

*the story of how
all animals are*
& EQUAL
other tales

— **MATT RUNKLE** —

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The Story of How All Animals Are Equal & Other Tales
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for Danny

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Spiel

Where you are right now is in a gift shop. In a place like this, the scandalous things must be cooked down, or at least macerated a bit, till the sugars scoot away from the fruit, and any hint of derision can be voiced from between the chops of a genuine smile. So when you tell me you're shopping for your mother, who's *not a typical mother*, my only reply can be—and watch how sweetly I say this—*You may be in the wrong store.*

Because what we sell here are *things for typical mothers*, the people you think of first when you see the word, long before you even begin to imagine your own. It's a well-honed type, and though it's rarely called out as offensive, all you have to do is look around to see: it's something that sells. Textures tend toward a synthetic softness; colors wander the palette from brick to smoky green. Needless to say, infants are fetishized, and fetishes infantilized. The fantasies here can fit inside a cylindrical chime. And the imagery, which is commonly mistook for feminine, is as genderless and dry as a falsely weathered piece of rattan.

Imagine me when I first embarked on this endeavor, when my partner and I set out to capture this niche. As compressed as it now all appears, our curatorial process involved much more roaming than most: this was a sprawling voyage. *Porcelain*, I would say to my partner. *Only the beginning*, my partner replies. And thus, we

embark down a keeling, seemingly endless corridor, and select from the tightly packed shelves the bric from the brac. Some sections we strip so bare, we see our own distorted faces gazing back from the mirrored walls. A fleeting question of sex is quelled: requisite for such work as this.

And so, if you're looking to find a gift for an atypical mother, you'd best move on down the wharf. If your mother fancies herself progressive, or if, at the opposite end of the spectrum, she's a decadent, implanted, tightly pulled, cutthroat priss, there are much better shops out there. We're not the type of fools who special order, and neither will we flesh out your impotent senses for you.

If my partner was here—and she has the day off, she's feeling rather worn these days—if my partner was here, perhaps she'd have more patience. I once saw her lead an exquisitely veined young man to the window, and gesture out over the ocean with a grace that transcended that of someone trying to close a sale. The young man left with an apple-studded picture frame.

And the vigor she gave to the pricing gun thereafter sang of an adventure we'd never again be asked to confront.

I'm sure she neglected, whatever she said, to mention the sharks.

Gridlock

First, let me orient you here. That's something you worry about, right? Orientation? I hear it's rare for people to live in cars in your time, so I assume you have a house. In the world Irene and I inhabit, houses are hidden, and often outright disappear. The only reliable structures these days are gas stations.

I hope this is useful for your science fiction novel.

The year is 2015, and the world now moves so fast that everything's come to a slippery halt. Cops and robbers have joined forces. Embryos are transmitted via blood. With the disappearance of schools, we've become a race of autodidacts.

Also—generally speaking—people tell more lies.

So, here I am, sitting at a gas station in the pale light of the early morning. “In the Still of the Night” wafts faintly from the outdoor speakers. Ice coats the concrete, and Irene slips as she exits the station. She adjusts her balance, then glides toward the car without lifting her feet.

Irene was wheelchair bound when we were in Corpus Christi. Saturday nights, I'd roll her downtown to hang out at the tattoo shop. *Getting a tattoo is a lot like naming a kid*, Roger told us, while his band warmed up behind him. There were a lot of men in his band.

The world was still a lot like your own, then, although the buildings were already beginning to transluce. Also, our encounters

with men were growing stranger. We hadn't started eating at gas stations yet—I don't think so, at least—but misunderstandings were becoming commonplace. Roger was one such case, obviously: we thought that when he spoke of tattoos and baby names, he was really speaking of permanence, and of unwitting biases. But metaphor wasn't a part of his reality. His trade didn't allow for it, I guess.

Irene scrubs her chubby knee with the hem of her skirt as she climbs into the driver's seat.

What did you get? I ask.

Orange crackers.

She opens the package and hands me a square.

Hydrog, I say, only it sounds like *Hi Rog*, because my mouth is full of it.

