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THE SECOND COMING

We're sitting in an empty diner after two a.m., drinking really good stale coffee and warm apple pie. We'd just finished talking about this Catholic woman she knows who has so many children in her apartment that she can't remember if any of them came from her womb—who's too full of Christian charity to check their papers and purge her living space of strays. I pictured them swarming, crucified to the trough, or suckling at rows of pink nipples, muttering *pater nosters* and smacking their lips in ecstatic delight. Now we're not talking about anything. It's not a sheer silence though; it's thick, and there are muffled noises congealing in the air above our tired heads. It's hot silence, muggy with possibility. She always says how all of existence is potentiality, and potential is loud. She's wearing an Indian Motorcycle t-shirt cut into a halter and a denim skirt fit like a ball gown. Her long white legs are drawn up, entangling each other. I'm sweating but she's completely at ease. No part of her is sticking to the vinyl bench. She closes her eyes against this noisy silence and asks, "How would you like to be Jesus?"

"I'd hate it. He wasn't well groomed." I haven't washed my hair in five days, brushed it in as many months, and we've been passing this shirt back and forth forever without any quarters for laundry.

She leans in toward me and stretches her forearms out on the table, resting on her elbows. I get a hint of her cold coffee breath on my face. "You're going to be him," she says. "It's the only way. We're saving the world."

"It's a big job," I tell her, spooning myself more pie. She prefers to eat with her lithe fingers anything that isn't scalding hot. She's a big careless eater, and she loves to immerse her senses in her food. She thinks eating implements are silly, barbaric. Nothing worth consuming requires tools to move to your mouth, she's sure.

"Bet your ass it's a big job. You read the bible, right?"

"Some, in high school," I said.

"Then you can do it. You were a Christian, right?"

"In high school."

"Then you can do it. We're going to save the world."

"I don't get it."

"Well," and she draws herself up to her full height. There's a jingle above the entrance and we're no longer alone. "Christianity is a great religion. How many great religions are there? Three? Four? I can only think of three, and Christianity only just makes the list." She cocks her head to one side. "Three and a half, maybe. Point is, we don't have room for all the Christians; they have a lot of kids. The Catholics still don't even use birth control for god's sake."

"On paper they don't." I correct her, thinking fondly back to my days in the

Catholic school playground.

She waves a hand in front of her face, breaking up my reverie and dismissing my clarification. None of that matters. "All they're supposed to care about is heaven and we're going to help them get there sooner."

"No we're not."

"Yes we are. They're greedy, baby. We're over-populated. We need more room. Buddhist babies can't breathe. One day," she leans in, "we're going to have babies who can't breathe. We're going to do this."

"No we're not"

"Yes we are. You're going to be Jesus. I'm going to be Mary what's-her-name in the background, they'll be your disciples, it'll be beautiful."

"We're going to kill them?"

"A little bit," she tells me, "but they're going to do most of the work themselves, because they'll be following you. Everyone loves a handsome Messiah."

I shake my head. "They won't follow me."

"They will. You'll be their god."

"They won't buy it."

"They will. They're hungry for it."

"They won't! Hell, I even quit being one of them, years ago."

"You should trust me more. I'm very smart." She places the last piece of pie in her mouth and winks. It was from my plate. "Do you know that some people believe men used to be amphibious mammals, more like dolphin monkeys than man monkeys? And that's why our hair grows in the direction it does, for swimming?" She rises to kiss me. She shuffles out of the booth, throws down a crumpled wad of small bills and a jangle of large coins. She leaves a bigger tip than we can afford because she used to sleep with the waiter. "Dolphins even used to have fingers if you can believe it, they could have shuffled cards or flipped through mail." She takes my hand and leads me out. "We'll get started tomorrow." The bell above the door rings as we open it, but no one turns to see us leave.

She leads me through the street, my mind trailing to dolphins walking apes wearing harnesses, the soft leather from their leashes entwined in nimble fingers. I think of fingers. Of harnesses. Bed. Her. The soft wood and pewter of her rings cool against my skin, and soon we're home. She leads me up the stairs to our third floor apartment, through the creaking door and into bed. She tangles my body up in dirty cotton sheets and wraps her legs around me. Her toes weave through mine, and she puts me deep inside of her. We writhe and sweat, my leather and her smooth damp skin, and she takes me to sleep, guiding me in dream.

