

A Modern Celebration

Forty minutes out from the Valley, Olympia worked up the nerve to ask, “What about Charlotte?”

Tennessee’s gut clenched up, and he said to pull over.

She skidded onto the gravel shoulder; he flew out the car and charged toward the guard rail, but stumbled. He broke his fall with his hands, steadied himself on all fours, and drew deep, deliberate belly breaths. Stones needled his palms; he could cope with the points that hurt, but where the gravel didn’t pierce his flesh, the absence of feeling left him startled and unsure.

He shifted focus to his knees; they stung. He wondered if he’d torn his new chinos, and if so, whether Olympia would be mad at him. A spasm in his belly forced him forward, but produced nothing physical; he suspected he was losing his soul. He searched the ground in vain for signs of life--an ant, a worm, anything--and concluded that the earth here could not sustain life; and that confirmed his suspicions about his errant soul.

A vile taste overtook his mouth, and he laid his tongue on the dusty earth. It felt good, so he inched forward, licking the gravel. It had no taste --more a non-taste; subtractive, it rid his mouth of bad taste.

Olympia sure as hell didn’t want to be late for lunch. She scrambled out the car to see what was taking him so long; the unseasonable heat made her perspire and her Subaru was covered with soot. If he’d hurry up, she might have time to get it

washed again--but no, no place'd be open today, it was a ridiculous idea anyway. She walked round the hood and there he was, kneeling in his new slacks, licking the ground. *Why now?* she frowned, but she wasn't surprised; he was always doing some crazy thing.

In her beige Ann Taylor suit, ivory blouse, and simple gold cross, she felt out of place. He'd pleaded to take Pacific Coast Highway instead of the freeway from the Valley up to Carpinteria--to make the day more of an outing than a chore, he said--and now they were stopped somewhere past Malibu, in bumblefuck. In a field beyond the guardrail, a handful of Mexicans were doing what they do, planting or picking, whatever, and she wondered why they were working on New Year's Day, and if they were dangerous. Though she'd lived in southern California all her life, she'd never really known a Mexican. *Figure the odds of that.*

Crawling in the dirt, licking it, his tight butt flexing in the silk-weight chinos she'd bought him, he was magnificent. She ached to tear his pants off and do it right there in front of the Mexicans. She could picture the shock on their faces. She shuddered. *You've lost it, woman.*

He lifted his palm to his face. Pebbles stuck to it, and with the tip of his tongue he flicked them off. She crouched down, and took his hand in hers. He stared up at her, his eyes wide and imploring as a wounded puppy's. "Can I help you up?" she asked.

He shook his head no. She felt his shoulder muscles twitch. His hair was damp. He smelled of Polo Blue and dust. When he withdrew his hand from hers

and set it back on the ground, she wasn't sure if he was steadying himself or rejecting her. She always felt that way with him, and hated herself for it--or him, depending when you asked.

She'd ask the Mexicans for help, but they probably didn't speak English, so she supported him while he stood and together they took baby steps to the car. He leaned against the hood while, with a water bottle and tissue, she wiped his forehead cool, his lashes curling at her. She'd been a sucker for them ever since they met--the night he poured the pinot gris she ordered, flicked his lashes at her like a goddam peacock flaunting his tail, grinned, and said, "Next one's on me."

He took the water bottle and gulped it empty, and then she helped him into the car.

She drove slowly. The a/c felt thin after the hot dust outside. "Want to go back home?" she asked. "I could call my mother and cancel."

"No, I'll be fine," he said. "But thanks for asking." That she'd even think of cancelling made him feel important.

She dialed her mother, but no one answered, which made no sense. She examined his slacks--they'd survived just fine--and wondered what he was thinking. "Want to stop at a motel for a shower?"

"Maybe for something else," he said. "Not worth it just for a shower."

"You recover fast," she laughed. "Always have."

He said, "I'm not your stud."

Her jaws clenched. "You brought it up, not me."

