

The Ordination of Montgomery Jackson by Mike Varley

Marmalade. Marmalade.

Ernesto opens his eyes. Marmalade. He pulls back the covers gently – carefully – so as not to get his adrenaline going, which could screw it all up.

Measured steps lead down the hallway to the bathroom. He leaves the room in darkness, relying on shower time instinct. The shower is trained on his forehead, plugging his ears with water and giving his thoughts a car wash atmosphere.

Marmalade. Marmalade, Ace of Spades, marmalade smooth as suede, marmalade in the shade, Marmalade Thomas Kincaid. Marmalade versus jams, citrus growers in South America, colonial England and its influence on breakfast, tangerine trees and marmalade skies.

Already it's hopeless. It's been six months since Ernesto the dream poet has had a dream he can remember. He moves the showerhead from his face and stares blankly into the bathroom, not caring to soap up or shampoo. How easy it had been in his youth, penning devastating love poems or great social truths in twenty minutes, bed-headed and boxer briefed. Flash forward fifteen years and there he is, grasping at fruit preserves.

Ernesto turns off the shower and gets out still half dry. He grabs hold of his girlfriend's threadbare pink robe on the back of the door and decides to put it on, then wraps her hair towel around his head to complete the look.

Ernesto walks around the apartment with the robe wide open, looking at all his...*things*. The towering collection of LP's taking up the entire shelving unit behind his couch. Memorabilia from his state capital tour, 1994. His first edition copy of Gregor Mendel's *Experiments on Plant Hybridization*. Long had he felt indifferent to their presence in his home, but now he actively hates the sight of them.

Ernesto disrobes and lays down naked on the living room floor, legs and arms spread. He looks like a furry gravity experiment, and feels like a memorized edition of Trivial Pursuit. At thirty-nine, does he already have nothing left to offer the world? Did he have anything to offer the world in the first place?

Why can't he be more like his girlfriend, Almond? Still vibrant and impulsive after thirty-eight years, she's been gone all weekend, off at a protest in D.C. on Big Business in America. She had only learned about it that Thursday, but she didn't think for a second about not going.

Ernesto had been like that once – impassioned, community minded. But somewhere along the way, most probably during Dubya's time, he had grown awfully world-weary. And what's left? A lowly regarded poet whose only political action is donating fifty dollars to PBS every year.

He grabs the disrobed robe and jerks the material in frustration. There's a loud rip as the left sleeve comes off in Ernesto's hand.

"God damn it!" This is not good. He and Almond are already on rocky terms as of late. She won't take kindly to coming home tonight and finding her favorite ratty bathrobe is halfway to being a bathvest.

Ernesto goes into the bedroom to look for his emergency sewing kit, all the while muttering about the things he has to do today that isn't this. Somewhere along the way the alarm clock on his clock radio went off. War's *Low Rider* is playing, and now he just *knows* it's going to be in his head the rest of the day.

He finally discovers the kit amongst the rubble of his closet floor. He turns off the radio and goes about making his bed comfortable for sitting. There, under the covers, naked and frustrated, he starts the tedious mending process.

Ernesto knocks on the door of his sister's house to the rhythm of the horns section from "Low Rider." He's clothed now, in attire that screams "Parent-Teacher Conference." Fortunately, he is going to a Parent-Teacher Conference with his nephew Trent, so the only word his outfit screams is "APPROPRIATE!"

"Monty, you're early for once," Helena says on opening the door.

"I couldn't miss me and Trent's big day, could I?" Ernesto replies, all the while looking around at the sky.

"It's really no big deal, Monty. I'm sure they're just going to tell you the same thing they've told me the past three years: "He's a good boy with strong marks in every subject'."

"Well, it'll be good to hang out with Trent anyway. Is he ready yet?"

"Yea, hold on." Helena cranes her neck. "Trent!" she yells up the stairs, "Uncle Monty is here!"

"Do you want to come in?"

"No, I like the air out here, thank you. It's so perfectly fall!"

Ernesto expresses with wonder.

"Yea...Trent! Your uncle's waiting!"

Ernesto can hear Trent on the creaky wooden stairs, descending with an unrushed, even-paced rhythm, as though he is tying a tie as he walks. In actuality, he's drinking a cup of coffee and reading an article in Boy's Life magazine. He had tied his tie upstairs.

"Ah, here's young Master Bismarck now."

"Hello, Uncle Monty, it's good to see you again."

"Hey, Boy's Life, huh? What is forth grade again, Webelo?"

"Yes, though I'm with the fifth grade Webelos now. I accomplished everything a fourth grade Webelo can do over the summer."

"Wow, that's pretty impressive, Trent. Congratulations. You must be very proud, Mom."

"Well, that's Austin's area mostly, but yes, very proud."

"Well, are you ready to go, Bud?"

Trent gives the coffee cup and a firm hug to his mother. Brother and sister exchange goodbyes with Ernesto still marveling at the sky. He distractedly gets into the car, a tan 1982 Cadillac Coupe Deville rusted at the wheel wells.

He pulls onto the street and rolls down his window. "Have fun at the arraignment" he shouts, and the two drive off.

"I don't think that's the type of thing you should yell farewell, Uncle Monty."

Ernesto's veneer of happiness deteriorates with each manual window crank.

"You're probably right, Trent. No, you're definitely right, that was rather inappropriate of me. Arraignments are no public matter."

Trent makes some room for his feet in the backseat foot well, displacing some sweatshirts, a broken computer printer, a plastic bag filled with old eyeglasses and an unsheathed garden machete.

"Would you consider me a success, Trent?"

"I don't really know where you're going with this, Uncle Monty."

"You've known me for what, how long? I mean, objectively, do you think my life has been a success to this point?"

"It depends—"

"You know what, don't answer that. That's not a fair question, you shouldn't have to answer that. Success is completely determined by the individual."

After a thoughtful silence, Trent replies. "It sounds like you need to reexamine your barometer for success, then."

"It's not just that, Trent, it's everything. Where am I going? Where have I come from? I feel like a memorized copy of Trivial Pursuit. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Not really, no."

"Fine. That's okay, I don't fault you. I don't fully understand it myself...No, no, I fully understand it, and I think that might be part of the problem, Trent. I devoted my entire life to the study of the peculiar and I'm already burned out. Completely tapped with half a life to go."

"You're probably just in a rut, Uncle Monty."

"Ruts," Ernesto says dismissively, "I've been in ruts before. Spent a year as a shot boy at a gay bar in Kingston, having sex with beautiful tourists, doing...look, I've said too much already. Don't repeat that to Helena, she doesn't know about that. The point is, even when I wasn't writing poetry I still *dreamt* poetry every night. The most wonderfully bizarre scenes. Have you ever read my poetry?"

"I must confess I haven't."

