

The nuns and priests, she reads, still perform human sacrifice, though not on a regular basis, preferring to stage the ceremony during high holy days and at the harvest moon. The guide book suggests that you check with the local authorities to find out if a production is scheduled, and if one is, be prepared for long lines and enormous crowds. A mortal bloodletting draws quite a gathering, with whole families traveling from all parts of the peninsula for a chance to join in the celebration, and it is advised that you purchase your tickets in advance. Your hotel concierge should be able to help you inquire into the availability of premium seating.

The temple, my daughter reads, is a relic from a dark, ancient time, its original religion shrouded by history, the structure both formidable and foreboding, apparently a superb example of the depth and magnitude of the nation's faith and belief, a source of great pride, a hidden gem, well worth a short visit to view the trapezoid dome and the ornate stage and especially the side walls where stone reliefs depict the religion's allegory of how God invented us and the world and how we first came to rule the earth. Apparently God, out of loneliness, during a melancholic fit, created the universe after a particularly long night by himself in a dark kitchen, brewing everything up like a potluck stew. At first we were second-tier, a cut below the great beasts, the whales and the serpents and the dragons, but over time God came to favor our species and soon he allowed us to dominate everything we could find. We are just like Him.

The guide book also says we are staying in a five star hotel, and maybe it is, for rats and roaches, but not for anyone who has even a modicum of travel experience. The pipes rattle, the beds sway when you sit, and the walls are thin enough we can hear the couple in the next room, and they are not praying. We are supposed to have two rooms, one for us and one for

our daughter, but we arrived late and the desk clerk gave our extra room away, demand being great during high holy week, and now the three of us sit on the beds and stare at the walls. Television, glorious television, would be nice, but I can't find the remote and the set doesn't have any knobs or buttons, the blank screen almost angry and menacing in its silence.

I have never seen a human sacrifice. It is not on my short list of things to do before I die, a very short list mainly comprising events involving my daughter, typical moments any father would desire to be part of by the end of his life. Wedding, graduation, grandchild. Watching another person put to death would rank near the bottom of any list, above any kind of child molestation, but certainly below something like swimming in the Ganges downriver from a cholera epidemic. Plus I believe that ritual murder, my definition, is sick and disturbing, reminding me of the worst we can become, the depths we can drop to. It is mankind at its most primitive, and only cannibalism is worse. My wife disagrees. She likes the idea. How often in your life, she asks, do you get to watch another human being put to death? This, she thinks, is why you travel, to experience the unknown, to discover new mysteries. Otherwise we should just stay home.

I hope my wife is kidding. Her sarcasm is sometimes hard to read.

My daughter also uses the guide book as a buffer, insulating herself from us, our sporadic bickering a constant annoyance to her sanity, and my wife and I do argue quite a bit, minor squabbles erupting on a frequent basis while driving on these foreign roads, the words between us often sharp and wounding but rarely rising to the level where blood and guts are spilled out for her to see. Those secrets that should remain secrets are kept as secrets. My wife and I are careful not to even get near that purple line. Once or twice we come close, near

enough a single name or phrase would tip us over the edge and drop us into an abyss. Marital arguments, I have found, are like that, reaching the cliff as if daring the other to jump, before stepping back into the safety of well-worn complaints. For a moment, a split second, we each have the ability, the chance to push the other off the ledge, the idea that we have arrived at a precipice exciting, exhilarating, and frightening.

Or so my wife believes. On my part I value the safety and comfort of family life. We are a team, a unit, us together and us against the world, and cohesion and support are the glues that bind us. If our life is a casino, I would prefer it as black-jack, all of us in cahoots against the dealer, and my wife would rather a game of craps, with mysterious rules and endless rolls of the dice. When we near the precipice it is I who trembles with fear; she is the one who thrills at the potential danger. If you don't take the risk, I believe, then everything will be just fine and dandy. Lock the doors, draw the blinds, settle in for the night. If only we had television. Television would give us something to do, occupy our time, and we wouldn't have to go out into the strange city and view the local temple. TV has that great ability.

The question, my wife says, is how they sacrifice. Knife, sword, hatchet. Gun, fire, baseball bat. Immolation, she decides, would be best, the spectacle of someone burning alive, the dousing of lighter fluid, the flick of the Bic, the flames slowly starting, the cries and screams. If you see a sacrifice, it might as well be a good one, with all the drama possible, not one of those half-ass attempts ending in disappointment, like poison or suffocation. It should be as ugly and bloody as possible, and fire fits the bill more than any other method. Snap, crackle, pop. And who would be sacrificed? A baby, a child, a virgin. A whore, a drunk, an adulterer. I flinch at the last, the adultery, and she sees me flinch. We are near the precipice.

