

Lighter Side

Square stone tiles the color of white ash formed a rectangular grid on the second floor balcony of the food court at the Vibrant Valley mall. Half of the tables had been collected and moved into storage for the winter, while the remaining twenty formed a dotted right triangle over the other half of the balcony, leaving a triangle of empty space outside the doors. A dark-haired girl stood smoking in the corner opposite the staggered line of tables.

The soles of her shoes had started peeling away from the webbed fabric on the toes. She'd only bought them two months ago, paid eighty dollars for them. Her feet looked small inside the large square, almost like two hooves. "They call me Goatgirl," she whispered, letting smoke flow out the side of her mouth. She smiled. "Stop by the Vibrant Valley shopping mall from two to four today and see the amazing Goatgirl. Watch her clop across the floor in worn-out tennis shoes. Scratch between her horns and hear her say, 'bah.' Be careful, though, she *will* headbutt you." She dropped the cigarette and ground it out on the tile.

"I think you meant bleat," said a voice as she passed the gap beside the automatic doors.

“Ahh!” she jumped, stumbling backwards. “What the hell are you doing there?”

“I’m sorry,” he laughed. The man wore all denim, a denim shirt, jeans, and a tight jean jacket. His hair was silver and curly. “I couldn’t help hearing you just now. You said that goats bah. Goats don’t bah, they bleat.”

“Alright,” she smiled, continued walking. “Don’t make eye contact.” The doors slid open and she stopped, walked backwards to where he was standing. “What are you doing here?”

“I work here, at the music store.”

“*That’s* where I’ve seen you. Stocking cd’s at Javelin Records.”

“Guilty. What are *you* doing here, Goatgirl?”

She thought for a moment. “Killing time.”

“That’s rather impolite, don’t you think?”

“Eye for an eye,” she said. “Time kills all of us, so…”

“Ah,” he laughed.

“Just returning the favor.”

“You don’t work here?”

“Nope.”

The droning hum and choral rush of cars on the highway filled the space in their conversation. The girl’s expression conveyed sadness mixed with confusion, a perplexed melancholy, as she peered at the concrete, then back up at him, and nodded goodbye.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Minette,” she told him.

“Well, Ninette, there’s an old—”

“No, *Minette*, with an ‘m.’ Like Minnie Mouse.”

“Well, Minnie Mouse, there’s an old Bob Dylan song, ‘Gotta Serve Somebody.’ It goes: *You may be an ambassador to England or France—*”

“I don’t really like Bob Dylan.”

“*You may like to gamble, you might like to dance—*”

“He’s a little before my time.”

“*You may be the heavyweight champion o’ the world—*”

“And his voice sounds kind of... nasally.”

“*You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls,*” the man sang in a low, bluesy baritone.

She started laughing. “You’re a lunatic, aren’t you.”

“*But you’re gonna have to serve somebody,*” he sang louder, “*yes indeed, you’re gonna have to serve somebody. Well it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.*” He punctuated the verse with a sky-splitting howl.

“You are... a true maniac,” she said, still laughing. “What’s your name, Bob Dylan?”

“K.R.,” he bowed. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too. I hate to break it to you, K.R., but I don’t believe in God or the devil, so that song doesn’t really apply to me.”

Glancing at the horizon, he asked, “What about your parents? Do they believe?”

“My parents are from China. They’re non-practicing Buddhists, I guess.”

“Brothers? Sisters?”

“Solo Minette.”

“Well, Solo Minette, the force is with you, whether you believe in it or not. Let me show you something.” K.R. pushed off the wall he was leaning against. “Creak,” he groaned, walking out from the cutout by the doors and across the empty side of the balcony.

“Where are you going?”

“Come on, Minette, join me by the railing for a moment. I wish to impart some wisdom.”

Directly below the balcony, one of the mall’s main entrances stood at the vertex of a giant parabola opening out toward the parking lot. The patio of an Italian café formed the left side of the arch, from where they were standing, and the psychedelic windows of an art gallery and supply store formed the right. Shoppers approached from the lot a couple hundred feet away.