In the morning I wake to her mouth on my eyelids. The mint and baking soda from her toothpaste is the first smell I catch, and then the sweet green tea scent she wears. I smile at her, eyes closed, and she gives me a toothbrush already coated with more of that paste.

"Morning, sunshine," she smiles. "Hurry up, we've got big plans." She's put out my clothes: khakis and a brown cotton shirt. She is wearing white, a sort of clean linen sundress. She wraps her head in deep green. The exposed parts of her flesh are

tanned to various degrees. She loves the sun, doesn't fear skin cancer, knows better than to waste her mind with worries about where one streak of colour ends and another begins. She knows that beauty is haphazard. Her legs are the whitest part and her shoulders the pinkest. Mostly though, she's smooth and soft and lovely.

We leave the apartment unlocked. No self-respecting thief would walk all the way up our staircase to steal anything we own. She says that if a man is so desperate he's willing to climb our apartment steps, then he needs our belongings more than we do, and should be allowed them. She turns to me, winks and smiles, and I know we're on the road. We descend and walk through the streets, hand in hand, squinting at the sun but infatuated still with its offerings of haze and salt and dust. We appear to be ambling, but her eyes are intent on the traffic in the street and I know that she's waiting. When the siren song of an ambulance cuts through the air, I grow tense, but her body relaxes, relieved. "Hurry," she rushes me down an avenue. "He'll make a mistake." She's right. The ambulance driver can't navigate through traffic and makes a wrong turn. We arrive at the accident a moment or two before he does. That is all we need. A child is lying on the ground. She's been hit hard by a shiny topaz scooter, the teenage driver crying on the shoulder of a stranger to the side. There's a puddle of thick, sticky blood on the street, so large and spreading that I can scarcely believe it came from so small a body. There is a crowd, and she stands behind me, her hands on my hips. "Go," she whispers in my ear, "touch her. You can save her. You *save*." She rubs my hand with her own and then pushes me forward. "She saves!" She calls it out into the crowd.

I feel myself moving toward the child, and when my decrepit Birkenstocks step lightly in her blood it turns to water. Startled by the transformation and a little heat-struck, the paramedics don't stop me from going to the victim. The crowd hushes, or I just lose their noise over the thunder of my heart. Her blonde hair is full of blood. A small spatter of puke or brains decorates the side of her face. I touch her cheek, her hair, her body, and her skin is wet and shiny. Her eyes open and she sits up, looking freshly bathed. There are hands all over me and she pulls me out of the crowd. With my hand in hers we run down the street. "She saves!" She screams until she is hoarse, until her excitement runs to desperate ravings of thrilled madness and arousal.

Days later I've performed miracles. I've walked on water, turned it into wine. We've had some crazy parties. I've been on television, in the newspaper, on the radio. I have more internet sites than the first guy. I have apostles. They clean my apartment. Electronics are being smuggled in for my use. There's money at my disposal. Not that my money is good anywhere. I have bright and shining teeth. I have millions of disciples around the world, men and women who have spent their entire lives longing for my return.

"They believe it." She shakes her head. "I knew they would, but Jesus, do they eat you up." She scrunches her nose.

"He never had it this easy," I muse, and she smiles.

"Times have changed, baby doll." She shrugs her shoulders. "We've never needed god like we do now. We've got all this fucking freedom, we let people revel

in their depravity, and they do, day in and day out, until there's only fine motor skills separating us from the animals we abuse and despise. We're a whole population of blasphemers, alcoholics, philanderers, and gluttons." She rubs her small body against mine. "The only thing that keeps us from fucking strangers in the streets is AIDS." I start to protest, but she cuts me off. "And we've got some corrupt system of law enforcement, rules and regulations, checks and balances, but that's not enough, it's never been enough. If that's the best we've got, then bring on the strangers. Show me the street. We can't burn our cities of sin because they're already on fire. There's nothing left that's good." She begins to remove my clothing. "Wives and mothers cry themselves to sleep at night. Kids go to bed so full of candy and acid they know they can fly. Husbands go to bed drunk and reeking of cheap hotel slut. We all hate ourselves, we all deserve it." She kisses me down my bare stomach. "But they love you, baby." She slips a finger inside of herself. Two. "They can sit on their clever IKEA furniture and watch you in HD. That's real to them. They needed you, and you came. They think you're pure. They're going to follow you." She rocks, gasping. "We have to make something of that, someday." She goes on and makes something of me, and I barely register sleep when it comes.

