

Rooms

Black plastic Jesus' legs end just below his knees. Most of his waist is marred by bite marks. The rest of him is splintered up somewhere in my stomach. My mouth is always occupied: everything is a pacifier. But this is something they don't have meetings for, something that can't be prayed into submission. You're just supposed to smoke a million cigarettes a day, like everyone else, which I do; that and coffee, drink a lot of coffee, chew on the red plastic stirrer. Coffee and cigarettes are famous for going together well, but everyone knows booze and cigarettes are even better. You know it, I know it, black plastic Jesus knows it. That's a joke. Black plastic Jesus doesn't know anything.

He's the big hoorah at the end of the rosary, a string necklace with black plastic beads that are supposed to be fingered and muttered over in prayer. I used to wear it to meetings because I thought it might make me look more sincere. Eventually I realized that sitting in the back and slobbering all over a crucifix probably didn't make me look any more sincere, but what the hell. I wasn't going to stop wearing it just because of sincerity or lack thereof. Maybe when the string finally snaps, which doesn't look like it will take long. I can't imagine I'll want to put in the effort to fix it. It's a piece of trash.

At Monday meetings in the church basement there's a husband and wife who met in the rooms. They married at the altar above our heads and probably held their reception right here, with all the guests unstacking cheap church chairs to sit on and then stacking them again once it was over. Someone bringing donuts. A few serenity prayers thrown in for good measure. I'm being mean because the husband and wife don't seem at all lonely. Tonight's speaker is the wife, and she's talking about repetition. She says there are two types of repetition: a bird stabbing open your stomach and eating your liver every day, or going to meetings. She says everyone gets to choose which kind of repetition they want, as though choosing one cancels out the other. Do you like repetition? Do you want to hear more about Jesus?

My boyfriend and I were wandering around a town we didn't live in with a bottle of whiskey that we couldn't legally possess because we were both seventeen. A handsome young vagrant stopped us on the street to give me a flower. One thing led to another and soon I was trading a kazoo for black plastic Jesus. For a red velvet bandana that was usually used to tie my wrists together, my boyfriend got broken toe-nail clippers that once belonged to Frank Sinatra, Jr.

The vagrant only spoke in fragments: I imagined his words coming out of his mouth in sloppy childhood script. He had a face of angles and eyes like black buttons beneath yarny brows. There was a woman with him who didn't speak and who the vagrant referred to

alternatively as his sister and his girlfriend. He had plans to hike to Colorado. We had plans to be drunk forever.

We shared the bottle of whiskey, which sister-girlfriend studied at length every time it got passed to her. Every minute it was in her hands was a minute it wasn't in mine. We sat on a porch plastered in concert posters, looking out at the main street. The porch belonged to a very old southern hippie who belonged to a music shop and who thought I was just about the most picturesque thing he'd ever seen with my little green dress and flower in my hair and black plastic Jesus around my neck. He came out from around back where sunflowers were growing like crazy and pretended to be furious that there were teenagers and ropers on his porch. We passed him the bottle. At some point, sister-girlfriend passed out and fell into a bush. Later, when the whiskey and some other things were gone, my boyfriend and I crept back to my parent's car and fell asleep. I could live that day over forever. Nearly nothing bad happened, if you can believe it.

Six years later I made ninety meetings in ninety days. I found a sponsor I wouldn't have to talk to, mostly because people are so eager to be someone's sponsor and I can't stand their enthusiasm, or turning them down. The meetings go on and on and on, hour-long increments of the rest of my life. Tonight, the room is full of people I know, people who are mostly nicer than me. The mom whose daughter is headed down the same bad path. The three old men whose years of sobriety haven't been enough to fully restore their speech or equilibrium. The girl who pronounces DWI like "deewee" and reminds me of a puppy, always wanting to bond over shitty boyfriends and absent fathers. I haven't had a boyfriend in forever. My father is still here. That's not my problem.

Usually, the things I have to say about the past involve apologies. Sorry, I did not intend to throw up Manischewitz in your bed while you were away. Sorry, I did not mean to steal your pants and wallet and run away because of things the coke made me think. For drinking all your rum, then your vodka, then your rum again. For saying it felt like rape when you touched me, which was not true. For taking money from your smiley-face piggy bank. For telling you how I really felt even when I knew it would hurt you. For showing up at your apartment and screaming, four in the morning and your brother was sleeping. For making your dad drive me home when I couldn't walk. Sorry for Geneseo, also for New Paltz. For telling your boyfriend you cheated on him. For pissing the bed on New Year's Eve. For showing you my tits. For sleeping with Scotty. For being mean to you on the fire escape. Sorry, sorry, sorry.

