

ALL THE REST IS LITERATURE: STORIES BY JOHN ALLISON

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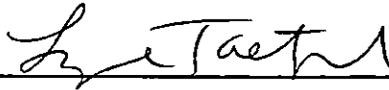
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ALL THE REST IS LITERATURE: STORIES BY JOHN ALLISON

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The following collection of stories represents my first attempt at assembling a body of works that showcases my emerging style. Several of the pieces, namely "Alas Poor Yorick," "Ahab and the Mailman," and "The Renunciate Parrot," are what many people may call experimental, though I prefer to avoid such labeling as it is often limiting. The other two stories, "The Wartman" and "Making Love to the Tin Woman," are much more traditional narratives, yet retain a certain degree of quirkiness that is found in all of the pieces in the collection. Each piece deals with the human condition in that each reflects some aspect of everyday experience; however, that experience, which is often familiar, is juxtaposed by being presented in an unfamiliar manner.

The opening story, "Ahab and the Mailman," is meant to serve as an allegory for the collection as a whole. The old man represents a realist perspective while the mailman takes a postmodern perspective. The tension

created by the clash between the two is similar to the tension between the traditional and non-traditional forms present in this collection. I have arranged the stories so that the pattern in which I present them mimicks the back and forth dialogue of the two opposing qualities.

Accepted by: Lynda Taetz, Chair
George Ekland
Walter R. R. R.

"The term 'Science' should not be given
to anything but the aggregate of the recipes
that are always successful. All the rest
is literatrue.

Paul Valery

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Ahab and the Mailman

"Hey you! You there, wait! Come back here!" yelled the old man, stepping from his door. The old wooden screen door slammed shut behind him with a sharp thud. "I've been waiting for you." He was almost out of breath as he tottered down the steps. "You give me the wrong damn mail almost every damn day. Yesterday it was Alice Samuels' water bill, Monday it was Henry Leighton's postcard from his daughter. I want to know who in hell you been giving my mail to. Two weeks ago my Sallie sent . . ." He was cut off with a quick halting gesture by the mailman and then a hand digging deep into the mailbag. After much rummaging, however, the mailman looked up blankly.

"Though it be honest, it is never good to bring bad news; give to a gracious message a host of tongues, but let ill tidings tell themselves when they be felt." He bowed his head slightly as he finished. "Shakespeare," he said as he looked up.

The old man looked puzzled for a moment then started again. "What in hell is that supposed to mean? What do you mean ill tidings? All I want is my damn letter. What's your name? I'm calling your boss."

"Call me USMAIL" said the mailman pointing to the

patch on his shoulder. He stared back at the old man saying nothing more.

By now the old man was angry enough to strangle the mailman. His hands, clenched into what fists his arthritis would allow, trembled in front of him. "Damn you! I told you I'm going to call the post office and we'll see who the smart ass is then."

Expressionless, the mailman stood silently watching the old man. He gave a slight bow from the waist, tipped his hat and turned to walk away.

"I'm warning you," yelled the old man as the mailman walked away whistling. He watched until the mailman got to the edge of the yard, then he trudged up the steps into the house, slamming the door behind him. He didn't remember to look in the mailbox until that evening, after he had stopped thinking about the mailman.

The Wart-Man

In the spring of my twelfth year my brother Ben had a wart on his neck. It was just above the line of his collar, exposed to everyone, and as far as Ben was concerned he might as well have had cancer.

"Oohhh . . . you touched it," the children chanted in unison as Jimmy Hatfield flicked at it with his finger. "Now your going to get warts too." Jimmy chased the others around brandishing his cursed finger like a weapon. Everyone seemed to forget about Ben; he had served his purpose and now was allowed to wander off in solitude. It didn't help that Ben was so much smaller than the other children; not that it would have mattered because the physical pain was only a small part of his problem. He was an outcast and that was a constant pain that didn't leave when the other children did.

I had watched it all happen from the other side of the parking lot. Looking back on it now, I know that I probably should have done something to help him, but even though

I was older, I told myself they would have just ganged up on me as well. Even now, as an adult, no one would ever consider my presence threatening. On our walk home Ben

didn't have much to say. I could tell it had been worse than usual, but there was nothing I could do. I knew better than to ask him what had happened; he wouldn't have answered me anyway. So, we walked along in silence. It wasn't until we got home and saw Jesse sitting at our picnic table, stopping by on his way out west, that things started to change.

Jesse was a hobo, but he was different from the other men that strayed from the railroad track down to our home in search of a meal. He talked to us, told us stories. He acted as if he had known us all of his life. He told us about being a hobo and about the secret picture language hoboes used. It turned out that secret language was why we had so many come to our house in the first place. Jesse said that the hobo sign for a kind-hearted woman was a picture of a smiling cat and that that very picture was carved on a tree near the track with an arrow pointing in the direction of our home. And he was right; Ben and I found the picture carved deep in the trunk of a dead oak tree. Maybe that one affirmation was why Ben believed Jesse about his wart, or maybe it was just his hope that he could be rid of his pain.

