HOLY ROLLING

by DAVID THORSTAD  photo: Mark Skinner

I come to the garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses,
And the voice I hear falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses.
And He walks with me and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there
None other has ever known.

I turned on as I sang the hymn. I didn't know gay from glossolalia, but "tarry" was a dead giveaway—such a gay word. Tarry together in the garden—alone with the beloved—a joy none other had ever known. Thank you, Jesus.

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I love Him, I love H'm,
Because He first loved me,
And purchased my salvation
On Calvary's tree.

At 14, I sang it with new meaning. "Him" was my pastor. In his mid-thirties, tall, with dark wavy hair and a rich baritone, he was my secret love.

Church was the Assembly of God Tabernacle in small-town northern Minnesota in the early fifties. Lutherans and Catholics called us Holy Rollers because we spoke in tongues and our worship sometimes got exuberant, in contrast to their own stodgy services. Their mumbo-jumbo was scripted, ours was spontaneous. They observed Pentecost one day a year; we relived it every time the Holy Ghost descended as in the Upper Room on the first Pentecost. We needed no priest or ritual to get God's ear.

when the spirit moved, the preacher had to stop his sermon and go with the flow. Out of the blue, someone would stand up and start babbling loudly in a "heavenly language." Shundaday, shanundaday—A hush fell, in anticipation of the sound of a rushing mighty wind. Frequently, the babble would be "interpreted" by someone who had the gift of interpreting tongues. Sometimes someone with the gift of prophecy would give an exhortation in the earthly vernacular. Occasionally, people would dance in the spirit, quivering in the holy breeze, or fall down rolling in the aisles. And David danced before the Lord with all his might. (1 Samuel 6:14)
Pianists had to know how to improvise and be able to find the key on the spur of the moment whenever some inspired soul broke out in song. They could even jazz it up—as long as it didn’t sound too worldly. I played a piece once during the collection so full of glissandos, syncopation, and improvisational gusto that the tune was unrecognizable. The performance was deemed worldly and I was urged to limit the dazzle.

These were pre-television days. The word of God was spread via the radio waves; in revival meetings held, like the circus, in huge tents pitched on the outskirts of town; at summer camp and bible school; at regional and state-wide fellowship meetings; in revival crusades led by a traveling evangelist whose wife was always a talented musician, singer, or painter; at Saturday-night street meetings outside a bar or some other den of iniquity.

In those days, born-agains debated whether television should even be allowed in the home. As a paperboy making weekly collecting rounds, I saw TV in customers’ homes and decided you wouldn’t go to hell if you watched it.

Pentecostals occupied the social fringes. They were in the world but not of it. Our church had about 150 members, mostly workers and farmers. Movers and shakers in civic affairs weren’t attracted by speaking in tongues, prophesying, faith healing, the casting out of demons, or rowdy services where people let their hair down. Sometimes nonbelievers, attracted by the hubbub, would hang around outside to listen.

The pastor’s wife rebuked me once during choir practice for saying “Nuts!” I guess she visualized man’s balls and it made her uncomfortable. Of course “Balls!” was a no-no, as were “gosh darn, “ goddamn,” “damn,” “golly,” “gee,” “gee whiz,” “Judas Priest”—anything, no matter how disguised, that took the name of the Lord in vain. And listening to dirty jokes would send you to hell as surely as telling them.

I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. (Matthew 5:28)

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I love him, I love him—this was a love none other knew about, not even the Other. It remained unexpressed, even during a prayer session when the pastor came into my row, put his arm around me, and caressed me. Plenty drowned in a surge of sensuality as I savored his touch. Couldn’t he tell I was aroused?

A couple of years earlier, we had shared the same bed overnight during a church fellowship meeting in Alexandria. I yearned to reach out

and touch the untouchable in feigned sleep, as I had my father’s, but didn’t dare. The next morning, I was pleased when he said I had slept with my head on his shoulder.

I envied his wife’s access to what was beyond my reach, and fantasized about it during self-abuse, a sin I’d been indulging in since age four. During rest period in kindergarten I squirmed around on my rug until I came. (My name came toward the end of the alphabet so I was in the last row and no one could spy from behind.) In ninth grade science class, I rubbed off against the desk top, hoping I wouldn’t be called to the front of the class before my hardon went down. In tenth grade English, the teacher—a high-strung spinster who had had shock treatments—ordered me to take my hand out of my pocket and put it on top of the desk. Once I came in Sunday School class by pressing against my bible.

The pastor came over to pray with me at the altar one morning after church. I asked him what petting was. (It had to be more than it sounded like.) I confessed to having done self-abuse that week while taking a bath, but nothing had come out. I was sure that this was because I had prayed for forgiveness just prior to orgasm.

He warned me about men in the big city of Minneapolis who might invite me into a toilet on Hennepin Avenue and give me 50¢ if I let them suck me off. They were “cocksuckers,” he explained, giving new meaning to a word that until then I had known only as an epithet. I was having sex with other boys, but we didn’t do cocksucking. The right man in his place at that moment might have been able to broaden my horizons.