I catch her wincing. *Partially hydrog*, she says, recovering with a shrug. *Everyone makes compromises. Especially at gas stations.*

Once, before we got our car and became eternal teenagers, we were intrepid. Our girlishness was uncontrived, and we felt old beyond our years. We had yet to master the art of deliberate vulnerability. A man in Nag's Head once scared us so badly, we stuck to sleeping at the sand dunes for at least a month. Days were spent marching wearily with the other tourists. Nights, we ran terror-stricken from the patrolling dune buggies. I slowed my stride to match Irene's, and it was almost like getting a good night's sleep. You might want to include these nights in your science fiction novel.

I miss the heater, I tell her. *The air's so cold and still.*

You're a rare one, baby, she grins. *It's why I love you, you know. You're specific.* She opens her phrasebook and reads: *You're specific in the face of a culture that—when, on the rare occasion it approaches truth—it does so only in the abstract.*

I stare at my go-go boots, which rise like buildings from the bitter, moldy floorboard. *Do you think I dress naïvely?*

You're asking the wrong girl, she says. *I don't know why I haven't*

put on pants in this weather. Because I'm fat, I guess. And lazy. She reaches across me to add breasts and a penis to the teddy bear I've drawn in the fog on the window. Her bosom is gently cupped by my clavicle.

A man in nice, new clothes appears in a nice, new car and rolls down his window. He says he's here to pick up some people who got in on the 9:45 bus from Jackson Hole. It's 8:30. He asks to bum some gas money, and Irene points to the soggy sign in our windshield.

If you're so smart, why do you have such a crappy car? he asks.

Get a job, says Irene.

He gives us some statistics: he's 45, the oldest of 15 children (7 girls, 7 boys), and his mother is 89. Irene asks how old the youngest sibling is.

He just graduated from Stanford, he says. *He's an attorney. One graduated from Harvard. Attorney. One from Princeton. Attorney. One's a doctor, one's a dentist. I'm the only bum, because I had to support them all, driving big rigs.*

What do you think? Irene asks me. *Abstraction or lie?*

The beautiful and paradoxical thing about art, says the man, consulting his phrasebook, *is that it obscures appearances to reveal deeper truths.*

Green light, says Irene, jaws clenched, and the man disappears.

It's night now, and thugs have taken over the gas station parking lot. Like us, they consult their phrasebooks, the only thing that offers the cerebral stability we need in the midst of a world so motion-obsessed it stagnates.

I need a drink, says Irene, opening her door and stepping into the exhaust and dirty bass lines. Her ass mimics the battling hydraulics. She whistles at it over her shoulder, and almost slips again.

So, how about this for your science fiction novel: A motel in

Corpus Christi. A man falls from the second story as he's carrying groceries to his room (People do this during your time, right? Have rooms and buy bags of groceries?). He's in a coma for three days, and when he finally wakes, the first thing he asks for is not his wife. It's his radio, because he wants to listen to a certain talk-show host—a host whom he'd never shown even a mild interest in before the accident. This is kind of what happened to Irene, only metaphorically. Roger was a musician and a tattoo artist, not a talk-show host.

Grape or strawberry? Irene asks through the window. She's holding two bottles of flavored malt liquor.

I point at the grape, and she twists it open and hands it to me. Then she gets in the car and sets the strawberry in my lap.

I thought you needed a drink, I say.

I think I'm pregnant.

She lifts up her sweater, and sure enough, there's a tattoo of a dripping cherry just below her navel.

Roger, I say.

Roger, she says.

But that was four years ago!

End times, says Irene. *Apparently, I've been endowed with biblical childbearing abilities.*

I try to remember what the sign in our windshield says. Something about work, I think. Or cigarettes. Or maybe it *was* something about the end being near.

A beautiful thug knocks at my window, and I roll it down, erasing another teddy bear—this one wearing halo and horns.

Put your hands on the side of the car, orders the thug.

I'm innocent, I tell him. *I was born in 1977.*

Those who are so selfish as to fall in love, he reads from his phrasebook, *can no longer claim innocence.*

But I'm a baby, I say. *I need love in order to properly develop.*

I thought you said you were born in 1977, says the thug.

End times, I tell him. I've taken a serum that allows me eternal youth.

Those who lack vulnerability become monsters, explains Irene.

You got a cigarette? asks the thug, fluttering his long, dark eyelashes.

Sorry, says Irene. We don't smoke. Read the windshield.

