

Visiting

Jesus commands us to visit the sick and pray for them when they die. Judith seems to remember hearing this from someone, a voice from the past, maybe even someone from her Indiana youth. Raised by atheists and never going to church, she would have had to be told. Or maybe she picked it up as she wobbled toward a ladylike C in the required Sacred Studies course at her Seven Sisters college, although she is unable to recall a specific text. Still, whoever or whatever the source, she clearly remembers that Jesus, in all his various versions, does not just make a suggestion. He firmly commands, and that command is what has floated up into her brain today. It's been two weeks, and so, instead of going over to Brookings for lunch with everybody else on the magazine staff, she gets her car out of the lot and drives to Georgetown to visit Alicia.

She finds an unexpected parking space on N Street and walks across the campus to the university hospital. Going up in the elevator, she surreptitiously examines her fellow passenger, a handsome black kid, somber, closed in on himself. He too is going up to visit someone, and for no good reason she remembers an elevator ride with Alicia forty years ago, shooting up through a fancy building somewhere in New York City to a party given by a friend of Alicia's who'd dropped out freshman year to be a full-time debutante but was nevertheless doing well, with a rich husband and a great apartment. There they were, rising up to some rich girl's party, and suddenly the elevator door opened and there was Huntington Hartford, who immediately commented on how beautiful Alicia was. One minute they were alone in the elevator and the next, there was Huntington Hartford proclaiming Alicia's beauty. And she was beautiful, although of course she never thought of

herself in those terms, tall, thin, flat-chested, acne-scarred, but beautiful nevertheless, and Huntington Hartford had seen it the very moment he entered the elevator. He got out a floor or two later, a short, baffling trip, and as soon as the door closed Judith whispered to Alicia, "That was Huntington Hartford!" because she knew Alicia wouldn't know. "And he was trying to pick you up!" No response, so she proposed a slightly different explanation: "He's a famous art collector. He has an eye for beauty. He knows what he's talking about." She knew Alicia pretty well by then, and Alicia's reply was quite predictably something like "Ugh." And that's Alicia, thinks Judith and gets off on the third floor of the hospital, a floor not marked for anything in particular, not surgery, not cancer, an unlabeled place where they put you while they wait for you to die.

Alicia seems to be asleep, so Judith sits down, and as she waits she remembers how they met at their first job after college, a women's magazine in New York City. It was Alicia who taught Judith how to deal with an artichoke, a vegetable unknown to Indiana, or at least to Judith, and, when she went home with Alicia for Thanksgiving, how to handle a soft-boiled egg in an egg cup. She remembers how formidable Alicia's mother was, the daughter of a bishop, the inhabitant of a world filled with artichokes and egg cups and arcane rules for coping with them, a world Alicia was eager to escape, although at the time just how she would do that was beyond her imagining. Still, it was to be expected that her plans for escape did not include flirting with Huntington Hartford in an elevator, while Judith, eager to belong to a sophisticated Eastern world, the precise details of which were beyond her imagining, would have responded in a second had she been the focus of Huntington Hartford's admiration. Who was Huntington Hartford anyway? Forty years ago she'd known that. Now she seems to remember that he was a grocery-store heir. A rich old WASP. Or something like a WASP and then considered rich on what must have been the limited spoils of groceries. Not like computers or petroleum. Tea, maybe? She's read somewhere recently that there aren't any WASPs anymore. That seems reasonable. Why would anybody want to be a WASP? As Alicia can testify, it isn't any fun, and Judith can back her up on that. In her experience many WASPs marry poor whites like herself or, if they're really lucky, Jews, and then they celebrate Passover and their narrow escape from being as limited as their parents. And even more WASPs become Buddhists, or what they imagine Buddhists to be,

and suddenly a vision of her former in-laws' dogs gambols across her brain: Max, a golden retriever too stupid to fetch, and the black Lab, Sambo, last of his name if not his kind. Hard as she tries, she cannot remember what Huntington Hartford looked like.

Eventually Alicia opens her eyes. Judith doesn't ask her how she is. Alicia tells her that Ellie has just stepped out for a nibble, and it flits through Judith's mind that for all the worlds they were eager to escape and attain, they have not done very well. Now in their late fifties, they have achieved the unlooked-for experience of foiled expectations. Alicia is married to the rector of Washington's most conventional Episcopal church, and Judith has not managed to hang on to any vestiges of the rich, sophisticated world she married into. After a pause, less to gather her thoughts than to summon her energy, Judith begins: "I know I haven't been here for a while, over a week. I'm sorry, but something came up, and I better explain right away because when Ellie gets back he will definitely not want to hear about it."