I am in a bad mood anyway, grumpy and out of sorts, and have been since the start of the trip. Traveling does not agree with me, never has, and I am not a big fan of this part of the world. Canada is more my style, foreign without being too foreign, different without being too different, sort of like bacon instead of sausage at breakfast.

Bourbon would be good, at least for a while. I won't do like I did when we went to the shore on a trip, our weekend ending badly after my wife revealed a secret, and I stayed up all night drinking bourbon from a plastic cup.

And my wife isn't much better. Eight hours in a car with me and my daughter as we drive the rental through this strange country would be enough to make anyone cranky, no matter how often we stop off the side of the road to view the guide book suggestions. Just today we have seen where the cow ate the cabbage, where the dog milked the calf, where they found the bones of the abominable snowman, where the nation's enemy massacred an entire town by feeding them to trained lions and tigers, and now, worn and tired after the long drive, my wife has the look of complete boredom, bored enough that she considers human sacrifice as a suitable subject for our evening's entertainment.

My wife, I know, wants to be naked. It is one of her habits, after work, when she returns home, to head up to our bedroom and remove her clothes and spend an hour alone pacing back and forth, and she does look very good undressed, always has, though erotic thoughts are far from her mind as her heels pound the carpet and floor. It is how she cleanses the day, removing her job from her soul, returning to what she calls her 'true self'. And I now see her mounting desire to be unclothed, after those hours in the car, to free herself from the material bonds, but there is no way, not here in the room with our daughter, not out in the open. Maybe

some mothers wouldn't skip a beat, stripping down and parading around, but my wife is very careful not to exhibit intentional nudity around our child, even if she is old enough, fifteen now, to understand and accept the natural state of things. Accidental exposure, being caught in the act, can happen, but bare ass flaunting is another story. Nudity, even with her fine apparatus, should be kept hidden from impressionable eyes. It would do my daughter no good, for now, to compare herself to her mother. She is not nearly up to my wife's beauty, just beginning her development, her breasts doing well but the rear end undefined, and open exhibition will run the risk of causing unfair comparisons, leading to long term dissatisfaction. My wife and I do have our rules and regulations, regarding sexuality, and just about everything else. We are a rule-based family.

A guide book, by definition, must stretch the truth in some way, to catch a reader's interest, but this seems to be too much. It is one thing to promote a tourist trap, exaggeration being accepted anywhere and everywhere, part of the fabric of our lives, probably hardwired inside our DNA, and another to claim current sacrificial rites, and I am sure that must be the case here, because the idea of an actual human offering is absolutely impossible to imagine.

I say I have no desire to see the temple, no interest in attending a religious ceremony, that I am tired from driving, that it is the last thing in the world I would want to do, that the local god, or any god, could do nothing for me other than waste my time and waste my patience.

You used to believe, dad.

Yes, I did.

I am surprised my daughter thinks she is old enough to speak to me in this way, pretty much implying that she understands faith, that she has reached an age where she can inquire into my new found emptiness, that she can comprehend what it is like to live a life in suspended disbelief. Not even my wife can appreciate what I am going through, much less my daughter. My wife says I am finally facing reality. I call it nausea.

I liked it better when you believed, my daughter says. You were happier.

I'm happy enough right now.

That makes my wife laugh.

And now the couple in the next room near their peak and we hear the headboard bang and the howls and squeals that come with that sort of thing and then there are the cries and calls for Judas, Jesus, and Holy Mother of God fucking Christ, showing a complete lack of imagination.

And my daughter, closing her guide book, asks if such noises are normal when people are in bed together.

Some do, my wife says, and some don't. Mostly it depends on the mood.

They, my daughter says, must be in a very good mood.

Perhaps, my wife shrugs, but sometimes people make noises to please the other person, make them feel like they are doing well, to give them confidence in their abilities, give them hope they are wonderful in bed.

Do you do that?

Of course, my wife smiles my way, we all do, every now and then. You do what you have to do, whether you want to or not. Everyone loses a little of themselves, makes a lie, to make things better when you are with another person.

My daughter asks my wife what position she thinks they are in.