"That's okay, you're not really the target audience. You see, all my work is dream inspired. I've never written about anything I wasn't obsessed enough to dream about. Trent, I haven't had an interesting dream in six months. It's dreamer's block or something."

"Couldn't you just start drawing inspiration from things other than your dreams?"

A brief chill sweeps through the roomy Coupe interior.

"I don't know how to begin to answer that question, Trent. I really don't."

Ernesto is quick to recant.

"No. You're just trying to help, I'm sorry I reacted that way. It's a good question. I can't discard my creative process as easily as all that. It's all I know. I'd just as soon shoot my wife if I were married. Or your Mom. I'd just as soon shoot your Mom before I could change, Trent."

Ernesto looks into his rear view mirror to gauge Trent's reaction, but all he can see is Trent's Alec Baldwin-esque coif.

“Fine. Have you experimented with any mind-altering substances? From what I understand, they can have some positive effects on artistic endeavors.”

“Trenton Salem Bismarck! I sure hope I didn’t just hear what I think I did. Substance abuse is no way to go through life. If you say one more thing like that we are *not* going to Burger King later. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Stepping through the threshold of St. John’s parochial school, a flood of memories from his time spent here suddenly appear in Ernesto’s mind. His first kiss, scoliosis test and public vomiting all occurred within these hallowed walls.

“I’m going to go talk with my friend Carson. You can walk around if you want, our session with Brother Paul isn’t for another,” Trent flicks his wrist out and pulls back the sleeve on his dress shirt, revealing a modest gold watch. “Twenty minutes.”

“Okay, sounds good...Oh, and Trent.”

“Yes?” Trent says, turning back around from down the hallway.

“I love you, Bud.”

“Yes, I love you too, Uncle Monty.”

Ernesto walks the halls, looking everywhere but straight ahead. He’s practically smothered in childhood nostalgia. His brain keeps trying to start up old memories that were long ago scavenged – the relevant parts chopped up for scrap and catalogued in a file labeled “grade school

experience”. As a result, Ernesto’s senses keep overlapping and contradicting each other. The smooth water fountain porcelain recalls the smell the Honeysuckle that grows outside the music room windows. The groaning of the radiator brings the taste of fundraiser candy bars to his mouth.

The only damper on the whole experience is the mental static caused by all the arts and crafts projects covering every available inch of hallway space. Hoping to prove to parents that their children are being productive in school, teachers drag out every time killing project they’ve done with the kids so far this year and assign several more the week before the big day just to be sure. It’s all there – construction paper scarecrows, pasta skeletons, paper plate jack-o-lanterns, and glitter? You betcha. While they’re cute on an individual level, the sheer volume of projects in the confined space is just too much for him to take. He walks this hallway as quick as he can and makes for the exit to the side parking lot.

Once outside, Ernesto sits on the bench where he and his classmates found a condom wrapper during sixth grade recess. The blustery October wind whips across the parking lot plain, forming powerful vortexes in the dips and folds of the blacktop. Fallen leaves from the surrounding Maples give the eddies a physical presence, producing fluttering leaf geysers as high as eight feet tall. It had been the subject of Ernesto’s first ever poem.

Untitled

This will help you understand the leaves: They're twice as tall as me, and if you try to hug them, the wind takes them away from you. Even still, I try every day.

This will help you understand the leaves: In deep fall, there are so many you can't see through the geyser, and it looks like the leaves are trying to show you the branch they fell off of before they die.

This will help you understand the leaves: I took my dog Lacy to see them before we put her to sleep. I carried her in my arms and chased the geysers for her while she barked.

This will help you understand the leaves: I only know one other person in the world who knows about the leaves.

This will help you understand the leaves: She showed them to me.
--Ernesto

“*She*,” Ernesto thinks, “*She...*”

“Maadaa Jakson, pee repor t’ roo Ive-o-Ive or da acly een”

announces the muffled P.A.

“What?” Ernesto asks aloud.

“Mr. Jackson, please report to room 505 for the faculty meeting, thank you.”

Shit, Ernesto had completely forgotten about the meeting! And he had been so proud of himself for picking up Trent early. He sprints through the hallways, deftly avoiding human obstacles. It takes a confusing hallway

intersection for Ernesto to realize he hasn't the first clue where room 505 is. Winded and confused, he looks back down the hallway he just plowed through. It's an arts and craftstastrophe. Most projects are still billowing from his gale force movements. Poorly glued cotton balls and macaroni bits riddle the floor. There's a conspicuous trail of glitter leading up to his person. Adult reactions range from bemused to horrified, but the kids seem pretty happy with the show, giggling and whispering.

He winks at a little Asian girl smiling at him and takes off at a sprint back down the hall. The flapping of the paper bags and construction paper (and even a few tiny bells) is now joined by the laughter of children. Parents are arrested in place, uncertain of how to handle the situation. Without stopping, he U-turns for a third pass, a dervish of glitter trailing behind him. Confetti and feathers still hang in the air from the last run as the bystanders watch from the safety of classroom doorways. Ernesto abruptly stops in the middle of the hallway and turns. The cloud of glitter dust at his heels pelts him like a giant powder puff from some vaudeville comedy act. The kids have passed the mere laughing stage and are in the shrieking throes of stimulus overload.

It's always in moments as this, covered in glitter and looking at a confused audience, that Ernesto is uncertain of what to do next. There's enough craft crap on the floor to sprawl out for craft angels. A second grader runs out from behind her mother's leg and runs down the hall squealing, hoping to reproduce Ernesto's display. The classroom doorways turn into crazed children tributaries, lusting on havoc and liberation from the straight-laced conference atmosphere.

“Mr. Jackson, please report to room 505, across from the front office. Mr. Jackson, 505 across from the office. Thank you.”

“Ohhhh...” He says, “the library!” He turns his back on the chaos and walks back down to the hallway intersection. Anyone interested in knowing what the hell just happened is too busy stopping craft condiment fights or trying to catch up with their galloping children to pursue the matter.

Ernesto steps into the library, face glowing (and sparkling). His anxieties about being late for the meeting were all ran out of him.

It doesn't take long to find Trent and Brother Paul, since the term “library” is more an honorary title for room 505 than anything. It's simply a classroom dressed up like a library, with bookshelves, one long wooden table and a computer with internet access. Windows look out onto an “authorized personal only” courtyard. To Saint John's students, the highest ranking dare on campus is to run out there and touch the bird feeder at its center.

The florescent lights are off in the room save the one over the oak table where Trent and Brother Paul are sitting. The daylight outside has abruptly turned to dusk, shadowing everything in the room laying outside the florescence.

Ernesto is struck with the shock of recognition.

“Holy crap, Brother Paul?!”

“How nice of you to join us, Mr. Jackson.”