He felt like a heel.

She speeded up, and the silence grew deadly. He eyed the plastic cross on her dashboard and sniffed her flowery perfume and imagined that the sunrays streaming through the tinted sunroof came instead through stained-glass church windows, and they were at his funeral. He stretched out straight as a stiff and crossed his hands over his chest. He tossed a tissue up to the roof; it floated down toward him like an angel, and he felt honored to welcome an angel to his funeral. Maybe he hadn't lost his soul, after all. When he was little and alone, he used to play with angels, but always kept it a secret, because his parents wouldn't approve.

Olympia rubbed his arm. "What are you up to now, you goofy motherfucker?" Things he did like that, throwing around tissues, no other man she'd ever known would do, and it made him special and hard to stay mad at. But it scared her, too, because she never understood, and he'd never explain.

Tennessee studied the gold cross on her chest. She had a great chest, generous but real, not silicone, the finest in their whole health club; but in the two years they'd lived together, she'd never once, as far as he knew, gone to church, or mentioned God. Yet she always wore a cross. "Just remembering last night," he lied.

Last night had been good. She'd hoped it would segue to this morning, and a negotiation during their ride up about their future; but his fainting, or whatever it was, put a stop to that. Ten days had passed since her boss offered her a promotion to the bank's headquarters in Charlotte--he'd sprung it on her at the

office holiday party, his dumb idea of a surprise--and for ten exasperating days, Tennessee had avoided committing to relocate with her, or even talking about it.

In Carpinteria they took Santa Claus Lane inland to the trailer park where her mother lived. The road up to it was potholed and dusty; if you turned left at the gate, you entered the park, but if you went straight, past a gully and up the hill, you came to a cemetery. A razor-coil fence separated the mobile homes from the graves. Residents got a discount on burial plots there, and the plastic flowers on the graves came from the same bodega off Route 6 as the plastic flowers in the window boxes of the trailers. She turned right, into the park.

“We could’ve gone straight,” he said. “It’d be quicker.”

“Smartass,” she said. “This is hard enough.”

She braked for a little boy, about ten, crossing the road. In the heat the boy was shirtless, and puny, with shoulder blades and ribs poking out of his skin like a bird. He wore an adult-sized, cracked Dick Cheney mask way too big for him; it flopped around monstrosly. “Sweet mask,” Tennessee whistled. Further down the road another boy kicked a Coke Zero can in the dust. An aging lady in a flimsy housecoat sat exposed on a porch, fanning herself. At the corner, teenagers in Goth--black jeans and Ts, dyed hair, black fingernails--labored in vain to resuscitate an expired Ford Escort. Dogs slept in shadows. The steps to Lynn’s double-wide were coated with the same slimy mold they’d pointed out to her at Thanksgiving.

Lynn shouted from inside. “‘Bout time you got here. Tunie fish ‘bout to turn brown on the plates.” They were clueless why Lynn--or Mrs. P, as Tennessee called her--set food out on dishes before her guests even got there. Was she that lonely?

“Happy New Year, Mom,” Olympia muttered to the slime.

The table was set for four. Tennessee’s gut still felt rebellious, but it made no sense to heave before you ate. “Happy New Year, Mrs. P,” he said as cheerily as he could, but she ignored him. *Ole coot looks good, in her way.* She was decked out in turquoise, flowered pedal-pushers; a pink halter top; big, bleached-platinum hair with blue barrettes; bright red, white, and yellow plastic beads, earrings, and bracelets; and commensurate makeup. She reeked of lilac cologne. He had no idea what she had against him, and felt small around her.

“I tried calling to say we’d be late, but you didn’t answer,” Olympia pried.

“‘Been busy,” Lynn evaded. “Got a frien’ ferlunch.”

