

*The Seventh
Acolyte Reader*



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Ride

by Marcus Tilley

Gee, thanks a bundle, Mister. It was getting cold out there. My last ride turned off up Thunder Fork – he sold for Massey-Ferguson – and that was an hour and a half ago, before it got dark.

This is a real nice camper. You got stereo? In back, too? I sure do like country music, only trouble is you can't pick up radio so good here in the mountains, 'specially after sunset. My last ride was *cussin'*! Said the next tractor he sold he was going to get one of them car CD-players, like this one, sure as death and taxes, that's what he said. You don't have any country and western? Just... chamber music? That what you play when you use the chamber pot? Sorry, mister, I guess that weren't so funny.

Well, I don't truly know where I'm going, just riding around, seeing the country. I hear New York's an amazing place. And I'd like to look at the White House in Washington D.C. where the President lives except when helicopters land on the front lawn and take him off to work. And Florida. Maybe go there when it gets cold over in New York and Washington D.C.

You're more right than you know: a boy on his own has got to be careful. Like that trucker back in Pocatello who promised to take me all the way to Kansas City, but that meant him doing things I wasn't about to, no way, so I left him when he stopped. A trucker can't very well interfere with you when he's driving and having to worry about all those gears, 'specially in the mountains, now, can he? But I ain't no prude. I seen a lot in my fourteen years, and done a few things, too, I could tell you about if you really wanted to hear.

Okay, like in my first foster home. That was after Grandma died, the nicest old lady who brung me up 'cause Mom was sick with taking all those drugs and drinking herself to death. I didn't miss her – Mom, I mean – but I sure did Grandma. Like to of bawled my eyes right out of my head. Franky, that was the son of the home, got tired of me crying all the time and persecuted me. The worst he did was peein' in my bed when I was asleep and telling everyone I'd done it. But Graham caught on.

Graham was Franky's older brother, I suppose about my age now, and I was nine at the time. He moved me into his room, and when I cried in bed he'd hold me until either my eyes dried up or I fell asleep.

One morning I woke and he was doing things to me. You know, with his fingers. I was *surprised*? You sure you want to hear this? It gets pretty raunchy. No, the tellin' doesn't bother me none; it's your ears that's got to listen.

Well, I lay there for a while, thinking and wondering, and then I turned around and asked him, "Why you doin' that?"

All he said was, "Doesn't it feel good?"

It didn't feel *bad*. I didn't know about pulling off and stuff yet. I just let him. I figured if Graham was doing it, it was okay. Graham was my friend. He wouldn't do nothing bad. When the alarm clock went off we got out of bed and I don't think I thought about his hand being on my privates for the whole rest of the week. By then I'd pretty much stopped with my crying – Franky wasn't a problem any more, I was starting to fit in at school, Graham's mom was nice to me. I was staying in my bed and Graham was staying in his bed.

Then one night Franky borrowed a scary video from one of his friends and we watched it while the old folks were out at a party and I had a nightmare in the middle of the night and crawled into Graham's bed and woke him up. That was when I discovered how big a boy got down in his privates when they was stiff once he grew up into his teens – you *really* want me to keep on telling you this stuff?

Well, he'd woken up that way – anyhow, that's what he said. He didn't used to wear anything to bed – slept buck naked – so I knew right away what was pressing on me. And we talked about the video. He told me there weren't vampires – maybe in the olden days, but not now, and surely not in the United States of America. That's right, isn't it? Maybe there's ghosts, good and bad ghosts, but how can they hurt you if you can put your hand right through them? I don't believe in the Devil getting into people, like in *The Exorcist*. No way. But back then... When you're a *little* kid, what's true and what's story get pretty much mixed up. One can scare you as bad as the other.

I told Graham I wasn't going back to my own bed for the whole rest of the night. He said I was. I said I wasn't. He said if I wasn't I'd have to do him a favor, and I agreed. He told me to lie on my back and make my legs tight. That was the first time anybody'd fooled with me that way. I didn't mind. It didn't hurt. I just didn't understand it, or what that puddle of sticky stuff he was wiping up afterwards with a Kleenex was.

