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Temptation

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Temptation

by James Calvin Schaap

To see Sarah Esselink outfitted in the full regalia of Santa's traditional garb would be to behold Saint Nick himself. She has his round face, his pudgy nose, and his apple cheeks. What's more, her stick-like legs seem woefully inadequate to lug her hefty midriff around town. She has his eyes—bright, sparkling twinkles that glitter when she's at the piano—and everyone recognizes that silly, chattering giggle of hers, even in a crowd.

Although she has never led any of the organizations she's served—Ladies Guild, School Booster Club, Legion Auxiliary—most people would say Sarah long ago found her own distinguished place on the piano bench at First Church. She was blessed with massive hands, the legacy of a long line of mason grandfathers, a titanic heart, and sensitivities so promiscuous that when she hears any of a score of old favorite hymns—say, "The Old, Rugged Cross," those thick fingers immediately wiggle into her purse for the tatted hanky she is never without.

Such powerful hands and such a tender heart make her piano playing remarkable. She is self-made as a pianist, having pulled up her skills from the bootstraps of her own meager abilities; she hears a melody once and owns it thereafter, as if God in his infinite wisdom stowed a computer chip in that round, red head of hers.

Everything she plays is a copy, and yet it isn't. No one tackles the piano like Sarah Esselink. Everything she plays turns out vaudevillian. If Sarah were a writer, her romances would be rendered in perfectly purple prose. If she were a car maker, '58 Plymouths would still roll from the back doors of her plants. To her, every line of music, like the sinners she serves with her music, stands in need of grace. She laced together a piece as solemn as "Beautiful Savior," with five minutes of leap-frogging arpeggios. Luther's "Mighty Fortress" comes out resembling the Taj Mahal in Sarah's rendition. She once finished "The Hallelujah chorus" with a gash of lightning struck over her keys with the back of her thumbnail—an event so memorable that some few older members of the congregation remember that Sunday morning as effortlessly as they do Pearl Harbor.

Her extravagance might well be expected from a woman who has been secretly addicted to supermarket tabloids for more than twenty years. Of course, she doesn't buy her *Enquirers* in town, where she's likely to be a stumbling block; she buys them out of town, where, seemingly, she doesn't care who she trips up.

She refuses subscriptions, although her husband, Eldon, has asked about it often as a birthday gift. She'd never say it, even to him, but investing that heavily would be like making a year-long commitment to sin, something less forgivable, she thinks, than simply grabbing them from the rack.

But Sarah's story isn't about tabloids, a fascination with Elvis, any stripe of alien being, or babies born with wings. Sarah's story begins with son. No, I take that back. It begins with her prodigious heart.

Fatigue. It started with fatigue. She and Eldon, a man so silent and dignified you might think him Navajo, live in an old house, three-storied on the west edge of town. Although the loads of laundry have shrunk considerably since the kids left home, Sarah began to notice that after lugging the upstairs hamper down into the basement, she was able to do little but wheeze.

"You better check it out," Eldon told her.

She's convinced, however, that she goes too often to the doctor.

Biking. For a while, she and Eldon took it up on warm summer nights, the two of them pedalling slowly down empty streets—the redhead butterball breathing heavily, while her husband, sapling-thin, never broke a sweat.

"He'll just say I'm overweight," she told Eldon when he reminded her to get an appointment. "I know what'll happen. I'll go in and he'll have me undress, and he'll say it's time for me to diet. 'Lose forty pounds,' he'll say. 'Next patient.'"

* * * * *

Nothing keeps Sarah away from her piano. When she plays at home, she keeps a hymnal on the rack in front of her, not so much to follow the music as to remind her of her options. She'll barrel through a favorite, then fan the pages until she falls on a title she hasn't had a shot at in a while. Her arms have considerable girth, despite the level of exercise. Her wrists are thick; and her hands, while barely wide enough to span an octave, have the heft of sand bags.

"Trust and Obey"—two verses she played a few months ago, and she had to drop her arms. She could barely hold her hands up. She felt almost as if she would collapse. She had to go to Dr. Howell.