“Now humor me, please, Minette, and just observe these people for a minute.”

She stepped up to the railing, looked down at the shoppers. A few teenage boys in a row, joking and laughing, not much younger than her. An elderly woman digging around in her patchwork bag while she shuffled past the vibrant paintings in the art shop window. A middle-aged married couple discussing something serious or troubling as they hurried inside.

“Okay. What’s your point?”

K.R. stretched his hands over the railing, palms down. “What do all these people have in common?”

“They have money. I mean, they can afford to come and buy stuff, so they must have money.”

“Probably so,” he nodded. “What else?”

“They’re all from Vibrant Valley?”

“No, you don’t know that,” he shook his head. “They’re all *alive*, Minaret!”

“Are you high right now? Seriously, did you just smoke like a bunch of pot?”

“No,” he grinned, “I don’t smoke anymore. I’m trying to illustrate an important truth here. Look,” he pointed at the hillside beyond the parking lot. “You see that grass on the embankment? It’s tan and dry, right, it’s dead. Now look at the bushes down by the patio. Green, lush, radiant. They’re alive. Do you see the contrast?”

“Yes.”

“It’s night and day, like the difference between seeing a dead person and a live one. Have you ever seen a dead body?”

“My grandpa, when I was three. I don’t remember it very clearly. What’s your point, K.R., I’ve got loitering to do.”

“Life, child. My point is life. You said you didn’t believe in God. I’m telling you that life is proof that there’s a God, life itself.”

Minette turned back toward the parking lot and the oncoming shoppers. Their faces looked sullen and vacant now, their gestures cold and mechanical. “War,” she said. “Sickness, hatred, anger, jealousy, death... If you ask me

that's proof there is no God, or if there ever was then it's like that philosopher said, God is dead."

"Friedrich Nietzsche. I don't think he meant that exactly. God is the very source of life. The source of life can't die. I'm tired." He walked a few paces to the nearest table and sat down.

She leaned forward with her arms crossed on the railing and slid down toward him. "Are you married, K.R.?"

"No, ma'am, I am not."

"You were, though."

"Yes, ma'am, I was."

Minette gasped. "She's not dead, is she?"

"Unfortunately not," he laughed.

"What a diabolical thing to say. There it is again."

"There what is again?"

"Proof, that there isn't a God."

"How's that?"

"Well," she sat down beside him. "You were married. You proposed to..."

"Natalie."

"You proposed to Natalie, she said yes, I presume, you walked down the aisle, spoke your vows to one another, till death do you part, you kissed each other, and so on, and however many years later, you broke up. Did you get married in a church?"

"Our Lady of Peace."

“A Catholic church no less. So, if God brought you two together, why would He separate you? Why would He let that happen?”

The sun had emerged from a screen of wispy clouds as she was talking. K.R. had to squint in order to look at her. “I asked Him the very same question. Want to know what He said, Ms. Minnie?”

“God actually talks to you? You really are a lunatic.”

“He answered by telling me He didn’t split us up, or even let us split up, and in His eyes we’ll always be married. In the kingdom, that is.”

“But you’re divorced.”

“Yep, and she’s remarried.”

“How...?” She raised her hands, shaking her head.

“It’s a great mystery, Minnarino. I can tell you this, though. Nothing that is loved is ever lost. Wise man said that. Peace out, little sister.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Cd’s to stock. Bob Dylan cd’s,” he smiled back. “Hey, maybe I can get you a job there. What do you say?”

She thought for a moment, glanced down at her worn-out tennis shoes. “Yeah, check and see, will you?”

“Come on then, Minaret.”

From the Pit

A jagged diamond of bright white light, fuzzy like he was looking through an unfocused camera, appeared directly above him. At the same time the pain awoke, a searing fire in his lower back and legs, and then he noticed the cold. He didn't want to move in case he'd broken something when he fell, assuming he could move, and assuming he did fall, so he just laid there, blinking up at the jagged white diamond.