Depleted on the sofa, Tennessee studied the molding drooping like worn pantyhose from the water-stained ceiling where the two halves of the doublewide were supposed to join, but didn’t. Among the clutter of painted plates, acrylic still-lifes, crocheted pillow covers, and blown-glass clowns, he scavenged for something new; Mrs. P was always adding shit, and he gave in to his art-student compulsion to find the latest eyesore, like Waldo.

He found it, on Crucifixion Central. On a wall bursting with crosses-- from do-it-yourself olive-wood crosses from Bethlehem to plastic crosses from

Big Lots--a new cross stood out. It was deep as a thumb, with sidewalls of wooden matchsticks like tramp art and a façade of shards from broken teacups and mirrors; in its nave, a glass dome held a tiny porcelain infant, sheathed in scarlet satin. He thought it was beautiful, and out of place near the tinsel-laden PVC Christmas tree.

A shout from the back of the trailer rattled his reverie. "Where the hell'd you put my pants?" a husky voice boomed.

"Shut the fuck up!" Lynn screeched. "Olympia's out here." She sounded alarmed, but the way she grinned suggested she wasn't. "She don't got to know our goddam personal business."

Black hair still wet, Jairo emerged from the back of the trailer. He looked younger than Lynn, maybe 45, lithe, buttoning up a plaid cotton button-down with a Polo logo. Tennessee wondered if the shirt was a genuine Polo or a Mexican knock-off, and felt like a jerk for even thinking that.

"Sorry 'bout the ruckus," Jairo said, his face brown and blushing at the same time. Tennessee hadn't known that was possible.

"No problem, I'm used to it," Olympia frowned, extending her hand for Jairo to shake.

"Don't get fussy with me, young lady," Lynn threatened.

During lunch, an old Dixie Chicks CD droned, "Not ready to say I'm sorry." The talk was sparse, and the tuna fish didn't require much chewing. Lynn announced, "Jairo got a new pickup. Christmas sale."

Guess he's not a hustler, Tennessee concluded. "Congratulations, Jairo," he said. "Celebrate with a beer?"

"Sure, man. Thanks."

"Tennessee, are you sure?" Olympia asked. "After this morning?"

"You ain't my momma," he said, and hurdled out to the cooler in the Subaru. His stomach knew better, but he grabbed two beers anyway. In the doorway he shouted, "Here goes," and flung a Corona Light across the living room toward Jairo. As the beer can flew over Lynn's bric-a-brac, mother and daughter braced for catastrophe; but when Jairo's fist closed on it, a sense of salvation, or at least reprieve, brought some ease to their conversation.

After lunch, Tennessee told Jairo they ought to go check out his new ride. "Let the ladies talk about us in private." They left.

"How they treatin' you at the bank?" Lynn asked.

"Good, Ma." She paused. "They're closing our operation. They want me to relocate to headquarters in Charlotte, North Carolina. It's a good offer."

Olympia had expected a tirade, but Lynn just asked, "A lot more money?"

"Yeah, Ma, a lot more money."

"That boy of yours goin' with?"

"You mean Tennessee?"

"Yeah, Tennessee."

"I'm not sure. We're discussing it."

Lynn used a crumpled paper napkin from lunch to pat Olympia's eyes dry. "He'll go with you, sweetie. Just wait and see," she lied.

Olympia felt stupid letting her mother see how much it mattered, but couldn't help it.

Tennessee and Jairo stopped at the Subaru for two more beers. Jairo's new pickup was white and shiny clean. They leaned against it, sipped beer, and watched the Goths tinker with their jalopy. When Tennessee asked if Jairo made the tramp-art cross, Jairo nodded.

"Sweet. Best thing in the house. You an artist?"

Jairo spit. "I work in a fuckin' restaurant, man."

"Cool. Me too." He rubbed his belly. "You live here? In the park?"

Jairo said no, he lived in town.

"The good side of the freeway."

"Right," Jairo snorted. "Above the motherfuckin' restaurant."

Tennessee laughed. "You born here?"

"No. Jalisco."