"It's lucky you did," he told her when she came in yet that afternoon. "I'm putting you the hospital in Sioux City, but first we have to run a few tests. Call Eldon and tell him. It's not an emergency really—"

"How can you say it's not an emergency if I'm not even going home?" she said.

"It's *not* an emergency," he repeated, "but it's something we can take care of nowadays without really complicated surgery, something we should take care of right away. You're all plugged up probably," he told her, his hand on her shoulder. "We got to flush your veins."

She looked up at the picture of a human carcass—neither man nor woman—pinned to the wall, all the muscles exposed.

"I'll call and get you in," he told her. "Now don't get upset. The treatment isn't at all what it would have been, say, fifteen years ago. We'll run some tests, but I think I know the problem."

"What is it?" she asked.

"I'll wait till Eldon gets here," he told her. "I'll explain it to both of you. Don't worry," he told her again. And then he did something that she thought he shouldn't have—he kissed her, not on the lips, but on the temple, the kiss of Judas.

She didn't call Eldon right away, because he was working somewhere—he's a master plumber. Besides, she thought immediately of her son Carl, who's not her son, the problem. He may be *a* problem, but he's not *the* problem. He's a doctor in Omaha, one of those who only keeps office hours—very rich, just treats allergies. Divorced, twice, but scads of money.

"He told me he was going to flush me out," she told Carl when she got him on the phone. She pulled his number from a card in her purse and reversed the charges.

"That's all?" Carl said.

"He said he was going to wait for your father to get here and then explain the whole thing." She looked up at the door because she didn't want the nurse coming in to hear her on the phone to her son and not to Eldon.

"I'll drive up," Carl said. "I don't trust GPs."

That only made things seem worse. If her own son wasn't going to say anything, and the doctor wanted to explain the whole operation only to the two of them, it was certainly useless to warn her not to worry. Besides, just a bit later, she failed the treadmill miserably.

"What happens," Howell told them later, when Eldon finally showed up—in his coveralls too, "is that you get crud in your veins." He looked at Eldon. "Like old pipes maybe?"

Eldon nodded.

"What we've got to do is go in there and clean up a little. Put a little Drano in—"

They both knew he was trying to make a joke.

"Actually, it's a balloon is all it is," he told them. "We push a little balloon in there and blow it up a little, and push back the crud so that your blood flows more easily. It's really simple," he said. "You can't believe how easy it is."

"Where?" Sarah said.

The doctor pointed at the very center of his being.

"I called Carl," she told Eldon once he'd gone home and picked up some things. They were driving to Sioux City. "He said he's coming. He's on his way."

Eldon nodded.

"You suppose we ought to call Mary too?"

"I already did," he told her. "She's coming."

Mary is a social worker in Elgin, Illinois.

"It's really nothing," Sarah said.

Eldon looked in his rearview mirror, then sat back and let his foot up a bit

so the truck in front of him could get out ahead and stop spitting up stones.

The fact is, Sarah had always thought she'd die long before Eldon, despite the odds of men going first. She thought her weight would take her, making her the exception to the rule and thereby sending Eldon into the arms of Alma Draayers or some other good-looking widow who could cook.

"I'm supposed to play organ this week," she told Eldon. "Maybe you better call the Pastor and get him to line somebody else up."

"It's Tuesday," Eldon said. "By Sunday, everything'll be perfectly honky-dory."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't be playing games, Eldon. Call the pastor—just call him."

In a half hour, she was checked in, fourth floor, the big window east giving her a nice view of the stockyards. She fiddled with the remote until she figured out how to get something on the TV, but nothing on the screen really went into her head because she couldn't think about anything but the fact it was her heart they were talking about here, not a gall bladder or a stiff cough.

And Mary was coming, all the way from Illinois, and Carl, the doctor—and you know he must have patients that are steaming mad, him cancelling the way he did. Some of them anxious too, she figured, probably really needing an appointment—wheezing hard themselves.

And why would Carl come if it really was nothing at all? He probably told his nurse that he had to cancel all his appointments, that he had to go home. "It's an *emergency*," that's probably the exact word he used.

