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Contrasting patterns of fantasy and motility in Irish and Italian schizophrenics

Michael Ross MacDonald

The University of Montana

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CONTRASTING PATTERNS OF FANTASY AND MOTILITY
IN IRISH AND ITALIAN SCHIZOPHRENICS

By
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B.A., University of Notre Dame, 1970

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for the degree of
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A HISTORY OF GUNFIGHTING IN EL LOPINO

Juan Valdez, most people agree, was first in our town to wear the sombrero. Juan Ortega had been champion for as long as any could remember. He held his position longer than his skill merited. The stories of Ortega's declining skill toward the end are probably only extensions of the old legends. Some talk of his taking four shots to kill one man, others of his shooting completely over a man's head and injuring a woman sitting in her window across the street. I know as fact that he missed a charging steer that had been stung by a swarm of hornets. The steer trampled the flowers in the church garden which were to be used to decorate the altar of Our Lady on the feast of the Assumption. He drank tequila well. His challengers could hardly hold a gun after hours of settling the formalities of the duel in the cantina. Juan Valdez, a crafty and noble gunfighter, chose to fight on May 17, the day when the cantina closed early for the procession of Our Lady of the Holy Blood. Juan Ortega had no chance to fight the duel with his famous drinking ability. He had the advantage of the two o'clock blaze at his back, which he thought would carry him as always before. Juan Valdez wore his now famous sombrero with the carved lemonwood crucifix on the brim. His eyes shaded by his white sombrero from the glare
of the green sun, he shot the old drinker through the heart.

Legend perhaps extends details beyond their proper perspectives. Juan Valdez was said to have killed two men by shooting them each through the left eye with the bullets blazing simultaneously from the bore of both of his famous silver pistols. I know for fact that he was indeed the noblest gunfighter of all time. He did not really need to wear the white sombrero as champion: since he had the advantage of having the blaze of the green sun at his back, he had no need to shade his eyes from the sun's powers. People said that he wore the sombrero for luck and as a symbol of his position as champion. I know his reason for wearing it to have been that the wood of the carved lemonwood crucifix was from the garden of Our Savior's sorrows. He was a most holy man and a servant of Christ. Each time he killed, he would pray on the grave of his mother, and he would have a mass read for all babies whose fathers had died before they were born.

Pedro Garcia should have been drowned by the toothless hag of a midwife who brought him into the world. Maria Santina, his unfortunate mother, a saintly girl who was raped on her way home from Lenten devotions, died before Pedro was yet born. He crawled out of her dead womb, and he refused to cry when the midwife slapped him to make him breathe. The wretched Pedro Garcia challenged
the champion, Juan Valdez, to a duel. He was too poor to afford his own drink, so Juan Valdez had to buy tequila for him in order to consummate the ceremonial rights of the duel. Pedro Garcia, miserable creature that he was, drank the tequila only so that he might eat the free lunch provided by the cantina. By the time Garcia had finished stuffing himself, the champion, who had been fasting in order to receive the body and blood of Our Savior in the Holy Eucharist, was overcome with drink. Garcia refused to take more than one drink himself. The sky was grey that day when Pedro Garcia killed Juan Valdez.

The rights of conquest permitted Garcia to take what he wanted belonging to the slain Juan Valdez, so he took the famous sombrero with the lemonwood crucifix. He could not even afford to buy a sombrero of his own. The white sombrero fit Garcia like the gold crown of a king on the head of an ass, pure and radiant against his dirty, ragged clothing. It was said by some who stood close to Garcia that he was able to kill Juan Valdez because his rusty pistol misfired coming out of the holster, and the wild shot struck the champion in the chest. In his next duel the black hand of Satan did not intercede in Garcia's favor as against Juan Valdez; the rusty pistol refused to fire, and Juan Sanchez shot three times at Pedro Garcia who could but stand and wait for the bullet that would kill him.
Juan Sanchez claimed the famous sombrero of Juan Valdez, which had already become a symbol of the champion, and, ignorant clown that he was, he wore it on top of his own sombrero which he had bought the very morning of the duel especially for the occasion to reflect the rays of the green sun. Juan Francisco Melenez claimed the sombrero of Juan Valdez as well as Juan Sanchez' new sombrero, and he wore both on top of his grey one. Thus the tradition of passing along the sombreros of all past champions came to be. Fredrico Ortega, who inherited the sombreros of seven past champions, initiated the practice of also claiming and wearing the sombreros of each and every challenger he killed. Some say that he wore a total of 35 sombreros when he was killed by Juan Aurio. I know for fact that the number was only 29 sombreros. Carlos Renales, who inherited 74 sombreros when he killed the champion, Pepe Valachez, initiated the custom of wearing only 25 sombreros besides his own and the sombrero of Juan Valdez at the top of all. He stood only four feet three inches tall, and the weight of the sombreros was too much for him to support.

The reader may at this point in my account, over the discrepancy of statistical record, come to question the sources of my information and wonder as to my historiographic stance. As an historian, my style resembles most that of Herodotus: I give as many divergent accounts of an event as are available, allowing the reader to choose
the best from among the many, in order that the history may remain ultimately objective. If I may at times show a preference of one version of an event over another, it is because I realize that, as Collingwood suggests, history in the final analysis exists only in the mind of the historian. History is a fiction, if you will. Since the facts in themselves reveal only that of history which is superficial and ultimately meaningless in itself, the historian must recreate the events and the characters and relive history himself. Though I have tentatively granted the reader the use of the term "fiction" as applicable to history, I must say myself that I do not regard history as a fiction. History is real in the ultimate sense of the Hegelian Idea. From the facts of history, it is true, we may not discover the whole story of history. History as a living spirit exists in the dialectic of the people. I am a native citizen of El Lopino and am more attuned to the spirit of the events of our town than would be the reader. Educated as you have no doubt discovered me to be, I am also more able than the masses of our town to make objective interpretations of the events, unaffected by the forces of myth which cloud the vision of our citizens.

Miguel Rodriguez, who had an additional thumb on his right hand where his little finger should have been, accidentally shot the sombreros from the head of the
champion, Rajual Oreo. Since Miguel had displaced the symbol of the champion in shooting off the sombreros, it was decided that Rajual could no longer be champion, and Miguel won claim to the sombreros. There was much argument as to what should be done with Rajual Oreo. Since he was no longer champion, he was officially dead, and many thought that he should be buried. Pepe Melene finally brought up the idea that Rajual would not have to be buried but that he was officially dead, and that he could never fight in a duel, and that he could visit the cantina only through the back door, and that he should be treated as a ghost when he was seen in the street.

The precedent set by Miguel Rodrigues and established as a rule of the duel; instead of shooting the champion, the challenger shot at the sombreros on his head. By the time Jose Marques became champion, there were five holes in the sacred sombrero of Juan Valdez. It was Jose Marquez who made the ruling that a challenger could not shoot at the sombrero of Juan Valdez but must shoot at one of the lower sombreros. He was later shot through the head by Francisco Marcede whose left leg was shorter than his right.

Rodrigo Manez had dreams of getting shot in the head. When he was but a baby he had seen his father accidentally killed by a challenger who shot too low. It was Rodrigo Manez who said that slingshots should be used
instead of pistols so that the champion would not be accidentally shot in the head.

Pedro, the orphan, whose parents had been eaten from the inside out by maggots from sleeping naked among flies, wisely said that the men who were officially dead should not be permitted to sleep with their wives in case they should have a child possessed by the devil. Since the soul of the father might be in hell, the father might be an agent of the devil. Father Francisca decided that the widows of those officially dead should stay at the presbytery. Juan Miguel Veron, who was then champion, said that the champion should be responsible for the widows and see that they were protected. He wore a purple band on his wrist as a symbol of his duty.

Rio, who had lost his left arm when he was gored by a mad goat as a small boy, suggested that a challenger might throw rocks, since he was unable to hold a slingshot. Burrito, who could lift a horse and rider on his shoulders, wanted the duel to be decided by feats of strength. Since he was much too strong for anybody to conquer, his idea was not accepted.

The ghosts, who still ate and drank tequila but did not work, since they were dead, became a problem for our town. The champion, Jorge Orlando, was in many ways like the famous champion, Juan Valdez. As well as possessing great prowess in the duel, being able to hit a tin
can with a rock at 30 paces, he was like the great champion in his dedication to Our Blessed Mother. Even when he was an altar boy holding the paten to prevent a fragment of the body of Our Savior from touching the floor, he would gaze into the eyes of the statue of The Virgin at the side altar and sometimes forget to genuflect after communion. Jorge Orlando suggested that he be blessed as a saint by the priest and that the souls of the dead be put under his charge. He wore a silver star on his shirt as a symbol of his position. He transformed what had become a burden on our community into a useful element. He had the ghosts work the lands which he, as champion, had assumed from all of the dead, and he put them to work in their spare time manufacturing sombreros like the famous sombrero of Juan Valdez, which he sold to tourists.

I have mentioned the name of Jorge Orlando in conjunction with the name of the champion, Juan Valdez, and compared to Christian spirit as well as the physical prowess of the two champions. You students of history will undoubtedly assume that I am an adherent to the "great man" theory of history because of my interpreting the characters of these two great champions as significant symbols in the progression of the history of our town. I must categorically deny such interpretations of my history. I regard the characters of Juan Valdez and Jorge Orlando through the objective eye of the historian, though the masses may
have viewed these men through a symbolic perspective. In adhering to the great man theory, the historian reduces his account to the level of myth. My history is not of a mythical nature. The characters of these most important champions, Juan Valdez and Jorge Orlando, are significant to history because of the exemplary nature of the lives they led. They represented the archetypal values of knighthood, combining skill in combat with the Christian values of charity and reverence to the Holy Mother. In the characters of these two champions the masses of our town find values worthy of imitation. The masses aspire to walk in the footpaths laid by Juan Valdez and Jorge Orlando. It is men such as Juan Valdez and Jorge Orlando who form the cornerstones of history, providing the ideals on which civilization is founded.

Many in our town who were complete paupers and who owned no land participated in the duel and became a burden on the champion, who got nothing from killing these men and still had to feed them. Pedro Melachez had the idea that only those with land could fight in the duel. Aurero Pele later decided that a man without land could fight if he had enough money to challenge.

Regino Ortega, who had attended the university and who was supposed to be the smartest man in our town, said that the physical element of the duel was barbaric in this
modern age, and that the champion should be decided by a debate. It was acknowledged that the duel should be fought in an intellectual manner, but everyone knew that Regino Ortega would surely become champion since he could speak four languages and had read the Bible all the way through, which not even the priest had done. I must interject at this point an evaluation of the reasons stated by the masses for holding Regino’s argument suspect. The inarticulate nature of the masses prevents their defining their intuitive perceptions in any but symbolic terms. Regino Ortega was in fact a charlatan. His family had made their fortune by playing on the ignorance of the town. Regino was most accomplished in the art of sophistry of any member of his family. As is common with the uneducated, the people of our town imagined Regino to be intelligent because they could not understand what he said. If Regino Ortega had intelligence, I myself could never penetrate the infinity of concentric circles within his reasoning to discover it. A poker game was proposed as an alternative form of intellectual conflict to the debate proposed by Regino Ortega. It was finally decided to determine the duel by the casting of dice. A lottery later replaced the dice. The one who drew the stick with the black dot became the champion.