Tennessee was curious whether Jairo was legal and whether he had a green card, but hesitated to pry. Instead he asked, "You bangin' Mrs. P?"

Jairo frowned. "What the fuck you think?"

"Can't say," Tennessee mused. "Never thought about Lynn getting' any. Maybe she's all dried up. Maybe not."

Jairo spit again. "Maybe not." He gulped some beer, and belched.

“Don’t get pissed, man,” Tennessee said. “Just makin’ conversation.”

“Some conversation.”

Tennessee kicked the dirt and a mini-squall of dust rose. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry in your business.”

Jairo watched dust settle on his polished topsiders and frowned, but decided it didn’t really matter. “That’s okay. You’re kinda young to understand people our age.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Tennessee said. “Ain’t that the fuckin’ truth?” Suddenly he felt like telling Jairo his whole life story. “Sometimes I don’t even understand Olympia, and she’s not near as old as you and Mrs. P.” Then he felt low for confessing that, like he’d betrayed Olympia.

A Goth girl ambled over and asked for some beer. The grease on her fingernails was a different shade of black from the polish. Tennessee asked to see her ID, and explained solemnly, “We cannot serve minors.” She ebbed away with a frown.

“You a piece of work,” Jairo chuckled. “How the hell you get the name Tennessee?”

“Same way you got yours. From my parents. Only my parents were crazier than yours. Fuckin’ hippies.”

“For real? Hippie parents? Tell me what that was like.”

Tennessee joined his hands atop his skull. “I prefer not to.”

Jairo grunted fine, whatever Tennessee wanted, and they occupied themselves with their beers. After a while Tennessee said, “Why do you care, anyway? About my parents.”

“Hippie parents--so fuckin’ cool, man. Groovy,” he rified. “I get off on that shit big time. Read Hunter S. Thompson, Kerouac and Ginsberg, Kesey, all of them.”

Tennessee grimaced. “I don’t read shit no more.”

“Really? That’s sad. What do you two do? Go to the mall?”

“Yeah, mall and ball,” Tennessee sighed. “Mall and ball.”

“Mall and ball,” Jairo echoed, laughing. “Perfect, man. Mall and ball.”

The kid in the Dick Cheney mask passed by then wandered off.

Tennessee and Jairo grew restless watching the Goths. Jairo said, “Maybe we should go back inside. Play some poker or something.”

Tennessee hated poker. The few times he’d played, the cards stank like cigarette smoke and French fries and his ass fell asleep from sitting still. “I got a better idea,” he said. “Let’s have a wrestling tournament.”

“You’re crazy, man,” Jairo laughed. For a white boy, this one was interesting.

“Hell no; I’m serious. It’ll be fun. I used to wrestle in college. I’ll show you.” He started running back toward the trailer. “Let’s make it happen.”

Tennessee dragged the women out to Lynn’s stained resin lawn chairs and explained the rules.

“It’s ridiculous,” Olympia said. “We’ll ruin our clothes.”

“Fuck that,” Tennessee said, and instead of unbuttoning his shirt, he peeled it off over his head and tossed it at her, meeting her glare with a big grin. He kicked off his flip-flops and stepped out of his chinos, standing in the yard in nothing but black silk boxers and a toothy smile. He knew how to manage women.

He’s sure a looker, Lynn admitted. “Olympia, I got us some shorts,” she declared. The women went inside to change.

“Your turn, Jairo,” Tennessee challenged.

“Punk,” Jairo growled. Blushing didn’t come to him easy or often, but it did then for the second time that afternoon. *Bitch of a way to start a new year*, he grumbled to himself. When he stripped down to his checkered cotton boxers, he felt doubly exposed, what with being the only Mexican in the trailer park, and unsure whether he could take the smartass college-boy down.

Two pubescent girls washing bikes on the driveway next to Lynn’s yard stared. “Hey, what’s goin’ on?” one called out.

