

THE HOLY CITY  
Alternate Title – How Many Demons Can Dance on the Head of a Pen?

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It was the school year of 1950 – 51. I was an 11 year old in the fourth grade of the all White school in Appalachia, Virginia. Segregation was the law of the Commonwealth. Except for work in the coal mines, the Black and White communities did not mix. The Blacks attended Central High School in Appalachia, Virginia. There was a Black grade school in Big Stone Gap. The White school building in Appalachia was a four story structure, laid out in a ‘box inside a box’ arrangement. The gym was in the inner box’s lower two stories, and the auditorium occupied the upper two stories. The space between the two boxes were the halls, with the class rooms along the outside edge.

The entire school had assemblies in the auditorium from time to time. The subjects, which varied, were always announced ahead of time. However, one afternoon an assembly was announced, but the topic was unknown by the student body. The teachers were strangely straight faced. As the class rooms emptied some of the students from the second floor, which had large windows at its front, facing the street which had parking spaces, began to murmur that there was a school bus parked out front. It was said to contain Black students. As this news began to spread, a sense of impending amazement and of imminent catharsis began to grip the confused students. After all the students were in the auditorium, suddenly all the heavy double doors leading into the auditorium were slammed shut, rattling the heavy brass crash bars and locks. It sounded like the crashing of the cell doors in the recent movies about prisons like Alcatraz and Sing-Sing. To add to the sense of drama, teachers stood by each door, blocking exit. A period of silence followed, ending with the tentative shuffle of children’s feet climbing the stairs and shuffling down the side hall. The White students seated near the doors could see the frightened eyes of Black students peering through the cracks in the double doors into the auditorium filled with White kids. The sound of the cavalcade could be heard entering the stage from the east hall, next to the bluff above the river. The curtains were still closed, but soon opened to reveal a large group of Black grade students from Big Stone Gap. They were visibly terrified.

Walter F. Jones, the highly respected principal of the Appalachia School, without fan-fare announced that the chorus from the Big Stone Gap Black Grade School were going to give us a concert. One cannot adequately express the shock at this announcement. This shock was on several layers. The Black Students being in the same building with White kids was hard enough to understand, but for the Whites to be confronted with the fact that the Black School had a chorus, while the White School did not was almost more than we could grasp. Then the singing began. The songs were not the material one might have expected. There were no spirituals, no

folk songs, but a program of serious music. For many of us the pieces presented were music that we had never been exposed to. We immediately appreciated the higher quality of that music. For us the world had turned upside down. We could not make sense of this new world with different rules.

Then the ranks of the Black chorus divided, and a slenderly built little Black girl stepped forward. She was at one and the same time shy and confident. She launched into a solo of “The Holy City”, a hymn written in serious operatic style that I had never heard before. The verses were beautiful and soothing. I felt uplifted, but when she launched into the refrain the music reached higher into the sky. But when the words “Jeruselum, Jeruselum” were sung, each syllable seemed to reach up into the clouds, where one could seemingly see the angels singing. She sang with unbelievable strength and clarity that one had never heard before. One could not wait until she got through the next verse and returned to the chorus to hear her voice that “Jeruselum, Jeruselum” again. I sat there in a state of cultural shock. I had seen and heard an angel sing, and she was Black. The foundations of the earth that I had always known had suddenly and permanently shifted. It was a beginning of the end of the old for many of us. Somehow, we understood that the future would be forevermore different.

The Kiwanis Club of Big Stone Gap was one of the oldest in the world. Their main public charity was an annual free clinic where they removed the tonsils and adenoids of poor Blacks. In today’s world it is hard for us to relate to a time when strep throat, tonsillitis, and their dreaded complication of rheumatic fever hung over communities like an angry black cloud. The first effective treatment for strep, penicillin, was just coming into general use. It was the accepted standard of care to do routine tonsil and adenoid removal in healthy kids before they entered school, as a preventative measure to shield them from the heart destroying disease. There was no health insurance. Well to do parents paid cash to get it done on their kids.

The T&A (tonsils and adenoids) clinic was set up in the library of the Black grade school in Big Stone Gap. The surgeon was Dr. Charles Henderson, Sr. MD of Norton. He was an Head, Ears, Eyes, Nose, and Throat specialist. Six years earlier he had done the author’s T&A in the Appalachia General Hospital. In the grade school the library tables, massive oak ones made in the State Prison in Richmond, were cleared off, and the kids stretched out on top of them. Their noses and mouths were covered with a gauze 4 X 4, and a drop or two of chloroform was dropped on it. Two breaths through this gauze and the patients were anesthetized.

A technical digression is necessary. Ether was the usual anesthetic of choice for T&As, and for all surgeries. It, however, had a problem. Both going under and coming out of this anesthesia the patient always went through an ‘excitement phase’ during which the patient became agitated and combative. It often took three adults to restrain even a child from injuring themselves until this phase wore off. This was not true when chloroform was used. However, there was a problem with chloroform – some patients did not wake up after its use. It was not common, but it happened. In a situation where surgeries were done serially in an assembly line fashion, with kids being laid out side by side on a library table, there would not have been enough

adults available to deal with all the excitement phases from ether usage going on more or less simultaneously. For this reason chloroform was used on the kids in the Big Stone Gap T&A clinic.

A few weeks after the concert at Appalachia the kids were out front of the school having recess. A rumor, like a wave, moved through the throng of kids. "Hey, do you remember that Black girl that sang that beautiful song at that concert we heard here a few weeks back? Well, she just died having a T&A at her school in Big Stone!" It was the second world shaking shock connected to her singing "The Holy City" at Appalachia. We had met an angel, and she was Black. Then she was taken from her life in an act of charity given by the best people in the community. There was no such a thing as justice in this life. As we have all grown old in the intervening years, we have had to somehow deal with these truths.

The heroine of this story was Loretta Lyn Barnes. She was born June 30, 1937, and died April 5, 1951. She is buried in the Oak View Cemetery Big Stone Gap, Va.; Sec. G, Row 8, SP 26.

It was the last T&A clinic done by the Big Stone Gap Kiwanis Club, and the last incident the author has ever heard of with chloroform having been used.

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