

The Tub and Other Stories

by

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This portfolio of creative writing includes four full-length short stories and two pieces of flash fiction. In each of the full-length stories, a male protagonist gets caught up in circumstances over which he has little control. Both pieces of flash fiction are inspired by recent re-readings of work in religious studies that has been important in my thinking – one by Georges Bataille, another by Linda Badham.

The Tub and Other Stories

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by

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THE OLD WOMAN

“The animal opens before me a depth that attracts me and is familiar to me. In a sense, I know this depth: it is my own. It is also that which is farthest removed from me ... that which is unfathomable to me.” –Georges Bataille

The old woman’s thin blemished skin lumped beneath her eyes and sagged to a gizzard beneath her chin. Her small eyes, set deep in two cavernous hollows, glazed gray, obscuring the once brilliant blue irises of her youth. Her ears were large and sage-like, pulled to a droop by Earth’s gravitational field, and by poorly chosen earrings. Like Mildred, Alice, Beatrice, and the other Alice across the hall, she masked the droop with a helmet of sparsing white, for she was old and felt it was the proper thing to do. To the young, I suppose, she probably looked like just about everyone else in the little brick building.

Though frail and fading fast, she wasn’t quite like everyone in the home, for she was awake once, living in the world like water in water. As she rocked gently before the television, which blared an English accent that spoke authoritatively of lions and their mating habits and beamed footage of a pair copulating under a commiphora, she had a thought, one which she hadn’t had for some time. That thought was of her husband, now dead, and what magnificent thing he accomplished nearly forty years ago the night she whispered to him over meatloaf and mashed potatoes, “I ... I think I would like that.”

You see, they were sitting together on the couch, as they used to before the children were born and each of them began to inhabit separate worlds, watching Mutual of Omaha’s *Wild Kingdom*, and a male lion—prodigiously-maned, gleaming gold in the distant sun—had just wrestled a much smaller female to the ground and rammed her mercilessly from behind until his seed was set free and her whiskered cheek, mashed up against the trunk of the tree, had begun to

bleed. She couldn't believe that she'd said it and hoped her husband hadn't heard or would quietly slough it off as another of her senseless womanly remarks.

No, she never quite understood where the comment came from, for she attended church like the rest, read the Bible like the rest, knitted sweaters and baked pies the rest, and was generally held to be a shrinking presence in the company of all, even in the company of her own family. Someone or something else had said this, she concluded finally, before uttering one other thing: "I don't want to 'have relations' or 'make love' or any of that anymore. What I want is ... is to be—" And though her nerve gave out, her husband had heard and understood the demure housewife by his side, although he said nothing at all then and merely rose and knocked the scraps of his meal in the trash and walked silently out to the shed, where he sawed wood and pounded nails and turned long screws until the sun came up. Two nights later, after the children were tucked in bed, he gently led the aproned mother of three by the hand upstairs to their connubial chambers, then thrust her up against the wall as if she were being arrested and rammed her mercilessly from behind so that picture frames fell and cracked and their youngest, Rebecca, who was sound asleep, woke and thought their little white picket-fenced house was about to be run through by a locomotive. Well, it was the first time she had ever been fucked.

Although she couldn't have said whether she felt more pleasure or pain that evening, she knew that he had accomplished a great thing, perhaps the greatest thing that he had ever accomplished, because from that moment she began to feel the wild fire of God's breath in her life, to feel his world as a consuming blaze, and to revel before the mighty forces all about that threatened to annihilate her. Although her husband never managed to replicate the act with the same beastly abandon and, being a good man, very soon wished to stop altogether—"It's plain unchristian what we're doing, Maude, and I won't have part in it any longer," he said one

morning with a muffin in his right and a briefcase in his left, poised to walk out the door for work—she began to seek out the universe’s rough edges and nourish an intimacy with the sacred that her people lost when they began to say that some things are good and true.

That winter, for instance, she would stride out into the quiet black woods after everyone else was asleep and traipse through the snow barefoot and nearly naked until she came to Beaver Creek, where she would wade up to her waist and stare at the white rock in the sky, then slog shivering back home, red and numb all over. In the spring, she would drive down to the flats along the reservoir after a hard rain and wade among the glassy-eyed copperheads, daring them to have a go at her soft white flesh. And in the summer, without a drop of water or sunscreen, she would slave all day bare-shouldered beneath the raging sun pulling weeds, planting shrubs, setting fence posts, trimming trees, hauling rock and railroad timbers, even digging holes and refilling them when she’d run out of things to do. At day’s end, she was burnt and bone-tired, but she wanted to know her place in the universe, to know that she was powerless before it, and that it would reclaim her one day; she wanted to acquaint herself with its ways and live the rest of her life in its teeth.

And she did, until Christmas came round again and the world began to speak too often and too loudly of benevolent gods become flesh for love of humankind—Why hominids and not other critters? she wondered then, And why, for Christ’s sake, only one kind of hominid?—so that her mind got scrambled and she began to think like other people, growing afraid of things generally, and of death, fear of which she had slain only months before. One night (she remembered it well), on the third Sunday of Advent, as she and her husband were wrapping pretty things to be placed under their tall tinsel tree, she seized him suddenly by the silver bells of his Christmas sweater and implored him to fuck her again so that she could regain her sanity.

But, because he was a good man, he would not do it, and told her calmly to put her finger on the red ribbon and keep it there so he could finish tying the bow.

But this was all so long ago, when she, for a season, drove out the creeds and comforts of civilization and stalked the sting of the universe. Mostly, now, she was tired, although sometimes she was cranky, especially when the staff would inter fruit cocktail in the Jell-O or stick the remote when cleaning on a high ledge where she had trouble reaching it. But she was happy on this night, rocking rhythmically before the television, imbibing that regal English accent and the resplendent panoramas of the Serengeti, happy to have had the good fortune of stumbling onto a good thought. Probably there weren't too many in the little brick building who had thoughts just like this one.

THE TUB

The two men knocked just as Roland had scooped his first spoonful of marsh mellow-encrusted yams. From between the blinds, he at first thought from their crisp white shirts and black ties that they were Mormons and cursed a little too loudly so that he felt he had no choice but to open the door. His yams, which he'd peeled and mashed and slathered in butter and sugar just an hour before, would grow cold now, and for this he was mildly resentful. He vowed then to scribble the letter he'd been meaning to send since having learned on PBS that the Church was trying to baptize just about every deceased member of the species by proxy. No one would make a Latter-Day Saint of his carcass, not now. He would make sure of that.

But the two men were not Latter-Day Saints or Jehovah's Witnesses or Gideons. (Do Gideons pester door-to-door? Roland couldn't recall.) Up close, they looked more like state troopers or FBI agents, or possibly Marines on holiday, dressed for the evening service.

Mr. Sims?

Yes.

I'm Agent Chrysostom and this is my partner, Agent Bavard.

Okay.

Well, sir, we've come to tell you that you've been chosen and that we'll be setting up a tub of water in your yard – out back or up front, it's up to you.

Roland was in no mood for whatever these hucksters were trying to pawn. His yams, which he'd slaved over and had cost him a hunk of skin from the tip of his finger, were getting cold.

I don't understand.

Even I don't understand, sir, as understanding isn't our business. But you've been chosen still, and we really should get to work before it all goes dark.

Work on what?

The tub, sir.

Roland glanced at Agent Bavard, mute thus far. He, like the other, had a mechanical, martial air and was riveted to the concrete upon which he stood, an obelisk of gravitas. The breeze, which fingered the mantle of foliage wrapped about the trees and bushes in his front yard, seemed to crook knowingly about the frozen pair. Their clothes flapped not a bit.

I can say more now, if you wish, or after. But bear in mind, the light is fading.

Now, please. Roland was in no mood.

We'll fill it for you, said the same one who had always spoken, and put a float in it – a ball, like in the old toilets. It's your job to keep the water level from going too low or too high, and the float will know when it does.

Roland wanted to slam the door on their stony faces and get back to life, but he heard his mother whisper something about manners – Now, Roland dear, how would *you* like to be treated? – and sensed that merely rotating a pine slab ninety degrees on its hinges wouldn't put an end to the matter anyhow.

The float will know? Roland wished to say Get the fuck off my porch just as Clint Eastwood might say Get the fuck off my porch, but he had said this instead.

Yes.

How?

A small chip – a microchip.

Oh. Roland scratched the back of his head, then his chest. And, if I don't maintain the water level?

You will feel pain.

How?

I don't know, sir.

You don't know?

I don't know. Roland wondered: Is it Halloween, or April Fools, or some other merry holiday I've forgotten? Long ago, when Roland had lots of friends and was buoyed by the endless possibilities that mirrored before him, he might have had a little fun with the shenanigan, played happily along, thought nothing of the cooling yams.

What kind of pain?

They say it starts behind the eyes.

How?

I don't understand the mechanics of it, sir. That's for people above my pay grade to know.

So, what happens then? The one who had always spoken furrowed his brow. Actually furrowed his brow.

Understand, it's hearsay, what I tell you. I have no direct experience of it. But it goes down the spine, they say, like someone's screwing a vice around it, screwing down hard. Water gets too low or too high, they say it radiates to the extremities and lays you out flat, hurts like hell.

Then how can you be expected maintain the water level?

It's tough, I don't doubt that. But sir, the darkness is coming, and me and Agent Bavard got a little work to take care of, like I said. Right now I just need to know where you want it.

I don't.

But you've been chosen, sir.

Who *are* you?

Agent Chrysostom, sir, and this here's Agent Bavard.

Roland was beginning to wish that they had been Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses or Gideons (if, in fact, Gideons do intrude door-to-door, although Roland was beginning to suspect they didn't go door-to-door at all but were the ones who shoved little green books in your gut right when you got off the bus and didn't yet have the wherewithal to motor left or right, avert your eyes, or muster a Go to hell – over which you would later agonize because you'd been brought up decently, but not quite so decently that you wouldn't mutter Go to hell when some stranger tried to save your soul.)

As Roland was thinking about the Gideons and their little green books, the agent who'd said not a word reached behind him, drew a pistol from his khakis, and shot Roland between the eyes.

When Roland came to, the crisp-shirted pair was bent over him, wiping blood from his forehead and dressing the wound.

What the hell are you—? Roland tried to ask, dizzy, still smarting from the tumble, the hole in his forehead.

Just relax, sir, said the one. It's nothing but a pin-prick. Pain should be gone by morning.

A pin-prick? You goddamn shot me in the—

A pin-prick, sir, I can assure you. Man up, will ya? It's really not that bad. Roland gingerly rubbed the side of his head, which had slammed hard against the concrete floor. A small knot was beginning to assert itself.

You guys are nuts! Get the hell off— Roland managed as the men struggled to hold him down.

The chip's lodged in your skull now. I recommend you monitor the tub. If you don't, you'll feel it. You'll see.

Roland tried to break free but found himself growing weaker, his eyelids drooping, his mouth going dry. Roland wasn't aware the mute one had rammed a needle into his thigh while he was out and injected an anesthetic.

I should also mention, sir, that it's in your best interest not to try to tamper with it – you know, cover it with something – a tarp, say, or a piece of plywood. The float knows when people tamper with it.

What the hell are you talking about? Roland slurred. Why would I tamper with it?

I just want to say good luck, sir. Know that you're not alone. There are others. They figure it out, they manage. You'll see.

What ... what others? Roland's eyelids had shut, and he was beginning to drool.

Just know that you're not alone, that's all. You're not the only one. And with that, Roland's brain surrendered to the serum. He went limp and his head rolled to one side.

The men carried him inside the house and laid him on his bed. Once they felt certain Roland's wound had quit bleeding, they strode silently out to their truck, loaded a large

rectangular crate onto a dolly, and wheeled it to the backyard, where they set to work on assembling the cruel master that would ruin the sleeping man's life.

Roland didn't wake until late afternoon the next day. From the room's lone window, the creeping sun managed to engulf his entire body in its fire and raised his core so high that what woke him was the sweat that had pooled in his eye sockets and burned. The pain in his forehead wasn't gone as the men had promised, but it had subsided, or at least was less of a distraction than the rumbling in his gut and the aching knot behind his ear.

