

## **Glossolalia**

The father had left. Of course the father had left! The only surprise was how long it had taken. Our sort, Aunt NeeNee thought, do not go to fancy East Coast universities, do not squint through microscopes, do not date their professors. Our sort do not break their family's hearts by getting married practically in secret (a “civil ceremony”, no less!) and showing up for Thanksgiving already pregnant with a belly the size of a house and bespectacled stranger in tow. A Spaniard, of course. Or perhaps a Frenchman. Possibly Jewish, possibly Communist, certainly an evolutionist. Also, twice her age. Anyone would have seen it coming.

Anyone but poor Sally, though everyone said she had all the brains in the family. Sally (who'd saddled her sister Nina with that ridiculous nickname, NeeNee, the day the daughter was born) was certainly the smartest child in their generation when it came to books. The first woman in the family to go to college, brilliant in math and science but with no more common sense than an old toad. And look where all that had gotten her: The Loony Bin. Psychiatric Hospital. Mental Health Facility. Whatever word the city folk were using for the place they stashed their kooks.

Sally had snapped, but it was not the satisfying snap of a fresh carrot but a soft crumble like boiled celery collapsing upon itself. The professor 's terse note (an apology: new and younger grad student, expedition to Costa Rica in search of a rare and disreputable newt, relationship “on hiatus”) had taken her entirely by surprise. She'd stopped showering, stopped eating, stopped showing up for work or taking calls from her family. She'd just gone limp. Worst of all, she'd deserted her child, the girl they'd named Antigone. Of course that's what they named her! Of course!

And so, now this: the girl would shortly be slumping off the bus, sticky and disheveled. It had been a 72 hour ride, Brooklyn to Tampa by way of the cheapest ticket. That poor child, all alone. From Tampa, she would have caught the dingy little half-bus that covered all the small town stops. Well after midnight, it finally pulled into the little plaza where the aunt waited. The bus station building closed at

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5:00, so Nina had been sitting out on the metal bench clutching her purse and stewing in the humid night. There was an old Coke machine humming by the torn out payphone cubby, and she'd gotten up three times to plunk in coins. Two Big Red's and an R.C. Cola, which she was still sipping on when the driver opened the doors.

The girl disembarked, reeling momentarily in the blast of Florida heat. She was the only remaining passenger. Aunt NeeNee had not seen her niece in the flesh for years, not since that disastrous family vacation, and it now appeared that the recent "Holiday" cards had been severe misrepresentations; the girl was pale as a honeydew melon, with dark and sunken eyes. Her traveling outfit was militant; cut-off camouflage fatigues, enormous combat boots, and a tattered tactical vest that dripped with zippers and chains and was barely held together by its many patches. The only concession to femininity was six inches of fishnet stocking visible below her ragged pants-legs but above the boots. Her expression was a mix of sour fear and nascent belligerence; a defiant little castaway, abandoned by her mother.

Wasn't that always her way, Nina thought, as she loaded the sullen girl's luggage into her little hatchback. Didn't Sally always just fold up and drop everything and expect her family to pick up the pieces? It was the baby rabbits all over again. Up the whole night with Momma in the heat of the laundry room, forcing eyedroppers full of of milk down the tiny protesting throats and swaddling the little pink lumps in dish towels. Sally had swiped them from some poor mother bunny's burrow and brought them home wrapped in her sweater. Kept them in a shoebox under the bed, and when the first one died she'd simply dropped the box on the couch between Nina and her mother. Ran up the stairs to cry into her pillow.

"Hey", the girl said, "Thanks for coming to..."

"Hay is for horses, girl. In this family we use our proper names."

"Sorry, Aunt NeeNee", Antigone said with the slightest of eye-rolls, "But thanks for coming to

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get me. And for everything. But I..."

"Butts are for sitting on."

"Sorry?"

"That's alright, honey. You don't know any better. You've got *years* of bad habits for the fixing.

Rome wasn't burnt in a day. Now, what shall we call you? Do you have a Christian middle name? I can tell you right now, we aren't having any of this Auntie Gone under my roof."

"My friends call me Annie."

"Well, Annie, I am glad we're going to be such good friends. Welcome home."