Brother Paul stands up to greet Ernesto and is met with a puppy dog handshake.

“Brother Paul, it's so good to see you again! See this man, Trent? He's a saint. Do you understand? An absolute saint.”

Trent rolls his eyes and strums his fingers. “Saint Paul, Uncle Monty, got it.

Brother Paul looks exasperated. “Monty, it's great to see you again but what...what happened to you?”

Ernesto looks down at his Parent Teacher Conference outfit, all jazzed up with a sparkly coat of awesome.

“Oh this,” Ernesto says matter-of-factly, “Yea...I got hit by a glitter tornado. But you. I want to hear about you.”

Brother Paul, eloquent man that he is, spends the next two minutes giving a beautiful synopsis of the past thirty years, free of false modesty or generalized blanket statements. It dawns on Ernesto that he's never really heard the question “How are you” answered properly until just this moment. He's touched that Brother Paul would put such thought into his words and eagerly awaits the chance to reciprocate.

When Brother Paul's “And how are you?” does come, warm and compassionate, Ernesto opens up to him. But unlike Brother Paul's refined, thought out response, Ernesto's account is more like on-demand regurgitation. Stray evenings in Kingston and entire decades of experience are treated as though equally crucial to the Ernesto story, and orated with no regard to chronology whatsoever.

Brother Paul politely interrupts when Ernesto pauses to remember the font type used in the St. James bible that led him to a brief stint in Evangelical Christianity.

“Monty, I’d love to hear the rest of your story, but we should probably talk a bit about Trent.”

“Of course, of course. Please tell me everything about Trent.”

“Well, Trent’s a good boy. Strong marks in every subject.”

“I knew it. I bet all the kids like him too, huh?”

“Actually, yes. He really seems to bring out the best in all the children.”

“Oh, that’s just Trent for you, Brother. He’s a real good kid. Truth be told, the whole family’s very proud of him.”

“You should be,” brother Paul replies warmly. Ernesto turns his head to Trent.

“Now don’t get all big-headed about the praise, okay? It’s very easy to stumble down the ‘rock star’ path.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that Monty.”

“No, you’re absolutely right, Brother Paul. I know he’s a good kid. It’s just good to keep it out there. So, please, tell me more.”

“Well...honestly, there’s not much more to be said. We seem to be in accordance.”

“Do we still have time left?”

“If you have questions, certainly.”

And like that, Ernesto’s demeanor changes, as though happiness is the big gulp of air you expel after holding your breath. Out comes the self-doubt and violent contradictions Ernesto expressed to Trent, but this time things seem different. Brother Paul is so much more...calming than Trent. *Not that Trent was bad*, Ernesto’s inner monologue defends as Brother Paul

artfully refers to a bit of scripture that parallels Ernesto’s situation, *he’s just not a Brother*.

Suddenly, it hits him, as ‘it’ is apt to do. An epiphany of a kind he hadn’t felt in at least a dozen years.

“Brother, what can you tell me about the brotherhood? I mean, joining and all that.”

Brother Paul clasps his fingers together in front of his face, elbows resting on the table, and sighs. “Now Monty, entering the brotherhood isn’t something to be taken lightly.”

“I understand Brother Paul, but, I mean, it’s just come over me. This rush...I haven’t felt like this since Clinton got elected. Everything seems so fresh and open to possibility.

“Deep down, I’ve always wanted to reconnect with my Catholicism, Brother Paul. Now it seems like something’s telling me ‘this is right. This is the time.’ Please, Brother Paul, I need to pursue this. It could save me.”

Maybe it’s the sparkle of his conviction or the absolute scintillation of his golf shirt, but something in Ernesto’s manner brings a little of that twinkle to Brother Paul’s eye.

“Alright, here’s what you do.”

“Oh, okay, fantastic, what? C’mon tell me.”

“I still have parents and students to see, but you can go across to front office and talk to Sister Olympia—.”

“Sister Olympia still works here?! Wow, I can’t believe that.”

“Yes, Sister Olympia is very dedicated to the children. You talk to her and she’ll give you some information to look over.”

“Oh, that’s terrific Brother Paul, I can’t thank you enough. Really, I can’t. See Trent, absolute saint. Understand?”

“Yes, Uncle Monty, Saint Paul.”

“Oh...man. I am on cloud nine, really I am. I really feel great about this...Trent, you ‘ole rascal, why didn’t you *tell* me Brother Paul was your teacher.”

“I told you when we walked in.”

Ernesto looks away to somewhere above Trent’s head and nods sagely. “Yes...so you did.”

The meeting ends much as it began, except for the hug Ernesto gives to Brother Paul, which leaves Brother Paul’s habit rather sassy. On leaving the room, Ernesto turns to Trent.

“Hey, can you take a ride home with Carson’s family?”

“Oh, come on Uncle Monty. Just get the info from Sister Olympia and we can go.”

“Please, Trent. Look, I don’t go stepping on your dreams.”

“Oh, like when you gave me cab money so you could stay after to talk to the Carnies at the fair? Like that dream?”

“I’m going to ignore your vibes, Trent. I’m just ignoring them. Believe me when I tell you this is different. That was just a peculiarity. This is a life change.”

Trent sighs, breath and body. “All right, look. I’ll ask Mrs. Siti, okay? But what am I going to tell Helena?”

“I don’t know. The truth? I’m guessin’ I won’t be seeing you again till I’m a Brother, so don’t sweat it too much. I mean, what can she say once I’m all converted. I’ll be a man of the cloth.”

“Fine.”

“Oh, this is great, Trent. Terrific. Thank Mrs. Siti for me. Oh, and just tell Almond I’ve gone nuts.”

Ernesto hugs Trent and the two break apart from each other. He jogs a few steps down the hall before turning round.

“Hey, and, make sure to use those exact words, okay?”

After what seems like no time at all, Ernesto finds himself at his first day at the San Juan Bautista Monastery, an old mission south of San Diego. A beat-up, desert preserved, checkered cab from the late 50’s drops him off and immediately takes off, leaving a cloud of dust to hang in the evening light.

Ernesto knocks on the monastery’s oxidized brass door. Immediately, the door is answered by an older Brother with a decidedly European look about him. Ernesto is floored.

“Brother Pierre?!”

“Yes Monty, it is good to see you again”

“Sister Olympia didn’t tell me you lived here now!”

“Yes. We monks, Monty, lead very interesting lives.”

“Well, I’m beginning to learn that, yea.”

“I see you’ve packed quite light,” Brother Pierre comments, noting Ernesto’s backpack and small duffel bag.

“Yea, well, no need for clothes anymore. Just boxers and undershirts, mostly. Oh, and socks and books. And an alarm clock and journal.”

“You know, Monty, we wear clothes under our habits.”

