sausages and crackers and pork and beans. A man needed a meal once in a while, to line his innards with a proper mess. And a man needed a woman sometimes, a soft mound of flesh to engulf him and drain his juices. He smiled, remembering, threading the memory throughout his body, weaving it gently into his groin until he was tight with the thought. LeRoy hummed a tune softly, meditating upon the glowing screen. The pictures in his head followed easily one upon the other of mounds of food steaming fragrantly on his table, served to him by nubile young women with extravagant parts. He smiled and smacked his lips, sniffing the air to catch the last delicious smell which blended of cabbage, ham and woman.

Mama Bertha came to him through his nose, titillating him with the saucy pungency that rose from her richly like a holy cloud. He loved her smell. She had always smelled good to him, from the earliest musk that rose from her excitement, to the full, rich aroma that followed the birthing of her children. He had thought wild, exciting thoughts that he wanted to tell her, that he wanted to do and he let the glow of the tube play the pictures in his head as he hummed his tune. Once he told Mama Bertha that she smelled so good he just wanted to eat her up and in her excitement she had let him nibble on her until his demands grew insistent and his body flushed with the excitement of his quest and he had grown brave with the urgency of his need and she had withdrawn, her face contorted with rage and disgust.

But, LeRoy got his revenge. He had waited thirty-five years until she was big and lumpy, but he had had his way and he had sensed a reluctant joy in her horror when he forced her submission. He smiled and hummed his tune and let the screen play the pictures over again and again in his head.

Annie Crumpton dragged her feet slowly over the rough and broken sidewalk. Her heavy body crushed down upon her worn and swollen ankles and she felt as if her bones were grinding one against the other each time she took a painful step. That morning, Reverend Jones had prayed over her and touched her aching feet. She had swooned with the ecstasy of faith, feeling the ripples of excitement run through her like a flame. She had talked in tongues like he instructed. It wasn't easy at first, but it got easier each time she tried it, and poured out her heart to the Reverend and Jesus. But the pain stayed, unrelenting. She wished she had won the lottery so she could buy some whiskey that would make her forget the pain, even if only for a little while.

Ever since Josh died, things had gone from bad to worse. It was as if he'd left his pain and sickness behind and settled it on Annie's body. Sometimes she resented him for dying, almost as if he had intentionally abandoned her when she needed him most. She thought of her friends who seemed

to think of her as if they did of Josh: gone and forgotten. She remembered, sadly, her lost youth, lost in a dim past that, now forgetting the happier moments, seemed an unrelieved desert of joylessness. She felt the rush of warmth at the back of her eyes as self-pity worked its way through the message of tears and she looked down the street for someone to accuse.

Shambling furtively, just ahead, she saw the figure of Shine Jackson moving towards her. He was clasping his hands to his chest and looking behind and from side to side, so much so that he seemed unaware of Annie's approach. Annie felt a wave of happiness flow through her heart that lifted and dissipated the cloud of hurt that she had dragged along the street. Shine always treats me nice, she thought, wanting to hug him hard so she could express the depth of her affection.

Shine often ate at Annie's table. He was almost a regular. It was through Annie that Shine had gone to the secret meetings and heard the Reverend's dissertations on the book of Revelations. The tiny group had taken a liking to the simple boy-man with the eternal smile.

Annie smiled broadly and felt herself open to the world.

Shine started when he saw Annie: a large, grinning figure looking as if she might engulf him. He jumped back and grimaced, although the smile was not completely displaced, and fled between two houses and down an alley.

Annie looked after the fleeing figure in disbelief and remembered the meals she had served him. A great weight seemed to descend upon her and she felt that she could go no farther. She stopped at the front of a burned out shell and sat on the blackened boards of the porch floor. Crazy boy! Not a brain in his head, she said to herself over and over as if the words could somehow dissolve the hurt. Annie cried, loudly and unashamedly, looking through the blur of tears now and then to see if anyone was looking. The pain grew more hurtful when she saw at last that she was alone with her misery.

LeRoy Gilhooly had almost entered his dreams when Shine stuck his smiling face through the hole in the screen door. LeRoy looked at Shine through half-closed eyelids and compared him with the girls in his fantasy and was angry. He said nothing.

Shine pulled his hand from his jacket and held the bottle up for LeRoy to see. The damsels exited Leroy's imagination and he sat as upright as the chair would allow and said "c'mon in here, boy. What you doin' out there?"

Shine could tell that LeRoy was happy and it made him happy. It made Shine happy to see the big smile distort LeRoy's face. When LeRoy smiled, it fed the hazy fantasy that had developed in shine's dreamy thoughts.

"Hi, LeRoy. What you doin'?" Shine said.

"Watchin television. C'mon in boy. Don't stand out there on the porch grinning or you'll scare the flies away," LeRoy teased, his eyes glued to the bottle.