Next day he told me about things what Grandma hadn't. She was too nice a person – the words would of burned in her mouth. He told me people got babies just like cows and dogs did – I'd seen cows and dogs humping on the farm. Only people had rules, and even though you wanted to do it a whole lot before you got married, you couldn't, which only left fooling around with yourself or with another boy. But why'd anyone want to *do* it unless they figured to make a baby was what I wanted to know. Well, when I got a little older I'd understand, Graham said.

From then on, about every other night Graham clumb into my bed and would tell me to make my legs tight. Sometimes we played 'stick shift', where I took hold of his rod and put it into first and second and third gear, and then down-shifted all the way back to first and into reverse. I did it with him because he was my friend. And it was starting to feel good – not so much *down there*, 'cause I was still pretty little, but when he'd snuggle me and rub my back. Somebody I like rubs my back, he can make me do anything he wants, just about. So there was more than him getting off. We'd whisper and he'd touch places that made me giggle and then he'd shush me so Franky wouldn't hear. We had this little thing we'd do, he called it 'auto-batics', like the way they make cars jump off ramps and things in the movies – you slide the tip of your finger slow and light down the other guy's forehead and nose and then Hoop! you jump right off his nose-tip and into his mouth. When I was sleepy and Graham had finished doin' what he wanted to do, he'd cuddle against my back. I'd pull his arm around me and I'd go right off to sleep and sleep good all night.

Well, that went on for quite a few months. One Monday morning, which was when Graham's mom stripped us boys' beds and did the laundry, she saw the spots on my bottom sheet. I sure hadn't made them, she knew that, and Franky was also too young, and Papa'd been with her all night. She asked me how they'd got there. Graham hadn't bothered to mention that pole vaulting – that's what we sometimes called it – was one of those things grown-ups got upset about, so I just up and told her.

Well, then the you-know-what hit the fan. She went to the preacher. The preacher called the child protection people. Graham's dad took out the thickest leather belt I'd ever seen and told Graham come here. Graham tried to run away but his papa caught him by an ear and hauled him out back, and you could hear him screaming for mercy all up and down the street. That's when the child protection people took me away.

No, I never saw Graham again. Sure, I missed him. He was the

best friend I'd ever had, and the last I knew of him he was hollerin' like to die, which I surely hope he didn't. You got kids yourself, mister? You're not married but you've had kids? Had how? Well, it don't matter. I imagine you'd never thrash a kid the way old Graham got thrashed that afternoon.

They put me in a home clean over on the other side of the state, and it weren't nearly so nice. I had my tenth birthday about a month later, and the next morning the other boys – they was mad at the miserable little cake we had to share – de-pantsed me so I was late to school and got punished. We had a big fight that night, me with a bloody nose spurting all over the wallpaper and the floor, and I looked up and here was Cal pulling the kids off. Cal was the biggest boy at the home, sixteen years old. They weren't a real family. The Mayhews, the folks that owned the home, was old and their own family grown up and left. They took in boys for a living – the state paid them – and about all they did was make sure there was food on the table and clothes on our backs. Speaking of food, are you stopping to eat pretty soon? I could sure use a hamburger or something. All I had today was coffee and a doughnut. *One* doughnut. And that was this morning.

Cal knew about the ruckus back at Graham's place. The old folks must of told him, which was typical. I found out one day when we were alone painting the back porch – that was typical, too, making us work for the food the State was paying them to feed us. I was up on the top of a step-ladder gettin' the ceiling, with blue paint dripping down on my face, and Cal said, "So how was that older kid hittin' on you?" I could of fallen off that step-ladder.

I said nothing.

"Did he get you to lick it?"

"Hell no!" I told him, and then I realized I'd made a big mistake because I'd let on I knew what 'it' was.

