

The Religion of the Rich

That afternoon, my only intention was to walk the dog and earn some brownie points in the process. It was one of the last summer days before school started. I was fifteen. I had managed to hold on to a girlfriend for an entire three months, a record for me. I spent every spare moment I could at Lisa's house. We swam and lounged around her pool in the mornings then stayed inside during the long, hot afternoons, putting together jigsaw puzzles and playing Scrabble or practicing trick shots on the pool table, the forced air of the central A/C whispering a cool, comforting shhhh, shhh over our heads. Lisa was an only child and the whole household seemed to revolve around her, and subsequently, me. There was a cook to make us meals, a maid to pick up after us, and a butler for everything else. I never wanted to leave.

To say my home was different would be an understatement. Ours was a classic big Italian family with a crucifix hanging in every room, pictures of Mary and Jesus flanking the television, and eight of us kids, all boys. There was never a minute when someone wasn't talking or whining or punching someone else. My parents bickered constantly, about anything, about nothing, as a way of saying "Good morning," or "I love you," their voices rising and falling over the constant clamor of children. Nobody ever

closed a door without slamming it; no one ever spoke without yelling.

Lisa's parents never fought. They were calm, reasonable, sophisticated people, though they were an odd-looking couple. Both of them were very attractive (Mrs. Roth especially, I thought) in that sleek and manicured way that wealthy people are attractive--perfect, really, until your gaze reached their hips. Then they were suddenly and alarmingly shaped like pears. Very large pears. When Mr. Roth waddled through the door in the evening and Mrs. Roth leaned forward to kiss him hello, they looked like two of those children's punching bags that pop right back up when you knock them down.

According to my mother, the Roths' wide butts were the topic of a lot of gossip at the beauty parlors and book club meetings in town. "It's such a shame," my mother sighed. "There's nothing you can do about that kind of body type. You can't exercise or diet it away. All that money and there's nothing they can do." My mother herself was overweight, everywhere, and would continue to be for her entire life but she maintained that it was just leftover baby fat which would magically disappear as soon as (or if) she stopped getting pregnant.

"You'd better hope your girlfriend is adopted," my father said, clapping me on the shoulder, "otherwise, that's what you have to look forward to in twenty years."

I didn't care what Lisa's parents looked like. It was Lisa that I was interested in, or Lisa and her rack. I thought of them as two separate entities. Or three. Lisa was sweet and pretty and the richest girl in town, rich on the same level as royalty and rock stars, but what really made her popular at Canyon High were her gargantuan, porn star breasts. No one had ever seen them unclothed or touched them, of course. For one thing, Lisa and her parents were super religious--they belonged to a church no one had heard of that was in

another town an hour away. And there was this other thing that was harder to overcome than Christian chastity.

No one could tolerate Lisa's laugh.

Her laugh. Her tragic flaw. Even now, I don't like to think about it. That summer, I came to dread its onslaught even if I was the only one around to hear it—the long, hoarse intake of air, the dramatic pause at the top where I could still hope that it wouldn't begin, that Lisa might simply be gasping in shock or choking on her lunch, and then, horribly, there it was--a tumbling, downhill series of barks and yips and honks and braying that left the listener numb. It came in waves, one long cacophonous peal after another, leaving Lisa gasping, her face the unflattering hue of a ripe tomato. To tell the truth, it scared me. Over the course of our courtship, I became a sober and sedate adolescent, fearful of any inadvertent slapstick moves or witty asides that might set her off.

I believe it was my mature demeanor that made Mr. and Mrs. Roth fond of me. They invited me to stay for dinner almost every night. Mr. Roth took to calling me “Dude,” not in a mean way, I thought, but affectionately. I liked both of them too. I felt like one of the family. So when, a week before Labor Day, Lisa fell off her horse at a riding lesson and broke her collarbone, I took over the job of walking the Roths’ dog, Lenny, as a way of paying them back for all the kindness they had shown me.

Lenny was an ancient Golden Retriever, with a head the size of a picnic ham, but he was a cowardly giant. If we encountered a random cat on our walks, Lenny would look the other way, pretending that the cat didn't exist rather than confronting it. He was also a dawdler, sniffing every tree, and snuffling the weeds along the side of the road.

