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I used to pray a lot.

I don't much anymore. It's not that I don't believe in prayer. It's just that I don't know what to say. Asking God to bless my mother and father and all my cousins and my next-door neighbors and the spotted owl over all his other creations seems more like an Incantation of Myself than any sort of heartfelt communication with the one who invented time and space and avocados.

And there was one night when I was walking to the liquor store in a blizzard, and it seemed I heard the babbling prayers of all mankind, the blizzard of *O Lord, gimme, O fix me, O help me, O ease my busted heart and let me sleep with a long-legged Finnish girl*, but it turned out it was my own voice, which sounded all the more pathetic in its yearning chorus.

Over the years I've developed a dubious idea of what it might be like to be on the other end of all that begging, groveling, and petty bargaining. Having a faint intuition of why God may have put up the "Gone Fishin'" sign, I've gotten off my knees and whittled my daily petition down to a more sensible and honest "Thank you, God. I know I'm a fool."

Still, there is one day in the year when I go plumb God-happy. It's a made-up holiday pulled randomly from the calendar, as far away from the retail conspirators and their chocolate bunnies and sawed-off pine trees as I can get; a twenty-four-hour period of gratitude, humility, and atonement I call "God's Day."

On God's Day, from midnight to midnight, I do not eat, speak, work, smoke, read, enjoy electronic media, or accept visitors. I contemplate, and I pray. The praying is not formal; it is more conversational, something along the lines of "I hope I'm of some pleasure to you, God. I hope I'm not getting this completely wrong. I hope I'm not an asshole. I feel terrible about that bucktoothed kid I beat up in sixth grade. And no, of course I shouldn't have slept with her. Or her. Or especially her." I avoid the syrupy-sweet, goody-two-shoes approach that I suspect has put the Old Man into a diabetic coma. If you're talking to the Divine Ground, the Ultimate Reality, the Truth and the Way, no amount of sugarcoating and verbs ending in *-th*

are going to mitigate the facts.

Upon the advent of my holy day, besides my fasting and contemplations, I give up something significant, a token sacrifice. Once, I destroyed a good story in progress. Another time I gave up watching the Michigan–Ohio State game. I always throw money away on God's Day, walk with a twenty-dollar bill into the darkness and leave it somewhere. Though this practice is supposed to demonstrate my detachment from worldly things, over the years I have begun to derive a childlike satisfaction from the thought of someone needy or deserving finding the money. I put one twenty in the pages of a library copy of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Several times I have dropped the money over the fence of a house in disrepair. Another time I slipped the cash into the slats of a bench in a park inhabited largely by winos.

One year I walked from my motel room to the cemetery-monument company across the street. It was early November, a cold wind blowing sandy snow. Around the back of the monument company was a neglected stack of tombstones: rejects, perhaps; misspelled, unpaid for, or abandoned in a sudden change of sentiment. There was one for a Staff Sergeant Vernon Frederick Brack, who'd died on my birthday in 1996. Another featured the names and birth dates of a married couple, only the wife's death date inscribed.

The heap of headstones guarded a weed-covered path that traversed the railroad tracks. And it was here where people like me — people without cars — would walk across the tracks to get to the store or to work. Unless a train derailed here, no one but the poor and autoless would have any chance at finding my devotion. My real hope was that the Dirty Man, who walked all day and never spoke, bathed, or looked anyone in the eye, would find it. I had seen him in every part of town: walking the railroad tracks and the highway; on a bench by the grocery store, eating out of a discarded pizza box; or simply standing in an aisle, hands at his sides, fingers curled, staring upward, stinking and dazed, the customers flowing warily around him.

Most people did not want to admit that with an unexpected turn of fortune — a low draft number, a renegade gene, a bad marriage — they might've been the Dirty Man themselves. But I knew how close I'd come, how close I might yet be. I was, in a manner of speaking, going nowhere myself: getting older, still

alone, and not making much progress toward my lofty goals. I had already suffered one major breakdown just two years before. I was well acquainted with the crack of Fate's cudgel on my skull; the look on his goofy, sadistic face; his missing incisor and sneaky laugh. And every time I saw the Dirty Man trudging toward me, his neck collared in black skin that had once been white, shattered soul turning in his shipwrecked eyes, I felt a shiver of recognition, a vision of Christmas future.