“Oh. Okay, that’s good. Yea, I was concerned how the winters might go. If it’s possible, could I call my nephew?”

“Yes, of course. But first, let me show you your new home.”

Ernesto follows Pierre down the adobe front hall, which opens to reveal a massive rectangular courtyard dominating the center of the monastery. The courtyard is divided into quadrants by two slate walkways, with a limestone statue of San Juan Bautista standing at the intersection. Ernesto notes each section is distinctly different from the other. First is the monastery’s garden, packed with rich, ruddy brown soil. Orderly rows of vegetables stretch the section’s length and homemade trellises support all manner of vine fruits and berries. The section, Brother Pierre explains, is meant to allow the brothers to meditate on the virtue of work.

The next section is filled with scores of California wildflowers, like something you’d see in a roadside postcard. All sorts of varieties, though as a rule all extremely tall, sparse things – straight stemmed and scraggly-leafed for five feet or so until their tops explode with color, like little organic fireworks. They walk through the section at its tamest point: a circular, slate path that cuts through each quadrant, keeping the statue of San Juan at its center. As Ernesto admires a flower shaped like a red votive candle, his guide explains the section is meant to make its guest meditate on the beauty God creates free from human assistance.

They continue on the circle path to plot three. This is the one Ernesto had been eyeing the entire time, for planted in section three is a giant Western White Pine, at least ninety-feet tall. The tree is bare for the first third or so before it sprouts branches about thirty feet in diameter. The trunk is bigger than a monster truck wheel. The surrounding monastery, with its simple, one floor design, is dwarfed by its presence.

“This tree,” Brother Pierre explains, “is meant to inspire awe and allow us to meditate on that feeling.”

Ernesto, still staring up at the tree’s upper reaches, replies “Yea, it is awesome, especially in a setting like this. But is it really worth it, Brother? I mean, aren’t you afraid it could fall one day and destroy the monastery? Aren’t you afraid it could kill someone?”

Brother Pierre smiles softly. “Fear, Monty, is necessary to achieve awe.”

They round the circle to plot four, a fallow, dirt packed patch of earth like some sort of ghost town thoroughfare. The slate slabs of the circle path are the only things breaking up the expanse of earth.

“This dormant, dusty lot allows us to meditate on our origins as well as our conclusions.”

“I like the tree one the best.”

“You will come to like them all. Come; let us go for supper. The other brothers are waiting.”

“What about my bags?”

“It’s okay. Come.”

They step back to the open air hallway and walk around to a door across from the garden. Inside is the monastery dining room, scantily furnished with a long wooden table and bench seating. The twenty or so residents of the monastery sit quietly in prayer, a collection of bowed heads and saggy necks. Port windows at the rear of the room throw beams of evening light across the scene.

“Brothers, if you’ll excuse the interruption. This is Monty; he has come to learn about life at San Juan and possibly join the order. Please make him feel welcome.”

The room is still silent, but an unspoken goodwill fills the air that is palpable.

“Now, let us begin our meal with a prayer.”

The congregation bows its head. Ernesto wipes his hands on his jeans as if preparing to shake someone’s hand after using the bathroom. His left hand brushes against a bulge in his pocket he didn’t know was there. As Brother Pierre leads the group in prayer, eyes closed, Ernesto stealthily removes the folded up piece of notebook paper from his pocket. It only takes a second of scanning for a spark of enthusiasm to light Ernesto’s face, at which point he furtively folds the note back up and assumes a prayerful pose.

Brother Pierre closes the prayer, but before he can sit for dinner Ernesto taps him on the shoulder.

“Brother, may I say a few words before dinner?”

“Go ahead Monty.”

“Ah...hi everyone. I wrote this on the bus here – I had forgotten about it until now. Things have been kind of rough lately. I won’t go into details, but one of my problems is I can’t seem to dream anymore. I used to have these really lucid, vivid dreams. But now I can’t anymore and my life didn’t make sense for a while. With the Brotherhood...I see hope. But things are still a struggle.

“I still want to write poetry, too, if only for myself, so I have to find new sources of inspiration. Instead of dreaming, I wrote this on the bus after seventy-two hours without sleep. It’s called ‘A Conversation with Jesus.’ I’d like to read it for you all if that’s okay.”

Again nothing is said, but Ernesto can tell he’s been granted consent.

A Conversation with Jesus

When I go to hell, Jesus, who will get my LP’s? Who will cry when they play *Pet Sounds* at my funeral, as per my request? Jesus, please say hello to Otis Redding for me, and I’ll be sure to give your regards to everyone else.

When I go to hell, Jesus, will it matter that I’m registered with the Green party? Will there be politicians there or is that just a cliché? If I were you, Jesus, I wouldn’t put them there. Somebody has to embody the worst of humanity.

Who do you think you are, Jesus, to let them turn news into "infotainment"? I'm getting tired of you hiding behind this idea of free will. What kind of God are you to let Saturday Night Live get to this point?

I'm concerned, Jesus – I don't think Suri is a Christian name. Do they have *Us Weekly* down there, or is that one of those great ironies of Hell they're always talking about? Can't you just kill those people that insist The De Vinci Code is real already?

I'm tainted, Jesus – "bad dates". I'm nervous, man. This is it; I've got no more outs. I can't do it out there anymore. I can't sit with the idiots and I can't snicker with the elitists. Help me find comfort. Help me or damn me.

Some silences are consenting, but some are just awkward. Ernesto folds up the loose-leaf and looks down at the floor.

"Thank you, Monty. How about we eat dinner?"

"Okay."

Before he knows it, a month at the monastery has passed Ernesto by. To remember anything that happened in that time seems impossible to him. All that comes to mind when looking back is an overbearing sense of failure. Every attempt at communication ended in culture conflict, which in

turn would only push him to try harder and resulted in increasingly spectacular failures. Last night Ernesto recalls as the capper, when Brother Paul (not that Brother Paul, but also a saint of a man, God bless him) Ernesto's eighth grade science teacher, had a "minor heart event" while sharing cooking duties with Ernesto. He couldn't help but think he was the cause. Why else would Brother Pierre take him out of Friday morning rosary to have a talk?

"Monty, the brothers and I, we can see that you are struggling to find your inner peace."

"Yes. Oh yes Brother Pierre, absolutely, I don't mean to upset the other brothers, I really don't. It's just that I can't help wanting to find common ground with them. I want to, but it seems like I'm too corrupted. It's like the poem. I'm too much a product of our corrupt culture."

"Monty, with God, nothing is too corrupted. The brothers and I decided you might benefit from time spent exclusively meditating."

"But what about prayer time and chores?"

"Meditation is prayer, and do not worry about your chores. The brotherhood is a family, and a family supports its members."

"Thank you, Brother Pierre. I won't let you or the other brothers down."