Aunt NeeNee slammed shut the trunk and made sure her niece was buckled in before they drove off into the dark and buggy night.

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I must try to be a Christian about it, NeeNee thought, as they drove to church. The girl has only been with me a week, but she has lived fifteen years in the bluest of blue states among the rabid liberals, the Godless biologists and the secular humanists. Exposed daily to every kind of hateful venom directed against faith and patriotism. It may take time to get her pointed in the right direction, but Annie was family, and you didn't give up on family. But Lord. Lord, *look* at her! Hair broken and flossy with black dye, cut on the slant. Scandalously short skirt, torn tights, black bra-strap peeking out for all to see. A face full of metal and mascara. A hobo, Nina thought. A prostitute for hobos. And those arms!

Who would allow a teenager to get such tattoos? Who would put them on her? And why were they so often nautical? Mermaids and anchors and old time sailing ships. Anchors! She who'd hated their summer beach trip, who wouldn't dip a toe in the water, who read salt-stiff and sandy paperbacks

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beneath a black umbrella, forever sneaking back to the motel room to sit in the dark chewing ice. Aunt NeeNee supposed the tattoos and piercings and outfits must mean something, but it didn't appear to be outright Satanism. Perhaps she was a female gay. Though who could tell anymore?

“You know, sweetie, Jesus doesn't hate anyone”, she said, “He only hates some of the things they choose to do. And it is never too late to reevaluate your choices, because...”

“I'm not gay, Aunt NeeNee. Not even Bi.”

"That's the spirit!"

Annie pushed the lever beneath her seat and leaned back, almost below the window. Nina sighed and returned her gaze to the road. What that girl needs, she thought, is some churching. As if conjured by that happy thought, the exit appeared on the right side of the highway and she turned down the little dirt road. The car bounced and rumbled for nearly a mile, passing beneath overhanging trees that drooped with kudzu. They came to an open field, full of cars parked willy-nilly on the grass. Laughter and raised voices could be heard from the nearby clearing, where a portable pavilion had been set up.

When the weather was fair, the members of the True Pentecostal Assembly of the Living Word (“His Name is Alive On Blessed Tongues”) liked to meet outdoors. Twice a year they held baptisms at the trout pond (long since fished out), and they did a big barbecue pot-luck for Memorial and The Fourth, but most Sundays were smaller affairs, a modest spread with folding chairs and collapsible picnic tables. Nina recognized most of everyone. There were sometimes strange faces: not-yet-saved family members, looky-loos, or the Easter-and-Christmas-only folks, but the core membership was about three dozen, mostly women, mostly white, and mostly middle-aged. The young pastor, Jonathan Bethel was enthusiastic and vigorous but essentially gentle Charismatic Evangelical who had taken over his father Sammy's church duties five years ago, after the old fire-breather had a stroke and fell off a riding mower into his eternal reward.

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When Annie stepped from the car, oozing boredom and dismay, her aunt's heart sank. What had she been thinking? To bring such a girl among these good people! In the unforgiving sun it became clear that the plain black blouse she wore was sheer and edged with immodest lace and the hemline was no acquaintance to her knees. Worse, these truly were her best Sunday clothes, as Nina knew; she'd checked the suitcases. She looked aggressively out of place and was drawing stares from the congregation. That cynical lifted eyebrow was like a drop of ink falling into the living waters of their faith.

Nina looked longingly at the trout pond in the distance. Had the child ever been baptized? That might be just the place to start; an old fashioned dunk in the water. It would take care of that awful makeup, too; shocking red lips and black eyeliner melting down her cheeks. Old Samuel Bethel had once baptized a man right here, a weeping man who had tottered into the service, toweringly drunk. He'd fallen to his knees, begging forgiveness, and the pastor baptized him with melt-ice from an igloo cooler. He led the prayer group up at Calhoun Correctional, where he'd been sent for braining his wife with a claw hammer. Nina shifted her gaze to the cooler.