Once, I'd tried to give him money. It had felt almost like a bribe. But, too proud — or too confused — he hadn't acknowledged me. My recent breakdown had given me a keen insight into the frail psychic condition of all sentient beings, a kind of bleeding affection for anyone immersed in the cruel playground of earthly existence, even dogcatchers and Donald Trump. But privately I could not think of the Dirty Man as anything other than lost and gone forever, dreadful sorry, Dirty Man.

I lifted the top stone — which simply read, DWINNELL — in the stack of forgotten grave markers and slipped in the corner of the twenty-dollar bill, which flapped vigorously in the breeze and met all my standards for high visibility. Satisfied, I returned home to finish my day of worship.

Though this is a hair-shirt holiday, and not a turkey-gravy-and-Detroit Lions one, I have never been in any danger of being swept up into ecstasy. I empty my mind of earthworms and onion rings, gossip and news, 62 percent of sex and up to 42 percent of daydreams, but no pictures of God have ever replaced them. I have never received a prophecy or a revelation on this day. I am never steeped in mania or visions. I have never spoken in tongues or burst into Mahalia Jackson song. No trace of stigmata or image of Christ's face on a cocktail napkin has ever appeared. I do not become charismatic. I just feel good for a while, cleansed, my accounts squared, and I try to linger at the edge of this crumbling precipice before I am sucked back into the sludgy swirl of *el mundo*.

For my midnight break-fast I had a big dish of chicken cacciatore, two chocolate brownies, and a Coca-Cola. Then I sat by the window of my motel room and smoked a cigarette and watched the snow fly past the glass. From the radio I learned that I had won all three of my recent football bets. The money I throw away always seems to come back to me this way. "Cast thy bread upon the waters," the Good Book says, "for thou shalt find it after many days" — though this has nothing to do with the purpose of the holiday.

At 1 A.M. I went to bed, listening to the soft hiss and tick of the granular snowflakes on the window. Even though I have expended little physical energy, I never have trouble sleeping after God's Day.

The next morning it was still snowing, the same hissing, dry, crystalline flakes blowing straight-as-a-bullet sideways. I needed some groceries, so I walked the railroad tracks to the store. The twenty was still flapping in the breeze between the tombstones. Daylight had just risen. There was not a great deal of traffic yet through the frozen weeds beside the tracks, but some trailer and motel dwellers would be along shortly for the first shift at their cement-factory and tech-support jobs. I figured the bill would be gone by the time I returned from the store.

But an hour later the bill was still there. *What is wrong with these people?* I thought. *I have been robbed twice, had bicycles and stereos stolen out from under me. I am owed money by more people than I can count. And here I am giving it away, and there are no takers.* I almost talked myself into reclaiming the twenty. I could've used it: I lived on four hundred a month. It wasn't my fault that no one had picked up the money. My intentions had been good. But I knew it would feel wrong. The money was no longer mine.

The next day was sunny but still cold, and I went to check on the twenty. Still there, bold and flagrant as a whore waving a handkerchief at a train. My neighbor hadn't gotten his government check yet that month and claimed to have just seventeen dollars to get him through the week. I thought of telling him, "Just go to the store, man. Walk to the store. Trust me." But that would have been too obvious, like a silly treasure hunt. Besides, the government was taking care of him. He'd be all right. You can't force these things. The one who needs it most will find it on his or her own.

The bill flapped unmolested between the tombstones for three days, snow piling up around it like sand. I couldn't understand why no one could see it. Then it occurred to me that maybe people were superstitious about fooling with tombstones. Or maybe it was too easy, hidden in a place so conspicuous no one would ever find it.

On the fourth day it began to snow again, heavily, and I decided to relocate the bill. If it got buried, it might be lost forever, a fruitless sacrifice, of benefit to no one. I was missing the point of the exercise, of course, but I was stuck on the completion of my charitable endeavor. I lifted the stone marked DWINNELL, removed the bill, shook the snow off it, and stowed it away in my left pocket — the nonspending pocket.

For several days I walked around feeling nervous and incomplete, the soggy bill accumulating moral weight, like something stolen or unreturned. I looked for needy children. I looked for the Dirty Man. He had always ignored me as he passed, slogging along in his cloud of eau de homelessness, but I figured I could slip the money into his jacket pocket somehow. He could buy a pizza with it, or toss it down a sewer grate like a candy wrapper — whatever he did, it would be off my hands. My conscience would be eased. But he was nowhere to be found.

(end of excerpt)