That afternoon it was hot, the hottest it had been all summer. The heat radiated up from the asphalt driveway in waves. As soon as I stepped onto the street that ran the length of the Roth property, I wanted to turn back. I decided that when I finished this torturous half hour walk with Lenny, I would have earned the right to jump in the pool to cool off, something I had not allowed myself to do recently, since Lisa, with her broken collarbone, could not join me. I had been accommodating Lisa all summer it seemed to me, playing the board games she wanted to play, never going further with her than a swift feel of her breasts over her blouse, always stopping when she said no. I realized that my self-control was close to the breaking point. The more I thought about what was under Lisa's blouse, now entirely off limits with the broken collarbone and the sling and all, the hotter and sweatier I became.

Lenny was taking his sweet time, painstakingly marking anything that stood more than three inches off the ground. It seemed like Lenny was taking longer than usual and I began to feel that he was doing it on purpose, that he somehow felt entitled to abuse me in this way. Who was I to him anyway? Just some dumb kid. And I began to feel that Lisa was doing the same thing, teasing me, leading me on just for the joy of watching me grow more and more uncomfortable. It wasn't fair. Didn't I deserve some kind of reward for my exemplary behavior? The combination of the heat and the sense of being taken advantage of made me so angry that I decided to cut our usual walk short and beat a path through the woods to get back to the Roth home instead of sticking to the road.

I pulled Lenny along behind me. It was cooler walking through the woods. The ground was covered with dry oak leaves and the undergrowth wasn't so thick that I couldn't step over it or mash it down with my tennis shoes. Every so often we would

come across a fallen madrone, its black branches like twisted fingers reaching out of a grave. We had to backtrack a couple of times to make a wide circle around a patch of poison oak or blackberries. Soon I could see the back of the south wing of the Roth house through the trees.

The south wing was the bedroom wing, a part of the house that was off-limits to visiting teenage boyfriends, but I knew that Mr. and Mrs. Roth's master bedroom was on the first floor and the other bedrooms were directly above it on the second and third floors. I had never been to this side of the house and I paused at the edge of the woods to take in the redwood deck with steps leading down to a grassy sitting area. There was a fountain there, a monstrous circular thing, with a statue of three leaping dolphins in the center. It would have filled my family's entire living room. Water shot straight up from somewhere in the center of the dolphins, splashing down over their backs and peppering the stone wall surrounding the fountain with cool, dark spots that evaporated almost immediately. I was standing there, contemplating whether to stick my head into the spray, when a naked woman rose from a lounge chair on the deck.

I didn't recognize her at first, of course. She had her back to me and I experienced a moment of disorientating dizziness. I wasn't accustomed to stumbling across women who didn't have any clothes on. Despite my best efforts, the only place I had ever seen a naked woman was in my older brothers' tattered *Playboy* magazines. I felt an instant erection press against the zipper of my jeans and I took a step back into the shadow of the woods, afraid that she might look over and see me standing there with my mouth hanging open.

The woman reached up, stretching both her arms above her head before turning in

my direction. When I saw that it was Lisa's mother, I can't recall anything making me so scared and confused and aroused at the same time.

It was Mrs. Roth. But it wasn't Mrs. Roth's body or it was a body with her head attached but it certainly wasn't the body I would have imagined under her clothes. Not that I had ever thought about Mrs. Roth that way. Looking back, I calculate that Mrs. Roth was in her mid-to-late thirties, an advanced age that seemed unfathomable to me at fifteen, but I now realize would have been quite young. Her body was thin and lithe, with no hint of that enormous behind and belly. The sight of her breasts nearly made me stop breathing. Her skin was brown and smooth, everywhere, as if she spent all of her life outdoors naked, as if she were some wild woodland creature, a young doe perhaps. With perfect boobs.

My thoughts scattered, trying to think of an explanation, all the while my eyes never leaving the sight of her. This couldn't possibly be Mrs. Roth. Maybe Mrs. Roth had a twin sister. A twin sister who was visiting from out of town. Of course that would be the explanation.

