

## THE CULT OF WORD FASTING

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*We imposed upon Dave to forego this issue's Kickshaws to run instead this fine short story.*

Reverend Linguistic Bob was the founder and minister of a religious cult that sought enlightenment through a technique called "Word Fasting." He looked like an old-fashioned fire-and-brimstone preacher—tall, slender frame, gaunt face, black hair slicked back—but he was as new-fangled as the twenty-first century. He wore a purple silk robe tattooed with golden thread forming mystical symbols

His followers wore cotton robes of different colors and symbols. Upon entering the cult, each person adopted an Ashram Name, composed of a nickname chosen by the individual followed by the person's first name. The last name was dropped. The purpose of the nickname was to reveal something about the individual. He or she could keep the nickname or change it on the first of each month.

Linguistic Bob began his evangelistic career as Reverend Edible Bob, praising the benefits of the traditional fasting from food, but he realized Food Fasting was too easy. It required sticking to only one simple rule: Don't eat. His twenty-nine followers had given up food three times in the past six months, but they didn't achieve enlightenment as they'd hoped, unless enlightenment meant getting weak, sick, or dizzy.

One spring morning, after everyone had finished eating breakfast, he unveiled his new plan to his followers.

"My dear children," he said, speaking from the wooden podium next to a barrel of grape Kool-Aid by the back wall, "I have received a message from God. To achieve true enlightenment, we must eat food, and we must fast from words. God has bestowed a new name on me, too: Linguistic Bob. Until further notice, you shall address me by that name. Now I shall explain the Word Fast."

Before he could continue, he was besieged with questions.

"Will it make me more anemic, Linguistic Bob?" asked Typhoid Maria, wobbling back and forth.

"And what about me? Will I lose more weight?" asked Anorexic Annie in a shallow voice.

"Will I become more bulimic?" rumbled a big, strong follower known only as Bull.

"Will I get worse headaches?" asked Migraine Sally, rubbing her temples with her fingers.

"Will everything spin around faster?" asked Dizzy Jimmy, tipping to one side.

"Will it ruin our figures?" asked Love Rachel, glancing at her friend Soulful Iris.

As often happened, Linguistic Bob was momentarily distracted by Love Rachel's charm. However, he never let his base feelings lead him astray. He cleared his throat, stretched his arms toward his flock, and said, "Now, now, everyone. None of the physical manifestations of Food Fasting will occur in Word Fasting. And yet Word Fasting will be a much greater challenge than Food Fasting."

"But if we eat, we won't get enlightened, will we?" said Skinny John 3:16.

“Oh, yes, we will. We’ll get enlightened by fasting from words,” said Linguistic Bob. “I’ve designed a seven-step program to make this quest for enlightenment as painless as possible. Each day we will do one step.”

“Do we really have to fast from words?” asked a woman whom Linguistic Bob was on the verge of excommunicating. She was always challenging his authority. He believed she was a non-believer.

“Heretic Harriet,” said Linguistic Bob with a sigh of frustration, “words are false idols. By giving up false idols, we will achieve blessedness, and blessedness is what we’re all about. That’s why our ashram is called God’s First Evangelical Reformed Transcendental Christian Church of St. Euphoria for the Blessed Age of Holy Salvation by Heavenly Enlightenment Through the Miracle of Fasting, isn’t it?”

“I thought fasting meant not eating food,” said Bad Wanda.

“Good point, Bad Wanda! Fasting can mean giving up anything. When you don’t fill up your car, your car is fasting from gas.”

“Can cars go to heaven?” asked Ignore Jane.

“He was just using that as an example, you idiot!” said Irritable Donna.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” she said, “and, by the way, you’re the idiot!”

“Alright now,” said Linguistic Bob, “angels don’t fight, and I believe you’re all angels. Everyone, especially you two, take a deep breath and think, ‘I am an angel.’ There. Feel better now? Good.”

“Excuse me,” Mutant Louie said. “Why do they call it fasting? It’s not fast. When we stop eating food, it’s slow.”