As Roland sat in the kitchen eating yams straight from the foil tray abandoned the day before, the newly installed tub caught his eye, its white porcelain gleam and cast iron clawed feet inviting closer inspection. Roland toted the tray outside, perambulated slowly about it, then peered inside, where a plastic sphere about the size of a softball floated above three or so feet of water. The waterline was between two thin black stripes that ran round the inside.

Kind of them to fill it, muttered Roland, as he thumped the ball with his middle finger and ran a hand along its cool smooth rim. The basin, plain but attractive, was antique – like something you might see touring an old country estate in New England, maybe. Like something fit for a Duke or a Queen. The men had set it high on a wooden platform.

Make a hell of a bird bath, he muttered as he walked back inside, foraging for a story he might tell his wife, who has due home within the hour from a trip upstate to her mother's.

We should call the police, said his wife, perturbed at her husband's recent misfortune, longing to plunge her tense frame into a warm candle-lit bath. The couple was standing quietly

at the kitchen's bay window sipping decaf, working bits of vegetable matter from the interstices between their teeth.

Just let it go, Liz. They'd never believe me. Probably they'll lock me up for being such a goddamn loon.

What are you going to do with that thing?

Leave it for the birds. You like birds, don't you? Roland's wife massaged the back of her neck and quaffed the remaining ounce or so of black Columbian, bitter and tepid.

I do.

Although the couple didn't speak the rest of the evening, they did have a fairly successful go at intercourse. There was something about emerging from a bath naked and clean late at night, and there was something about warm soft skin, about a woman smelling so sweet. There was just something about it. So all the questions they might have had about this unusual event just vanished, as a chip of ice spit poolside under the noonday sun.

Not until the following evening did Roland begin to feel the first surge of pain – a new and unfamiliar kind of pain – between his eyes. Consumed with the tedium of evaluating stacks of student essays on their most memorable summer vacation ever, he had forgotten about the tub and the tiny hole in his head. At first believing the ache to be a routine occupational hazard no different from any other he'd gotten grading papers, he took a few ibuprofen and lay down. But when he woke at about 5 a.m., he noticed that it had worsened considerably and migrated to the base of his skull. It was no longer a mild ache that might be thrust from consciousness by focusing on something else but searing hot, impossible to ignore. He took three more ibuprofen

and a couple of his wife's Pamprin and reclined before the television, where he flipped aimlessly past local morning shows and cheery infomercials.

The flickering soon began to aggravate the tissues behind his eyes, so he stepped outside and watched kitchen lights snap on up and down the broad familiar avenue he'd called home since he and Liz had been married. A faint pink glow could already be seen through the tall pines that flanked one side of their property and soothed him. He thought of stalking hungry largemouth with his brother on mornings like these, of the implacable eerie misty calm of the ponds they frequented, of his line as it began to grow taut and move slowly on its own, and of the magnificent pleasure that once gave him. An open-topped Bronco rumbled slowly by, and the flannelled old man inside who delivered the paper heaved a package end over end that struck Roland on the crown of his head. A not quite genuine Sorry buddy could be heard from the cabin just as another package landed in his neighbor's driveway. Roland waved weakly then turned and bent to grab the morning news. The pain seemed to be getting worse and traveling down his spine. This seemed odd to him. Ibuprofen had never let him down so spectacularly before. He hadn't expected much from the Pamprin.

As he reached for the handle to the front door, the thought that probably should have occurred to him earlier finally did: maybe there was something to that tub after all. He jogged around to the backyard and peered inside the porcelain bath. The water level was flush with the bottom line.

There's just no damn way, he muttered to himself, glaring at the inert ball. Angry at himself for entertaining the possibility that a plastic ball could be responsible for the pain, Roland scooped it out and made as if he were going to hurl it into his neighbor's yard but fell to the ground and let out an agonizing cry of the sort one imagines when a man runs a finger

through a band saw or when a soldier's leg is blown to tiny bits. Roland arched backward horribly too, as if he'd just had a thousand volts shot through his scalp to the base of his spine. And while fumbling violently for the dropped ball and cursing and biting his tongue and wriggling maniacally like some worm with its head mashed under a boy's shoe, he grabbed for a hunk of bark and rammed it sideways into his mouth, which didn't help with the pain as the movies suggested it might. The man screamed a ghastly scream and pounded at the wet grass and kicked and thrashed and bit his way toward the ball and having seized it somehow stood shaking and writhing and flailing while cussing in the most deeply offensive ways. When the ferocious thrashing thing bleeding now from its mouth dropped the sphere back into the tub, it fell limp in a livid heaving heap beside the wooden platform and moaned softly. When a woman came running out of the house in her bathrobe and squatted beside it crying and frantic and stroking its hair, it waved her away sharply and swore and curled up tightly into some kind of fetal position. As she yelled Honey! Honey! What happened to you? What's happened? What's happened? and turned back toward the house and ran, he stood and walked toward the spigot and cranked it once and dragged the hose to the porcelain bath and filled it till the water came up just a fraction below the top line. Still bleeding from his mouth and with the iron glare of someone to whom the gravest wrong had been done, to whom no greater wrong could be done, he lumbered toward the shed, fished around in the dark for caulk and a roll of screen he'd saved to patch holes so he and his wife could eat burgers and sweet corn on their porch in peace, harassed no longer by those rude bloodsuckers that seemed to have no other purpose than to make all of God's other creatures suffer, and quickly fixed a sheet to the top of the tub while cursing the gods above, evening naming the ones he could remember, so that the ball would stay where it must and he wouldn't be reduced to a mound of searing writhing flesh ever again. As he applied the caulk

and bled and cursed, his wife ran panting and shaking out of the house with the phone in her hand and told him that an ambulance was on its way and that everything would soon be fine. She drew him close and questioned him ceaselessly about the events of that early morning, but he just applied caulk and pressed down on the screen and bled seething in silence, glaring and cursing like some possessed thing.

When the ambulance arrived, Roland fled upstairs and got in the shower. From the shower he yelled down at the paramedics and his wife and told them to leave him be, that he had things to do and would be fine, just as his wife had said. What he had to do was bleed a little more from his mouth and curse. After that was taken care of, he crawled under the covers a different man and fell asleep.

Hours later Roland woke cold and afraid. He slipped a sweatshirt over his head, finally knocking free the thin square of gauze the men had taped between his eyes, and stumbled downstairs to check the water level in the tub. He noticed that his wife was sitting at the kitchen table with her face in her hands and that his tongue felt huge and hard and sore. The slightest movement, the slightest tap against the inside of his teeth, sent a wave of hot pain through his whole face and neck that suggested to him he'd be taking his food puréed through a straw. He wanted to cuss at this discovery but couldn't.

He went back in the house and scribbled instructions on an envelope, then passed it to his wife. Once she had gotten hold of herself, she called the community college where her husband toiled for little money and told them he'd come down with a stomach virus and likely wouldn't be back in until next week. The kind woman of advanced age who'd picked up the phone said she wished him well and that she would lift up his name during a prayer meeting later that

evening. His wife said that it was such a minor thing, really, and that the creator of the universe probably had more important matters to attend to. Naturally, the woman insisted.

For the next several days, Roland assiduously monitored the water level in his tub. Occasionally, he would scoop out just enough with a measuring cup to bring the water flush with the lower line, and each time he did, a dull ache formed between his eyes. And when he removed a smaller amount with a teaspoon so that the water dipped below the line, the ache spread suddenly and sharpened, reminding him of the moment he'd recklessly flung the sphere from its proper place and collapsed writhing on the ground. The very same thing happened when he added water so that the level was flush with the top line. And again, when a teaspoon or so was poured in so that the water inched just above the black line, pain migrated to his vertebrae and sharpened. All this time, while Roland experimented cautiously with the tub, testing to see exactly what kind of hold it had over him, his enormous sore tongue diminished slowly in size, which pleased him. But Roland was on edge.

Roland didn't return to work until the middle of the following week because he couldn't talk like a normal human being, and because he felt that talking was a critical part of his job. Some of the students who liked him a lot razzed him about his inability to clearly articulate about half his words and about the occasional bit of drool that would pool at one or the other corner of his mouth. Other students felt squeamish when he spoke and wished to be somewhere else.

The teacher gave the appearance of taking the whole affair in good stride, although on the inside he felt like a squirrel caught in traffic, fretting endlessly over the water level in the tub, imagining against his will all the one-in-a-million things that might cause the water to plummet

or spike unexpectedly. When Roland's brain was underemployed, as it was, for instance, when he was in a staff meeting or brewing coffee or taking a leak, it would inconsiderately hurl the most implausible scenarios at him one after another.

By the end of the spring term, Roland's chair, a stout fellow whom Roland felt enjoyed his power too much and probably hadn't had an original thought in a decade, began to get wind of the young teacher's more frequent comings and goings and noticed that his office door was nearly always closed now. The chair questioned the employee about this one afternoon, wisely framing the discussion with the most sympathetic remarks about Roland's welfare. Their conversation, insisted the chair, wasn't about job performance at all. Not yet anyway. Roland responded vaguely with copious hemming and hawing, in the end randomly pinning blame on a strained marital relationship. The chair nodded thoughtfully, said he understood and hoped things would improve, and that if they didn't he knew a lovely young psychiatrist who could help get the couple back on track.

I do appreciate it, Bob, said Roland as they shook hands that afternoon, knowing full well that his habits weren't about to change, that in fact he was growing even more obsessed by the day, and that his relationship with his wife was, at the moment, the least of his worries. She would stick by him until he got this thing figured out, he thought. Some time ago she'd made a promise – for better or for worse, he seemed to remember her say.

Having been scared into adopting an obsessive-compulsive temperament foreign to his prior easy way, Roland managed to make it through the semester with few oversights or mishaps. There were times when he had to be away from the house all day and evening and the water would creep down a touch too far, triggering first an ache in his forehead and then the stabbing

searing sensation in his upper vertebrae, but he always found a way to excuse himself and get home before going mad with pain. Heavy rains caught him off-guard several times; it was, in fact, the sudden downpours that terrified him most and sent him into a blind white-knuckled panic. Harrowing too were the heavy winds that swept down into the porcelain bowl and stirred things up beneath the float, sending seismic jolts of pain through his whole body that made him look like he was being stuck with a cattle prod or shot with a Taser. He tried constructing a barrier around the tub to stanch the wind, but the crisp-shirted men had been right: when the walls reached a height at which they might actually do some good, somehow the ball sensed interference, that the tub was being shielded artificially from the elements.

Summer, brutally hot in these regions and prone to the most outrageous thunderstorms, created even more trouble for Roland. The scorching midday sun seemed to suck water straight from the basin as if from a straw, as if it wanted to keep Roland on his toes, even to watch him suffer. Roland learned that he could remain away from the tub no more than four or five hours at a stretch, so he dashed home between sections (to help pay down student loans, Roland stupidly agreed to teach two remedial reading courses during both summer sessions) to refill the tub. During the most vicious thunderstorms, he simply excused himself from class and thrashed about in his office until it had passed, emerging later with cuts and bruises over his whole body. On a few occasions, the downpour managed to outpace Roland as he sped home so that he stood from his car raving mad, his back wickedly arched, blood from his tongue streaming down his chin. While he always somehow managed to scoop out enough water before losing consciousness, the incidents were beginning to take their toll. A man can only take so much abuse before the fragile structures of thought carefully constructed over a lifetime to give a little order to this place begin to crumble.

And crumble they did. Having been moored ruthlessly to the present, returned to that brute animality our species labored so hard to transcend, a mere responder to stimuli, nervous always, keyed-up, frightfully tense, Roland lost sight of the past, lost his taste for the future. He thought constantly about the tub, always and only about the tub. What few pleasant memories remained were overshadowed by those moments when Nature had outwitted his relentless vigilance and coerced from him a primal scream.

And so his mind became dominated by this singular obsession: he must do everything in his power to prevent the water level from surpassing either line. Everything else in the multiverse had ceased to matter.

After a difficult (some might say harrowing) summer, the harassed and tethered teacher began to lose control. He woke to find that he was not free, as the great French philosopher once had said. Pain, or the fear of it, had become such an imposing omnipresent specter in his mind that he saw or thought little else. He had become a driven animal fitted with blinders, tugged this way and that, slashed from above, heeled from the side, commanded when to go, when to stop, when to lie down. He was a man no longer. And as he began to concoct ever more fanciful excuses for declining invitations to dinner or cocktails with friends, to barbeques and pick-up games after work, his social life so atrophied that the only conversations he ever had outside the college – and these, only of barest necessity – were with his wife. Not much could be said for their terse business-like exchanges. They went something like this:

Shall I pick up some milk, then? Roland might say at the beginning of a meal.