Those among the dead began to complain about the fact that there were many who had never participated in
the duel. Families who had never fought owned vast tracts of land and were prosperous while those who would risk their lives were left among the dead, and their children became homeless paupers. Raul Gomez made it compulsory for every man with land or money to participate in the duel. The one whose lot was marked with the black dot became champion and the ten who drew lots marked with a red dot joined the dead.

It was pointed out that the champion was at an unfair disadvantage in the duel. He had most to lose, being in control of all the lands and money of the dead, and he had only one chance out of the many of winning. It was decided to sell tickets so that the champion, who had the most money in the town, could buy as many tickets as he liked and could have a better chance of winning.

A tourist from the north, who had visited our town several times to observe the festivities of the duel, pointed out how the duel had degenerated from its original purpose. The champion, he said, should be the one who is the most powerful and most worthy of the sombreros, the purple band and the silver star. Now even the weakest have a chance of becoming champion, he showed us.

As I have already indicated, Hegel has had considerable influence on my approach to history. It is for this reason that I foresaw good times to come for our
town in the words of the northern tourist. If the dialectic is to continue, the thesis must be met with antithesis. Our town was becoming complacent toward the duel. The criticism from the north served to generate a new concern for the significance of the duel among our people.

The Rock Insurance Company became champion. They had more money than the entire town. George Glem wore the sombreros, the purple wrist band and the silver star as field representative of the champion. He said that the dead, even in hell, have some rights. He decided that, if the dead in their spare time would make jewelry to be sold to tourists, they could spend a night with their wives when they filled their quota. The wives of the dead had by this time overflowed the walls of the presbytery and were begging in the streets for food. George Glem built a fine building for the wives to stay in. It was such a fine place that tourists and traveling salesmen stayed there also when they came to town. The children of the dead, George Glem sent to school so that they could learn to read the notices that he nailed to the wall of the cantina.

A man whose name nobody knew challenged George Glem to a duel. He refused to drink tequila or even go into the cantina. George Glem stood in the street with the green sun at his back and took out his checkbook. The
man didn't wear a sombrero. He wore dark glasses to shade his eyes when he faced the green sun glaring over George Glem's shoulder. The man didn't reach for his checkbook. He drew a pistol from his holster and shot George Glem through the heart. He refused to accept the sombreros and the purple wrist band and the silver star. He got on his motorcycle and rode out of town. I was told by a small child that she had seen him urinating in the street beside his motorcycle before he left.
It was like watching a gull banked off the shore breeze, wings extended and never-moving, floating, over the boiling thunderhead. She made me cry. Right down on my knees like a baby; and the whole ship looking at me. I felt just like a baby laying on his back reaching up to grab the moon in his fist because three thousand miles looks like a foot away to his eyes. I reached for her and I brought back my hand empty.

She wasn't like any of the others I've seen: they stare past you with those murky, brown eyes like they're listening to voices coming out of the air, like they can't hear you talking, and they don't even know you're there. They know you're there all right: "Glabba-glabba-glabba," they scream out in that gibber-gabber language of theirs; as soon as you lean on them a little, they bellow and beg you to do anything to them just so you'll turn off the pain. This one was real though. She was the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. She had no reason to be here with the rest.

I want to say right off that I'm no holy-holy or anything. What-the-hell, I'm a sergeant. I've been working these patrols for three years now, and I do my job.

I don't get any charge out of fucking some floppy-tits
old bag, all dirty and smelly with smoke from living in those caves. But I love that look in their eyes and the begging. She moans, and you dig into her flabby back with your nails 'til there's blood running down your fingers. And she doesn't make a move to fight back, because, if she does, you'll break her even more. She's like a kitten, whining and sucking at your toes for milk. You squeeze her throat, watch her eyes pop out and listen to the mad hiss of her sucking for air. Maybe she tries out her claws on you. You raise your hand; just hold it there until your whole arm is tight as an anchor line in a hurricane, then you crack her across the face and send her into a fit of the epileptic shakes. Maybe you just hold her under water and watch her squirm 'til she's almost dead, then pull her up and look into her eyes, daring her to fight back. I like that all right, to hear them begging in that gibber-gabber language so it sounds like a sprung alarm clock flying apart; they look up with those murky, brown eyes pleading that you'll understand what they're saying.

But she was different.

We picked her up with a whole fucking boatload of them holed up in this cave just off shore. And she wasn't your fat old bag. Everyone screams, "let's fuck her," wild-eyed and poking at her. "We'll save this one
'til last," I tell them. I'm the sergeant. "We'll do something special for this one." So they went on with the usual shit. I was in command of the ship while the captain was patrolling the island, so I just stood back and watched.

I started watching her. This whole shiteree is going on right under her nose, and she just stands there like a marble statue. She's got three kids, which surprised me, because she don't look like anyone three kids have gone through. There's two kids hanging on her legs and the baby's suckling at her breast.

I walk up to her and look her in the face. This shit's going on all around her. She sees it too, and she just stands there like she was listening to voices echoing up from the hollows of those caves. So I grab the baby by his leg out of her arms and hold him up to her; upside down, dangling by one leg, he's screaming like a young pig, right in her face, and reaching out for her with his fat little fingers. I grab her chin and make her look at me, and I smile. She doesn't blink an eye, just looks right at me. It scares me for a second and I pull my hand off her chin. She's still looking at me though. I pull out my knife like I'm going to make a eunuch out of her kid there dangling in front of her face. I give her a look to see what she thinks about that. She looked me straight in the eye, then she smiled and bowed her head.
like: "Whatever you please, you just go right ahead and do it." I slapped her a good one across her face so she almost fell off backwards into the water.

She stood up and looked at me again, like I didn't really just slap her face almost off. Then she looked at her baby hanging there. I slapped him across his bare little ass. I smiled. I picked up my knife and gave the kid a slice down his leg, just enough to draw some blood and get him howling good. Then I looked her hard in the eye so she knows I'm not playing around with her, and she smiled at me. I swung her kid against the rail. I smashed him two or three times, and I flung him into the water so hard that I almost fell in after him. I couldn't see, I was so pissed off.

I looked up at her. Her other two kids were screaming and clawing at her legs like a couple cub bears trying to get up a tree. She just stood there like a flower painted on the wall. Blood from her kid was splashed all over her face, women were getting raped all over the ship, her kids were screaming and pulling at her legs, and she just looked at me, like she was a fucking lily painted on the wall, and the whole building burning down around her. "Well fuck." I grabbed her other son who was clinging to her leg. I sat on his chest and cut his little nuts off and held them up to her face.
"Here," I screamed. I was so mad I almost cried, and I tried to grin at her, but I couldn't.

She just looked down at me there at her knees. The crew had seen what was going on, and the whole place got quiet. I felt the sound of my voice in that silence. I felt the whole ship looking at me, down on my knees at her feet holding her kid's bloody scrotum up to her. She smiled at me and held out her hand to help me up.

It was like she had kicked me in the stomach and knocked the wind out of me.

I got up. I looked at what I had in my hand and threw it onto the deck like it was a wriggling snake I was carrying. "Leave her alone," I said. My voice cracked. I cleared my throat. "Leave her and her kids alone," I said in a louder voice. It was still quiet. Everyone stared at me. They were all scared, like the sun had gone out or something. "Clean up this fucking mess," I said. "Get this ship cleaned up, and get them stowed away below." They started moving, mumbling and doing what I told them. "Leave this one here," I said to the scurvy old bastard who tried to stow the woman away with the rest. "I want her and her kids left here."

I puttered around below for a while pretending like I was busy. Finally, I got some wine and cheese and went up to where the woman was. She was standing there in the same place. Her kids were asleep on the deck. I tried
to look her in the eye, but I couldn't. I held up the cheese and wine for her to take some. She shook her head. I looked her in the eye and grinned, hard. Then I sat down by the mast and watched her. My mouth was so bitter I could hardly chew, but I swallowed like I enjoyed eating in front of her.

She stood there all day under the sun. The blood on her face dried out and cracked, then peeled away in the breeze. Her kids woke up and cried. The one I cut was in pain for sure; even when he was asleep he moaned and thrashed around. They looked up at her and cried. She would touch their head with her hand and smile, and they got quiet like her smile was filling their bellies or something. "Hey you." Her kids had forgot about me watching them. They looked up, scared, like a rabbit when it sees the shadow of a hawk. I laughed and flung a wedge of cheese over to them. Those kids forgot about me soon enough and lit into that scrap of dried cheese like a pair of starved rats. I could have maybe had some fun with them, but it was hot and quiet sitting on the ship rocking on the water. I chuckled at the filthy little things.

She looked mighty good, like a governor's wife or something. She looked good even in that hair dress that they all wear: those fat, ugly women, their nipples all
chafed like they've been nursing a whole litter of needle-toothed whelps for a month. "Penance," that's why they wear that ugly hair dress. Living in smokey caves like animals, and listening to the echoing voices of water dripping down in the guts of the earth, like it really was a god talking to them. No man will have them: that's the real reason they come out here to live. Hell, they'd smile while you burned their old man and kids right under their noses, if you could give them a shape so a man would love them like a real woman. They'd fuck 'til their soul ran out onto the bed. You can see it in their eyes. Even when they're half scared to death: they watch the ones before them get fucked and then get tossed alive into a fire, and still they enjoy it when you're fucking them on the deck, and they'd burn in hell forever just to do it one more time with you in a bed. "Penance." Why shit.

But this one is different.

Even scraped to pieces from that hair dress of hers, her skin is soft and smooth like the best Persian whore you've ever laid. I wondered what it would be like having her in bed. Not one of these gang fucks on the ship deck or even like paying for it, but to go home to, like she's all yours, and she fixes you dinner and pours wine. She lays there in bed with nothing on, waiting for you, submissive, and ready to please. She's almost too beautiful
to fuck. And, what's more, she wants you to fuck her, and she wants to do it any way she can just so she'll please you. She gets you there and makes it hang at the top for six hours, like one of those Jap women they talk about. She keeps you there 'til you're ready to bust open.

I wanted to tell her I was sorry; that I loved her. I heard her kid moaning at her feet. I could just hear the crew laughing, me at her feet saying, "I'm sorry. Forgive me for cutting your kid and smashing your baby."

The whole crew was just about drunk. They'd been at the wine all day and the sun was almost down by this time. The captain would have had my ass if he came back: the crew drunk and me moaning over some cow-eyed bitch. To hell with him. What does he expect, leaving us all day, tied up with nothing to do. "Tell her I'm sorry." I chuckled when I thought about it.

