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A Christian Boy and a Proud Man of Color

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At nine years old, he is the youngest of a divorced woman's five children. Their suburb is strangely content with itself and its illusions. It takes five minutes to pull out of their driveway because of the traffic. The house sits on a widened thoroughfare with no sidewalks. The lawns, immaculately trimmed, teem with people fashioned out of polyurethane—elves, Polish peasants, Catholic virgins—who always smile and never get fat. They stand patiently, showered by sprinklers and sprayed with enough pesticides to poison a small Third World country.

A small Third World country; that's the family's house. Enormous, exaggerated, grotesquely ostentatious; decadently, maybe antagonistically, more lavish than the neighbors. His mother is an immigrant from Latin America and believes that if she doesn't do everything the Yankees do five times better than they do it, she'll be ridiculed as a failure. And so with imaginary money she clutters an oversized yard with adamant birdbaths, plaster statues of Roman gods, an artificial well made of shining granite, flagstones hewn into asymmetrical shapes, and glossy patio furniture made of blinding plastics.

Everybody's violence here is invisible. They don't speak about it. They don't tolerate it. They don't allow it. But it happens. A few times a week, he is followed after school by a gang of boys. His tormentors are sons of rich doctors and reputable parents whose names pepper the newspaper. The pack trails behind him until the edge of a chain-linked fence; the place where he must walk through an alley behind a plaza of small stores and a slanted row of parking spaces, in order to make his way back home. He has learned not to embarrass himself by running or calling for help; he knows how long to struggle against them until it is only a matter of accepting defeat. Violence requires a balance that develops out of concentration and practice. Not to fight back is disgraceful. But to keep fighting back when there is no hope is
Lopez
degradation; it only challenges them to prove their strength by being
crueler. Once he stops throwing punches and curls up, trying to hide
his face and his neck, they beat him until they are out of breath. And
then in the silence, there is only glum, percussive breathing, and a
group of boys looking at one another without speaking. It will not be
discussed.

Their hate is invisible too. Even when it's scrawled in the black ink
of magic markers, spelling the names of strange races across his locker.
Even when they trace it in the bright white dust of the teachers' chalk,
on the blackboard during study hall. They are not particular about what
they call him. It doesn't matter what exactly he is or whether this or
that name describes anything that could offend him with any accuracy;
their insults are entertainment. And everyone wants them to be
entertained. The world is happy when these children are happy. They
are always right. He is always wrong. He must be provoking them, his
French teacher tells him, or they would have no other reason to pick on
him. The best course of action is not to draw attention to himself
anymore; these unfortunate things happen to every child. Everyone
must go through awkward stages in order to learn how to fit in. Soon,
she promises him, he'll find his place and this will pass.

He is an embarrassment to everyone, with his swollen eyes and
strange bruises; he has interminable migraines, nervous tics, stomach
problems, and endless excuses to stay at home. His room is a mess, his
mother shouts at him, and it is right that he should be trapped inside it
so long. This is all his fault. He watches the fireworks on the Fourth of
July from a bed in the city hospital, waiting for his abdominal swelling
to recede. If he can't fight back, his mother scolds him, then he
deserves every beating, every humiliation, every lost moment of youth.
This is the way of the world, she tells him, and he will never be loved if
he cannot show them that he has enough pride to defend himself.

Something marks him. He does not know what it is. Nobody hates
his sisters, who chat peacefully in the pizzeria across from their school,
surrounded by friends and admirers. The autumn is already brisk on the
day of his sister's homecoming dance. Her date arrives with neat bangs
that dangle handsomely over his forehead, parted in the middle. He
recognizes the outlines of the beau's face and his arctic blue eyes. His
sister's escort is the older brother of a boy who tortures him on the
school bus every day. He watches her laugh without worries as she
steps into the car. Nobody says anything.

ii.

"Jesus loves you," the nun tells him. "There are evil people in the
world, who do Satan's work, and never suffer their due punishment in
this life. But in the next life, when judgment falls on all of us, their lots
will match their deeds."