“I know why,” said Useless George, raising his hand. “Because slowing would sound funny.”

“Very good, Useless George. Now, my flock, please hold any more questions till later. First, I’ll explain Word Fasting.”

Linguistic Bob whirled around and went to the blackboard. He reached into the pocket of his purple robe and pulled out a stick of purple chalk. For him, purple was the color of holiness. He began writing the seven steps on the blackboard. As he wrote, he read each step aloud.

#### SEVEN-STEP PROGRAM FOR WORD FASTING

1. Stop reading books, magazines, newspapers, and other printed matter.
2. Stop watching or listening to television, radios, computers, and CDs.
3. Stop receiving mail and answering the telephone.
4. Stop buying food in containers that have words on them.
5. Stop speaking in words.
6. Stop thinking in words.
7. Start thinking in pictures.

On the next four days, everyone was busy making sure that the objects specified by the first four steps were removed from the ashram.

1. They threw out all their books, periodicals, etc., and cancelled their subscriptions to *Cults Illustrated*, *Holy People Magazine*, *Enlightenment Today*, and *Godsweek*.
2. They donated televisions, radios, and other electronic media to the homeless who were always asking for spare change outside the ashram.
3. They cancelled their mail and phone services.
4. They stocked up on food and put it in unmarked bags.

On the evening of the fourth day, satisfied with their progress, Linguistic Bob stepped up to the podium and addressed his followers: “We have achieved much, but our road to success, like the road to hell, is paved with good intentions. Now we must engage in the real struggle.”

“What do you mean, Linguistic Bob? Do we give up food again?” asked Anorexic Annie.

“No, my child, we eat food, but we give up words,” he replied. “In the first four steps of Word Fasting, we removed the words outside our consciousness. In the last three steps, we will remove the words inside our consciousness.”

“It’s like a striptease, huh?” Temptress Chloe said.

“In a sense, it *is* similar to removing one’s clothes.”

“Or like a car without gas,” Ignore Jane said.

“Yes, it can be like anything you imagine it to be.”

“Can it be like an airplane without gas?” Useless George asked.

“Yes, anything.”

“Can it be like having marathon sex,” asked Gigolo Joe, “so that when you’ve reached the fourth day you don’t remember your name or the names of those five women you’ve spent the past few days and nights with and then one of them takes out a vibrator with a French tickler on the end and asks you if she can open her mouth and—”

“GIGOLO JOE! You’ve found the one thing the Word Fast probably can’t be like. Don’t forget: We gave up sins of the flesh as part of our overall plan for becoming enlightened.”

“But Temptress Chloe said it was like a striptease, and you agreed.”

“That’s a borderline case. But we’re getting off-track. Let’s talk about the last three steps.”

“Excuse me! Could those of us who are interested in hearing the details of Gigolo Joe’s comparison meet with him later?” asked Temptress Chloe. “Anyone else interested? Raise your hand.”

Twenty hands shot up, but Linguistic Bob motioned for them to put their hands down. He was angry at Temptress Chloe for interrupting him in order to gather people together to talk about the sex marathon. He gave an impromptu sermon, beginning in a loud, righteous voice.

“My angelic followers, how can you be tempted by lust after all we’ve talked about? Don’t you wish to be enlightened? Do you really want to know more of the details of Gigolo Joe’s sexual adventures? Does he really want to tell more? Gigolo Joe, bless his soul, is a recovering sex-a-holic. Religion is his saving grace. He can’t help being a victim of his own past, but I urge all of you—especially you, Temptress Chloe—

not to push him back to those sin-filled days when all he could think about was the devil's tool. I think we know enough of the details of his marathon, but if you want to know more, the answer isn't in this ashram. It's three or four blocks away in the red light district. Go there, if you dare! If you wish to be red-lightened instead of en-lightened, if you wish to pursue the seamy side of sin, if you wish for your souls to roast in the fiery tortures of damnation for a thousand times a thousand eternities, if all twenty of you, or even just one of you, wish to leave this ashram, I will walk over and open the door for you. I will shake your hand and wish you best of luck. I will regret having to do so, and I hope none of you makes that choice, but I can't stop you. God has given you a free will. He doesn't charge you for it. If He did, you couldn't afford it. He only asks that you use it wisely, and that means you must obey all his commandments. And one of them is, "Thou shalt not have sexual marathons!"

