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Red Ivy

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RED IVY

KRISTEN RIVOLI

Recently evicted, I sit beneath the red ivy twisting around the splintering telephone pole in an alley two streets down from where I used to live. This alley is my new home, the concrete my bed, the weeds my backyard garden, the back door of the Wiener House my kitchen, where occasionally I'll get the delicious results of a screwed up order or stale, end-of-the-day hot dog buns and sympathetic comments from the waitress. I don't remember homeless people being treated this kindly, not when I was growing up, when Dad would drag us through the city with his eyes fixed straight ahead, a compass with its unflinching needle pointing in one direction, ignoring the sea of human refuse that surrounded us from all sides. I was scolded for throwing pennies into their boxes when they played a broken tune on a tarnished saxophone or when they danced like my father danced when his Huntington's progressed into its final stages or when they just sat there looking dead.

I don't see people like that anymore. I don't see anyone else like me, digging through dumpsters, pissing into the gutter. Well, there is one woman. She walks past me occasionally, announcing her arrival at the mouth of the alleyway with her shopping cart rattling over the unevenness of the poorly paved road. She moves as quickly as her body allows her, bobbing along like a blimp filled with rocks, stopping every so often to catch her breath before she even passes by me. But once she's a few feet away from me, she speeds up as if trying to escape something, wheezing like a deflating balloon, shuffling along in her clogs with her eyes set ahead. She wears the same clothes every time I see her and carries no purse with her. Her cart is always full of hamburger meat, Wonderbread, and tubs of margarine. She seems eager to get to wherever she's going, which makes me think she may not be homeless after all.

I don't know why I do things sometimes, like why, today, I choose to spread out all of my shit, my plastic drawer of change with the worn "Hello My Name Is: *Nikolas*" tag (as if branding it with my name protects it from thieves), my single-serving cereal boxes, my booze, myself, right in her path. Maybe I just want to talk to someone, anyone, and this is the only way to get her to stop and notice me. I partially believe, fear even, that she'll continue on like a train without a conductor, like my father leading my brothers and me through the city and just trample right over me and my last possessions. But this time she stops. Stops and leans over her cart, her fat breasts molding around the handle like clay, her crucifix dangling just above a sweaty bag of hamburger buns. She stares at me through steamed-up glasses, her teeth

gritted like a whale sifting krill.

Like I said, I don't know why I do these things. Sometimes, I imagine I can feel my brain unraveling (though I know that's not how it works), shaking loose all of the sense like moisture from airing laundry, leaving it crusty and brittle. I stare at the ground beef in her cart and imagine a mound of it inside of my head, dead nerves and bloody gyri. I smile as she finds herself stuck in her path.

"Good morning."

"I don't have money," she whispers, her voice surprisingly delicate. "Just stamps. There ain't much left on it anyway so you may as well not bother trying to take it."

I pull myself up off the ground, moving slowly when she startles and takes a step back. "What makes you think I'd want your money?" I ask.

I can see her eyes wandering over me, over to the bottles I've spread like lawn decorations across the pavement. For the first time I notice how empty they are, how some are broken from the brief drunken scuffle I had with the college frat boy before his friends dragged him off.

"You can't get beer with stamps," she informs me with a hint of accusation, "and besides there ain't much left on there anyway, like I said."

"Those aren't mine," I nonchalantly assure her.

"Smells like they are," she says, braver now as she grips at her crucifix hard enough to give herself stigmata. Emboldened by the power of Christ, she steps around her cart and peers up into my face. "How old are you, son?"

"Old enough." Another lie she sees right through.

"Why don't you stop drinking that stuff," she says. "It's poison. It won't do your body any good."

"It does my soul good," I say.

She glances at my bed, a strip of cardboard, the stuffed turtle that serves as my pillow. I can see the growing distress in her eyes, and it alarms me that someone else could be more concerned about my situation than I am.

"Listen," she says, "why don't you stop by St. Joseph's up the road later today? I'm in the choir, and I sing solos at every mass. We have picnics afterwards. You can listen to the sermon, grab a little somethin' to eat. How's that sound?"

I shrug. Organized religion perturbs me with all of its rituals and strange rules, though the idea of food, a warm building, and a place to go to the bathroom is appealing. "I'll check it out," I say.

