

So Much for the Habits of Bees

DAWN GOULET

“It is appointed unto man once to die, but after this: the judgment.” The sign is sturdy and simple, made of black-painted plywood with letters blocked out in white painter’s tape. It is the size of the thing that draws the eye, hoisted precariously above the crowd by a thin man in a sweat-drenched suit. Roy almost offers to take a turn—let me shoulder your burden, brother—but their eyes meet, and the man has the face of a martyr. He will not be denied the bearing of this cross. Roy walks on, pressing his Bible against his leg.

The heat and noise and crush of people suddenly overpower Roy, and he stumbles. There are broken strands of beads and condom wrappers lying in puddles of rancid beer. A woman in pink spandex bends to help him, her long false eyelashes resting on her cheeks. There is water in the heels of her platform shoes; and in the water, Roy sees, tiny floating words calling out to him to “LIVE.” He feels suddenly conspicuous in his dress pants and shoes, his short-sleeve button-down shirt.

And just like that, they are gone. Brother Scott and the younger boys, Miranda, Callie. He’s lost them.

Roy was hanging back, uncomfortable with the way the girls hovered around the traveling preacher. Brother Scott was not quite handsome, but he was trim and hale, a few years older than them, and a college man, which counted for a lot. He’d arrived in May to lead their summer youth group and been fêted, seated at the place of honor, in each of their homes in turn. Roy had watched as Brother Scott swallowed his own mother’s instant mashed potatoes and chewed her crinkle-cut carrots, gave thanks for the undercooked pork chops as if they were manna from Heaven.

The sun is setting. People who can’t be much older than Roy—Callie says you can order a drink here if you are 18 and someone vouches for you—are streaming out of bars with names like “The Dungeon” and “Saints and Sinners”—frat boys in trucker hats and bridesmaids in sashes and tight shirts, their stomachs and chests exposed. They jostle him, the juices from fried oysters and slabs of sticky ribs dripping down their chins. They gulp

hurricanes, yard-glasses of beer, and daiquiris with sliced fruit as big as sails. Tourists stop with their children in the cool doorsteps of strip clubs.

The girls. From their perspective, Brother Scott is worldly, exotic even. He has ministered all throughout the Gulf States, spent summers at a soup kitchen in New York City and in Polynesia with honest to goodness *savages*, facts evidenced by a Moleskine journal filled with shiny pencil sketches. Roy has seen those pictures the girls swoon over: a homeless man on the subway, a dead pigeon, women in grass headdresses with babies at their breasts. The girls clamor for Brother Scott's attention. But there is something about him—lanky, aloof, by turns amused and then sternly disapproving—that makes Roy uneasy.

An old woman spins into Roy with her eyes closed, a boombox on her shoulder. A girl with enlarged earlobes shouts at him, her hot breath buzzing in his ear, asking if he's there for her Haunted Bourbon Street tour. He backs away from her, shaking his head, as a man in an alien costume lunges by on stilts, his dirty yellow bellbottoms skimming the street. Little kids line the gutter, tap-dancing for coins and beating plastic buckets with drumsticks. Roy looks away. He wants to put money in their cups, but he has none. They turned over their wallets and cell phones before setting out. Distractions of the devil, Brother Scott said.

These are the people they have come to carry God's word to.

The church group drove overnight from their small town outside of Shreveport, in the half-sized white school bus the church used to transport old ladies to services. There was a prayer breakfast organized by one of Brother Scott's old classmates—a man with girlish lips and a prepubescent moustache—then they busied themselves unpacking their few things. All of the drawers at the guesthouse were warped and out of flush; they jammed at odd angles and made sounds like nails on a chalkboard when forced.

A space of hours trickled by. There was no one right thing to do besides read the Bible or pray. A few of the boys went on an excursion with Brother Scott, but Roy pleaded a headache and retreated to his room to lie in front of the oscillating fan.

Through the window he watched Miranda sipping Diet Coke on the balcony and

twirling her hair. It was piled on top of her head and crisscrossed with elastic headbands, and Roy was careful to keep his eyes there, on those headbands, because Miranda's body, bursting indecently from even the most modest of cardigans and skirts, was a throbbing temptation to him, a vision with a pulse of its own, thumping wildly behind his eyes long after she was safe from view.

Down the hall, Callie, coltish and awkward, tried to straighten her own hair in the humid prison cell that was their shared bathroom. She gave up and, to compensate for the failed attempt, told Miranda her headbands were a sin. Callie, who puffed her flat chest out when she passed the boys and who had once, during a retelling of Samson and Delilah, stared at Roy across the Sunday School classroom and licked her lips.

Roy dozed, sleeping later than he meant to, but not allowing himself to hurry. He tied his brown Oxfords tight, brushed the lint from his pants, and combed his hair with the black plastic comb from the drugstore travel kit. He took up his good Bible, with the red satin ribbon, and stared at himself in the mirror. He looked just like his father.

Roy's father kept bees. He zipped himself each morning into gray canvas coveralls and pulled on long chamois leather gloves. He walked across the yard to the hives, a mesh beekeeper's hood under one arm, the spatula-shaped tool he used to pry apart the waxy frames swinging by a string from his other hand. But on church days he wore brown or gray dress pants with matching shoes and shirts with ironed-in creases.