"Oh, don't tell me you've fallen in love again." Alicia even laughs a little, and Judith knows she really means, Tell me everything, every single thing. Do not omit a single, solitary detail. And so Judith tells Alicia about the man she met in her new book club—after swearing her to secrecy, especially with Ellie, because while he is probably not a communicant, his fiancée, Charlotte, probably is. In fact she is just the sort of cave-dwelling rich Washingtonian who probably still attends an Episcopal church.

"Oh, no," Alicia says, "he's not engaged!"

"Well, yes, he is. But he's not actually married, and he was totally up-front about it, not lying about it or trying to deceive me or anything. I guess he started dating her right after he left his wife, and he's given her a ring and everything, but apparently they haven't set the date."

"Oh, Judith! How could you?" Alicia asks, happily anticipating Judith's answer.

"It was easy!" Judith thinks a little and continues, "God! He was so amazing, and I knew he would be. I took one look at him, an ex-Episcopalian sitting there in the middle of all those Quakers, and I knew he'd be the best lover I've ever had."

"The Quakers! Oh, give me a break!"

"Well, he's not a Quaker." Judith smiles. "He's an ex-Episcopalian and a Republican!"

“Oh, my God! A Republican! You’re kidding. You’ve fallen in love with a Republican! And the best you’ve ever had?” Alicia manages a nonpainful groan. “I can’t believe it.”

“The absolutely best I’ve ever had,” Judith emphasizes, and then she goes on to tell the story of the amazing lover she met at her new book club. “Oh, he’s unbelievable. Everyone in this book club is a bureaucrat, mostly in the State Department, but he works in some quasi-private entity that runs housing for poor people, I think. The rest of them are Democrats and Quakers, or at least their children all went to Sidwell Friends—I don’t know about going to Meeting or whatever—but he’s an ex-Episcopalian. I was careful to ask. And a Republican. I pretended I hadn’t driven, and he offered me a ride home. I had to go pick up my car the next day at lunch, but it was worth it. He drove me home and walked me up to the front door, and you can imagine the rest.”

But just in case Alicia can’t, Judith starts at the beginning, a long introductory explanation about how she was interviewing this guy—the magazine is doing a series of articles on all the board members, you know, articles on the preservation activities that got them onto the board—and this one board member, Brian Simmons, is actually from Indiana, where his parents were Quakers and he’s been very influential in saving all the physical evidence of the Underground Railroad.

“Was there any?”

“Well, not a lot. But anyway, he got involved in other Indiana preservation things, and then, when he moved to D.C., he went on the board in part because his job—I’m pretty sure he’s at State—doesn’t have much to do with history. Which is his great love, he said. And I said, Oh, mine too—more to have something to say than because it’s literally true—and I told him how I wished I could make myself read more of it, real academic history, not Steven Ambrose and Doris Kearns Goodwin but real history, and he said that was exactly what his book club did.” Because Alicia would know that logically someone like Brian would belong to a book club. Everyone in Washington takes part in a prayer group or a book club, one or the other. In fact, for many years, Alicia’s husband, Ellsworth, has run a Republican prayer breakfast for high-level sinners in the Nixon administration, incredibly ancient men who have long left sin behind. “And then he said if I was interested in reading real history, he was hosting his book club

this month, and wouldn't I like to come? They were reading Caro's book about Robert Moses, and I said sure, why not? And I ran out and bought it and read some of it at work the next day instead of typing up the interview."

Judith tells Alicia how the next evening she drove over to Cleveland Park, and after describing the boring house and the oh-so-typical living room—not in very much detail, just enough to set the scene—she tells Alicia how she noticed him right away. He was sitting next to her, and believe it or not, he was aroused. It was really weird. He was sitting there saying intelligent things about Robert Moses—he was the only one who really admired him—and he was clearly physically excited by her, excited by simple contiguity or maybe by the feeling that some things are meant to be. And so all the Democratic Quakers dissed Moses, and she was careful to make one sensitive, salient remark, not at all critical of Moses, and then she shut up and didn't say another word. And as soon as the discussion ended he leaned over and introduced himself. "Rod Something, I'm not quite sure what."

"You don't know his name!" Alicia actually laughs. She can't believe it—although of course, knowing Judith for all these years, she in some way expected it.

"Well, yes, I admit it, I went to bed with him and I don't know his last name. But the problem is if you miss it the first time, it's hard to ask because that shows you weren't paying attention. Anyway, I know he grew up in Lake Forest, and he went to St. Paul's and Princeton and Harvard Law, and he runs this . . . I'm not sure exactly what it is, something like Fannie Mae, and they make the smallest of profits by charging all these poor tenants for their cable service. But look, he's an amazing lover and totally respectable, and I'll get his last name the next time I see him. Or I could ask Brian Simmons. I mean, I could call him, couldn't I? And I could say I think I recognized Rod from . . . I don't know, some meeting of precinct captains, Republican precinct captains in the District, but I didn't catch his last name. And I'd be thinking, I hope you didn't notice my car sitting out in front of your house all night or me, the next day, coming to pick it up."

