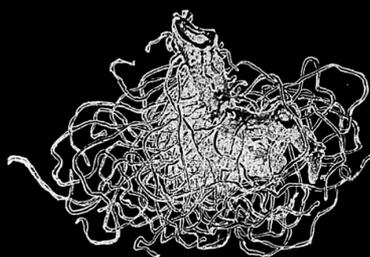


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A Giving Toilet

GABRIEL DESCENDED THE STAIRS and presented me a bowl full of his teeth. He lisped the number of dollars he expected from the Tooth Fairy. I helped him rinse his mouth, then returned him to bed, medicated Lila, and soothed the woken daughter. The next morning, Gabriel counted his money but could not gloat. Staff doctors at the hospital turned us over to the distinguished resident from Bombay. He read Gabriel's x-rays and declared our son's voice box gone. "Poof," he said, clapping and turning his palms up to the light. We were not amused. The resident explained that such things happened sometimes in the woods of Chota Nagpur, less often here.

He sent us home after a week of fruitless tests and samplings. He asked to be kept informed. An article could be published; a documentary could be made.

In the downstairs bathroom that evening, old scratches in the toilet's base turned into cracks, those cracks turned into deltas, and water ran through my socks.

I never told Lila that, before I installed the new toilet, a golden spider crawled from the floor register. She would have looked at me foul if she knew I had not bagged it alive for money but instead ground it into the tile. I swept the goop and fragments into the brown hole which led, I figured, to a landfill or ocean or limbo. Then I set the wax and leveled the toilet and bolted it down over the portal. I hacksawed the bolts' rough ends and caulked the toilet's base and attached the water cable and opened the valve. The liquid treble feedback sound of the refilling bowl reminded me of TV news anchors interrupting my dreams. Gabriel fetched me to eat before I could test the flush.

Lila baptized the toilet after lunch. The children were banging pots and I was rinsing dishes when a moan grew loud beneath the house, followed by a pop in the bathroom. Lila squealed.

Soon our gathered family surveyed a toy duck, preserved in shrink wrap, floating on its side in the bowl. I washed the find in the sink and sliced it free with a box cutter. I massaged and sniffed it. No excretory residue adhered either to it or to my fingers. Then Lila tested it with close-up eyes and hard sniffs and hot-potato hands before agreeing that it posed no harm. The daughter once again ignored my best goo-goo faces and sounds. She giggled, though, when Gabriel squeezed and flew the duck at her nose.

In the living room, the children continued their play while Lila cuddled me on the couch. She had the tenderness of a noodle, though I never said so aloud. She would think I considered her bland. She would ask me if I thought I was the marital sauce. No, the word “noodle” simply came to mind whenever she touched my knee. Later, I touched the crown of the toilet. Later still, I touched the forehead of my sleeping son, and I hoped.

[Night]

During night feedings, I often sang mindless songs or whispered tall tales to the daughter. We rocked in a chair given to us by Lila’s dead uncle. The deceased had given us a great deal, though he had failed to leave us money in his will. The story was complicated and despised.

In this near privacy, I thought of the nurse whose hand had grazed mine at the hospital’s commissary, reaching across me for a blueberry muffin. I had never been touched by a nurse so white and fat. In the cradle of my arm, the daughter slept and sucked. She could not express much. She had not hit many of the benchmarks listed in Lila’s books and articles. I sang of a princess who turned into a fish, then a tiger, then a hawk orbiting a mountain. Afterward, I described the mountain’s wondrous shape. I detailed its icy peak.

In spite of regular lever-pulling, the portal did not open again for days. My hope waned until another moan and pop attended Gabriel’s flush. He came out beckoning like a happy dog. He led us to a shrink-wrapped, blue-diamond necklace moving in the bowl. I cut it free and trusted it to my son, who offered it to his mother. Lila sniffed it and let her young gentleman clasp it round her neck. He smiled rosy gums and broken roots. The diamonds shined like crumbles of sky.

That afternoon, she wore the necklace to our city's most neglected park. There grass grew from rocks and rocks grew from grass. Trees slumped more than stood on a line to the east. The basketball goal had neither backboard nor hoop. Puddles had the haze and glow of motor oil. Ducks flapped noise on the womb-shaped pond. At the water's edge, frogs gathered round a bike tire. Its upper half cooked in daylight; its lower half waved like a ribbon on the water. Somehow the sun made wonder of that wretched earth. I pushed my family on the big spinner colored with graffiti. They rode with open, laughing mouths, though Gabriel, of course, could not laugh.

A pack of older children advanced from the court. I worried over the necklace, but they were after Gabriel. They made him a crown of grass, built an altar of brush, and brought him a frog and a sharpened stick, but he waved off their plan, and they were amazed by his mercy. He tossed the stick forty yards end over end. It landed spike down on an anthill. A glory floated about and through him.

I watched from the tree line, where I had followed the women. The daughter crawled over the roots of a dead oak. Lila tugged my shirt and said that I must flush the toilet after lunch tomorrow.