Shine grinned bigger and pushed through the door.

"Looky what I got here, LeRoy," he said, waving the bottle before him.

"Careful, boy, don't you go and drop it. Don't want you to stink up my place. C'mon and sit over there," he said, pointing to the one kitchen chair that had a back.

Shine sat in the chair, clutching the bottle and looked at the television. He wondered why LeRoy watched the imageless tube and wanted to ask him but couldn't find the words.

"Looky what I got here, LeRoy," he said again, still staring at the television.

"I can see what you got, boy. Where'd you get that?"



“I bought it Leroy and I brought it over to show you.”

“That’s all you gonna do, boy. Juss look at it? That’s a mighty purty bottle to juss look at. You want me to show you what to do with it?” LeRoy said, controlling his anger.

“I brought it over to show you, LeRoy – see,” Shine said, holding the bottle up again.

LeRoy looked at Shine and got madder and madder. He was thirsty and could feel the cool, dark liquid flowing over his tongue and warming his throat. He hated the half-wit boy who sat grinning cross the table at him, clutching the bottle.

“You want a lil drink, LeRoy?” Shine asked shyly.

“Shore do,” LeRoy said, easing himself up out of the chair, beginning to feel better.

“Git me a glass,” Shine said.

“Shit,” LeRoy said and walked to the box where he kept his dishes. He couldn’t find a clean glass there and rinsed one in the sink. He dug a piece of food off the rim and flicked it onto the floor and sat the glass down hard in front of Shine. Shine unscrewed the cap and turned the bottle slowly towards the glass until the liquid began to ease over the rim and dribble down the outside of the bottle, dripping from his fingers.

“Goddam, Shine, you wastin’ the stuff. Here, let me pour it,” LeRoy said, reaching for the bottle.

Shine jerked away, sloshing some of the liquor onto the table top.

“I bought it for you, LeRoy,” Shine smiled, holding the bottle beyond LeRoy’s reach.

LeRoy smacked his lips after draining the half glass Shine poured for him. He was feeling better towards Shine already. His misery had been on him of late and he needed something to pick him up.

“Man that hits the spot Shine. Juss a little more. There, son,” and he sat his glass on the table.

Shine poured more liquor into the glass and watched LeRoy drink it.

“Kin I have some, LeRoy?” Shine asked, his voice assuming a wheedling tone that irritated LeRoy.

“It’s your goddam whiskey, boy,” LeRoy said, his anger returning.

Shine poured himself a glass and drank it slowly, like Newt Birgans had shown him. He couldn’t understand why LeRoy liked the stuff. It tasted bad and burned his throat. But he liked the way it made him feel. He could see LeRoy smiling at him, like he was something special. He felt so good his heart hurt. He poured another glass and drank it. LeRoy watched carefully as Shine drank his draught, measuring the remaining liquor in the bottle with his eyes. He fervently hoped Shine wouldn’t drink it all. He had been feeling bad since Mama Bertha left. Her round, accusatory face swam through his mind and made tears come to his eyes. If only she had understood and not called him names: mean, dirty names. Now it looked like she was gone for good. Mama Bertha gone, replaced by a smiling idiot.

Shine’s eyes were becoming red as the whiskey worked its magic. He looked closely at LeRoy and loved him. He wanted to show LeRoy that he loved him: wanted to share that special feeling with him. He pushed the bottle across the table towards LeRoy and said, “you kin have the rest, LeRoy.”

LeRoy kept himself from grabbing the bottle and calmly, leisurely, took it from Shine’s hand. He turned the bottle up, took a sip, and held the bottle out, measuring the remaining liquor. He felt good and smiled at Shine who sat fiddling with the butcher knife on the table.

When Shine looked at him, LeRoy thought it was like looking, not at a human face, but at the face of a beast. The eyes were not quite focused and had a blank stare that left LeRoy wondering if Shine were really looking at him. His forehead was shallow. His ears were ludicrously small and asymmetrically placed on the sides of his head. There was a slackness in his jaw that left his mouth perpetually open like that of a gaping fish. LeRoy stared at the boy. Shine smiled back. Like a beast, LeRoy thought. He looks like a damned beast.

The conviviality of the moment brought to fruition a hazy notion, an inspiration in Shine's foggy brain. He pulled the battered wallet from his pocket and dug in the secret compartment. When he had extracted the photograph, he got up from the chair and staggered shyly to where LeRoy sat.

"My Mama," Shine said and extended the picture.

LeRoy took the picture and looked at it. It was the face of a young girl, no more than fifteen or sixteen years old.

"My Mama," Shine said.

The oval face was not unpretty, with a half-smile tugging at the corners of her lips. Her eyes had a dazed, uncomprehending look.

"Lena Jackson," LeRoy said.

"My Mama," said Shine. "She pretty."

