

The Counter, The Finder

The crosshatching numbers began when Sara Sue wasn't paying attention in church.

She started simple: boys vs. girls, young vs. old, total number on each side of the nave. Then she started to get more detailed counting the total pieces of her stained-glass savior. She loved the precocious twelve-year-old Christ amazing his elders. She lingered on the baptism at Bethany beyond the Jordan. She took off her patent-leathers and imaged the compassionate leader washing her feet. But she could never bring herself to count the pieces of suffering Christ. She turned from the temptation in the desert. She refused to look at the abusive walk toward Golgotha. She couldn't even say the name Peter. The artist had found the real betrayal in the hands of the prized disciple—in each storyboard of stained-glass, Peter's hands would be deformed, mangled, cursed into a perpetual claw that pushed the weight of his decisions away.

The abuses then began piling up. The news of clergy members with whole scrapbooks of parish boys, macabre trophies tacked with care and precision. Talk of catamites—the resurfacing of a seedy past that the church thought it had buried with the likes of the Inquisition. Sara Sue knew that she could now count the suffering. Each plea and pool of bloody sweat. Finally feel the crush of the cross on Simon's shoulders.

Still, more than a decade later, Sara Sue sometimes catches herself involuntarily cocking her head and talking to the sky. Pleading for understanding, patience, maybe even a way out. Eventually she'll see it, breathe, and stop—never forgetting to first admonish the church for brainwashing her into believing in such pathetic fallacies.

Jasper is no healer. He's more of an excavator, a finder, a shifter of unseen things.

It started with women, and is still strongest with them. He pulled away from his first love, but she grappled his vinyl windbreaker and yanked him back, and when their lips smashed, bundles of black tumors leavened into his mind. He tried sex twice with a girlfriend in high school. The first time was standing up in a bathroom beside a bike path. Both were willing, but after half a minute the flashing blips made him stop. The final time was after boozing the night away at a punk show. They fell into each other for five minutes, but when she flipped him over to climb on top, Jasper noticed the blood, and then her wilting from the hemorrhaging ovarian cysts.

He collapsed into himself, away from women especially—constantly fearing that he would fall into one and have to tell her about a rotting uterus or breast. During his senior year of college, he finally found someone of equal chastity. She slept at his house every night but always feet to face. But it was during a three day blizzard that the boiler died and Jasper woke up with her little-spooned against him. He slid out with a flick and buried his head in a pillow. He dug at his eyes. Hummed. Bit his tongue. Stuffed his nose full of pillow case. Afraid that if he let any of his senses come to fruition they would show him the gaunt hand of cancer grasping a hold of her brain. But he opened and there was nothing. No hand. No black bulbs of cancer. No clogged arteries or premonitions. Only the soft and steady beat of life. That's when he realized the answer wasn't chastity, but simple touch. The forearm. A soft tuft. Chapped lips. A simple touch and he could see everything. Or nothing.

The Day of the Dead

Sara Sue was finishing a churro when she noticed a pair of juvenile delinquents.

A wake of flimsy wax paper trailed behind them as they dodged and weaved through dense foot traffic. Unlike the majority of dine and dashers, their faces were not distorted into gleeful caricatures, but instead were panicked—stricken with the realization that the middle-aged street-vendor they robbed was hot on their heels. The two juke and spun through a sixty-eight person logjam. The vendor hurdled six small dogs and three leashed toddlers. Whenever the thieves passed a storefront window their reflections would breed and blend into a disarrayed amalgam—a frightened hydra, each head holding a stage of fear as the street-vendor gained traction. The two limboed underneath a sawhorse when they should have hurdled. The vendor hurdled, and in mid-air grappled the two by their thieving collars.

But the street-vendor then noticed what Sara Sue did: the little thieving bastards were female—heavy knots of waist-length hair tumbling out as they desperately tried to gain more grip on the shifty construction rubble. The vendor folded, arched the top half of his torso back, simply not able to process this bizarre turn in events. Suddenly he looked embarrassed, almost ashamed, letting go of the female thieves as if they were hot coals. The two took this opportunity and escaped into the thick gyres of people. His face a gnarled rotten truffle, the street-vendor bent at the waist and rested his elbows on meaty, polyester thighs. The holiday traffic swelled the town square, the crowd engulfing the street-vendor, filing him back to his cart, to his life of small gratifications that meld into monstrous disappointments. Sara Sue wanted to go to him. She

wanted him to know that she watched him. She saw him glide through the muck of people with graceful determination.