Linguistic Bob stepped out from behind his podium, dramatically walked over to the door, his robe snapping with each footstep, and opened it.

"What a lovely day outside!" he said, gesturing with his arm. "You are free to go out and enjoy it and talk about vibrators and French ticklers, whatever they are, but if you do, you will not be free to come back in. You'll will not be one of us anymore. You will not join us in attaining enlightenment ever, ever again. That is all I have to say. The decision is not mine. It is not God's. It is not your neighbor's. No, it is yours! And yours! And yours!"

His impromptu sermons always shocked his followers into grasping the real dangers of sin. He knew how to wake them, to shake them, and if necessary to break them into a million sinful pieces and rebuild them into a sanctified whole. No follower made the slightest motion toward the door. Instead, everyone applauded him for his incandescent speech. Amidst the applause, he closed the door and returned to the podium.

"Okay, back to the Word Fast," he said. I trust there will be no more interruptions, my children. Any questions about the fast?"

"What's the most difficult step?" Bull asked. He regretted that he had to throw out his copy of the Cults Illustrated Swimsuit Issue.

"Good question, Bull! Each—"

Typhoid Maria fainted and crashed to the floor.

"Excuse me, Bull. Someone over there, please revive Typhoid Maria and give her some food."

Skinny John 3:16 helped Typhoid Maria regain consciousness and stumble to her bed. Busty Betty went to the kitchen and made a ham sandwich with lots of lettuce and mayonnaise for her.

"I'm having a scary vision for dinner!" said Typhoid Maria when the ham sandwich arrived. "Aggh!" She tossed it on the floor. Busty Betty scooped up the pieces, reassembled the sandwich, and ate it.

Anorexic Annie shakily staggered toward the podium with her arms raised toward Linguistic Bob. "I can walk! I can walk!" she exclaimed. "This proves that God loves me."

"Yes, Anorexic Annie, you are surely a chosen one! Now sit down on a chair before you collapse."

She staggered over to Typhoid Maria's bed and plopped down in the chair next to it. "I can walk," she whispered to her friend. "You try it."

"Me? Right now?"

"Yes, it's like riding a bicycle."

Struggling, Typhoid Maria sat up, put her legs over the side of the bed, and stood on her own two feet for about three seconds. Then she toppled sideways and landed on Anorexic Annie. "Ham sandwich pushed me over!"

Skinny John 3:16 helped Typhoid Maria back to bed for the second time. Busty Betty guided Anorexic Annie to her own bed.

Linguistic Bob continued: "I am very impressed with everyone's devotion to Food Fasting. Unfortunately, it seems to have affected some people's bodies and minds much more than their souls. With Word Fasting, we won't have to worry about weakness of the flesh. The last three steps are—"

"Difficult," muttered Bull. "Which one is the most difficult, Linguistic Bob?"

"Each step is the most difficult until we have conquered it, my son."

"Gotcha," said Bull, giving the thumbs up. "When do we start?"

"Tomorrow we will attempt the fifth step: *Stop speaking in words*. Instead, we will use noises, hand signals, pictures—anything but words. Tomorrow will be forever known as Wordless Wednesday. It will be a landmark in the evolution of human consciousness tempered with the holy mysticism of God. At the stroke of midnight, our silence begins. But now it's time for dinner. Laughing Zoe and Wheezing Stephen have cooked a delicious beef stew. My advice is to eat."

They lined up and filled their plates with stew. Anorexic Annie and Typhoid Maria stayed in bed and slept. In the dining room, Linguistic Bob said grace: "Let the Good Lord bless this beef stew and bring those who are unhealthy back to health, and let Him help us succeed in the Word Fast. Amen."

