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### And Now This

Tizi says I have plumber's butt. We're in the kitchen. She's applying a lotion that's supposed to help with my lower back pain. I'm a drug man, myself. Every six hours I've been hitting the Ibuprofen and extra-strength Tylenol. "Better living through chemicals," my dentist friend Dennis says. Better living through stretching, my MD friend Rob says. Rob gets what I have, taut hip flexors. I've seen him walk kind of crooked and bent over. Rounds at the hospital, he said, could be murder. All that standing around. He stretches. In a pinch, he'll take the drugs.

Better living through yoga, Tizi says. I tell her I'll get to yoga next week, or the week or the month after that. Right now, hunched over a countertop, my shirt pulled up, I'm in pain.

Someone gave her this lotion a while back. It's called Ted's Pain Cream. It's been sitting in a bathroom cabinet next to assorted unguents and elixirs she collects and forgets. She remembered this one and is rubbing it on my lower back.

"Can you feel the heat?" she says.

"No."

"You should feel the heat pretty soon."

"I like the smell," I say. "This stuff is just going to wash off in the shower."

"We'll put more on."

"Your mom and dad rubbed stuff on," I say, "when they had back pain. Remember? Aspercreme? Ben Gay? I don't recall my father using lotions."

She shudders. "I hated the smell of that stuff."

"Do you think it's cultural? Italians and lotions?"

"Lean forward."

I do as I'm told. "Cornhuskers was a thing when I was a kid," I say. "Guys at school used Cornhuskers. Doug Haynes, for example. There were TV commercials. 'For workers' hands.'"

She says she needs to go to Jo-Ann Fabrics today.

"As if those guys needed hand lotion. Did you ever hear of cornhuskers?"

"Who's Doug Haynes?"

“How would you say cornhusker in Italian?”

She squeezes out a little more Ted, tells me to hold still. A little lower, I say, more to the right. My pants, my shorts, are riding low.

“You’ve got plumber’s butt,” she says.

“You looking?”

“Well, yeah.”

Oh, baby.

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A few days later, we go. Once or twice a year I follow her into Jo-Ann Fabrics, thinking, “This is a test.” I stand and wait while she hunts for holiday and quotidian baubles. I take in the fabric and craft supplies on thousands of square feet of floorspace, breathe in the craft store fragrance, one part candle, two parts dust. Look, over there: six-, twelve-, and eighteen-inch grapevine wreaths, on sale. Just what we needed. And Diamond Embroidery Facet Art Kits. And We R Memory Keepers Foil Quill All-in-one Kits, and hildi and jo Glass Beads, and 3 mm parachute cords. (Parachute cords??) A Valentine’s Day Ceramic Heart Shaped Cocotte Dish with Lid (red), on sale.

Gazillions of do-dads, dazsits, and thing-a-ma-jigs.

Most of the stuff she buys here she gives away—to our grandkids, to our friends’ kids and their grandkids. Some she keeps, for when the kids come to our house. And for herself. We have a few dedicated shelves at home.

Today, as usual, I lose track of her for a while. I hang out in tassels, then migrate to fasteners. Jo-Ann radio is playing Michael Jackson on the sound system. I ask a clerk walking by if every Jo-Ann store in the country is listening to Michael Jackson right now.

“Don’t you like it?” she asks.

When I tell her that I do, that I like it a lot, she smiles and says it’s their all-pop format, from Taylor Swift to Michael Jackson. And yes, as far as she knows, every store.

After a twenty minute-or-so wait, I head for checkout, replaying the recurring conversation Tizi and I usually have about Jo-Ann’s. “Why not go by yourself?” “I might need your opinion.” “The waiting kills me.” “Plus we’re together.” “The smell of the place kills me even worse.” “It’s

not like I ask that much.” “The smell—Do you think there’s an aerosol spray they spray, Jo-Ann in a can?”

Ten more minutes, an eternity, she finds me. “Hey, where were you?”

“Feathers,” I say.

She holds up a small plastic chicken. “You push on its head,” she says, “it clucks and drops a jellybean in a basket. Won’t the kids love this?”

“Easter chicken,” I say. “Were they out of bunnies?”

“Hen,” she says. “It’s not about Easter. It’s just a fun thing. I’m going to buy two of them.”

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Next day we’re clearing the table after lunch when we have a surprise visit from a friend who recently lost her husband. We were neighbors for thirty years. Then they moved half an hour away, to live in a smaller house, to be closer to her family. She was in the area, she was driving by the old house, she said, and thought she’d stop in.

“Did you eat?” we say.

“Yes,” she says. Then: “Well, no, not really.”

“Come in and eat,” we say.

“That’s okay. I’ll just stay a few minutes.”

“Come.”

She sits at the kitchen table. We talk. It’s been six months since. For a long time Jed, her husband, had been facing an onslaught of challenges—a lifetime of restless-leg-related sleep deprivation, bouts of daytime narcolepsy, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, periods of confusion and absence that seemed to suggest the onset of dementia. And bad back. Things were going okay in the new house, really okay. Then early one morning she got up and he wasn’t in the house. The back door was open. She found him face down out in front of the house, on the neighbor’s lawn.

We take out some cheese. She says yes to a glass of white wine. We dip bread in hummus and baba ganoush. We talk about kids. Both their boys married with two kids, living in California. One of ours out there too, no kids; one of ours nearby, with the two kids. We talk books, TV shows, movies, Covid. Her old mother just turned 100. How about that.

When she sees me walking crooked, a little bent over, I tell her about my back pain, show her some of my therapeutic stretches, careful to keep my plumber's butt covered.

