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How to Be a Disciple

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Sure, there’s the obvious—Jesus H. Christ, as Binky says, his thumb between a wrench and a hard place. But then consider: the lilies, the fields, all that lies beyond Catoctin’s rural idylls. See the world! Aim high! Be all you can be, and grab the hand of a newfound leader: fierce or maternal, the vague image of dark-skinned purpose in traditional clothes. Then remember. It’s the twenty-first century; it’s post-post-Enlightenment. We’ve moved beyond guys in robes. Here’s Binky, your beautiful brother-in-law untouched by the Age of Reason. He’s out in that old shed next to his house, the hood propped high on his Grand National. When you see him reach in to adjust something with fingers so delicate and gentle, you just know this is what it means for someone to worship. What it means for someone to follow. Stay close to that idea. Stay close. You’ll need it now—now—

Now. No more than a week after Binky plays—Jesus H. Christ—under the hood of that car, no more than a day after Jay, your husband, takes off on another job, you’ll go up to Binky’s house and find the others—Pete, Carl, and some new little guy everyone keeps calling “Junior.” It’s Friday, they’re all off from the base, and Junior keeps getting tossed into Binky’s above-ground pool right next to the spot you’ve marked out as your own: third lawn chair from the steps. Smack center in the brightest patch of sun.

“Told your old man I’d look after you,” Binky handed you a magazine when you showed up, and you’re still looking for something, so you sit there, flipping through its pages, a collection of colored ads and articles about men. Even though keep a page open too long—splash!—Junior gets it soaked, and you’re stuck with a sopping ad for “Naturalizer” or a water-soaked “Uma Thurman for Lancôme,” the pages almost tearing as you move on.
You’d like to believe in shoes. You once had this friend, a big girl, and she said the best thing about shoes was that they always made her feel beautiful when she went shopping. Didn’t matter what she ate—before, during, after. She was always the same size—Mmmmm-hmmmmm—and she always knew she’d feel better when she came back from the store.

You find an ad for some gold-colored strappy sandals with heels. There are others thrown in on the sides—pink sneakers with flowers, slides made from sparkling blue jelly-like substance—and the drops from Junior’s serial immersions hit these pictures in the margins like they’re target practice. You keep your eyes on the center, because you’ve decided that you will focus. Strappy shoes. Strappy shoes. Strappy shoes. Just before Junior hits the next time, you feel warned. You pull the picture to your chest. Then release.

Those shoes might hurt to wear—there are at least seven different straps. You know this because you count the straps, then stop, pulling back from the details, letting your eyes go out of focus in the way you used to hold them as a child each week in church (the preacher’s form and words a soft haze that made you feel good). And then the page turns completely wet, as if lightning and thunder have struck simultaneously. As if: no thunder. Because there was no sound this time—no yells, no contact of one or even four bodies hitting the water—and Junior’s not to blame.

Instead, there’s only Binky, standing right behind your chair.

In a minute, you’ll note all the separate details—the sopping wet t-shirt like a towel around his neck, the cutoffs he wears in place of his swimming trunks. You might think of that shirt being held out and wrung right over your seat, but all you see now is hair: great water-soaked strands of it hanging down from his head, its golden brown mass dark and streaming, the water hitting you full in the face as you close the magazine and look up.

“Binky!” Damp in your own cutoffs, you writhe around, the wooden pool deck too hot to walk on without shoes. You see everything and nothing: a confused haze of color and light—the pink geraniums Binky grows in clay pots stacked around the edges of the deck; flashes of light from the chlorinated tank; the yellow hand Binky’s bolted to
the wooden rail, its spring-loaded arm sending a mechanical, wind-fueled wave to the locals who drive past the house. "Binky! You—!"
You pull the magazine, warm and wet, to your chest. "Binky!" And then emerge, the sun drying the traces of water that remain on your face. The sun lighting up Binky from behind, his head blocking its orb but not hiding the fact that brightness and light lie behind him—him, that water-glistening spot of stillness in your vision.

"I just heard from Bill."