Jesse had come to our house three times before, but we

remembered him because of his stories. It didn't matter what they were about because they were always just a little too far-fetched to really believe, but they were entertaining. He said he'd traveled all over the world, that he used to be a sailor. "There are more things out there in the world than you'd ever think possible," he'd say. Once he even told us about a race of people without mouths that lived on a tropical island. "They couldn't talk," he said. "At least not like you and I. Or even eat like we do. They don't need no food or water. They get their nourishment from breathin' in the scents of flowers and roots and fruits and the like." But even little Ben, with only his eight years and naivete to protect him, would routinely cock his head to one side, uttering his disbelief, "Oh Jesse, that could never happen," until Jesse hit on the one nerve that Ben left bare to the world--his wart.

"Hey, little buddy, ain't you got nothin' ta say to your old pal Jesse?"

Ben just stared at the ground saying nothing. "Some of the other kids have been teasing him," I said.

"Teasin'? A fine young fellow like yerself? What could anyone find to possibly tease you about?"

Ben's head remained bowed to one side, hiding his wart. I could see his jaws tighten as a frown fell over his face, but he said nothing.

"He's got a wart," I said, pausing, "on his neck."

"A wart? Just one?" He looked first to Ben and then to me and back to Ben again. "That's nothin' I know a man that's got hundreds of warts, maybe thousands, all over his body." Now he had Ben's attention, and he knew it. With a shake of his head his long red beard swayed, and he turned to walk toward the porch. Ben and I followed.

"Thousands of warts? Really?" Ben played into his hands.

"Yep, all over his body." Jesse talked as he made his way to the old wicker chairs that lined our porch, trying not to sound too concerned over our interest in his story. The chair let out a yelp as he plopped down his considerable bulk. "See this here?" He doubled up his arm to expose his elbow.

"I don't see nothing," said Ben, leaning close.

"That's right. You don't see anything now, but there used to be the biggest wart you'd ever wanna see right there on that very spot. And you know what happened to it?" Ben shook his head dazed under Jesse's spell. "That

wart-man took it, took it for a dollar. That's what we all called him, the wart-man. Nobody knows his real name. But that's how he makes his livin', people give him money to take their warts."

"How's he do that?" Ben was leaning on the arm of Jesse's chair, hanging on his every word.

"Nobody knows. He just touches your wart, and the next day, when ya wake up, it's gone."

"You think he'd take my wart? I could give him some money."

"Well . . . I don't know. I couldn't even tell you if he was around these parts now. And even if he was, he don't usually come out to eat. He finds most of his food in the woods--rabbit, squirrel, berries. I even seen him eat some bugs once. Just picked up a stick and pushed it down into an ant hill so that there was hundreds of ants all over it, and then he held it over the fire for a few seconds, until the ants was dead, and he ate'em."

Ben stood there silently, his mouth open, not wanting to let his chance to speak pass but not really knowing what to say. Finally, Jesse broke the silence. "I suppose, if I see him, I could try and get'em to stop--if he's comin' through."

The summer quickly passed, even more so than usual for Ben. He was up early every morning, excited, expecting the wart-man to come. I wanted to tell him that it just wasn't possible to do what Jesse had told us, but I couldn't. He wouldn't have believed me anyway. Every evening, about six or seven o'clock, Ben and I would walk over to the tracks and watch the trains, or at least that was Ben's excuse to Mom and Dad. He didn't want to tell them about the wart-man, maybe because he was afraid they wouldn't let him give all of his money to some hobo, or maybe because he knew they would tell him it was all just a bunch of foolishness. Whatever the case, Mom and Dad never knew.

Most of the time the tracks were abandoned, but whenever we did see someone Ben would squint to examine him for warts. We usually walked down to the tree where the smiling cat was carved. Ben thought that was a popular place for the hoboes to stop, but we never did see one there. Not that none ever stopped by for a meal anymore. They did, but most weren't as talkative as Jesse. Ben would sit there and watch them eat. They always tried to ignore him, but he would just sit there, like he was studying them before he asked the big question--"You ever see a man with warts all over his body?" Each time the

result was the same. They would let loose with a big deep laugh before narrowing their eyes and giving Ben the encouragement he so desired. For a while I thought Ben was starting to catch on to the joke, but then it started all over again.

"Warts all over his body?" said one man, tucking his chin and crinkling his forehead.

"Yeah, a guy named Jesse who comes through here says that this wart-man can take warts off people just by touchin' em. All you have to do is give him some money and he'll take your wart."