"I know, Monty." The pair step out from the open-air hallway and onto the courtyard, where they walk the slate circle path together.

"Here. Walk the circle path awhile. See where it leads you."

They walk together in silence for a few revolutions before Brother Pierre excuses himself. Alone, left with all the time in the world to sort out

his problems, Ernesto has no idea where to begin. Vegetables, flowers, tree, dust. Work, beauty, awe, origins. He turns around and starts walking the path counterclockwise. Nothing. He picks up the pace and starts jogging around the path, doing twenty-second laps. Nothing. He slows down and focuses all his attention on the statue of San Juan, hoping for some divine inspiration. Nothing.

Ernesto lies down on the packed earth and stares up at the early morning sky. He's frustrated, but mostly scared. It doesn't seem so long ago that he had been *certain* this was the path for him. He hadn't been surer of any decision in years. Now everything seems to be falling apart. If this isn't the answer, what is? What will make him happy again?

"God, what do I do?"

"Madison. The girl from your poem was Madison Quigley, and every time you smell indelible marker you think of her. She wore flowers in her hair that first day of seventh grade, even though she was twelve and it was 1980. She and you had always been in the same grade, but now – sharing a bus – you finally got to know her.

"Not right away though. It took you until just before Halloween to gather up the courage to talk to her. You traded her your Reese's Peanut Butter Cup from the class Halloween party goody bag for six M&M's, even though you both knew that was an unfair trade. After that you started talking on the bus, mostly gossip about who was dating whom and what girls in the class Madison thought were sluts. You just admired the skin of her cheek and how her eyes drifted to the ceiling whenever she tried to remember something, mouth just slightly open.

"One lonely Friday in November when you were both waiting for the late bus, Madison showed you the leaf geysers. She talked about her father dying. And how her Mom and sister had to move across town to a new house. And how after the funeral she had come back to the church across from school and saw the geysers and thought it was a sign from her Dad. And how when she saw it again a week later from across the street at the diner, she stopped believing in signs. You didn't know what to say, so you jumped up from the bench and burst through a geyser like a sprinter crossing the tape. She ran after, giggling and holding her arms out at her sides to let the wind push her along. You started up a leaf fight, and right in the middle she kissed you and then ran off to hide in the school. Somehow she got home without taking the late bus.

"That Monday, your relationship went back to the way it was before Halloween. Madison started dating other boys from the grade and you secretly longed for her. One time during recess, Joey Kennedy bragged about touching her boob and you made it a point to never talk to him again.

"After Easter break, Madison started talking to you again, but this time was different. She'd talk of nothing but kissing and boys, and most times you'd have to sit with your backpack on your lap. Sometimes when you said something funny, or sometimes when you said anything at all, she would laugh and touch her hand to your forearm. On the last day of seventh grade, she gave you her number and told you to call her.

"You called her every week to make plans with her. Each time, she'd agree to meet or call you and each time she never did. She would apologize with such sincerity that you always forgave her. Even that last

time in August, when you swore to yourself you wouldn't forgive her again, she started crying on the phone about how much she missed her father and you spent the next three hours talking her down.

"When Madison got on the bus with flowers in her hair that first day of eighth grade, you gave her the special rock from your trip to Crater Lake that you had been waiting to give her since June. It was white with red speckles and shaped like a dime store snow globe. The bottom was as smooth as polished granite, and when you held it at an angle to the sky, pure light reflected back. She said thank you and put it in her backpack without looking at it.

"It took you a few months to get over her indifference, but eventually you did. You started talking to Benedicte Delacroix, who sat next to you in math class. One day you suggested she should come over to your house to work on homework and she agreed. You were the last two to get on the bus that day, running across the parking lot in a strong rain. You smiled at Madison as you climbed the bus steps and she quickly looked away. As you passed her seat, you sensed movement and turned to see her lunging at your waist. She grabbed hold of your belt loops and pulled, bringing your uniform pants to your knees.

"She smiled now, like how she smiled when she used to touch your arm with your backpack on your lap. You wanted to hit her. You wanted her to get the uneven end of the trade for once. But all you did was pull up your pants while the younger kids laughed at you. She invited Benedicte to sit with her and Benedicte accepted, looking you up and down from her seat with a face that asked why you were still standing there. As they laughed

and gossiped together, you sat two rows behind them, looking out at the rain and plotting their deaths.

"When it was time to get off the bus and Benedicte asked if you wouldn't mind if she went home with Madison, you didn't bother responding. You got to your house and opened your math notebook, where you started with algebra but ended with profanities and ill-formed hate etched into your paper with forceful pen presses. Your math notebook turned into your first journal that day, and your first poem followed a month later."

Ernesto lies there for a few moments, staring up at the sky. He has no idea where that just came from. The words had simply flowed from his mouth, each new sentence appearing like another boxcar on an impossibly long freight train. As he lifts himself, still seated, his eyes fall on the statue of San Juan. The statue looks skyward, arms out to the side in a pose of complete surrender. Ernesto jumps up and tears across the courtyard, holding up the length of his habit like a sundress.

Without reservation, he bursts into the monastery's modest chapel, where the brothers are praying the Glorious Mysteries.

"Brother Pierre, I've found it!"

Brother Pierre looks up from the front row pew as if roused from sleep. "What?"

"My inner peace, I've found my inner peace!"

"Really? Already?"

"Yes! Isn't that fantastic?"

Brothers shift on kneelers and sigh deeply. He can sense the irritation, but Ernesto's too high above it.

"But you've only been out in the courtyard a half an hour."

"Brother, I've been 'out in the courtyard' my entire life. The answer was there all along; I was just too prideful to accept it. I asked God, Brother. I asked God...for help...and he responded! He spoke *through* me; about the girl that pantsed me in eighth grade and suddenly it all came together. My poetry hadn't been about celebrating anything; it had been about proving some girl wrong. And how long can you really expect to draw inspiration from something like that?"

Brother Pierre looks at Ernesto curiously.

"Monty, did you...not believe in God before?"

"I mean, yea, kinda. I mean, I more believed in his *principles* than...*him*. But, look, that's over now. I was *wrong*. I couldn't find my peace until now, but...once I opened up to God he came and *showed* me the root of all my distress. The words came out of me without any thought. It was just so...clear and mapped out. It was miraculous. And now I understand while you're all so peaceful. It's not solitude or celibacy or some sense of sacrifice. It's surrender. Surrender to an all powerful being that loves you and will take care of you.

"And brothers, I know I sound crazy and I wouldn't even believe me. Why should God come through me and not one of you – so much holier, such better servants? But it's true. I see this whole urge to join the brotherhood wasn't even my idea. It was God speaking to me and I was too self-absorbed to see it. But I laid down outside, in the dust, in our

origins...and God came through me and showed me *my* origins. And I don't know how else I could convince you, but that's what it is."

