

Communion

Luke is in a bar, talking to a friend. You are this friend.

“I never thought that I should think twice about trying to *flirt with*, aka talk to for the sake of ultimately fucking a woman, until three days after I met Rachel in the long line of a Whole Foods.

See the problem is, society is supposed to naturally comb and sort people according to this invisible rule of fuckability; my older brother explained it all to me, different levels meet and congregate in different places, but then a couple years ago, when this Whole Foods was just slammed down smack dab in the middle of our neighborhood, our fast-food and basketball court neighborhood, bringing all of its upper middle class devotees and granola-crunching yuppies and those people who like to demand their grass-fed meat sliced to a certain thickness, the whole system of stratification was fucked up.

And so three days after meeting Rachel, I’m attending this church service, against my will. But I had to, she begged me to come, and honestly I owed it to her. Go to church, see what she was all about and then leave her: move on. But everything was different this time.

So this church service, it’s early in the morning, like 8-o-clock, way too early to have your eyes open on a Sunday, and I have somehow ended up sitting, my ass feathered by this cushiony pew, in an auditorium listening to a guy, the preacher, talk and spit and scream. And I kid you not, I feel like he’s talking to me, straight at me. And I would have left already, but I’m holding on to Rachel underneath my jacket, which is all scrunched up between us, and she’s squeezing my hand like a Chinese finger trap.

‘I want to tell you a story today,’ the preacher says, and I was so relieved that it wasn’t another goddamn Bible verse or soft rock song about angels and God and heaven, that I sat up a

little higher and stared at the man who, up there on stage, was taking off his little black-rimmed glasses. The man was dressed like a religious prick, the kind who at first looks approachable, but then you realize he's trying to look approachable, which entirely obliterates any ounce of approachability the guy might have. He had on the exact same khakis and button-up white shirt I would wear if I wanted to look like I had my life together. And he was wearing this sand-orange tie, which looked like it had been dipped in gold or honey, probably a seasonal sale at Dillard, and it was strapped around his thick and tanned neck, drooping down to just above his silver belt buckle, so that it wagged like a broken tail as he moved around the stage. Honestly I've never understood neckties. I think—and I've been wrong before—that they are to blame for the rise of suicides among the business-class elite. Some people say it's a lack of moral integrity; nope, neckties, slowly slurping the life out of these head honchos that have finally realized success isn't quite the green grass that it once seemed.

And so the preacher starts out, 'This story is not in the Bible or available on any website. This story, I heard directly from the source. There was once an ordinary man, just like you or me, and he lived with his parents in a cabin out by a lake. He was good-looking and charming; he was athletically built. I'm sure you are all picturing someone in your minds right now. That's him. He was well-behaved. Everyone in the town called him a "respectable young man" and he even played on his high-school basketball team.'

And I'm sitting there in this worship service, this *time of fellowship* as Rachel called it, and I'm thinking back to when I saw her walk into Whole Foods three days earlier, in some tight black capris and an athletic pink top, right—you get the picture—sexy and athletic, and I remember thinking I'd play a little pick-up-the-hot-girl-that's-not-your-type game, one that now I think I can safely say I regret ever playing. See, we had walked in at nearly the same time,

through those automated doors that on a hot day feel as refreshing as, well you know, something like if you stuck ice cream under both of your armpits, and I was strategically walking a little bit behind her, more like a spy than a stalker, untangling whether she was a young soccer mom who just came from a yoga class or some sort of post-collegiate trail runner, all while trying to put together a stream of words that would display my interest in her and, at the same time, showcase how interesting of person I am, you know, how freely I live and all, but then we parted. I went right to the deli, like *right* as in to the right side of the store, and she grabbed a hand basket and went to the left. To the left, I mean, who goes to the left when you enter a grocery store?

Anyways I walked to get a turkey, ham, Swiss, and cheddar sub with this garlic aioli spread on it, a bag of salt and vinegar chips, and a glass bottle of lemonade. Oh god, it's a feast. I mean I don't even know what the hell aioli is, but the stuff is incredible; you've got to try it. The whole meal is like twice what it should cost, but I'm serious, try it, you will not be disappointed.