"You and your kids get the fuck out of here." My heart was pounding like a thirteen-year-old kid getting laid for the first time. I stood there in the dark and talked into her face. The moon was coming up and shining off the water over her shoulder. "Get the fuck out of here." My voice cracked and I was trembling all over. I gave her the wine and cheese and pointed to the gangplank, trying to tell her with my hands to get the hell off the
ship. "Get. Do you want the crew to wake up?" I could
taste her breath in my throat I was so close to her.
She just looked at me. She couldn't understand
what I was saying.
I took her by the arm to lead her off the ship.
She pulled away from me and stood there, rigid,
like she meant to stay. Then she shook her head and
smiled at me.
I wanted to grab her eyes out, so I wouldn't have
to see that look. But I was afraid to touch her.
I picked up her little girl by the throat. "Is
that what you want?" I said, shaking the little girl
and choking her. The crew was awake and everybody was
staring at me. "Put her down below with the rest," I
said. And I got some wine.
"She's a queer one, ain't she?" a weaselly private
grinned at me, trying to make conversation. I looked at
him, ready to smash his face, and he crawled away into
the dark. I drank wine all night and listened to the
water lapping against the side of the boat.
She hadn't slept. She had stood all night like that.
I could see it on her face, and in the stiff way she walked,
but that look in her eyes was still the same.
"Heel," I called. The dog, with his dim, grey eye
oozing yellow down the blind side of his face came running
and sat at my feet. They held her little girl down on the deck, right in front of the woman, and they pulled her legs apart. "Do it," I said: the dog growled and went at the girl, slobbering all over her. I looked at the woman. I could see the reflection of the dog and the little girl in the woman's eyes. The crew was laughing and poking at the dog, and the dog growled. The little girl was turning blue from holding her breath. She was so scared that she couldn't even cry. "Stop," I said. I grabbed the woman's dress and tore it off her.

Someone kicked the dog in the ribs, and he ran, yelping, into the hold. The woman just stood there, the breeze ruffling her hair. I could hear the waves lapping against the side of the ship. Everyone was quiet, like they were afraid to breathe.

That black ugly thing. "Take it off," I told her. She was trussed up in a rusty, iron chastity belt. Her skin was rubbed open and sore like a sulphur burn where the thing cut into her waist. "Take it off." Goose bumps rose on her skin in the morning breeze and tiny quivers rippled across her belly. "Take it off." Two men grabbed onto the thing and jerked and twisted, like a couple of anxious puppies, trying to break it. "Take it off," I told her.

I watched the hot coals touch the iron band around
her waist. Her flesh quivered with pain. Still she had that look in her eyes. I couldn't stand the smell. I hung my head over the rail and watched the waves carry away what I puked.

He chizzled and swore and twisted and burned her trying to get it off. Two men tried to help him. They jerked and cut at her, and she just stood there smiling at them. I swallowed the gall in my mouth and watched the waves against the ship. The iron snapped, and they twisted it off.

Her side was burned and filthy blue with ashes like a piece of bloody meat dropped into the fire. They had cut a gouge clear across her belly getting that thing off. I wanted her to say something. She just stood there. Her kids were behind me, crying. A fly buzzed around her and landed in the open tear in her belly. I flicked at the fly to get him off of her, and her belly lurched with pain when I touched her. Her face and her eyes were still the same, like she was listening to those echoing voices.

I smiled at her. I snapped again at the gouge in her belly so I could watch her flesh dancing. Then I grabbed her. I dug into her back with my fingers 'til the sound of my fucking her pounded in my head. Tears were running across my face. I pushed her up against the
rail, and I laughed. My throat was choking up so I couldn't breathe.

I could hear the water lapping against the boat, and I felt her skin against my face. I touched the back of her neck with my fingertips; her hair pulled across the back of my hand. Her face was cold. I squeezed her 'til I felt I would swallow her, then I let her loose. She stayed there; hung backwards over the rail. Her eyes were closed.
THE PEANUT

He wears those crepe-sole shoes and doesn't say anything trying to sneak up on me, but I feel him breathing over there behind the row of shelves, looking at me. The green cloud of his breathing is all over me, sickening mint breath choking my throat in. "Ain't we, Mr. Selvey? 'Aint't'?" I hear him thinking. He makes me nervous so's I spill paint all over the table and on my hands.

"Where are we going, Mr. Selvey?" I feel him walk out from behind the shelves behind me.

"I'm going to take a piss." By myself. Can't I piss without you holding it for me? He looks at me with those eyes of his: I can feel his eyes on the back of my neck, but I won't look back at him. He knows if he catches my eyes he will have me then.

"Are we really, Mr. Selvey?"

So I run. They all are looking up at me running. I smash into Mrs. Olsky around the corner. She's carrying a whole tray full of paint in her clumsy, tip-toe-ing way, like a cat stealing food from a dog's dish. "Oh my." She just lays there on the floor with paint splashed all over her and paint all over me. She's a worm, squirming in her puddle of paint. "Fuck you, Mrs. Olsky with your
brown, puppy-dog eyes looking up at me to help you."
I want to crush her in her helplessness on the floor.

"What's our hurry? Hum-hum-hum," he chuckles right behind me. He will blow the whistle and have them catch me, but he likes to chase me into a corner first, walking slow behind me, chuckling. He thinks he's a cat toying with his crippled mouse, twitching and lurching with fear. "I done my work. 'Done' work?" He wants to tease me. Sneaking animal, slavering all over himself with his chuckling snorts.

"We'll accomplish nothing by running."

"You can play with that crippled Mrs. Olsky drowning in her own shit and tears on the floor. You don't have me." I run through the whole length of the room. Smash my head right through that wall. He will stir around in the bloody mess running down the wall onto the floor. He won't get me.

Both of them are laughing. He bends way over my face and smiles, his breath like sour tit milk on a suckling baby. All four of them's bent over my face with fish eyes the color of river slime 'til all I see is eyes lichen cold and moldy-wet on my face.

"A peanut," he says, and the other laughs, and they all laugh, "A peanut."

It's like I'm pinned face down under a car with my arms under me. Trying to move my arms and legs, I
squirm and wriggle, twisting in on myself like a slug poured over with salt, but nothing moves cause I don't have any. And they all roar out laughing at me. "Fuck you, bastards," I want to scream 'til my ears bleed, but it's like the arms and legs. I got no throat, and I cave in on myself thinking about it 'til there's so much hate I can taste the hard, cold of it like a piece of polished flint rock which don't even taste the dusty taste of rock cause it's so smooth, but it tastes just cold and hard. I feel myself biting down at this flint rock taste 'til it's swallowed up inside my teeth. But I don't bite, because I haven't got any. I'm a peanut.

"Ain't this something, Mr. Selvey? 'Ain't it?"

And they all break down laughing 'til their faces melt into a puddle of tears and teeth, gaping, "Ugh-ugh-ugh," gagging laughter all over me.

I feel him pick me up in his cold, white hand and put me in his pocket. There is no way for me to see it's his pocket cause I've got no eyes to see, but I feel the smell of the breath mints he always eats, and I feel the tinfoil wrapper scrape my shell. He keeps fumbling in his pockets, and tumbling me against the roll of breath mints, and then he rubs at my shell 'til his sweaty fingers curl pieces of my shell up in wet balls like lint.

"35 cents?" I hear him say. "It was only 25 a week
ago. Are we trying to retire on our profits in a year's time?" he says to some poor grocery clerk. And he forgets about me. Breath mint smell is enough to make ya puke, like living inside his mouth. Dried up lint pieces of paper he crumbled and fidgeted 'til they were frayed like a hampster's nest all over the pocket, and I am burrowed into the center, covered all over by my nest. Deep and dark and warm, I listen to the silence. Nobody says to me, "Wouldn't you like to join the others, Mr. Selvey?" That Mrs. Olsky who tries to imagine that she isn't ugly with white sweat pimples all over her throat like a shaved chicken neck, trying to touch me. "We wasn't going out to lunch? We 'was' going, 'was' we?" he would say. "We 'was'?" 'Til I couldn't talk anymore, the words wedged like a pencil crossways in my throat. But no one laughs, now. Here it is just silence. "Left alone, now," I think, and I feel like I want to laugh at those smart-ass bastards. I dream about being a peanut: the cottony inside of my shell is like a bed of muslin sheets, pulled all the way over my head so no one sees in. Curled in on myself like a snail, like a fetus in my mother's womb, I feel the round, smooth shape of my body.

"It's a peanut," I hear him say. He wraps a thread around the middle of my shell and dangles me in the air.
The cat swats me and claws my shell. "Snort and chuckle, you perverted son-of-a-bitch," I think. "Chuckle 'til you piss your little pants. Your cat don't hurt me. There is no pain; I'm a peanut, and it's dark inside my shell."

"Don't step on it and crush it into the rug," I hear a voice. He's let his kids play with me. I can feel light coming in. The shell is cracked. My shell is cracked and all his kids are looking in at me. I hear laughing, and I want to hide. I want to stuff up the hole with something, but I have no arms or legs. I can't move, and they're looking at me. The pain is so heavy from trying to move that I feel like I'm crumbling, turning to dust. I hate them, looking in at me. Laughing, all of them. Those kids all laughing, their smiles outlined with grape juice.

It's dark. The cat has batted me under a cabinet. My shell is cracked all down one side, but they can't see me under this cabinet.

The vibration of the hand rubbing over the carpet warned me. And I can't run. A child's sweaty fingers, sticky with candy, clutches onto me. I feel like a goddamn fishing worm carried around all day in a baby's hot, sweaty hand, a worm floating in the death of his own slime. They're all looking at me, watching me try to wriggle away with no legs or arms. Naked, in the sweaty hand of
a child. "Take off the husk," he says, and he chuckles while he says it. With clumsy, fat fingers, the child shreds my skin. My skin peeled away, they all look at me. Sticky baby's fingers touching my insides, peeled open while they all gawk at me with their mouths open, dripping saliva from the silver wires on their teeth. I want to scream 'til I feel like I'm going to explode where my chest should be.

He has me now, naked in his hand, I feel his nose-snot breath: he's holding me to his nose and snorting like a cut pig who don't know if he should laugh or scream from just losing his balls. I feel his white, pointed nose, the skin stretched tight so the cartilage shines through. He tastes me. It's like I'm turning inside out, I've got to puke so bad. Mint-slimy saliva in his mouth, and I hear the belching echo from his chuckles. He's got me now.
My dad came in the back door. "Hello, Jowe," he said. My dad always does the "O" real long. Mother says that Joe is a calf when he gripes about stuff, and that's how my dad says "Joe," "Jowe," like a calf crying to his mom. Joe called Pal, his dog, and went upstairs to his room. My dad put his grip down and hung up his coat and overalls on the cellar stairs wall. He pinched my nose and tears came in my eyes. "How's momma's boy?" he said. He slapped my mother on the bottom. "Mac, you G. D. fool," she said, "Get out of here."

"What's Santa Claus bringing you for Christmas, Mick Michael?" he said. "A bunny," I told him. "A bunny? That's a fine goddamn thing for a boy your size." "He's only six years old," my mother said. "I'm sorry I can't talk to my own son. You done a fine job raising that one of yours, sitting in his bedroom reading those fairy tale books and talking to his goddamn dog all day."

My mother cried. I wanted to go upstairs, but my mother likes it if I watch her cry. My mother makes me touch the hole in the back of her head where they drilled for a tumor. "I had to sit there is a chair with my head shaved and they drilled with a drill into my head," she tells me. My mother has headaches from the drill.
Finally she turned off the stove and went into her room.