Oh, doggy-style, most definitely, she's on her hands and knees on the bed and he is standing on the floor from behind. You can tell by the squeaks. My own favorite is turned around on top, what they call a perverse cow girl, and your father prefers the standard missionary most of the time.

This is not a conversation I prefer to listen to, and I wonder if they feel free to discuss such matters in my presence then what do they talk about when I am absent.

My daughter says she has heard us quite a few times, though not as often as she expected. What did she expect? Oh, she's not sure. And I wonder if we should be louder, at least as loud as the couple next door who now reach their crescendo, cries and words replaced by grunts and yowls, defining the term 'to rut', that maybe she wants to listen to us from her bedroom down the hall, that maybe our noises will give her comfort and calm. Perhaps we have been too careful in hiding our sexuality. Perhaps we should be a bit more open, leave our bedroom door cracked a little so she can catch a glimpse of us as we go at it, satisfying her teenage curiosity, letting her know that we have our limitations, because nothing speaks limitation like watching another couple doing the deed. Copulation, observed, will dampen the most raging libido. Copulation, human or animal, when seen, quickly, almost immediately, loses its charm and soon becomes almost embarrassing in its frank stupidity. All of which means, yes, my wife and I, when we were young in New York, sometimes partook in what they call an

alternate lifestyle, and, really, if you've seen one fucking you've seen them all, only the technique of any interest, hoping to catch the odd tip and trick for later use. Sex, for us, we found out, is best enjoyed together and alone and without any extracurricular participation.

Does my wife make noise? Quite a bit, most of time, and she is correct when she says she sometimes does it only to please me, and I must admit that I do appreciate the effort. What man doesn't like to hear his woman cry out from an abundance of ecstasy? And who cares, at that moment, whether it is actual or not? It is only after that the memory of a possible performance keeps you skittish as you try to fall asleep.

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The desk clerk, after a large tip, arranges quality seating for us. Left orchestra, she says, ninth row, near the aisle, go to Will Call and ask for Maria, she is my sister. Before we leave she gives us a small lecture, describing her country's customs. You are not in America, she says, do not pretend you are at home, we are a proud people, understand that first, and then she has us remove any material trappings, my wife's pearl necklace, her diamond bracelet, my daughter's gold necklace, her tennis bracelet, my watch and my wedding ring. Our cell phones must be turned to vibrate.

The clerk tells us the normal regulations common to most religions. Cover your head, kneel when instructed, keep a shameful demeanor, don't laugh or talk and certainly don't stare at the other worshipers. You have no idea what lives they lead and what horrible acts they have committed to bring them out in public to ask and beg forgiveness and salvation from an invisible deity.

Worshippers pack the streets and sometimes we almost lose each other as we make our way through the crowd, my wife's stark figure briefly disappearing among the multitude until she raises a hand, calling us forward. We enter a shop so my wife and daughter can purchase scarves to cover their heads, bright rayon fabric the color of sunsets and molten lava. I choose a dark blue beret that matches my mood. From the neck up my wife and daughter could be twins in their identical scarves, except for my wife's excited gaze. She has the look of a woman determined to savor the moment. I have seen this look before, and I know to stand back and let her have her time. Any attempt to invade her thoughts will be met with knives and chains.

Beggars begin appearing as we near the temple, the lame and the disfigured at first, grotesque human beings better shoved off into the shadows, and then the more robust, in their rags and threads, practiced at the art of whine and complaint, until the crowd of vagrants pack the street so tightly that we have to push our way through by forming a wedge. My wife takes the point, going ahead like a lead blocker at the goal line, clearing space so we can squeeze between the now hostile throng. My daughter grips my hand like I might leave her any second among the rousing rabble. My wife looks back, smiling, as if to say: We're not in Kansas anymore, are we?

The temple itself, even packed to the gills, is a relief after squirming through the begging masses. Silence reigns beneath the trapezoid dome with its letters and numbers etched in the roof above, obscure constellations from another world's night sky. As we reach our seats I notice how the worshippers act like worshippers in any other religion, quiet, observant, arrogant, their attitudes betraying a bedrock belief that their God is the God and that they are special and extraordinary enough to have been chosen by Him to receive this most amazing knowledge. I

would say esoteric, but I doubt no more than a handful in that crowd of thousands could define the word on a vocabulary quiz. It is my wife's favorite word. Esoteric, I hear her whisper in the night. Her open sesame. Her voila. Her abracadabra.