The sides of the enclosure gleamed softly beneath the opening, a faint silvery luminescence gracing the edges and faces of the gray-black rock unlike any of the rocks he'd seen in the hills around his home. "Home," he thought. Where was home? Suddenly a bolt of lightning struck his back, convulsed his whole body, a cloud of steam burst up toward the diamond light, then another, smaller cloud, and another, each one frying his nerves like a blast of fire. "Note to self," he thought when the pain had settled. "Try not to cough."

How he had landed at the bottom of the pit may have been a useful question to try to answer, but his memories vanished like fleeing shadows; his own name wrestled free from his grasp. A fall like this practically guaranteed severe brain trauma. Staring up at the diamond some seventy feet above he felt a rush of gratitude for being

preserved alive. Drawing open his jaw, he whispered a word of thanks, one word, "God."

Soon after that he slept, he must have, because the next thing he knew the diamond had disappeared and the pit was covered in darkness. Fixing his eyes on the place where the light had shone down he searched for stars, clouds, the slightest hint of moonlight, yet found nothing, and shutting his eyes again, resolved to sleep until daylight. Before the numbness could swallow him, a crawling sensation on his right calf alerted him to the presence of some creature lurking there, a small animal with strength, insect or lizard. With a simultaneous kick of his right foot and flail of his left arm, he managed to smack it off, then laid as still as possible till the fire in his bones subsided. Sleep overtook him, smiling in the dark. He could move.

The next day proved somewhat productive, though advancement was slow. By the hour at which the diamond began to grow dim he'd completed a turn onto his stomach, and had inched forward two or three feet in the direction of what he judged to be the closest wall of the enclosure. The floor of the pit, mostly sand and gravel with a few large rocks the size of car batteries, felt soaked by collected rain water or maybe thin puddles seeping up from an underground stream. Whatever its source the liquid was nearly frozen, numbing his flesh on contact. Sinking into sleep that night, his thoughts narrowed upon the goal of crawling to the wall by the end of the following day. He remembered a line his brother used to say, a

quote from the Bible. “All things,” he whispered. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Voices, sounds, groaning... Spirits churning in the deep... Dull chanting like the songs of a demon choir woke him, drove him up past the surface of oblivion. He gasped, a quick succession of panting breaths, the gritty taste of sand in his cheek. He turned his head upright and spat, resting his chin on a smooth flat stone, and blinking his eyes, detected the faint sheen on the nearest wall, twelve, thirteen feet away. “This is possible,” he assured himself. Drawing three more deep breaths, he hoisted the weight of his torso onto his right elbow, unleashing a tortured wail, and threw all the power he could summon from his right shoulder and lat into propelling his upper body forward, in the hope that his legs would advance behind him. The maneuver planted him flat on his face in the rocks, with a succession of gnawing aches pulsing out from the base of his spine. Ten long minutes elapsed before the agony receded enough for him to open his eyes and gauge the progress he’d made. The gently luminous wall still shone twelve feet away.

The day he’d set for reaching it became one week, and the week became two. Every attempt to move forward tormented him worse than the last, however this impression faded with the agony itself. When the sober working of his faculties returned at the end of the day, he believed the pain to be lessening with each new attempt. Whether or not this was wishful thinking, or the projected longing of sheer faithful desperation, was impossible to

say. He hoped the pain was receding, that his body was healing, but these concerns fell into periphery on the morning he reached the wall.

The full utility of his right arm and most of the use of his left would help him grip the holds and hang there, for a few minutes at least, to catch his breath, before pulling up to the next resting place. To even begin the climb required a minimum of leg strength to support his body while resting, letting him search out the next viable hold with his free hand. His legs had proven useless during his journey across the floor of the pit, since any endeavor to bend his knees or push with his feet spiked a debilitating shock into his back, blinding him and nearly rendering him unconscious. But he felt better now, stronger, like God had empowered him for the second phase of his escape.