"Well, little fellow, as a matter of fact I have seen such a character," the man said, trying to hold back a smile. "But you don't see him around too often. He stays away from us common hoboos. He's got a gift, that's for sure. Well, I've seen him take warts off all sorts of people. And not just people for that matter. Man or beast, it doesn't matter." And with that and a little chuckle he finished the last scrapes of his food and got up to leave. "But you keep your eyes open. You never know when the wart-man will come."

"Why did he laugh like that . . . at the end?" Ben asked me, as if the total lunacy of the story escaped him.

"Well Ben, you gotta admit that story is startin' to sound kind of funny." I hated to come right out and say that Jesse had lied, that there was no such thing as the wart-man. I wanted to discourage him gently. And I thought I had. By the end of the summer he had stopped talking about the matter altogether. But even so, I should have known that he hadn't actually given up his hope.

It was one of those last warm days, just before winter sets in. The trees had shed the last of their leaves, and we were walking down the lane to our home. We could see that someone was sitting at the picnic table. Ben stretched his neck, squinting, trying to see around the tree that blocked his view, all the while walking faster and faster, until he ran.

When we got up to the table the man just sat there, oblivious to all around him. But Ben stood there staring, because it was him. It was the wart-man. His face was hard, with deep wrinkles running under his eyes and through his cheeks, disappearing into a dirty, grey beard. At the edges of the beard you could see the warts, some large, some small, most of them hidden by the hair. There were more, one on the side of his nose and another at the corner of his left eye. Ben's gaze had settled on the only other

area of exposed skin, his hands. The hands were truly grotesque. Completely covered with rough, bumpy skin, like a toad, so rough that they looked as if they were carved of gnarled wood. With each bite of his sandwich he raised those hands, so scaly and filthy, to his mouth. I could easily imagine him eating bugs.

Finally, he raised his head to speak. "What are you lookin' at boy?" His voice was rough like his hands.

Ben looked frightened and ran into the house. This man was not the saint he had expected. He was not even the smooth shyster I had expected. He was just a mean, dirty man with troubles of his own, and I was about to follow Ben inside when I heard the door swing open.

Ben was running full speed. The green of his savings poked through the top of his tightly clutched fist. By the time he got to the table the wart-man was already turning to meet his stare. "What do you want, boy?"

Ben tilted his head and pulled down his collar to better expose himself. The man just stared, not saying a word. "Do ya see it? I want you to take it from me. I brought all the money I have." Ben laid down his offering--eleven dollars and thirty-seven cents.

"You want me to what?" His voice was getting louder,

angrier, but Ben just stood there, his neck turned, still showing his shame. "Why in hell would I want that? Can't you see? Are you blind?" He was raving now as he stood up. "Look at me," he said, ripping open his shirt. "Do you think anyone would want to look like this for anything, for all the money in the world?"

Ben stood with his head bowed, not saying a word. The wart-man let out what sounded like a sigh of disgust and, swinging his bag over his shoulder, hurried off toward the tracks. I could tell Ben was about to cry as he ran to the house.

I stood there for a moment, not sure what to do. Mom came out to see what had happened, but I didn't know what to tell her. I didn't even know what to think myself, or even who to be mad at. It had all started out so good. Ben feeling good about himself, Jesse feeling good about making Ben feel good. It was all part of this huge inexplicable chain of events and how could I, a child, be expected to sort it all out. I think it's bothered me more than Ben over all these years.

Not long after all this happened, a year or so later, we took Ben to the doctor to have the wart removed. Dr. Hartley examined it closely and explained the options to

our mother. "It's a viral infection," he explained. "If you don't kill the root, there's a good chance it will come back. We can do one of two things: we could either try to cut it out or we could use a substance that's sort of like dry ice and freeze it. There's no guarantee that cutting it out will get rid of it for good; it's tough to tell if you get all the root out. But then the freezing offers even less of a guarantee. It will almost certainly come back, but the procedure is much less complicated." Mom decided on the freezing.

As the doctor began preparing things at the table behind Ben he joked. "Or I suppose, you could try what my grandfather always said to do to get rid of a wart. Take ten pennies and rub each one over the wart and then give them to a beggar."

But then it was all over. Dr. Hartley pressed the metal tube that held the ice to Ben's wart; it was so cold Ben said it burned and it even brought a tear to his eye. After two more visits it was gone--no magic, no fuss. It wasn't that simple for me, though. I think deep down I wanted the magic. I wanted to believe in something like Ben had believed, and a couple of years later, when the wart came back, we tried rubbing it with pennies.

Alas, Poor Yorick . . .

Karl VanNordstromm achieved his fifteen minutes of fame almost a hundred years after his death when his skull was held aloft by a pimply-faced student-actor in a college production of Hamlet.