He pictures a Hell full of teachers and rich people and doctors and
counselors and bus drivers, burning in oceans of boiling oil, their limbs
torn apart by Leviathans with jagged teeth. He imagines them turning
to one another, their smug faces disfigured, saying, "look at my
innocent face! What have I done wrong? Why me?"

He asks the nun if it is wrong to fantasize about these things. He
reads the words of Amos, the shepherd driven out by a king and hated
by noblemen. He admits that he wishes he could be a prophet. He
wishes he could brandish the threat of Judgment Day against everyone
who has laid hands on him and gone without punishment.

The sister tells him in her soft voice that if he were perfect, he
would feel no hate. But nobody is perfect. "Take all your rage, and give
it to God as a sacrifice," she tells him. She gives him Paul to read, and
Paul tells him that love is the fulfillment of the law. *Omn nonom pleitoma
agapē. Love exceeds all rules, love is greater than any injury, love will set
all things right. He must love his oppressors too, even if they refuse to
love him back, or else their hatred will imprison him.

He comes to church too often. He is enrolled in the public high
school and not in the Catholic academy like his brother. He apologizes
to the priest for pestering him and the nuns, but he doesn't feel safe in
school. If only his family had the money he would have gone to
parochial school too. But the older brother was older and more
promising. These decisions had to be made. His mother is almost never
home. When she is home, she busies herself with dinner guests who
hate him. Inside it always smells of potpourri, detergent and aerosol, so
he goes outdoors and sleeps under the trees in the nearby park.
Nobody notices that he is gone. He is not accounted for in the park.
This gives him his first taste of freedom. But there he feels
encroached by the dark chill of the waterfall's mist, the whistling of
owls, and the crawling headlights of the patrol cars. All the world tastes like poison and plastic, even in nature; nothing is real. He comes to the rectory for purely guiltless motives; merely to read at the small wooden table on the second floor, listening to the nuns speak about Central America and liberation theology. There he feels inside his body. His breaths are full. He feels awake and doesn’t want to die.

“We like having you here,” a sister tells him, “so we can practice our Spanish; we learned it in Central America, where we went and saw the horrors that our government does.”

One day an aging Jesuit father lays his arm around his shoulder and tells him, “you have suffered. You have been wronged. But remember the Lord sees everything. Forgive everything and let God worry about settling all the scores.”

Each time he reads the Gospels, and he reaches the part where Jesus hangs on the cross and nobody brings him down, he cries like poison and plastic, even in nature; nothing is real. He comes to America and liberation theology. There he feels inside his body. His rectory for purely guiltless motives; merely to read at the small wooden table on the second floor, listening to the nuns speak about Central America and liberation theology. There he feels inside his body. His breaths are full. He feels awake and doesn’t want to die.

“If the pleasure makes you forgive and love the world,” the Jesuit tells him, “then yes, it’s fine.” When he was a young man, the gray-haired father says, he felt the same things, and it was good for him.

“My parents were Polish,” the Jesuit confides one afternoon. “People abused them and called them names, but in the house of the Lord, I too found a safe harbor.” And then another afternoon, at last, he tells the young man, “I am full of sorrow for the racism that brings so much suffering into the world. It is an abomination in the eyes of the Lord.”

“It is wicked,” the young man says. “But I will forgive it. I have no other power over it.”

He returns to the same town after twelve years away. His mother died many years ago. His brother and sisters are all gone. He has journeyed already through self-hatred, through a strident radicalism, and finally to an equilibrium inside himself. “A proud man of color,” he describes himself, when asked. He has worked out with weights for 10 years. Wearing black boots with thick heels, to match his curly black hair and his dark eyes, he looms untouchable. Racists see his bronzed and barrel-chested grandeur and shrink. Most people who know him now think of him as quiet, a little mysterious, and intense. But when he comes back to this town, he is no longer recognized by anyone. Cloaked in anonymity, he goes back to his old school. On a wall hang the pictures of every year’s senior class. Each picture contains a few hundred college-bound adolescents, crowding together on a slope of bleachers. There are eleven new pictures in silver frames between his graduating class and the last in the line. He goes to see his old self.