"How do you like our stew?" Laughing Zoe asked the people at her table.

"It's so delicious I can hardly eat it," Sarcastic Cheryl said.

"Don't make fun of their blessed cooking," Sorry Dexter said. "They did it for you and the Lord."

"Can I sit at your table?" Unwanted Lucinda asked.

"No," Sarcastic Cheryl said. "There are only three empty seats."

"I understand," she said meekly. She went to another table and stood next to it for awhile until Lost Melvin invited her to sit down between him and Guilty Tim.

"What's wrong, Lost Melvin?" Unwanted Lucinda asked. "You look happy today."

"Oh, I don't mean to. I hope it doesn't make you feel bad. Does it?"

"A little."

Guilty Tim said, "I think the Word Fast is going to make us all feel happy. Imagine. We won't have to use words."

On hearing that, Lost Melvin frowned. On seeing him frown, Unwanted Lucinda stopped frowning. Guilty Tim blamed himself for causing their mood shifts.

Love Rachel, Soulful Iris, Busty Betty, Tempress Chloe, and Bad Wanda were sitting at Linguistic Bob's table. They complimented him on the Word Fast. He enjoyed their friendly conversations. At times, he wondered if they were flirting with him, but he

brushed that thought out of his mind. He knew that their thoughts, like his, were occupied with enlightenment.

As bedtime approached, his followers went into the men's or women's communal bathrooms and changed from their robes to their nightclothes. A half hour later, they were all in their beds along three walls of the meeting room. Linguistic Bob stood behind the podium at the middle of the fourth wall. He raised his arms and led them in the nightly Ashram Prayer for the last time until the Word Fast ended.

When the alarm clock went off at midnight, it signaled the beginning of Wordless Wednesday. A silent peace reigned supreme, a heavenly peace that settled on the group consciousness. Linguistic Bob flicked off the light and retired to his private bedroom. His disciples closed their eyes in wordless silence and drifted toward angelic sleep. Peace reigned supreme—until Typhoid Maria started having a nightmare about turning into a ham sandwich. Then her screaming reigned supreme.

“Agggghh! Ham sandwich arms! Ham sandwich legs. Agghh! I am Ham Sandwich Maria. Haaaaaaaam sandwich heart! Ham saaaaaandwich mouth! Ham sandwiiiiiiiiich fingers! Agggghhhhh! Save my ham sandwich sooooooul!”

Skinny John 3:16 flicked on the overhead light. Dizzy Jimmy jumped out of bed, but everything started spinning around, so he jumped back in. Useless George didn't think he could help, and Bad Wanda didn't want to. So Migraine Sally got up, grabbed her small hand mirror, and rushed over to save the night.

“Hey, Typhoid Maria! Wake up! You're not a ham sandwich. Please stop screaming. You're giving me a splitting headache,” she said, holding her mirror before the other woman's face.

“That's me in there!” Typhoid Maria shrieked. “Then where am I?”

“Here in bed,” said Migraine Sally.

“Oh.” Satisfied with that answer, she fell asleep again. Her nightmare was over. Migraine Sally returned to her own bed. Peace finally reigned supreme, and cherubic snores filled the ashram.

When the alarm clock went off at dawn, everyone woke in silence, but soon a few people started talking out of habit. Linguistic Bob came out of his bedroom and took his post at the podium. He clapped his hands to get everyone's attention, and then he held his finger to his lips to remind everyone not to talk.

The day went well. A few more words were spoken by accident, but not many. Migraine Sally told him through gestures, noises, and schematic drawings about Typhoid Maria's nightmare of the previous night.

His followers seemed stronger in their will to fast from words. They were eating better, too. For the first time in awhile, Typhoid Maria and Anorexic Annie were very hungry: Each ate a large bowl of baked beans.

Late that night, Linguistic Bob stood behind the podium and used hand gestures to remind them that Step 6 would go into effect at midnight. He pointed to his mouth and moved it up and down as if talking. Then he pointed to his forehead and shook his head no. That meant *Stop thinking in words*.