Sure, if you want, his wife may reply.

Can you do the dishes again? Roland may ask at the end of this same meal. My head hurts, and I've got to fill the tub. Then his wife would rise silently from her chair as Roland walked out the back door to address this most intractable issue.

It is true that their conversation was somewhat more involved the evening Roland informed his wife he'd been let go from the college.

What reasons did he give? asked his wife.

That I was late for class and didn't fulfill my office hours. And that I wasn't coming to staff meetings, or leaving them early.

Is that true?

Yes.

Will you fight it?

No.

His wife must have been irate when she heard this, but she showed no sign of it. She simply dropped her head and finished her meal. When she was done, she stood and spoke once more to her husband.

I will work more hours, then, she said.

The sacrificial gesture would have been duly noted by most men, but Roland was no man. He was beyond caring. She might have said, I'm leaving you, or, I love you, but neither declaration would have had any effect upon Roland, for he was no man. And he knew that all love was conditional anyhow, no matter what the preachers and the people in Hollywood had forever been telling everybody. She might love him today, he thought, but it couldn't last. You can't love fear and instinct, and that's all Roland really was. She still looked at him through their shared history, through all the wonderful memories they'd created together. But this was an

error, and it perpetuated a wildly distorted of image of her husband that had nothing at all to do with the tethered and driven thing he had become.

I can't do this anymore, said his wife inevitably one evening that fall. The couple was again standing side by side before the kitchen window, sipping coffee, staring blankly at that porcelain fiend. Roland had just scooped about a quart of rainwater from it because his head hurt.

I'm not fond of the situation, replied Roland.

Roland hadn't given much thought to his wife in the past several months. She had become to him a kind of permanent fixture in the house, part of its furniture. He watched her as she perused glossy catalogues and thought about things they might buy for the house, or as she surfed the web for some hauntingly beautiful and secluded spot to which they might go to rekindle their love. Roland saw no point in either of these activities, so completely riveted he was to the two thin black lines that now defined his life. Sometimes his wife spoke of kids too, and Roland resented her deeply for this. Could she not see that he was no father? Fatherhood was for the tub-less, for those who still had leisure to give the future a look.

I want you back, she said.

Is there something left to want?

I want to believe there is. Her voice may have cracked, but Roland wasn't sure, and he'd fallen out of the habit of checking.

Why do you want me back? asked Roland.

Because I love you.

But her love wasn't enough. Roland suspected he might still love her too, but he couldn't coerce his gaze away from the tub long enough to test the theory. He had been driven mad, and he knew there was no coming back. He told her so one evening over dinner, and did it in an uncommonly cruel way to drive the point home, to drive her away.

I am ruined, he said. I cannot love you. I do not love you. It is time for one of us to go.

She took the hint – she was not stupid. She packed her things and moved to an altogether cooler climate, where she purchased a small home that had no tubs at all, only a shower. There she sadly began a new life without Roland. Soon she married and had babies and bought nice things from catalogues and took exotic vacations exactly twice each year, but never again was she truly happy, aware that such a thing as happened to Roland could happen. Most of the time she was fine because of the endless distractions of raising children and putting money in the bank, but if one looked closely, there was to be found a profound and irremediable sadness in her eyes, and she often wept late at night after her new husband had fallen off, perplexed and angry and numb that such a thing as happened to Roland could happen.

LARRY THE LETTER CARRIER

After possums had waddled up from the autumn scraggle and began dipping their snouts in the feed bowls of neighborhood cats and dogs; after raccoons had climbed from the storm drains and began pawing through cylinders of trash perched at awkward angles along the roadside; after good girls and boys had scrubbed their teeth and whispered short endearing prayers that made their parents smile; after Jon Stewart had elicited satisfying snickers from weary liberal suburbanites who at other times were just plain terrified of all the loony things the GOP might do; after children-ridden couples had given sex a feeble go and lay inert in a tangled heap of sheet and comforter; after sleepwalkers had secreted a few bites from some savory high-caloried treat and tumbled sated back into bed; and after the wrinkled old and chronic worriers everywhere had dozed open-mouthed and drooling before a poltergeist screen or those brightly colored bars, Larry the letter carrier fell from a high place onto concrete and knocked his skull so hard that he had not one more thought.

The sound, you may imagine, was a ghastly one: a single sharp crack – an illusion built of so many smaller cracks – accompanied by a colossal thud that for anyone looking on would have shook the tiny patch of Earth upon which she stood. But there was no one looking on. When the good citizens along Larry's route woke, they would think (if they thought about it at all) that as the young woman in blue stuffed their boxes with tightly wound magazines, windowed bills to darken their day, glossy ads for pizza and cheeseburgers and printer cartridges – well, they would think only that it must be Larry's day off. And when this same woman stuffed the day after, and the day after that, then for a whole week of days, they naturally would think that Larry had been transferred or promoted (for he really was a conscientious letter

carrier), or maybe that he even had retired. After all, Larry was showing a little gray above his temples and through his enviably thick cenobite beard.

Now, following the event, the musings and twitterings from the few who knew Larry were predictable.

Thought two of his co-workers: *Poor guy. Must have been so lonely with no wife, no kids. Just can't imagine how dull and pointless it all was for him.*

Said the permed women who stood all day at the window passing out stamps and weighing boxes: "How anybody lets it get that bad, I don't know."

"Always a strange one, though. Like he wasn't there when he was there, you know?"

"But one of the nicest."

"He was."

"Such a shame."

"It is."

Said the boss with a grave and jilted look as he paced along the concrete lip of the loading dock: "I'll get someone in here quick as I can. Ain't no way I'm gonna leave the team in a lurch, trying to make up for what Larry done. The selfish bastard couldn't have waited till after the holidays?"

Said his very successful and very wealthy older brother: "Figures."

Said his ailing mother though a river of hot tears: "Now, what's he have to go and do a crazy thing like that for. Never thought of anyone but himself, that boy. Oh Larry, how can you do such a thing to your poor mother!"

Said the stocky plastic-smiled fellow who'd dunked Larry at twelve, reluctantly presided over his marriage to a garrulous Irish Catholic from Queens, and pleaded with him later on to get

right with the Lord: “Pray for his soul is about all we can do, I’m afraid. Larry’s gone and done a terrible thing.” After finishing his pie, the fellow set down his fork, quietly added: “But the Lord is merciful.”

Said the grizzled bartender who passed pints of dark frothy beer weeknights to the bent-backed letter carrier and who spoke not a word unless spoken to: “It just don’t work out for some.”

All but the bartender got it wrong.

Now, let me tell you a little about Larry. Larry tried real hard. Sure, others have tried harder, but Larry was no slacker: A’s, mostly, in high school; A’s and B’s in college (sometimes he drank too much, stayed up too late, thought about girls when he should have been reading the *Euthyphro* or calculating the area of a dodecahedron); A’s, mostly, in graduate school, where he was working toward his Ph.D. until one morning in the lab he found all the white mice in his charge belly-up, their little mouths caked in foam and dark about the gums, like they’d been sipping hot tar or nibbling coal, which they hadn’t. The mice belonged to his dissertation advisor, who – importantly – wanted to see whether listening to Britney Spears or to Brahms might enhance their ability to drop ping pong balls through rings for pellets of food. Naturally, the professor was angry when he heard the news, but he prided himself on being a rational man too, committed to the cool distance of the scientific gaze, so he told Larry over corndogs and tater tots the next day that he wouldn’t hold it against him, that crates of fresh mice were already on their way and would arrive first thing Monday morning. But Larry knew that our rational part was no master – he was, after all, writing on Freud – and the professor, in spite of himself, couldn’t help wondering what the boy had done wrong, or even if he had sabotaged the

experiment. “Mice don’t just up and die like that,” his brain would tell him in the morning as he soaped and rinsed, bladed graying whiskers from his face, and munched through his Mini-Wheats. “But Larry’s the most honest and conscientious student I’ve ever had,” it would counter over lunch and through much of the afternoon. “Still,” it would waver late in the evening, as the professor pulled the blankets snugly up to his chin and shut off the lamp.

And then there was the email, which Larry believed he’d sent only to the other graduate assistant who worked in the lab but had been copied to his advisor when he carelessly clicked “Reply All” while scavenging for a fry lodged between his crotch and the seat cushion. In the message, he had compared the sudden demise of the mice to the mass suicides of Jonestown and Heaven’s Gate, commenting, “Guess the little guys couldn’t hack old Haversham’s obstacle course and those cheap-ass Walmart rock-pellets any longer and just opted out. Hell, I think I would have done the same thing if I had to work that damn hard for, like, Beanie Weenies or Spam or whatever. Hope they found the peace they were looking for, poor little dudes.”

The remark might not have irked the professor had he been in a decent mood that morning, but he’d just learned that he’d been asked to teach two more sections of Introduction to Psychology because of the recent budget cuts and dropped his only remaining razor in the toilet, which left him with a very cold wet hand and some pretty gnarly stubble over just one side of his face. The Department, you see, had cut three term-faculty, which meant the tenured-folk would have to pick up the slack until people quit believing that tax cuts for the rich would magically benefit those who weren’t and the Democrats won back the legislature. Old Haversham could be a cool guy, but he was in no mood that morning, and very few mornings after that. It seemed the free and easy exchange between professor and student had vanished overnight (those damned mice!), and without a sterling recommendation letter from his advisor, Larry knew he would

have no shot at a teaching job. Six years of grinding labor and playing the sycophant had all come to nothing with the click of a mouse. Larry was just smart enough to see this, so he quit.

Larry couldn't quite see himself as a company man and recoiled at the thought of taking orders from intellectual inferiors, so over the next few years he tried his hand at a number of entrepreneurial ventures. For instance, with a small inheritance left by his grandmother he bought three acres of land and an old Winnebago and raised alpacas for a season, hoping to profit from their wool. But just weeks after their first sheering, the alpacas acquired a fatal intestinal illness from mushrooms that sprang up after heavy rains and passed. Nearly broke, the former grad student decided to use what few resources remained – an outdated computer, stacks of copiously footnoted hardbacks in psychology, and a brain that still functioned reasonably well a few hours every morning – to churn out a self-help book. The genre was red hot, he thought; the plan couldn't fail.

But it did. “Too much academic jargon,” commented a soccer mom from Nebraska. “Reads like a dissertation,” remarked a software salesman from Wichita. “Not vrey helpfull for improoving happiness felings,” wrote a student from Phoenix. And they were right. But the book still managed to sell nearly two thousand copies during its first year in print, which left him with a whopping \$1,850 in royalties, before taxes. Figuring in labor and home-office supplies, Larry calculated his pay to be somewhere in the neighborhood of 13 cents an hour and at that very moment decided not to become a writer.

Larry eventually stumbled into a tolerable job at the local newspaper where he met a reasonably attractive woman who occasionally made him smile and taught him to bake Bundt cakes. The two were aware they were getting on in years, and since the sex was just about what

both expected, they wed, bought a fixer-upper on the wrong side of the tracks, fixed it up, and filled it with three adorable screaming kids.

Larry worked nights at the paper copy-editing for the Sports and Life pages, so he was responsible for picking up their eldest son Matt from school. One brilliant blue afternoon at pick-up, as Larry watched his son and several of his friends miff the soccer ball around on the playground, he found himself standing next to the mother of Matt's best friend. The two struck up a thoughtless conversation that seemed to be going nowhere until the mother was hit above the eye by an errant Frisbee, which drew blood. Larry was concerned, so he called out to Matt and his friend, informing them that he would be taking Ms. B inside for some First-Aid. The boys, maximally absorbed in the contest, could not have cared less, and likely did not even notice their parents' departure.

