

Feral Paradise

But god he does look good on TV. He's a man who knows something, a man you can trust, a man who has seen and heard and felt our lord. He carries in his pocket the secret map to paradise. He's up there, above us all, at his pulpit, pacing the stage, a microphone in one hand and the open book in the other, reading aloud about Jesus and squealing pigs, comparing us to pork, asking us to stop waddling in the sty, calling us to join with him to give Christ our soul and sacrifice. Listen to him, follow him, he'll keep you on the true path, he's your guide to glory and eternity. The road is rocky, the forest deep and dark. There are lions, wolves and leopards. Devils and harlots hide behind bushes. Satan sends out a heavy fog that smells of lust and perfume. On TV he's a central casting wet dream.

From the back of the car he says, "God is the biggest something of all time."

He says, "I want to die with my bible in my hand."

He has a Christian Now reporter beside him. These are his usual quotes. She writes them down word for word.

He says, "We all need salvation. God is a poem without words. Life, without god, is impossible: that is an irrefutable fact."

We call him Andy among the help, somebody's wise ass comment, finding comparison with the dead star, the vacuous attitude hiding shallow waters, which is unfair to Warhol, who was never stupid, and we worry he might really be as he is. Who wants to work for an empire built by someone so unaware? My resume, please.

"There's this sky," he says, "it has a horizon. If you look, and you're on a mountain and you see how it curves and fades. And that is how I see faith. It is like an envelope you lick shut and put on a French stamp and send it off in the mail."

He's in his pale white cotton suit, with the bright blue pocket square. It's his summer outfit, his enormous closet full of different colored suits, enough he could go a month of Sundays and still not wear the same one. He's let his hair grow on top, so it's almost a pompadour. There's his scent, his expensive cologne, something taut and sweet. His sunglasses are too big for his face, but they do hide his eyes.

"All nature is but a pale imitation of god. In the Garden, we had perfection; this is just a poor facsimile, tainted by our original sin."

The reporter smells like soap and shampoo. She's poised, obviously intelligent. Christian journalism is big right now, bringing in a lot of ad money, and it pays well, and I've found writers will pretty much write what they're told to write, if the check is big enough. Her crinoline dress is pressed and sharp. She's crossed her legs, turning towards him, her notebook on her knee. Her

highlighted brown hair falls in stiff curls down to her shoulders. When she crosses her legs I hear the zing of her white tinted hose rubbing together. You have to like that.

“I think it would be terrific, if everyone believed.”

I take us through a poor neighborhood, the shotgun houses no more than shacks, their windows open in the summer heat, so he can give her his origin story, a childhood mired in countryside poverty, absent even Jesus, his parents caught in a web of evil, and the morning when, just a kid, he was walking the lower forty down to the Brazos and heard Gabriel’s high note, how the lord appeared on a slender wispy cloud, riding in from over the horizon, a son coming to claim his throne, how god, somewhere in the background, spoke of what the world should be. His parents, when he returned, saw the light, and knelt with him on the kitchen floor. I don’t know. I’ve met his mother. I doubt she’s ever been poor.

She asks about the allegations, the court case, wanting to hear what he has to say, the world waiting for his answers, as if he will suddenly reveal his soul to her in the back of his long black Cadillac car, as if he will venture through words back to the hotel and the scene of the crime, when he played Alfred to Batwoman, and got his hand caught in the carefully laid trap.

“We all sin. We all transgress. We fail with each breath. It is only through his grace that we have hope for his mercy.”

What a clown. He's trying to play her for a fool. Hear the way she talks, she knows her way through the thicket.

If she asked me I'd say I was as surprised as anyone. I doubted he could even have an erection, much less parade it around out in the open. And so large. I was astonished when I saw the video. Maybe that explains his wife. Nothing else does.

Though I do like his wife: she's far better than him. I'd drive her anytime. I'd drive her driver. Her driver is Michelle and Michelle is the berries. Michelle is my blossom.

Michelle believes she's lived many lives. She believes her last life she rode a white stallion across endless steppes. She believes in her last life she reached heaven. She believes this life is like an extra life, a reward, a lagniappe, given to her as a bonus. She can do anything she wants, with no heavenly repercussions. She's already passed the test, she's already been received, she has the golden ticket, and she can finally be who she wants to be.

And is this who she wants to be?

I know better than to go there.

If he was the driver, and I was in back, I'd do the touch and heal, I'd call saints and angels, I'd bring damnation and salvation, I'd promise love, money, and happiness, and time to enjoy them all. I'd describe fantastical castles, so we had somewhere to go. I'd say I got the spirit deep down in my heart and it feels

like a key broken off in a lock. I'd say Jesus was my locksmith, on his knees jiggling at the lock to my soul. I'd say many things.

But I am a driver, and drivers are drivers. We simply find the best way to go where we are told to go. Comfort and time, our mandate. The goal is serenity, in the backseat, and making the trip shorter than expected. Maybe we should start a new religion. The Chauffeur Sect. Comfort and Time. It's not that much different from all the ones we have. What does Christianity offer? Ease and eternity. The Buddhists? Nirvana on a daybed.