"What have you been up to?" my dad said. "Nothin," I said. "Danny has two bunnies. One's white and one's dark brown. My favorite one's dark brown." "You're too big a boy to be playing with bunnies," he said. My dad's hands are big. He does finger pull with Joe and makes Joe cry. His fingers are so think that he crushes Joe's finger. He picked at his nose with his little finger; he rolled it and flicked it on the rug. "So you think you want a bunny for Christmas do you?" "Danny has two," I said. He put on his glasses and read the paper.

"First snow," Obie shouted. "First snow." He put his head back and stuck out his tongue to catch the flakes. "First snow." Obie ran down the side of the mountain. He jumped over a log and dodged the gopher holes, running so fast that the wind made tears in his eyes. "First snow," he shouted. "First snow." Obie's uncle stood at the bottom of the hill, leaning against the big iron-rimmed wagon wheel, whittling a piece of white pine with his jack knife. Obie ran up to his uncle, "First snow," he said, out of breath. His uncle continued whittling. He shifted the chew in his lip and spit. "Well, boy, you better bring them goats off the hill don't you think." Obie's uncle smiled, not looking up,
still whittling.

Already the road was crowded with goats and the goatherds driving the flocks down the mountain for winter. Obie climbed the bank on the uphill side of the road and looked back up the mountain. Along the face of each of the three peaks which drained into the ravine, white streams of goats threaded down the rocky mountain paths.

"First snow. First snow." Single flocks trickling down the mountain sides joined others and these bigger streams flowed into the road leading to the village. "First snow." The bells in the village were ringing. "You going to winter there on the side of the road boy?" Obie's uncle said. Obie blushed and slid down the bank into the flow of wagons and goats and herdsmen. Obie's uncle winked and rubbed his grey, stubble beard with the back of his hand.

The bells were ringing. Everybody at mass bowed their head when the priest held up the chalice of blood. "My Jesus mercy," my mother said. The sisters said that we should say this to ourself. My mother says it loud in her dry, man's voice so people hear.

Consecration is the worst part of mass because you kneel so long, and my pants itched. Tweed pants my mother calls them. "A little penance won't hurt you," my mother said when I told her they itched. I don't
talk about the itching anymore.

We sit in the third pew. My dad sits by the aisle, but he is out on a turn today so I am by the aisle.

When I look back down the aisle, the pews are like rails. If the pews went across the street to behind the post office, they would come together like the rails. The rails go all the way over the mountains to my dad. When I put my ear to the rail, I can hear the ringing:

It's exciting when everybody gathers in the big log hall on winter nights to eat and talk and drink and play cards, but the first night is always most exciting. Many have not seen one another since spring when the flocks were driven to the high pastures, and there are always stories about the things that have happened over the summer.

Obie stood drinking a mug of hot cider watching his uncle who was seated at one of the tables made from split logs. His uncle was playing cards with some other men and listening to their stories: "They sure don't make things these days like they made 'em in the old country. I remember one time I was working in a logging camp up north. There was a thaw and we couldn't skid anything out for a couple days, then come a blizzard and the cut timber froze in so we had to use two teams of horses to get some of the logs loose. Well sir, there was one log froze so tight those horses strained on it for over an hour. Now I didn't
believe it myself 'til I saw it, but them horses had strained so hard that they stretched the chain right out into a steel bar. Not a link broke out of it, but it turned into a bar of steel you could hold out in front of you, stiff as this staff here. That's the way they made chains in the old country."

Obie's uncle took a drink of beer, and looked down at the table like he was digesting Old Oscar's story. Then he rocked back on the hind legs of his chair. He shifted the chew in his lip and rubbed his whiskers with the back of his hand. Obie knew that his uncle was about to begin a story so he pulled a chair up close. "Well sir, Oscar, I know for a fact they made things in the old days like you don't see any more. We had a clock in the parlor, when I was a lad, that was brought over from the old country. That clock run without ever losing a second for over a hundred years. Only one thing ever wore out on it: the shadow of the pendulum, swinging back and forth, wore a hole clean through the face." Everybody laughed and poked fun at Old Oscar. Obie's uncle smiled and winked at Obie.

My mother pulled my hair for turning around in mass.

My coat was wet from outside yesterday, and it is cold in mass. The wet cold comes in when most of the people leave before benediction. Danny's mom has a brown fur coat. She is young with long fingers. Danny put his
head on her shoulder, and it is soft and dark and her fingers are cold on my forehead like the nurse when I was in the hospital.

"Sit up you big baby," my mother pushed me away from her with her elbow. She whispered loud so that the people could hear. I felt big. My ears felt big and hot and the back of my neck felt everybody looking at me, and my mother knelt hard and straight when I looked at her to feel sorry for me.

The monstrance with the big white host in the middle was looking at me like it was a big white eye. I was afraid from thinking I hate God. I bowed my head so He could not see me, and I hit my chest with my fist, but I couldn't quit thinking I hate God, and He kept looking at me. My mother was looking at me to see if I bowed my head like her.

The double doors at the end of the hall flew open and wind and snow blew in. The witch stood in the open door. Blood was dripping from her teeth. She threw back her head and laughed: "Ha-ha-ha-ha," she cackled, and she looked around at the people through that big white eye in the middle of her head. Everyone in the hall stopped talking and turned to look at the witch. She walked to the center of the hall and struck the bell with the golden bell-clapper she had brought in with her.
"Ha-ha-ha-ha," she cackled. Everyone in the hall fell to his knees and bowed down to the witch. "We are your slaves," they moaned, and they tore at their hair and began beating themselves with whips. Obie was frightened. He could not hear the sounds the bell made, and he couldn't understand what was happening.

We went to the depot, and I thought we were going to pick up my dad. "Do you remember Sister Benelda?" my mother said. There is a picture when the sister was here before. My mother wore the sister's habit and sat in the big chair in the picture. "That's the only picture I've seen of the old girl with a smile on her face," my dad says. My mother has the habit picture stuck in the corner of the frame with her wedding picture.

My mother was cold standing in the wind and went back to the car, so I got to stand alone by the tracks. Snow was a white snake crawling over the ground between the rails, blowing from the east. "You stay home and do what your mother says," my dad tells me. "It's up to you to keep that old creature quiet." In winter the sound is clear. With my ear to the rail I can feel him whisker my face when he comes in from the cold:

It was Hulanka. His face is hewn from the weathered mountain cliffs. His hands are the gnarled
branches of the whistling vine which crushes the skulls of wolves and shelters the song bird in its limbs. His eyes are the wisdom of the pool into which all men from the beginning of time have looked and seen themselves reflected. "My little one who sees beyond the mountains, you are Sustumna, the savior of your people." The old chief spoke to Obie not with words but through the light of his eyes set deep in the furrows of his wrinkled face. "Take with you Babbo, the monkey, and Galu, the bear. The witch has no power over these. Cross the mountains to the sea, where you will meet the maiden. She will give you a boat."

The west-bound passenger train came in. Looking at the train going by, the ground moves the other way and I felt like I would throw up from watching. Standing still when the train comes in going backwards, and I want to get on and be going with it.

There were two of them in black. The one that was here before was old like my mother and kissed my mother's mouth.

"This is Sister Madeline."

The other sister was young. Her hand was cold from the wind when she shook my hand. The hat thing she was wearing was part blown off. Some hair showed. She saw that I was looking at her hair, and she pulled her
hand away and straightened the hat part.

"I'll carry your grip, sister," I told the young sister.

"'Grip' is it now, Michael?" said my sister aunt, and she smiled at my mother.

The young sister was holding my hand and started to get into the back seat with me. "Sister, you sit up in front with us," my mother said.

"Michael is going to become a priest."

"How wonderful. You must be so proud, Dode."
Her black veil hung over the seat. It felt like burnt tinfoil and smelled like the train. It was cold and made me think of breakfast in the dining car.

She smiled at Obie. "You will be hungry after your long journey. I have hot cocoa with marshmallows for you and your companions. But you must not stay long; the witch will be following you." The maiden's cabin was at the edge of the forest where the river empties into the sea. Obie and his friends went inside. They sat by the warm fire. Obie watched the maiden as she prepared their cocoa; her hands were slender like river reeds bending in the breeze. "That which you carry is a thing of greatest evil," she told Obie. "Those who hear the sound of the golden clapper striking a bell become the slaves of the person who strikes the bell. It must be taken to the top of the world, where it is always winter. Give it to the
man whose house is painted red and who has lights in
his window colored all the colors of the rainbow."

"Did you really receive your first communion,
Michael?"

"Boss Anderson won the prize for the best confes­
sion. But he talked in church after, and the sister took
it away." I told this to the young sister.

"The Anderson boy was five years older than any­
body else in the class. It is a wonder he took instruc­
tions at all. Both parents drink a good deal."

"You have such a cozy home here. I love the wood
stove burning in the kitchen and the snow mounded on the
window sills," the young sister said. She was sitting
by me.

"It's difficult to maintain a good Catholic home," my mother said.

"Can you really recite the mysteries of the rosary,
Michael?" said the sister aunt.

"Yes," I said. And I said the sorrowful and the
glorious. My mother helped me at the second Joyful mystery
and the fifth.

"You must be so proud, Dode."

"Recite the Angelous," my mother said.

I said the Angelous. And then I recited the prayer
to the archangel, Michael.
"Snares, Michael. Protection against the wickedness of snares of the devil, not flares of the devil," my mother corrected me.

"Can you tell us who the devil is, Michael?"

I was not sure. My mother looked at me, and I looked down at my cords and tried to get the spot of egg off.

"I'm not sure," I said.

"You know who the devil is, Michael. That's the one who makes you sin by putting evil thoughts in your mind," my mother reminded me.

"Like if we think we want to miss mass on Sunday," I said. The young sister smiled at me, and my sister aunt looked at my mother and they smiled.

"And what other evil thoughts does the devil put into your mind?" said my mother.

"Thinking about ladies," I said.

"And what must you do when you feel these evil thoughts coming into your mind?"

"Say a prayer to Joseph, Mary and Jesus so we think about God and don't think sin."

I looked at the young sister. She saw me looking at her fiddling with her sister ring and put her hands under her habit.

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My bed is a boat in the dark with my animals by me. The monkey's long arms go around my neck when he gives me a love. The bear is big by me like sitting in the car by my dad. I'll have a real bunny for Christmas, dark brown, a baby one that sleeps with me and his fur is cold and alive to touch him. My other bunny wasn't real but was a baby only as big as my hand. I kept him in my coat pocket and rubbed him on my cheek for a love. My mother tore his head off after mass when we got home that time. "Playing with dolls during the elevation of Christ's body," she said and slapped my face and cried. "God is punishing me for my pride," she said and she threw him in the stove.

The sheets smelled like outside because they were changed today for the sisters. I like to sleep in just my shorts with new sheets to feel them on me and pull the covers way up by my face. The waves were on my boat and my monkey is afraid and holds on my head. "Whew-whew" the wind blows on my boat.