I had a pretty good friend when I started coming to meetings, so I chewed the fat more than black plastic Jesus, but a few weeks went by where I didn't hear from her and then I heard she was dead. The last time we fellowshipped she was saying she didn't like needing a higher power, felt like they were trying to sell her something she wasn't buying. I was raised Catholic and used to it. She was barely raised at all, never mind trained in one religion or another. I told her I agreed, but that wasn't enough to stop coming. It doesn't cost anything to

listen to bullshit, if everything else keeps you sober. She thought that was easy for me to say, because I came into it with faith. "That's what that rosary's for, right?"

They warn you to never leave the rooms: you just can't ever leave, no one ever makes it out there. Everyone comes back, or dies. A point I guess my dead friend proved. So I do it, I keep coming back. Not like I have less things to apologize for these days, but at least I know why I do the shit that needs to be apologized for. I hope the vagrant is in Colorado. I hope that sister-girlfriend is still alive. I don't know where Frank Sinatra Jr.'s toe-nail clippers are now, or that boyfriend. I certainly don't know where the red velvet bandana is. Probably disintegrated into the soil of an empty lot somewhere. Most everything from then is trash by now.

But black plastic Jesus is right here in my hand. I'm not thinking of anything. I don't want to worry about anything besides my dwindling supply of cigarettes. Many ways to go about pacifying yourself, and this one is fine for now. I go around in a circle, every bead leads to another bead, and I wind up back with black plastic Jesus on his cross, his head lowered as though looking at the mess I have made of his legs.

I've made a mess out of everything, Jesus. What makes you so fucking special? I put the beads around my neck and him back where he belongs.

It's time to get up now, and hold everyone's hand for the Serenity Prayer. I wind up holding the hand of the electrician who ran over his own dog. It's hardened like one big callous. On the other side, someone I don't know, a big guy with a widow's peak and a striped, collared shirt. He's sweaty and holding his hand is difficult, it makes me want to drink, this strange wet hand squeezing mine. When I open my mouth to speak, Jesus pops out and falls down to my chest, sharp end gunning for my heart.

Flush

Which all reminds me of the thing I have been meaning to contemplate. Of going to the mountains in Virginia and climbing some summit, where at the top I saw it all: the mountain and the next mountain and the mountain behind that one and the mountain behind that one and the mountain behind the mountain behind the mountain behind the mountain, and the sun doing the holy breaking through the clouds, and the clouds low down and golden, the trees growing spiny and the wind ruining everything as usual and the whole entire splendor of it that made me think of nothing but glaciers. Not like Kansas, where there was the corn and the crows and the long bluesy hum of nothing coming up to distill you. You knew you could die walking towards the sunset. In Kansas a great adoration swelled up inside me. I need things to end.

Holy shit, across the street, I just saw this through a window: a man was lifting a baby over his head and then the baby just disappeared! I could make up a magic trick where you throw a baby up into the air and it disappears back inside its mother's womb, and she goes into re-labor right there and I deliver it like a midwife. If I could do a trick like that I would be rich no doubt and wouldn't be needing to buy all my drinks on credit like nothing will ever catch up to me. I would be a real good thing to have around. I would be baby powder. And I would be swimming in cigarettes which reminds me that I have some. Whoopee.

These aren't my cigarettes. They must be from the man I met in the pizza place, when I said something about Spinoza and so did he, so I said we should get married, and then off we were going to have bad stiff sex in his stupid J.C. Penney catalog bed. That was not very long ago but I can't remember anything except there was a Miller High Life I must have drank on the table next to it. So I deserve these cigarettes. Hardly anyone deserves anything, least of all me, but still.

Like, how about that time in the mountains when I saw a pheasant? It was spectacular because things are going to be whatever they happen to be being at the time and no amount of anything can make them something different. I'd rather it have been a big gray rabbit or a little brown bear but I was happy seeing a pheasant tall as a toddler walking through the woods where you are always so alone with the things that do not love you. When you look at a tree fallen over and the roots, they seem too small and thin. And the more you look the more foreign they seem until it seems like they don't belong here, that they belong here even less than humans do, which is certainly saying something seeing as how ever since Adam we've been running around scared shitless of this alien world where we weren't meant to be and aren't loved by anything. But remember: sometimes in the woods you find a stream with the sunlight all over it and a little sound it doesn't even know it's making, the thinnest trickle of water down the side of the mountain, the striations, the shimmery – did I light a cigarette?