When midnight arrived, his followers were lying in bed trying not to think a single word. Linguistic Bob flicked off the light and sat on the Kool-Aid barrel behind the podium to watch for any problems. He was just as tired as everyone else on the Word Fast. He tried to stay awake, but before too long he nodded off.

A little after 2:00 AM, Typhoid Maria was feeling the effects of the baked beans she and Anorexic Annie had eaten earlier. In the middle of a snore, she farted loudly! The nocturnal explosion woke Linguistic Bob and some of his followers. Mutant Louie Irritable Donna, and Unwanted Lucinda chuckled. Gigolo Joe, Whining Ruth, Ignore Jane, and Lost Melvin smirked. Bad Wanda, Agnostic Kevin, and Temptress Chloe tittered. Religious Roy gave a big, resounding guffaw. Laughing Zoe slept through everything. Linguistic Bob flicked on the light and sternly shook his head “no” to remind them of their fast.

Unfortunately, Typhoid Maria cut another huge fart, which was followed by Anorexic Annie cutting an even huger one. Both were still sound asleep, but Laughing Zoe woke up laughing. This time even Linguistic Bob laughed. He decided that laughter was exempt from the Word Fast and that the sounds coming from the two sleeping women certainly didn’t constitute verbal communication. He retired to his bedroom. All was going pretty well.

Next morning, he and his followers sat down together for breakfast. Many of them were still weak from the long Food Fast they’d recently endured. He hoped their strength would return after a few more meals.

They needed exercise, too, so after breakfast he motioned for them to follow him on a walk down the street. Typhoid Maria and Anorexic Annie had to be helped by the two healthiest women, Love Rachel and Soulful Iris. He was curious to see how his devotees would handle being out among non-fasting non-believers.

They’d barely walked a block when he realized that their trip led them right back down the primrose path of verbosity. STOP. NO CROSSING. NEW AGE TOFU DELI. LAZER TAG. STARBUCK’S COFFEE. Signs in windows, T-shirts with messages, cars with vanity plates. Linguistic Bob motioned for his followers to turn around and go back. He needed time to figure out a solution to this proliferation of words, but he had to do his thinking with a complete absence of words.

Back at the ashram, he organized his followers into a wordless prayer group. Their prayers consisted of grunts, shouts, moans, hums, laughs, and cries, punctuated by an occasional toot from Typhoid Maria and Anorexic Annie. The rest of the day went fairly well.

A few minutes before midnight, he gestured that they were about to embark on the seventh and final step in his program: *Start thinking in pictures*. He hoped that visual thinking would make it easier to avoid the temptation to think in words.

The clock struck twelve. His followers did their best to think visually instead of verbally, but no one knew whether the others were doing it, too. There seemed to be no way to share that information. Some of them turned to Linguistic Bob for help. He held the solution in his hands—a set of photos of the ashram’s last camping trip.

He rapped his knuckles on the podium to get everyone's attention. Making loud, random noises, he fanned the photos out like playing cards and tapped them on top of his head to indicate he was thinking not in words but in pictures.

Bull got the message first. He came up to the podium, grabbed the photos from Linguistic Bob, tapped them on his head, and yelled his own random noises. Heretic Harriet did the same, then Trembling Ned, Sarcastic Cheryl, Love Rachel, Mutant Louie, and so on. Even Typhoid Maria and Anorexic Annie joined in. All of them were yelling together. Everyone was speaking in tongues while thinking in pictures. It was exhausting. They returned to their beds and fell asleep quickly, but their sleep was filled with strange dreams.

Soon after sunrise, Linguistic Bob got up before everyone else. He put on his robe and left his bedroom. Walking around the ashram, surveying his sleeping followers, he was pleased that the Word Fast was succeeding. He thought to himself, "They are truly enlightened." Then he thought, "What am I doing? I'm thinking in words. I must stop it."