I roll up the window and finish my grape. "Angel of the Morning" wafts out of the car radio.

He was gorgeous, I remark.

Maybe, says Irene. In an abstract kind of way.

I stomp my boot in a numb-toed try at infantilism. Irene, like always, remains unfazed.

Remember how scary that man in Nag's Head was? I say, and maybe I really am crying. How sharp his eyes were? And how he hollered without opening his mouth? How we were so sure it was finally the apocalypse, we headed out into the wilderness to wait it out?

Yeah, baby, I remember. Then, with the help of her phrasebook: We prayed their neglect would deepen, that tourism would become obsolete, and we would once again be left with the potential for beauty.

And we were.

Were what?

Left with the potential for beauty. Look how lovely your knees are.

Irene switches the radio station. *Insemination!* screams an angry male voice.

How's that novel coming? she asks, taking the strawberry from me and cracking it open.

I hate when she asks that question. She's so entangled in the plot that I can't really talk about it.

And that's why I'm leaving the task to you. With your house and your desk and your sense of stability, I imagine you'll come up with something quite moving. Either way, it's science fiction, right? A sneaky little genre. More circuitous than most. But above all, one that protects the innocent.

Just write me sitting by my captain, a navigator with nothing ahead. I coat the window with my breath, and draw another teddy bear.

Pride goeth before

I first became star struck as an altar boy, a god-fearing child in the maw of a yawning cathedral.

The cathedral was expansive and gilded. Wine bruised the carpet and dust collected deep in the folds of ancient radiators. Trash blew in on glamorous winds and gathered at the feet of the cleric as his eyes raised to God. Such is the nature of theater.

I miss the thrill of being watched. I long for those days as an altar boy, when I still possessed the ingenuous hopes of an understudy. I took the devoted gaze of the crowd for granted then. I didn't realize shame could be cumulative; I thought it faded with time. And, of course, I underestimated the importance of knowing your audience.

Rhonda could dazzle the most straight-laced old biddies, leave them uneasy, yet still somehow satisfied. Flamboyance is an art, it's true, but certain crowds require something more—something magic.

I expected Holy Orders to cast me, like Rhonda, in a ruthless array of roles. But sadly, instead of honing my charisma, it's cramped me into a confessional, where I endlessly wait for the dying to creak in on crutches of guilt. I'm not the diva I dreamed I would be, but rather something supplemental. A collector of gossip—without the satisfaction of reporting anything I'm told. The sins I hear are as

salacious as any star's; they simply lack the glitz of celebrity to make them immortal. Defining the soul with eyeliner can be tricky.

And now I'm walking up the aisle holding the processional cross aloft. I want to strut like a queen, but am kept in check by looks from the prayerful audience. I take to the stage and compose myself as a gleamy-lipped, pious-eyed altar boy. Hair parted at three quarters, sweet on the feel of my emasculating alb, I wait with bells in my hand.

Father Bowlin—seven feet tall and Black Irish—says Mass with a voice like a rolling boulder. His belly is big enough for a benevolent god. His brow sprouts two thick clumps of steely hair. He lifts the Host and heavies his eyes, lowers and codes his voice. A holy light throbs from among his ringlets. I raise the bell and shake out a tiny chime, the closest I ever get to a speaking role.

But the real star of the show is Rhonda. She digs her candy-apple claws into the folds of her choral gown and pulls it thigh high as she mounts the steps to the lectern. Her stilettos and black-stockinged legs are sudden and shapely as they emerge from the neutral vestment. She surveys the crowd with predatory ease.

The audience shuts its eyes and withdraws in prayer. Petitions float from the ends of ascetic eyelashes. The proper place for music is in the choir loft, the crowd believes, at the cathedral's rear, hidden away where it won't distract from the solemnity of the Mass.

But Rhonda has them trained. The saints and angels crowd in miniature around the lofted chalice, extend their matchstick arms to catch the faithful's prayers. Rhonda widens her smile, and a few wayward prayers become lodged between her teeth. Her drawn-on eyebrows rise behind the bangs of an immense bouffant.