The woman stretched her arms further up over her head and twisted from side to side, giving me a full view of each of her breasts from several angles. I felt a whimper caught in my throat fighting to fly out from between my lips. Lenny was panting obscenely at my side and I thought if the woman saw me there, she would surely think I was a pervert or worse. But I couldn't move. My legs were too heavy. I prayed the splash of the fountain was drowning out Lenny's heavy breathing.

Then the woman lowered her arms and heaved a big sigh. She picked up what I thought was a mound of laundry from the chaise lounge and proceeded to step into it. The

laundry turned into a pair of gigantic white panties that appeared to have been padded with foam rubber pillows. It was a grotesque sight, watching that lovely body disappear inside what could only be described as some sort of clown bloomers. It was definitely Mrs. Roth. She struggled into an oversized pair of jeans and slipped a shirt over her bare breasts, flipping her hair back over the collar.

She then picked up a book from the chaise lounge and headed back into the house. But just before she reached the French doors, she stopped, turned and looked directly at me, standing there in the shadows. I didn't know if she saw me there or not. It was the absence of any expression on her face that caused me to bolt, terrified, into the woods, dragging Lenny behind me.

We ran headlong through the woods, crashing through the underbrush. We ran straight through poison oak and blackberry bushes heedlessly, dodging only for the massive oaks until Lenny dug in his feet and wouldn't budge another inch. He collapsed on a pile of leaves and rolled onto his side. His tongue fell out of his mouth, thick and pink, and immediately it was covered with soil and leaves. I dropped the leash. I considered leaving him right there.

Then my legs felt weak and I sank down a few feet away from Lenny. I didn't know where I was exactly but the Roth's property was only 40 acres or so. If I walked in one direction I would eventually come to the road or back to the Roth house

I was never going back to the Roth house. Not ever.

A twig snapped somewhere behind us. The image of Mrs. Roth as a deer flitted through my mind. Was she coming after us? What would she do to us if she found us? All of a sudden, I didn't want to leave Lenny there. After all, he was just an innocent

dog. Wasn't he?

I stood and walked over to where Lenny lay, still panting. As I approached, he lifted one back leg to offer his belly up for a scratch and thumped the tip of his tail twice. I squatted down next to him and poked him with one finger. Then I ran my hand down the length of his body and parted the fur on his chest. Rubbed one of his ears between my fingers. Stared into his eyes. Brushed some of the leaves off his tongue. He licked at my fingers. He seemed pretty real.

A woodpecker erupted in a wild cackle over my head and for one terrifying moment I thought it might be Lisa coming to get me. "C'mon, boy," I whispered, standing and pulling Lenny to his feet. "We gotta go. Come on."

We didn't run this time. We walked. Slowly and carefully. I looked down at my arms and saw that something, probably the blackberry bushes, had scratched deep red lines into my skin. My t-shirt was torn. My mother was going to have a fit. Thinking of my mother made me want to rush home and hug her, put my arms around her rolling waistline. My mother was really fat. For the first time in my life that thought was comforting to me.

I hoped we were traveling away from the Roth house. I had never been an observant boy; coming from a big family, you learned to tune things out or you might go crazy. But that day, when it seemed that I was in incredible danger somehow, I tried to pay attention. The sun was starting to slip in the sky and the slant of sunlight was coming in at my back. I knew the sun set in the west. Where that was in relation to the Roth house, I had no idea.

And then the road appeared before us without warning. This wasn't a well-

traveled road, barely two lanes snaking through the trees but I suddenly felt safer. Lenny pricked up his ears. I supposed he thought we were going back to his home and supper.

I remember thinking at that point, now what? If I walked home, my parents would make me take Lenny back to the Roth's. If I refused, one of the Roths would come to get him. They'd want to see me, to talk to me. I'd probably broken the law standing there gaping at Mrs. Roth. The Roths could have me arrested. Or worse. The Roths were what my parents called filthy rich. I had seen something that had to be a secret, a deep, dark secret that the Roths might do anything to keep quiet. They might have me killed.

And what about Lisa? Did Lisa know this about her mother? How could she not? A horrible thought struck me and I almost stumbled as I hurried along the road. What if *Lisa* wasn't real? Was that why she wouldn't let me put my hands under her blouse? In my terror and confusion, I failed to remember that no girl, ever, had let me put my hands up under her blouse. But now, Lisa's refusal to let me feel her up seemed sinister, not virtuous.