Cal had his own room. I had to share with three other younger boys. Cal said to come to him that night after the others went to sleep, but I didn't, and the next morning he was pissed off. "Don't fuck me up another night," he told me. "I'm coming to get you when I'm ready."

So I had to pretty much do what he said, 'cause Mr. and Mrs. Mayhew left things between the boys up to Cal – no use appealing to them. I suppose it was eleven – I was asleep, anyhow – when I woke up with a hand over my mouth and my shoulder getting hit with a fist. Cal pulled me out of bed and walked me up to his room and made me stand and put my arms above my head so he could pull my pajama-tops off and

he undid the strings on my bottoms and made me step out of them. He had a pole even bigger than Graham's when he got his clothes off. It stood straight out from him. And, man, I was so sleepy! I was only ten years old. You wake up a ten-year-old kid in the middle of the night and you don't really wake him up. He's a zombie. That's the way I felt, like a zombie.

We clumb in his bed and we did the tight leg thing. He put spit in there which I thought yucky.

Other nights I had to stroke him, and pretty soon he had me lolly-popping him. Not that I appreciated the attention. It's no picnic getting hauled out of bed and never knowing when. If I'd of liked him it might of made a difference, 'cause by then I was starting to have feelings where older boys have feelings, but Cal didn't care about me. He said I was good looking and that's why he was doing it, because I was the best lookin' of the little kids and there was no girls around. I don't see I'm all that good looking. Well, you probably can't tell here in the dark, but you can make up your own mind when we stop for supper. There must be a cafe or something pretty soon, even up here in the mountains. You eat in the camper? You're inviting me to dinner? Great! I don't care what it is, long as there's plenty.

I stayed there two years, till the Mayhews got so old they had to close the place down. Then I was taken in by a farm family and worked my ass off. Didn't mind it, though, and I fell in with a good crowd of kids. We did all the things after church on Sunday kids do – shoot rabbits, swim in the irrigation ditches when it was warm enough, walk around barefoot with our toes squidging in the mud.

Oh, sure, we fooled around. What twelve-year-old doesn't? That's right, I was starting to grow – down there, too. Well, if you really want to know, I'll tell you. We'd have races. Who could get off first, who could keep going longest *without* getting off, who had the best way of doing it, whose stood up the straightest, whose snapped tight against his belly, whose was the biggest, whose was the smallest – no, mine *wasn't* the smallest. I didn't tell them about Graham and Cal – I figured they'd think bad of me if I did.

And there was the movie theater on Saturday nights. We'd take the center of the front row and pull our things out and show them and about break up laughing. Sometimes men would come and sit down with us and try to feel you up. One man wanted to take me off to his hotel room for a half hour and return me back to the theater. I talked it over in whispers with my friends and we decided it wasn't so good an idea, even though the

man offered me five dollars, which was more pocket money than I got in a week.

One afternoon I was hitch-hiking back to the farm when a guy from out of state picked me up and offered me money. "What you want to do?" I said.

"Go down on you," he said.

Well, I had to ask what that meant.

"You mean you never done it before?" he said.

That was a hard one to answer, but when the man learned I'd *done* it before, as I had to Cal, but I'd never *got it done* to me, he doubled his offer. So I showed him a farm road that went up behind some popple trees.

He told me afterwards, "You could make a fortune, kid. You don't even need no practice."

I didn't figure it took much practice just to sit in a car and get lolly-popped.

"You could be rich as creases," the man said. Then's when I saw if everything else came down around my ears I had a way to survive that didn't hurt at all.

I left that farm when the couple's son came back from the army and took over the work and the bedroom where I'd been sleeping. I had to go to this charity place, a big old building in Boise that had been a hotel. They said my being there was only temporary, but after two months I decided the people that were to place me weren't doing nothing, so one day I just left. A man I'd picked up at a video arcade said why didn't I go to Sun Valley? There was plenty of tourists up there and a kid like me could do pretty well. I asked him what he meant by a kid like me. He said smart and good looking, but I think what he meant was on the game, which wasn't very nice.