She's been as subtle as possible about transitioning her hair from black to its current platinum blond, for although her appearance is meticulously crafted, she hopes to leave some impression of

nature. Over the course of four years, she's worked her way down the home-dye-kit aisle: from jet black to the darkest and medium browns, with a brief detour through wine, then strawberry blond, then back to the standard spectrum, brightening from dishwater to downy blond. Such planning is necessary to retain her position as cantor at a conservative parish. As a flamboyant, almost-50 divorcee she already walks the line. She knows where to temper her tartish tendencies, which shade of lipstick is a hair past respectable.

A sinister, diminutive figure lurks in the choir loft. Pimples cluster at his hairline, and he rests his leather-clad arms on the railing as he surveys the crowd. He's Rhonda's son, Dom, runty even for a 12-year-old. I can feel his sulky gaze, his spite at falling short of the faggy altar boy, his hatred winding out among the wafting prayers. Behind him, the organ pipes begin to thrum; they flood with a hum, then a roar of devotion.

Rhonda bursts into a showy hymn. Its lyrics praise the scent of newborn flesh.

Father Bowlin descends from the stage, cradling a bowl of communion wafers. He recruited Rhonda from an off-Broadway stage, just in time for a woman looking a bit weathered for ingénue roles. His motives, I imagine, came from a fascination with her overwrought femininity—he seems to carry a hint of lavender deep within that belly. A tenderness belies his manly façade. He feeds communion to his flock like a mother bird.

With Rhonda came Dom, a picture of compact impudence, an unhealthy child whose greasy, unblushing cheeks could never fit within the border of a holy card. He was eight when Rhonda began her gig as cantor at the cathedral, yet was still small enough to be cradled in her arms. He soon left those arms, though, and began to adopt a street swagger. His mother tenderly aided him in this, working Pomade through his hair, taking her fingernail clippers to the knee of his jeans. At school, he curses God and slithers beneath the habits of the nuns. He strums a guitar and

snarls about a girl named Sugar. He lost his virginity before his eleventh birthday. Despite his size, girls find him irresistible. He pads his height with attitude.

I once found Dom with Rhonda's purse open on the sacristy floor. He was holding her compact sweetly against his cheek. I ignored him, walked to the wardrobe, and began to pull my alb on over my head. When I emerged from its folds, he was gone, but the purse remained. I scanned the room for witnesses, then emptied the bag in search of makeup, but there was nothing.

I made due by polishing my lips with my tongue. I removed my shoes and trousers, then bunched my alb up around my knees and strutted around on tiptoes. I distorted my face with various looks of rapture, holding my forehead an inch from the mirror. I imagined myself a bloodthirsty saint.

The next Sunday, Dom was in the sacristy again, masculine and skulking. He watched me don my alb with a sneer.

At the lectern, Rhonda warbles and shrieks. The red ring of her mouth contracts and expands in time with the organ chords. She raises her arms as a haughty cue to sing along.

The audience approaches the stage in single file, plowing aside the glitz with a serene armor. Father Bowlin stoops to rest the Host on extended tongues. They receive the body of Christ; they crack and dissolve it against the roofs of their mouths, careful to avoid the blasphemy of teeth. The wafers absorb and circulate and surround every head like a halo.

I move to clear the altar and prepare the Host for its return to the tabernacle. I've honed my peripheral vision to track Rhonda's sizzle and flash. Both jealous and enamored of her, I anticipate each hammy expression, each willful display of leg.

One Sunday, I waited alone in the sacristy with only a few minutes left before the Mass was scheduled to begin. I'd donned my

alb, lit the candles, and was standing offstage, uncertain, clutching the brass staff of the processional cross. Father Bowlin was nowhere to be found.

The backstage door swung open, and Rhonda and Father Bowlin stumbled through in a cloud of giggles and fermentation. The priest was in the throes of a low-register laugh, his hand over his mouth like an old maid. Rhonda's head blurred amid a gray-speckled feather boa. They halted when they saw me standing ready in the shadow of the cross. Rhonda wrapped her talons around the doorjamb for support, grinding her jaw toward sobriety. Father Bowlin bent unsteadily to pick a stray feather from her bouffant.

Rhonda looked at me as if for the first time, one eyebrow arched in disgust. She let loose a snort, and turned with a dramatic swish. Musky feathers dusted my cheek; a spray of mites and dandruff tickled my nose. She centered her stride as she moved off to put on her choral gown.