There he was, smiling nervously, with a bushy head of hair and crooked glasses that threw back the light of the camera. A thin, well-adjusted boy, he sat innocuously in the row of other eighteen-year-olds, just on the eve of his escape from the place where he knew so much hatred and anger. The photograph makes it all invisible. Nobody saw it. Nobody will remember. Everyone who did those horrible things has become someone else and drifted beyond the reach of grievances.

He has come back for graduate school. It will be cheaper if he gets his degree while he lives rent-free in his grandmother’s attic. It was not his purpose to relive uglier times when he had no muscles to offer a third choice beside forgiving and dying. The purpose was to become someone brilliant, to string three letters at the end of his foreign-sounding name. But being back in town makes him long for the quiet comforts of that wooden table on the second floor of the rectory, where he wept and philosophized with the priests and nuns. His old comforters have long since been cast out of the church for ideological reasons. Some, he has heard, like the kind Polish Jesuit, defected to other faiths or went to other parishes where their Leftist theology could be tolerated without scandal. Maybe the rest died. Even without them around to listen to him, though, he longs for the safe rage of their dusty library full of ancient books. He wants to return to the primal moment of becoming intellectual.

The graduate school is twenty minutes away from the old cathedral and seven blocks from his alma mater. The highest towers of the university’s pharmacy school jut in brown concrete above the treetops just visible from the parking lot behind the high school gymnasium.
When the college football team plays night games the stadium lights outshine the small searchlight fixed on the high school’s campanile. This small distance between the two schools, though, makes an enormous difference. In the seminar rooms of the graduate school, nobody likes tears or religion. Scholars mock such things. Professors ridicule personal experience and denounce the sheepish comforts of ritual. His classmates take the beautiful passages that uplifted him in his youth and grind them through theories that he doesn’t recognize. A peculiar personal ritual.

He finds himself strolling through the dim stacks of the research library close to closing time, searching for books to solve his new spiritual crisis. In an obscure section he stumbles on Arrogance of Faith, a monograph that seeks to prove that Christianity is from its beginning racist. According to the eminent author of this study, Christianity places the white man above the black man, justifies colonial rule, and rationalizes genocide. As the librarian’s soft voice announces the last call at the circulation desk, he ruminates: What else is there to do when you are powerless, but to forgive? If I went into my anger boldly without Christ to calm me down, would any of these scholars and thinkers be willing to listen to my rage?

At every turn in graduate school liberals speak eagerly to him about race. They speak with full authority about what it means. They decide when it is a problem and when it has been solved, like a riddle or a knot unraveling, he decides to speak of other things. He will not speak about race. He cannot speak about race without being angry and going back into his hatreds from a long time back. Instead he keeps busy with stories about British kings and Roman emperors, he scans the lines of classic poetry, and he devotes himself to the tutelage of Oxford-trained professors who are close to retiring.

Only silently in his mind do the questions haunt him. At night, while he sleeps in his grandmother’s attic, it happens again, the way it did when he went to college; he dreams in Spanish and wakes up with nervous tics again. To punish himself for not being able to purge this language that tortures him, he drinks scalding coffee all day, skips lunch, and pours Tabasco sauce on his dinner to burn his tongue into submission. Yet there is no way to purify by fire this place inside him, this furious Spanish-speaking devil who enters his room while he sleeps. There is no way to summon Christ in English when his conscious mind is asleep. There is no way to stop the words in long syllables from forming ungentle questions in his mind—because now he doubts his classmates. As he sits next to them in seminars and hears their questions, he wonders where in the past they committed their own violence. Did they call the outsiders in their schools nasty names when they were children? Did they trip the loner on the sidewalk to make their friends laugh? Did they scrawl hateful words on someone’s locker during lunch? Maybe their violence dissipated, like steam from a settling pot of water, diffused with the forgiveness exerted from the ones they victimized. Ultimately he decides that he cannot trust them.

