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Abstract

On the day he was cured of his left-handedness by the Good Sisters of St. John, little Frank Lombardi also went cross-eyed. "So the Lord wishes," Sister Josephine said. It was her hickory switch, along with the Grace of God, that had been the prime mover behind the curing of the boy's affliction. She had a strong belief in the rightness of the method. There was a time when such a thing would not have been questioned, but the new priest overseeing the parish had proven himself to be skeptical of such practices. He had a taste for photography. Some of the Sisters called him an Episcopalian behind his back.

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Fiction by Eric Cipriani

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When Frank arrived home cross-eyed, his mother proclaimed him cursed and blamed herself. She said the source of this curse was the first hands that had touched him out of her womb—those of the Jew doctor. Frank’s father said that she was wrong. Frank had been cursed before he was wrenched from his mother. After all, his father explained, the only reason the doctor was needed was because the boy had a head the size of God’s left testicle. Frank did not understand why this was a sign of his cursedness and not his blessedness. His parents’ superstitions were of a world alien to him, the Old World, where an offering of saffron could summon the saints to intervene in matters earthly and human. Frank’s father, who fled his home when the *fascisti* finally crumbled, spoke often of the good luck bestowed upon him by the goat he saw in a patch of ryegrass on the day he departed for America on the long steamship.

After Frank went cross-eyed the other boys in the fifth grade at St. John's called him St. Francis the Afflicted. They liked to ask him what his two miracles were. The first few times this happened Frank tried to think of something funny or clever to say, something to turn the joke back on the other boys. But nothing ever did come to mind and he stood there in silence.

One afternoon at recess, while Frank was kicking over ant hills at the back of the schoolyard, Gene Hacek appeared at his side and said, "St. Francis the Afflicted." Gene had a fat face and freckles. He walked with his shoulders constantly in motion, the affected strut of a boy who had not learned that the universe had no interest in him.

He said: "Show me a miracle."

Frank looked at him, or around him, after destroying one last ant hill. This time he did not try to think of anything smart to say. Instead he bent down and picked a gumball-sized rock up from the ground. It did not have a long distance to travel from Frank's hand to Gene's eye, and as soon as it connected Gene cupped his palm over the eye and screamed. Frank saw blood drip down the boy's cheek like a tear.

#

Gene Hacek did not strut after Frank Lombardi put out his right eye. He wore a patch over the wound for many weeks. He was taken to a special doctor and fitted for an eye made of glass. When the prosthetic finally arrived and was placed in his skull, it itched terribly. Gene worried often that it would come flying out, which did not happen until his senior year of high school, during a football game, in which Gene was tackled from behind as he ran up the sidelines toward the end-zone. The eye shot forward several yards and landed soundlessly in the grass. Gene heard the crowd shriek and gasp. He found himself thrilled by the thought of it, of being a spectacle of horror to all these people.

When his teammates ran to his side they found him laughing as he lay on his back, the dark orb of his empty socket staring up at them. The boys had of course never seen Gene without his eye, though they all knew that such a state existed, like they knew the dark side of the moon or the Asian continent existed. To some the sight was too much. Mitchell Molloy vomited over his cleats. Bud DiCarlo felt a rock in his throat as if he were about to cry and Dean Marks did cry, though nobody cared to notice. Several of the boys asked if Gene was okay but he only kept laughing. No one thought to retrieve the eye resting a few steps away. Most stood and stared, drop-jawed, until they were pushed away by their coaches.

On the opposing team's bus ride back home, Henry Sacosky, the boy responsible for Gene's lost eye, was treated as a hero, the star of the game, though his team had lost and lost soundly. He was christened with a nickname: Sacosky the Killer. This embarrassed him terribly, though he did not ask his teammates to stop until they were dropped off at the school, where their parents waited to take them home.

#

Upon graduation, Henry enlisted in the United States Marine Corps at the encouragement of his father, a veteran of the European theater of World War II. Henry's nickname eventually found him at boot camp by way of a letter, carelessly left in public view, from a high school friend. The name hit the ears of his sergeant and his life became miserable. The sergeant took it upon himself to prove that Henry was not a killer and was doing a fine job of it until one calm and cloudless night the sergeant's heart exploded in his sleep. Henry was at the time in his bunk dreaming of the many girls from home he'd failed to slip himself into. He was a virgin and, because there was a war on, feared he would die one.

He would not though. Vietnam would hold many firsts for Henry. It was his first war, for instance, as well as his first woman. His first marijuana cigarette. His first helicopter and rice paddy. It was, in some ways, a good time for him. This was, at least, what he wrote home and what he would say to his children not many years later, the woman and marijuana scrupulously omitted.

In Vietnam, Henry was given a tomahawk with which he killed a man. The man Henry killed was a member of a party of Vietnamese who ambushed Henry's platoon. After a series of events that he could describe only with the most imprecise details—gunfire coming from 360 degrees around their position, the movement of bodies, screaming voices he recognized and screaming voices he didn't—Henry found himself in close combat with the man, whose face was streaked with blood. The tomahawk entered the man at the base of his neck and a spurt of his blood hit Henry's eye. It stung slightly. Several hours later he noticed dark specks in his vision. Blood dried in his eyelashes. He brushed it out with his fingers. For his actions, he received a ribbon.