"Hoist up the sail," Obie said to Galu. The bear climbed up the mast in the wind and rain. "It sure is scary out tonight," said Babbo, and he put his arms around Obie's neck. Obie and Galu smiled, but they don't tease Babbo for being afraid. "She's blowing a hurricane out," Galu said. The North Wind is the witch's cousin, and he
was trying to prevent Obie from reaching the North Pole. "Ha-ha-ha-ha," the witch's cackling laugh carried on the wind. "We'll weather this one all right," said Obie. He pulled Babbo, the monkey, close to him. And Galu, the big bear, snuggled up to Obie to keep him warm.

The cars in the yard hit together when the switch engines go "Din-din-din-din," through the frosty window. The lights at the yard are shore, far away in the storm.

The young sister in Joe's room turned on the light. Down the hall I can see her like she's standing on shore. "That's the lighthouse off the starboard bow," Galu shouted, and his words were carried away by the wind. "Come on in out of the cold," shouted Obie. The bear's fur was soaked with spray.

Joe will sleep in my bed because the sisters are in his room, and he teases me and hurts the monkey, but the bear is not afraid. Joe gets bad grades at school. "That bastard of yours," my dad told my mother. "If he'd come to work for me, I'd make a man of him."

The sister's habit was off in the light in Joe's room. Her hair was dark brown, short like when my mother had holes in her head from the drill, but the sister did not have a grey headache. My mother was undressed through her door that time; I didn't want to see. "Touch it," I felt my mother say through the crack in her door, like
touching where the headache is. She was grey hair; I was afraid that I saw her, and I wished that I could not remember. I would not want to touch her oldness, but she would not go away. My mother was like Mrs. Avery when we said the rosary with those ladies at Mrs. Avery's bedroom. Right by her face I kneeled looking at the purple-yellow bruise over her eye. She chewed her tongue with no teeth and I tasted her yellow breath in my mouth when I said the rosary. "Kiss her," my mother said.

I did not want to look and have sin at the young sister. She was in the light and waves were splashing on her feet. She hung up Joe's shirt, and held it on the hanger by her all undressed; the shirt arms were around her neck giving her a love. She looked in Joe's drawer and snapped his shorts and laughed a little. She held his shorts on her chest standing in the light looking down the hall at me. My mother was talking to my sister aunt downstairs. The waves were on the boat and the wind blowing. "Careful, Obie," said Galu. "We'll splinter like an apple crate on those rocks if this wind catches us wrong." "Ha-ha-ha-ha," they could hear the witch's cackling in the howling of the wind.

Under the covers, I wanted to tell the young sister to come out of the storm in my boat. It's dry and warm in the new sheets. She stepped out of the light in Joe's room into the shadow-dark hall, wearing the dark all
around her. My mother and my sister aunt were saying the rosary downstairs. I thought if it was sin to look at the sister. I didn't want to say the prayer to Joseph, Mary and Jesus, but I closed my eyes. She put her habit in front of her and turned the light out.

"Mac, you look as young as you did the first time I met you."

"I've worked hard all my life," said my dad. "I'll be 62 in July."

"He certainly doesn't look it does he, Sister Madeline?"

"Where are your people from, Sister?" my dad said to the young sister.

"Minneapolis," she said. My dad liked talking to the young sister.

"Joe lived in Minneapolis with Aunt Dolores before he came to live with us," I said. The young sister turned red and looked at her plate. Joe stopped eating, holding his fork, shaking, and looked up with his eyes like when my dad kicks Pal.

"Bill Murphy was up town drunk," my dad said. "He was sitting down to a T-bone steak on Christmas Eve. There's a boy from a good Catholic home lost his religion."

"I'm afraid of what is going to happen to Joe and
Michael when they leave home," my mother said.

"I don't think you have to worry about them," said my sister aunt.

"It's too damned easy," my dad said. "There's no sacrifice anymore."

"Some of the younger nuns are talking about doing away with the habits," my sister aunt said.

"They are?" said my mother. "Next they'll be wanting to get married."

"I see you're still wearing your habit," my dad said to the young sister. She was looking at my dad all during dinner, and she turned red when he said that.

"We had two leave the order this past year," said my sister aunt.

"There was a nun born and raised right here in this town. She dropped out. Thirty-eight-years-old. Said she was mental-strained. You're not mental-strained are you?" my dad smiled at the young sister.

"And fewer and fewer priests and nuns taking orders each year."

"They had to get a priest from Ireland to replace Father Cleary when he died in Thompson Falls."

"Well, we'll have one more priest in Michael won't we?" my sister aunt said and smiled at my mother.

"I'm just glad I'm getting old and won't have to
Santa Claus comes in the morning. I have to take a nap before midnight mass, then in the morning, Santa Claus comes. Santa Claus is not God. My mother was angry when I asked. Santa Claus is like God because he knows what you do. He doesn't know if you're thinking a sin, though. Santa Claus is not mean like God who sees think sin. My mother tells her sin. You can hear her loud whisper at confession.

I heard Joe go downtown. "You better be home in time for mass with your family or you can just stay downtown. Your friends mean more to you than your family, it seems," my mother said out the door.

The sheets were not fresh from Joe sleeping with me last night. The bed was wrinkled and not tucked in. The passenger train was pulling out of the yard. The diesels hummed, then, "Clun-clun-clun-clun," they started as it pulled out.

The waves were cold. The bed came apart when I pulled the covers up and it was cold on my feet. My bear and my monkey were cold. "Din-din-din-din-din," the engines idled and the waves splashed on my boat. Obie and his companions heard a crunching sound, and suddenly, the boat jerked to a stop. "We've hit the ice," said Galu. "We'll
have to walk the rest of the way," Obie said. The wind was cold. It bit into their skin like a whip. The sound of the witch's laugh was all around them in the wind, and they felt the evil of her eye on the back of their necks. Snow blowing along the ground twisted into ugly faces: faces with hooked noses, long sharp teeth, white hair moving like a thousand white snakes, and each of the faces in the snow had a big white eye in the middle.

The young sister was saying the rosary in Joe's room. I didn't know if she was there, and she was crying in the dark. I could see the shape of her when she moved and her fingers were cold and squeezing on the beads. She didn't say the rosary but just twisted the beads and tried to tie her hands up. She twisted the beads around and around her fingers and the rosary broke. "Ay," she made a tiny sharp noise. It frightened me when I heard her in the dark. My bear fell out and I was afraid to get out of the covers and get him. Cold came in on my feet from the messed covers. Her fingers reached at me and I held my monkey, his arms round my neck crying.

"Oh, Mac, don't be such a killjoy. He's just a little boy."

"Here's one for you, Sister Madeline."

"Thank you, Michael," she smiled down at the present
I gave her.

"It's too bad you can't be with your family, sister, on Christmas," my dad said, and the young sister looked at him.

"Joe, here's a big one for you." I passed out presents so I could have all mine together and open the one I knew was a bunny last.

"Don't you like it, Joe?"
"Ya, it's all right."
"Well if you don't like it, take it back. It's too expensive to keep if you won't wear it."
"It's OK," Joe said. His orange shirt that I bought him.

"I bought it, Joe."
"Ya, thank you."
"You didn't need to be spending money on me like this. I have a perfectly good suit," my dad said.
"It's all worn out, Mac."
"She can't spend enough money on me for clothes it seems. Well, thank you. I have a perfectly good suit. How much did you pay for this? Thank you, it's a fine suit."

"How do you like your present, Sister?"
"Yes, very much, thank you, Michael."
"I'm sorry you got only one present," I told her.
"Let me see that book when you open it, Michael," my mother told me. "Are you familiar with this series, Sister? The sisters last summer said it was the best, Catholic, young-people's Bible series available."

"We'll have to read this later, Michael," said my sister aunt.

"Thanks for the gun, Joe," I said.

"Ya."

It wasn't a bunny.

"Stand up and try it on, Michael," my mother said. Tweed like my pants. I felt hot and my throat hurt like I will cry so I didn't talk but just nodded my head. My mother jerked me straightening the coat on me, and I wanted to kick her and run away.

"Go get your tweed pants and we'll try them on with this coat."

I threw up at breakfast.

"Poor little boy on Christmas day," my mother said to me. She rubbed her hand on my forehead through my hair. Her finger was swollen blue from her ring. "Arthritis," she calls her fingers. "I'll have to have my ring cut off," she said one time.

I wanted to go up to my room. My mother said for me to go to her room so I could be downstairs by everybody.
"Feeling tough are ya, Mick Michael?" my dad said. The young sister was looking at my dad.

My mother's white bedspread has bumps on it like little hills. I walked over the bedspread with my fingers: it is a hot desert and burns my feet walking on the sand. My dad sleeps in the other bed. "I just can't sleep with you, Mac. I have hot flashes all night, you snore so loudly," my mother told my dad. My dad was angry like when he touches her bottom and kisser when she says she's busy. Then he slaps her bottom hard and laughs going away.

"Poor, sick, little boy on Christmas Day," my mother said. "Is there anything I can get you?" She poked my eye when she went to rub her hand on my forehead. She got up and got a thermometer and put it in my mouth and sat down. "Sometimes I think God will punish me for loving you too much," she said with her hand on my head. She made me hang my head over the bed and put nose drops in my nose. It feels like standing on my head at the lake and water gets in my nose and burns inside my head in back.

The sun shining in the window made the room hot. I did my fingers on the bedspread, walking over the hills my legs made slipping in loose sand. Dust hung in the
light coming through the window, not moving. There were no sounds of trains in the yard. There was no color except my dad's plaid shirt over the back of the white chair. White walls and white curtains, even the white bedspread my mother made my dad have on his bed, and he gets dirt on it from his hands. The river outside the window was frozen, hot white snow.

My sister aunt came in and read me a Bible story from the new book. She looked like my mother in the picture with the habit.

"Feeling pretty tough are you, Mick Michael?" my dad said in the door. I smelled he had a nip from his bottle. "Hope you're feeling better." He went out to see Mr. O'Clair's for a little taste of the Christmas cheer. When Scotty McLeod was over, they put on the bagpipes record and were dancing the highland fling. They broke the picture off the wall and trampled dirt all over the rug. I wanted to go to Mr. O'Clair's with my dad.

The young sister came in with my monkey. She closed the curtains, dark, and read me the story about Noah. My monkey was holding on my neck and listening to the passenger train leave the yard. The young sister sat by the bed with a lamp on and read about the flood and cold waves. She was talking with her hands, reading the
book. She looked at me over the book, reading, but not looking at the words in the book. She looked at me with her hands and read with the book closed on her lap. She touched my forehead, cool like the nurse, and quit reading, touching my head, looking at me.

The Bible book fell on the floor and she pulled back her head. She picked up the book to read. I thought of when she undressed.

"Sister Madeline," my mother called the young sister.

She looked at me.

"Goodby," I told her, and she went into the kitchen.