We're finishing the wine when we turn to the subject of grief, how she's doing. She says she's making progress. It's better. Until suddenly it's not.

"A dear friend recently told me he had a dream about Jed," she says. "He said he dreamed that Jed was in purgatory. He said he was praying for Jed." She looks down into her wine glass, shakes her head. "I burst into tears," she says. "I couldn't help myself."

Damn that purgatory, I think, searching for something helpful to say. Growing up Methodist, I never quite got a handle on it.

Tizi says, "Well you need to read your Augustin."

"What?" the friend says.

What? I think. Oh, Tizi, she has tricks up her sleeve. She has Ted's Pain Cream and plastic wind-up chickens (hens) that lay jellybean eggs. And she has her Augustin and a ready store of knowledge.

She says, "Sure, St. Augustin. Before he became a saint he was a big-time sinner, you know. He invented purgatory because he couldn't imagine going to heaven without first, you know, paying for his sins just a little." I notice "invented." Meaning, I guess, that it's nonsense, purgatory, and Jed would have been on the express route to paradise.

"That's very helpful," the friend says. Meaning, I guess, she's going to go home and read up on her Augustin. Or not. Where would you begin?

A few minutes later, at the front door, we hug and stand. She's going to be okay. She assures us. Yes, we'll get together. Text, phone, visit.

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For a long time, for most of my life, in fact, the only St. Augustin I knew about was the one that ended in e, with the accent on the first syllable, the one in Florida. There were no saints in the Methodist church I grew up in, no purgatory. It wasn't part of the Method. I recall my father making snarky remarks once about the Catholic dead, about having to pray them out of purgatory. I asked him one day, What's a saint? He thought for a long moment, then said his mother was a saint. It was a terrible answer, but I was nine. It put the matter to rest.

In Sunday school, sitting on metal folding chairs in the church basement, we were taught Jesus was a friend, don't drink alcohol, and when times get tough, read the 23rd Psalm. I can still smell the musty odor of old hymnals, dead air, retired dust. Upstairs was the sanctuary; somewhere above that, way up in the sky, was heaven. More than anything, I just wanted to go outside and ride my bike.

Now, frankly, I don't like thinking about afterlife. The idea does not appeal to me in the least, even the good place. Suppose you weren't condemned to rolling in a lake of fire forever. Suppose you made it out not alive, dead but saved. What on earth would you do for all of eternity? Would it be like sitting in church? Would you be able to take a nap? Could you be alone if you needed to take a break from rejoicing? Could you go read a book, watch a little tv? Could you go skiing? And if so, would Jesus have to come along? Would He be a fun guy?

Because He would be everywhere, all the time. I can imagine a situation where you would have your own personal Jesus. Is that really such a crazy idea? And in the middle of an endless afternoon, a conversation like this:

Jesus: "Where do you think you're going?"

Me: "A couple runs down the ski hill might be nice."

Jesus: "How about taking a Friend? Heaven is other people, you know."

Me: "I thought about that."

Jesus: "I know you like Utah."

Me: "Full sun, 38 degrees, no wind?"

Jesus: "I think that can be arranged."

Me: "You the Man."

That would be a heaven I could live with, for a while. But forever freaks me out.

Later that night we're lying in bed. Tizi is reading a book called *Disobbidisco* (I disobey), about Gabriele D'Annunzio, the decadent Italian poet, seducer, and preacher of war. I'm reading Lawrence Sanders's *The Devil Knows You're Dead*. My hip flexors are pulling. I'm waiting for the Ted's to heat up.

"So," I say, "today, that business about purgatory."

"Why even bring it up?"

She knows I'm agnostic on the subject of purgatory and a lot of church teaching. I think she is too. One time we were lying in bed holding each other, and she said, "This is all there is." I

said yes. I didn't press her, but I'm pretty sure she meant the big this. This life, right here. But she grew up in a culture of ritual and mystery that still strikes a deep emotional chord. If I pick at it, it hurts her. She gives me my space; I give her hers. If we talk about it, the moment has to be right.

I tell her I'm sorry I brought it up.

"Not you. Him. That guy who said he was praying for Jed."

"Maybe the friend was just trying to help. You know, purgatory and the progress of the soul? Taking comfort where he could get it."

"It was thoughtless. Selfish."

She turns back to D'Annunzio.

I wait a second, then ask: "If you can't be sure someone's in purgatory, how do you know when they're out of it?"

She turns a page in her book.

I say, "When would you stop praying?"

"I don't know."

"A year? Two years?"

"Stop it now."

Okay, I think. Not tonight.

Then she says, "You never stop."

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I can't help myself. Sometime after this I go looking for Augustin, wondering, really wondering, What did he say about purgatory? And finding this, from *The City of God*:

*Of those who suffer temporary punishments after death, all are not doomed to those everlasting pains which are to follow that judgment.*

Well that's good. And there's this torturous passage, from *The Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Love*:

*It is a matter that may be inquired into, and either ascertained or left doubtful, whether some believers shall pass through a kind of purgatorial fire, and in proportion as they have loved with more or less devotion the goods that perish, be less or more quickly delivered from it.*

I see my mistake. Purgatorial fire. Jesus, fire. As a Methodist brought up in a small town, I'd always pictured purgatory as, like, a waiting room, an antechamber, like a giant Jo-Ann Fabrics minus the all-pop format, where, surrounded by goods that perish, you stand and wait, your hip flexors killing you. The voice of God or St. Peter or someone says: *We'll be with you in a little while. Now you just stand here and think about what you've done.* For a good chunk of eternity, you just think about it.

And then what? Whatever happens next, it's forever.