Okay, so in church, next to her, I'm imagining all of this, and I'm thinking back to that innocent first encounter, and it's so vivid. I truly felt like I was watching this movie play in my head, and the preacher just keeps on, with his voice playing in my head as if it was a soundtrack, 'This young man was on the path of righteousness. Didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't ever have sex. He prayed every night and served every Saturday at the local soup kitchen. He was a good Christian man, but he began to grow complacent in his faith.' And the preacher's hollow voice was having this kind of hypnotic effect on me, and I kept thinking back to the damn grocery store.

And I'm seeing my intentions so clearly, as if watching myself in third-person, and they seem almost humorous to me, and at the same time so selfish, like selfish is this cruel way. Right, and so as I waited for my sub, I knew what I had to do: one head-on, face to face approach,

probably in the freezer aisle, somewhere between the dairy-free ice cream and the frozen fruit, make eye-contact and politely smile, show her you're friendly, and then wander around the stacks of local booze until you spot her heading for the checkout; the way she was dressed, the whole hand basket and fast walking thing she had going on, I knew she wouldn't be long.

So everything happened according to my plan. The eye contact, a solid smile—it made me feel like a magician or something. Then I followed her to the back of this long staggered line of self-checkout customers, because these yuppies somehow feel that checking yourself out in a grocery store makes you into an autonomous human being. And this girl, the one that has her hand choking my hand in the church, but even before I knew her at all, there in the grocery line, pulled out her iPhone. Typical right? She pulled it out of some tiny pocket in the middle of her ass, and I knew it was then or never, it was either me or a text from her affluent and good-looking boyfriend at the office, so I opened my mouth to let escape whatever wave of bullshit my mind sent.

'Diet soda? Really?' I had noted a 2-liter of soda in her basket after having labeled her as a health-junkie.

'Yea?' Take it from interrogative to playful. Exaggerate.

'That stuff will kill you. I mean that sugar stuff, that's not sugar; it's a neurotoxic, which breaks down to methanol inside your body, and then that's like signing a death warrant.'

Bingo. Could be true. Hope she's not a nutritionist.

'Is that so? Well, I might have to look into that. But the soda's not for me.'

What a sweet voice. Make her talk more. Fuel your man-juices.

'Who's it for, your boyfriend?'

'No.'

‘Well, who’s it for?’

‘These kids that I get to spend my Thursday evenings with.’

‘Yea? That’s a good gig, I bet. I wish you’d been my babysitter. You...’

‘No, it’s a volunteer thing.’

‘Well I still wish you’d been my babysitter.’

‘You do realize you’re talking to a stranger?’

‘I wouldn’t say you’re that much stranger than me.’

Words. Just words, I thought at the time, but in the church, I’m thinking back and remembering every word. I was close to perfect, like perfect in some ideal reality of how I wanted the conversation to go with Rachel. It was like I had been playing Jenga and kept making the right choice. Block by block, you know, tiptoeing into her life, the subtle art of seduction, and I’m thinking of how it had all felt so light then, like a game, like just for fun.

And I catch the pastor finally getting to his point, or so it seemed at the time, ‘This young man left his house late one night, because he had an itching, something that wouldn’t let him sleep. He couldn’t just stay in his bed with his mind wandering, so in the light of a full moon, he left his house and went down to the lake. There was something stirring about in the water, some kind of blackish creature. The young man had a dangerous sense of curiosity and went forth to examine the mysterious creature.’

And I glance over at Rachel. She’s following the story, as she must’ve every Sunday for the last two and a half decades. And right then, I feel a bit sorry for her, I really did, that she had been born into this life, you know, where the older people, the men in neckties, tell you scary stories that are supposed to make you believe and behave. But she’s listening with this kind of prey-like intensity, where every sound seemed to have the power to give or take her life. It was

actually pretty hot, honestly it was, this kind of captivation, and I remember thinking that to see someone so attentive to each word, so devoted to something outside of herself. Hot.

And I'm thinking back to the self-checkout line. One of those robotic things had broken down, and the lifeguard-on-duty, aka the woman too ugly to be assigned to checkout normal customers, was more than flustered. She was, and I'm serious when I say this, yelling to the back of the store for help, that old ogre was standing there, all red in the face, yelling for some guy by the name of Stuart, interrupting the romantic conversation that Rachel and I were sharing.