The vice principal pointed the pair in the direction of the nurse's office. When they arrived, they found the room dark but unlocked, so they went in and began rummaging for gauze, tape, and iodine. Not much was said. Larry cleaned the wound in a mindless perfunctory way as the mother sat erect and grimacing on the crinkly-paper. When Larry dropped the iodine into the gash, the mother squealed in an endearing manner and reached out for him, pulling him close. Larry noticed then that her hair smelled sweet, of lavender and coconuts, he thought, and that her breasts were warm and firm, which reminded him of turning tight circles with shy sweaty girls in disco-balled school gymnasiums. He sensed too that she was all alone in this big world, although he in fact knew not a single thing about her – whether she was married, for instance, or whether she had any kids other than the boy outside, or even her first name. “Ms. B,” his eldest had always called her.

As Larry reached around to stroke her sweet-smelling hair, Ms. B peeled her legs from the crinkly paper, stood, and gently backed the well-intentioned responsible father of three against the wall. Heart rates rose, breathing grew shallow, eyelids began to fall, and rational parts suddenly ceded to animal parts, so that the two got irreparably tangled up until what had to happen happened. When it was over, Larry finished dressing the woman's wound with trembling hands as she straightened her hair and wiped sweat from her neck and brow.

Larry thought about the event a lot over the next several days and tried to figure out what had gone wrong. He recalled being in an unusually fine mood that day on the way to school, and having taken special notice of a large green tractor as it clawed deep troughs into the dark steamy earth, and of a man wrestling a jackhammer into groves along the pavement. He felt that maybe these unfortunate sights had wakened something in him that spring day, that none of this ever would have happened had that careless kid thrown the Frisbee straight, had Ms. B not smelled sweet and given the air of someone not quite at home in the world, had she presented slightly saggier breasts more appropriate to her age. Most unfortunate of all was that Larry's strict upbringing had created an overly scrupulous conscience, which pressed him hard to come clean to his wife. This he ill-advisedly did late one night in the sack, post-orgasm, persuaded then that the strength of their marital bond might withstand any assault.

She was not pleased to hear it. In fact, she became quite angry, grew angrier by the day, stewing for pointlessly long stretches on the affair, thought Larry, who held an unfortunate concatenation of events responsible rather than himself. "As if there really is some unchanging, essential self we might blame," he added smartly the evening of the revelation. Larry's wife was put off not so much by the act itself but by his defense of it, and after stepping on an upturned Lego early one gray morning, she told Larry, who was dutifully packing up peanut-butter

sandwiches and grapes and Oreos for the kids' lunches, to get the hell out and never come back. Well, that's just what Larry did, not because he wanted to, but because his wife had become a wild animal in the intervening weeks whom he no longer recognized and who began to scare him in ways he hadn't known since bullies first rose up in school and began to terrorize the well-behaved with great shouts and insults as they fast-fretted home. Larry felt both that his wife had every reason to go berserk and that he was somehow innocent, both that he was a felon and that things merely had gone wrong that blue day. But that's how Larry lost his wife and kids.

About a year later, the lonely and vulnerable man joined a conservative church much like the one in which he himself was compelled to make the good confession, curious to see if he still might be capable of the warm feelings he took comfort from as an awkward gentle lad, curious to see if he might meet a few young untroubled women there not yet ruined by life, but also because it was a mere two blocks from his miserable little apartment and held pig pickings every spring and fall that doused the neighborhood in the most sublime primal aromas. Larry didn't think much about what the scrubbed and smiling church folk actually believed – to tell the truth, a lot of it seemed just plain silly to Larry, although he couldn't yet articulate why – because there were several reasonably attractive women who sat up front and whose big brown eyes and big round breasts most of the time captivated his attention. They sat erect and earnest, brimming with hope and all things decent, he thought, lit up on the inside by something pure and true, yet still seemed in possession of all the animality that no religion, no zealous prophet of the Most High, could ever stamp out.

One afternoon, the pastor of this church, a small exclamatory fellow with a wide smooth brow and apocalyptic eyes, asked Larry to accompany him on visits to the elderly ill. About mid-way through each visit, whether asked or not, the little man would offer a lusty word-

clogged prayer, then draw a jar of ointment from his hip-pocket. Having rubbed the goo vigorously between his fingers, the little man would quickly apply the sign of the cross to whichever body part had been ailing their host. Without fail, once the ointment touched the skin, the host would cry out how near she suddenly felt to God, how sure she was the Spirit had touched her, how she now knew that God would finally heal her. Often, they would bawl afterward too, which made Larry so uneasy that his skin became hot and prickly and he knew not what to do with his hands. Larry had been assigned no role in the drama and felt useless, so he went along only that one time.

Now, on the way back to the church that evening, the pastor pulled over at a convenience store for a Yoo-hoo and some Fig Newtons. While he was inside, Larry began rummaging for a napkin or two to wipe down his face and the back of his neck. When none could be found, he opened the glove box and there discovered something that surprised him: tubes of His & Her KY Jelly, each half-squeezed, rolled up from the bottom. Larry wasn't the sharpest tool but neither was he the dullest, so his mind managed to piece things together rather quickly, and as it did something deep within him recoiled at the notion that the Spirit might be purchased for a mere \$11.95 at Walgreens.

When the two arrived at the church's parking bay, Larry mustered the courage to confront God's herald. The conversation went poorly. In the end, the pastor said he didn't care much for Larry's skepticism or his tone and thought it best that from now on he seek his spiritual food elsewhere. Larry would miss the full-breasted women who sat up front earnest and erect, but he took comfort that the biannual aroma of seared swine would still be his to enjoy.

The unfortunate event left Larry a bit jaded and raised questions for him, questions that before he never thought worth pursuing. After all, Larry was an American, and Americans

assuredly believed in the Almighty and his watchful care over all God's creatures. The first question he asked, "Might it *all*, then, be a sham?," was too big to manage right off, so he thought of some smaller ones like, "If I'd been born in India, wouldn't I probably have been raised a Hindu and thought my whole life that Hinduism was the most sensible and natural thing in the whole wide world?," or "Can God really punish us for eternity for not being able to figure out which religion's got it right?," or "If God is God, why can't he find a way to make his will plain to everybody?" He'd heard these questions before, so he started with them, thinking deeply about them for the very first time, ashamed that he hadn't gotten around to it sooner. These questions led to even more like, "Would a good God really make a mosquito?," then, "What might we do to a fellow who created something like a mosquito and sent it into all the world to harass and slay millions?," which led to the purchase of a stack of books on the problem of evil, that intractable and damning conundrum that very soon foreclosed for Larry the possibility of believing in any kind of Creator concerned with our welfare.

Things might have been just fine had he simply quit being a Christian and turned to roller-blading or to noodling or to fantasy football, but for some reason Larry kept right on reading, eventually getting hooked on really bleak stuff by Lucretius, Schopenhauer, and Camus that convinced him the universe cares not a lick for us, that anything we do will come to nothing, that the world's sufferings far outweigh its joys, and that the dead are the most fortunate of all. The overall effect of his studies was to banish from him all fear of death, even to implant within him a mild desire for its arrival.

Now, Larry might just as well have read all kinds of literature that celebrated life – gather ye rosebuds stuff – but he didn't. Some take up a *carpe diem* creed when waking to the truth of a godless universe, but others just grow melancholy, and Larry found himself among the latter. I

can't tell you why. Some kind of unresolved childhood trauma, maybe – your guess is as good as mine. I bet even Larry couldn't have told us why.

It was about this time that Larry became a letter carrier. He hadn't set his mind to it. Rather, a shy helium-voiced youth who worked evenings with Larry at the paper told him about an announcement he'd seen on a bulletin board when downtown contesting a fine for public urination. (The boy was fishing, and a forest ranger searching the area for marijuana groves happened by just as he was zipping his trousers. There was nothing at all antisocial or perverse about the exposure of his privates to fresh air; it was simply a wrong-place/wrong-time sort of thing. In the end, the charges were dismissed.) The announcement said the government would be hiring three postal workers over the summer and promised "solid pay and respectable benefits." The youth said he enjoyed being outdoors and might have applied himself if it weren't for his ailing mother, whom he cared for during the day. Larry had never had "solid pay" or "respectable benefits" and happened to be in a bit of a funk at work, so he applied, took the civil service exam, and was hired on the spot. Later, he was told that only four people were interviewed, and one of these, whose hair seemed to lack order and whose clothes seemed more rumpled than they ought to have been for a job interview, gave some on the committee the impression of "mental instability." Among Larry's reasons for leaving the paper and striding about town with a large white bag was that thinking had never really gotten him anywhere. Sometimes it even seemed to make matters worse. At the time, he was of the opinion that the daily repetition of sorting and stuffing and scooting one's feet along the pavement might put his mind to sleep, which would enable him to see things more like otters and beetles. As it turned out, Larry was right, and life became more pleasant overall as a result.

The evening Larry knocked his skull on the concrete so hard that he had not one more thought was much like any other. He wasn't distressed or angst-ridden or angry or out of his mind. He was a touch melancholy, but he had grown accustomed to the feeling over the years, and even had acquired a certain fondness for it. It was, in fact, a desire to deepen a pleasantly somber and reflective mood that inspired him to grab a few beers from the fridge and climb the fire escape alongside the four-story brick building where he received his bins of mail to a small steel platform that overlooked the city. He had been there many times before and found solace in the spectacle of it all – the passing clouds, the mangy strays stealing from dumpster to dumpster, the lone pedestrians shuffling along hands-in-pockets, the rhythmic yellow flicker of the traffic lights, the wind's rousing of dry foliage and debris, the steam ascending from manholes and storm drains. How he hated to leave! For these moments nourished him like nothing else, and this night was no different. Cross-legged, Larry absorbed the subtle sensations of night, thinking little, sipping slowly, running his free hand methodically through that massive tangle of beard.

Until a small bug maneuvering along the edge of the platform caught his eye and he leaned over to see what it was. It appeared to him to be a ladybug. Having a certain fondness for ladybugs, he reached out for it, lowered his index finger that it might climb aboard, but it turned back. Larry set down his bottle of beer, leaned in farther, cupped both hands around it. And as he waited for it to ascend one hand or the other, he glanced out beyond the ledge, then straight down, fixing his eyes on the sidewalk below, which suddenly seemed so far away, and startled him. A dizzying panic overcame him, and his brain elected – oddly, maybe – to present for consideration the recent insight that the dead are the most fortunate of all. It might have sent along something else, like an image of his estranged children or his loving mother, or nothing at all, but it offered precisely this message, and only this message. Larry felt himself tumbling

forward – over his hands, then over the ledge – and at some point became aware that he might prevent his going over, but the sudden calm awakened by the insight so pacified him that he just smiled and went limp. So over he went – not planning to, not wishing to, but not regretting it either.

Everyone but the old bartender will keep saying the event made perfect sense because Larry had no wife and kids around, no close friends or hobbies they knew of, and appeared to be drowning his sorrows with booze when he hurled himself from a high place. But it's just that a man saw a bug and had a thought.

WE REALLY DO HAVE A HELL OF A DEAN

Here's what I said: "When the monks reach the top of the mountain, they unwrap the body, then begin cutting it into manageable pieces." I clicked the mouse, and a photo appeared of four Tibetan Buddhist monks, all bent at the waist, all hacking away at a woman's limbs. "This is the customary spot for the sky burial, so the vultures pretty much descend right away and begin tearing at the skin." I advanced the slides. "If there are enough vultures around, they can pick a body clean in under an hour." In this photo were about a dozen of the scruffiest foul you've ever seen, gathered in a circle, ripping bits of flesh from a pair of dismembered legs. "Then, the monks have a go at her torso. Sometimes, they just slice it open with their machetes without actually dividing it into separate pieces, as you see here." When I advanced the slides this time, I paused and looked out over the lecture hall, tiered slightly, and lined with rows of padded maroon flip-chairs like the kind you might see in an old movie theater. I saw maybe seven or eight faces of the one-hundred or so in the room. The rest were angled down, presumably fixated on some kind of electronic device – an iPhone, a Blackberry, a laptop, something like that. Some of the faces were happy, others were somber or even expressionless. I'd never noticed so many heads bowed at once. Had I simply not been paying attention?

"Hello," I said, tapping the microphone.

"Hello, Professor Johnson." Sarah always sat in the first row and never addressed her electronic device during class. Sarah was cute and attentive, which encouraged me.