"Clun-clun-clun-clun," the diesel started up in the yard. I put my head on the steel headboard of my mom's bed. It was cool. "Clang-clang-clang-clang," the cars on the eastbound freight jerked as the train pulled out of the yard. I listened to the sounds on the cold headboard. "Whew-whew," the wind was blowing. Galu walked on ahead. With each step they sank up to their knees in the snow. There was nothing but snow; mounds of ice rose and fell like sand dunes, and snow blown by the wind drifted over and around these, forming new mounds of ice. Obie held the golden clapper in his hand. He could feel the cold of it even through his thick mitten. It was heavy and he was so tired that he could
hardly walk, but he knew he had to go on. "Don't be afraid," he told Babbo, and the monkey wrapped his arms tightly around Obie's neck.
"Christ, I think anybody won't ever forget that Clayton game." Tom blushes after Eddie's comment, looks down at his beer and picks at the label on the bottle. "Ya," Tom says and nods his head.

"The Clayton Game, junior year," comes up in the conversation every Tuesday. Tom scored four touchdowns that game and became a hometown football hero.

"Ya," Tom fumbles with his beer bottle. He looks up at Eddie, "Eddie, what in hell was the name of that Indian kid? I never saw a guy with a broken nose like what you gave him. Goddamn, the line was good that night. I doubt if there was ever that many players hauled off the field in one high school game."

"You backfield guys too, if you was getting 500 yards, either," Eddie responds.

"Shit, my grandmother could run a football if the line was making holes like you guys were plowing out that night," says Tom. He puts a cigarette in his mouth and rummages through the pockets of his jacket for a match.

Tom's varsity jacket is faded, frayed at the cuffs and is too small around the waist. He wears it every
Tuesday night. Tuesdays Tom and Eddie play basketball with the town team and come here after practice to get drunk.


"A hell of a fine lineman."

"I wonder what ever happened to Vick Nolden."

"Jesus, Old Vick Nolden."

"Don't you remember Vick Nolden, Arthur?" Tom asks me again.

Tom invented Vick Nolden in here one Tuesday night: a crucial block was unaccounted for, that towering defensive end in the red Clayton jersey stood between Tom and the goal line, and Tom invented Vick Nolden to cut him down like a pile of bricks.

"Wasn't it you intercepted that long pass, Arthur?"

I stare blankly at Tom in response to his question.

"You was one hell of a fine guard."

"Fastest man on the team."

I don't even bother to remind them anymore that I never played football.

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The string of red licorice was wrapped around Joey's bare waist and the end of the string extended from his belly button to his mouth. He was wearing a tight,
dirty-yellow swimming suit which blended with his skin so that he looked completely naked. Sucking on the string of licorice, Joey looked like a fetus sucking the juices of his own umbilical cord into his mouth.

I ran up behind him and snapped the strands of licorice which encircled his waist. Joey cried, and I pushed him down so that he landed on his stomach and face in the gravel. Then I kicked him in the ribs with my cowboy boot.

Tom Berkevitch was on me in a second. Tom was strong and sure of himself in a fight. I let myself go limp, and Tom lay me onto the ground like a new bride onto the wedding bed. I cried, made my nose bleed and said I was sorry and wouldn't ever hurt anybody again.

Tom sat on my face after he had gotten me to the ground. That's what you did in grade school fights in those days. Tom had been running through the hose, and his swimming suit was stretched out so that his pink little penis showed through the leg hole. The sight of his penis, and the cold of his wet swimming suit pressed to my face made me sick. I bit him. He screamed until he passed out.

I crawled out from under Tom. Joey Niedler was chewing his licorice again. His stomach and the end of his nose were skinned. The fresh blood mixed with dust
formed muddy clots which looked like an exotic fungus. I pushed him down and kicked him in the side. His ribs popped like the gristy joint of a ham bone being broken. I threw Joey's licorice into a mud puddle and trampled it in the mud. Then I went into Tom's yard, washed the dirt off my legs and arms with the hose and went home.

Joey Niedler was run over and killed by a snow plow when he was seven, but Tom still carries the scar from that little incident in front of the candy store.

"How is it you don't join us Tuesday nights for a bit of B-ball, Arthur?" Tom asks. I just look at him and don't say anything.

"Keeps ya in shape, hell."

"There's nothing like the feeling of being in good shape."

"I really feel sorry for you, Arthur," Tom said to me one time when we were in high school. "You could probably be a really great athlete, but you don't care about anything." Tom went to practice after school. He took Joanne out for a coke that night, dropped her off at her house at 9:30 and kissed her goodnight under the porch light. Tom had to be home in bed by 10:00 so that he wouldn't break training. I was watching from my car parked across the street. I got Joanne drunk; she even
smoked a cigarette that night. We used Tom's varsity jacket for a blanket and there's still a faded-black spot on the back of Tom's jacket from the blood stain.

"How's your wife, Eddie?" I ask.

"She putten out for you, Eddie?"

"I come home with that big check if I worked 7-day weeks. The old bitch give me a piece of ass," Eddie bellows.

"She gave you a piece of ass, did she Eddie?"
Tom laughs. Eddie snorts and bellows: "Wawah." Eddie is happy that he has made his friends laugh, even if he doesn't understand the joke.

"Give us a round here, Ruth, you piece of ass you," Eddie hollers.

Tom and Eddie watch Ruth opening the bottles, exposing the tops of her nylons as she bends over. They watch her cross the floor to our table.

Tom puts his arm around her ass and winks up at her. Eddie belches and laughs, "Hoar-hoar." "You need a escort home after closing?" Tom asks.

"What's Joanne going to say?" says Ruth, putting the beer on the table. She takes Tom's money and twists away, short-changing him 75 cents. Tom wants to mention the money, but then he is embarrassed for having thought of it.
"I bet that Ruth's a good fuck," Eddie observes.
"I'd fuck her all right."
"I feel sorry for someone like that Ruth Giggs," Tom said, when we were in high school. "She doesn't know anything about life, the way most people live, I mean. She's been married twice. Dropped out of school in the eighth grade. Never been to a high school dance."
"You'd like to fuck her though, Tom, wouldn't you?" I asked him. "She knows more about that than you'll ever know." He became indignant: "I said I was sorry for her, Arthur. You can't take anything seriously, can you?"

"Hey, Ruth. How about me and you if you're after work," Eddie bellows. The couple in the corner gets up and leaves. They are just out of high school and find Eddie offensive.

"Hoar-hoar," Eddie laughs.

"I did it, Miss Bromley," I said, and I started crying in front of the whole class.

"You didn't do it did you, Arthur?" she asked. With tears streaming across my pink cheeks, I stared into her eyes. "Stay in for recess," she said and dismissed the rest of the class with a wave of her hand. She ran through the hall to the faculty restroom.

I knew she had in mind for me to play the part of
Teddy Roosevelt in her annual pageant. She felt I needed this outside interest to divert my thoughts from my home life.

I looked up at the portrait which was pinned onto the pulldown map of the Spanish American War. The Spanish American War was Miss Bromley's life: five minutes before morning recess, the map would come down. This marked the beginning of history class, and for the rest of the day, through geography, music, reading, recreation, art, phonetics, and civics classes, Miss Bromley would guide us through the world of the Rough Riders.

Miss Bromley entered the room. "Arthur, you know I had intended to choose you for the part of Teddy Roosevelt . . ." She had to break off here. She put her hand on mine, which were folded on top of my desk.

She tried to look at me. I turned my whole body hot. I could feel her hand getting burned from just touching my skin. I looked into her eyes. My pupils dilated: the deep blue of my irises clouded over, and I began to cry. She broke down.

Her makeup began to streak. She had an acne problem, even though she was well over thirty years old, and she wore too much makeup. Dabbing at her face, first with her handkerchief, then with her shirt sleeve, she made a complete mess of her face. The sight of that
muddy, pulpy face convulsing with sobs made me sick. I put my head down on my desk.

She ran out of the room again, and big, dumb Eddie Hoofster sneaked in. He tried to find out what was going on. I looked at him like he wasn't there. He got nervous and began sniffing and belching. I extended my arm and pointed at his face. My index finger was two inches from the bridge of Eddie's nose. He stared, cross-eyed, at the end of my finger, and he lost control of his voice. His hollow monotone rose and fell like there was a child playing with the volume-control knob.

I heard Miss Bromley coming out of the faculty room.

"Not my mother," I moaned.

Eddie became even more nervous. It didn't show on his face, but he sniffed so hard that I could taste the glob in the back of his throat. "You trouble kid whadda mean who tomorrow," he bellowed.

"No, please," I moaned, and Miss Bromley came through the door.

Eddie froze. He sniffed and swallowed. "Forgetting when 'til I hide my ruler." His voice crescendoed to a volume which frightened Miss Bromley. He sniffed and walked out the door.

"It was Eddie," she said, and she smiled like a two-year-old looking at the sucker in front of her face and forgetting about her skinned knee.
I looked up at what I had drawn. Eddie Hoofster couldn't draw a stick-man's house, and the picture hanging in the front of the room looked exactly like Miss Bromley. I had even included a sprinkling of pimples on each of her scurvy breasts. No other third grader but me could have drawn it.

I couldn't understand how she thought Eddie Hoofster had drawn the picture. I looked at her and started to cry. She knew by this that Eddie was guilty. I put my head on my desk, and she stroked my hair.

I refused the part of Teddy Roosevelt. She cried and got out the box of chocolates she kept in the bottom drawer of her desk. She emptied the box onto her desk for me. I swept the pile of chocolates into the waste basket.

"Hey, Ruth baby, why don't you join us? There's no one left in the place but us?"

"I've gotta stock the bar."

Tom and Eddie sip their beer and watch Ruth moving behind the bar. It is as quiet as half time during the homecoming game, as though Ruth were the coach pacing back and forth in front of them.

"Eddie," she says, stopping Eddie on his way to the john. "If you can't relax that little thing of yours,
you go outside to piss. I'm not cleaning up the walls anymore if you boys can't get it down long enough to take a piss."

"Fuck you," Eddie retorts.

"Better stick with your fat wife, Eddie. I'm afraid you'd fall out of the saddle with me."

Tom watches Ruth bending over, rinsing out glasses. I can understand why Eddie watches Ruth: Eddie's wife is a pig. But Tom has much nicer stuff waiting for him at home.

Tuesday nights while Tom is out playing basketball with his cronies, I drop in on Joanne, and I listen to her complain about what a poor show Tom puts on in bed. That's what's so amusing about Tom's mooning over Ruth: if he ever talked her into going to bed with him, he would never be able to do anything with that mutilated penis of his.

"Do you feed him Friskies?" Tom asked. I looked at him and said nothing. His upper lip was sweating. He had a hynie haircut. His cropped head looked like the head of a penis, all red and sunburned with the cowlick in the middle. The thought of touching his hair made me want to wash my hands.

"He likes Friskies. He likes Friskies, and he sure likes ice cream cones." He smiled, and he started to
laugh. Then he looked at the dirty mongrel wagging his ass end, trying to get out of the pen to touch him. Tom remembered that the dog wasn't his anymore, that he would have to look at the dog through the mesh of the pen from now on, and he quit smiling.


"His name isn't Rexy," I said. "His name is Gunk."

"Oh, he knows his name is Rexy."

"His name is Gunk."

"Gunk isn't a name of a dog," he said.

"Gunk's his name. He's my dog you know. I just let you take care of him while he was a puppy."