"Yeah, she's pretty. Twenty years ago she was pretty," LeRoy said aloud, although he was talking to himself.

"You like my Mama?" Shine brightened.

Leroy laughed: a hard, biting, dirty laugh.

“Everybody liked your Mama, Shine. Specially the men. The women didn’t care much for her, Juss the men.”

“You like my Mama?” Shine asked again, his face displaying a puzzled look.

“Yeah, I liked your Mama. Everybody did, like I said. She was somethin’, Shine, young and purty and . . .” LeRoy grinned expansively.

“You my daddy,” Shine said. It was an affirmation, not a question.

LeRoy was in the middle of swallowing some whiskey and a few drops trailed down his trachea. He fell into a fit of coughing and gagging, beating his chest and the arms of the chair, fighting for breath. When he had done coughing, he looked at Shine coldly.

“You crazy, boy. You crazy like your Mama,” he said.

“She not crazy,” Shine said, his voice pleading.

“Your Mama crazy as a Bessie bug, Shine: wild, looney-ass crazy.”

“She not crazy!” Shine screamed, a plaintive, pathetic wail that bled from the boy.

LeRoy smiled at the crazy boy and gulped down the last of the bourbon.

“You wanna know how crazy your Mama is, Shine?” LeRoy giggled. He could feel a wave of meanness sweep over him. “She crazy as that yellow cur dog that stays down at the burnt-out house. She crazy as old man Johnson that killed his wife and baby last year. Shine, your Mama was the local whore before they take her to the crazy house. She go down for any man, Shine. She was a crazy whore, a crazy-assed whore. That’s what she was.”

LeRoy looked at Shine for a moment, pleased with himself. He felt rotten and good at the same time. Some of the poison was draining away. He felt a little sympathy for the boy.

The smile had left Shine's face and his mouth was shut. His eyes, clouded with emotion, seemed focused now on LeRoy. Shine stood at the kitchen table in front of the television, his body jerking with tiny spasms and his eyes brimming with unshed tears. He tried to think clearly about what LeRoy had said. He didn't understand all of it but he knew that it was bad: he could tell by the way LeRoy talked and grinned. And LeRoy had called his Mama crazy. His Mama Crazy? The dark curtain began to descend in his brain. He didn't like LeRoy any more. LeRoy was mean. He had called his Mama bad names. His own Daddy calling her names.

"You ain't my Daddy, LeRoy," Shine shouted, his voice choked with rage. "My Daddy wouldn't do that. It ain't so, LeRoy. It ain't so! You a Revelation beast that the Reverend talk about. A mean Revelation beast and I goan kill you."

Shine picked up the butcher knife. The curtain dropped lower. He turned towards LeRoy.

LeRoy sat in the chair staring at the boy. The mean feeling returned. His eyes narrowed and he glared at the boy who had a mean look on his beastly face.

"You crazy bastard. I could be your Daddy, but I ain't. Any man in this neighborhood – in this whole town – could be your Daddy, but it was probably Cletus Johnson that killed his wife and baby last year that's your Daddy. You got a crazy Mama and a crazy Daddy, boy, you crazy sonofabitch."

LeRoy had never seen him move so fast. Shine had always moved like a broken doll, struggling to keep his mind focused on the moment with the smile as an anchor against the curtain falling all the way. But it wouldn't stay up.

Annie Crumpton and Reverend Jones were standing on the porch of her house that sat next to LeRoy Gilhooly's. The sun had set and the twilight placed the world in a cozy, copper perspective. The Reverend was just commenting on how the Lord blessed the believer when they heard a scream come from LeRoy's house: a high, wailing sound that had the stink of death and they looked in time to see LeRoy run through his screen door, dragging pieces of the rusted screen wire on his body, waving his arms and moving his mouth and standing for a second on his steps. No words came. His lips moved, but he remained silent. Then Shine Jackson ran through the door with his arm raised, screaming incoherently and LeRoy ran from his steps across the front of Annie's house and looked up at Annie and the Reverend with a strange, woeful look on his face.

"My, ain't that a purty tie LeRoy's wearin'," Annie said after LeRoy ran by. "I ain't never seen LeRoy wear a tie before."

"That ain't no tie, Annie," the Reverend whispered as he knelt on the step, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together and Annie wondered why the Reverend was talking so quietly with Shine screaming down the street. "That ain't no tie, Annie. That's blood," he said, his voice closing on the whisper and he pointed to the thin sprinkling of crimson just visible on the concrete of Annie's front steps.

They watched as LeRoy staggered, stumbled and pitched forward onto the street in front of Newt Birgans' house and they saw Shine fall on him and the world seemed to stop for an instant as the figure of Shine Jackson plunged his arm again and again onto the back of LeRoy Gilhooly who lay, calm and still, under the last rays of the sunset on Church Street.