Two church bells rang with corresponding force. Children ate sugar skulls impaled on pikes and spits. Sara Sue counted 457 black balloons huddled in a centralized pen bumping their fontanel heads together, each balloon representing a patron saint. A group of widows walked past her toward a graveyard. They paced one another at a comfortable shuffle, holding marigolds and mescal. A sharp squeal began to build, the women balling up like panicked mackerel, heaving their bodies at the back of a man. Sara Sue could only see his wardrobe: long black sleeves and gloves, his pants spackled onto the sides of his boots, his face masked in a festive *calaca*—a grinning skull terrified at the multitude of widows wanting a touch. They torn themselves to shreds, small swarms racking up the man’s skyward arms, stretching and straining for the bracelet of flesh between his glove and sleeve—any small ring of skin. The crowd tensed, sucked itself shoulder to shoulder, wrapping themselves around the masked man with reverence, shouting.

“Por favor! Por favor! Uno toque! Uno toque! (Please! Please! One touch! One touch!)”

One of the taller widows managed to grapple his wrist and pull it down to her face, to the tuft of her head, to the bottom crescent of her left breast, crying and pleading.

“Cúrame! Cúrame! (Heal me! Heal me!)”

The masked man ducked into the swarm, staying low. Sara Sue saw his head split out between a wall of legs, stuck behind bars. Then he was swept in, pulled by the ankles, flown into the swarm, toward the open doors of St. Francis de Sales parish.

Jasper could already smell the guacamole and grill tops.

His *calaca* mask smiled back at him from the broken reflection of a cage-covered window. The festivities were in sight, but this abandoned book-binding plant corralled his impish spirit. The gangrenous pages stuck in the sharp diamonds of the fence. The breadth of the building taking up an entire city block. The flaking poles of an ivy-coated forgotten playground.

He snuck into a studio sectioned off by chain-link closets, each one stuffed with corroded wooden boxes of scabrous glass and discarded fuses. Something sour dragged itself along a concrete tube of stairs. Jasper followed the smell, leveling his nails into the walls, squinting, stumbling onto a massive production floor of dead magazines and obsolete textbooks. Pungent, long-forgotten literature of Americana: housewives smiling their barbiturate gin and tonic smiles; a caricature of a cartoon-headed Khrushchev pounding his pink fist on a pulpit.

Taking up three-quarters of the floor was a skeletal printing press stripped for scrap metal; its guts ripped out for the copper wiring—the vulnerability, the nakedness causing Jasper to flush, as if he walked in on someone adjusting their wig or wiping themselves. He backed into a corner and knocked over a cart of wastebaskets. The porous netting of the iron trashcans rattled, shattering the silence of the abandoned factory. It was unsettling, and when Jasper grabbed the wastebaskets from hopping up and down, he heard the first shuffle. It came from the far corner, a trapped corner between the wall and the decrepit printing press. Then a second shuffle and a step. Jasper bent and picked up a scabbard of casing. He gripped and waited for the violence.

“We got a sick one back here.”

Six spindly arms poked out from behind the press. The arms connected to a shallow group of mid-pubescent teenagers, one girl and two boys, fear swimming in their eyes.

“I ain’t going to hurt you...”

Jasper tossed his scrap of metal down and removed his *calaca* mask.

...sick how?”

The girl stuck out her arm and called him over.

“She just won’t move.”

Jasper rounded the corner and found a caramel mutt splayed out and shaking, her chest filling with sharp bursts.

“Don’t know what’s wrong with her...only found her about two months ago.”

Jasper leaned down.

“Mind I take a look?”

The tiny matriarch nodded approval. Jasper didn’t want to tell these kids that their dog was about to die, but he was compelled, possessed, already leaning down and putting his hand on the dead dog’s ribs. He waited for the burst of death, but saw four faces instead. He could practically smell the puppies with each breath of the mother.

“She’s going to be a mama.”

The matriarch shook her head at the other two and eased against the wall.

“No shit...

She popped a sweet cigar into her mouth.

...looks like I'm going to be a grandma.”

He raised a brow and bummed a smoke. The teenage matriarch struck the match, the sweet sting of phosphorus hanging in the air.

Jasper never believed in signs and symbols. It was all flim flam, nothing but trying to decipher, complicate something as simple as happenstance. There usually aren't poetic semantics behind things, or a string-pulling deity or patron. It's all just cut and dry, black and white coincidence. The pregnant mutt wasn't a sign from above (or below for that matter) but simply an opportunity for education. Jasper finally read the other side of the coin, he evolved his renaissance spirit; his touch wasn't meant just for pain, but prosperity as well.