"COME SEE THE WORLD FAMOUS PALEONTOLOGIST KARL VANNORDSTROMM IN HIS FIRST APPEARANCE SINCE HIS DEATH," the advertisements read.

"So who is this VanNordstromm guy anyway?"

"He used to be some kind of famous scientist. I think he discovered a dinosaur or something."

"So what's he supposed to be doing in this play. I mean how can a dead guy . . ."

"Shhh! They're starting. You'll have to be quiet. It says here he is playing the part of Yorick."

In 1886 VanNordstromm discovered the only known remains of the Brynxtiosyphlasauras, a small dinosaur with a disproportionately large jaw and an equally disproportionate short tail. It is on display in the Smithsonian.

"Which one is he?"

"He's dead! You don't see a dead person up there, do you? He'll be on later."

"So what will they do, just haul this corpse out? That's going to be. . ."

Shhh! You've got to be quiet. Just wait and see. He's the only dead person on the program."

VanNordstromm wasn't happy with only discovering a new dinosaur. He was afraid that wouldn't ensure his fame. He was very concerned about fame. He wanted something more. He wanted people to remember him for himself--not for the dinosaur he discovered.

"That ghost. Is that supposed to be him? They don't really expect us to believe that he's a ghost. That's really dumb."

"Shhh! I told you to be quiet. I don't think that's him. It says here he doesn't come in till much later."

VanNordstromm strongly believed races not directly stemming from his own Nordic roots were inferior. Thus, he reasoned all non-Nordic people to be unworthy of that

distinction that is uniquely human. He believed that the only true representative of the human race must be of Nordic descent.

"Okay, I think he's coming out in this next scene. Remember, he's playing Yorick."

"I still don't see how they're going to do this. What is he, like a mummy or something?"

"Shhh! Just wait and we'll see."

When Carolus Linnaeus created the system for classifying species he decided that there was no need for a detailed description or specimen for homo sapien and instead playfully listed only the phrase, "Know thyself."

"I don't see how they're going to put a dead guy on with these clowns--that is what those are supposed to be, right?"

Yeah . . . well, I think so. But just wait.

Clown: What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?

Other: The gallows-maker; for that frame outlives a

thousand tenants.

VanNordstromm believed that his Nordic roots made him the perfect specimen to fill the taxonomic void that Linnaeus had left. Such an inclusion would ensure his undying fame, he thought. The problem was that in actuality he was too short, only five-foot-five, and that his bones had deteriorated from syphilis.

Clown: (sings)

*But age with his stealing steps
Hath clawed me in his clutch,
And hath shipped me until the land,
As if I had never been such.*

[Throws up a skull]

"That's gotta be him! That skull, I mean."

"Yeah, I think you're right this time."

"Finally! We come just to see this guy and we have to sit through all this shit just for this."

"Shhh! Let's see what happens."

Hamlet: That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing

once. *How the knave jowls it to the ground, as if 'twere Cain's jawbone, that did the first murder! This might be the pate of a politician, which this ass now o'erreaches; one that would circumvent God, might it not?*

In a gesture of self-indulgence VanNordstromm willed his body to science so that he would once and for all be remembered for something other than his dinosaur. After his death taxonomists at the Wistar Institute stripped his body of muscle, skin and organs. They placed the bones in a wooden crate with a label reading, "TYPE: HOMO SAPIEN, MALE. 015436" The bones remained in storage at the institute until they were acquired by a small, eastern university looking to make a name for itself.

"Wait a minute! There's another skull. Which one is him?"

"I don't know. And if only one of these is him, who's the other one?"

Hamlet: Whose was it?

Clown: A whoreson mad fellow's it was. Whose do you think it was?

Hamlet: Nay, I know not.

Clown: A pestilence on him for a mad rogue! He poured a flagon of Rhenish on my head once. This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the King's jester.

The crate remained in storage at the university for many years before it was finally checked out by a little-known paleontologist so that he could take photos for a book he was writing. Because of its obscurity and relative anonymity no one noticed that when the crate was returned the skull was missing. It had become a companion of sorts for this formerly unknown paleontologist and was finally commanding the fame that it had once so desired. It wasn't until almost two years later that he loaned the skull to his nephew for the play.

"That is him! That's Yorick. He said Yorick didn't he?"

"Yeah, this is so cool. Look, he's picking it up!"

"Aaoh! I wouldn't touch that. It's some guy's . . ."

"Shhh! What's he saying?"

Hamlet: Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him . . .