"Sit, Rexy," he said, and the stupid dog sat right in a pile of his own shit. "Roll over, Rexy," and he rolled in it. "See, he knows he's Rexy. That's how he does tricks, when you say, Rexy."

"Gunk."

"He probably won't even come home when you call him that." I didn't answer, so he rephrased it: "Rexy, you'll have to call him if you expect he's going to come when you call him home."

"He can stay in the pen. I won't have to call him home."

Tom was surprised at my stupidity. "Oh you have
to let him out of that little tiny pen so he can get some exercise." "He'll probably get sick if you just keep him in that little pen."

I stared blankly at Tom.

"You have to let him out of the pen. A dog gets sick in a little pen all the time."

I looked away from Tom's empty face to the dog. The crop-haired mutt had the same puzzled expression as his former master. He saw that I was looking at him, and he crouched his belly to the ground and pushed himself backward into the corner through the shit that covered the pen. He reminded me of when you shoot a rat in the guts and it pushes itself through the dirt with its guts trailing along behind so that he can get into his hole and slowly bleed to death instead of just giving up and dying right where he is. It made me sick, and I turned away from the dog.

"Probably you'll want to take him to the lake swimming or something, and what if he gets away."

"I wouldn't take him to the lake, Tom. I wouldn't be seen anywhere with that dog."

"Gall, though, he's a awful smart dog."

"He's not smart. He's an ugly dog."

"Oh well, he's a pretty smart dog."

Tom was beginning to understand my argument. He noticed that I hadn't cleaned the pen since I had put the
dog into it; he noticed the shit in the dog's water and the shit caked onto the dog's coat. His argument became less forceful.

"You know what I'm going to do with that dog, Tom?"

He didn't answer. His shoulders quivered in hopeful anticipation.

"You know what I'm going to do with him? Go ahead, guess."

"Heck, I don't know." He kicked at the dust with his tennis shoes. He knew I would give him the dog to keep forever, and he was too bashful to say so.

"Do you think I might give you the dog, Tom?"

"Oh, heck, I don't know," he said, almost bursting. "Well, I'm not."

He didn't hear what I said.

"I'm going to shoot him with this shotgun."

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Tom orders another round.

"It's nice and cold. It might help if you hold it between your legs," Ruth says handing Tom a beer.

"What would you like between your legs?" Tom asks, rubbing his hand across Ruth's ass.

"Sure would like to fuck her," Eddie says as Ruth walks back to the bar. He sniffs and quietly belches. He
and Tom simultaneously take a drink of beer.

"Why don't you?" I ask.

"Oh sure."

"I'll bet you guys each ten bucks I can fuck her right here tonight. And you two can stand in line for seconds."

"Oh come on," Tom says. The thought of having to fuck with an audience is making Tom nervous.

"You guys don't know how to go about fucking a girl like Ruth." I bet them each ten bucks. "Hey, come here, Ruth." Ruth moves over to the pool table where Eddie and I are standing. I grab her and throw her onto the top of the table so that her knees hang just over the edge.

"Wowah," Eddie bellows, already excited. He grabs her arms and holds them down. Ruth tries to kick me. I crack her across the shins with the butt end of a pool cue.

"Wowah," Eddie bellows, and Tom flicks off the lights.

Tom moves toward the door. He wants out, but he is afraid to leave. When I pull Ruth's panties off, Tom moves in closer and stares at her naked crotch. The revolving Budweiser clock casts a red light on her legs. The red shadow touches her knee and moves up the thigh of her right leg then down the thigh to her left knee.
"Wowah," Eddie bellows.

Ruth is pissed about the whole thing. I look into her eyes. Her eyes are soft and blue and deep in the shadowy-red light of the Budweiser clock. She is waiting. She shivers a little when I touch my hand on her knee. Tom is across the table facing me; he stares at Ruth on the pool table.

"Wowah," Eddie's voice breaks as I climb onto Ruth, and he steps around behind me, getting in line. Eddie frightens Ruth, and she becomes tense. I look into her eyes. She closes her eyes and moves under me. She tries to pull me into her.

Ruth kisses my neck and face. She moves under me and claws at my ass pulling me into her. Eddie starts to hiccup when I put it in. Tom is playing with two pool balls in the corner pocket.

"Oh, no," Ruth moans like a high school virgin telling herself that it really is love.

I pull out and stand over her, laughing. Tears cloud my eyes I laugh so hard. "Here, Eddie, you're next. She's not even fucked yet, just a little heated up." Ruth tries to turn her head away and hide her crying. I grap her chin and force her to look at me, and I laugh. I pull up my pants and have a sip of beer all the time looking at Ruth and laughing.
She's crying and trying to hide her face with her arm. Her legs are still spraddled out, and the red Budweiser light moves across her half-fucked crotch. It makes me sick to look at it. I hit her across the shins with the pool cue. She pulls her legs together and quits crying.

A chair falls over in the corner by the door. Tom is already outside, and Eddie is sneaking out behind him. "Get back in here." They turn and edge in out of the night. Tom is holding the door half open. "Where in hell do you think you're going? You owe me twenty bucks.

Tom counts out ten dollars, looking across the bar at me with contempt. Even Eddie throws his money onto the table like he has somehow been cheated and I'm the one to blame. "I'm going to help myself to another beer, Ruth. There's twenty bucks on the table by the door. That should pay for it."
MILO'S RELICS

My father said to me every day of his life, Milo, he said, Milo, I am working hard even before the sun comes up in the morning, and maybe our house is not as fine as that of Peter Zenella, but I am building for you a business. My poor father, three times each day I pray on the knee bones of St. Antina a prayer of thanksgiving that my father did not live to witness the day that business should fall to such a state.

Milo, how do you dare to talk of a business? Marcus, in his new, white coat stood in the middle of Milo's shop with a box full of bones bleached white as Emperial parchment at his feet. Milo, every time I am in your shop I listen to the threats of creditors who come one after the other asking for the money you owe.

So you have come to take the money you say I owe you? Is that why you have brought me warm broth and a smile on this rainy day, Marcus? You forget, perhaps, who set you up in the business at which you are now making such a handsome living.

I don't ask for what you owe me, Milo. But, after a great deal of thought, I have decided that the best thing I can do for you . . .
You are a man with a short memory, Marcus.

"Send a man into the world with a fish, and he will eat that day. Teach a man to fish, and he will know how to make a living," as the saying goes. So I am done with giving you money, Milo.

Milo stood at the window watching the rain. The stream running off his roof was so heavy that he could not see through it to the world outside. Six years old my father was, his milk teeth still firm in his gums, when he got his job as a grave-digger's apprentice, Milo began, talking into the rain.

I am done with giving you money, Milo.

It was indeed not a good time for a child to apprentice in the grave-digging craft. The plague having been within the city walls for some five weeks, there were corpses stockpiled for a month before they could be buried, and this in the hottest part of the summer.

I mean what I say, Milo. Even though you refuse to listen.

He would talk to me of the old days, Milo, my boy, he would say while sitting at the table as Momma prepared the evening meal. Milo, my boy, many could not keep food in their stomach, the smell of the corpses was so strong.

Drink your broth, Milo. You are letting the broth get cold with your talking, and I rushed to your shop through the wet streets so that you might have warm broth
to drink.

My father could tell a story like no other man you have heard. Ninety times he told me the story about how, accidentally, a city elder was buried with two heads in the box and no arms. Arms and legs fell off the body like the limbs of a chicken which has been boiled in a pot for three days. Ninety times my father told the story, and each time he made it interesting to me like I was hearing it for the first time.

This is market day, and people will be coming around your shop. I have here a box of bones, Milo. You will run a sale today on saints devoured by lions. Put up a big sign: "50% OFF THE USUAL PRICE ON THE BONES OF SAINTS DEVORED BY LIONS. EASY TERMS."

I won't sell your bones in my shop, Marcus.

Have you any red paint? Red is your best salesman. Milo, I will make more money for you in three days time than you have made over the past four months.

I will not sell the bones of a sheep as those of a martyred saint, Marcus. So just get them out of my shop.

You are starving to death because of your pride, Milo. When a man buys from me, perhaps he is a little skeptical about the merchandise I sell. The man says, in his mind that the relic looks more like a sheep bone
than the bone of a saint, but he will buy from me nevertheless because I sell so cheaply that he cannot afford to pass up such a bargain.

Do you see there on my wall, Marcus, the chastity belt of St. Agatha? It required two powerful horses pulling in opposite directions to open that. It is forged of the finest steel. St. Agatha stood in the middle of the arena stripped of her clothing, crowds of heathens cheered as the steel garment was torn from the saint. She was ravaged by three black gladiators, then a donkey and finally a bear. All the while she was praying to God for her virginity. I have seen imitations of the St. Agatha chastity belt which could be torn apart by a man with his bare hands. Her sacrifice is made into a joke by those imitations which are displayed in monastery reliquaries.

I am probably not the most honorable man, Milo, but I do not have to crawl to my friends begging them to feed me.

You call me a beggar? It has come to that has it, Marcus? You sound like Bastinus, that half-wit miller.

Yes, Milo, I saw Bastinus. He told me that you insulted him and kicked him out of your shop.

Do not talk to me about Bastinus. He came into my shop all covered with flour. The wife of a governor
will not care to handle a relic covered with a miller's four dust.

He told me he would give you no more flour. What will you do now, Milo?

Pay me, he says. I gave him the Gossillio relic for what he said I owe him. It is worth more bread than a fat friar could eat in three years time. He threw it in my face. That son of a slave whore. The only reason I bothered to patronize his broken-down mill was because I had thought of him as a friend: I do not find his flour filled with worms and rodent droppings to my taste. I told him so to his face too, you may be sure of that.

If only you would sell these bones I have brought you.

Good money my father was earning as a mortician. When he was 15 years old, my father got a position with the finest mortuary firm in our city. He married my mother, the daughter of the man who owned the business, and half the business was offered my father as a wedding present. No, my father said no that, and he began collecting relics.

Christianity is not just a passing thing, Milo, my father would say to me. Christians will one day pay a good price for these relics. Many nights my mother had to reboil the bones my father brought home so that we would
have soup on the table. Sell some of your relics, my momma would tell my father. Save them, Momma, he would say. In twenty years time people will pay plenty for these. Give our son a meal tonight of fresh vegetables and mutton, and he will go into the world with flesh on his skeleton. Give him reboiled soup and save these relics, and he will have a business when he becomes a man and never have to work hard like me.

But this is the whole point of what I am telling you. I am not a wealthy man, Milo, but I am not starving like you are. I have a house and two servants. I can buy meat when I want it.

This is the whole trouble today. These times are too easy. The people have fallen away from the basic values. I remember a time when I was seven years old. My father had been gone for two weeks on business. Momma had not eaten for three days in order that there would be something to feed me. I walked into the kitchen after looking all morning for food. Momma was lying on the floor. She was vomiting, and she had nothing in her shrunken stomach to vomit. Lying on her side, her whole body would close on itself like a hinge each time she tried to throw up the emptiness. When she saw that I was watching her, she began to cry. She lay on the floor with her eyes closed, shivering, and tears streaming over
her dirtied face. I thought that she was dying. I tried
to pick her up, and she began wretching while I was
lifting her from the floor. I dropped her and started
to scream. The whole world went black before my eyes.
All I could hear was my screaming, crashing about my
head. At that moment my father entered: It's all right,
Milo. Stop screaming, Milo. Everything is all right.