"Bill?" The magazine cuts in as you pull your hair back from your eyes.

Then Binky moves one hand out to the back of your chair. Edged by grease, his fingernails meet you at eye level. Bill. Bill. You remember: Binky's portable phone, its customary spot by the pool, all the rings you blocked out this last hour. Bill.

"Looks like"—as Binky moves, he reveals the full light of the sun—"we got another ticket now." His hands, just their tips, both sink into his pockets, their weight pulling the band just below his six-pack tight waist. As he shifts he blocks up the sun once more. In the shadow that hides his face, you think you see him smile. "Wanna go to Richmond?"

As you slide your feet into your sandals by the pool, Carl, that mean little fat-faced bastard, who always looks like he'd be nicer than he is, calls out, "Shit, Binky! Don't tell me she's coming, too."

His light eyes fixed unblinking when you laugh. So you don't turn back for your magazine, its pages spread out on the lawn chair.

You're down to the house next, gathering possessions without thought—an act as useless as if you hadn't gathered anything at all. Later, you'll think of t-shirts, freshly washed, stacked in your bottom drawer. Later, you'll remember the money, a tight wad you keep folded up underneath your jeans. As for now, you only know this: that if given the choice—go right now or don't go at all—you would take it, you would jump at it.

The intensity with which you believe this surprises you. Since moving "back" to Jay's "home," you've seen more races than you care to count, perched in the corner of the shed where Binky's hooked up an old TV. You'd started out fine—calling your driver, asking Jay questions; him saying what you needed was to go
sometime. When Earnhardt died this February, his car demolished in the final lap at Daytona, you even found yourself wiping tears from the edges of your eyes because you’d never seen men look so stunned. You’d sent down some black cloth that Binky had wrapped around the yellow arm on the deck railing, its automated wave the stuff of mourning until summer wore the fabric away. But then, mid-July, you’d lost interest. Jay had got different after moving you here, especially with that stuff at the base, and you found yourself staying away, even when the others made prank calls to the house. This Deb? Carl’s voice in falsetto. This here’s Doris—your old friend from the base. Meaning Watertown, Fort Drum—the place you’d met Jay almost two years earlier. Him now giggling like a fool in the back. You know . . . . Been thinkin’ about you, hon. In that special way. Mmm-hmmm. A click always sealing their world off from your own. Now, suddenly, no reason, it seems as though your heart would break if you couldn’t make it down to Richmond with the rest.

Twenty minutes after you left the lawn chair by the pool, Binky’s car idles outside your house. You run out the front door, testing the lock as you pull it closed, and you see Carl’s taken the front seat next to Binky. They’ll let you join, but they won’t make it easy—the hump seat for latecomers, a pinch on the back of your left thigh as you squeeze in between Pete and Junior.

“Pete!” Slap that bastard as you laugh. “That hurt!” He’ll look innocent, even you can see that, but oh my God don’t even think of looking at Junior, that presumptuous who does he think he is don’t care how many times he was thrown in the pool today.

“Got enough room back there?” Binky doesn’t even turn around.

“Know who to leave if we don’t.” Carl, his face tilted back just enough, shows one cocked eyebrow, but he won’t look directly at you. He doesn’t laugh until you hit him three times—“Carl! You’re mean, Carl!” Push your hair back from your eyes as you lean into your place, fold your arms across your chest. “Carl!”

And then just as that fat-faced bastard’s lip finally curls up, Binky, his eyes still straight ahead, hands back something folded half over.
"Deb"—you don’t reach till the second time—"Deb!" When he shouts, you take the magazine like a baton. Its pages feel warm and damp. Light, inconsequential, it rests easy on your lap.

Binky turns the car around, stirring dust up as he heads out the driveway.

“You like shoes?” Junior, pressed against his door, gives you space now, as Binky heads south on 270. Carl’s got his window down almost all the way, and you can see Binky’s pulled his hair back from his face.