"Oh, no, someone like Rod would never be a precinct captain. It's better just to call Brian and ask straight out."

"You're right. It's not the sort of thing Rod would do. You know his sort far better than I do. But never mind, I'll think of something."

"Maybe Ellie knows him?"

“Oh, no. No, no, no. Anyway, Rod told me about whatever it is he does while he was driving me across the park to Mount Pleasant. And he walked me up to my door,” and then she tells Alicia how Rod embraced her as soon as they entered her foyer, a long, long kiss—a lot of very active tongue and a firm grip on her upper arms—and after a while he complained that she wasn’t paying attention. “Something like, ‘I get the feeling your mind is elsewhere,’” so she stuck her hand down and—

“What were you wearing?” Alicia asks.

Judith has to think for a moment. “I decided to wear a skirt, denim but still a skirt, and my pink-and-lavender quilted jacket, the one I got from that Indian import shop on Wisconsin Avenue? I wanted to look serious but unconventional.” Alicia nods. Judith sees that Alicia remembers the jacket, if not the occasion on which Judith bought it. “Remember? We had lunch at that new place and then went shopping?” A long, long time ago. “Anyway, the skirt was a great idea because he just shoved me up against the wall and pulled up my skirt—”

“Weren’t you wearing tights? Did he take them off? How unromantic!”

“No, not tights. No. No. Knee socks. Boots and knee socks. Anyway, after a while we went upstairs. At our age you can do a lot more if you’re lying down,” Judith admits and changes direction. “You know, the most interesting thing about him, aside from the fact that he’s sexually amazing, is he’s engaged to a woman who bores him to death. He came right out and said he’s afraid he’ll marry her and then die of boredom. Now, that is something I just can’t imagine doing.”

“Well, clearly she’s got some money.”

“I guess that’s it. Of course you’re right. The head of whatever probably doesn’t make a lot of money, and it probably really cost him to get divorced. But still.” And Judith goes on to tell Alicia in a great deal of detail what she and Rod did once they went up to her bedroom and took off all their clothes and how Fetters was absolutely terrified and hid under the bed but couldn’t bring himself to leave the room. This description takes about twenty minutes, from oral sex through lots of positions to multiple orgasms, and lots of exclamations from Alicia to the effect that Judith will never change. Then Judith says she has to get back to the office.

But in exchange Alicia wants to tell Judith about her last visit to her mother in the nursing home a few months ago, when she was still

able to get around. “I brought her some flowers and told her about how I was redecorating the living room, not true exactly but easier to talk about than radiation. New white slipcovers, nothing showy or expensive. And suddenly I noticed how happy she was. She’s usually really grumpy, as if she just has to remind me how much she doesn’t like being there and how she really doesn’t see any good reason for it and how it’s my fault, my fault and Ellie’s. But that day she kept smiling and looking past me at the door, and I wondered if they were serving something really good for lunch or if there was some activity she was looking forward to. You know, they have little sessions where the aides tell Bible stories and sing hymns and all, sort of connecting them to their childhoods. And so finally I said, ‘Well, you’re in a pretty good mood today. Is something special going on?’ And she said, ‘Oh, yes, today’s the day Alicia comes to visit! She’s such a sweet girl, and I do so look forward to seeing her.’”

Alicia laughs, and Judith laughs. “That’s a great story. I hope it didn’t make you too sad,” Judith says. “It’s what happens when they get old.”

“Oh, no. It was great just to see her so happy. It was always hard to go see her. I guess you feel guilty when you put them in a home, no matter how nice it is. But, you know, Jesus says we must visit the sick and pray for them when they die, and I’m sure we get extra points for making them happy.”

After the visit Judith walks back across campus to pick up her car on N Street. Some of us will marry our proper fiancés and die of boredom, she thinks, and some of us will die from breast cancer, and some of us will go on for a long time dying a little of one thing and another before we manage to die altogether from something specific, and over and over again we will all be conscientiously visited by inept fools spouting vacuous nonsense. She is exhausted and thoroughly sick of herself. The knee socks were a serious mistake. Knee socks! Who wears knee socks? And Robert Moses just didn’t reverberate. Maybe next week the book club will read *The Unredeemed Captive* by John Demos because she read a review of that a few years back and it still sticks in her mind. A white girl is captured by Indians and likes it so much she refuses to go back to the comforts of Williamstown, Massachusetts. Yes, she just fell in love with Indian Dick, and then she will tell Alicia how she tied Rod to the posts of her childhood bed and—to celebrate the text—beat him with one of those bright-colored

Guatemalan belts Alicia used to buy for Christmas presents at that shop in Adams Morgan: Remember all the good times we had? Guatemalan belts, fashion statement of the eighties?