I have a uniform. It is subtle, a dark suit with thin piping. No hat. We tried a hat, but I have the sort of head that doesn't do hats well. No fez, no cap, and forget a beret. I do handle a cowboy hat, one of those Stetson's, but we don't live in a place, and I don't work for a man, where that is possibility. A cowboy hat would distract from him. He would become the man with the driver who wears a Stetson.

I must be clean. I must have my hair cut, my nails trimmed. I must smell like the car, clean and comfortable. I must exude nothing. I must exude nothing while he is nothing. It's not an even trade.

The smell of her roses does not remain. I'm left with a battle that refuses to escape my expectations. Won't you come see me, Michelle?

Do I believe? Michelle asks if I believe. I say not this year. Do I believe in her? Yes, of course, I do. Why wouldn't I?

She sees the world alive, as if it has an exciting immanence, something extraordinary, to be here and now, fate casting a glorious shadow. I sit and I listen and I think, Why not angels? There could be angels. Wouldn't it be a better life if there were angels? There are mornings where I wake and pretend I hear the flap of wings outside my window.

You can tell the reporter would love to see his erection, not for erotic or sexual reasons, but simply to find out if it has been photo-shopped in tabloids that run the story of a big time preacher pulling the giant thing out of his pants and pumping at it until it went off like some ungodly geyser. I've watched the video. Who hasn't? He did it in a hotel room in front of a woman dressed up as a cosplay creature, the hidden cameras filming, and how she danced in circles while he grimaced, doing his thing.

It was ugly and tawdry and deeply inconsequential. You wanted more than him standing there with his trousers down around his ankles. You wanted him to stop making that face, as if he was part and parcel of the second resurrection. At least he said Amen at the end.

Then he raised his pants, zipped and buckled, bowed to his dancing creature, and left. He seemed, death to a preacher, exceedingly unlikable. What you want, in a man of god, more than anything else, is character. They saw what I see every day. They saw a dull man, and nothing more, and they wanted much more, and they saw he was a man who couldn't even have a good time doing the shivy-shivy shake to a dressed up woman dancing around a hotel room. If he'd

shown some sort of excitement they might have excused him for having certain sexual oddities, because we all have those, and they might have remembered the video for his erection, but instead there was this discomfort, and unease cuts deep, making you question your assumptions, and nobody likes their assumptions questioned.

Not that I don't mind a good erection. Who doesn't? Though I prefer my own, and so does Michelle.

The reporter is good at her job. You have to admire her gift. She's untied the knot and its beginning to unravel. He's like a little kid, tripping over his shoelaces. So much so, he tries his go-to gambit, Yale Divinity, the drab story of mild university hi-jinks, stripped sheets and stealing Harvard's Christening cup during their annual debate at Cambridge, and the week they spent at Oxford with all those crazy Brits.

"But weren't you expelled?" She's done her homework.

"Because I became Charismatic."

"But that wasn't why. Wasn't it because you exposed yourself to an undergraduate in the library?"

I guess the crows have come home to roost. I wonder if she'll head on to the whole Blacks being sons of Ham fiasco. That put him in a bad light. You don't damn a race to eternal servitude, at least not camera, not in front of thousands viewing your Sunday morning telecast.

His temper rises. His right eye twitches as if he's caught a dust mote. His thin nostrils widen. His top lip arches, Elvis-like.

"We had an agreement," he says. "We must stay on topic."

"I'm sure you appreciate our readers' interest in your current situation, given the fact you have so far refused to make a public statement, regarding your actions last May."

"And I am sure you can appreciate I am a man of god, and I am beholden only to god, and he forgives me, as he forgives us all, for our trespasses."

"But what about your congregation? You have lost members."

"God will resupply my flock."

"And your ratings are way down."

"He understands."

"They say you have loans in default."

"God will provide."

I'd planned on a forty-five minute round trip, but I turn now, my foot on the accelerator, trying to beat the lights. It's not like we can leave her off at a random corner. He's beginning to sweat, his heavy cologne simmering, the car gone dense and tart.

I drove him to the hotel that night. When he returned from his excursion he seemed happier than ever remembered. He was actually chatty from the backseat. He went on and on about Ezekiel and Deuteronomy. It was an endless ride home.

The failures of the past, they multiply. I don't care if you are god-sent or god-forbidden or god-forsaken or god-forgiven, your cows will return from pasture and drink from the rancid water. God will, in the end, proclaim his vengeance.

That's the only god I know, the one who makes you pay for your transgressions. And, lord, he's done a number on me.

I believe in heaven. For now, she's called Michelle.

We all want a paradise, absent of pain and suffering, minus anger and regret, full of love and happiness, where dreams include lust and innocence; foolish, perhaps, this adolescent need, but necessary just to be able to wake up in the morning when it's still dark outside.