Oh, fuck me if fluffy dogs aren't truly the best dogs, something proven time and again when they are being walked down the street I am walking down. Like right now. When I try to smile at the woman walking her big fluffy dog she gets a look on her face like me trying to show appreciation for how much fur her dog has grown has made her night worse. Which is why I don't even want to consider Brooklyn half the time, even though the voices on Flatbush Avenue get me sentimental. True, sometimes I happen to be up with the sun, 6am or so on the 3rd floor and there's the rooftops smoking, the birds you can hear for the first and only time all day, the downsloped clothesline. Then I feel a god wrapped around my neck like a live mink and I dropped my cigarette.

Greenwood Cemetery is a good place to stop and think about death and how we all can rest assured: someday, the ways you have screwed up will not matter at all. This is the way I need to think mornings after I drink too much and have said one or more terrible things to people I don't know well enough to get away with saying such things to. Even at 6am, all there is out the window is the big hopeless with the life you laid out before you, a mountain, endless ruining everything you do. Shut up. Whisper it aloud to the corpses on the other side of the fence. I won't get pregnant, not again this time, I'm pretty sure. You know how the mistakes are. All the people there buried with their mistakes that I'll never know about, that no one will ever know about. What a fucking relief. Death is the better god for folk like me. I can't say it maketh me to lie down in green pastures, because it doth not do that, but lo – here is the all-nite diner where they soon will be bringing unto me a plate of French fries, and an egg cream if I can afford it, which I can as I am flush with infinite American credit and all the baby powder in heaven.

The Baby

The baby was born with red hair. Also, an abnormally large hole. There is a birth certificate; there are many pictures. All the evidence exists, if you need it.

“Not to worry,” said the doctor. “Everyone’s different. She’s a beautiful baby.”

The hole would close up at some point – all holes did. Still the mother worried, comparing it to the holes she saw on other babies: quarter-sized gaps in palms, a pint glass circumference in a thigh, a space just a little bigger than a piercing in an earlobe. The baby’s hole looked nothing like the other holes she saw.

“It’s not normal,” the mother would say. The fabric of every onesie lay loose and slack over the baby’s belly with its hole the size of a saucer. “What will people think of us?”

But the doctor, at each check-up and vaccination, just ran his fingers around the hole, making the baby laugh, and nodded. “She’s fine. Don’t worry.” There are vaccination records.

At the end of the baby’s first year, they moved to be closer to the mother’s family. Her parents and friends adored the baby, who was so calm and light she could be put on a lap and nearly forgotten about. The father, unemployed, stayed home with her. He drank often, but not too much. Every morning he took her to the bakery and the park. Sometimes they met the mailman, from whom the baby hid despite his attempts to charm her. Sometimes the woman at the bakery gave the baby a buttery, sprinkled cookie. The father expected the hole to close up while the baby looked sparkling back at the woman behind the counter or hid from the mailman behind her chubby hands, or best case, while he pushed her on the swings. There are stories about the mailman, the baker, the swing set. But the hole did not close up in the baby’s second year.

The baby, and they assumed this was because of the hole, started talking late, and used few words. All the mother’s friends had normal babies, normal children, normal lives with no problems and happiness all the time forever. At the mother’s insistence, the doctor – the new doctor – gave her a referral for a psychologist who would test the baby.

“If they say she’s special needs, we’ll get government assistance,” said the father, still unemployed, drinking more. The mother thought everyone should have regular needs. That year, the father spent days unable to leave the bedroom. He kept the baby in the bed with him or put her in front of the television. The baby passed the test, was normal. Everyone was normal. There is a record of the baby’s test results.

The baby turned three and someone brought a human-sized inflatable banana wearing sunglasses and a Hawaiian shirt to her party. Everyone watched to see if the hole would close up at the sight of it, but it did not. It was still a good party. They took pictures of the baby’s reaction, the hole a faint outline under her shirt. In the background, the father is smiling and holding a beer.

“Do you think she knows the hole is there?” the mother asked one night when the baby was sleeping and the father was sober. The mother’s frettings got on the father’s nerves. As did the baby’s growing language, her ability to make more and more inane desires known.

“She doesn’t know anything,” he said. “That’s the point.”

What the baby had done on the day she stood crying at the top of the stairs remains unknown. It must have been very bad, because the father screamed at her from the bottom of the stairs. She cried for her mother and he screamed that her mother wasn’t there, that only he was there. His face was red and he spit when he shouted. She clutched her blanket to her side, she stuck her fingers in her mouth, the light fell through the window in an afternoon way. Pain rippled through her body as the hole finally sewed itself shut.

That night, the baby lay in bed holding the place where the hole had been, terrified, not knowing how she was meant to go through the rest of her life without it. There was too much flesh now. She was too much body. Now, when things hurt, she would have to feel it forever: the only record invisible, the only evidence inside.