She is heading toward the library when she is startled by a huge dark cross shooting over the grass in front of her. It stops her in her tracks. It's like nothing she's ever seen before, the shadow of a cross. She waits for it to happen again, and when it does, she realizes it's only a jet, the shadow of a jet. Not a cross at all. The planes are heading up the Potomac River to land at Reagan National Airport, and as they fly along the river they cast their shadows over the Georgetown University campus, shadows that take the form of crosses. It's a remarkable coincidence, she thinks, something they could use to recruit students. But even though she knows what it is, she waits and watches another dark cross appear in her path and then another and another, and she thinks she may stand there all afternoon, watching as each dark airplane shadow shoots across the bright landscape like the blessing of an unknown god, the unknown god who commands us to visit the sick and pray for them when they die, the unknown god who watches us make our visit and do our tricks, the unknown god who watches over us and listens to our stories, the unknown god who forgives us when we lie.

Irene

Irene was nothing if not sensitive to her location, sensitive, too, to the names of the towns and cities through which she had conducted her personal *hegira*, and so it seemed significant that when Buck escaped from an upstairs window, the tree where he landed was located in Fort Bragg, some ten miles north of Mendocino, California. Buck made his escape while Mrs. Sanchez was shaking out the bathroom rug, and although she hadn't noticed him perched on the towel rack, she immediately screamed for help and Irene got to the bathroom in time to see him flutter onto the low-lying branch of a neighbor's tree. She immediately ran next door to coax him down: "I can't explain, Mrs. Chin, but Buck's in your tree." And Mrs. Chin, accustomed to mysteries more opaque than this, welcomed her in and calmly watched her run through the house and out the back door to direct a plea at the bishop pine that filled most of the backyard: "What *do* you think you're doing? *Come down here right now!*"

After a few minutes Irene calmed down and began to speak soothingly: "Buck, Buck, listen to me, please, please," and Buck cocked his head and looked down, but refused to fly to her offered wrist. It wasn't surprising. They'd never really practiced the come-on-command trick—or any other trick, for that matter. She'd let him out of the cage when she got home from work, and he'd wander about and eventually land on her bed and start pecking at her earrings, just to drive her crazy, and eventually she'd gently seize him and put him back in his cage.

Irene was surprised that Buck could still manage to fly out a window, although of course he'd done it before, or something like it, at least fifteen years ago now, when he'd flown into her ex-husband's classroom right in the middle of a lecture on Frederick Law Olmsted,

and even though they'd advertised, they'd not discovered whose window he'd flown out of. Who'd have thought he still had it in him? Maybe it was the continuing influence of his name, for they had named him Buckminster Freedbird, presumably after one of her favorite toddlers from the year she worked at the day care center shortly after they got married. Buckminster Freedberg, Jr., son of the famous art historian by a third or fourth or maybe even a fifth wife.

A slight gray-and-white speck against the dark green needles, Buck perched just out of reach, looking down at Irene, then fluttering almost to the top of the tree as Mrs. Chin struggled out the back door with a ladder. She was in her eighties and had dealt with all sorts of bad situations. A bird in a tree seemed a problem with an easy solution. "No, no," Irene cautioned her quietly. "Don't make any noise or he'll fly away," and Mrs. Chin clanked and clattered back inside.

Buck stayed put on his high branch, and yet Irene knew he was paying attention, looking down, although probably not directly at her, just at the location of her voice, and she wondered how keensighted an old cockatiel could be, old, she assumed, for she didn't know how long they lived or, in this particular instance, Buck's age—although it seemed as if he'd been her bird for a long, long time. Maybe he was all but blind, and so she muttered loud words of encouragement. "Nice bird, good bird, you've got a great view up there. You can probably see all the way to the Pacific Ocean, but come on down, now, come down, and let's go inside to your nice, warm . . . home." And after only a few minutes of this palaver, Buck did flutter awkwardly down, more like falling than flying, but nevertheless landing safely on the next-to-lowest branch. Maybe he'd reassessed his options after a careful look at Fort Bragg: blocks and blocks of rundown houses, an abandoned lumberyard, and the dark gray ocean stretching out to meet the light gray sky.

Irene could tell Buck was definitely listening to her because whenever she raised her voice he sort of bobbed in her direction. It was easy to get and keep his attention, although hard to think of what to say. And so, at first, she decided to tell him about his life, a narrative technique that had always worked with Lucy when she was little and had trouble falling asleep. "Your name is Buck Freed—no, your name is Buck, and you live with me in a room on Mrs. Sanchez's second floor, next door to Mrs. Chin's boardinghouse in foggy Fort Bragg, California. Mrs. Sanchez does not technically run a boardinghouse because she has four