Turning so he sat with his back against the wall, he felt behind him for leverage to stand up without bending his legs. Securing his palms to the edges of two uneven holds about a foot off the ground, he strained up and back, shifting more and more weight onto his outstretched legs, lifting higher, to the highest position his grip would allow, the pain smoldering in his back, until his left palm slipped off the wall and he fell, catching himself with a backwards slide of his right foot, able somehow to support him now. He stood up for what felt like the first time ever. He turned around, rocked from heels to toes, heels to toes, leaned his head back and shouted for joy. The bright diamond beamed down at him from a height that looked

insurmountable. His joy ceased instantly, destroyed by the cruel hammer of reality, and he dropped, hollow, to the ground.

For days he stayed there, curled up by the wall. The sun would rise, somewhere, illumine the mouth of his pitiful den, grace the cold rock in front of him with a soft blue sheen, and set again, immersing his life in empty darkness. One day, two, three, he stopped counting, buried his mind in the chambers of his soul where a soft dim warmth still glowed. Waves of grief passed through, turned him over in riptides of hungriest despair, roaring death pounded nightly at his door, and then, hearing no answer, tore away again, letting warm comfort envelop him and soothe his damaged heart.

One morning as the diamond light waxed brighter up above, he extended his arm, pressed his hand against the cool angular surface, when instantly the stone awoke, enlivened by his touch and animated inside by golden flowing particles of light. The light poured through the rock, entered his fingers and traveled up his arm, collecting at his core and radiating outward in slowly widening rings. This occurrence jolted him awake, though he failed to move from his place by the wall. No physical sensation had accompanied the influx of this new light, but rather an awareness, the sudden activation of knowledge so familiar, so native to his soul, as if a vital circuit were now restored, engaging the harmony and totality of his being. Silently rolling onto his back, and standing up, he started to climb.

Carefully at first, making certain not to slip, testing the holds with his hands and feet before committing his weight to them, then more quickly, each safe elevation adding new courage, strength, boldness. Toward the light he struggled with increasing confidence and ease, joints and muscles working smoothly, painlessly, like he'd been built to scale this wall, intentionally designed to conquer this surface. The stone gleamed brighter and brighter—in an instant he felt it, his right hand breached the diamond entrance of the enclosure and grabbed hold of the jagged shelf.

A combined lift and pull of his arms let him swing his foot over the ledge, and at last he was free, on his back in the light. Shielding his eyes, cautiously, he looked around. At first all he saw was mini-blinds. Light filtered through the horizontal bars outlining a female body standing beside him, speaking quickly and squeezing his arm. The words grew clearer as his vision sharpened, and he saw her, a young dark-haired woman wearing a stethoscope and black scrubs.

“Don’t try to move,” she told him. “Can you understand what I’m saying? Blink once for yes and two for no.”

“I can hear you fine,” he said.

“You can talk.”

“I can talk.”

“Stay still, please, sir. We’re going to have to run some tests.”

The Senator

“The first sign of the decay of nations is when they begin to have common gods. When gods begin to be common gods, the gods die as well as the faith in them, together with the people themselves. The more powerful a nation, the more individual its god.” — Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*

The senator’s crisp white sleeves made a whisking sound as he punched, jab, jab, right cross, left hook, left uppercut, jab... He kept his chin in and head down, weaving lightly back and forth. The standing mirror in front of him quaked gently after every punch, faintly blurring his reflection, as he threw his fists harder, faster, exacting a fierce combination of head and body blows until the whole room began shaking, then he slowed, dropped his hands to his sides, stood there and watched himself breathing.

“You don’t get into my line of work unless you care about people and want to make a difference in the world. I look back at who I was thirty, forty years ago, and it amazes me how much I didn’t know. It astounds me. You could fill a library floor-to-ceiling with volumes of

books about the staggering depths of my ignorance. The knowledge I've gained since then has changed my opinion about some things, but honestly, the reasons for me staying in this fight are the same as when I started. My heart's the same, it's about heart."