And I'm sitting in church and remembering all these little details, just like I'm telling you, and I think back to her waiting on me to finish my own check out. Can you imagine, seeing this divine figure waiting for you? I started thinking maybe I could get my life together, maybe we were supposed to meet, maybe all the shit in my life didn't matter anymore, and maybe we were meant to fall in love. And so at this point, I actually had the thought that she might be an angel. I mean I don't, or I never really believed in God or even the whole notion of soul mates, but there in the grocery store, I considered it. See, she had bought the diet soda and some other snacks because she was getting ready to go and help at an afterschool program for children who are either blind or deaf, I don't remember. Maybe both. If they're blind, they won't even realize it's diet. Anyways, she stood there, poised like a bronze statue of a goddess, waiting for me, as the afternoon sun outlined her entire body: all those curves that are so visible and so sexy in anything tight, especially, the running clothes she wore, and at this point, I've caught myself realizing that the thoughts I was thinking there in the grocery store are, I don't know, really evil or vile or sickening, or no, beastly is more accurate, like a goddam lion or something.

And in church, at this same moment, I was starting to feel terrible about it all, I'm telling you, those places are guilt factories, and that certain greed or lust or passion that had invaded my

entire body in the air-conditioned grocery, that had made me want to rip off her clothes and squeeze her skin and feel her body next to mine, started to feel hideous, like a hickey, you know, something that seems great at the time, but then you've got to hide it for the next few days. No, fuck it, I think hickies are love marks; people shouldn't be ashamed of them. But anyways, no, it was worse than a hickey, there's not a word for it, guilt and shame all jumbled up together. I felt dirty, that's what I felt. Dirty.

The pastor went on, clearly adding theatricality, his voice becoming louder and deeper. And he was pausing every few sentences in all the right places, you could tell he had told this before, or that he had at least practiced it in the mirror a dozen times, 'And the slithering and mysterious beast stopped moving and lay perfectly still on the dirt there by the lake. The young man didn't dare touch the creature, but he also didn't run, and so the creature crawled over to the young man's bare leg. It wrapped one of its inky arms around the man's ankle and grabbed him. The young man was, at first, repulsed, but the poison on the blackish creature's tentacle went to work, and because this young man entertained the thought that this darkness might not be evil, the poison sunk deeper and deeper into the young man's blood.'

And so, I'm watching Rachel listen, and right there, I start to understand what it feels like to experience fear. Utter fear. Not like when one of us is watching a horror flick, no, she's squeezing my hand like a life-buoy and her eyes have a cusp of visible and tottering tears sparkling on the edge, and you could see a sense of hopelessness. I don't know how to describe it to make you understand, it's something you've got to see, it's like that second before you realize some dream you're having is just a nightmare: the despair of not being able to turn back time. I don't know, it was fear though, I'm sure of that.

And so at the same time, the storyboard of the grocery store is continuing in my mind. I had walked her to her car, this old Ford Taurus, and I was being all gentleman-like and everything, and when she pressed the unlock button on her keychain, I ran and grabbed the door for her, which I knew would secure at least the phone number. They love that stuff, a gesture of chivalry or whatever you want to call it, but I knew getting the phone number would lead to a date the next night, and that would lead to me inviting her to take a walk around the block with me, which would lead to me inviting her in for some *leftover* brownies and ice cream, you know, like I just happened to have extra brownies and ice cream waiting to be eaten, which would then lead to making out and hooking up and then, fucking. You know, classic-me shit: 36 hours and a phone number, that's all I need, learned it from my brother.

And so I'm in the worship service, right, and I'm glancing at her every so often, and I feel sweat, I actually feel sweat dripping like a leaky faucet from the pits of my arms, and there's a circle gathering on my shirt, without even looking, I know there's a circle, and I wonder why people ever wear grey in the summer, but then, sitting there, I get this kind of knotted feeling in my stomach, this hollowed-out hole right in the belly, and I want to leave. I need to leave. And it's because, as I'm thinking about Rachel and me in the parking lot, I'm seeing this sickening and slimy intent buried beneath my schemes, but the word "scheme" makes it sound bad and it didn't feel bad at the time, no not a scheme, my 48-hour plan, and I started to feel, I started to feel like a goddamn monster, right there, sitting next to this angelic girl. A monster. What would my dad have said? I decided right then I had to get out. I could leave her there, say I needed a tissue or something, and never come back. But this story, the pastor's story, the young man and the creature, I wanted to hear how it ended; I needed to hear some kind of come-uppance.