“They’re okay.” You flip the magazine over, pressing the ad from the back against your legs—you kept your cutoffs on—and giving Junior an eyeful with the cover. Some blond actress from the fall lineup smiles big, her cleavage popping out of a bright red dress. You turn toward Pete. “Think Rudd has a chance?” His right shoulder presses steady against the top of your left arm, but he’s got both hands on his knees.

“What’s that?”

“I said”—even back here, Carl’s window makes it hard to talk—“who do you think has a chance?” Because as soon as you’d said Rudd’s name, you’d regretted it.

“Guess there are lots of people, you could say.” Pete’s never been one for much talk. “You know, a short track like that—”

“I like Rudd.” Junior’s got his knees turned toward you now. “I like”—you slump down in your seat.

“I can’t hear nothing with that window.” You close your eyes, ducking Junior and Pete’s chatter with your slouch. Then you open one eye, the left one, just a slit, and watch Binky’s hair for at least half an hour. The wind keeps playing with the bits that are teased out from on top, wiry wisps that dance and play on the breeze.

“Rusty’s team—”

“But if Rudd hadn’t—”

miracles. Until you wake up, hours later, and it’s almost dark.

So here’s Binky, here’s you—everyone else is asleep—and the early evening light catches the same pieces of hair you’d been watching when you drifted off.

“We almost there?” You lean up to the front, stretching out your spine. Your face between the seats, you find Binky’s smell, warm and familiar.

“Wouldn’t know from the traffic.” Binky’s right. You’ve seen the crowds on TV. Tomorrow, this road will be packed. “Help me look for this place.” The grounds now come up on the left. Binky drives slowly, but the car seems to slide on the pavement.

“You stayed here before?”

“Every year. Some guy, rents his yard. You pay, you pitch a tent. Right across from the track. It’s just these trees—” Binky slams on the brakes as a man stumbles out of a ditch and on to the road.

“That the Canadian?” Carl, awake now, laughs at the man who lurches back into the ditch. Just beyond, on the bank, two more men stand between the trees. Caps on their heads, beer cans clutched tight, they point at their friend in the ditch. Even in the dusk, you can see how their eyes follow Binky’s car, their beer cans at their waists until Binky finds the dirt driveway just beyond, and Carl, rolling down his window, lifts a hand in salute. “How ya doin’, ya crazy bastards,” Carl calls out beneath his breath.

Once over the ditch, Binky stops the car, runs his hand through the top of his hair, then turns on the headlights. There’s a house straight ahead. Boards coming through the white paint. Pillowcases tacked up in the front windows. An old man—“that old coot”—keeping guard on his steps. He walks up to Binky’s window, takes the money. Then—Binky’s headlights, that steady spotlight—you see something move at the curtains. No one else catches it, and you gasp.

The men on the edge of the ditch hold their beer cans toward Carl, their arms frozen in salute.

Binky eases the car ahead.

Whoever said twelve was a magic number?

As it is, there are five in your group. Six more when you add the Canadian, his two friends by the ditch, and three more they had back
at their campground. Two more when you count Mr. Drew and Mrs. Jimmie, Junior's friends, this old couple he met two years ago at Dover.

And if—seventy-three—there are more tents on that old coot's yard than you've ever seen in one spot, Binky's headlights picking out the path that winds through tarpaulin and bodies, and then fires starting up here and there, then one is the number of Luxury Line Campers. Parked in the middle, brought there by Mr. Drew and Mrs. Jimmie, the sole spot of civilization in this place. Perfumed liquid hand soap in the bathroom, which you use when Mrs. Jimmie insists; the truck pulled out next to the camper so its back can accommodate supper.

But three: Binky keeps coming over, looking for Carl and Pete, while four, you're just helping Mrs. Jimmie with the food she's setting out. "Macaroni, potato . . . bean salad . . . rolls. Potato, macaroni, bean salad, rolls." Because—two—both those bags of potato chips she's got stacked at the end keep falling down if the containers aren't in just the right order. Don't know why Binky—he's supposed to be setting things up at the site—can't get his hands on Carl because, two, here comes that bastard yet again, his beery breath warm as you take the twisty off a package of hot dog rolls, a perfect dozen.

