

One might also say that an apparition is human vision corrected by divine love.

— Willa Cather

Outside of a psychotic who attacked me a few months ago (I stuck his head into a snowbank until he promised to leave me alone) and a middle-aged fellow who drives around town shouting obscenities from a riding mower, there is not much happening here in Middlebury, Vermont. It's a handsome town, though: kindly in spirit, smart and well run, home of a fine college with an extraordinary library. My position as cook at the Café Chatillon down along scenic Otter Creek is more than tolerable. So too are my living quarters: Usually I'm stuck in a single room near the railroad tracks. Here I live far from the tracks in a small, clean apartment attached to the comfy house of a middle-class family who spend most of their time watching television. The canned laughter fluting melancholically through the walls has become as familiar to me as the sounds of plumbing or forced air from the vents.

I am, unfortunately, watching a lot of TV myself. The cable is spliced in gratis from the house, and ever since I sobered up, I don't seem to get out much anymore. Granted, I could screw that teenage girl who's been coming around, or I could have an affair with that married woman who eyes me at the gym, but that's all part of the old life. The old life had no meaning. I have learned, through my many years of depraved blundering, that men are not mere flesh, for flesh without spirit cannot move, laugh, drink absinthe, forgive, or consider the end of time. Flesh without spirit (see: *meat*) simply goes bad, simply stinks.

But enough about my old life. These days I have whittled my welter of vices down to gambling (I do love the horses), two beers in the evening, and an occasional cigarette. I fancy

part because I needed material, but mostly because I boarded a train called the Romantic Debauchery in the mistaken assumption that it would somehow get me to my destination quicker than the ones marked Hard Work and Paying Attention. Hundreds of wrong trains and many lost years later, I have learned that, despite the jovial public legends, inebriation and lucid expression are at odds with each other. If I am to write with spiritual integrity, I cannot be a drunken butterfly.

All that time I was watching those cocktails and powders glide down my throat or slide up my nose, I did little in the way of maturing as a writer. I'd felt raw-nerved, out of place, and shy all my life. I found achieving worthwhile goals difficult, but *talking* about them was easy, especially with the help of drink and drugs, and in the company of fellow dreamers. I knew I had to quit the gliding cocktails and the sliding powders, but I did not have the courage or the know-how. Romantic Debauchery kept pulling up to the station, doors open, plenty of seats, magic confetti fluttering gaily down. At thirty-six, my pockets jammed with ripped railway tickets, I'm still scrambling to recover the lost years, still trying to "find my voice."

But now that I am reformed, a disciplined writer at last, mature at least in accumulation of years and control of appetite, I feel entitled to my modest deserts: a good night's sleep, esteem from my neighbors, a humble career in letters, a mate, certainly — and not one of those slovenly, voracious creatures who always took the window seat on the train, but a respectful, book-loving brunette who owns cats, enjoys clarinet solos and avocado sandwiches, and has come, like me, the long, hard way to virtue. I'm sure I will meet her soon.

In the meantime, after a few hours of searching for my "voice" and a vigorous workout at the gym, I sit in front of the TV munching on snacks and experiencing great emotions while watching glib characters skillfully solve personal problems

501 Minutes To Christ

POE BALLANTINE

For Kim Hansen

myself an upright figure, a man of honor, a future novelist of minor distinction (even if I can't *give* away a story), a weight-lifting, monastic hobo of whom people might say a generation or two hence, in the small likelihood I am remembered, "He was honest."

I don't recommend the writing life — at least, not the one in which you move around a lot, live alone, and work odd jobs. Swing a gig where you hit the big time quick. Be a prodigy, if your agent can arrange it, and then get yourself banned in Boston. I arrived at the discipline late, at the age of twenty-nine, in

with warmth and humor on the half-hour. Human intercourse at last! I am interested in politics, sporting events, unsolved mysteries, comedy of all brands, movies, news, documentaries, debates, interviews, biographies of serial killers and stars — anything to keep me distracted from the fact that I have once again backed out of the human arena, afraid of getting stomped or regressing into the old life, and that I should have left Vermont long ago.

One night, without warning, H. Ross Perot's earnest, nasal rant about the arrogant complacency of the American people



JAMES CARROLL

triggers the realization of my own arrogant complacency, and self-reproach suddenly gurgles up to my eyelids like storm water in a backed-up sewer. I think to myself: *I'm thirty-six years old and rotting in front of a television set.* The electrons that bomb that cathode-ray tube are crumbling the cartilage of my soul, eating away my youth and the children in my loins. I don't need to see another riot, or plane crash, or evil twin, or clever light-beer commercial, or guy pointing a gun at me, or steroid millionaire swatting a home run. I snap off the tube, and all those emotions that have been sluicing into my veins,

all the opinions and ideas I have mistaken for my own, zip dizzily up into the atmosphere, and I am suddenly a man alone on a fold-out couch in the empty darkness of an add-on room.