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He cannot hear what the priest is saying. The sermon comes out in a clear Castilian voice, speaking the wonderful Spanish in which this Franciscan priest always addresses the Latino parish. But the enormous placard that says “God Bless America,” hung over the altar, drowns out even the music. Flags dangle unyieldingly from poles set beside the crucifix. The little flag, the kind that costs $1.50 at Wal-Mart, is taped to the raised hand of St. Paul and deafens him. He keeps reminding himself to be humble. He keeps calling to mind where he is and who is sitting next to him. Most fervent churchgoers in this Latino parish belong to the military. As they risk their lives for an English-speaking country, it would be wrong to deny them the certainty of a holy cause. He knows that if he speaks against this war, the other Latinos will no longer welcome him. They will accuse him of being like those spoiled gringo protestors who have no consideration for all the black and Latino and poor-white soldiers who are going to risk their lives for America’s sake. So he struggles to think the way they do and agrees to “support the troops.” He struggles to make the Bible mean that the war is good, that Christ wants the terrorists to be bombed, that to love God...
everyone must fight in his name, that the invasion of Afghanistan is the fulfillment of divine law.

Every Sunday, after mass, as the families congregate on the front steps, he bites his tongue to stop it from starting trouble. He promises the mothers of servicemen that he will pray for a decisive victory and exalt the troops when they return. He struggles not to speak for God. He struggles not to take on the arrogance of faith. But something—maybe God, maybe the devil—tells him that this is all wrong.

And at night, when he dreams, the words now tell him in English: God will not bless America. God cannot bless its plastic, its extortions, and its invisible violence. Finally, two weeks after the bombing of Afghanistan has begun, he stands up, turns to the back of the church and goes out. He struts beneath the magnificent mandorla that glows at the back entrance, where in colored panes of glass the virgin gazes down at him. This is not his church anymore. The violence, invisible, has crept inside and infected its spires and statues. Inside he cannot hear himself breathe. He does not feel at home inside his own body when he is here. So he won’t come back again.

Outside, under a calm October sun, he wanders untethered through the streets. The signs, the billboards, and the mastheads of newspapers keep reminding him of the era in which he has made the frightening choice to live without religion. The country is full of rage about the towers. All of his countrymen are crying for vengeance and seeking signs that their fury is holy. But he needs no more dreams to tell him what he believes: he believes that they must forgive the thousands who died, and even more. There is no other way.

But he knows that most people in his country are not suited to forgiveness. So many Americans have beaten the lonely into silence, levied forgiveness from weaker beings, and made their violence invisible.

At last he loses his stutter and befriends white classmates who oppose the war. At school, where liberals are a besieged minority of thinkers whom the rest of the country despises, at last he feels comfortable next to them. He can unearth his invisible violence and teach them what he learned from it. They nod and share their invisible wounds, the emotional violence caused by a country that now hates them for how they think. It is pure agony, one of his new friends confides in him, to be white and to be unable to think like a white man, to be American and to disagree with most Americans. Somehow, whoever these white liberals were when they were children, now as adults they have learned what it is to be crushed into submission and cowed into a silent fear until there is nothing but forgiveness. They know now what it is to be called a spic in a schoolyard where everyone is white.

He only wishes that they could forgive his Christianity, because he cannot leave it entirely. He wishes he had a way to explain why people cloak themselves in religion, embrace faith, expel debate, and resort to prayers and absolutes. Even now, as he lives without a church, his instincts tell him that without Jesus Christ there will only be bleak nightmares, grudges for things unaccountable, and invisible violence. And he does not know how long he will be able to survive with no church. But he is a proud man of color now, and he will savor it while it lasts.