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SYNOPSIS

CRYING HOLY by James Baldwin

At seventeen Johnnie Rogers realizes that he has always hated his father. His father is Deacon Rogers, the head-deacon of a fanatically strict church. There are two other children—Roy, two years Johnnie’s senior, and Betty, one year Johnnie’s junior. The mother is a meek, frightened woman completely under her husband’s domination.

The church is led by a man who calls himself “Blessed Father James,” a shrewd psychologist who preys upon the religious emotion inherent in his people for his own ends. He says that he has been especially called of God to lead the members of his congregation to the Promised Land. “A present-day Moses in the wilderness!” he is wont to boast. Johnnie takes an instinctive dislike to him the first time his father takes him to the church. He is about six years old at the time. The sect has acquired some publicity in the outside world because of their unorthodox behavior.

Deacon Rogers has determined that his children shall grow up in the church and lead the sort of life he feels that they should lead. Their mother is a more unsympathetic and less hidebound member of the same sect. She sympathizes with her children but is unable to help them. Her love for her husband is more than to him than a convenient piece of furniture, by whom he feeds his ego, begets children, and satisfies his bodily cravings. Her fear of the wrath of God, her servitude to convention, make her a pallid and unimportant person in the household. Her husband treats her completely without affection (save for intermittent bursts of lust) and blames her for whatever domestic crises that arise. One of his habits is to refer to the children as “my children when they have pleased him; “your children at other times.”

He forces his children to lead incredibly secluded and narrow lives to their detriment. For the good of their souls he forbids them movies, friends whose parents are not members of a church of his persuasion, and, as they grow older, dancing, any social life apart from the church. Johnnie’s first actually concrete feeling of hatred toward his father stems from a time when he was seven years old and wanted to go to his first movie with a friend and the friend’s parent. Johnnie adores both with all the intensity of childhood, and at that time nothing is more important to him than the boys good will. Johnnie comes home from school accompanied by them both as a sort of reinforcement of his plea to be allowed to go. His mother and young sister, Betty are at home. Roy is still in school and their father is at work. His mother hesitated but in the face of Johnnie’s pleading and the other woman’s friendliness, finally lets him go. She cautions him to be home before his father arrives. Johnnie is thoroughly thrilled. They see an old Joan Crawford movie——“Dance, Fools, Dance” and afterwards they stop for an ice-cream soda. Johnnie enjoys himself immensely. On their arrival home, they discover that Deacon Rogers is already home and that Johnnie’s baby sister, Betty has told him where they have been. Deacon Rogers is filled with a holy wrath, denounces his wife, and commands his baby daughter for her honesty. “The Lord done laid his hand on that child,” he tells his wife. “Gods gonna punish you for your wickedness.” He insults the woman who took Johnnie out and beats Johnie who is already crushed with remorse and humiliation.

“I hate him,” Johnnie sobs that night. “I wish he was dead.”

“He too,” Roy agrees grimly. “Things would be so nice if it was just us and mam-a and Betty.”

“I wish Betty was dead too,” says Johnnie. “She’s just as bad as he is.”
Venomously they discuss plans of revenge on Betty and her father, their father’s treatment of their mother, his attitude at church, his forced seclusion of them from others, his bad personal habits, his uncleanness, coarse references to bodily functions, and his own complete and disgusting frankness concerning his own. Shortly after this Betty is convicted of sin and is “saved.” This makes her, if anything, a good deal more objectionable than she was. Her father, of course, is delighted and shows her off at every opportunity. Her brothers are disgusted. Her mother is amazed and uncertain. They of course are made to attend church also and are continually exhorted to leave their sinful ways and come on the Lord’s side. They are bored and frustrated and their hatred for the church and their father grow.

Roy’s hatred for his father breeds in him contempt and an outward hard defiance. Johnnie, more emotional and sensitive by nature broods continually as he grow older and his hatred grows, but finds no outlet. One Sunday, the three children are sent to Sunday School. Roy, now ten, decides that he will not go. He elects to go with a group of boys to Coney Island. Johnnie wishes to go, but is afraid and Betty, being saved, does not, of course, consider it. Roy goes, eliciting from Johnnie a promise not to tell and buying Betty’s silence with a dime.

When asked about Roy on his return home, Johnnie lies, but Betty, seeking her father’s approval, betrays them both. For this Johnnie is beaten and when Roy arrives he too is beaten until he is almost physically ill. Their mother soothing Roy in secret weeps futile tears over his plight, and reproaches Betty for telling. “Daddy told me never to lie,” Betty says. “It’s a sin.”

Roy and Johnnie, now respectively twelve and ten, begin to run around on the sly of their own accord. They go to movies, experiment sexually with girls, run around with a fairly tough bunch of fellows. At this time Roy develops his interest in candid camera photography and he and take and develop a good many pictures together. Johnnie learns a good deal about developing including the fact that cyanide, a substance used in film developing, is a strong and efficient poison.