He tried to think visually. He heard noises behind him, and he turned around. He saw Love Rachel and Soulful Iris tossing and turning in their beds. He noticed how beautiful the two women were. He saw Love Rachel and Soulful Iris sound asleep wearing skimpy nighties. He noticed how sexy the two women were. He especially noticed Love Rachel lying on her side. The top of her nighty had come unbuttoned, and it was wide open.

He noticed her heavenly black hair forming a holy veil around her sacred head, her graceful hands folded in supplication near her angelic face, her beatific breasts like two halos gently moving with her inspirational breathing, her blessed waist leading to the enlightenment of her saintly hips, and her divine legs pressed together as if they were praying for a miracle. And he noticed his heart beating faster and faster.

He started to picture himself having a ménage a trois with Love Rachel and Soulful Iris, but that would be a sin! He quickly turned away in shame, only to see Bad Wanda, Temptress Chloe, and Busty Betty in their beds. They were wearing negligee that they'd bought from Victoria's Secret. He started to picture himself having a ménage a quatre with them, but that would be a bigger sin! He turned around and saw the safe where his followers' money was stored. He pictured himself skipping out with the money and spending it on drinking, gambling, and whoring, but those things would surely be sins! He'd never had thoughts like these before.

"O, God, am I the biggest sinner of all?" he wondered, covering his eyes with his hands. "Wait... thinking in words again... must stop..."

The alarm clock went off. All of his followers awoke. They looked around. They were bewildered. In their dreams, they'd seen themselves lusting after each other in bizarre ways that terrified them, and they continued visualizing those images even after waking. Each was tasting his or her own forbidden fruit. Fortunately, no one could taste anyone else's forbidden fruit.

Skinny John 3:16 visualized having a mud-wrestling match with Whining Ruth that ended in a love-wrestling match.

Soulful Iris visualized being a dominatrix in black leather whipping Sorry Dexter and Wheezing Stephen at the same time.

Migraine Sally visualized tying up Guilty Tim and using an ancient acupuncture sex technique to drive him wild.

Dizzy Jimmy visualized watching three Bad Wandas fighting over who would be first to hop in a waterbed with him.

Useless George visualized sitting naked at one end of a couch with Unwanted Lucinda sitting clothed at the other end.

Anorexic Annie visualized spanking Laughing Zoe and ordering her to do the same to Irritable Donna.

Religious Roy visualized handcuffing Heretic Harriet to her bed, ripping her clothes off, and arousing her with religious tracts.

Typhoid Maria visualized making mad love to Mutant Louie on a bed of ham sandwiches.

Bull visualized forming a daisy chain of all the women in the ashram and having sex in a different Kama Sutra position with each one.

Trembling Ned visualized being a hermaphrodite engaged in a passionate orgy with himself.

And so it went with all twenty-nine followers. Many were weeping at what they were visualizing. Some buried their heads in their pillows trying to hide their guilt. Others gazed blankly at the floor. Soon, through their group consciousness, they realized the entire ashram was having nightmare visions. They looked to Linguistic Bob for guidance, but he was standing silently in the center of the room, mortified at his own loss of innocence. His hands were covering his face. His followers visualized him as responsible because he made them think in images instead of words.

Slowly, they climbed out of their beds. Growling like animals, they started creeping toward him. He peeked out from behind his fingers and discovered he was in grave danger. They had a group visualization of attacking him like a pack of starved wolves, tearing him apart with their teeth, and devouring him, for he had lead them into their own personal Babylons. They stalked closer, closer, forming an angry circle around him. They gnashed their teeth and clawed the air.

He tried to picture how he could communicate with them visually, but nothing came to mind. The Word Fast had turned ugly. As a last resort, he forced himself to think in words again. The shift from visual to verbal felt strange yet exhilarating.

“My beloved followers, awaken to the word of God!” he beseeched them. “You have achieved enlightenment in less than a week. God has shown you the importance of words.”

Words! His followers stopped in their tracks. The spoken words entered the caverns of their ears, beat on their eardrums, and sailed up their ear canals all the way to their brains. Their confused thoughts surrounded the prodigal words, hugged them, and welcomed them back home.