I guess my signals were too weak. But how subtle was it the time I rubbed my leg up and down against his foot pedal leg while riding in the front seat of his Pontiac? To reach it I had to ease toward the middle of the seat, just like girls did with their boyfriends.

At 16, I met him in his study and announced that I was leaving his church for one that wasn’t uptight about dancing and going to the movies. “In ten years,” he predicted, “you’ll end up being all but a bum on skid row.”

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There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. (I Corinthians 10:13)

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I love him, I love him—the Sunday School superintendent led the congregation in singing. A hint of prissiness in the way his chubby right arm marked the cadence. A Korean War veteran, now a high school teacher and principal, he devoted his spare time to church youth activities. He seemed mother-henny, asexual.

When I was a junior in high school, he told me he preferred juniors, but I thought nothing of it. Then he asked to have a talk with me, in private. He made it sound important. As the day approached, my curiosity mounted.
He parked his car in front of the church and we talked for an hour before the evening Christ's Ambassadors youth service. He inquired about my personal relationship with God. Intimate spiritual probing. I played along, but what was the point? I wasn't a backslider—I played piano at youth meetings, played trumpet, saxophone, and oboe in the orchestra, sang in the choir, went to fellowship meetings, spent Sunday morning and evening in church, seldom missed Wednesday night prayer meeting, visited shut-ins, won a prize once for bringing the most people to a revival crusade, could recite all the books of the bible, and even took part in street corner services to witness to the heathen. You got a new bar to add to your attendance pin for every year you didn't miss a Sunday, and mine was one of the longest.

Later, I realized he was checking me out.

He was eventually kicked out of the church for making a pass at a 16-year-old. While visiting the boy's parents, he had stayed overnight and doubled up in the boy's bed. The boy rebuffed him, told a friend about it, and it got back to his parents, who informed the pastor. He had to move out of town.

I often wondered who he was thinking about when he sang "I love him, I love him...."

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I tried for years to get the gift of tongues, but it never came.

There was a service every night at bible camp. One night the Holy Ghost swept over the teenage crowd. Arms were in the air all over the place and the hall reverberated with "Thank you, Jesus," "I love you, Jesus," "Jesus, Jesus," "Praise God," and "Hallelujah." Many made their way to the front to repent or to rededicate their life to Christ.

After the service, the prayer benches were filled with people seeking to be blessed. Many spoke in tongues for the first time. I prayed until the wee hours, but to no avail.

One friend was always the first to switch into a heavenly tongue at prayer meetings. But I noticed that he always said the same thing: Shundadaya, shanundadaya. Had he merely memorized the phrase and uttered it, eyes closed and hands raised like antennae, just to impress? When I heard someone in another town utter the same phrase, I suspected that one of them was pretending. Would the Holy Ghost run out of heavenly languages and have to double up like that?

Speaking in tongues set Pentecostals off from other believers. It was the bee's knee of the charismatic cult, even though Paul had characterized it as a lesser gift. He that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God; for no man understandeth him.... I could that ye all speak with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesith than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying. (1 Corinthians 14:4-5)

Years later, one heard of Episcopalians and Catholics speaking in tongues, but in the early fifties they still spurned glossolalia—I guess the Holy Ghost hadn't yet branched out to include them.

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I looked forward to taking the boat out on the river with a friend who was a year older.

His family oozed saintliness. His father often burst into tongues and usually gave the interpretation. I would have found it more convincing if the Holy Ghost had given the interpretation to someone else, but the Lord works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform. His friend's three older sisters stayed unmarried in order to devote themselves full-time to the Lord. They prayed so often it would shame a Muslim, and believed that Jesus was literally with them every moment of the day. If halos weren't Catholic, they would have had one. Eventually, the family left the church to worship at home—if you didn't need a priest, you didn't need a church.

When he and I went out on the river, I would recline with my head in his crotch while he rowed. I plotted how I would set up the right moment when I could offer to show him mine if he'd let me see his. We talked about our friendship, our sins, our dreams, the girls we firstfooled around with (he was 5, with the preacher's daughter I was 4, with the girl next door). We'd row into the seclusion offered by large willow branches drooping over the water and hold each other. In a corner of the park, as we sat on a bench and talked, I eased my head into his lap. Out riding around with friends, we would circumspectly put in the back seat—always being careful not to touch that.

On a camping trip to Itasca State Park with two older boys, I made sure I slept next to him in the tent. While the others were asleep, he lay on his back while I caressed his chest and stomach, gradually inching lower. When I grazed his dick for the second time he pretended to wake up. "What are you doing?" he asked.

One Sunday afternoon as we rode bareback, he holding on from behind, he let me inch my fingers down into his pubic hair. But when I touched the base of his cock, he moved my hand up a bit. Grabbing that would have been going too far.

Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. (Matthew 26:41)

I struggled with my lust all afternoon. That evening I told him I was sorry I had gone so far, thereby compounding my sin with a lie. Get thee behind me, Satan!

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There was rejoicing when a family that had just been born again was welcomed into the church. The son and I, both in our early teens, became close friends. I guess he didn't get as saved
as you were supposed to because it was easy to get him to do things. He had no guilt. My diary was full of entries about us by the time I burned it a few years later. Keeping a record of enjoyable sins was not the way to get over them.

We started fooling around at bible camp, on the shores of Lake Alexandria. To get there, you drove past a replica of the Kensington runestone, promoted as evidence that the Vikings had visited Minnesota in the fourteenth century. Alexandria bills itself as "the birthplace of America."

I'd been going to bible camp since I was nine. One afternoon all the boys were called to an assembly on the lakeshore. A preacher warned us about self-abuse, saying that it required a quart of blood to produce one drop of semen and was therefore a sin to waste it. The argument did not impress me.

Our first camp together, my new friend and I shared a room with bunk beds. After lights out, he'd reach down from his top bunk and grab me. I reciprocated. At a statewide fellowship meeting--in Alexandria, again--we slept in the same bed. I played with his cock and rubbed against his butt until I came in my pajamas. "Uh-oh, something happened," I said as I got up to go to the bathroom to wipe off. "Oh," he mumbled, as if to say it was no big deal.

I often stayed overnight with him on his farm. He'd pretend to be sleeping while I played with his hardon. The next day, I prolonged the pleasure by describing it to him, hoping to set up another episode.

We sexplayed every chance we got--on overnights, in the hayloft, in the sheepshed, in the woods, riding horseback, even while spearin' northern pike in his father's ice house on Pine Lake.

Once I brought two Lutheran friends to bible camp. We had separate rooms in a big cabin which we shared with the son of a prominent preacher. Before going to sleep, I turned into a squirrel hunting for nuts. I groped my way in the dark from one room to the next, and climbed into each bed. Not being saved, the Lutheran boys played along. One said that to make a baby, it was not enough just to squirt your cum in the girl, you had to make sure it went all around inside her. "Like this?" I asked as I rubbed around on top of his cock.

The preacher boy wouldn't allow the horseplay to go that far. "That's private property," he objected when my hand strayed. Why should his be any more private than mine? I wondered. Being a preacher's boy could cramp one's style.

Other boys and I would jerk each other off, beat off in empty boxcars to see who could shoot the farthest or who had the most cum, come on each other's butt, horseplay while skinny dipping, fool around while watching Laurel and Hardy on TV, or park the car in a secluded spot and hunt nuts. During lunch hour, we'd play nut hunt on the dark stage of the school auditorium, or in the room where musical instruments were stored. We fucked watermelon, told each other our wet dreams, bragged about our girlfriends, compared pubic hair, kissed and fondled girls on church outings, and joked about fucking chickens and sheep, sticking our dick in a calf's mouth, and masturbating dogs--some of which we actually did.

Sometimes we'd hyperventilate by taking a hundred deep breaths, and then pass out after the other guy squeezed hard on our stomach; he would unzip our pants and play with our dick until we came to.

Most boys seemed to be committing these sins, which were all the easier to indulge in because you never heard them explicitly condemned in sermons against fornication. (Fucking girls was strictly verboten.)

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And Jonathan caused David to swear again, because he loved him as he loved his own soul...

I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. (I Samuel 20:11,41)

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Youthful homosexuality in 1950s small-town America emerged in the stifling shadow of God and triumphant heterosexualism--tentative, isolated, unnamed. Even years of same-sex play did not necessarily a homo make. As late as the twelfth grade I can remember turning to a friend in French class and asking, with genuine puzzlement, "What do homosexuals do?" After eight years of enjoying other boys' bodies, I was apparently only beginning to suspect that the word might in some way describe my own pleasure.

Today that shadow looms less large, and heterosexuality seems a bit less firmly ensconced on its pedestal. The era of enforced silence, ignorance, and isolation seems past. Today the backdrop to emerging homoeroticism is fear of AIDS and concern about "child abuse"--a term sometimes stretched to include the joy of sexual discovery itself, particularly if it involves teenage boys and gay men (one area where homosexuality remains, if anything, more taboo now than it was then).

By comparison, the obstacles of the fifties seem almost mundane, manageable. For the most part, they remained private, individual, self-imposed, whereas today's efforts at social control of sexuality are truly totalitarian, the subject of governmental control and media hype. If monogamy and sexual abstinence by young people were once mere religious and moral exhortations, today they have become almost a social mandate, chanted even by some homosexuals. Paradoxically, greater public awareness and discussion of sexuality--a goal of gay liberation--has brought with it not much a greater tolerance for ambiguity as an increased rigidity in defining what is socially acceptable behavior.

No matter. Whatever the prevailing imperatives of social respectability, whatever the contours of social repression, the irrepressibility of same-sex love will continue to confound the regulators, as it always has.

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