Once, coming out of a motion picture house, they run into Betty. Knowing Betty will squeal they decide to run away. They wander aimlessly for two nights at the end of which time they are picked up and brought back. They receive a furious reception at home — their father is beside himself with rage. He beats them both, denounces his wife for “her children.” Roy curses his father, Johnnie screams defiance from the depths of his pain and rage, and for the first time in her children’s history their mother defies her husband and defends her children. Beacon Rogers thrusts Johnnie the weaker, into the church with a vengeance. He is forced to attend regularly and one of his monthly duties is the preparation of Holy Communion. Roy, however, becomes a thorn in his father’s flesh, becoming one of the tough guys of Harlem, joining a gang of hoodlums and doing as he pleases. He is rather disappointed in Johnnie’s weakness, and the two brothers begin to grow rather apart. Johnnie is a little horrified by Roy’s toughness, but envies him nonetheless. His frustrated, bored and repressed life makes him increasingly neurotic and bitter. His hatred for his father must always be concealed, and he is forced to sit through long eulogies in praise of him by church members. He is always being told that he is lost, that he must get saved. His mind is in complete confusion. At this time he meets Sylvia, member of the church, and they become friendly. Betty, of course, being saved, loses no opportunity to intensify his loneliness and misery.

None of the childrens’ have been given anything resembling adequate sexual instruction, so that at fourteen, Johnnie’s body is still a good deal of a mystery to him. A homosexual lures him into a hallway and
attempts a perversion of sexual intercourse with him. Johnnie flees in terror. Now he feels irrevocably lost and unclean "as though no water can make me clean again." He broods on the subject with a terrible intensity, afraid to tell Roy, afraid to tell anyone, he is so ashamed. Roy at this time becomes involved in a robbery, so that Johnnie sees even less of him. His only companion at this time is Sylvia who describes the peace of Christian life so vividly that her attractiveness, combined with Johnnie's morbidity, neurasthenia, emotionally repressed state and feeling of guilt, result in a stormy conversion to religion. The breach between Johnnie and Roy, long in coming, widens.

At this time they also move from their old home to a house nearer the church. Their old camera supplies are left in the cellar. Betty hates to leave because of the janitors boy of whom she has become enamored.

Johnnie's only life now is in the church and for awhile their sermons, their blind faith, and pure emotionalism satisfy him. He finds a much needed outlet for repressed emotional energy and is happy. Betty is not as joyous over his conversion as she might be, being indeed a little jealous. Roy is frankly disgusted and disappointed. Johnnie's romance with Sylvia is watched with hawk-like fear and eagerness by the church. The church fears that they will sin and to prevent that calamity keeps them apart as much as possible.

It is not long, of course, before Johnnie's intellectual apparatus begins to question many of the facts presented by the church. His emotional need, however, and again his fear and weakness cause him to saddle his doubts for nearly two and a half years. Then he begins to yield to secret to the natural demands of his youth. He does not reveal this even to Roy for fear of the latter's contempt after the way he has preached to him.

One Sunday morning in a sudden access of recklessness, perhaps intensified by drinking of the night before, he persuades Sylvia to come on a hike with him instead of going to church. She demurs but he persuades her that once won't hurt. They go roaming in New Jersey, along the countryside, while they are lying on the grass talking Johnnie suddenly realizes that he desires Sylvia sexually. He pleads, but Sylvia, steeped in the tenets of her faith, successfully keeps him at bay, though she is torn by desire.

Frustrated and repentant, the pair arrive home late in the evening to face Sylvia's angry mother and an outraged Deacon Rogers. Both parents are disinclined to accept their children's protestations that they have done nothing wrong. "If ye didn't want to an' the Bible says that's just as bad," says Johnnie's father. "Then I wish I had." Johnnie cries. His father slaps him. For the first time Johnnie thinks of killing his father.

They are denounced to the church and Sylvia is kept a virtual prisoner by her irate mother. (Betty's morbid curiosity at this time as to whether they are really guilty, and Roy's somewhat contemptuous sympathy, add to Johnnie's misery.) The church is told to pray for them, and they are continually being told to repent, Sylvia, not being allowed to see Johnnie, and being reminded of her "sin" twenty times a day by her mother and visiting church members and being tortured by visions of hell as punishment for her wickedness, in even desiring Johnnie physically, broods to the extent that her mind snaps and she is confined to an asylum.

Johnnie is filled with horror and a blind hate for his father, who uses the tragedy as a springboard for long lectures to Johnnie on the danger of incurring the wrath of God. "He's glad it happened," Johnnie thinks in horror. "He's glad. It makes him feel strong and infallible. It makes him feel right. He'd be glad if it happened to me. He'd like to sacrifice my life like Abraham so God would be pleased." His self-control snaps and he screams: "Why don't you leave me alone? I hate you! I hate you! You're an evil old man and you want want to make everybody as twisted and ugly as you are! It's your fault! Sylvia's crazy! She didn't do any harm. You just
ruined her life for nothing, the same way you ruined Mama's, the same way you're ruining Roy's. I bet you'd like me to tell the church the way you treat Mama. The way you slap her around and then go to church and shout and holler. You're not going to ruin my life you mother-lovin' son-of-a-bitch. Not my life! I'll kill you first! I'll kill you...." His father slaps him down. Johnnie has decided to kill his father.