Making Love to the Tin Woman

Minnie Watkins lost her husband to a tin woman --that's what she would tell people when they asked about Ellis. Sometimes she didn't even have to be asked. Sometimes she just needed to tell someone, anyone who would listen. Even though Ellis had retired two years ago Minnie was more lonely now than ever. In the forty-one years they had been married Ellis had only spent a couple days out of the week home from work at a time, but, ironically, they had less to say to one another now than ever. She thought about those early days as she stood before the sink washing dishes. Ellis had cut timber for a living and had to go where the trees were. Back then she would tell people it was nice not having him underfoot all the time, that she liked being able to look forward to the couple days out of the week that he would spend home, that it made their time together all that more special. Deep down, however, in that place inside herself where she let no one venture, she longed to have him with her always. She brought a dish up out of the soapy water, rinsed it, and submerged her chubby hands back into the suds. These were the days that she had so looked forward to when she and Ellis were young--days

when they could be together, days when Ellis would be underfoot and they could sit out on the porch together in the hot summer evenings, talking, or not, but mainly just being close.

She finished the dishes and as the water drained out she rinsed her hands under the faucet, noticing how her wedding ring hugged her wrinkled fingers so snugly. She had never taken it off, she thought to herself, not in all these years, not even when she washed the dishes. She glanced out the window as she dried her hands. She could see the light was on in the barn. Ellis was out there, at it again, she thought to herself, though really she didn't know what it was he was doing exactly. She had only seen a drawing of it once when he left his notebook laying open and she saw a vague sketch of what, if she used her imagination, looked a little like a woman. There were numbers and measurements written in the margins and at the top of the page he had written the words "Tin Woman."

"Making love to that tin woman," she said softly to herself, turning to go into the living room to watch TV. It was a nice evening with a cool spring breeze, but she knew that if she was outside she would hear him out there hammering and pounding and sawing. Then there would be

silence and she would think he was coming in to be with her but it wouldn't be until much later, when she felt him slide into bed beside her. And so, she watched TV and she went to bed and then she waited.

In the mornings he was always up before her. She would wake, though, and be downstairs making coffee by the time he got out of the bathroom. She rattled dishes and made kitchen noises so that he would know she was up, that the coffee was ready. Ellis came down the stairs wearing the grey pants and grey shirt that he seemed to wear every day and went to the counter to pour some coffee.

"Morning," said Minnie. "I've been watching those squirrels outside," she motioned with her head toward the window. "They've been having a ball out there on those screens of yours." She was referring to one of Ellis' projects. He had shaped several pieces of wire mesh into various shapes and hung them from several of the trees in their yard. He painted them different colors and said he was studying how they moved in the wind. Sometimes he would sit for an hour or more watching them and rebending them and making scribbles in his notebook.

"Let'em play," he said, glancing over his shoulder out the window but not really looking. "Somebody should get

some use out of all that stuff. Lord knows it don't do me no good after I'm done with it." He referred not just to the screens but to the other things that he had created that lined their yard. Useless things Minnie had said. Junk she called it.

"I think I might be going into town today. You need me to pick you up anything?" She stood and went for more coffee as she spoke.

"Well, I don't know. I suppose I could go with you. I need to stop by PJ's. He's got some old copper tubing he said I could come pick up. It's been in the back of the store for years and he just wants to get rid of it."

Minnie nodded and stepped over to the window with her coffee to get a better look at the squirrels. She didn't say what she was thinking--that Ellis already had enough junk laying around; that he'd never be able to use it all and if he did that it would still be just junk. He had been saving things for as long as they had been together. Scrap metal, old tools, wood, car parts, wire, fence, whatever he came across, usually things other people were throwing away. He had just about filled the barn and had two old vans out back of it that he had filled. It was all junk to Minnie, though. It didn't matter what he made with

it, how he stacked it or how he painted it. She couldn't see any use for any of it. She knew that it was important to Ellis, though, that he wasn't the type of man to spend so much time on something unless he cared about it.

"So, what do you want for breakfast? I picked up a ham the other day. You want some of that with your eggs?" She turned and leaned against the counter, facing Ellis' back. He was still sitting at the table.

"Sure that sounds good. Whatever you want to fix." He stretched and yawned and then pushed his chair away from the table. Minnie started breakfast and Ellis walked outside. He walked over to the screens that hung from the tree closest to the house, the ones the squirrels were playing on. The two squirrels hurried up the tree and Ellis stood and watched the screens till Minnie called him for breakfast.

It was Sunday so they waited until the afternoon to go into town. PJ went to church in the morning and wouldn't open his store until one o'clock. Minnie wanted to go to the grocery to pick up some things for dinner and maybe stop by the card shop to get a birthday card for her sister Eilene--nothing important, more of an excuse to get out of the house than anything else. It was even better that

Ellis was going, she thought, that they could be together and he would focus his attention on her and not his junk. She didn't relish the idea of stopping by PJ's but they wouldn't be there long she told herself.

They drove in silence except for Ellis cussing the Miller's dog for chasing after their car and Minnie pointing out all the flowers blooming in Sarah Hudson's yard. At the grocery Ellis pushed the cart along following behind Minnie and stopping every so often to read a package. Sometimes Ellis would stop and Minnie would be halfway down the aisle before she would notice and walk back to see what he was looking at; she just didn't care to read every label and advertisement the way Ellis did.