I hope that this someday comes later rather than sooner, but the next day I'm doing daytime TV and she kisses my eyelids awake earlier than usual. "It's time." She slides the shaft of a toothbrush into my hand with unusual urgency. Preps me on the way to Chicago. I'm reluctant, but I obey. Oprah's brown eyes shine as I command the faithful to meet at the nearest body of salt water, tomorrow, to prepare themselves for ecstatic communion with their maker. Those with skills and means will devote themselves to installing great television and sound systems at all ports, and my people—dressed in white (for posterity, she tells me when I ask) will hear me speak from harbour stations. People will drive and fly and walk and boat wherever I tell them. I'll make a speech that she prepares. They will submit to me because she has made me their god.

When tomorrow comes I'm dressed in white and brown. I make my way in front of a thousand cameras, on a pier, facing the ocean of my choosing. There are people on the shoreline, not just here, but all around the world. They stand, staring open mouthed at the screens, waiting for me to deliver my message of peace, hoping secretly for vengeance and war. I begin by raising my arms the way she has taught me to do. "I've been among you for twenty-five years, though you, the faithful, have known me only for days. Since I have revealed myself, you've opened your hearts, homes and wallets to me, and—" they giggle. I point up to the false blue skied heavens and smile. I was never this smarmy in real life. I can't believe she wrote this garbage. "The two of us appreciate it very much." The crowd screams applause. I lift my palms and they know to be quiet. "We live in a spoiled age. We have everything we could want and nothing we need. Our arteries are clogged with depravity. I've witnessed the depths of human weakness and evil. I've lived with it. But it ends. My friends, I'm going to sacrifice myself for your sins." There is more thunderous screaming applause. She warned me that this would be harder to reign in. I swear I see doves circling in formation with seagulls. I extend my palms again.

I wait. "But that isn't enough." Silence. "I have known perfect love from you since I saved this blessed child's life" I gesture to the saved child, who occupies a position of honour behind me. Her blonde hair shines like pigtailed honey. She seems even better than before. Her skin gleams.

"My father is proud of you for being so accepting. That's better luck than we've had in the past." They laugh. It's worshipful, like fairy bells. "You've all earned the opportunity for rebirth. We're going to have a planetary baptism. All the world's collected sins—but not your personal misdeeds—will be forgiven, and as a planet you can start over!" Applause. I wait, count one-two-three. "Oh, all right, your personal sins will be forgiven, too. You guys drive a hard bargain." Wild applause. "I want all of you to get in the water. Jump in the water. Get yourself wet. I mean, really wet. Splash your neighbour. Dunk your head in. Swim out as far as you can. Have fun! Go now!"

There are tremendous splashes all over the world as my people dive into the water. Quickly, she steps forward. She covers her hand in some false sacramental oils we brought just in case, a jar of body butter thickened with silver eye make-up. She dips her hand into the water and stirs, creating a tiny star spattered whirlpool. She turns to me. I brace myself.

"The thing about whirlpools is that they create a vacuum. They suck small bits of gunk down into the water." She grins. "And 'small' is a relative term, right? The bigger the vacuum, the more gunk it can process." She gestures with her head over her shoulder and I can no longer see my happily splashing indoctrinated in the waters by the shoreline. But I do see an immense copy of her toy swirl. I see distant arms and legs and I have no reason to doubt that there are copies of this phenomenon in every body of salt water on the globe. She removes her hand from the water and shakes it off. She dips her big toe in the water. Reaches down and slaps. The whirlpools swell up and crash down, empty. Within moments the waters are calm and still.

She turns to me.

"What happened to them?" I ask. She smirks.

"Tadpoles." She can't contain herself. She laughs. "They're all tadpoles"

I open my mouth in disagreement, but she stifles my response. She cocks her head. "I know, it seems cruel, but they didn't feel a thing." She turns us away from our accomplice ocean. We walk back toward our home. "Good job, baby. The world will be a much better place for say, five or ten years." I don't answer. I feel sick. I also feel hungry and a bit aroused. "We should start doing a bit of research for next time. I think you could pass as Elijah. You have his nose." She kisses me giggling Eskimo style as we walk toward the city we love, bathed in orange light. We're headed, I know, to talk about frogs over a nice plate of apple pie and a warm cup of stale coffee.