The boy glanced up at the creases branching out of the corner of his dad's eye. "Brandon said his grandpa had a heart attack a while ago, and he died."

"I'm sorry to hear that. May Brandon's grandpa rest in peace. Steven, I'm talking about your figurative heart, like your spirit. When heart attacks happen it's your physical heart, here..." He pressed his hand against the boy's chest. "That's what pumps your blood. I'm talking about the heart you feel with, the heart that makes you strong."

"Where is that one at?"

"Same place, I suppose. Only it's invisible."

"Invisible?" The boy's eyes opened wide as he smiled.

"Never mind. The point I was trying to make is whatever you decide to do with your life, you'd better make doggone sure you're doing it for more than a paycheck. You can farm money trees for all I care, but if you haven't got a bigger goal than making money, you might as well set those trees on fire."

"*Burn* money trees?"

"You bet, burn 'em up."

"Wouldn't that be a waste—"

“No, it wouldn’t be a waste.” He looked at his son’s blank expression. “Yes, it would be a waste, but only because of what you could accomplish with all that money, the businesses you could start, people you could feed, and bless, and help out of all kinds of trouble. The money itself isn’t the *thing*, is what I’m saying.”

“The money isn’t the *thing*,” the boy echoed.

“Correct.”

“Isn’t the *thing*,” he said again, more softly.

The pavilion they were in had a green pyramid-shaped roof made of hard plastic that started to click right then with the impact of heavy raindrops. *Click-click, click, click-click-click, click, click-click, click...*

The senator cast an irritated glance upward. “Did they design this thing to be obnoxious in the rain?”

The pavilion was built on a bridge spanning a small lake in a park near their home, and the fish started jumping once the rain began, launching out over the rippling surface and splashing down, or merely churning the lake with a whip of their tails and descending.

“Whoa! Did you see that?” the boy asked, his eyes lit like high beams.

“Must have been a five-pounder,” he answered.

Steven jumped up and walked over to the railing, then, feeling the cold rain, leapt back under the roof of the pavilion. “It’s cold.”

“It’ll stop soon. You see those clouds over there, the gap over those trees? The wind is driving ‘em this way. We may see sunny skies before lunchtime.”

Sitting down again, he turned and asked, “What’s for lunch, you think?”

“Chips,” the man smiled. “Salsa. P, b, and j. Doubt mom’s gonna fix anything today. She might, though. Never know.”

The rain slowed to a light drizzle.

The man cleared his throat. “Steven, I want to tell you something, and this may have been what I was trying to say earlier. You’re too young now to understand it, perhaps, but I’m not getting any younger myself, so here goes. Grown-ups, we do the best we can. We start out as little kids just like you, everything’s new and interesting, the world’s a great big adventure. We go to school and get jobs, start families, and hopefully put our time and effort into something useful. The problem is, most of the time, the simple goal of building something, building a career, a life, can be the most difficult task in the world. And people can hate you for it, even when you’re just trying to help.”

“Hate you?”

“That’s right. Now life is complicated, son, and the world, it’s a chaotic place. Chaotic, you know, crazy. For everything that goes right and smooth and the way it’s supposed to go, there’s about fourteen hundred things that go wrong along with it. I’m not saying I’ve been a perfect man, far from it. But I have tried, every step of the way,

to steer clear of trouble, both for myself and your mother, for you, Helen, Jenny, and Allen, and most importantly for the American people. My job is tough, Steve, tougher than you know. You've got to fight and do the best you can to help the highest number of people you can, and half the time you're killing yourself just to steer clear of the next catastrophe. Catastrophe, like a disaster, like an earthquake or something. Anyway, that's what I tried to do, day in, day out, for thirty some-odd years." He smiled. "So don't let them tell you different."

The boy glanced up at him, half-smiled, and gazed out over the water.

"You hungry? Let's go get that p, b, and j."

As they crossed the bridge onto the path that curved up toward the front of the park, it started raining again, harder than before. The senator hopped a few times and started running, smiling back at the boy, and letting Steven run on ahead.