"Isn't this interesting?" I asked. A smattering of heads turned up. "I mean, they're cutting up this woman's body because they really believe that whatever inhabited it is now totally gone. It's just flesh and bones – you know, matter, stuff. And they're offering it back to the animals as a gift, as a way to atone for all the harm we cause them when we're alive. Isn't

that cool?” A young man with his feet kicked up on the vacant seat in front of him made as if he was going to speak but instead raised his index finger, signaling that I should wait a moment. He was eating a hoagie.

“Pretty gnarly, dude,” he managed finally, reaching down for a can of Red Bull. I held on for more, but he just leaned back and launched into another ambitious bite.

Then, for the very first time, I really heard it: a symphony of tapping, like the patter of light rain, maybe, or like a grove of caterpillars gnawing their way through soft spring leaves. Why hadn't I noticed this before? Now, if I had been lecturing on Malinowski or Levi-Strauss or on some arcane bit of nineteenth century anthropological theory, I suppose I would have understood. But, a selection of the some of the world's weirdest funerary rites? Really, this was as good as it got. What would it take for them to quit working their thumbs? Yodeling, maybe? Or performing one of those dead-armed Irish dance numbers? Dropping my drawers? What would it take?

There was no time to pursue these thoughts further, so I just kept advancing the slides and talking. I spoke about how some Hindus build pyres right along the Ganges and cremate their dead there, dumping the charred remains into the river; about how some indigenous societies dig-up (bare-handed!) the bones of their deceased after all the flesh has decomposed and place them in boxes or in niches in caves; about how the Parsis in India still expose their dead atop towers for vultures to pick them clean and for the sun to bake dry whatever fleshy bits remained. I was into it, I mean really into it. I showed several video clips, too. In one, a British reporter talks about how the Parsi community in Mumbai has run into trouble recently with other residents because there are no longer enough birds to finish off a corpse. Some of these bodies

lie up there for months, he said, creating an awful stench, which sent some of the rich who live downwind into an uproar.

“What’s so interesting,” I said after this clip, “is that social pressures are forcing religious leaders in the Parsi community to recommend cremation to keep the peace. This change has nothing at all to do with divine revelation or with some deep hidden truth. It’s purely pragmatic. As a minority community in Mumbai, the Parsis either change or risk being ostracized, persecuted. It’s about survival, really. It’s as simple as that.”

As the students continued to work their thumbs and to ignore every word I said, I made an outrageous promise.

“Hello,” I said, again tapping the microphone. “Hello out there.”

“Hello,” said Sarah.

“Next week, we have a real treat. A few members of a tribe from Belize will be right here on this stage, and they will do very interesting and shocking things! For instance, a woman will breastfeed a small monkey.” I paused and moved in closer to the microphone, preparing my very best Al Green voice: “*A woman will breast feed a small monkey. Why? Because her people have such love for the animals that live in the forest around their village! They treat some of them like they would their own children – in fact, no differently than their own children!*” I had gone too far, I had claimed too much for this tribe, but I suddenly felt that getting their attention was a top priority, and that truth had shifted to second place. Sure, I had overreached, but nearly half the room’s faces now were visible. Half!

Invigorated by the response, I unwisely pressed on: “We will also have small children here from a tribe in Ecuador. These children regularly venture out into the forest without their parents in search of very large and very poisonous tarantulas, which they trap with a little stick

and then roast over an open fire for an afternoon snack. And they will trap and eat these spiders right here! How about that?" I imagined a spate of Oo's and Ah's, even light applause, but these things didn't happen. Nevertheless, I'm happy to report that about eighty percent of faces were visible at this point.

One more vow came forth that day: "And, as if things couldn't get any better, we will have cannibals here who will crack open the skulls of enemies killed in battle and eat their brains, right here on this stage. They will wear loincloths and be very tan and carry tall spears and wear necklaces made of dried human ears! The whole thing will be as authentic as possible!" I'm happy to report that at this remark nearly one-hundred percent of faces were visible. Really, something had to be done. These students' parents were paying far too much to be bored by mere words from some talking head.

When I informed the Dean of my rash promises, she suggested I might combine my accumulated international travel allowance of \$4500 (I hate to travel) with a portion of an unused research grant to fly in and lodge the participants. With the assistance of two TA's, I was able to make all the arrangements in just two days: the woman and monkey were scheduled for Wednesday, the small children for Friday, and the cannibals for late the following week. Because the anthropology department at State is quite large, I had no need to fly in translators: we already had faculty among us who were equipped to serve in that capacity.

On Wednesday of the next week, attendance was way up. And at first, most students seemed not to be engaging their electronic devices. This encouraged me greatly.

Naturally, I introduced the woman, explained where she was from, and thanked both her and the monkey for their willingness to come all this way on such short notice. The woman began by offering the monkey some kind of nut or bit of fruit, presumably to coax it from her

shoulder into her lap. Understandably, the monkey was hesitant at first but soon scaled down the woman's chest onto her leg. The woman slowly pulled off her shirt and held her breast out to the monkey, which immediately dropped its treat, seized hold of her nipple, and began to suck as if it had been wronged in some profound way. Nothing must have come out, because the monkey pulled back and began slapping and head-butting the breast in a most belligerent manner. I asked Professor Gilke, our translator, to ask her if she was OK or if she would like our assistance.

“OK,” she said.

The woman restrained the monkey's arms and spoke to it firmly. Almost instantaneously, it stopped behaving like a monkey and behaved more like child. She then cupped the monkey's head in her hand and brought it slowly toward her breast. The monkey placed both hands on the breast, forming a triangle around it with its thumbs and forefingers, then recommenced its ferocious, almost hostile sucking. There it remained for the next three or four minutes. The students were mesmerized, as I myself was too, but after the fifth minute or so had passed, heads began to drop, and the faintest pecking could be heard throughout the room.

“Ask her to rotate the monkey!” I cried. At first, the woman looked confused, but she soon began slowly turning the monkey counterclockwise until it had orbited a full 180 degrees and was feeding upside down. “How about that!” I said. Only a small fraction of heads returned to their upright position. “Can she perform a traditional dance while the monkey is feeding?” I asked. Again, the woman was confused but graciously complied with the request. The monkey very quickly grew agitated with the shimmying and the bouncing and retreated to the woman's shoulder, where it buried its face in her hair. More and more heads began to drop, so I put a stop to the demonstration and solicited questions from the class.

Q & A brought forth few questions of substance and was a disappointment overall. Here is some of what was said:

“Why do you breastfeed monkeys?”

“Because some of the babies get abandoned by their mothers. They need milk to survive, and we can give that to them.”

“Does the breastfeeding hurt?”

“Oh, yes. Can’t you *see* the scars?” Many men in particular shook their heads, so the woman walked slowly down the center isle and held out both breasts for all to see. Indeed, there were multiple bite marks and unsightly skin tags around both nipples. I could see a few welts as well, presumably due to the monkey’s earlier tantrum.

“What does your husband think of you breastfeeding monkeys?”

“I don’t care what he thinks.”

“What other animals do you breastfeed?”

“None. My aunt once tried breastfeeding a goat, but it nearly took her nipple off.”

Convinced that the demonstration and Q & A would be enough to sustain a full class session, I had not prepared a lecture and therefore was forced to adjourn class early. The students seemed pleased most of all by this news. As a parting gift, the woman was given an honorarium drawn from my travel allowance as well as a coffee mug bearing our school’s logo, a free year’s subscription to our alumni magazine, and a set of four coasters featuring our state bird.

The tarantula-eating boys, I’m pleased to report, drew more accolades. Admittedly, the tarantulas did cause a bit of a fuss for Customs, but when officials received word that they were required to enhance the educational experience of our best and brightest and would be killed

anyway, they said, “All right, but promise you’ll keep those lids on tight.” The boys nodded and everything was fine from that point on.

On Thursday, Jerry, head of Facilities Management and an expert carpenter, built a rectangular Plexiglass structure at the front of the classroom that resembled a child’s playpen, only much larger. In the center, he created a fire pit of large stones fueled by propane. About fifteen minutes before the start of class, all of the tarantulas were released into the structure so the hunt might commence as soon as students arrived.

I expected the boys’ pursuit of the spiders to involve coordinated effort and to include several edge-of-your-seat moments. But the tarantulas seemed jet-lagged and the kids were just too adept. The boys walked silently and workman-like to each of the corners of the structure, where the spiders had taken up residence. They merely compressed them against the walls with their sticks and picked them up with their bare hands. None of the spiders put up a fight. Maybe they were elderly or disabled or diseased spiders, I don’t know.

Next, the boys wrapped each one in a large smooth green leaf and bound the parcels with vine so they looked like tamales. Then they rammed a pointy stick through the centers and suspended them just above the gas flame, turning them round and round while chatting amiably in their native tongue. This took about fifteen minutes. While the tarantulas were cooking, however, a lot of violent popping and fizzing issued from inside the tamales, which added some drama. I stated that the popping was probably due to rapid expansion of the spiders’ joints. I couldn’t be sure of the theory, but I felt it was time for something educational to be said.

As the boys were eating their charred spiders, there was quite a lot of crunching, as if they were eating pistachios but had forgotten to remove the shells. I hoped that none of the

children's teeth would be damaged since there was virtually no room in the budget for health care. I'm happy to report that none were.

Here is a very brief account of some of the things that were said during Q & A:

"What do you do with the fangs?"

"We don't eat those."

"Has anyone ever been bitten trying to catch a tarantula?"

"Yes, lots of times."

"Has anyone ever died?"

"Oh, yes. My cousin's stick broke and she died."

"Are you afraid of the spiders?"

"No. They are slow and not very smart."

"Are tarantulas your favorite food?"

"No."

"What's your favorite food?"

"Snickers."

Again, the demonstration and follow-up proceeded more quickly than I had anticipated, leaving us with twenty or so minutes to fill. I was up late assisting Jerry with construction of the Plexiglas pen, so I hadn't time to prepare a slew of entertaining and insightful comments. Anyhow, I noticed that many students had begun to engage their electronic devices soon after the popping and fizzing had ceased. They just didn't seem much interested in watching the boys eat or in what the boys had to say afterward. The students took the news of our early adjournment well. (In addition to \$1000 to be put toward the purchase of textbooks, paper, pencils, and pencil sharpeners for all the children in the village, the boys were given several bags of fun-size

Snickers and inexpensive plastic toys stamped with the school's logo, which they seemed to receive enthusiastically).

The following week, three cannibals from New Guinea arrived. The human heads, which were kept on ice and transported in large Styrofoam coolers, naturally caused quite a stir with Customs. But the very same rationale supplied for the transport of the spiders was employed in this case, and it worked just fine. Customs officials readily acknowledged that our test scores here in the States were well behind those of other industrialized nations and that drastic measures such as these now probably are in order to bring our students up to speed. "Really," they conceded, "our future economic growth and national security depend upon it." I suppose I wouldn't have put it quite that way, but I was glad to have their support. Although the cannibals now wear t-shirts with Western logos and Lee jean-shorts, they brought along loin cloths and long sharp spears and necklaces of human ears, as I'd requested. Given that this would serve as the climactic event in the series, I felt that authenticity would be a must.

The cannibals were quite congenial, not at all fierce and aloof as I had expected. They joked around far more than I felt was appropriate for cannibals, and even had large flabby bellies not unlike the bellies of most adult Americans. They told me that they didn't really go in for cannibalism anymore, and that the heads had come not from vanquished foes but from community members who had passed recently after a bout of food poisoning ("Undercooked pork," they said).

"Then, why did you agree to do it?" I asked them.

"The money's pretty good," they said.

"Although, it could be better," one added.

"Why have you given up the practice?"

“We recently discovered that our god is a god of peace and not a god of war.”

“How did you learn that?”

“Our shaman told us. Plus, our enemies now have air-conditioners and bug-zappers, which they are happy to sell us if we don’t kill them.”

In order to expedite the process, we placed all three heads in a convection oven and let them bake for about ninety minutes at 400 degrees so they would be ready for consumption at the start of class. I knew that if there was too much time between introducing the cannibals and eating, the students would resort to their devices and all would be lost. We also brought in a general surgeon from the hospital who had agreed to cut a 3” X 3” opening into each head with a small circular saw ordinarily used for amputations. Because the process would likely get messy, we arranged for disposable ponchos to be distributed to students in the first four rows. Although the procedure for preparing the heads admittedly was unorthodox, the cannibals were amenable overall.