And oh, my Lord, Mary would come alone and that would leave Frank with the kids in Illinois and he'd have to cook and get them off to school, and what not. Maybe they'd just go out for meals. That'd be better, of course. Mary certainly wouldn't take the kids along—I mean, they should be in school. And how would Eldon ever keep them fed? He doesn't have the time. Of course she wouldn't take the kids along, but then she shouldn't really leave them either. All on account of her own heart.

If all this rigamarole was happening, she thought, then it should at least be something dangerous. Maybe it was.

And had anyone called Chris?

* * * * *

Chris, you may have guessed, is the problem. He lives in LA, and he's single. For years, Sarah thought his problem nothing more than not being able to find the right gal. That's still what she likes to think. It's what she tells people when they ask about Chris—which they haven't done now for about five years. People in Neukirk aren't dumb—at least not when it comes to smelling scandals.

Chris is gay, and everyone in Neukirk knows it, or thinks they do. Because

he is single and lives in California, because he wears his thinning hair cut very short, and because those who remember Chris Esselink from high school will never forget his strange drawings, they think they know the truth.

No one says it—at least not to Sarah. Most people in town are quite comfortable with that kind of arrangement—knowing everything, saying nothing. It's pretty much a way of life.

The only effect Chris Esselink's being a homosexual has had upon life in his hometown is a bit of restraint. He occasionally prompts some wife to elbow her redneck husband at Bible study, once her husband starts into gay-bashing—if, of course, the Esselinks happen to be in the Bible study. Otherwise, it's open season.

No one in Neukirk really knows, except Eldon the Silent and Sarah, Mom and Dad. They *know* because their son, Christiaan, told them straightforwardly three years ago, via a letter, a long explanation, a defense, and an assurance, something book-like Sarah read maybe six times a day the first week after it arrived, then sealed up with Scotch tape, and stuck away forever in a hymnal she never uses in the piano bench.

Chris was what he was, he said, and he'd spent too much time in his life trying to be something he wasn't, something that didn't square with himself, he wrote, or—he assured them—with God. Now he could breathe, he said—with the letter. He hoped they would love him—he was still their son, after all—and he really believed that, knowing them, they would, as would God Almighty.

Of course, they showed no one, not even his older siblings, who knew anyway from a copy of the same letter addressed to each of them. But no one in Neukirk knew, even though they all suspect the truth.

What is important, at least in terms of tying up some loose threads here, is that whenever Sarah Esselink finds herself worrying about her baby boy, whenever she feels her face go suddenly leaden, she wanders into the family room and proceeds to dress up whatever hymn the book is open to and leaves her fear, like doffed robes, somewhere on the banks of the Jordan.

* * * * *

"I called Chris," Mary told her parents when she came, alone. "I wanted him to know."

For a moment, conversation stopped.

"Anyway, it's no big deal," Sarah announced. "Lots of people have this little operation. I don't know why everybody has to be here—"

"Is he coming?" Carl said.

"He was going to try," Mary told him.

"I don't know what all the fuss is," Sarah insisted.

"The fuss is you're our mother," Mary told her. "Would you stop griping and let us love you for a minute here?"

"It's not that I'm going to die," she said.

"That's a *good* reason for us to come, Mom," Mary told her. "Better than the other."

She'd had a hold of her mother's hand ever since she'd come into the room, and Sarah thought after a while that her being there, on the bed the way she was, got a little close.

"And who's taking care of the kids?" Sarah said.

"Frank's a veteran, Mom," Mary said. "I've been working full time for years. He's a better cook than I am."

Still, she thought, there was too much fuss over something everyone said—even Carl, her big-time doctor son—wasn't anything to be alarmed about.

* * * * *

That evening in the Sioux City hospital, when the kids stepped out with Eldon to get something to eat, she had a moment alone. Tomorrow morning, the specialist said, they'd go after those veins. He had the gravelly voice of a heavy smoker, she thought, but he didn't look it. His face had sharply cut features of someone intelligent, like Prince Charles.