Nina took her niece firmly by the hand and led her closer, brazening through the knot of worshipers milling about near the familiar portable church. Which was probably not so impressive to a city girl; just a bunch of folding chairs lined up in rows, a plastic tarp rolled out between them for an aisle, and the old wooden lectern on its dolly. The current pastor had a little portable microphone clipped to his lapel (his father hadn't needed one), and there was a big canopy they could be put up if it looked like rain; you didn't need any more than that. Not that Annie would know what a church needed, the sullen little shit. Looking at the girl's sneer, Nina's stomach turned acid and she dug in her purse for some spearmint Tums. Be Christian with her, she thought. Here, of all places, be Christian. She cannot be entirely spoiled; a girl is not milk.

Pastor Bethel, strode purposefully toward them.

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“Howdy!”, he said, “Your aunt shot me some text and told me all about you, and we are just real happy to have you here and to expose you to some nice folks and let your hear His message and maybe you like what you hear and have some questions? Maybe some minds gets changed? Maybe we show you that old Jesus can be pretty 'dope' after all?”

He extended his big, warm, red palm and pumped her hand, all the while offering his most welcoming smile. He was a charmer, surely, though not half the man his father had been. Hellfire Sam was a fellow with Christ in his heart and hair on his chest. The son was too polite, too polished, too eager to please. Too well dressed. But maybe young Jonathan was better for something like this. Less off-putting to a skeptic and less threatening to a young girl; his brown eyes and long lashes reminded Nina of a sad, trapped deer. But he knew how to rap with the kids.

“You know, Annie, Jesus is a pretty cool dude. He doesn't hate anyone. He just hates some of the things they choose to do. But He would be really happy if at any time someone was to decide to stop with certain choices and maybe move on to other choices. Healthier choices. Choice which would of course begin with choosing to invite Him into one's heart and accept him as one's Lord and Savior. Which is a good choice. A positive choice. Which we should keep an open mind about and maybe we learn something today. ”

“But I'm not even Bi!”

"Butts are for sitting on", Aunt NeeNee said automatically. Blushed. In front of a preacher!

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There was a sermon every week, of course, but Nina's favorite part of the service was when the Holy Spirit was invited to enter into the congregation. Each week, one worshiper, or two, or several would feel His spirit enter them and inspire them with the Gift of Tongues. Ecstatic babble would

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simmer and burst out of a person in the crowd, and then another would feel it, and another. When they were inside the church building it could be quiet a racket, but out under the sun they could really let loose; every worshiper would hiss and gibber and bray according to their own mad mandate of Heaven. The Gift of Tongues was what Nina came for; the intersection of the mundane and the divine, the sudden jolt of connection to something vastly greater than herself.

Her darkest secret, which she could barely even tell herself, was that she sometimes faked it. At the beginning! And only for a moment or two. When she saw that the others were being seized with the spirit she would fake a spasm and begin to say any old nonsense that came into her head; pig Latin, celebrity names, half-remembered high-school French. Then, after a heart-sinking second of shame, the flow of words came, like the satisfying rumble of a mower after tugging the cord. And wasn't that, after all, Faith? A moment of foolishness, an acrobats leap into the dark, wild waving hands waiting to be caught by something on the other side of an unimaginable gap.

She tried to believe. Lord, how she tried! But seeing that teenage girl bored and wilting in the heat, all crossed arms and closed mouth, dying to get back into the air conditioned car - it was too much. She wasn't getting any closer to Jesus; she looked about to faint. Nina felt like a fraud, her faith a popped soap bubble. She choked on her tongue, stopped speaking. Her head had begun to hurt, and suddenly there was a high tone building behind her skull. Her ears popped and her mouth became dry. Sweet Jesus, she thought, this must be what it's like to ride in an airplane. That, or a stroke.

Annie's head snapped back, and her dry black hair crackled with static electricity. The girl's mouth fell open, dark red lipstick now smeared down to her chin, and she began keening, long and loud. The sound expanded, becoming a rumbling bass note that could be felt in the ribs. The other tongues began to still, the worshipers going silent one by one. The girl was now standing on her tip-toes and speaking rapidly in what seemed like two languages at once. The first was throaty and full of thick, guttural consonants, rising and falling, unrhymed but in a regular meter, the second a sing-song

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full of “llls” and “rrrs” and unstressed vowels. Over at the picnic tables, the punch bowl shattered.

Some members of the congregation clapped their hands to their ears or fell to their knees.