You have a bill collector coming to visit you,
Milo. Marcus stood at the door poised to greet the
visitor. Ah, hello, Joseph. And how is the woodcutting
business in this rain?

Joseph nodded to Marcus. He turned to Milo, rested
the head of his ax on the floor and leaned on the handle.
Rain, dripping from the shirt stretched across his huge
back, formed a puddle at his feet.

Ah, Joseph, if I were not a man with an even temper,
I would be very angry with you. Joseph stared passively
at Milo, like a bull listening to the buzzing of a fly.
He wiped his nose with the back of his hand, turned his
face away from Milo's talking and stared out of the window
at the rain. I have had no firewood for three weeks,
Milo continued. A wealthy relic buyer does not like to
come into a cold shop to do business in the middle of
winter you know, Joseph.

When you gonna pay up, Milo?
Will you listen to this man, Marcus? Pay up, he says. Did I not give you a relic only last week, Joseph, worth more than all the wood in your tiny forest? Here, then, if you will rob a man, take this and bring me some wood.

I have good teeth of my own, Milo.

St. Isis, on the relic of your tortured and bleeding gums, I pray forgiveness for this man.

I'm going to turn your name in to the collectors if you don't pay up.

You blasphemy the saints whenever you are in my shop, Joseph, so I know that you are a heathen. But will you have a man thrown into prison because finances are bad at the moment?

Get a job. You tell me the same story every time I'm in here. You do nothing all day but sit in your shop praying and looking at bones. My donkey died, Milo. Did you know that my donkey died? I have to carry wood on my back until I can afford to buy another donkey. You carry wood for me, Milo, then I will listen to your sad story.

You know what you are, Joseph? You are a philistine. You are a man, Joseph, who would walk up to Seneca while he was writing one of his famous plays and you would say to his face: Seneca, you would say, Seneca, get a job.
What do you do, Seneca? What good are your plays? I can't eat them. You are a shallow man, Joseph. It is no use for me to talk to a man like you.

I don't know this Seneca fellow, but if he is like you, Milo, I tell him to get a job.

Marcus was standing a little behind Joseph with his hands tucked into his warm coat. At this point, he stepped in front of Joseph, assumed a smile and began moving his arms in great, sweeping gestures: But Joseph, he said, do you not see this box of bones here? Milo is holding a sale. He will have the money to pay you in three days time. Why not give him a week or two to raise the money? You will despise yourself, I am sure, for having a man like Milo thrown into prison because you are now caught up in a fit of anger.

I would advise you, Marcus, to find better company than a man destined for debtor's prison. Joseph shouldered his ax and went out into the rain.

Why have you insulted him, Milo?

He is a heathen and a philistine. He worships the ass which carries his wood.

You are in real trouble now.

The altar stone in the chapel of St. Paul of Alexandria, that was donated by my father. Did you know that Marcus? My father knelt on the left side of the altar, in the place of honor, during the consecration of
the church. Momma was sick and stayed home that day, so I walked alone behind my father and his friends to the chapel. My head was light from fasting, and I was dizzy from excitement as I trotted along behind and tried to understand what was said by the men. My father's voice boomed like cascading boulders as he strided toward the chapel, telling jokes and laughing with his friends. We arrived late and all eyes turned toward my father: his arms swinging and his legs stretching out with each step, he looked like Caesar himself as he walked through the chapel to take his place at the front. My father, as most honored, was first to receive communion. Even before the monks, he strode up to the altar. Going back to his place after receiving, my father's eyes met mine, he smiled, then he winked, as if to say, this is Christianity, Milo, and our relic business is part of it.

At that moment a monk entered Milo's shop. He removed his cape, shook off the rain and looked around for a place to hang it.

Frate Alberto, Good day to you.

Hello, Marcus. The monk extended his hand to Marcus, then to Milo. He greeted each with enthusiasm, as though he were meeting the Pope for the first time.

Is your visit, Frate Alberto, one of business or of pleasure?
Milo, to do business with you is always a pleasure. Except, of course, that your prices are so high that a man with the meager funds of a monastery so small as ours can afford only to browse and admire.

Yes, Frate Alberto, you are a great one to browse.

I admit, Milo, that the items you display are a pleasure to behold. But I must remember that it is God's money I have here in my purse, and I must answer to Our Father in Heaven for the way it is spent.

And does the Father In Heaven take notice of the fat belly on which your purse is bouncing?

I see, Milo, that you have not yet been able to get rid of the St. Milina.

Frate Alberto, the piece is so mangled from your constant handling that no one else shows any interest in it.

It is much less dusty than the other items that clutter your shelves, to be sure.

Twenty five I told you last time. Twenty. Take it for twenty, Frate Alberto. You will carry the Milina away in fragments under your fingernails anyway. I will give it away for twenty so that it may remain in one piece.

Gino said that he could give me the same article for two.

Gino?
Gino, I told him, I would no doubt have to pay Milo four for the St. Milina, but my friendship with Milo cannot be overlooked. A friendship such as ours weighs more heavily than gold.

Gino? Why Gino gets his relics from the floor of his father-in-law's butcher shop.

Gino, I said to him, Milo loves to make his prices so high because he thinks that if I buy the relic from him, I will no longer come into his shop to visit him.

You would commit the sacrilege of celebrating the mass over an altar-stone filled with the sweepings of the Milentte Butcher Shop? I pray for your soul, Prate Alberto.

I must constantly say to myself, Prate Alberto, you must keep in mind the good of the monastery. Do I buy expensive whitewash to paint our chapel or do I decide that God knows that we have only a limited amount of money to buy our whitewash?

Whitewash? What is this talk of whitewash?

It is of course true that these are the relics of a Christian martyr and, therefore, rightfully belong to God and should be in His chapel. Prate Alberto turned his eyes to heaven: But Milo has his relics priced so high that Caesar himself could not afford them. You, God, will understand the difficulty I have in dealing with one
such as Milo. Hopefully, God, You will forgive Milo for being the miser that he is with his relics. Amen.

Whitewash. You talk about whitewash when buying the sacred relics.

I would consider paying five. It will mean taking bread from the mouths of wandering orphans, but I will give you five for the Milina.

Go buy from Gino. But it is a high price you pay for spoiled mutton.

Wait, Frate Alberto. Marcus took the arm of the monk and led him to the box of bones. Have you seen here the box of relics which Milo is selling at a special liquidation sale? Relics of saints ravaged by lions at a special low price. And clean; you will notice that they are all bones polished white as the sacred vestments.

Those are sheep bones he is trying to sell you, Frate Alberto. You may take them as a gift to go with what you buy from Gino.

Marcus, our friend, Milo has a most unconventional business manner, has he not: insulting his customers, thinking that they will enjoy this kind of treatment and pay his high prices.

It is a sacrilege for you to wear the habit of a monk, buying false relics from Gino. May St. Jessella pray for the intercession of your soul.
Good day to you, Marcus. The monk bowed and blessed Marcus then Milo.

I refuse the blessing of a servant of Satan, Milo shouted after Frate Alberto, who was already out of the door.

You could have gotten seven out of him had you not insulted him, Milo. Joseph the woodcutter might be quiet about what you owe him if you were to put part of the money from the St. Milina into his hand.

The monks would have me give the relics away. You have never prepared relics, Marcus, or you would think differently. Many nights as a child I lay awake unable to sleep because of the stench in our kitchen. My momma's skin became ashen from working over the pots. Remember your momma, my father would say to me. Remember relics do not come cheap. My momma caught leprosy from the corpse of St. Aliosa. She spent the last years of her life in the leper colony from preparing relics, and the monks would have me give the relics away.

Milo, you talk like I am a man who thinks only about money, but that is not true. The way I do business, it is possible for even a poor shepherd to wear the relic of a saint around his neck. Pay when you have the rest of the money, I tell him, and he goes away with his own relic. I, in my own humble way, am spreading the faith to all.
The most humble along with those most high may wear the relics of the saints and exercise their Christian faith.

But when a man bought from me a wooden peg thinking that it was the one used to put out the eyes of St. Alirino, and his business failed because I sold him an imitation, what kind of a man am I then, Marcus?

My uncle, who was a tax-collector, came all the way from Rome to visit us. My father and my uncle sat at the table drinking wine. More wine, my father would shout to my momma. His voice was like an explosion coming out of all the walls at once. Twice Momma had to go out of the house to fetch more wine for my father and his honored guest. I was lying in bed, but I was much too excited to sleep. My momma stood at the counter stripping a corpse. The boiling pots were pouring steam into the room so that I felt as though I were looking into a dream as I watched from my bed. You could make a good easy living as a tax-collector, my uncle said to my father. My father took a huge drink of wine, leaned back in his chair and looked at my uncle. The reply my father made to my uncle I shall never forget: Relics are the foundation of Christian religion, my father said. And my name will be carved into the foundation of what will one day be the greatest religion in the world.

A man entered Milo's shop carrying the bag of a
scribe over his shoulder. He removed the bag and set it at his feet.

Ah, Cassio, you are the very man I have been wanting to see, Milo said to the newcomer. Cassio was bent over, rummaging in his bag. If you could give me a few more days, Milo continued, I will have enough to pay not only what rent I owe you, but I could pay ahead.

Cassio stood up with a scroll in her hand. He opened the scroll and read: "I've found someone to rent this building. You and your bones are to be out of here by Tuesday or you'll be jailed."

The night of my tenth birthday is one I will never forget. Today Milo, my father said to me, today you will come with me to gather relics. There had been a huge circus that day. Over two hundred people were slaughtered. Among these were fourteen Christian martyrs. Never have I seen such a sight. The pit outside our city was nearly filled. It was the first time I had ever seen an elephant. There were three of them split open so that I could crawl about inside as though in a cave.

Finding saints was indeed a task, at night. Gather your relics at night, Milo, my father would always say; a corpse will decay in the heat of the day. I still do not know how my father knew which were the saints. The activity of the circus had left the faces shredded. Rats
had already eaten portions of many of the bodies. These are the arms of St. Velesso, Milo, my father would say. And these the legs of St. Marellsa: to me the two legs did not even look like they belonged to the same person, yet my father could tell. Digging among fifty bodies, stacked higher than my father could reach, he would identify two saints. One body was decapitated and yet he knew it to be St. Tirena.

For hours, until I could hardly walk, I carried limbs and torsos up the side of the pit and piled them into our donkey cart. We returned home with the sun coming up and roused my momma to start boiling the relics and prepare our breakfast. Sweaty and smeared with the blood and dust of the arena, with the hair of martyrs and animals clinging to my neck and back, I was the proudest boy in the Empire as I sat down with my father to drink a wine. Milo, my boy, he said to me. Milo, my boy, I have set for you a path to follow. I have worked to build a relic business, and I can see by the way you worked last night that I was right in doing this for my son. You can imagine the effect on a ten-year-old boy of these words coming from a man like my father.