The young matriarch thanked him with sweet tobacco lips on his cheek, and said she'd name the first pup after him. Jasper knuckled the remnants of the young lips as he walked back, honing in on The Day of the Day. Widows filed past a centralized fountain toward the graveyard. Marigolds peeked out from behind ears. Transparent pints of homemade mescal were stuck to sticky mouths. The mourners walked toward graveside altars, loving but shoddy rows of slapped together wood and nail. The large crowd of a *patrón*, a respected public figure, impregnated the center of the street. The *patrón's* influence could be seen in the myriad of faces: latin, white, black—all races together, a mural unified by death, by love. Following custom, the mourners carried the *patrón's* favorite things to his graveside. Long stalks of cigars glowed from the end of mouths. *Lucha libre* masks spattered the crowd. A trio of violins and a single guitar played not sappy ballads, but lively tex-mex two-step.

A hand grabbed Jasper's bicep from behind.

"You are one..."

He turned to a woman, a shrouded widow.

"Excuse me?"

"You are *sanador* (healer)."

He pulled back, but instead of letting go, the widow grabbed his hand and threaded her fingers into his, her eyes widening, welling.

"I can tell! *Por favor! Por favor!* You can help us! Help us all!"

Jasper tried to pull away, but her grip only tightened.

"Help you with what?"

The widow shook her head and kissed their threaded hands.

"Everything...you help with everything."

Rock of Gibraltar

St. Francis de Sales Parish is a beast of burden. The whips of its parishioners so sempiternal and fierce that it developed a callused hide quickly, a steady and unmoving root of faith. The hands that now lay on the pews flow with the same spilt blood of those that built the parish. The community itself was an end of the line town from the waning days of the American Indian War. Back then, crops of soldiers would amble in lost-eyed and decrepit, and after the initial shock, the boys would soon realize this latest defeat was their last. There would be no glory, no homecoming here or anywhere. Invariably, the disenchanted soldiers would pillage and destroy, the rapacious nature of the defeated taking hold. But the self-lacerating townsfolk would always rebuild. The migrant forbearers becoming so entrenched in a commitment of something that it became an inescapable voluntary subjugation, a misplaced martyrdom that they would pass on to incoming generations.

Jasper was noticing the pock-marked walls of the church when he was spread-eagled on a couple dozen shoulders. By this point, he was docile, immobile, giving in; his organized believers, twenty-seven volatile fundamentalists, mechanically clawing at his limbs in unison. The crowd lowered him facedown to the stone ground. He saw the dying, flaking away kidneys of one worshipper as she knelt with the full force of her hefty frame on his biceps. The worshippers scraping became more frantic. They started with his skull-faced *calaca*, followed by everything else, stripped him down until Jasper was naked on the century-old floor. The inflicted

widows then disrobing themselves, each one trying to chaff her illness away against Jasper: a medical orgy of asexual bodies sliding and writhing together.

Sara Sue was never a believer. The only thing that counted for her, the only thing that she could ever guarantee, were the numbers. The 314 pock marks on the walls of St. Francis de Sales church. The twenty-seven very confused women dry humping an even more confused Jasper. Monotheism, polytheism, faith, cynicism, one or many, the numbers finally didn't matter. No matter what she believed, Sara Sue knew that she had to find a way to stop this increasingly violent, yet oddly obsequious crowd. Violence was out of the question with a crowd this large and uniform. Sara Sue the unrepentant non-believer then did something she hadn't done in more than a decade—truly prayed, even remembering to genuflect before going into the pew. Granted, she was rusty, but as soon as she started, it all spilled forth, almost in tongues.

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...”

Maybe all God needs is a little communication, something small, a morsel.

The Day of the Dead decorations fluttered from the walls. The bewildered *padre* sprinted from the scarcity carrying wine and cassocks. Stone saints leapt from their perches. Jasper's worshippers, not to be deterred, grasped onto their bucking bronco until a hanging wrought iron lamp wavered, snapped free and crashed into the one straddling his neck. The remaining widows scattered. Compassion always seemed for rubes, but seeing that naked bastard dazed in the middle of a disintegrating church, Sara Sue couldn't help but sling his arm over her shoulder, snag one of the cassocks the fleeing priest dropped and hobble out of St. Francis De Sales parish. The earthquake made the holiday live up to its cryptic name: the limbs of Jasper's minions

protruded from beneath a fallen clock-tower, while a group of people plucked tiny bodies from the shambles of a daycare.

Sara Sue—granular and feeling the first glow of compassion, and Jasper—thrashed and wearing a clerical cassock, held hands like play-date best friends.

When the corporeal world, the tangible, begins to buckle, people will grapple onto the closest circulation system they can find. The closest heartbeat to convince ourselves that the current absurdity they're experiencing is not the real world. That the real world is the unmoving, indefatigable rock we all need it to be. It's these times that two transcendent forces will unknowingly rendezvous. Not for a spiritual or everlasting fetter, but just to share this ripening moment. A counter will always count, a finder will always find, but evolution never nibbles—it rips out great white chunks. The inevitable will always be an unknown to us. Never defeat, only proper placement—a puzzle piece, the twist of a screw into its tread.