From somewhere down the road, I heard the roar of Mr. Roth's Lamborghini racing towards us.

Panicked, I turned to dash back into the woods. At that same moment Lenny decided to rush to the opposite side of the road, the result being that we ended up going nowhere. Mr. Roth screeched around the corner and slammed to a stop in the middle of the road. I could have, at that point, let go of the leash and taken off into the woods. But for some crazy reason, I felt like I couldn't abandon Lenny; we were in this together now.

"Hey, Dude," Mr. Roth said. He had the convertible's top down and he ran a hand through his hair to smooth it. "Let me give the two of you a ride back to the house."

My mouth went dry. I knew how Mr. Roth felt about his car. The Lamborghini was off-limits to everyone except Mr. and Mrs. Roth. Lisa herself had never been allowed to ride in it. The interior had been custom made for Mr. Roth. The seats were a buttery-soft leather, the dash was teak; the probability of either Lenny or me tearing or scratching something was about 100%. My shirt was soaked with sweat and one of my arms was still bleeding. Lenny's fur was covered with dirt and leaves and twigs.

"That's okay, Mr. Roth," I said, barely above a whisper.

"Get in the car," Mr. Roth said.

I stalled for time, trying to wrestle Lenny over to the car. Mr. Roth gunned the engine a couple of times and gave me a strained smile. Finally, because I couldn't think of anything else to do, I opened the car door, dropped into the seat, and pulled Lenny in on top of me.

We sped to the house in silence. I was aware of Mr. Roth's powerful forearm where he had rolled up his sleeve and his tan hand moving the stick shift. This was the arm of a man who worked out and yet his massive hips and thighs spilled over the bucket seat.

He's fake too, I thought. Somehow, in my panic, I'd left Mr. Roth's butt out of the equation. This new realization made me lightheaded and I clutched Lenny to me like a life preserver.

We pulled into the garage, tires chirping against the polished concrete floor.

"Thank you for the ride, Mr. Roth," I said, my voice quavering.

"Open the door," Mr. Roth said, "let the dog out, and stay in the car."

I did what I was told though my hands were shaking so badly that I could barely

grasp the door handle. Lenny lumbered out of the car and out of the garage into the sunshine. Mr. Roth turned off the engine and clicked the garage door opener. The door slid shut as if sealing us into a tomb. In the dim light I could see the other cars covered in grey shrouds. The scent of car wax and my own sweat filled my senses, making me numb. Mr. Roth didn't look at me. The only sound that broke the silence was the tick-tick of the Lamborghini's engine cooling.

Dozens of scenarios raced through my mind. They were spies. Or aliens from another planet. Or maybe they were in the witness protection program. No matter which plot line I chose to follow, they all ended badly. For me.

Mr. Roth stared straight ahead as if searching for something in the neat shelves against the wall of the garage, shelves stacked with rows of motor oil and carefully folded chamois. I could see a muscle working in his jaw. His smooth tan skin, his perfectly level sideburns, his white shirt ballooning out to accommodate the bottom half of his body-- nothing about him seemed real. If he had suddenly sprouted another head, I don't think I would have been surprised.

"Christopher," he said. He had never called me by my first name before; he seemed uncomfortable saying it. "Mrs. Roth told me what happened this afternoon."

I bowed my head and waited. I prayed that whatever happened next, it would be quick.

"Be not proud for the Lord has spoken—Jeremiah 13:15," Mr. Roth intoned to the row of oilcans. "Being wealthy is not easy for truly religious people, Christopher. Mrs. Roth and I are just trying to remain humble in the eyes of God. It's what our church requires us to do."

“Everybody in your church is pretending to be fat?” I blurted out, stunned into speech. A picture formed in my mind of his congregation, all those wide bottoms arranged in pews, row after row.

Mr. Roth snorted. He turned and looked at me like I had insulted him. “No, of course not. Our pastor decides what form each parishioner's humility will take. It's a sliding scale based on net worth. It can be as simple as a bad toupee. Some of our wealthier believers have had plastic surgery to augment their ears or their nose.”