They separated when Minnie went to the card shop. Normally, when she was alone, she would read card after card after card, trying to find the one that was just right, but today she was conscious of Ellis; she didn't like to leave him alone. She could see him in her mind, wandering the streets, looking in windows. Her memory always went back to that time so many years ago, not long after they were married, when they had gone to Lexington to do some Christmas shopping and Ellis went off by himself while Minnie shopped for a dress for her niece. She really

thought that was the start of it all. Ellis had happened upon a clock shop and saw something that would change his life. It was the most unusual clock he had ever seen. Built on a wooden platform, a little man made out of twisted metal stood at the bottom, pumping a metal arm up and down, setting in motion an intricate mechanism that kept track of the seconds and minutes and hours that passed so quickly. He had been watching with amazement for close to an hour when Minnie came. She stood at his side momentarily, watching the little man pumping that arm that turned a gear that turned another smaller gear and so on and so on until there was such a jumble of motion that she looked away and pulled Ellis along with her. He had almost figured it out, he told her, and on the way home he made Minnie drive so that he could sketch out the clock on the back on an old AAA map that he found in the glovebox of their car.

Today when she found Ellis, though, he was just sitting and waiting, content just watching the cars passing by. They drove to PJ's and Minnie waited in the car, hoping that that would keep Ellis from taking too long. As she waited she thought about the clock again. Ellis seemed to be obsessed after that day. That night as they lay in

bed he continued to talk about it. He told her how he thought he could build one and how such a machine was the only way to actually watch time. It was only a matter of days before he began taking apart watches and clocks. He started trying to build one of his own, like he had seen at the clock shop. He took over the spare bedroom that Minnie had used as her sewing room until it became so cluttered with her junk that she didn't have any room to move. Ellis cleared the table of boxes of old clothes and Christmas ornaments and covered it with metal and tools and diagrams. On the days he was home he would disappear in there and Minnie and their daughter Jeanne would hardly even know he was home. He worked on that clock for almost five years before he got it to work properly. Minnie had thought that would be the end of it but he continued to build more. He talked about nothing else and when he revealed to Minnie one night that he wanted to build something that he could interact with he scared her. He said he wanted to be part of the mechanism, to actually be not just the creator but a participant. Minnie heard Ellis open the trunk and the clanking together of the copper as he arranged it. He got in the car quickly, like he was excited, almost like a child racing to get home to play with his new toy.

"PJ says he may be getting lumber when they tear down the old Johnson house. I told him I'd come by next week and see what he comes up with."

"You already got more than you know what to do with. Why don't you try using some of that you already got first." She said it without looking at him.

"It won't hurt nothing to have some extra. Besides it would just go to waste if I didn't take it."

Back home Ellis helped get the groceries in and then took his tubing out to the barn. Minnie put the groceries away and sat down to write her sister a short letter to go along with the card. Later, when Ellis came up from the barn, Minnie was sitting on the porch. She was just sitting, rocking in her chair and looking out over the yard at the things that Ellis had created over the years. There were animals shaped from scrap metal and painted bright colors. Giant mushrooms carved from wood were scattered around between the house and the barn. Minnie had learned to live with all that, gotten used to it really.

Ellis let out a groan as he plopped down in the chair. They sat in silence for a few minutes before Minnie spoke. "I'm going to call Jeanne a little later, after supper probably. Anything you want me to tell her?" Jeanne was

their only child. She had moved to Ohio after she had gotten married. She and Minnie were closer now than they had ever been.

"Well, no. Nothing new I can think of. When they gonna come down for a visit?" He said it like he didn't expect an answer and Minnie didn't respond.

After supper Ellis lay down for a nap and Minnie put away leftovers and washed dishes. When she was finished she sat at the kitchen table and called Jeanne.

"He's taking a nap right now," she told Jeanne. "We were in town today and he brought more junk home from PJ's. I told him we didn't need all that stuff but you know how he is." As she talked about Ellis she gripped the receiver tightly and pressed it hard against her ear. "I'll tell you what he's been doing, though. He's been out there in the barn with that tin woman. Probably will go back out there after he gets up." Jeanne tried to console her mother and tried to change the subject. It worked some but by the time Minnie was off the phone her mind was back on the tin woman. Boredom and curiosity conspired against her and she found herself going over in her mind what little she knew. She really didn't know what it was exactly, or what it was supposed to do. She had quit following his

projects long ago when she decided it was all just junk. She thought about the sketch she had seen in his notebook, but that was a long time ago, she thought to herself. It could have turned into anything by now.