For my wife unrevealed secrets hold the greatest allure. They become private riddles she can mush and meld inside her mind. They become keys to a hidden world. They are her own sealed books where only she can read and comprehend the enigma of our worldly existence. Most, I assume, are mundane, neighborly confessions, family skeletons, maybe even a sexual dalliance, those run-of-the-mill secrets, but there are others, puzzles I see flash across her thoughts, and these worry me, their depth far beyond my comprehension. When she has these unfathomable secrets cross her mind she shakes like a sudden cold breeze has popped up on a midsummer day. And when I ask her, What?, she frowns and whispers, Esoteric.

Though she did once let me into a secret, apparently one of many, when we were at the beach, and after that I have learned to take 'esoteric' as an acceptable answer.

And my daughter is following in her footsteps, her diary kept private with a key and a combination lock, and who knows what lurks inside that juvenile brain? Apparently my wife does, at least much more than I do. I often catch them sharing a secret smile, a hidden nod, whispering between themselves, stopping dead still when they notice my presence. It is, I suppose, natural for a father to be left out, but it still rankles as they silently, almost angrily wait for me to leave the room so they can return to their close conversation.

My daughter has found a bulletin detailing the night's schedule. It is as you would expect: Hymn, Hymn (Gladys Wight solo), Procession, Benediction, Greetings, 1st Reading (Juan Lopez), Hymn, 1st Collection, Speech, Hymn (Hank Courson solo), 2nd Collection, Hymn, Offering

(featuring Matilda Weinstein), Dismissal. I say it says nothing about human sacrifice, but my wife shakes her head. Offering can easily mean a sacrifice. A blood offering, she says.

The first hymn is happy, calling the faithful to the joy of being in the presence of the Lord, and on the next hymn Gladys Wight does a reasonable solo as long as she stays on pitch. We remain standing as the small boys carrying gold and silver icons come first down the aisle, followed by women in long brown dresses and beige habits, and at last the clergy wearing purple robes and tall white pointy hats, a plodding march that seems to go in slow motion, and they take their time as they find their places up on the stage. Such formality would normally sooth me, rules being obeyed, but now I am anxious to be done with this somber religion. It is like when you are on a morning toilet, and you are in a hurry to dress for work, but you have to stay patient because your stuff just won't come all the way out, no matter how much you squeeze your buttocks.

The priest reminds me of Richard Burton, with his heavy pock-marked face and lazy demeanor, as he goes about the benediction, making plain his rote lines have been said a thousand times before. But I also catch him staring at my wife as if he is speaking directly to her and no one else. And my wife clearly enjoys the attention, her body beginning to throb against me. The priest's gaze is noticeable enough that the other worshipers begin to turn and I see women nod and point towards my wife as if she taking away from their enjoyment of the proceedings. She has become an object of jealousy and it is obvious they feel slighted by his focused scrutiny. I hear 'bitch' and 'whore' whispered around us, the women beside themselves with rancor. Which makes sense; worshipers want to be worshiped by the clergy as much as the clergy want to be worshiped by them. They have made the effort to attend the service. They

have come all the way here and don't want some interloper made special. Everyone should be special. The dark spell is only broken when the priest finally lifts his eyes, bringing in the whole congregation, as he ends his long prayer with a loud amen.

He gives his greeting and the crowd returns the welcome. We pass through a list of slowly rising calls and responses, the volume soaring to almost orgasmic heights as we reach the end. We finally sit. The collection plates are passed around during another hymn and I am surprised at the bounty, small mountains of bills and coins, dished out by the believers. My daughter nods stage right to an iron contraption with hand and ankle cuffs, the type of apparatus you find at private S and M bars in New York City, places my wife and I visited back when, though I doubt we are in for a whip-wielding dominatrix.

I assume it is for a 'human sacrifice' performance. I had expected an effigy, perhaps a paper-mache woman dressed in a white silk robe thin enough to see an outline of what matters or a stuffed burlap doll with a top hat and a long beard that comes down to the stomach, something representing an idea many want to execute, or maybe a live replacement, a ram out of the thicket, a red rooster wildly flapping its wings, a lamb bleating as if it anticipates its approaching misery, a dog barking and whining, a goat dumbly considering the landscape, a cow chewing its cud unaware its impending doom, any of them a metaphorical comment on our existence, how we go about our varied lives while the specter of death awaits. These thoughts, my wife would say, reek of the shallow mind.