The look and odor of the baked heads caused a few students to throw-up even before taking their seats, which triggered a wave of (mostly) dry heaves throughout the room. We hadn’t anticipated this and lost several students right off. I was concerned about the vomit on the floor and what impact the smell would have upon the students, but I also felt that we ought to press on, given that the cannibals would be flying out later that afternoon.

The removal of the 3” x 3” squares actually went far better than expected. Blood spatter was nearly negligible since these individuals had been dead quite a while, and stray bits of flesh, bone, and hair did not make it past the first row. I’d say the cannibals took their first bite no later than 10 minutes into the class session. A few students had begun to address their electronic devices, it is true, but not so many that I became discouraged.

Watching the cannibals eat was not pleasant. They turned down our offer of forks and knives and napkins, insisting instead on using their hands, which they neither washed nor sanitized beforehand. There was a lot of tugging, ripping, and sucking of the sort you might see at a BBQ cook-off or a tailgate party, and although their table manners certainly gave the appearance of authenticity (which is what we were after), they nevertheless were a bit off-putting. I regret now not having put more thought and energy into the argument for using classic Western utensils.

About midway through the meal, I opened the floor for Q & A. Below are a few of the highlights:

“What does it taste like?”

“Like a monkey’s brain.”

“What does a monkey’s brain taste like?”

“Like a pig’s brain.”

“What does a pig’s brain taste like?”

“Not like a goat’s brain, maybe more like a chicken’s brain, which is sometimes too small to taste.”

“Do you like the taste?”

“No.”

“What’s your favorite food, then?”

“Carmel corn. Baby Ruth. Sometimes hotdogs, but not the red shriveled ones.”

“Do you always wear just loin cloths?”

“No.”

“What do you wear when it gets cold?”

“Sweaters. Sometimes down jackets.”

“Is it hard to kill an animal with a spear?”

“Yes, very hard.”

“Who taught you how to do it?”

“No one. We don’t do it. We grow yams.”

The overall outcome of the conversation, as I’m sure you can see, was to raise doubts in students’ minds that we had before us “real” cannibals. Some students just wagged their heads and rolled their eyes. One young man silently mouthed the words “Total fucking rip-off” just before addressing his device. One young woman turned to her friend (rudely, I thought) and whispered, “Posers.” Before the cannibals had even turned their attention to the eyes – “the best part, a kind of delicacy,” I said – it was clear that this could no longer serve as the climactic event in our series, and that another, even more startling, would be required.

So this is what I said at the end of class: “Next week, the Dean and I will have sex right here on this stage.” The Dean was equally if not more committed than I was to the education of our best and brightest, so I felt almost certain she would participate. Plus, I knew that she had spent two years after graduating from college traveling up and down the West coast in a Volkswagen bus with polyamorous nudist hippies.

“But, *why?*” moaned Sarah, clearly unhappy with the announcement. “How is that related to anthropology?”

I hadn’t planned on offering a rationale. I panicked. “There is a whole sexual subculture out there – you all may know a little about it – in which people derive pleasure from pain, both from giving and from receiving it. You know, sadomasochism. That’s probably worth talking about, don’t you think? For instance, we might look at the question of why people find this

option attractive, or what benefits it might confer upon its participants. We might want to discuss whether we ought to classify it as an aberration or an alternative lifestyle. And, I think it's important not only to hear about such things but to see an actual demonstration. Students learn in different ways, as you know, and some of you really benefit by having the visuals." Granted, a topic like this is probably better suited to a course in sociology, but my mind extended only this offer.

Mere intercourse with the Dean was one thing, but I wasn't convinced she'd help me illustrate sadomasochism. I myself knew nothing about the subculture, and didn't even really want to know, but a promise had been made and I'm a stickler for fulfilling vows. Plus, the cannibals just didn't pan out like I'd hoped. Something more would be required. (The cannibals, by the way, each were awarded with a \$300 gift card to our student store. They were strongly encouraged to pick items that bore the school's logo, but most loaded up on candy, bug spray, sun screen, and small rotating fans, none of which were stamped with the school's logo.)

When I called the Dean to tell her about my hasty and imprudent vow, she surprised me by saying, "Sure, why wouldn't I help you?" She even offered to order a few items for the demonstration from a catalog that "somehow" had turned up in her mailbox but which she hadn't yet gotten around to recycling.

"It's got my name on it, Jack," she told me. "And I am the Dean, you know."

"Well, just pull the back page off and shred it," I said. "Then, you can recycle the rest."

The Dean changed the subject at this point, but I was very happy to have her support.

On the day of our performance, attendance nearly matched what it was on the first day of class, and students seemed to be in a fabulous mood. Most were engaged in animated

conversation, and I saw few electronic devices. It became clear to me then that the necessary steps had been taken.

The Dean arrived a couple minutes late dressed in a skimpy black leather outfit covered in pointy metal studs. She also wore a black mask with little bars over her teeth similar to the one worn by Hannibal Lector and unreasonably high-heeled shoes. Perhaps the best analogy I can offer is this: remove the studs and the bars from her mask, and she looked a lot like Cat Woman.

“Why aren’t you dressed?” she whispered to me behind the podium.

“Well, I didn’t realize that—”

“Ah, you’re a lumberjack!” she said, clasping her hands together. “You’ll be playing a lumberjack!” She was referring to my plaid flannel shirt, stone-washed jeans, and Bean snow boots, the get-up I had worn nearly every day since receiving tenure. The afternoon I was tenured, I packed up every tie, blazer, and starchy shirt I owned and dropped them at Goodwill for some other poor sucker. I am not exaggerating when I say that was probably the single happiest moment of my life.

“So, untuck and unbutton your shirt, will you?” she said, setting a small cardboard box on top of the podium. “And make it quick.”

“OK.” Apparently I was moving too slowly, because the Dean took over while I was still working the second button from its hole. Within just a few seconds, she had completed the whole row for me, exposing a very hairy Neanderthal-like chest that I’d never quite managed to own. “Arrrrgh!” I said.

“No, Jack, that’s a pirate.”

“Grrrrr,” I said.

“You’re not a bear.”

“Then, what does a lumberjack say?”

“Not much. They grunt, I suppose. And they speak Swedish and Dutch and other difficult languages you don’t know.”

“There *are* American lumberjacks.”

“Jack, why don’t you open that box and get started opening the whip. I’m going to jump in the swing.” The prior evening, Jerry and I hung a swing from the ceiling. Neither of us had any idea what it was for, and neither of us really felt like talking about what it might be for.

“The Dean will know,” Jerry said. I nodded.

The class grew quiet as the Dean clicked over to the swing and I began pulling the contents from the box: one whip still wrapped bound by twisty-ties, a pair of handcuffs, a rubbery strap-on dong of unreasonable length, and some kind of medieval flogging device. As I drew each item out, the class had a good laugh, which I was happy to see.

“Well,” I said after emptying the box, “the day you’ve been waiting for is finally here. I trust that all of you will have the decency not to record what transpires this morning on your phones and upload it to the—”

“Professor Johnson!” cried Sarah. “The Dean’s stuck! Help her! Help her!” I turned back, and the Dean was hanging from the swing by her foot, with her torso splayed on the ground in a most un-Deanly manner. Body parts that aren’t normally seen on university administrative personnel could be seen. I jogged over to the swing and released her foot from her shoe.

“Oh, these damn heels!” she said. I helped her lay back on the floor. “Oh, Jack, I think I’ve really hurt myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean my back really hurts.”

“Can you get up?”

“I don’t think so.” I unfastened her mask. “Oh, Jack, the pain’s spreading! It’s like fire, it’s like fire!”

“Sarah,” I called out, “Call 911.”

“Oh, yes, Professor Johnson! See, Professor Johnson, I knew this was a bad idea.”

The Dean, it turned out, was nearly good as new after a few days of bed rest and a lot of pills. Fortunately, she had just strained a muscle in her lower back. The paramedics didn’t even cart her away. Rather, I drove her to the clinic, and after an exam and a scan that turned up nothing serious (“I see a bulging disk,” said the doctor, “but at your age, that’s not anything to get excited about”), we went back to her place for dinner and had a good laugh. I asked her what she wanted me to do with the sex toys and the swing, and she just smiled. We really do have a hell of Dean. I think we are very lucky.

I have learned that it is sometimes better just to stick to the script and not to worry too much about our best and brightest. Every generation has managed to figure it out, and I suppose this one will too. Plus, I’ve always liked the sound of a light rain. When all those heads are bowed and all those thumbs are pecking away, I now imagine I’m sitting on my porch during one of those spring showers when the sun’s still shining, sipping sweet tea. Really, it’s not half bad.

ROUND THE WHEEL

I didn't want to do it. But Dad kept giving me the look, like something a Tea Partier'd give a single mom on food stamps.

I was sleeping late, but so were all my friends. And it's not like I wasn't doing anything. Every day I was doing something, like fishing or playing ball or tossing the Frisbee. Or like reading novels and the newspaper, and even thinking long and hard about what I'd read. Midsummer, I'd already plowed through a couple of Camus' novels, a little Hesse and Hemingway too, and God knows how many of those multipage features in *Newsweek* or *Time* or whatever was lying around the house. As I saw it, I was refining my intellect, honing my social skills, my coordination even – all things I'd probably need to please Dad down the road. It's not like I was smoking crack or nuking puppies or anything. Anyways, who was going to hire me for just a couple months?

“Oh, they'll hire you alright,” he grunted one evening after work while sifting through a stack of mail. “And you'll learn a thing or two about what it takes to make a buck in this world. I guarantee you'll still have plenty of time to screw around with Jones and Turcott and all the rest.”

Dad was a bootstraps guy, old-style, and still worked like a horse. Just vacuuming the house or washing the car, Dad was all in, grinding away with the steely determination of Rafa on clay, or Lance climbing the Pyrenees, soaking those ragged V-necks of his with the yellow pits and the collars that looked like they'd been yanked over the head of a steer. I admired him for this, although I was cut of different cloth, an alien and disappointing sort that hadn't turned up in our family til I was born.

So, because I didn't like the way Dad was eyeing me, all fierce and miffed-like, jealous, maybe, that I was having some fun, or worried that I'd turn out lazy and mar the family name, I peddled my bike down to the Piggly Wiggly and put in an application, which I hoped would be filed away and not looked at again until the store did a little spring cleaning, or went belly-up. With a name like Piggly Wiggly, I figured that day wasn't too far off.

The manager called the house next morning at 8 a.m. sharp as my dad was suiting up for work. Mom didn't know exactly what to do with the call, being as I was still asleep, so she passed the receiver to Dad, who must said have something like, "Of course he'll be there!", because by lunchtime I was wearing a pink polo with a pig's head stitched over the nipple and watching some corny DVD about what made for proper manners. After a second DVD on hand-washing and packing groceries up right (eggs on top, put the Liquid Plummer in a different bag than the sweet corn, that sort of thing), I was led to lanes 11 & 12 and told to "load em up and wheel em out." "It ain't rocket science," the boss added as he slapped me a little too hard on the back. Well, that was the day I earned my first real taxed buck. I remember being so damn tired after that I didn't even feel like screwing around with Jones and Turcott and all the rest.

The polo chafed something fierce around the collar, and I didn't much care for wearing khakis in 98 degree heat, but the boss was decent overall and didn't ride us too hard. All summer long, though, it looked like I had scabies about the neck, but that was the only real suffering to come of the deal. I wasn't going to land some hot one anyway that summer, seeing I was still a gawky shy thing. Every now and then a plain-looking girl would say another plain-looking girl thought I was cute, but I couldn't find much motivation to act on that. It made me kind of happy for an hour or two, maybe, but that's about as far as it went.

I remember that sometimes a kid would blow chunks in one of the aisles, or a frazzled mother would drop a jar of pickles, or some granny's scooter would clip a display, sending the bulk of whatever we'd so diligently stacked tumbling down. Once, Lloyd, one of those old guys who'd made a career of it and still took the bus everywhere, found a monster tarantula in the bananas. Guess it hitched a ride all the way from Panama or wherever. After tossing different stuff at it to see what it would take to piss it off and make it bare those fangs, Lloyd heroically scooped it up with a shovel and dumped it in the mop bucket, where he drowned it by knocking it on its head every time it'd come up for air. That was quite an event, and it took up a whole half hour. We talked about it for a couple weeks, maybe, after. Lloyd was loving it.