"Whatcha gonna eat, Deb?" Carl points at the number on the package, one of his fingers sawed off to the knuckle, lost years ago at Fort Detrick. That base, Uncle Sam's gift of productivity, the best employer in the area Jay said when he moved you down to Catoctin. He'd come back, good ol' boy finished up from the service, happy to be there—"One nation, civilian jobs for all"—till some bastard, calling it "ethics investigation," said he'd caught Jay stealing. Stupid stuff like tools and tires, an old lawnmower nobody had used. So that now he was driving truck. "I'm still looking for the rat," Jay had said two nights ago, late. A few hours before taking off early for his job. "Still looking," Binky echoed, having helped his brother back home. Moving Jay off his shoulder and on to an easy chair. Then laughing—"Gonna get—him—some rodent." And making as if he were stepping on something with his boot.

Carl's gone both times before you can say anything. Because twenty-four: those Canadians, all settled in since yesterday at this time, have used every hour since arriving to get drunk. They're
handing beers out—free drinks for all fools—their campsite set up somewhere just behind that house. Which speaking of here comes, one, that solitary old coot, winding his way through the mess he’s created, pants drooping off his flat ass, feet slow and shuffling in the dirt. He’s telling people they can’t have open fires, as Junior informs you between, four, helping Mr. Drew set up lawn chairs. And even though Mrs. Jimmie’s petro grill gets a nod, the old coot first stands there, jaw working, as if he can’t figure out where the fire is coming from.

By nine o’clock—and you can count that number too—you’ve had your share, you’re on your third, and even Carl seems funny when he tells you there won’t be enough room for you in his tent tonight. Everyone’s finally filled up their plates, and Pete’s pulled out his Rusty Wallace car, number two (count that number too). You keep staring at its frame, miniature but visible, even from where you sit—on a blanket, on the ground, Binky lying flat on his back, pulling on your shoelace over and again, so that you keep swatting his arm. He’s already grabbed your wrist so that, two, you’ve lost food off your fork both times on the blanket below. Seems he can’t stop touching pieces of you tonight. And he’s just started pulling on the fringed edge of your cutoffs—one, two, three tugs—when Junior walks over, looking straight on at you, kicking dirt on the blanket as he crouches down just beyond its edge.

“Mrs. Jimmie’s got—.” You’ve seen him talking to her like they’ve got plans for you, so now you jump up, two, swatting the backs of both legs with a shriek, and then getting “God, Deb” from Binky, his finger wrenched free from the belt loop he must’ve just found. When you push past Carl, his bulk snapping back firm, you see nothing. What a circle of light you’d been living in. Zero. The dark pressing deep and then something flashing out bright in the backs of your eyes because, four, Mr. Drew’s electric lanterns had illuminated your world.

And one, you still walk because you know you’ll find your way. You know, one, you’ll keep straight on that road, one, even if you trip as you do at least twice, your knees hitting the dirt the second time. Even if, one, you only hear what lies beyond that path, one,
how chaos can be quiet on top but still threatening below, until someone stumbles out and almost runs straight into you, one, and you, one, keep on walking until the trees break, and there’s pavement, the road that brought you here the very one.

And you expect to see the speedway, whether dark or lit up, how the hell could you, one, know what you, one, would find. But you don’t not even in your wildest dreams imagine what will open up before your eyes: two little Sambos, as Binky calls them (and more), pickaninnies, babes, little coons. They’ve crawled out now from that house, where you’d seen their little hands, and the whites of one’s eyes as Binky’s headlights caught him looking out from his place behind that curtain. And now they’ve made a playground of that street—one on each side shooting sticks across the pavement. And you can see that they mean for those sticks to be cars, for what else could those sticks be when those boys live across there always just behind those trees from the track. But suffer the little fools even you know that no one can win that way. And it’s not a track if you’re just going back and forth that way even if they try bless their hearts yes they try to start out at the same time, the sticks shot out now across the road, and then one or the other sometimes jumping out from the ditch shaking himself in a way that spells victory but fully silent so that it’s only their limbs, loose, that pull you in—their dances, the way that they manage to signal the now and then manage to signal again and again.