And the pastor, he just goes right along, but no one's bored, I know this, because I had been looking around, and all the eyes are just blank and wide-open, and I'm thinking, based on this enchantment I see in these sheep, these pew-sitters, that this is probably the best story he's told in years. 'And at that moment, the young man began to feel as though he possessed the courage to do anything. And all these deep dark and secretive thoughts that the young man had been battling for years started slipping to the forefront of the young man's mind. Temptations. Of the flesh.'

Now this was one of those big churches, you know the kind I'm talking about, lots and lots of rows of pews—and why do churches have pews anyways?—probably four or five hundred people in all, the church was uncomfortably big, you know, looks like a place where a business convention would be held except for these great big crosses standing everywhere, and, oh yeah, lots of beige, seriously, beige carpet, beige walls, beige pews, beige-skinned people sitting in the beige pews, I remember feeling like I was stuck in some beige-themed fish tank, but to be fair there were some colors up near the front, these flowers, right, there were about a dozen pots of colorful flowers sitting, serving no purpose at all, at the foot of the stage. But besides that everything was just pretty plain, I guess it was so you had to pay attention to the pastor, but up above us, seriously about 65 or 70 feet, there were these two huge windows, and I remember wondering why they were there, and I thought maybe it was so in the middle of a sermon you could glance up and remember that there was a world out there, that this private club which met every Sunday, was not the end-all, be-all. Lightning bugs trapped in a jar need air sometimes, you know? But as the pastor's getting into the juice of the story, I can feel this heat on my arms, and I realize the sun is coming through those big windows, and the rays are climbing up my body, just me, out of everyone there, just me, the sun is on me like a spotlight, and the heat is rising up

my body, and I'm trying to relax, trying really hard, but I'm anxious and not sure why, and I think back over my last three days with Rachel, and how it must've seemed, to her, like the unfolding of a new and inescapable world, Pandora pulling off the top of that box.

See, because after the parking lot, I had gotten her number, and we had left each other. Neither of us had even said our names, which was great, because it made our whole interaction feel unique or surreal or like-a-movie: not weird, 'Never be fucking weird,' my brother told me that one, and said, 'Give them something beyond the everyday,' you know? 'or at least give them a story to tell their friends.' And so I called her the next day and invited her to dinner, somewhere cheap and cute, a little hole-in-the-wall Mexican place. And she says no. She can't. And so I'm sitting in church and this is all playing through my head, like a highlight reel, and I'm thinking that I should have stopped there, right after she had said no. But I didn't, I tried to convince her to spend time with me, you know, just give me one chance, like what if I'm the man of her dreams or something, but she had some missions meeting at her church, on a Friday night, can you believe that, so I conceded, and told her that she'd won the battle but not the war, I'd wait for her to text me, you know, put the ball in her court.

And so as the sun broiled my entire body in that pew, the pastor kept on, 'He went first back to his house and went to the place his father kept his alcohol. The young man drank until he could drink no more. He then took all the money out of his mom's purse and then stole his father's keys and drove the family Cadillac, having already become intoxicated may I remind you, to the downtown area and found the one strip club in the city and went inside.'

And I'm thinking to when she finally texted me back, how I had waited for that, how my mouth nearly started salivating when my phone vibrated, and how I'd told, rather how I'd lied to her, saying that I wanted to bring her brownies and ice-cream. And how she had said that was okay,

but that I couldn't stay or come inside because her parents were gone for the weekend, can you imagine, a woman of 24 still living with all of her parents' rules? And so I drove over there with a pack of Oreos, right, and I get there, and without any hesitation, I walk up and kiss her.

'After the young man entered the strip club, tired and drunk, he sat down. And without knowing what to do, he raised a handful of cash up in the air. A woman came over and began dancing closer and closer to him, and he paid her more and more until he had no bills left.' Now as he's speaking, I'm starting to see, or rather feel, this strange connection, and I start breathing harder, and my hands, they're actually shaking. I let go of Rachel's hand and just clench my fists, and I'm feeling that same fear I saw on her face earlier, and I'm terrified that she's having the same realization that I'm having, and it's the complete desperation, that feeling of I-need-to-wake-up-right-now, the pain you get as you watch the last grain of sand fall through an hour-glass.