Tennessee walked over to her and said in a serious tone of voice, “We are having our soon-to-be-world-famous First Annual Santa Claus Lane Mobile Park New Year’s Day wrestling tournament.”

“Awesome.”

“I’m Tennessee.” He extended his hand.

“I’m Nell.” She shook his hand. “This here’s my cousin Ella.”

Tennessee bowed toward Ella, who turned away, giggling. “May I borrow two of your lawn chairs?” he asked Nell.

A pasty woman about Olympia’s age charged out the trailer to see why her daughter was talking to a nearly naked stranger. Nell said, “Ma, he wants to borrow our chairs for a wrestling tournament. Is it okay?”

Nell’s mom scrutinized Tennessee’s abs. “Sure.”

Tennessee placed the four lawn chairs at the corners of his concocted wrestling ring and penciled brackets for the tournament on a Safeway bag. Olympia and Lynn returned in shorts and tank tops, barefoot, with beers for all. Tennessee’s blood raced to see Olympia dressed down like that, red toenails from last night’s partying suddenly bared to the world. “Just takedowns, escapes, and give-ups. So nobody’ll get hurt,” he explained.

The first match pitted Olympia against Tennessee. Ella cranked up the volume on her CD player, hip-hop heavy with bass, and Nell’s mom resurfaced with a beer can in hand, and a man in a blue work uniform took a break from mowing his ration of lawn to watch, and the boy in the Dick Cheney mask, whose name was Nasty, and the boy who’d been kicking a Coke Zero can came by with some other kids, and the old woman in the flimsy housecoat hobbled off her porch, and the Goth teens, who’d by then scored some beers and reefer and given up on their Ford Escort, wandered over, and some dogs ran around barking; but Olympia and Tennessee ignored them all as they circled each other, amused, but each intent on winning.

After some feints and horseplay, Tennessee made his move, sudden and decisive. His left hand struck out to grab her right. He pulled her toward him and, squatting, hoisted her onto his shoulders, and spun round all wobbly like a top. She kicked the air and threw unconvincing punches at his chest. He spun and spun. The little boys yelled, "Hooray," and the girls yelled, "Go, girl!" and one of the Goth boys yelled, "Hang on, bitch! Be like Hillary!" Finally Olympia cried, "I give," and when Tennessee let her down, they hugged and kissed and the neighbors and Jairo and even Lynn clapped and hooted and high-fived each other like a congregation of dingbats.

Tennessee and Jairo faced off next. The females were mesmerized, so when Nasty kept springing up in front of her, Ella shoved him. "I can't see nothin' with you jumpin' up in front of me, you crazy li'l freak," she hollered. Nasty, in his Dick Cheney mask, shoved her back. "Freak," Ella screamed.

Tennessee, even as he circled Jairo, glimpsed the youngsters' spat and hollered, "Hey, cut that out! You'll get your turn in the ring."

"Whoopee!" Nasty screeched, fist-punching the air. "We get to wrestle!"

"Yeah, right," Ella said. "Who gonna wrestle you?"

"You, girl. You gonna wrestle me."

"No way, freak."

Nell corrected her cousin. "You'll wrestle whoever Tennessee says."

As the tournament progressed, it attracted more denizens of the trailer park on their day off, such that if a flier in one of the ultra-lights that crisscrossed Carpinteria on that calm and sunny holiday afternoon looked down, she'd see

people moving, as if on a samba line, toward a focal point, the vortex of some happening, like a schoolyard fight, or a lynching, or a pillorying, that in all ages and places draws people to it.

“Take him down, Jairo, take him down!” Lynn shouted. Olympia laughed and hugged her mother for the first time in a long time. When, in a practiced move, Tennessee felled Jairo, Olympia swelled with pride.