Look, I didn't do none of that stuff for a profession. I do it, number one, when I like somebody and, number two, when I have to get out of a bad situation. And that charity place was a bad situation, all right. The kids was mean. A new kid, soon as you moved in, you was taken in the showers and hung up by your hands while they swung you around by your balls. The bigger kids stole your food. The little kids were always pissing their beds. Everybody yelled at everybody else. You had your own room that nobody was supposed to come into, but that was a laugh. The Cal thing started happening to me all over again, only it was going on in my bed and it was three of them this time sticking up my sheets, and they was taking turns.

So I went off with that man, Jim Humbolt he was called, to Sun Valley, and that's the last time Social Service or Child Protection or any of those other peoples ever heard of me. Passed me off as his nephew, Jim did. He was working on the ski lifts, getting them ready for winter. But he wasn't like Graham. He got uninterested in me after a couple of nights. I've met other men like him. First time is everything, then they got to get a new kid or a new girl. Nothing wrong with it, I suppose, long as nobody hurts nobody, but it's sure a lot nicer if you at least like each other. I mean, it's *natural* for a boy to like a grown-up man if that man pays attention to him and listens to him and answers questions and stuff. And it's *natural* for a man to like a boy that'll work for him and help him and not ask for nothing but the Bare Necessities of Life.

It was starting to get cold, so one day I hung out my thumb on the Hailey road and headed south. And I was makin' money as I went. One ride just wanted to lolly-pop me and I got ten dollars and ninety miles out of him. Another fellow pulled off onto a forestry road. I sat on his lap and he jerked me off and caught the stuff that came out in his handkerchief and tucked the handkerchief in his shirt pocket so he could have it handy later when he did his own self again in a motel that night, or so he said.

A truck picked me up – just about rode past me, then the brakes screeched on and I'll bet there was peaches flying all around inside the back. It was a younger man driving and an older man ridin' shot-gun. They switched places, and I clumb up into the jump bed with the younger man and we did things all through Oneida County, Idaho and Cache County, Utah. Must of had the cleanest penises in the whole West by the time we pulled the curtains open and crawled down. That got me enough money so when they stopped in Salt Lake City I went to a Mexican restaurant that had a sign bigger than it was, and I ordered tacos and burritos and enchiladas and gallons of V-8 tomato juice – speaking of which, my mouth's watering so bad just *thinking* about dinner I'm about to drown. We're turnin' off? Really? Great!

Whoa whee, it's something back here, really fancy. Sure, I like lamb stew. You made it yourself? Let me have a smell – I'll try not to drool in it. De-*li'*-shus! All you got to do is heat it up, right? Yeah, this is the first time you've had a good look at me. Thanks, but I knew *you* was okay soon as I got in the camper. You didn't smoke, that I smelled right away. You were were just what you were. What I hate is people that cover things up. They smell of cover-up. They use breath drops, they goop up their hair with tonic, they rub stuff under their arms and they slop

on after-shave even if they haven't shaved. Your camper doesn't smell of any of those things. When a man that's got to cover things up gets older he buys a wig. You go to bed with a man with hair and you wake up with a man without. Gives you a fright, makes you wonder where you been that night. No, mister, I knew you was okay right from the first.

It was somewhere in Sevier County, Utah that I picked up the Grangers driving this Lincoln Continental that must of been twenty years old but hadn't a scratch on it. Mrs. Granger reminded me of my grandmother, and Mr. Granger was an ornery old cuss, but everything he said I agreed with. He had this theory that all the things the government did was bad, was wrong. People could look out for themselves better than the government could. He'd never paid income taxes. He'd never voted and he didn't let his wife vote, neither.