She grabs my hands and clenches them tightly. Her hands are soft and fleshy, and when she pulls away to rattle on down the alleyway, their warmth lingers in my palms.

I walk along the same path she took to St. Joseph's Parish, shuffling beneath trees the colors of candy apples. I enter the church and drop into the first pew I see. I close my eyes, fingering the flask in my pocket for

reassurance. Dim colors dance behind my eyelids, the reflections of mosaic saints from the windows. The colored glass reminds me of hard candy. I can't recall the last time I had a lollipop. Beer and vodka are the only tastes my tongue can remember.

I take a deep breath. The heady scent of the wooden pews fills my nostrils like death's cologne. I wonder if I'll get to smell my coffin, if I'll even get a coffin, or if they still dump the sad, insignificant people like me into communal, unmarked graves. I picture myself buried in a huge glass bottle, my body preserved in alcohol. Worms and maggots clink against the glass, knocking like persistent neighbors, but I am divided from the world, even in death.

I remember most of my father's funeral. How the priest mumbled archaic words, how my mother wore a veil, a son at her side at all times. I remember how my father's body was arranged in its coffin, finally motionless, and the way mine continued to shake, with delirium tremens, with a deteriorating nervous system, with the rage of having inherited the same disease that killed my father, that had me doomed from birth by the unfortunate probability that my four brothers had managed to escape.

I couldn't let my mother see me die. I wasn't going to let her aid me through my final years just to see me die, not after all the time she spent doing the same with my father. So I would hop from apartment to apartment, easing my way across state borders, slowly shedding my contacts, my living arrangements, deteriorating along with my health.

A clear, purging voice suddenly fills the church. I open my eyes, glance around and spot my shopping cart lady in a balcony just above me, her eyes closed and her mouth open, producing a sound smoother and more colorful than the stained glass surrounding me. I feel pure, the way I feel after I spend the night puking, when my stomach is finally empty and my mouth is rinsed out, and I feel like a newborn in the cool, clear dawn.

I stand when everyone else stands, sit when they sit, kneel, shake their hands. Nobody looks at me or my soiled garments strangely. Nobody seems to be able to tell that I haven't showered in days. Nobody notices how my body twitches like a metronome in time with the congregation's chants. I blend in seamlessly as we shuffle from the pews and down the aisle to the front, where I receive a wafer, a morsel that I savor while it melts on my tongue.

I arrive before a woman in a robe. She places a chalice in my hands, and when I peer inside I see a ruby red liquid: wine.

I start to salivate like a savage beast hanging over its kill as I tip the cup carefully against my lips. Just one little sip, and then I have to go sit back down. But the moment the wine hits my tongue something in my cognition goes haywire. This is the blood of Christ, the very liquid that pulsed through his sinless body, the earthly body given to him by his father in heaven. Somehow I'm sure that if I drink this I'll be cured, healed, forgiven. It will

make me whole, restore the damaged nerves of my brain, repair the broken relationships of my life, reverse the dependence I've developed on all things that lead to death. Whatever I did wrong to deserve these faulty genes, it can all be forgotten if I partake in this healing concoction.

The cup is emptied, and I drop it to the floor, my arms suddenly weak. The movement behind me, in front of me, the organized, orderly movement of the congregation ceases with the clatter. With a few gasps all eyes are focused on me. I can feel a little of the wine dribbling down my chin. I wipe it slowly on my already-stained sleeve, slowly remembering where I am and becoming increasingly aware of the attention that is on me.

Ravenous with a thirst that cannot be quelled by shame, I suck on my dirty sleeve, suck the potent moisture out of the fabric as I stalk past the pews and all the decent churchgoers that stand motionless, indistinguishable from the statues of their saints. I push open the heavy doors, and I am released from the illusion.

The sun scorches my eyes, the body and blood of a man two-thousand years dead churning in my stomach. My body is out of control, my limbs jerking and shuddering like a marionette with tangled strings. The clouds twist like fluffy spines across the sky. I don't understand how people can look up at the sky and see God with such certainty. My view becomes obstructed by red ivy, by leaves, different shades and hues, loosening their grips on their branches. Colors I never thought existed fall in a whirlwind of kamikaze leaves. I wish my death could be as beautiful as theirs.