Tennessee teased Lynn as she darted at him, and laughed when her hands slid all over his sweaty body, but before she wore out, he gently took her down so she'd have some energy left to wrestle Olympia. Olympia played with her mom like they hadn't in two decades, and then won. When Olympia took on Jairo, she latched onto his manly brown body long as she could, but by then they were just goofing off, so they cut it short and let the kids wrestle, Tennessee playing referee and having a jolly old time. Some of the grownups, like Nell's mom, gave it a whirl, and even the sullen Goths lightened up and went at it.

In time, the crowd segued to dancing, dirty suggestive dancing, Nasty in his Dick Cheney mask humping an imaginary striptease pole while Ella and Nell ground their hips at each other and the Goths went all out berserk, and Jairo eased up about being the only Mexican among so many unruly white people.

Before nightfall Lynn wished Tennessee a happy new year. She told him moving to Charlotte would be good for him, and then she kissed him. He was so floored he didn't even wipe the wet off his face, just headed fast for the safety of the Subaru. But Olympia would have none of that; instead she grabbed his hand and

tugged him to the razor-coil fence at the back of the trailer park, by the cemetery. The sun had already set behind them, over the ocean, but its last light hung over the hill just enough so you could make out shadowy gravestones sprouting up like cacti.

“There used to be a juvie down the road,” she said, pointing north toward Montecito. She rested her arm on his shoulders. “In high school, I was officially a Good Girl. Everybody thought I was a virgin.”

He laughed. “My first time was in a cemetery, too. Mrs. P ever catch you?”

She shrugged. “I never figured out if she knew or not.”

“I’m glad you told me.” They stood by the fence and he laid his arm on her shoulder till they were twisted together like a pretzel. He asked if she believed in God; it’d been on his mind, he said, how they never talked about it. She said no.

“Then what’s with all the crosses?”

She laughed. “I believe in appearances.”

They turned back toward the car, kicking stones as they ambled like children, swinging each other’s arms. She asked if he believed in God.

“No,” he said. “I believe in France.”

She asked him to explain, and was surprised when he did.

“You know how trannies feel trapped in the wrong sex?” he asked.

“Is this a confession?” she laughed. “Should I sit down?”

He squeezed her hand. “I feel trapped in the wrong country. The real me is French. I belong in France.”

Not exactly Charlotte, she sighed, but she said, “I’m glad you told me.”

In the Subaru, Tennessee told her Jairo invited him to go fishing. “Out past Channel Islands. His boss has a big boat.”

“You going?”

She still wore Lynn’s shorts and tank top and reeked of sweat and dust and beer, and he loved it. “Sure. ‘Never been deep-sea fishing.” He wondered if he’d get seasick.

“Good. I like Jairo. I’m happy for my mom.”

“Is he what you talked about after lunch?”

“Some. “ She paused. “I told her about Charlotte.”

“How’d she take it?”

“Fine. Better than...some.”

He turned away, to watch car lights on the freeway. No denying, six figures was a lot for a woman with no college degree, and it’d go a long way in Charlotte. No denying, his gap year after graduation was nearing its fourth anniversary with no end in sight; his lover was eight years his senior and the alarm on her bio-clock was shrieking; and he could as easily tend bar in Charlotte as L.A. and hardly anyone would notice he was gone.

He stretched himself out stiff, trying to revive his funeral, but what came to him instead was gyrating Goths, Jairo’s cross, Nell wrestling her mom, Mrs. P kissing him goodbye, and Nasty in his old Dick Cheney mask. He’d started to buy the mask from the boy, but when he saw that mournful look come over the kid’s

face, he changed his mind; he figured maybe he could find one like it on Melrose. He flexed his eight-pack, and for once his gut felt fine.

“Tennessee, what about Charlotte?”

“Not now,” he said, kissing her arm. “It’s still New Year’s. Tomorrow, I promise, we’ll talk.” He supposed moving wouldn’t be so bad--it might even be more an opening than a closing--but he didn’t want to deal with it then. Instead, he laid his hand on the back of her neck and with his fingertips traced soft circles there until she shivered with pleasure and anticipation.