Made Holy

Michael Downs

St. James Infirmary

After Jim died, his house fell into the custody of a violinist who drove a small hatchback that looked like a black soybean, if a soybean were decorated with affirming bumper stickers. Jim had been a choir director for a Lutheran church, and the violinist was a friend. She hired contractors to reclaim the basement that Jim had left flooded knee-high and to dispose of the packaged underwear he'd bought in bulk rather than do laundry in the flooded basement.

Then came a family with boxes to live in Jim's house, to eat at his table, to stretch out on his mattresses, to sit on his chesterfield sofa. This was late summer. The oldest of the two daughters practiced clarinet, and through open windows her notes came innocent and bright. A yellow bus arrived each day to pick her up for school; she, the only passenger. Sheri and Michael, who lived two doors away, said they'd heard that this service meant the family had been homeless. Why that would be so, Michael and Sheri didn't understand, though who but a homeless family would seek shelter among the furnishings of a dead man?

Robert, the husband in that family, repeated over and over for neighbors, us, his sad tale. He explained to Joyce as they stood in the street and then again across her fence, to Bert from his driveway, to Michael as he walked

with the dogs, to Sylvia in her backyard. Big and unshaven, Robert spoke of his tenure as an Episcopal priest, of the parish he'd recently lost. He detailed for all the unholy conspiracies and politics, the enemies who hid behind brocaded curtains, the vague betrayals, and incomprehensible motivations. Neighbors would nod along, confused by his homilies, then turn to a chore that required their attention.

But not Sylvia, who in her seventies and with no hobbies enjoyed a wide-open schedule. At a small table shaded by her patio awning from the July sun, she offered a glass of chilled white wine, and Robert accepted. This was at noon. He'd talk. Then he'd pour himself another. Then another. She'd find an uncorked bottle. Then it was four o'clock.

"He never leaves!" she later brayed to Michael. "He won't go home."

Each weekday, Robert's wife drove to a job. On the weekends, she mowed the yard. She never visited with neighbors. She worked and mowed and worked and mowed until the day she packed their car with boxes and with the daughters, then drove away from Jim's house forever.

For a time, through the windows, neighbors glimpsed Robert lumbering from room to room. But no garbage can appeared at the curb on collection days. And he did not come outdoors to bring details of this fresh sad tale. Then, one afternoon when leaves fell, the violinist arrived in her tiny car. Robert had slipped away, she told neighbors. No one on Sefton Avenue had noticed.

Let them go, let them go, God bless them, wherever they may be.

Bible Study

Today's lesson: that number who have his name and the name of his Father written on their foreheads and so have places reserved in heaven.

"Like a restaurant," says Sister Dorothea. "There are only so many tables. You can't seat everyone. You can't even seat all the ones you'd like. But it's not true that He lets the others go hungry. Because to be in the sight of God is to be fed with his love."

Joyce sets her rock-solid bohunk jaw. A devoted twice-each-year-Lutheran, she's thankful that Sister Dorothea visits, bringing God and the Bible each Thursday at ten a.m.—to the porch on pleasant days like today, into the house when it's cold or hot. But this? Only 144,000 pass through Heaven's gate? And most have already arrived?

"According to Scripture," says Sister Dorothea, and she nods. She points her wrinkled finger to a page in *The Watchtower* and to another in her Bible, open to Revelation. The pointing fingernail is neatly trimmed and polished.

Joyce can't —won't—believe this. You cannot tell her that, after sixty-some years, after cigarettes and litter boxes and hairballs, after decades of Orioles misery, after high blood pressure, her father's death, her mother's long and painful passing, her own crappy colon, the cramps and shits and resections, after a life spent living with and loving that faithless wench Baltimore—Baltimore!—you cannot tell her that when she dies God won't lift her to that better place where she'll find her mother and father, young and healthy as they were when she was a girl eating egg-custard snowballs on the eastside. You cannot tell her she won't wear that dress again, the one in which she felt pretty, and that her mother won't hold her and smell of baked sweets, and that her father won't sing the old songs—you can't tell her this, Joyce won't hear of it—because otherwise, Sister Dorothea, what the hell's the point?

For I Was Thirsty, and Ye Gave Me Drink

More Eeyore than woman, the prostitute who has moved in with Bobby shuffles toward them. Damp leaves glisten along the curb where Joyce—rake in hand—enjoys a cigarette break, where Michael in his car idles with driver's side window lowered so he and Joyce can talk yesterday's Ravens game. In the sideview mirror: the prostitute, her reflection filling the glass until she's upon them. Face grim as a brick, shoulders sloped into her breasts, old jeans and dirty sneakers, a sweatshirt. Her life: passenger seats in strange cars, a new john behind each steering wheel, short drives, then long walks back to Sefton Avenue, Bobby's place, what neighbors rightly call the drug house. Or a detour to Harford Road for Little Betty snack cakes at the Shell station, or for heroin.