“You have seen your lusts, your desires, your sinfulest dreams. You didn’t use words to think about those unspeakable temptations. You thought with pictures, and what you saw was more primitive than words could describe. You were tempted!” he

shouted dramatically. He was more charismatic than ever. Each gesture was a masterpiece of preacherly art. Each turn of phrase made his followers' hearts leap heavenward. His performance was impeccable.

Anorexic Annie screamed, "Tell it like it is!"

"Why were you tempted, dear children of God? You were tempted because you are sinners. Yes, you are sinners, one and all. But did you sin? No, you persevered with sacred strength, and your souls overcame those temptations. You seized the four-edged sword of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude to fight against eternal damnation. No, you didn't sin at all! You were thinking about sinning, and you were shocked! By God, you were shocked at your sinful vision."

His followers were enraptured by his impromptu sermon. They knelt down on the floor and listened in awe.

"You were like the farmer who walked through his pasture to find a lost cow, but when he found it, it turned on him because it was a bull! A raging bull. And it gored the farmer's heart, and that poor farmer died—but he went to heaven! Your vision was like that cow. When you looked too closely at it, you discovered it was a bull, and you were afraid, you were confused, you were bewildered. It gored your souls, but you faced that raging vision bravely. Your souls survived, because God wanted you to see your evil in order to know your goodness."

Skinny John 3:16 yelled, "Mine eyes have seen the glory! Yes!"

"O, my children, you have brightened the eyes of all the angels in heaven above. O, my friends, you have blinded the eyes of all the devils in hell below. You are rewarded with enlightenment. The Lord wants you to speak in words again, speak passionately of truth now and forevermore. Your Word Fast is over, but your Sin Fast must continue. God has blessed you with first-hand knowledge of the fallen state of humanity."

To everyone's astonishment, Typhoid Maria shrieked, "Give us this day our daily bread!"

"You are Eve! So are you, and you, and you! You are Adam! You, too! And you, and you! You have tasted the forbidden fruit, but you chose to spit it out! You are saved! You are reborn! You are holy people now! You are cured from your physical and your spiritual ills! You are healthy! You are strong! Let us all raise our eyes to heaven and pray in one magnificent human voice to the Holy of Holies, for He loves us, and He blesses us with divine wisdom. Let us pray the Ashram Prayer. Lift up your voices with me! Together in a single voice we will send our prayer to God on high! COME, LET US PRAY!"

He knelt down with them, and they all folded their hands and looked heavenward. They prayed the Ashram Prayer as loudly as they could in a voice that was more sincere and pure than any of their individual voices ever were. They felt strong and healthy again. As their words ascended to heaven, they miraculously recovered from the ill-effects of their recent Food Fast. They prayed in perfect unison.

When the prayer ended, Migraine Sally shouted out, "Praise the Lord! My headache is gone!" Typhoid Maria shouted out, "I'm cured! It's a miracle!" Bull shouted out, "Linguistic Bob is a holy guy!" Dizzy Jimmy shouted out, "Everything's

stopped spinning!” Love Rachel shouted out, “I love Linguistic Bob!” Everyone began to chant “Linguistic Bob! Linguistic Bob! Linguistic Bob!”

Linguistic Bob held up his arms for his followers to quiet down. “Thank you, everyone. Will you all please get dressed? We will have breakfast in the kitchen.”

Typhoid Maria and Soulful Iris cooked eggs and bacon. Dizzy Jimmy served it. All the followers ate heartily. Linguistic Bob thought how angelic they looked in their robes now that they’d completed the Word Fast. They spent the rest of the morning cleaning up the entire ashram.

In the afternoon, Linguistic Bob said that he had a major announcement to make. His followers knelt down in the middle of the meeting room waiting for his message. He stepped in front of the podium, unbuttoned his robe, and let it drop to the floor. He’d always worn his robe in the presence of his believers. They weren’t prepared for this revelation. They were stunned at what they saw. Some of them gasped in shock. Some covered their eyes. Some turned away. But no one fainted.