But I'm fixated on all the sand that had already fallen through, how I had kissed her, and how she had resisted, and how I had kept at it, badgering her with all the reasons why she should let go of all her rules, so that I could have whatever I wanted. I commanded her, like a military officer: take off your clothes, lay down on the bed, use both hands, I mean you can imagine it all: order after order, I told this sweet girl, this virgin, to give up her so-called *chastity* for me, to this creature that I had become. It had felt like love or passion or desire, but as I'm sitting there in the church, I see my actions for what they were, the opening of a Pandora's box.

And as I'm there, listening, I feel this kind of disgust growing and hardening inside me, like I had swallowed the seeds of a cactus, and I don't want to have to go on living knowing all the things I've done, but the pastor, he just continues, staring right at me, 'And the young man soon left the strip club with the woman. Next, he broke into an abandoned house, where he took

advantage of her, and then just left her. Afterwards, the young man made his way back home, shouting curse words at the moon and the trees and God, because his itch had still not gone away. When he got back to his home, he walked straight to the lake to kill the creature that had darkened his blood, but the creature was nowhere to be found.'

And I'm sitting there next to Rachel, scared to look at her face, horrified by the idea that she might be thinking the same thoughts I'm thinking, and I'm scared because, see, after that night where I persuaded her, working my way to that eventual goal of fucking her, and I don't understand this, but she trusted me, almost instantly, it was like I had cast a spell on her or something, and she left all of her rules, like I think she actually started to believe that sex was love, and that it was a paradise, some kind of heaven, that our relationship would go on forever, you know, like happily ever after and all that Hollywood bullshit. But for me, the game was over. I had won my prize, and I would move on. But in the pew, I begin realizing what this would mean to her, to Rachel, like I didn't see how she would be able to even go on living once I left her, but I had to, she wasn't my type, no one ever is, and so I was starting to slide, inch by inch, away from her on the pew, and she must've noticed, because the next thing I know, she's standing up.

So she stands up, I'm not lying to you, and starts walking to the front of the church, seriously she did, she was moving with the focus of a soldier, can you imagine, I had no clue what she was doing, I didn't want to know, and the pastor was clearly trying to get to the end of the story before she got to the front of the auditorium, and he, in a hurried tempo says, 'the young man, devastated as he was, recognized that his terrible crimes could not be undone, and so he began to thrash about in the lake with a great fury, searching for some sign of the black beast.'

And at this point, she's at the summer flowers, and I'm thinking that her momentum is going to

carry her up onto the stage. And the pastor just goes on, but his voice becomes frail, and with all the effort he's got left, like a man trying to get out his dying words, he says, 'But the brutish creature, who must have been Satan himself, had not only disappeared, but had found a new home in the blood and in the heart of the young man.'

And she stops. She bends down and takes a cup from the ground. I hadn't even seen it. And at the same time a man from the front row, walks next to her and grabs a basket of breadcrumbs. It's communion. The pastor mumbles something about getting rid of your sins, and people begin emerging from the pews, taking a bit of bread and dipping it in Rachel's cup. And sitting there, I know that I want to feel better, I will eat anything that will make this cactus feeling go away, so I walk up the aisle, knowing that bread cannot change to flesh in your mouth, but wanting to believe in miracles, wanting to believe my parents could come back from the dead, wanting to undo all the pain I've caused Rachel. I get to the front. I grab a morsel of bread from the man's basket, and I can see my hand trembling, I had no clue what all of this meant. I dip the bread in the wine, making sure every part is covered, and as I place it on top of my tongue I make eye contact with Rachel. She's doing everything she can to not lose it, not now, not here in front of everyone; her eyes are filled with tears and no one knows why, no one besides me. And so, my lips sealed shut around the taste of French bread and sweet intoxication, and as I pushed the soggy bread toward my esophagus, I swear to you, it seemed, for an instant, to become slick and slimy and alive, as it wiggled down my throat."