There was Amanda, too, a cashier who to this day remains one of the hottest things I've ever seen. She was tall and tan with the sort of cleavage that makes you ache something awful inside. She had dark brown eyes, tattoos in just the right places, and an overall dangerous look that promised forbidden pleasures we peasants couldn't even dream of. That scabies-inducing pig polo (the women had to wear them too) could do nothing to mar her beauty. Although she lived in a double-wide with her stepfather and a mess of thin cats, we knew she was way out of our league, which kept things light. It's not like any of us got the idea of asking her out or anything; we knew our place in the grand scheme. Plus, she had this chopper-riding boyfriend, older, with lots of dark stubble and large unfriendly tattoos. Sometimes he would pick her up from work and stare hard at us while he waited, like we were the devil's spawn or something, or hell-bent on stealing his woman. I was so happy to see him go. But he didn't stop our eyes from feasting shamelessly on his girl when he wasn't there. Even the boss, a fat married guy with Jesus stickers plastered all over the back bumper of his Caravan, couldn't help himself. I'm sure

she would have won bikini contests if he'd let her compete, but he wasn't that sort: he had to possess any woman that rode on the back of that bike.

I remember one time when it was just the two of us sitting on milk crates out back on the loading dock. She lit a cigarette, then offered me one. I'd never smoked before, but I said yes like it was no different than stick of Wrigley's or a Rollo. She went on about how she was going to get out of this place one day and get an education but that she had no money for luxuries like that, and couldn't bear to leave the fate of all those thin cats to her stepfather, who had no regard for any of God's creatures except himself. When I kept coughing, she turned to me finally and laughed, then slid her crate right up next to mine. She wrapped her arm around me, drew me close, put her hand on mine, shifted my fingers around so I didn't look like "a little girl holding a lollypop." My face had never been just a couple inches from a pair of that caliber (from any pair at all, really), and I nearly passed out from the sight of them, all mashed together and encroaching on me like that. She smelled like the inside of one of those high-priced candy stores at the mall, and her body was real firm, athlete-like, not soft as I'd imagined it.

She drew the cigarette to my mouth and told me to breathe in nice and slow, to hold it for a split second, then to let it go. I did like she said, as if she were some sage of vice or something, and it worked like a charm. My mouth felt kind of hot and stale, I told her afterward. She laughed and held me as I watched the pair jiggle and began to wonder more about them. She was so tender to me, so friendly and wise, so dangerous. I've felt that good once, maybe, in the ten years or so since. I must have been in heaven, as they say, as I can't imagine anything finer. But my imagination isn't anything to write home about.

We sat close, our shoulders and hips and knees sharing the warmth, as she talked about all she wanted to do in life, not once about that Harley-riding fiend. When our cigarettes burned

down to little soggy ashy nubs, she stood and stretched and reached out a hand to help me up. Reluctantly I parted with my crate, with her, who had been to me for those few moments on the dock vixen, sage, and some kind of big sister all wrapped up in one. And, as if punishing me for having peered into paradise, the boss slapped a putty knife in my hand on the way back into the storage room and instructed me to chip fossilized bits of gum and muck from the tiles in frozen foods. I remained there on my hands and knees til closing, increasingly jaded for knowing there was some bit of heaven out there I couldn't ever have.

I was glad when summer was over and I was free again. The paychecks were so small, and didn't seem a fair exchange for all the vomit and pickle jars and wrecked displays I had to clean up, for all the rich ladies who looked right through you and barked orders like you were some mule, for all the bags I had to repack because some pursed-lipped beady-eyed thing from the Cretaceous hadn't been laid right in half a century, for all the ache I felt watching Amanda drag cans of soup and boxed waffles over that glass plate, for all the pity and terror I felt hanging with Lloyd, sensing all the while that it wouldn't be but a thing for me to end up a career grocerist at 50 too, that life was going to do whatever it was going to do without any regard at all for what I wanted. I was glad when summer was over.

Later that fall, a buddy told me about a cash-paying job selling Christmas trees – right there in the Piggly Wiggly parking lot, as fate would have it. We had just gotten out on Christmas break, and having taken to screwing around and sleeping late the minute that final bell rang, Dad started giving me the look again when he'd get in from work, so I told my buddy, Let's do it.

There were two things I loved about the job: hulking sappy needle-y evergreens over your shoulder and tossing them on top of a car made you feel more of a man than you really were, and all the pretty girls were in such good spirits (because it was Christmas, of course) that you got the impression some of them might even be into you. It was an illusion buoyed by the cheer in the air; we knew that, but played along all the same, just like people do on Christmas morning when the preacher reads stories about traveling stars and virgins having babies and angels singing in the sky. I especially loved it when a rich lady all bundled up in fur would make you cut a tall one to just the right length, because then I got to swing the chain saw around and make some noise, and there's hardly anything in the world that makes you feel more of a man than chewing up wood with a chain saw. The cash passed out at the end of the night was pretty sweet too, far more satisfying than the sliver of a paystub from Piggly Wiggly that showed how much the government wanted for its battleships and fighter jets.

But the boss was a wild animal, disposed to fits of rage and the crudest sort of talk. He came down from Appalachia every year towing a camping trailer behind a red dualie. He lived right there in the parking lot for four whole weeks, tossing back tall bottles of the clear stuff one right after another, slurring orders to us kids from a little window in his trailer where he took the happy people's money, and always breaking some seriously foul wind, *Blazin' Saddles*-style. He was a wide grizzly fellow with dark teeth and a wandering gray eye, and he had a mess of coarse hair bursting from his stocking cap, from his undershirt, from his nose and ears even – a real beastly sort all around.

I remember one night, after the crowd had thinned out and we boys had begun picking up the twine and sweeping the needles into piles, he came crashing out of the trailer cursing my buddy's name, cradling a bottle of Everclear in one hand, waving a shotgun with the other. From

what we could make out (he was slurring something fierce), it seemed he thought my buddy was pocketing cash payments for himself and then telling customers there was no need to make a trip to the window. But he wasn't. I worked alongside him pretty much all night long, and I've never known a worse liar. On the rare occasion he would try to pass some lie over on his buddies, he'd look away all of a sudden, get pretty white in the cheeks, and starting gnawing on his lower lip. He had no stomach for lying, and was maybe the most honest guy I've ever known.

The boss came right up to him and raised the shotgun to his forehead, cursing and splashing that grain alcohol every which way with his wild gesticulating. We all gathered round quick and started searching each other for some kind of cue. I couldn't find one, and neither could anyone else apparently, because we all just stood there dumb-faced, like it was the TV we were watching. My buddy kept insisting that he'd always sent folks straight to the window after he'd loaded up their trees, but that animal would have none of it. He cocked his gun and instructed him to turn out his pockets. My buddy did like he said, and nothing fell out but a set of keys and half a dog biscuit covered in lint.

"Ware'd ya put it, then?" he shouted as he jabbed my buddy in his crotch with the tip of his gun. "You hidin it down with your pecker, you crafty little bastard?" He kept on jabbing, but my buddy stood his ground with his hands raised up high, like he was being arrested. "Take em off, then, goddammit! Lemme see!" My buddy wasted no time dropping his drawers, but as he did one of the older grizzled locals who'd been working this lot for years came up behind him with a log and knocked him hard on the back of his noggin, which sent the boss face-first into a pile of shavings. As he hit the ground, his gun went off, and the bullet lodged in one of the tires on his trailer, which dropped loudly on its rim at an awkward angle.

The grizzled fellow got a bunch of us to help haul the boss back into the trailer, where we laid him on a bed littered with bent-back bottle caps and half-eaten bags of pork rinds. Above the panting of a fat naked pair on TV, one of us asked if he was going to be alright, bleeding a little behind the ear as he was, but the old local assured us that it “waren’t nothin but a scratch” and that he’d be “good as new by sun-up.” Because he wore one of those green Vietnam-era jackets and was old, we took his word for it and began heading for the door. As we were knocking our way down the stairs, the grizzled fellow suggested we go ahead and pay ourselves from the register, seeing as we hadn’t been paid yet. My buddy said he was just happy to be leaving with his scrotum in one piece and didn’t want any more trouble. I told the man he could have both our shares. He was a real rough one and looked like he needed it more than we did.

My buddy and I never went back, but we were four days shy of Christmas anyhow. I was eager for it to be over. The novelty of feeling more like a man than usual and believing the lie that girls were into you was wearing off. I was tired of being cold all the time too. Plus, none of us really belonged there long-term anyway, or understood the Appalachian like the grizzled vet did. I suspect he went back, mainly because he had to. We all had daddies with spiffy office jobs who would give us a respectable Christmas and make sure we had plenty to eat. I thought that night about Lloyd and the vet, though, and it unsettled me some. I wondered too if the other boys at the lot ever had the same fear that stalked me – that maybe you’d wake up one day wearing a Vietnam jacket for real, or wearing a pink scabies-inducing polo for real, with your name tag pulling two little holes above your left nipple.

I told her I had no experience at all, but she hired me on the spot anyway. Was that even rational, in the best interest of the company? I think not. She immediately began inserting my

name into these black rectangles on a whiteboard, and as she was, I began having second thoughts. I was thinking, Maybe just put me in for fifteen hours or so and let's give this a test run, but she was having different thoughts.

The job was actually pretty easy. Groups of people would sign up for one of the hotel's banquet halls, where they would hold conferences and share a meal or two, and we would set up the rooms the way they wanted, monitor the coffee and water and such during the meetings, and serve them food when the time came for that. I guess we were basically just waiters who did some heavy lifting before and after.

Most of the guys were athlete-types – confident, clean-cut, handsome. Not all the girls were into sports, but none were waifs either. There was only one ordinary little guy like me. He came from somewhere in the country and drove an old 280Z, which he was endlessly remodeling. Sometimes it showed up in the parking lot with no headlights or seats or bumpers. Once, it showed up stripped of all its paint and riding low on boat-trailer tires. He was quiet but always really cool to me. Whenever our conversations limped along, I'd just ask him about the 280Z and things would perk right up.

I liked all the athlete-types too, though, and they seemed to like me. But it's like they were a whole different species or something, and saw the world as one giant oyster for their taking. There were super positive about life, about the future, and seemed used to getting what they wanted, especially when it came to girls. And these guys weren't even football players; they were just track people and swimmers and golfers, but they had all the confidence of football players. I sometimes wondered what good I might need to do in this life to come back as one of them. Would I have to work in a leper colony or join a monastery or start a homeless shelter, or

could I just help old ladies with the door, or with their groceries? I was hoping the latter would take care of it.

The woman who hired me and told us when to come in and what to do was a hot thing. She was older than all of us by about a decade, but she seemed a lot younger than that, and not much different in the head than we were. She had long blonde hair, a tight butt and firm calves, a pair of ocean blues and an overall I-can-show-you-a-thing-or-two sexy look to her. She talked all the time about parties and passing out. I remember that she used the word panties a good bit, which was a huge turn-on. I wished she hadn't told us about the parties she attended, or sprinkled her stories with that word as often as she did, because it kept me from focusing on the task at hand. I hadn't learned yet the art of working and having a little fun at the same time; the two, I felt, ought to be kept separate. Plus, even if I would have entertained the possibility of merging the two realms, sometimes I felt like my brain couldn't handle both at the same time. But the athlete-types had no trouble with this. In fact, not only were they cutting up and having a grand old time, generally they were far more efficient than I was.

The athlete-types would hit on our boss just about any time the work slowed, and she seemed not to mind it one little bit. She would tell us how some days she didn't feel like wearing panties, so she wouldn't, and how on days she did wear panties, she couldn't wait to pull them off when she got home. She said most days they'd come off right after her shoes (she wore skirts almost all the time), and that she'd leave them right there in the foyer, on the wooden floor. When she got to talking like this, the guys would get quiet for a spell, and begin working their lips and tongues as if they were thirsty. It was about the only time they'd just not say anything at all. Sometimes I felt like I was going to pass out.