“Oh, my God!” said Soulful Iris, breaking the silence. “Linguistic Bob is wearing a dark olive-drab business suit!”

“And a white shirt!” Anorexic Annie said.

“And a black tie!” Love Rachel said. “He looks so handsome!”

“What happened to Linguistic Bob?” asked Dizzy Jimmy.

“It’s another miracle!” Typhoid Maria replied. “That suit just appeared under his robe so that, when he took the robe off, he wouldn’t be naked!”

“Is he really Linguistic Bob?” asked Skinny John 3:16.

“He’s a fake!” Heretic Harriet said.

Smiling, he replied in a calming tone, “My beautiful, beloved followers, look at me. I am dressed in normal clothes. I am a common person, like each of you. Together we successfully completed the Word Fast. We are truly enlightened, and our ashram is no longer necessary. It served us well, but all good things must come to an end. Now we must go and blaze new evangelical paths in the material world until we meet again in the spiritual world. May all of you find your own followers and start your own ashrams and save the souls of others. Together we have achieved the same level of holiness. We are equal, we are one. Go forth and spread the good news about Word Fasting.”

“What about your purple robe?” asked Bull, pointing to it on the floor.

“You may have it, my disciple. Wear it for as long as you serve the Lord.”

Bull pulled off his green robe, revealing his red smiley-face boxer shorts, and carefully put on the sacred purple robe. He felt its power. “Okay, everyone,” he said. “You heard the man. We’re closing up this ashram. Get your street clothes on. Pack your possessions. Don’t forget your robes. Let’s get a move on it!”

Linguistic Bob opened the safe, deducted the money needed to pay the bills, and returned the rest to his followers. As they left the ashram, they were teary-eyed. The men shook hands with their ex-leader, and the women kissed him on the cheek. When they were all gone, Linguistic Bob, with bittersweet tears in his eyes, flicked off the overhead light.

“Hi, Linguistic Bob,” said a voice in the darkness. He flicked the light back on. Love Rachel was sitting on her bed. She was wearing a purple teddy. Her pink robe was lying on the floor. He wasn’t prepared for this revelation.

“Oh, Love Rachel,” he said, blinking, “uh, I thought you left with the others.”

“No, I didn’t leave with them. And I didn’t join them when they made a circle like a pack of wolves around you, either.”

“Thank you for telling me. You are truly enlightened.”

“No, I am a sinner, Linguistic Bob. I’m visualizing—“

“My dear angel, you didn’t sin. You achieved enlightenment through the Word Fast just like the others did. You conquered sin.”

“No, sin conquered me,” she said with a sigh. “I’m visualizing something sinful, but I’m not sorry for it. I have this... this desire commit a terrible sin. Please sit down next to me, Linguistic Bob, and pray with me.”

“Certainly,” he said in a slightly nervous tone. The way she was dressed tempted his desire, but he was determined to follow the path of righteousness. He joined her on the bed and took her hands in his. “Love Rachel, just repeat these words after me: O, dear God, forgive—”

“Can I lead the prayer?” she asked in a soft voice.

“Yes, if that will help,” he said.

“O, dear God, forgive me for my sin,” she began.

“*O, dear God, forgive her for her sin,*” he said.

“I am only human, and I have human desires.”

“*She is only human, and she has human desires.*”

“I want to make love to someone close to me.”

“*She wants to make love to someone close to her.*”

“Because I have fallen in love with him.”

“*Because she has fallen in love with him.*”

“And I will kiss him now.”

“*And she will kiss him—now?*”

“For his name is Linguistic Bob.” She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him passionately for a longer time than he’d imagined possible. When the kiss ended, they were lying next to each other in her bed. He looked into her eyes, and he knew that he loved her. He realized he’d fallen in love with her months ago, soon after she joined the cult, but he assumed his love was unholy lust. She’d loved him for a long time, too, but she assumed unholy lust was one of love’s benefits.

They sinned all night in many ways, for they were truly in love, and they sinned all day in many more ways, for it would’ve been a sin not to sin.