Ellis was still sleeping when she decided to go down to the barn to look at it herself. She started out walking through the yard, looking at flowers but she kept telling herself that if she made it down to the barn she would peek in--just to have a quick look. The door was open but she couldn't see much when she just poked her head through so she stepped in. She could see it back in the corner. She had to step around a lot of other stuff to get to it, other projects Ellis had done over the years. All of the smaller pieces here in the barn seemed to play on that same fascination with movement that the clock did. When she got around to the tin woman, though, she could tell that it was different than all the others--if for nothing else than sheer size. It sat atop a base that looked like it was at least as wide as Minnie was tall. There was a metal railing that went around the outside of the base. Rising from each end of the base were pillars that supported a cylindrical mechanism of pulleys and cables and gears and wires. It all seemed to wrap around the outside boundary

imposed by the base. In the center a long metal pole rose up from the base and extended through the open space at the center of the mechanism. At the bottom of the pole, resting on the base, was a bucket seat that Ellis had taken from a car. He had welded a bracket to the back so that it would attach to the pole in a way that allowed it to revolve around and even be raised and lowered. Minnie stepped onto the platform and looked up into the inside. She couldn't tell what any of it was supposed to do. She reached her hand up into the mechanism and turned one of the pulleys. Nothing happened. She spun the seat around on its axis and it moved up the pole a little ways. She tried to spin it the other way but it wouldn't move and she couldn't get it down. She panicked; she didn't want Ellis to know that she had been there. She knew he wouldn't have minded but she felt like that if he knew that she was looking at his work then it might seem as if she was in some way validating it. She thought that may even bring him closer to it.

She began turning wheels and pulling cables and cranking handles but nothing seemed to work. If anything she made things worse. She tried to remember how everything was before and set it all back just as it had

been; but still, the seat would not go back to its original position. One last effort resulted in her disconnecting a cable that ran from the base of the pole up into the mechanism. It worked; the seat spiraled down the pole and came to rest at the base, only now she could not reattach the cable. She tried everything but it just wouldn't stretch back to where it had been attached.

Later, Ellis awoke and Minnie asked him, "You going out there to work tonight?" The second she asked she was afraid that he would be suspicious. She never had to ask when he was going to the barn, but he answered with a nod and disappeared out the door.

Minnie sat back on the couch with her feet up, watching TV and hoping that Ellis wouldn't notice the cable. She thought every noise was him coming in early to ask her if she had been in the barn. Her movie ended and then the news ended and Minnie decided that he had not noticed or had thought that the cable must have just come loose. She went to bed as usual and lie half asleep waiting to feel Ellis slide in beside her. Hours passed and Minnie was awakened by the sun streaming in the window. Ellis was not beside her.

She looked out the window and could see the barn door

still open. Her first thought was that he had to work all night to fix what she had broken. Then she started to think it served him right for spending all that time out there anyway. At the kitchen table she drank her coffee and watched the squirrels and waited as long as she could. On the way down to the barn she stopped to look at her flowers so as not to appear too anxious over his absence. As she stepped into the dim light of the barn she shivered at the cool air trapped from the night before. She called Ellis' name and stepped over the junk and walked around to where the tin woman stood. The seat was raised up into the mechanism and she could just see Ellis' feet dangling in the air. She put her hand on his boot and called his name again, but still he didn't answer. She ducked her head down so she could look up inside. It took her eyes a second to adjust before she saw Ellis with the cable wrapped around his neck. His eyes were turned back in his head and his mouth was open and he was not breathing. Minnie screamed and pulled at the seat and at Ellis and fumbled with the tin woman, but she couldn't get him out. She sat on the floor for over an hour before she went to the house to call the ambulance.

When the paramedics came and they asked Minnie what

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had happened all she could say between sobs was that he
died making love to that tin woman.

The Renunciate Parrot

[Camera zooms in on view of small, white church, nestled against a hillside. The small parking lot is packed with cars.]

Louie is a 37-year-old African grey parrot. He lived in Alabama with Frank Poustaphos for the first thirty-five years of his life. Then Frank died. Now he resides here in the small, southern Ohio town of Beaman. During services at the Cedar Grove Church of Jesus Christ he sits on his perch above the pulpit, huddled over with his head down. He has no feathers except the ones on his head he cannot reach.

[Cut to inside of church, camera slowly pans from the back of the church to the front.]

He was brought here by Brother Paul Kelley from the Center for Avian Treatment in Birmingham, Alabama; that's where birds go when they have problems, when their owners don't want them anymore or when they abuse them. You see parrots are very sensitive and intelligent creatures and are subject to many of the same problems as humans. Brother Paul was there on a tour when he saw Louie. To most people Louie didn't look any different than any of the other parrots at the center. They were kept three or four

to a large cage and had plenty of room to move around, though they did very little of that. Some huddled in corners, some hung from the sides of the cage, and some hung upside down from the top. Louie huddled in a corner. He sat there withdrawing from everything as best he could, rocking gently from one foot to the other. When Brother Paul walked around that side to face him he could hear Louie's voice above the screeching and whistling of the other birds. At that moment he knew he wanted to take Louie home.