In the months the prostitute has lived on Sefton, Tracy has called police about her. Joyce has made snide jokes, muttered small cruelties. Called her ho. Snickered.

Now, an autumn morning. Bright air, cold sun. "Bum a smoke?" she says. "I'll pay it back."

Her own cigarette balanced between her lips, Joyce straightens up, digs into her pants pocket.

"Here, hon," she says. "Take the pack. Give some to Bobby."

"I'll pay you back."

"Not to worry, hon."

The prostitute Eeyores on, toward Little Bettys, gel caps carrying dope.

Joyce looks from the question on Michael's face to the leaves yet to fall, cigarette still perched as if by miracle on her lower lip, its smoke threading the air.

"Bobby won't get any," she says.

Joyeux Noël

Merry Christmas, Joyce. How's Fran?

"She's got my shoe halfway up her butt," says Joyce.

But at the casino near Baltimore's harbor on this Christmas Day, Joyce's longtime partner sits comfortably, as if nothing's wedged between ample tush and swivel-seat cushion at the quarter slots. If you ask her, it's grumpy Joyce who has something up her butt, but after all these decades, she knows Joyce will get over it. Jesus is born and died and gone to Heaven whether Fran spends today at the casino or not. So she presses the button again, watches colorful lights spin and flash, listens to the machines sing and swoosh and jingle.

They give you bonus cash on Christmas Day. What the casino calls Stocking Stuffers.

Fran won't drink, but she likes how the cocktail waitresses dress like elves and reindeer. She likes how they smile and wish her Merry Christmas, though they don't know her. She likes the bright star hung overhead, with a little engine that murmurs and turns the star to throw sparkly light across the casino carpet, across Fran's face. She likes that anytime she wants she can swivel on her seat, turning from all this worldliness, to find and enter her quiet place, and to hope.

Made Holy

Over several years, the violinist who owned Jim's house rented to an array of tenants with little in common but a willingness to let the grass grow uneven and weedy, the bushes leggy and coarse. When the violinist's own daughter had grown into an adult, those tenants made way, and the daughter, lithe and elfin, moved in.

She paid bills with help from a candy-box assortment of housemates, some who stayed a few months and others a few years. They included several smokers, a dog owner, a barista, and one woman who dug and planted a backyard garden, then neglected it. Someone once propped open the screen door to the backyard with an upholstered arm chair, and it stayed for years, though no one ever sat in it. When it became difficult to find new roommates, the violinist's daughter rented a furnished room to strangers through an online marketplace, thirty dollars a night. She also hosted house concerts, intimate gatherings at which she encouraged ten-dollar donations. The guests were a few dozen, the music acoustic and quiet, the concerts done by ten p.m. She gave neighbors no reason to complain. When advertising the shows, she called each "A Concert at St. James."

Manna

As if dropped from heaven, the shreds—fluffy and white—come to rest on a car's hood, lie on a porch's brick rail, settle atop mulch in a garden. Leave them or clean them up, it doesn't matter. The gauziest of white bread, with rain they'll melt into paste, dry into dust. Ants will steal away with the motes.

Tomorrow, Sylvia—bikinied and ready for a float—will scoop a soggy dollop out of her Doughboy pool. Next week, one of Kristen's boys will lift a morsel to his mouth, and she'll snap, "Ah, ah, don't eat that!" Or maybe that's a month from now.

If God is the origin of all things, then it follows: this miracle begins with God. But Joyce plays a part, too. Each morning, from atop the back-door stoop, she tosses white bread hunks to a shaded spot under the cedar. Birds come as multitudes. House finches and sparrows, jays and red-eyed pigeons and grackles. City birds: rough as men on nearby Harford Road whose cardboard signs describe their homelessness and need. The birds crowd roof lines, power wires, fence posts, and rose bushes. They swarm the maple, the cedar, a dogwood, an oak. Branches teem with feathers. Bird shit spatters parked cars.

Perilous, their hunger. A goshawk once swooped into Joyce's yard and gutted a feeding pigeon. Feral cats stalk fledglings. So as not to eat at death's table, birds beak what bread they can and lift it into trees and eaves. Sometimes,

harassed by fellows wanting the same bite, one drops the prize. Like that: abundance becomes loss. Michael's dog sniffs out the fluff and swallows it.

When bread falls from the sky, and there's an explanation, some might say it's no miracle.

But if you are a bird, how to explain the goodness of Joyce? How can anyone explain hands from car windows passing crumpled bills to the rough men of Harford Road?