She'd have to tell Carl and Mary that it wasn't necessary for them to hang around the hospital all day—I mean, she thought, there was nothing they could do anyway, really—forty miles from Neukirk. Magazines would get old inside of an hour. She'd tell them to stay home until she was out of the surgery. Mary still had some old friends in town—every five years Donna Millsson asks if Mary's coming to the high school reunion, and Sherrie Rademaker would love a visit too, especially after that caboose had come so unexpectedly. Carl should really have a tour of the new clinic, or else he could stop in on Frenchie Schoon's, since Frenchie was in the office now anyway, having built up that welding business to the point where all he did was shuffle paper himself.

Chris. There really were no old friends, no place where he could talk shop. He was an accountant, but she wouldn't think of sending him to Herm Felton's office, where every wall had some stuffed trophy head.

Chris was the problem. What would she do with him, after all? Maybe he could cook. She could bring that up—how about Chris cooking for the others because he sometimes wrote about the fun he was having learning how to make this and this and this other foreign-language stuff.

Chris. She wasn't forgetting really.

At least he never wrote to tell them how much he despised his parents. Her worst nightmare was that someday he would blame them somehow for the way he was, the way they all do on talk shows, everybody with problems. How many times don't you see, nowadays, parents and kids having it out in front of millions of viewers?

It was something they never talked about, of course. Eldon never said much,

and she'd always blamed herself somehow—after all, she'd read about pushy mothers herself and heard it often enough on television. She knew that theory. She'd read about faults she knew she had, lots of them, too, and sometimes she wondered how it was that the Lord didn't give you the ability to see yourself the way your kids did.

She'd always tried to do what was right. She'd never flinched on that. Her father, the mason, had molded a code of right and wrong so readable he might have fashioned the Ten Commandments himself on a cement slate if Moses hadn't beat him to it. She'd just followed suit.

What she focused on constantly, however—more than what kind of thing he was doing with other men (she couldn't bring herself to say the word itself), more even than AIDS—was his soul. How could he do what he did—what she thought he did—if he still had faith?

If what Chris has become is somehow my fault, she thought that night, the night before the operation, then it's only fair, that she know where that fault lie. But the only thing she'd ever come up with really—there were other things too, of course, like harping at Eldon sometimes for not doing the same little jobs around the house he spent all week doing for other people—but the only real problem she could find, aside from too much television, maybe, was those magazines.

"Why do you read those things?—they're nothing but trash?" Mary had told her years ago already, when she was in college. After that she'd hid them downstairs between the stacks of old newspapers when Mary came home.

And there was the night all the kids came for Eldon's sixtieth. All that laughing and all that joking, and all of sudden, out of nowhere, Chris: "It took me ten years to forgive you for reading that stuff," he said, absolutely in stitches—as if it was meant to be funny. "I mean, the whole time we were growing up, I thought everybody had them at home. And then Thompson—the only teacher in high school I respected—just gagged on *The Enquirer*," he said, wiping tears out of his eyes. "You made me so embarrassed, Mother!" he said, laughing hard actually. "You don't still read them—do you?"

"You don't read them anymore, Mom?" Mary said.

She'd dropped her eyes.

"Mom!" Mary said. "Tell me you don't."

"Mom's got a right to her kicks!" Carl said, and all three of them burst into laughter, even Eldon, who brought an arm down from where he'd had it across his chest and laid his hand, like a father might have, across her wrists.

What if I die tomorrow? she thought. What if that thing gets poked up too far and then pops like a birthday balloon right there in my heart?

Besides, she thought, some things in those magazines people needed to know—breast surgery, for instance, and information about the President.

Was it so wrong?

Poor Sarah. Major surgery—even if it's only a balloon in a clogged vein—

had a way of focusing her life as sharply as a date at dawn with the gallows.

"Christiaan," they'd named him, after his grandfather, the mason—but he never got his grandfather's shoulders. Just a year before, the *Star* had run something about a San Francisco parade in an issue she didn't buy because she didn't want to see the pictures inside.