[Night]

In the dead uncle's chair, rocking easily for any and all to see, I felt songless. The daughter's mouth hardly moved on the bottle, though she groaned whenever I pulled it back. The longer she took, the more I soured. I could never sleep after her leisurely drink sessions.

The uncle had bought the rocker as well as the baby's crib and dresser. He had bought most of Gabriel's furniture, the living room couch, and the lamps scattered across the house. He would not let me slip him twenty bucks here or a hundred bucks there. Sometimes, though, he let me wire a fan or replace a rotten board on his property. On breaks from those jobs, I looked in vain for signs of company: a second razor in the shower, a tampon in the trash can. He could not tell a screw from a screwdriver. He had more liver spots than real teeth at his passing.

I relayed these dumb facts to the child.

Then I thought of the nurse. Her blond hair. Her berry perfume. Her smothering white fat smothering me.

Say a man stops at a hospital's commissary for lunch. The moment he tongs a lukewarm chicken thigh, he spies a nurse paying for her tray of slop. Later, he brings her a muffin. And so on. Should have skipped to the so on.

A song came to me. I declined to share it with the girl.

[Night]

Gabriel slept fine. I watched his back inflate and deflate. The toy duck stood guard atop the bed's mantle. It had nailhead eyes. The tooth money was crumpled in a bowl beside it, the same bowl Gabriel had used to deliver his teeth to me. Beside the bowl lay the crown of grass. The bowl had been a mainstay of silent games of blackjack between him and the uncle. They tapped a card to hit and waved a hand to stay. They played for pennies and, whenever Gabriel won, he dropped his spoils into the bowl. He stirred those pennies with his hand, making a sound like metal rain.

Gabriel must have learned his stoicism from their method of play. He had not saddened once over his lost teeth and, in fact, enjoyed pointing at what he wanted of the world. He did not want much, apparently, beyond his sister's duck. I touched the money. Then Lila entered, stroked my arm, and pushed her chest against mine.

[Night]

She rolled from me toward the window and faded from coitus to dream. I sat up, filmy in the crotch and bitter atop the covers. At the climax, the nurse had filled my mind.

Now I wondered what the golden spider's bite could do. Its venom might transmute guts into gold. Then noodle and children and mortician and nurse would tear at me with forks and knives. They would set my newly golden muscles and bones on the prospector's scale. I retain—even now—a low opinion of justice.

The uncle seemed to make money from air. Less alchemist than diviner, he had seen before almost anyone the importance of floppy discs and, later, their obsolescence. Yet he had seen little of the world. Its weather and landscapes and cultures did not stir him. He played cards. He called and took calls from his broker. He went barefoot

through our house on summer days. The daughter, like him, had large gaps between her toes and dulling brown eyes. My wife said to forget the debts. He said money did not matter. But, on his last Valentine's Day, I pulled him into the garage to show off a pair of earrings. He asked me what I knew of thrift. I did not ask him what women he knew.

I excused myself from the table before biting into my roast beef sandwich. The family escorted me to the bathroom door, smiled as I closed it on them. They joined me inside after my flush. Soon a moan and pop brought a green thong from below. It could not have fit around Lila's hips. It could never become a voice box in Gabriel's throat. We watched incoming water carry it around the bowl until it floated like seaweed before us, and a monogrammed "B" on the crotch became legible. Blue sequins bordered the letter.

Gabriel fished it out and made a dripping pendulum of it. My daughter splashed the forming puddle. Lila conveyed several unpleasantries to me.

"What?" I said.

She went upstairs.

The children and I returned to the table. Before my flush, Gabriel had been slurping milk-soggy chocolate cereal. He would continue a soft food diet for another week, when his dentures would be ready. At other meals, he ate strawberry ice cream and, less often, his sister's jars of pureed fruit. He would not try the distinguished resident's under-the-table jelly, a mixture of vitamins, herbs, and elephant shavings favored by some villagers in Chota Nagpur. The doctor claimed its heartiest devotees survived well past their centennials, but Gabriel had not listened past the word "shavings." I could not blame him. The mixture smelled like a zoo cage left unattended for several summer days. I had raised my sandwich level with my mouth when Gabriel set the thong on the table. I told him to put it in the trash. He dipped it in his bowl, waistband first, as though he was releasing a fish into a pond. He swirled it in the milk till the crotch flattened and spread over the surface. I dumped the bowl's contents into the sink and switched on the garbage disposal. Its blades chopped at the thong. They failed to eat it.

I poured him a second bowl. Gabriel let it soften, then wolfed it down. The daughter painted her tray with milk and pureed peas. Cabinet doors vibrated. The refrigerator hum sounded male and soothing. My stomach seemed to fold over my bladder. I took the children to the living room and overturned a bin of toys. The children played till Lila returned. She wanted to take her kids for a ride.

I unscrewed the bathroom's floor register and gloved my hands and drew from the duct a morning's worth of Cheerios, gauzy sheets of webbing, and three golden eggs like misshapen marbles, all of which I flushed.