And I have told you what this is about, from the start I have told you. And there is no silent car pulling up on that street because it’s not about a car or an accident or someone stepping in at the last minute to prevent such an accident. If it had been I would have told you, I would have sent you a sign, a signal. If it would be, if it could be, I would have said, I would have told you.

But even if, instead, you try to add all those numbers in your head—the seventy-three, the three, the four, the two, and all the other twos and all the ones and don’t forget nine o’clock and the hours that have passed since then, you’ll discover that one hundred forty-four, the number of the chosen, is harder than hard to reach. And you’ll forget what you’re doing as you stand there—watching. Just watching and not counting all the new numbers: how many times the little one is
the one who hops out in the road. And how many inches his stick car falls short every time, even the times he finds his brother now signaling his victory. You'll forget why you're running everything through in your mind—not just to find order, but looking for the order, the way, the truth.

And even if I had told you what to expect, told you listen, told you wait right there in my still, small voice, I still think you would have jumped.

The gunshot. Not too loud but definite, sounding off somewhere back behind that house.

But those kids—like they've heard it before or heard nothing—still continue their mute pantomime through it all. The barking, the trampling, all the running, all the moving down knocking over; you can hear somewhere back, somewhere back behind everything.

They only pause when Binky, who's now found you; Binky, with his hair around his shoulders; Binky, his shoulders coming out full from under the cutaway of his tank top; Binky, your beautiful brother-in-law, who has taught you how to follow who will teach you even more; Binky, he moves up just one step from beyond you, and he speaks and the boys stop and listen.

"Better watch out, or you both'll be next." And holds a can up, his only beer, where the boys can see it clear.

They run. Dropping their sticks in the road, the one closest to the grounds slows down so that they both run by Binky together. As if it takes two—two to push by, two to break through. Binky, making a motion at them, making as if to grab them; Binky only fuels their race, their flight.

"Little Coons," Binky says to you as they make it to the steps of their house. "Showed up last year when that old guy got a nigger girlfriend." He laughs as he places the can, still half full, on the ground by the side of the road. "Shoulda seen last year. Carl and I pulled a trick on the both of them with some beer cans." He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Little shiners must still remember."

And have I told you what remains? That after you learn, there are tasks? That there always are tasks that attend one who follows? As it is, all that you have now is this: the walk back to your site, Binky one step in front of you. There are lights turned on everywhere now: flashlights found, emergency flares pulled out from trunks, and people on edge, excited.
And as Binky walks by, they'll reach out. A tip of the hat, a nod as if they know him. And you: just follow. Because you know he's prepared—a place for you. Because this now is it, this is all that remains. Because he went out to find you.

Back near your site, the camper sits dark, shut off.

"They've got Junior in there," Binky nods at it, walks eight feet over to the tents. "Little rat." Binky stops then and looks at you. As if he's got something he wants you to take from those words.

And you. You don't ask where the others are. You don't ask why only one tent remains, the other knocked down. Or maybe never set up. You don't ask when that fire got built—or that thing that you guess was a fire till sometime not so long ago—still smoldering but kicked out. Extinguished like someone had walked straight through the center.

When Binky stoops down to go in, pulling the flap back, saying, "You might want to get some sleep." And then looking, just looking at you. You'll just nod, you'll just smile, as you tell him to go in with a wave of your hand.

And get back, did I tell you to test those car doors? (Carl left his side unlocked.) Did I tell you to crawl in? To shake the dirt off your feet before you close and lock that door and check the other one now from inside? Did I tell you to squeeze into the back? To curl up? Hug your knees? When you look out through the window you'll keep watch: you can see Binky's tent. Even as you pull that magazine, wrinkled and the closest thing to warm, right up to your chest and hold on. Even as you fall asleep, but first catch the smell (it's dog shit on your shoes), the only thing that reminds you where you are as you wake up throughout the night.