Although it seemed she led a charmed life, when I was around her I occasionally felt the same pity and fear Lloyd and the grizzled vet aroused in me. The first time I felt this way was when we walked out to the parking lot together after work and she unlocked the door to a Geo. Rarely could I say that my ratty Caprice was better than anyone else's mode of transport, but in this case I definitely could. Her two-door hatchback, slate-blue with three missing hubcaps, a coat hanger for an antenna, and bright red tape where the brake and signal lights should have been, was the smallest thing on the road at the time, except, of course, anything in the motorcycle genre. The engine sounded not much different than a moped's, and when she pattered away through the empty lot toward the exit, she looked no more substantial than a bug that could be whacked into oblivion at any moment. As it buzzed and sputtered on up the ramp toward the interstate, I found myself saying a prayer for her safe passage home among all those speedy giants that whirred by. I thought for a moment of that poor hapless creature in Frogger, and how one wrong move meant a mighty unforgiving splat.

The second time occurred after we waiters broke down the tables and stacked the chairs too soon, midway through a seminar on how to become a millionaire by thirty. When the participants arrived back in the hotel after a tour of our historic district and a visit to the house that last year claimed the world's largest ball of paint, they found an empty ballroom with a solitary athlete-type vacuuming in the corner. She hadn't instructed us to break things down; for some reason, we just assumed that the speaker had said about all there was to say on hawking beauty products and sex toys. But the hotel manager came at her like a caged tiger and thrashed her mercilessly right in the middle of the hotel bar, and right in front of the majority of the banquet staff. She really took it for us.

At first I admired her, and thanked her deep down, but I pitied her later that evening when I found her alone at the end of the bar, slouched over the counter, turning a red-rimmed glass round and round in her hand. Her long blonde hair hung limp and stringy about her bowed head, as if she'd set it just so to conceal her face. When she glanced up at the bartender to signal for another, I caught a glimpse of her face in the mirror behind the tap, and it looked as though she'd been crying. Her mascara was badly smeared, her cheeks were hollow and drawn, her ordinarily impeccably ironed blouse was wrinkled and untucked – she was not at all the perky sexy thing that made us go quiet, made our mouths go dry. She said nothing to any of us for the rest of the night, and when she pattered away in her toy car, its gears grinding away, its engine hiccupping, its muffler exhaling the dark oily stuff, my stomach drew up in a knot and I started to cry.

I'm not entirely sure why I quit. Boredom, probably, or the weariness of having to listen again and again to the athlete-types razz and proposition our boss in the very same way they'd always done. I never stopped liking my small shy compatriot, but after a while I just couldn't coerce myself into planting questions about the endless renovations to his 280Z, so things went quiet between us. And as I watched our boss more carefully, I began to notice a deep and irremediable sadness in her eyes, in her posture and gait too, a sadness her beauty must have concealed from me during those first months on the job. I saw a woman who, while flitting around from one party to the next, nourishing an ego on crude alpha-male banter and lusty propositions that often went nowhere, was stuck, or chasing wind, or turning circles – a hamster spinning round her wheel. It wasn't long before her sadness crept right on over to me and, like some kind of virus, took up residence and made the whole world go blue.

You may be right in accusing me of projecting my own stuckness onto her. I would not contest the claim. But nothing ever changed in that banquet hall, and it was this inertness, I think, this over and over and over, that compelled me to hand over my name tag and try something different. She hugged and even kissed me that final evening (which I shall never forget), and when we pulled apart, she looked at me as if she knew I knew her secret, and as if she knew I was fated for the wheel too. How could I have known something like that then? Who believes from the very start that their life will be but an endless chasing of wind or turning of circles, a long lonely going nowhere?

Twenty minutes, he says. The old suit at orientation told us, Thirty minutes for lunch, plus fifteen in the morning and fifteen in the afternoon, but the boss is now engaged to the suit's daughter and knows he can say, Ten minutes, if he wants. Probably he will once they get hitched.

I usually just shut off the engine, pull a tuna sandwich and a Mountain Dew from the cooler behind the seat, and watch the office-types across the street file out to their cars all dazed and squinty-eyed. They always seem in such a hurry and never look my way, so I lean back, kick up my boots, and watch, sucking in air not saturated with exhaust, and trying to hear things again, to get the thump and clamor of that diesel engine out of my skull. And I think, too, about what it'd be like to sit all day in a clean cool quiet room all day like those office people, poking away at keyboards, grabbing at telephones, punching buttons on copiers and fax machines and coffee makers, mashing staplers, scribbling on long yellow pads, then coming home feeling pretty much like you did in the morning, with no aches, no grit in your hair, no blisters on your hands. I wonder: How is it that I'm sitting on a backhoe eating fish from a can, wearing a

scratchy orange vest and a hardhat, and the people across the street are sitting in the cool quiet, their brains not pummeled to mush, their ears taking in inoffensive sounds like doors clicking shut, like chairs scooting back, like co-workers asking, How was your weekend?

I tried college, I did. But those looks of Dad's would come at me sometimes, when I was reading a bit of poetry, for instance, or when I was trying to write some paper on how women get a raw deal in Hemingway. So my brain would tell me to get up off my ass and get a job, and I would, but that job would wear me slam out, eventually run me right out of school. I know what you'll say, and I'd probably say you're right in saying it. You'll say, Well, why the hell would you go and do a dumb thing like that? And I'd have no answer for you. I'd shrug, maybe.

I guess what I'm really trying to say is that I wished I'd kept on reading and thinking and not paid any goddamn attention to those looks Dad gave me. Don't get me wrong, I'm not blaming Dad for anything, I just wish I'd not let those looks do such a number on me, get stuck way down deep and let them toss me this way and that. Because once I'd gotten into the slaving way, I just stopped thinking like a college-type and never got back in the habit.

I'm paycheck to paycheck now, and job to job; I'm Lloyd, that grizzled vet, that hot perky thing with the sad eyes. I sometimes wonder if they're still on the wheel, and I sometimes wonder what more I could have done to land a spiffy office job with a nameplate on the door, with my name etched on stiff little cards in my wallet, but that line of thinking's never turned up much. The hardest part's knowing you're just some expendable cog, some bit of machinery the boss can replace when it breaks or goes bad, knowing there's thousands of bodies just like yours out there that'll do just as well. Nobody ever tells you that you might end up just putting food in your mouth, putting in one application after another, putting one aching foot in front of the other. But they should. That way, when it happens, you're not disappointed by it.

GOAD'S FIRST VISIT

“Are we to suppose that in one generation there were anthropoid apes who gave birth to the next generation of true Homo sapiens, and that the changes between one generation and the next were so great that the children counted in God’s eyes as the bearers of immortality while their parents were ‘mere animals’? Yet unless dualists are prepared to fly in the face of evolutionary biology, how can they avoid this unpalatable conclusion?” –Linda Badham

Irk was squatting beside a stream turning a round stone over in his hand. He was two and a half seconds from inventing the wheel when a wildebeest walked up beside him and began to speak. The invention of the wheel would wait another 5,867 years, which would add gobs of needless suffering to the poor people who scratched out a living on this planet.

“Irk,” it said. Irk turned his head. “I know you, and I can see that you are a good and decent man.” Irk leapt to his feet and displayed the whites of his eyes, the rot of his teeth. “I said, ‘I know you and—’”

“I heard you,” said Irk. He looked about for an explanation.

“I have come to give you a soul.”

“What?” Irk scanned the outcrop to his right, the scrub to his left, and the valley behind, where lay his small village and all the people he’d ever known. His heart thumped against its cage, for he believed at that moment that he’d finally lost his marbles. You see, he was getting on in years. If it was true that he’d lost his marbles, he would be stoned to death by week’s end or declared a holy man. He wanted neither.

“A soul,” the wildebeest said.

“Like bottom of foot?” Irk lifted his foot and pointed to the bottom of it to clarify. After all, he was speaking to a wildebeest.

“No,” said the wildebeest. “Like you’ll never really die.”

Irk spun around. “Who fuck with me?” he shouted. “Why fuck with me?” There was no response. The people of his village carried on with their chores, for they hadn’t heard him.

“You will live forever,” said the wildebeest.

“Who you?”

“God.”

“Goad?” As Irk said this, he began to back slowly away. He was going to put an end to this foolishness.

“It’s Gawd,” said the wildebeest as it raised a hoof and gestured to its larynx. “Use the back of the throat, Irk. And open your mouth a little wider.” The wildebeest demonstrated.

“Gawd,” it said. “Like that.”

“Goad,” said Irk.

“No: Gawd. Like that.” The wildebeest once again pointed to its larynx.

“Goad.”

The wildebeest gave up.

“I created this beautiful place. What do you think?”

“Not much,” said Irk.

“But, it’s quite the work of art, wouldn’t you say? So well-ordered, all of its parts working together in harmony. And there’s the regularity of the seasons and the tides, the abundance of so many different kinds of food, the laws of nature all—”

“Bugs eat on me,” interrupted Irk. “Hot all the time. Sometimes I eat bad berries and shit all day.”

“A glass half-empty sort of guy, eh?”

“What?”

“No matter. I’ve been away for a while, see, working on other projects, other worlds. Kind of forgot about this one for, oh, about a billion years or so. Evolution was going so slowly, you know. Nothing but blue and green slime for hundreds of millions of years. I got bored. What would you do?”

“What?” Irk swatted and killed a large black fly that his tribe had come to call Evil. It was one of several recent abstractions to enter their language, and it was one reason why God felt they were just about ready for souls.

“No matter. I think you’re ready. And I wouldn’t mind one bit if you came up and joined me once all this is over and done with.”

“Up where?” Irk had resigned himself to the likely truth that he had lost his wits, so he now felt there was no harm in playing along.

“It’s a nice place.”

“You make it?”

“Of course. Who else?”

“But, you make this place too.”

“Yes.”

“I do not like this place so much. First wife—dead. First two sons—dead. Second wife—sick, dead soon. Mother—bite by bat, go nuts. Me—fall in hole, crack leg. Limp now. Pain in morning, when it rains. Why I want ‘live forever,’ as you say?”

“This is a much better place, Irk. You’ll have to trust me.”

“Why I trust you? You forget about us many years and make bad place. Why I trust you?”

“You don’t have a choice. I’m giving you a soul and you will live forever.”

“What about wife? What about kids? They ‘live forever’ too?”

“No. Just you and all your children from now on. They will live forever.”

“I do not want it.”

The wildebeest was becoming angry. “Well, you’re going to get a soul whether you like it or not.”

“I do not want ‘live forever’ with you. You make bad place, so you bad too. Go now. Leave Irk.”

“It’s a gift. You’ll show me the proper gratitude.”

“What?”

The wildebeest realized his error. He had reminded himself before adopting his avatar to keep abstractions to a minimum. The notion of “forever” alone must have been taxing enough on poor Irk.

“You should say thank you.”

“No.”

“Say it.”

“No.” Irk squatted once more before the stream and reached for stone. “How you do it, then?”

“I don’t know yet. You’ll have to trust me, Irk. But I can promise you that some part of you will live on. Not your flesh and bones, some other part.”

“What other part? I am this!” Irk pointed to his chest, to his arms and legs, to his head.

“I am ‘flesh and bones,’ as you say. What else am I?”

“You are more.”

“You nuts.”

“You are out of line.”

Irk looked about for any sign of Ork or Urk, his two toothless older brothers, who never tired of playing pranks on poor Irk.

“Why now?” Irk asked. “Why ignore all else for so many years, not give them gift? Unfair, yes?”

“No. I was away on business. Detained, attending to other matters, important matters like building other worlds. You have no idea how demanding it is.”

“Go away, Goad. They stone me soon.”

“No matter. I will give you a soul.”

After one more look around, Irk fled limping down the ridge into the valley, where all the people he'd ever known were quietly doing hard things that hurt their backs and knees. He wanted to see his wife before she died, and he wanted to see his kids before the villagers discovered that he'd lost his wits and began to hurl stones at him.

God (or Goad as the villagers would first come to know him through Irk's drunken ramblings one evening about the communal fire) gave up his avatar and returned to his heavenly home and there reconsidered his plan to give Irk a soul. He wasn't happy with Irk's reaction, especially his lack of gratitude, but he also wasn't happy with his poor grammar and small vocabulary. God thought that maybe he at least ought to wait until they started using contractions and had come up with a few more verbs. Plus, he wasn't quite sure he could pull it off. Have I bit off more than I can chew? he wondered. How in heaven's name will I ever extract from that bit of flesh something worth saving?