He continued on but I barely registered at first what he was saying—it was if he were speaking a foreign language. I remember thinking that this might be one big elaborate practical joke or that I was being secretly filmed by a camera crew, but there was no denying the earnestness in Mr. Roth's voice. He seemed less concerned that I had seen Mrs. Roth buck naked than he did about convincing me that what he believed in was right. His church's interpretation of the Bible was perfectly rational, he said. That whole business about a rich man getting into heaven vs. the camel fitting through the eye of the needle could be circumvented. There was always a loophole for the wealthy. One just had to read between the lines to understand what God truly wanted. Mr. Roth put a hand on my shoulder. Maybe he could arrange for me to visit their church, and one day, if I were lucky and worked hard, I would make enough money to join them.

And it suddenly hit me. Lisa's tits, those tantalizing breasts that I wanted more than my next breath, weren't real. I looked into the future and saw myself standing next to Lisa, her mandated padded bosom now enhanced to the size of a sleeping bag, both of us singing over an open hymnbook, our freakish children, all fake ears, rubber noses, and buck teeth, gathered around us like dwarfs in a fairytale. Disappointment hit me like a

punch in the stomach.

“Of course,” Mr. Roth said, “it’s very important to our family that this,” and he gestured to his hips, “this, remains confidential. A secret—like what happens in a confessional at your church. I’m sure you can understand that, right, Christopher?”

What the Roth's were doing was about as far from what happened at my church as the Milky Way but I nodded. I just wanted this to be over. I wanted to go home to my normal family who worshipped God in the normal way.

The door into the house opened on the opposite side of the garage. Lisa peered in, looking worried. “Lenny came back all covered with dirt,” she called over to us. “Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine, Pumpkin,” Mr. Roth said. He ruffled my hair with his fist. “Isn’t it, Dude?”

“Fine,” I said, my voice cracking in three places.

“Well, mom says dinner is about to be served,” Lisa said.

I followed Mr. Roth into the house like a zombie.

I took my usual place at the table across from Lisa but I couldn’t make eye contact with her or Mrs. Roth. Mr. Roth chatted about his day as if nothing had happened. Mrs. Roth didn’t even glance my way. If Lisa suspected something was wrong, she didn’t show it. Her sling held her right arm across her chest in a way that made it difficult to see her plate, what with her “breasts” and all. It took all her concentration to use her fork with her left hand. As far as I was concerned, my relationship with Lisa was over. The entire family was crazy. I’d wasted the whole summer pouring my energy into trying to touch a pair of tits that didn’t exist. All I’d find in that gigantic bra of hers was foam

rubber or wadded up tissue paper.

“And do you know what Henderson said when I challenged him on the Tate account?” Mr. Roth waved his fork in the air.

“What did he say, dear?” Mrs. Roth said.

“He said--,” Mr. Roth began and that’s when Lisa, struggling with her salad, shot a pyramid of iceberg lettuce and Thousand Island Dressing towards me, leaving an orange skid mark across the white tablecloth. There was a moment of silence and Lisa frowned. She looked at me then at her dad and mom, and then, as if suddenly remembering what she was supposed to do, she started to laugh. She snorted in enough air to last her five minutes and proceeded to guffaw and gulp and whoop and wheeze her way through a litany of one of the worst attacks of laughter I’d ever heard from her. In terms of volume, she outdid herself. The maid dropped a serving spoon on the table and ran from the room. Lisa kept on going—a tsunami of honking and shrieking and snorting with no end in sight. Both her parents paused, utensils poised over their plates, and beamed approvingly at her as if she were waving a perfect report card in front of them.

It would be a few more years before I would begin to question the teachings of the Catholic Church—by the time I finished high school, I would refuse to genuflect or cross myself or even mumble the benediction along with the rest of the congregation. I would stop going to church altogether, berate my parents when brother number nine made an appearance, and rage against pedophile priests. I’d move on to mock my Jewish college roommate who could leave the television turned on all day on the Sabbath but not be allowed to use the remote to change the channel. I’d condemn the jihadists with their seventy-two virgins and the Mormons with their magic underwear and the promise of

their own special planet to live on after death.

But that afternoon, sitting at the Roth's dinner table, watching my soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend gasping for breath, her eyes watering, her face turning the glistening purple of an eggplant, *that* moment was the beginning of the end of religion for me.

And I knew those breasts were real.