Right there, she broke into prayer. There she lay, in a hospital bed 40 miles from her piano room, remembering what her baby had said about it taking ten years for him to forgive her. She went before the Lord in her hospital gown, the night before a thin little balloon would be thrust up through a vein in her leg toward some clogged artery, an operation thousands have gone through without so much pain as a persistent hangnail.

"Father in heaven," she said, "I need to live through this. If you let me live," she told the Lord, "I'll be a faithful servant. I'll give them up," she promised. "I . . . I will."

That's how easy it was. She didn't name the sin because the Lord could fill in the blanks. She lay right there and cut a deal with God, his healing hand for her abstinence—and when it was over she felt His hand sneaking beneath the covers and picking her up off the bed.

* * * * *

Now I've built all this up toward a climax that never occurred. Chris couldn't make it—he called just a little later that night and spoke to her himself. "It's really nothing, Mother," he said. He was the only one of her kids who insisted on calling her "Mother." "Countless people have undergone this thing and come out ready to play tennis."

"I'm only worried about playing the piano," she told him.

"Can't keep a good woman down," he said.

She was full of the burden, so she found it hard to be polite.

"How's everything else?" he said.

There was nothing else.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"I'm just making conversation, Mother," he told her.

She didn't know what to say to him. There she sat in bed, holding the phone, full to the ears with what she wanted to ask him.

"How's work?" she said finally.

"You're worried, aren't you? It's not like you not to talk."

"If it wouldn't be around my heart," she said. "If it would only be my kidney. . . You know, you've got an extra one of those."

"You're going to be all right," he told her.

She had this odd feeling that it wasn't really her son she was talking to at all, but someone she needed.

"You pray for me, you hear?" she said.

"I'll pray."

"You pray much, Chris?" she said.

"I pray," he said.

"Much?" she said.

"I didn't think God kept a record," he said.

"The Bible says 'pray without ceasing,'" she told him. "It's in there."

"Look, Mother," he said. "I just called to reassure you, you know? I don't want to get into anything here—"

"I'm your mother," she said.

"I'm not arguing that," he said.

That's when it came out.

"Christiaan," she said, "was it something I didn't do right? Tell me if it was. I need to know."

The silence spread out so long that she wondered if her boy had simply hung up the phone. "Chris?" she said again.

But he still didn't speak.

"Chris—are you still there?"

"The question implies, Mother," he said, "that my life is some kind of screw up."

"You want me to believe that it isn't?" she said.

"It's not a problem to me."

"I don't want to stand before the Lord with things not right between you and me," she told him, shakily, her nerves tightening her throat. "If it's something I did, then I want to know because I want to be forgiven."

What went through Chris's mind was a whole litany of incidents, but then all of us keep a running score of parental transgressions better forgotten. He was thinking only that his mother didn't really need a sleepless night.

"Whatever sins you carry up to judgment, Mother," he said, "you know as well as I do that your Lord Jesus will take them away."

"Is he your *Lord* too?" she said.

He knew this much: he knew what kind of answer would bring her rest. "He is," he said. That's all.

You have to love Sarah Esselink. For hundreds of years Christians have painted heavenly glory as if it were a monstrous Mormon Tabernacle Choir in the Up Yonder Metrôdome, a trillion voices singing praises to the glory of the Lord. Today, some Christians find such an image archaic, out of touch with the media generation. But that night, once she put the phone down, Sarah Esselink went to sleep with only occasionally interrupted visions of that very monstrous choir, herself at the bench of a crystalline baby grand, accompanying.

All the anxiety about the operation wasn't necessary. Medical science has about perfected that delicate little surgical operation, and the next morning, without much fuss at all, Sarah's heavy-laden arteries opened up like tulips in soft April sunshine.

I feel like a con man in preparing you for a climax and not delivering the goods. It's a dirty trick, but sometimes life doesn't work like fiction. But I wouldn't be still telling the story if there wasn't more to it. Besides, I think I'm obligated to bring you back to the piano at least once more. I've got too much of an investment in her incredible style to let it go so easily—so do you, for that matter.