Then I stretched the thong across the pit of the sink. It smelled like chocolate milk and disposal bottom. The "B" looked ripped by a gator's claw. I considered working it further with a box cutter and tossing the shreds into a neighbor's backyard, then taking the family out for barbecue.

Instead, I reinstalled the floor register and returned to the table. At last, I would eat what I could of my sandwich. I set aside the hardened bread and wilted lettuce and faded tomato, and chewed the softer slices of meat, which were still flavorful with veggies and Creole mustard. The cabinets had not quit their vibrations, but they bothered me less now. The thong lay over my knee, letter down. I would have liked the uncle across from me, eating a sandwich of his own. I would have given him the thong to sniff.

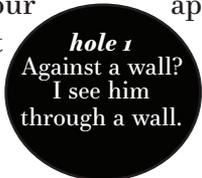
I found, under the bottom slice of roast beef, a golden egg. I washed it and the remainder of the sandwich down the drain. I rinsed the other dishes, hid in the master bathroom, and found a second egg in my pocket. I sent it down the bathtub drain. I showered till I heard the ticking of legs in the drain grow loud.

I felt easier and more certain after I dressed. I waited in bed for the last egg to reveal itself and hatch, for the newborn spider to bite my calf. Later, I woke to pressurized quiet. My ears felt encased in plastic shells. I did not budge. An idea remained from my dream: to call the daughter by name. She had not yet had a chance to flush the toilet. My family would gather round. I would help her press the lever. The moan and pop would herald the necessary gift. I would wire the

Archaeology of Dad

YOU WOULD NOT REMEMBER HIM. His name was buried with the Cold War, but, in the Seventies and Eighties, he corresponded with Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz. He wrote columns for *Commentary*, *The Weekly Standard*, and *Grey's Review*. His most important piece remains "The Gift of Liberty," a sprawling essay which circulated quickly among Republican congressional staffers and certain of their bosses who needed a tougher flag to wave.

It also earned him invites to Washington cocktail parties, where he played a gentleman wallflower (**hole 1**). He nursed wine and studied the women's footwear. His liver spot gave him distinction, but not the kind he wanted. He used creams to keep his cheeks smooth. They sheeted our apartment with medicinal smells. For his patrons at these events, he wore subtle colognes. The ballrooms had vaulted ceilings and soft lights. Huge frescoes demonstrated our leaders' bad taste. Hidden speakers pumped weak jazz. Our American nobility nibbled at fancy cheese. Its members wanted assurance from mainstream minds like him. Before a party, he would write lines from Tacitus or the Talmud on a slip of paper. After dessert, he would slide those lines to an heiress, who did not need to know what the words meant to know what the words meant. His prep work opened many pairs of legs.



His success those nights, more than his writing, secured him a gin meeting with Representative Richard Cheney, at which the latter spoke at length about leather belts and bar games. A dartboard in the shape of the Soviet Union had been tacked to Cheney's washroom door. He had played many times, apparently, without hitting the Moscow bull's-eye. My father soon learned that, whatever the man's other faults, he did not cheat at games. When they played at last, my father took a dive.

I cannot prove, merely by the association of memories (**hole 2**), that it was my father who, on the third night of Chanukah in 1983, convinced President Reagan to propose the abolition of nuclear weapons, though I believe that to be true. Nor can I be certain whether or not my father was a prophet, heretic, or plain hack who, for an aberrant time, wrote from the heart. I am not certain I can prove much about history by the mere presentation of facts. Timelines are unconsciously subjective. Any consensus is vague and useless, as when we call 9/11 a dark day. Hume's study of billiards proved long ago that logic is subject to faith. Let me break.

hole 2
So notorious for their distortions and gaps.

Substantively, "The Gift of Liberty" has always merited scorn. Stylistically, its labyrinthine string of words prefigured my father's turn from orthodoxy. The metaphors contradicted themselves as they came into being. They were chopped up, baked together, and served as a drink.

The essay begins with a description of Lady Liberty's torch-bearing hand. The statue was, of course, a gift: France paying homage to American virtue. That history leads into his real subject, for the gift in question is not French and given to America, but American and bestowed upon the world. It is no statue, but a great fist of military love. Its fingers touch four points on the globe: Qatar, Japan, South Korea, and West Germany. The thumb is our navy, large and mobile enough to be anywhere at any time. It is, then, not only a fist but an open hand guarding the free world. Moreover, it is a beacon of hope (**hole 3**). People on the wrong sides of walls

and DMZs want nothing more than the freedom embodied by our tanks. This convoluted image is opposed to that of Khrushchev's shoe, which the Soviet premier once used to interrupt the speech of either Filipino delegate Sumulongor

British Prime Minister Macmillan (**hole 4**). In the last decades of the Cold War, that shoe was a common trope in hawkish editorials, every bit as popular as Munich is today. My father wrote that Khrushchev (**hole 5**)

hole 3
To summarize: the American military is a closed/open/beaming fist/hand/lighthouse.

hole 4
Do not worry about which guy Khrushchev interrupted. The yarn is apocryphal.