He came back from the war. He married. He joined a union, bought a house, built a fence. Avoided politics and Asian restaurants. Dreamt he was blind. Dreamt he was a high school virgin with no legs. Chopped wood for the fireplace. Slept naked with his wife. Became a supervisor, buttoned his collar, put a pool in the backyard. He had a son. Had a daughter. Dreamt he was screaming through someone else's mouth. Played billiards twice a week. Dreamt. Never drank in the house. Never raised his voice.

Except once. When his son, James, found several notes addressed to Sacosky the Killer in one of Henry's old yearbooks and said, "Daddy's a killer, daddy's a killer," over and over again until it made his sister cry.

Henry heard this and yelled at James to stop. The boy listened, but he did not know what had upset his father. He knew only that he hated him for yelling. He went outside and threw rocks at a tree.

#

James attended elementary school at the School of the Sacred Heart, a place very similar to the school once attended by little Frank Lombardi, who gave Gene Hacek the need for a glass eye, which James's father knocked out with a fine tackle on the twenty-yard line. James was left-handed, like Frank, but by this time all of the nuns at the School of the Sacred Heart had been replaced by lay teachers who did not see the Devil in left-handedness.

One of his classmates was a girl called Lee Ann Marsh whose straw-colored hair and tall, skinny frame gave her the look of an upturned mop. She walked with her head down and shoulders turned in. James and his friends often threw things at her. He did not give much thought to it. Throwing things at Lee Ann Marsh was merely what one did at the School of the Sacred Heart.

She often cried, but not when pencils or erasers or bits of broken chalk were chucked at her. Her tears came at odd moments—at the start of the perfunctory religion class after recess or when Miss Cunningham asked her to read an exercise from the phonics book. It made James dislike her. He didn't see the use of it, all that crying.

Lee Ann disappeared after she threw Susie Gruebler to the ground by her hair and bloodied her nose with a fist. She wasn't seen again until James's junior year of high school, by which time the diocese had closed the School of the Sacred Heart and razed the building. He and all of Lee Ann's former classmates were now at the public high school. Not much was made of her return. She'd been forgotten and would remain so until she became pregnant by an unknown man. A favorite joke among boys that year was to say to their friends, "Are you and Lee Ann to be married?" or "Was it worth it?" and other such things. Sometimes James told these jokes, other times he was the butt of them. His favorite variation was to say, "Don't ask me to be the godfather" to one of his buddies, because of its subtlety. He was very proud of that joke.

When news reached James a few years later that Lee Ann had been killed in a collision with a tractor trailer on Route 19 he did not know who she was. "You

remember,” Bill Lancaster, who’d seen it in the paper, told him over the phone. “Tall girl, not much to look at, always getting in trouble. Had a kid.”

Though he still did not know who Bill was referring to, James said, “Her, right.”

After they hung up James retrieved his Class of 1988 mug from his cabinet, which had the names of the entire graduating class printed around it in miniscule white letters. He used a magnifying glass to search the names, but could not find any Lee Ann Marsh. He decided that Bill had been mistaken about what he saw in the paper. Whoever the dead woman was, he didn’t have any connection to her.

#

Before she was killed by a speedhead trucker coming onto the interstate by way of an off-ramp, Lee Ann Marsh gave birth to a boy named Sam. He grew up fat and quiet and nearsighted. At school he was called fatty and four-eyes, but this did not bother him because the tags on his clothes did not say “fatty” or “four-eyes,” but “husky,” which brought to mind images of bearded, barrel-chested men in plaid, and this Sam liked very much.

After his mother died Sam was put up for adoption because the man who made him was a drunk and had a taste for hitting Sam’s mother when she was alive. His father’s name was Charles. On Sam’s eighteenth birthday Charles showed up at his house and bloodied the nose of Sam’s adoptive father for threatening to call the police. Then he took Sam with him to a strip club. “What do you think?” he asked Sam.

Sam said that it stunk. And it did. Of smoke and urine.

Charles slipped a folded dollar into a woman’s cleavage. “Met your mother here,” he said and smiled.

Sam broke a highball glass across Charles’s forehead. A wash of blood spilled down his face. Sam cut his own hand on the glass and the blood of each dripped to the floor.

Many years later, Sam was alone and his eyesight was terrible. Each morning before leaving for work he’d lay in bed for an hour hugging his pillow. On one such morning, he left his house and found dew and a strange bug on his car’s windshield. The little creature resembled a praying mantis, only it was white and much smaller. Sam thought of throat-singing monks and green tea and temples perched on jagged fog-cloaked mountainsides. As he left his driveway, he turned on his wipers to clear off the moisture and the bug was pushed to side of the windshield. The creature’s

spindly limbs writhed and its body, torn and mangled, clung to his car. Sam watched the bug and said, No, no, please, no, just fall off, oh God, no, I'm sorry, as he drove, crying.

In this way the life carried on for some time until it ended, screaming.

Eric Cipriani's work has previously appeared in *Fiction Southeast*, *New Southerner*, *The Adroit Journal*, and elsewhere. He holds an MFA from the University of North Carolina-Wilmington and currently lives and works in West Virginia.