When we got to Phoenix which is where they lived they told me I was moving in with them. Mister G, he invented this cousin that had died and I was their kid. He laid that one on the school, and the school took me in without actually having the Papers on me they was promised but never saw because there weren't none. Mister G was the sort of guy that got his way.

Man, this stew tastes as good as it smells. Better. Well, I had the nicest room in their home, ate the nicest food. They got me the nicest clothes, not really practical but pretty. And any time I wanted to swim all I had to do was open this sliding door to my room, walk about ten steps and jump into their private pool.

But I didn't fit in, 'specially at school. I was way behind in what I was supposed to know, so they put me in with littler kids to catch up. And I talked different. I liked country and western music, the other kids were always listening to a new group out of England or some place. And then kids was drinking. Drugs was running all through that school. After what I'd seen drugs and alcohol did to my mom, I wasn't going to get into that scene, no way. I don't even smoke cigarettes.

Long about early May the Grangers got a visit from their son and his family. There was a grandson name of Willis just out of high school and still looking for a job. Willis was put in with me to sleep. When the family was gone and my door was closed he said, "Wherever did Grandpa and Grandma pick up a jewel like you?"

I said, "I ain't no jewel. I'm just a boy."

He said, "Well, I bet I can make you catch fire like a diamond does in candle-light."

Whatever that meant, I guess he did. We partied that night. We

partied all night. Willis never unrolled the sleeping bag he'd brought. We did everything, things I'd never heard of. I got licked all over, two times, so I didn't even have to shower in the morning. It was like one big Adam bomb going off in my stomach, after all those months of being nice and polite and not being able to burp when you drank a coke. Oh, sure, you could burp, you weren't going to get punished, but people'd look at each other, you know the way they do.

Next day I don't know who had the sorest private parts, Willis or me. Mr. and Mrs. G took us all on a tour in the Lincoln Continental. Willis and me, we fell asleep. "I don't know what's made you boys so tired," his mother said. "Did you two stay awake for hours talking?"

Well, we partied the next night, but not so long and not so hard, and the next night and the next, maybe gettin' it off three or four times and sleeping in between, like I used to sleep with Graham, only Willis had this thing of snuggling up close behind me with his pole tucked between my legs and a grip around *my* pole – I'd wake up and he'd still be the same way. How you can squeeze on something while you're asleep I don't know, but Willis could.

I told him one day when we were alone in the pool I was going to leave. He said, "You're crazy. You have more going for you here than any boy could want."

I said, "That's for sure."

He said, "You'll have all the opportunities."

And that was true again. But there was this empty feeling in me, like I was wasting my time. I told him, "These are the best years of my life and all I'm doing is sittin' still."

He said, "A teacher told me once you're a kid for a short time and a grown-up for a long time, so it's not so dumb to use your kid years to make your adult years better."

I said, "But I don't know I'll *live* to be an adult. Maybe a war'll come along and I'll be in combat before I'm even twenty-one."

We were standing in the shallow end of the pool and he ran his hand over my wet face and said, "That sure would be a pity."

About a week after Willis's family went back up to Utah I bought a nice little cactus plant for Mrs. Granger's dry garden and left a note under it thanking them for all they'd done for me and set off again, toward the north, because it was getting hot down there in the desert and it would be nice back in Idaho.

I went to the farm where'd I'd grown up with Grandma but there was nobody there as knew me. I went to where Graham had lived, but they'd

moved on somewheres, nobody knew. I didn't want to move in on any of those people. I just wanted to see the places again. Then I got the idea of hitching east and, well, here I am.

Everything I told you was honest to God and hope to die true, except back there before we pulled off the highway I may have put it on a little heavy to get you, well, interested, because I was scared we'd be driving all night, and me without any dinner. Let me tell you, that lamb was terrific – yeah, I know I wolfed it down in minus seconds flat. But, well here we are, me with a full belly and the most content boy this side of the Mississippi River. I take it you're invitin' me to stay the night? Well, like I said, you rub my back and I can be talked into just about anything.