Annie's back was arched and only the dangling laces of her heavy boots still brushed the ground. Her cheeks and nose glowed red, like a flashlight pressed against the palm of a hand, and golden light came from her mouth. Folding chairs toppled and slid across the ground, a warm wind pushing them away from the girl. Car alarms began to blare in the field behind them. A bird fell from the sky.

The sound spiraled up and up to a whistle that would drive dogs mad, but simultaneously deepened until it shook the ground, a throb only the bones could hear. Worms begin to squeeze out of their holes in flight from the vibrating earth. Pastor Bethel swallowed a filling. There was still language in the sound; thousands of voices scolding, pleading, cooing, shrieking. But the words became a distant part of the ever-expanding whole; there was bacon sizzling on a marble anvil and a dental drill skipping off a set of ruby teeth. There was a broken cash register and a laughing baby. A star burning out and a single clapping hand. There were green and gold fireworks and vast engines spinning up and the clatter of stolen silverware. A lion being birthed by a lamb.

Annie was a full ten feet off the ground and glowing like a torch when it passed. The sound cut off with the anti-climactic pop of a vinyl record and Nina came back to her feet in time to see her niece crumple to the ground like an unstrung puppet. A woman beside her clapped her arm, tears flowing freely.

“Hallelujah!”, she said, “Thank you, Jesus, thank you! Oh, Jesus! Oh, Jesus, thank you?”

The Pastor struggled to his feet and walked off toward the woods. When Nina called out to him he turned back, dazed. Straightened his red tie and re-oriented his his tie-pin, a little golden fish.

“My father is in Hell. He's in Hell and they'll let him out if he'd only love me. Like I am. But he won't do it. He won't do it, and nobody has a choice about anything and I am just about sick of this shit. I'm going to Miami, and I'm going to suck *so many* dicks on the way down. Make up for lost time.”



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They traveled most of the way home in silence, Nina driving and Annie in the back seat with a moist toilette on her forehead. Finally, Aunt NeeNee spoke.

"We won't be invited back there in a hurry. Why you'd want to embarrass me in front of all my friends is beyond me, though. You know what our Momma used to say about your Momma? That she came out cussed. That's how God made her, and it was no good taking her anywhere or doing anything for her. Some folks are just born to be hanged."

She reached across her niece to pop open the glove compartment and fish out some cinnamon gum. Unwrapped, chewed, gazed out the window and read the signs. Gas and Ice, 5 miles. Easy-Out Bail Bonds. Nobama. Explore God.

"Aunt Neenee, was I baptized?"

"Sweetie, I don't know. I wouldn't think so. Your momma had you up in New York City; I'm not sure it's even legal there."

"When they say 'The Lord moves in mysterious ways', what does that mean?"

"That's something you say when hurricane insurance doesn't cover the flood damage or when Jesus loves a little baby so much He takes it to heaven before it can grow up. The meth cook who won the lottery over in Pensacola? That's Mysterious Ways."

They drove on in silence for a while, the odometer ticking softly. Annie had been wearing fingerless lace gloves all day they were starting to look very shabby and worn. She tugged them off, looked at her hands.

"From the sermon? If Jesus and God are the same person? When Jesus was on the cross? Like, 'Why have you forsaken me'? Is He just talking to Himself? Or, like, trying to work out why it has to happen that way? Or did He forget He was God? Or what?"

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“If you want to give me a heart attack, you're on the right track. You're not close enough to an orphan already? You want to put your NeeNee in the ground with these questions? Just keep it up.”

“If He's omnipotent AND good, why does He let evil happen? He can't stop it? He's not really good? Or He's so different from us that good and evil don't mean anything? Is it sometimes good for evil things to happen? If everything was always good would that somehow end up being more Evil? Or we just aren't even supposed to understand?”

“No, we aren't. And we aren't supposed to ask about it either.”

“Back there? Was that...”

“Hush. We're just not going to ever...Oh, sweetie, you better lay off picking at yourself like that; you're bleeding!”

Annie had pulled off the sticky gloves and was holding her right hand up to the car window. She flexed it, squinted, wiggled her fingers. She could clearly see sunlight through the ragged hole in her palm. It was about the size of a nickel and crusted with blood.

“Aunt NeeNee, I'm getting a little scared.”

“Lord, girl. You think I'm not?”