Dinner that night was pasta and iceberg lettuce at a local homeless shelter. They served first and ate last, ladling the dredges of meat-specked sauce onto cheap spaghetti glued in starchy heaps, stacking their Styrofoam plates in the trash. On the bus, the girls sang "Holy, Holy, Holy" and "Down by the Riverside," as Brother Scott's friend drove them through the French Quarter to Bourbon Street. Roy clenched his feet inside his shoes, waiting. He knew that if the home of sin was this 300-year-old city by the river, then the epicenter of sin, the very bullseye of the target, was Bourbon Street.

This was his first time.

Born eight years after his next oldest sibling, Roy was the product of a rare instance of lust between his aging parents. To compensate for this embarrassment, his mother had embraced religion fiercely upon his arrival, and his father had capitulated to her wishes.

As a result, Roy experienced none of the joyful chaos his older siblings recalled from their own childhoods; no road trips or family vacations. One week each summer Roy was bundled off to vacation bible school, to participate in wholesome outdoor activities, fellowship, and prayer. He spent that week in a trance, daydreaming of a furtive romance with one of the girls, towels wrapped tightly over their modest bathing suits, that he and the other boys passed on the way to their separate swimming hour in the algae-slick lake.

Stepping down from the bus at Canal Street, Roy found himself in a river of flesh, black and brown and pale white skin shaded with tattoos roiled beneath feather boas and bulged from sequined waistbands. Hands sloshed cups of foaming beer, flung beads, flailed, groped, reached—for him—for whatever could be had. From the wrought-iron balconies fell red lace panties, plastic shot glasses, masks smeared with lipstick and glitter.

They marched, defiant, holding signs aloft or clutching bibles to their chests. And then, the man with the sign. The stumble. The filthy ground.

Roy walks for hours. What feels like hours. He sees his own people, here and there in the crowd. Not Brother Scott and the others, but his own sort of people. The pure of heart. The redeemers. They carry signs saying “Repent,” and “Hell is Forever,” and “Hear the Word of God.” They are there to remind the world, with their stoic silence and with their hungry rage, that “Jesus Saves,” that “Hell Awaits All Sinners,” that “The Price of Sin is Great.”

He is never going to find them. Roy is angry at Brother Scott for taking their phones and not picking a meeting spot. At the girls for distracting him. He turns down the next street he comes to and walks toward the river.

A line of people waits outside a shoddy stucco building. The whispers of paint clinging to the streaked façade might be a hundred years old; they might have been applied that morning. The neighboring buildings, in on the joke, are all fresh red stucco and gleaming green French doors.

A skirmish breaks out at the front of the line. A man is being turned away but won't go quietly. His friends are inside, he insists. He just needs to use the bathroom. His brother is a city councilman. He'll have them shut down. The bouncer, lost in time in a crushed

fedora and suspenders, puts his hand on the man's chest and says: "Walk on, now. Walk on." The gesture, or maybe just the man's voice, is like a spell; the drunk grows quiet and staggers off. A slip of paper flutters from his hand into the gutter.

"Gonna nab that now, or what?" the bouncer asks. Roy looks up. He picks the ticket up and hands it over. The bouncer motions for him to follow the others inside. He can't, he explains, he has to find his friends. But the guy isn't having it. "Why deny yourself, man? You got somewhere to be?"

Roy has no answer.

"Uh huh." The man punches the ticket and hands it back. "Live a little, kid."

Roy is swept inside by the closing door. Darkness. Stairs leading down. Lacquered posters on the walls announce artists with names like Tiny and Squig, a woman called Mama Freight Train in a floor-length gown. "Live Jazz in the Crescent City," they scream in ten-inch letters, "Music from Noon to Midnight." Another step down and sunlight from the street-level windows obscures it all in a flash.

Roy is five or six years old, crouching unseen at the top of the cellar steps, the sun cutting trapezoids in the dust-filled air as his father walks the aisles of honey. He tilts a jar, releasing a slow-traveling bubble, then turns another a quarter of a turn.

Roy's father used to read to him from Aristotle's *The History of Animals*—that tedious but hypnotic chronicle of living things. At the end of each section the old philosopher wrote "So much for the habits of birds" or "So much for the habits of wood lice." Roy's father always let him read those parts.

The music starts: a tin cup on a washboard, the snicker and hiss of a match as the bass player lights his cigarette.

Roy's father rinses his coffee cup at the pump and hangs it on a hook above the sink in the barn. He lights a cigarette, his only one of the day, and blows the smoke in lazy rings above his head.

Because of a two-and-a-half-thousand-year-old Greek philosopher, Roy's father knew to plant almond and pear trees around the hives, beans, poppies, and creeping thyme. He knew that when harvesting the honey, you must always leave an honest portion behind. With no sweetness left to them, he explained, the bees' work becomes spiritless, and they suffer; the whole hive suffers.

Soon the music is a wall of sound, at war with itself, falling apart and coming together again. A calculated confusion of drums and brass. The crowd is shouting, stomping and swaying. It's the waggle dance of bees drunk on nectar, Roy thinks, full of that same urgency and joy.

When the show is over, the crowd flows out onto the street, mellow and sated.

And of course, it is in that moment that Roy's church group walks by, dragging their signs and hugging their Bibles. They won't think to look for him here. They will return to the guesthouse and sleep, ready to board the bus for another overnight drive. There will be hymns and prayers and somber meals.

Roy almost calls out to them.

He almost runs to them.

In a moment they will turn the corner. □