The mood has changed. What was once impatience has turned to compassion. Brother Pierre smiles at Ernesto like you would at a child who's just discovered some small wonder out in the garden.

"Well...let's stay out there a couple more days. Just to be sure."

"Yes brother, whatever you say."

Ernesto doesn't move. He just stands there, face beaming.

"Okay, you can go back now."

"May I say one more thing?"

"Yes."

"I also realized something on the run over here – something I've been lying about all this time. My name isn't Ernesto – it's Monty. Montgomery Jackson. I'm done being dishonest with myself.

"I think I always hated my name as a kid. It sounds like some old Southern General in a white suit. I changed it as soon as I could get away with lying about it. But no more being dishonest with myself."

The mood of the room shifts yet again, this time from benevolence to confusion. Brother Pierre speaks up.

"Okay. Thank you, Monty."

"And if anyone goes to see Brother Paul tonight...the heart thing, I feel real bad about that. Please tell him I said hello and I'm sorry."

To the surprise of the Brothers of the San Juan monastery, Montgomery Jackson had seen the light. After the chapel door closed that

day and Monty went back to meditation, he did not speak again, save for scripture reading and morning vespers, for the rest of the year. For Monty, it was not a discipline of the mind. He simply no longer had anything to say; all the inner battles had been decided. He would take his portions as they were passed around the dinner table and listen with great pleasure to the brothers when someone had made a small personal discovery in prayer or scripture and wanted to share.

He had also abandoned the idea of writing poetry altogether. He viewed it as the genesis of an unhappy life, and while he knew there was nothing wrong with it intrinsically, he no longer wanted it to be apart of his life. Whether or not that decision had been spurred on by his dreams failing to return to him, Monty cared not to dwell on.

The poetic spirit did not leave him, however. Now, rather than feel a need to channel and control beauty with words, he let the beauty of the world collect within him, unexpressed and uncontaminated by the corruption that is motive. By the time he was ready to travel back to Saint John's for his initiation, his capacity to pick up on the subtleties of a silence or recognize the faintest trace of anxiety on someone's face was as delicate and fine tuned as a Stradivarius.

So when taking that first step into the school auditorium, Monty can't help but shudder. There is so much fruitless energy expenditure in the space, much more than his new constitution is comfortable with. His only comfort comes from the children present, chasing each other through theatre seating and making paper airplanes out of programs.

He spots Helena, Austin and Trenton waiting by the entrance at the other end of the auditorium and flags them over. He's charged with excitement to see them, but as they get closer, the excitement is replaced with sadness. They look miserable. Since the last time he's seen her, Helena's face has changed to where even her neutral expression has been pinched and furrowed by anger. Austin does his yacht club strut, with his chest puffed out till his nipples stick out from his knit shirt like two small stacks of pennies. As for Trent, all the childhood joy and innocence he sees in the other children is completely missing. Still, this doesn't prevent him from tenderly embracing each one of them, much to the discomfort of Austin.

"It's good to you all again. Helena, Austin, I'm sorry for any grief I caused by having Trent go home with Mrs. Siti that night. I was unused to God's presence in me."

Now it's Helena's turn to look uncomfortable. "A...pology accepted. So God, huh? I didn't know you were interested in that sort of thing."

"I wasn't, Helena. I'm very lucky God choose to save me."

Helena starts rummaging through her purse as she talks. Monty can tell she's not intending to find anything. "Well, I have to hand it to you, Monty, you do seem like a happier person. If that's God doin that, than I think that's just *great*."

"Helena, I'd like to talk to you about God before I go back to the monastery."

Helena looks up sharply from her purse. “Yea. Yes. Lets do that. Yea. You know, I’m going to use the bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

Helena escapes out the auditorium door and the men are left to fend for themselves. Austin looks pissed.

“Austin, I was very sorry to hear about the verdict.”

“Yea. It’s all politics and bullshit, you know.”

“How long are you banned from the arena?”

“Pretty much forever. Yea. But, like I said, you know, political bullshit, you know. They couldn’t spot a true fan if he bit *all* the ref’s in the face.”

“You sound angry, Austin. Are you angry?”

“I’m gonna hit the head and then find a seat. But good luck up there, I’ll see you after the show.”

“Thanks.”

Monty smiles placidly at Trent.

“So are you happy, Monty?” he asks, adjusting his monogrammed tie clip.

“Yes, Trent.”

As Trent looks up, his eyes thin a little. “Really? You don’t miss your old self at all?”

“Why would I miss that which caused me so much pain?”

“Well, from what I recall it wasn’t all pain. In fact, I recall a lot of times where I thought you were the happiest person I knew. You know, it was only for about six months that you didn’t like yourself. Seems like an

awfully short amount of time to up and abandon some pretty defining life decisions.”

“Are you afraid of me changing, Trent?”

“Oh, don’t go all after school special on me. You know it’s not about that and I’d like to believe you hold me in higher regard than that.”

“Why are you angry, Trent? And why do I never see you playing with the other children? Are they mean to you?”

“Get over yourself, Monty. I’m not angry – I’m concerned. You used to be passionate about things; about saving the world and communicating wonder through words, even if you knew both were impossible tasks. I don’t see that anymore.”

“And as for how I choose to live my childhood, there’s more than one way in life to be happy, you used to know that. You taught that to me.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Trent. I can only pray that you one day see things from my perspective.”

“Hey,” Helena interrupts; sounding more excited than Monty can recall in recent memory, “look who I found at the bathrooms!”

She’s older, but it’s undoubtedly her. She has a haircut designed to impress people at airports and skin that speaks of some holistic approach to aging. Dressing her lower half is the most repugnant, hippy-Mom skirt he’s ever seen, made of patchwork fabrics. It’s red and black and lavender and beige, like a gingham tablecloth on acid. It’s only when Monty catches Trent chuckling at him that he manages to compose himself.

“Madison Quigley. May God show mercy on you.”

His eyes immediately widen with realization at what he just said, but Madison hardly seems to notice.

“Monty, it’s so good to see you. But it’s not Madison Quigley anymore, it’s Madison Lincoln.”

“Oh, okay. So are you a parent of a Saint John’s student then?”

Madison laughs like an incumbent governor on the campaign trail.

“Yes, I am parent. In fact, I’m head of the PTA here.”

“Really, that’s great, Madison.”

“Yes, in fact I get to introduce you to the public as a brother on stage today.”

“Really?” Monty says curtly.

“Yea, isn’t that great? What a story you are, Monty. From arts and crafts disaster to Brother in only one year. It’s remarkable how far you’ve come.”

“Yea, yea. The children really liked that.”

“Yea.” Madison clears her throat, and then smiles. “But the clean-up.”