It's my time to shine. I place the leftover wafers in the chalice and drape it with linen for the Mass' solemn denouement. Rhonda steps away from the lectern as the organ eases into a quiet dirge.

Before I turn to carry the Eucharist back to its chamber, I see Dom's head climb to a wobbly new prominence above the horizon of the choir loft. Whatever he's standing on is unsteady, for he pitches and shifts and struggles for his center of gravity. A report shocks the building—the sound of a foundation snapping in two. Dom topples over the railing and into the crowd below.

The cathedral is no stranger to disturbances. Bats and pigeons sometimes star in minor comedies here. Flitting down from the bell tower, each entrance provokes a slapstick chase. Winos and madmen, heretics and con artists have interrupted Masses, striding

up the aisle in the midst of the Liturgy, shouting and cursing and instating themselves as bloodshot nobility. It's usually a welcome distraction—a giggle for the children, an adrenaline boost for the ushers who escort the intruders back to the street.

But now a child lies crumpled between the pews.

A cry arises. The familiar pattern of sitting and rising and kneeling falls away as the audience congregates around the body. Rhonda sheds her shoes and races down the aisle, her robe flying higher than ever. She pushes aside the befuddled bystanders and stoops to cradle her fallen son. Father Bowlin approaches, murmuring words of comfort. As if reminded of her current role, she arranges the wrinkles of her face and gown in imitation of the Pieta. A beam of light, gilded by the stained-glass virgin's halo, alights in her nest of hair. A tear slides down her cheek and glances off Dom's oily head.

I see something else glinting from the floor. It's a black reflective object, vaguely cone-shaped and four inches long. It's the evidence of Dom's folly: the broken heel of one of his mother's shoes.

I clutch the covered chalice, saddened my moment of glory has been stolen, and shift, unseen, to return the sacred objects to their cupboard. My hands, steady around the stem of the cup, stay hidden beneath the shroud as I picture the tiny morsels of flesh cradled in the chalice's bowl. They lurk beneath the innocent cloth, soaked in boozy blood.

Rhonda has upstaged the stage. Drenched in the audience, she plies a sympathy so complete, she's no longer just an actress. She's the act. A Host unto herself. I want to get to the meat of a role like that, to claw my way through the linen. But I know I don't have the nails for it. I loosen my grip on the chalice, slacken its levelness, and drip wine across the carpet and out the door.

Like any man-made building, the cathedral's vaulted reach for heaven failed. Despite its crucial floor plan, its outstretched wings of dogma,

there was enough echo to allow for uninvited gods. For just like the Tower of Babel, pride brought about its fall.

Perhaps Dom suffered a similar fate. No one else noticed the broken heel that day, but if they had, would they have understood him any better than I? By cramming his feet into those shoes and striding along the edge of a precipice, he strove for the divine feminine, one might say. And given the tenuous mold of his persona, this makes sense. I myself witnessed a structural flaw in his machismo that morning in the sacristy.

But what if Dom's quest was for the masculine ideal of height? Babel's construction was, after all, a testosterone-fueled act of hubris. One that let in every language, even as a jealous god sought to drive out all the gods that came before. And when you leave the door open, there's no escaping night.

But back to the light: there's no question Dom died pretty. Once I lost my more cherubic attributes, I was doomed. Aging men can't be taxidermied together with feathers and foundation in the same way Rhonda could. And appearance is everything in a vocation like mine.

I squint at books in this confessional, poring over a pantheon of imaginary roles. Anyone who's studied scripture will agree: Jesus was a showman. It's the devil who prefers to work in secrecy. Which one performed magic tricks in front of thousands? And which prefers to tempt in moments of solitude?

I clutch the bloodstained linen in the dimness, looking for meaning in its scarlet splotches. But no face of Christ appears; no virgin comes to turn the stains to roses. The one small sign I've found is a Rorschach blot at the outermost edge of the cloth: a wide-eyed, neckless owl.

Some legends say the owl is one of three disobedient sisters, cursed with nocturnal urges so she could never again see the sun. Others say she pecked out her own mother's eyes in exchange for the gift of flight. I envy her ambition, as foolhardy as it may have

been. Few are so adept at posing artifice as instinct. Believe me, I know. It's a long way to fall in the quest for height, for the heavens, for command of the greatest stage.

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