Sarah Esselink held tenaciously to her death-bed commitment. Once out of the hospital, she didn't buy another supermarket tabloid. She scrambled for the shortest lines at the store, and when she ran stuck behind two or three other customers, she picked out mouth spray or extra batteries just to keep her eyes off the headlines.

She never lost the urge, she just sat on it in prime Neukirk fashion. In the four months that have passed since her operation, Sarah not once so much as glanced at one of those charming covers. Not once. The woman takes her promises seriously.

You've got to love this woman.

Act II. Florida, West Palm Beach.

Eldon didn't like the grass down there because he said it's really not made for walking. It's thick and wiry and almost cactus-like. All it's meant for, he said, was to look green. And bugs, he said, tons of bugs. Guy ought to make a real living in pest control.

That's what he told Sarah, not Al and Betty Verdoorn, in whose trailer they stayed for a week.

"You don't like it, hon?" Sarah asked him.

"I didn't say I didn't like it," he told her. "It's just not like home."

"You'd be freezing your tin lizzies off," she told him. "If you were back home, you'd be dressed in two coveralls. You saw the weather last night—two below."

"All I said was they got bug problems down here—that and I didn't care to walk on the grass," Eldon said.

They were sitting out in a pair of bright yellow lounge chairs lined up with another half dozen along a shuffleboard court where Al and another guy were doing battle. From somewhere neither of them could identify, a warm breeze picked up a smell so delicious it almost seemed sinful.

"I never thought I'd see you play shuffleboard," she told him.

"When in Rome," he said, and he pulled the morning newspaper back up over his face.

Betty came out with a tray full of steaming cups of tea, which was nice. She offered them each one, then sat on a lounge beside Sarah, who still couldn't get over the fact that all of those old women wore shorts.

"I was thinking," Betty said, her cup up to her lips. "They got the nation's biggest Christmas tree over in Boca. They ship it in all the way from Oregon

or Idaho or something. Take it all apart up there, label all the pieces, and then assemble it down here. White spruce, or something—Al would know what kind.”

Sarah liked the way the cup of tea felt warm against her stomach.

“We ought to go over there—it’s really something to see,” Betty said.

“World’s biggest Christmas tree?” Sarah said. “Bigger than the White House?”

“That’s what they say.”

It’s huge. The only thing taller on the flat coastal landscape, of course, is the endless range of high-rise condos along the beach. That monstrous tree towers above the suburban world like a New England lighthouse. The closer you come to the spot where it stands, the higher the parking rate, of course, but Al knew exactly where to leave the car, having brought just about every Neukirk snowbird they’d hosted in the last few years to one of this tree’s predecessors. He found a spot about six blocks away on a street full of little frame bungalows, each with their own wire fence.

“Bad neighborhood?” Eldon asked when Al was locking up the Chrysler.

“It’s *all* bad area,” Al said. “There’s crime down here that’s worse almost than anywhere. Somebody’s always getting murdered—every day.”

Sarah put a hand in the crook of her husband’s arm. “People don’t keep us their yards down here, do they?” she said.

Shards of palm trees were lying all over the sidewalk, and all over that wild grass Eldon complained about grew out of control. But the sun was wonderfully gentle, almost out of sight to the west.

“People really do live here, don’t they?” she said as they crossed a quiet street.

“You mean all year long?” Betty said.

“I can’t imagine having it this good—I bet they don’t appreciate it after awhile.”

Half-assembled motorcycles stood ghost-like in the yards, and trash littered the weeds along the street, enough nickels in empty cans to make a living, she thought. But whenever she looked up at that tall Christmas tree, she thought about what kind of testimony it was in this run-down world, a towering Christmas tree like that, reminding everyone it was really Christmas down here, that it was a holiday because of the coming of the Lord Jesus, who everyone, it seemed, was forgetting nowadays.

“Is it some church puts it up?” she asked.

“You wait,” Betty said. “They got a whole bunch of displays set up for Christmas. You won’t believe the lights.”

“What church can afford to pay the bill?” Eldon said.