“Mmm-Hmm. Yea, there was probably clean up wasn’t there?”

“Yes, oh yes. But tell me, what was it like out at the monastery. What did you do?”

“Ah, it was...a blur, mostly, really...” Monty has never encountered such a disturbance to his dearly loved peace of mind. Saving grace comes in the form of choir warm-ups. “I think that means I have to start getting ready for the procession.”

“Yes, that’s what it means, Monty. I’ll see you up there.” She steps forward and gives him a hug, and suddenly it’s Monty’s turn to look uncomfortable. “Congratulations. I knew you could turn your life around.”

Trent stays behind as Helena and Madison walk off to find seats.

“Wow. It takes a special breed to act like that on someone’s ordination day.”

“Trent, I can’t be angry at her. She’s just as lost and unhappy as anyone else here.”

“You know the old you wouldn’t even entertain being angry at her. The old you would have been too captivated by her pettiness to even care if you should be angry or not. What happened to that you?”

“That way is over. It came with a person I didn’t like.”

Trent shakes his head. “I don’t know. I guess I just always thought you’d soon as shoot my Mom before you’d change your principles, ‘Ernesto.’”

Trent is halfway to his seat before Monty recovers. A desire to run after Trent comes over him, counterbalanced by the need to prepare for the ordination. He takes a couple steps down the aisle, then back, then a couple more steps down the aisle, and back again until finally he forces himself out the auditorium door.

Stumbling into the hall, Monty can see the procession has already formed over by the other auditorium entrance. He walks over to join them, taking conscious breaths and gripping the rosary beads in his pocket. Monty could tell Trent wasn’t being mean. What’s worse, in all their dealings, he had never known Trent to be wrong. *Did she really just work*

something into the conversation that happened a year ago? Do you think she had been planning what to say ever since she heard you were coming back?

“No!” He mutters to himself. “Stop it. Stop thinking like that.”

Down by the clump of processors, he sees Brothers Paul and Pierre smiling at him. The smile is quickly replaced with a look of concern, and they come out to meet him a distance apart from the crowd.

“Monty, is something the matter?”

“Brother Paul, it was just so certain until I came here. All the restlessness and anxieties were gone; I had never felt such a harmony with everything. With body and world and mind and God – it was all in perfect rhythm. But then I see the girl that pantsed me in eighth grade and Trent’s trying to save me from the death that is happiness and I just don’t know what to think anymore. Again.”

“I mean, I know he’s just trying to help, but –”

“Monty.” Brother Pierre interrupts.

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s okay to be uncertain. We can always just put the ordination ceremony on hold and go on with the feast day mass. Far better to have doubts now than after you’ve taken your vows.”

Monty sags in his spot. “Brother Pierre, why can’t I just be like you? Why can’t I just be happy and placid and certain of myself?”

“Monty, faith isn’t just one burst of divine inspiration. It takes effort and struggle. Everybody has doubts, even the greatest men and

women of the church. I’m no exception. There can be no belief without doubt to define it.”

“But I had no doubts when I was at the monastery. Everything was so certain.”

“Monty,” Brother Paul answers, “If you’re so at peace as to have no doubts, that’s something God would want you to share with the world. We need you out here.”

And somehow, they both make sense. He’s not sure *why* they make sense yet, but it all makes sense to Monty. The logic of it all brings him back to the rhythm, and he releases his death grip on the rosary beads in his pocket.

“Thank you, Brothers. I really needed that.”

“Are you sure everything’s okay?”

“Yea. Yea, I want to do this.”

“Okay. Let’s go over with the other brothers then.”

Monty embraces the two Brothers and together they walk over to the procession. He falls in at the end of the line and puts his hood up, like he’d seen so many other initiate brothers do during his days in elementary school. His face is obscured completely, making him the picture of cloistered life.

The song being sung by the choir concludes. Monty knows what’s next on the playlist: *Corde Natus Ex Parentis*, the traditional Franciscan Brother initiation hymn. There’s a young, innocent-faced alter boy at the front of the line, almost certainly Joey Kennedy’s son because he’s the spitting image of his dad. He looks behind his shoulder tentatively, craving

instruction from some adult to be told when to begin the procession. Brother Paul just smiles at him and nods his head. The boy opens up the auditorium doors and choral harmony floods the hallways like light. It is time for the ordination of Montgomery Jackson.

Inside the auditorium, Monty can sense the pure energy of the room. What was before a collection of frayed nerves and brave fronts is now a venerate, rapt audience, queued by the ceremony of it all: the incense, the draping hoods, the soaring organ work and the choir singing the ancient Latin hymn.

The brothers renewing their vows break off from the procession and seat themselves in the first two rows, leaving Monty to take the stage with the priest, the alter boys and several school administrators. There are two rows of steel folding chairs set up before the red velvet stage curtain: one set for school officials and three chairs stage right for the priest and the alter boys. The room is flush with spiritual scent and the audience Monty now looks out on sits in a half-lidded haze.

Helena, Austin and Trenton sit in the front row right side house, eyes on Monty. Austin and Helena sit serenely; Helena is even smiling at her brother, though it may be incidental. Trent, however, is perhaps too low to the ground for the Frankincense to affect him. He wears the same disdainful face as before, as though spotting a stain on freshly wrapped laundry. He sits between his mother and Madison, who is locked in the same drone-like piety as everyone else. Monty smiles at her, then Trent, and Trent looks away.

The mass' first half progresses as any normal mass might. Monty listens attentively to the reading and sings the psalms joyously. The priest though, God bless him, is the most boring homilist he's ever heard. Before long his mind is wandering, thinking fondly of Brothers Paul and Pierre.

Brother Paul was right, as usual. How could he think of hoarding such peace to himself? It simply wasn't in his character. He had to share his knowledge with the world, as he had for over thirty years with poetry. On feeling the excitement that comes to him at the thought, he proudly realizes this is a fact about himself he can suppress but never deny.

"Please rise for the profession of faith."

As he rises for the Creed, Monty smiles and winks at Trent, and to Monty, Trent's face seems to dare a little hope.

Monty recites the Nicene Creed along with the rest of the crowd. "*For us men and for our salvation, he came down from heaven.*" Yes. He must do the same, so to speak. Come down from the heaven of cloistered life to share his peace. But wait. There's a clenching sensation in Monty's chest. How quickly that peace had evaporated when exposed to the real world. And this, on the day of his ordination ceremony! He's already wrung out from the rigors of today, what kind of assault will his psyche feel in places where God is most in need?

He thinks about this all through the offertory and the preparation of the alter, responding when appropriate as on autopilot. He kneels on stage for the consecration as a matter of course, a move the administrators and other higher-ups on stage follow after distressed glances back and forth. The twenty or so other brother's down in the house follow Monty's

example, and soon the whole auditorium is kneeling on a floor more suited for concession stand messes than reverential presses. Half the kids in the audience can barely see over the seats in front of them.