The priest returns to the podium and begins a speech describing their great religion. Christianity, it appears, is just another fad, a Johnny-come-lately, compared to their ancient faith. Their religion is the religion from where all religions come from. Which may be true,

because all the people around here look like idiots, sideshow freaks barely able to walk like coherent adults, dull eyed and slow witted, perfect examples of an existential paradise, ideal candidates to originate a myth devoted to a prickly tempered all encompassing God. He is, in the end, created in our own image, puerile at best.

Then he calls a select few to come forward and take wine from a golden chalice. The virgin, the barren, and the impotent. My daughter stands and shuffles down the pew, apologizing for stepping on toes, and she stands patiently in line for her sip. My wife gives me a glance and I say, Hey, it happens, and she shrugs, and she is right to shrug, because it has been happening since we began the trip, my pecker petering out on every try, staying small and useless no matter what we do, so maybe I should stand up there and wait by my daughter, maybe a miracle will occur and later I will be able to make my wife praise the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, me pleasing my wife a start to getting our vacation better, or rather an erection pleasing my wife, fingers and tongue having lasted only so long until they have worn out their welcome, and by now, after two weeks on the road, my wife keeps the door locked when she feels them come a knocking, and she is angry at herself for not bringing along her dildo, vibrator, and her other toys, though she never would have expected that I could have gone this far without obtaining a decent wood, my penis playing its role as corpse very well, not a whiff or stir, flaccidity being its complete and total personality.

Impotence must be common in this country. There are plenty of men who join me in line. Some, I suppose, might be virgins, given their blank demeanor. Virginity, among women, appears much less common than male inadequacy. My daughter is virtually alone except for dozens of prepubescent girls. And barrenness is almost non-existent. This must be a fertile

nation. And I stand there in line and look around and the other men look around and every once in a while we lock eyes and give a short nod, careful not to acknowledge our shortcomings.

The bitter wine still stings my stomach even after I sit back down by my wife and daughter and I begin to hope that the nasty tasting beverage will seep down to my groin and perform its blessing, that the urge will return strong enough that I will have to put both my hands in my pockets to hide my erection the next time we stand for the service. Even I, in my state of disbelief, have a need for a miracle or two.

They bring the girl out, my daughter's age, a plump teenager shy and hesitant, dressed in a pink outfit and a flowered hat, a getup usually worn at Easter in my old religion. It feels like a high school stage play as the priest guides her to the iron apparatus. Two nuns remove her clothes and cuff her hands and ankles and there is a great ooh and aah from the crowd. The girl's body has barely ripened, small buds for breasts and no pubic hair to speak of, just a little fuzz about the edges. We really do have excellent seats. I am sure I am about observe a pantomime act, an amateur production meant to symbolize an offering, until I see the priest wave a long knife in the air and hear the audience go wild.

Watching a child being flayed is not recommended under any circumstance. It takes a long time, longer than you might expect, even with a sharp knife the flaying lasts at least thirty to forty minutes, seeming much longer, what with the screaming and crying and all. There is nothing remotely interesting how a skinning is performed. Dog, cat, fish, fowl, deer, moose, human being, the act of removing skin from a body, especially a living body, seems so

unnecessary in its inevitably graphic detail. You cannot skin something in any other way than by simply skinning it.

What does my daughter think of observing such an act? She seems excited, almost giddy, as it progresses, letting out a little squeal now and then. My wife is the same way, leaning forward to catch every cut and slice, holding her breath as she anticipates the next sliver of skin to be removed. I may not be normal, none of us are, but I am disturbed by their reactions. They are no better than the rest of the worshipers who have now reached some sort of climax. I used the term orgasmic before, but I was premature, that had been a loud foreplay compared to this horrible ejaculation. My only solace is in the hope that maybe, just maybe, this religious spectacle will somehow prove its worth and miraculously heal my inability to rise to a sexually admirable completion.

What am I to make of my wife and daughter? I have no idea, and I am not sure I want to find out, preferring to let them remain a mystery. The answer, for me, may be worse than the question.

After the sacrifice we naturally feel a bit let down as we leave the temple and shuffle with the crowd down the steps to the street. The post-sacrifice blues, if you will. My wife in particular seems off-kilter by the way she moves on the sidewalk as quiet and silent as the rest of the solemn worshipers. It is a dirge we now live in, a soundless mourning damp on the air like a heavy fog you find at the seashore on a humid summer Sunday morning after a long night of drinking bourbon from a plastic cup. We all know that feeling.