Without the distraction of television, that life-support system for people with no lives, I sit for a long while, steeping in the sudden revelation of my own stagnancy. The family next door is watching *Murphy Brown*. Why has probity not rewarded me? Why, through the exercise of conscience, am I not a measurably better human? Why, after seven years of dedicated Hard Work and Paying Attention, have I not pub-



ADRIENNE MOUMIN

lished a single story or poem? And what will I do, I wonder, to eradicate this monstrous disgust I've amassed for myself? March back into the bar? Walk out the door and just keep walking? Commit suicide?

Instead I begin punching myself in the head. Having a palpable outlet for my hatred feels good. I'm slamming away like Marvin Hagler on Thomas Hearns in the first round of that famous three-round championship bout when I hit my nose, and blood drips onto my sweat shirt. Then it begins to

pour, and I have to stop punching and cup my hand under it. I cry a bit, but it only makes the loathing worse.

After I've cleaned myself up, I take a walk. It's a spectacularly clear spring night. Vermont is one of the prettiest places I've ever lived. I once thought I might stay here. I thought things might be different. I nod at my neighbors, pass my two old friends who always ignore me: the post office and the bookstore. There is still blood on my sweat shirt, which at least is physical proof that I am still alive. When I get home, I feel better.

Self-battery has dislodged a few forgotten imperatives. I can't write anything worthwhile about America or its inhabitants if I have withdrawn from them, and no one really wants to hear another criticism of tv. It's time to throw myself back into the fire. In the morning I will give notice at work. My employer will be surprised. My employer is always surprised.

Like most people, I detest moving. Once you get started, though, it isn't so bad. You get into a rhythm, throwing things away. You realize how little you really need, how much of a drain these coffee mugs and dead houseplants and Bic pens and tortilla presses are. It feels good to give away a television set or discard an embarrassing manuscript printed in dot matrix. A day or two before I leave, I usually get sick with diarrhea and worry that I'll have to cancel the trip. But I know it's just my craven way of trying to wriggle out of the duty of waking up and being alive. The diarrhea usually dries up a few hours before I leave.

There is inexpressible satisfaction in leaving my stale and cowardly life behind, in saying goodbye to the room of loneliness with its acre of rejection slips, and to the me I despise so much. Yes, I know I will see that self again soon, but for a while I will be lost, scuffling, distracted. Who knows: maybe something will happen. I will rescue children from a house fire, or a tree will fall on my head, or a famous editor will discover me, or (dare I say it?) I will find the dark-headed girl.

I buy a one-way bus ticket for Louisville, Kentucky. I have always wanted to visit Churchill Downs, home of the Kentucky Derby. They just ran the Derby a couple of weeks ago, so the track should be reasonably quiet, with fewer plastic mint-julep cups to wade through.

As the Greyhound leaves from Burlington, a girlish, yellow-haired German woman of about fifty, wearing box spectacles and a backward white painter's cap, takes the seat next to mine. Her name is Annie, she tells me in a warm cackle of a voice, and she's going to Chicago.

I'm not much for bus conversation. It's a bit like talking to yourself. But I nod along as Annie begins to relate to me, with glittering sobriety, a story about the Death Bays of 1954, when the Indian landlords came with their Polish prostitutes and bought all the YMCAs, and for fifty thousand dollars you could sign your own death contract wherein a boy would be assigned to extract the juice from your liver, spleen, and heart, though it usually didn't work. I try not to laugh. Greyhounds have electromagnets in them that attract the disturbed and the desperate. Manic Annie talks for hours and sits with me at all the food stops, where she never eats anything, only pockets crackers and dressing packets, which she snacks upon fastidiously back on the bus while explaining about the substance called "Senn" (you mean you haven't heard of it?), which melts women into creatures that resemble sheep, or her brother-in-law who nearly became a world-champion boxer but lost the European title bout because his feet suddenly began to stink.

Two states later, God bless her soul, Annie suddenly decides to change seats, though she keeps waving and whistling

for me to join her in the back. I return her waves but don't get up. I've heard enough about the Polish whores who exchange their feet with yours while you sleep.

When the bus pulls into Louisville, I think for a moment that Annie might follow me out the door, as she has faithfully at every stop, but when I look back, she's jabbering to the man next to her about the ability of Peruvian (or Tibetan?) people to stare at you through their llamas until you are dead. And the man is in *stitches*, as if she were some sort of highly advanced comedian. Maybe I should have laughed instead of wasting my time being polite. I suddenly realize that if Annie is going to Chicago, she's on the wrong bus. Oh, well, good luck, Annie. Many laughs to you. I suppose the joy of finding an appreciative audience is better any day than some feeble notion of a destination.

(end of excerpt)