Fine, he thinks, looking out on the assembly of adults and meercats, *So I won't have peace. It's overrated. I'd rather help someone achieve it than have it anyway.*

His satisfaction with this answer barely lasts a breath as he stands for his Last Supper as a lay person.

“The Body of Christ.”

“Amen.”

Monty sticks his tongue out and the priest applies the host – one of those mass produced, Necco-wafer types that dissolve easily in the mouth. He unconsciously grinds it between his back molars. Without his peace, what is he? A hyperactive man with a penchant for the peculiar. How will that help him as a brother?

“The blood of Christ, my son.”

“Amen.”

Monty takes a rich swig and goes to the kneeling position for reflection. This time, his esteemed chair neighbors choose to sit rather than kneel, eyes closed and hands clasped in an attempt to look passable. No. He is not about to give up. The monastery is no longer an option for him, he can see that, but he'll be damned before he gives in to despair. Not again, like he had with his old life. He will find a way to make this work, even if it means enduring a lifetime of suffering.

The priest and several Eucharistic ministers step down from the stage to distribute communion to the rest of the Mass. The choir starts in on an a cappella version of “How Great Thou Art.” Trent receives the host to his tongue and steps to the side. He genuflects completely, head lowered with reverence, and stays that way for several seconds before crossing himself and returning to sit with his parents. Is it possible that the look he now gives Monty is one of expectation?

Moved by the beauty of the music, Monty bows his hooded head in prayer.

God, you know my hearts intentions, even better than I do. I'm willing to forfeit my peace to serve others, as so many of your servants have done before me. Please...help me find the way to best serve them.

I mean, I know I've asked a lot from you already this past year, but I know you can see—

“Good evening, and welcome to the 83rd annual St. John's parish renewal of vows ceremony.”

Monty opens his eyes. As he was praying the service had moved past Communion and Madison Lincoln had taken the stage. She stands near the stage's edge, front and center, addressing the crowd without the use of a podium, aided only by a mic stand, her memory, and that hideous dress. By now, the enchanting incense has dissipated from the room, and Helena can be seen rolling her eyes at her brother's surprise. Monty gets off his knees and quietly slides back into his chair.

“Today, on the feast day of Saint John, we have the first new initiate into the brotherhood in twelve years.”

He wants to remember this moment as best he can. He starts with Madison and her painfully loud dress. What an interesting choice by God to bring her back into his life in this way. It amazes him how much she still looks like that girl with the flowers in her hair. From over her shoulder, Monty can see paint chipping on the ceiling roughly in the shape of Snoopy. All these years since he went to school here and they still haven’t fixed it. Toward the back of the room, two older boys are balling up tiny pieces of the service’s program and surreptitiously throwing them into the folds of poor old sister Olympia’s habit, just like they used to do thirty years ago. Their faces are beat red with suppressed laughter.

“Now back in the stone ages, before video games or even the internet.” Polite laughter. “Brother Monty and I used to take the bus to school together.”

He had been looking at this all wrong. Missing out on peace isn’t something to mourn or suffer in silence about. Decrepitude, irreverence, decay, childhood heartache: He wants it all. He thought peace was to surrender to God – and it is. He just isn’t ready to surrender. For every broken heart there’s a leaf geysir at its core, and for all your million Madison’s there’s an Almond.

“But Monty had to find his bottom first. A year ago today, he destroyed all the arts and crafts projects up for Parent Teacher night in a fit of rage and confusion. That’s next Tuesday at 8, by the way.”

Why did he do that to Almond, just up and leave her like that?

There had been differences of opinion for sure, but she was a special person to him. She didn’t deserve to be told about their break-up by a nephew; she didn’t deserve such lack of regard. Why hadn’t he contacted her?

Almond. Almond.

“I talked with him before the service today and can claim he stands before us a changed man: respectful, soft-spoken, humbled.”

He looks at Madison. He looks at that God-awful skirt, now recognizing its pattern as a swatch from his sewing kit. He looks out at the children with their unchanged faces in an unchanged auditorium. He looks at Helena, Austin, Saint Paul and Brother Pierre. He looks at Trenton Salem Bismark, his anti-inner child. He looks at Madison.

In this supposed year of otherworldly sensations, it’s good to feel something equally as powerful but much more familiar. It’s a sensation he hasn’t felt in a long time – much, much too long. It’s the return of his creativity - that feeling that beats anything God has to offer. Spiritual epiphanies are given by the grace of God; with a creative epiphany, you *are* God. He looks at Madison.

Ernesto smiles.

“So please allow me to introduce our native son and local boy done good, the soon to be Brother Montgomery.”

He’s halfway to her by the time she turns, crouched low and skittering like a crazed leprechaun with a switchblade. His hands catch true to the psychedelic fabric. There’s a collective gasp.

Granny Panties.

It's always in moments as this, clutching a skirt and looking at a confused audience, that Ernesto is uncertain of what to do next. Always except for this moment. He drops the skirt, stands up, and dares to pierce the deafening silence.

“MY NAME IS ERNESTO BYERS! AND I AM A POET!”

Bedlam erupts. Kids pointing and howling, adults smirking and “coughing” into their hands. Some of the more conservative parents clutch their children’s heads to their breasts, outraged. Ernesto looks to the front row. Helena and Austin are already making their way up a side aisle, leaving Trent by himself. He masks his face with his hand, shaking his head and smiling. He doesn’t dare look at the brothers, feeling their disapproval like a strong wind against his back. He wishes he could explain.

Next to him stands Madison, holding her dress up at the waist. Ernesto’s hood obscures her face from view, but her breasts seem to quiver with rage. What to say to your grade school love after you’ve pantsed her in front of the entire school?

“Well...bye.”

He leaps off the stage, habit fluttering, and hits the ground running, up the middle aisle to the tune of children’s squeals. With each step, the attunement of monastic life fades, like the dimming of a candle at the end of its wax. He feels the warmth from the children to its last.

He bursts out into the hallway and makes for the parking lot, arts and crafts projects swirling around him. The leaf geysers are in rare form

today – red, yellow, brown and orange; ten feet tall and thick as Live Oak branches.

He runs around the near abandoned lot, laughing and playing, crashing through geysers and stuffing leaves in his robes like they’re dollar bills in a game show phone booth.

He hops in the Coupe Deville, War's *Low Rider* blasting, bloated with leaves and punch drunk with possibility. He’ll set it right with Almond first thing. Everything will be okay; he’s good at persuasion. And he’ll help. He’ll care again like he used to. That’s what he’d been missing.

Leaves billow from the windows as he drives off to an uncertain horizon. Back to Almond, back to start a new chapter. There’s finally work to be done.