Roy is involved in the murder of a policeman in Harlem. He is found innocent, but the notoriety infuriates his father and precipitates a final break between them. Roy decides to leave for Chicago. His mother begs him to stay till Sunday and go to church with her for one last time. As he will have to wait a week anyway before he will have enough money to leave he halfheartedly concurs.

The Sunday night is a communion night and Johnnie has been back to the old house for the old photographs, supplies and bought more developing fluid. He has planned to kill his father that night by slipping cyanide in his communion glass. He had planned to throw suspicion on Betty by having her help him with communion but Betty's presence is required in some other church function and Roy offers to help him instead. Johnnie is in too highly nervous a state to do much resisting, tho' he tries weakly to dissuade Roy. In a second when Roy leaves him, Johnnie slaps in the cyanide. A moment later Betty comes in Johnnie is nervous in her presence. "What's wrong with you?" she asks.

"Nothing," Johnnie mutters. He completes the preparations.

At communion that night there is the usual emotional exhibitionism. Johnnie is dry with terror. Roy, in order to catch his train, leaves before communion has begun. When Deacon Rogers, in the middle of a 'shout' slumps to the floor, the rest of the congregation, believing he is "under the power", pay no particular attention, continue their rejoicing. Very slowly Johnnie rises and walks into the street. He goes for a long walk and suddenly bursts into wild, hysterical laughter.

He returns home to find the house full of church members, doctors, policemen. Deacon Rogers is dead. When the time had finally come to go home they had been unable to raise him, and thus they discovered his death. They examine the glass he drank from and discover the traces of cyanide. The congregation is horrified. Because Roy has a bad record, and there was bad blood between his father and himself, because of his attendance at church that night after a long absence and the fact that he has left home under adverse conditions throw suspicion on him. Johnnie is not suspected. No one believes that he would have the courage necessary to put his father out of the way. Johnnie is dismayed at the turn things have taken but has not the strength to do anything about it.

A bewildered Roy is brought back, made to stand trial, and sentenced to the chair. Their mother has become an invalid and the utmost care must be given to her. Johnnie goes almost entirely to pieces during the trial, drinking, sleeping, etc. Roy is completely bewildered. After Roy is sentenced with one month to live Johnnie kids himself into believing that he will give himself up just in time to save Roy's life. But he fritters the time away and on the night that Roy is killed he is dead drunk in a harlot's room.

After Roy is dead Johnnie degenerates more and more, grows more and more careless, and in a drunken stupor gives himself away to Betty. Horrified, Betty rushes to the police after Johnnie has vainly tried to stop her. Johnnie starts to flee but suddenly realizes that the jig is up no matter what he does and "there's no use running anymore."
Looking back, it seemed as though life with his father had been a preparation for the murder he was about to commit.

Deacon Rogers, his father, was a middle-aged negro whose life had early resolved itself into a perpetual struggle against sin. Born in the South of generous and oppressed parents, the one thing life had offered him was to escape and assuage the harsh realities of life in religion.

He was not a subtle man, Deacon Rogers, for even a very intelligent one, life had endowed him with very little and he had given little in return. He was by nature small-minded, petty and provincial. The world he lived in was bound on all sides by his desires, his emotions, his righteousness. Never had he been able—indeed, never had he tried—to escape from himself.

Religion among negroes is infinitely more primitive, more emotional and sincere than among other racial groups. To them—God is a very real, as real to the most nest-door and infinitely more terrible than the avenging Jehovah of the Old Testament; something personified and divinely depicted with the wisdom and charity of Christ.

In some religious prevalent in the Negro, Christ takes the upper hand and Jehovah becomes something more than a shadow. There are the marks and eternally smiling, the women who wept for her...
kitchens for starvation wages, the men who perpetually turn the other cheek. These, if sometlilhe self-consciously and determinedly, love their enemies, pray for them, and offer
revenge.

The others, the Hell-fire and brimstone believers in Jehovah’s claim the same virtue but do not possess them. Their religion is really nothing more than a protection charade worn to make them insensitive to the vicissitudes of life. They may turn the other cheek but not without a subliminal seeremon; and they may forgive their enemies but they wait with avid hatred for the bolt of light the wrath of God to blast them from the earth.

Deacon Rogers was in the latter category. His pain, his hatred and frustration had found expression in this narrow and ugly perversion of faith.
The cogs plunked behind him with an angry clink. He marched downstairs blind and swollen with rage.

He had decided to kill him yet.

Once on the pavement he walked resolutely toward the church to fool anyone who might be watching from the window. When he was sure he was out of sight, he turned a corner sharply, walked past a block and reversed his steps. That goddam church wouldn’t see him tonight.

Sylvia was gone. He would never see her again.

Sylvia, who was so pretty and innocent and harmless, shut up forever away from the world. She loved away from the city. The train from the city. The train from the city. The train from the city. The train from the city. She alternately loved and hated. Shut up away from him forever.

There was no time for tears now because he knew what he must do.

He had decided to kill his father.