“There’s big churches down here,” Al told him. “You can’t believe how big-a churches.”

The big tree stood in a kind of park, and even in the daylight, just to see it was a thrill, Sarah thought. Dozens of people pushed forward slowly, some

of them with blankets as if they were going to sit for fireworks.

When the kids were little, Eldon and Sarah used to take them to Sioux City on the Friday before Christmas, when Younkers would open up decorated display windows downtown. Everybody'd be there, no matter how cold. But what she found around that huge assembled tree was a display of Christmas ornaments like she'd never seen, millions of lights hung from trees and strung around animated productions of Santa and his elves busy in their Christmas workshop, Rudolf polishing his nose; of Mickey Mouse and Minny, getting everything ready to go for Christmas Eve. Everywhere you looked there were silver lights like a sky suddenly gone mad with stars.

To see the children, Sarah thought, their bright eyes dancing with all the magic, she had to stop herself, at times, from just breaking down and crying—that's how warm it made her feel in her spacious, newly-repaired chest. A whole city park full of storefront displays, all of them circling around this huge tree decorated with ropes of ribbon and ornaments of all colors, big and round as volleyballs.

"You get up close and you can see what they did," Eldon said when he found her back at the manger in Bethlehem. "Every limb's got a number. It's like an artificial tree, really," he told her, shaking his head.

"Don't look so close," she told him. She turned to Betty Verdoorn. "Who pays for all of this?" she said.

"The office of that newspaper," Betty said. "There's an office over there. They write that newspaper—what's its name, Al?"

It's a cheap trick what I've done here, set you up for this surprise, but it was necessary because Sarah Esselink herself nearly collapsed when Al, without batting an eye, without a hint of malice or sarcasm, with nothing at all to indicate any sense of Sarah's own shock, said, "*The National Enquirer*."

"You know," Betty said, "that awful magazine you see in stores—it looks like a newspaper, but it's got all that stupid stuff in it?"

"Sure," Eldon said, covering for her, "I know that one."

Sarah heard the words like a message from the bowels of the cosmos. She stood amid the golden bowl of holiday lights, impenetrably transfixed.

"The office is right around the corner there," Al said. "They give tours."

What she felt was the heat of desire she'd effectively repressed for four months. To say that she wanted that tour would be an understatement with the proportions of that huge Northwest spruce.

"We went on the tour once," Betty said. "It's very interesting."

It's not everyday, of course, that Sarah Esselink is at a loss for words.

"Maybe we ought to go in," Eldon said, his wife still something of a pillar of salt.

The three of them stood there in silence, waiting for some sign from Sarah.

"You want to go?" Eldon said. "You know what kind of paper they're talking about?"

"Sure," she said, emotionlessly, her mind already spinning out the excuse: God wouldn't have brought them here if he didn't think it was just fine for her to go through. And besides, wasn't it incredible that a magazine like that could bring so much warmth to the faces of kids.

All I know is this. The four of them took the tour. But when Sarah got back to Neukirk, she kept up her abstinence for awhile, then she bought a *Star* somewhere out of town. That was the beginning. Now, once again, she's in over her head, and Eldon never says a word because he's happier himself, what with the wife not pulled tight as a machine wire.

Nobody in Neukirk knows all of this, of course, and even if they did they'd not think any of it was as important as all of it was to Sarah. Nobody even guesses anything traumatic even occurred, because nothing that did happen ever changed a note in the way Sarah bangs the church piano. She still offers every last hymn in streamers and bows over shiny holiday paper. Every anthem ends with a thirty-second bass chord salutation chasing madly down the keyboard.

She's healthy now. Some summer night, walk by her house and you'll hear more energy from those keys than you could imagine a woman with her years and burdens could ever raise. Listen in for yourself. You won't forget it.

But Sarah Esselink did, in fact, willfully break the deal she'd cut with the Lord one harried night in the Sioux City hospital. And it did prompt a change. She talks to her son Christiaan a bit more regularly now on the phone, calls him just to talk. But even though she's still passionately interested, not once in all those calls has she ever asked her wayward son again about the state of his soul.