[Cut to interview with nephew]

Uncle Frank pretty much kept to himself those last few years of his life. Except for me checking in on him and Louie every week I don't know of anyone else he saw. He was living what he called an ascetic life. He wanted to live a life of strict self-denial so that he could gain spiritual discipline. He explained it all to me in a letter. I just went over there one day and him and Louie were locked in his room and an envelope was tacked to the door. I could hear him inside saying something, but I couldn't understand the words and when I tried to talk to him he wouldn't answer. After I read the letter, though,

I understood. Uncle Frank and I always seemed to understand one another.

[Cut back to church. Camera pans around room, ultimately focusing on Louie]

Louie looks at home here in the sparsely decorated church. The walls are bare except for a picture of Jesus behind the pulpit and a cross above the door. On a good day there are only about thirty people in the congregation—plain people in plain clothes. Louie's perch hangs from the ceiling, about eye level. During the quieter parts of the services he sits there rocking gently back and forth, but when things really pick up, when the guitars are going and the drums are beating and the piano is playing and bodies are moving, Louie increases his pace. His head bowed and shaking hard one side to the other he mutters something inaudible beneath the roar of the music.

[Cut to interview with nephew]

After Uncle Frank's letter I was curious, not surprised, but curious. Uncle Frank had always been sort of a loner. Anyway, I started reading all about it. Uncle Frank had this book, the Philokalia or something like that. It turned out that what that parrot was saying was the

prayer of the Publican. You know in the bible where Paul says "pray without ceasing." Well, some people used to take that literally and go around saying this prayer over and over. I think that's what Uncle Frank was saying that day when he first locked himself in that room. You see, you can't just start out doing it continuously all at once. You got to work your way up to it. That's what Uncle Frank had to do. At first he even had to say it out loud. I tried it for a while myself and that was the only way I could do it. My mind still wandered but at least I could keep going. It was the same for Uncle Frank. That's when that bird picked it up I guess. He heard Uncle Frank and started saying it himself. That's what parrots do you know. After a while, after Frank got more disciplined and all, he could say it internally, not out loud I mean. Louie kept on saying it out loud, though. I guess it just takes longer for a bird.

[Cut to view of Louie and Brother Paul]

When the service ends Louie leaves riding atop Brother Paul's shoulder, staring straight ahead. He looks like any other parrot, except for the missing feathers. His eyes are clear and he seems alert--a totally different parrot

from the one he was back in Birmingham, or even in those early days here with Brother Paul.

In the car on the way home Louie perches on the passenger-side headrest, that's where he rides when just he and Brother Paul are alone in the car, like when they go to and from church. Brother Paul's wife Jeanne and his ten-year-old daughter Anne do not attend church. They are not atheists or agnostics, even. They say they just don't like all the commotion and activity that goes on at Brother Paul's church. "Maybe if there just wasn't so much noise," Jeanne says. Their absence causes a lot of talk among the brethren, but Paul goes about his business and they all pray for Jeanne--except for Louie; he still prays for himself.

[Closeup on Brother Paul]

"Louie was something I needed in my life. I think everyone at the church likes having him around also. He seems to bring in a lot of people who wouldn't necessarily come every Sunday.

"He's good around the house too. Jeanne and Anne really enjoy his company and I think he's been good for them. I mean he gives them someone to depend on them.

Since I've been with the church they don't have me around like I used to be."

[Cut to interview with nephew]

After a couple months Uncle Frank got so he'd at least talk to me. That's when I really began to see what his new life was all about. Usually me and him and Louie would sit out in back of his house, looking out over the field at the lake. We didn't always talk much but it made me feel better to see that he was okay, that at least he was wasn't letting himself waste away in that room. I think that's why he started seeing me, really. Because he knew I was worried. Still, when I was there, he never forgot his praying. He had this bell; you know the kind with the wood handle coming out the top? Well, he'd ring this bell every quarter of the hour and then he'd say the prayer.

"Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me."

And then Louie would repeat it right after him. "LORD JESUS CHRIST HAVE MERCY ON ME. RAAAH."

Uncle Frank said it was so he'd be sure to keep God first and foremost in his mind at all times. I guess it was a way for him to remind himself.

[Cut to the Kelley household]

Louie has the run of the Kelley home and spends a good deal of his time with Anne. Anne sits on the floor and Louie perches on the arm of the chair behind her. "Louie is my best friend," says Anne. "He's always here waiting for me when I come home from school." At the mention of his name Louie stretches to rub his beak against the back of Anne's head. "Daddy says he'll be mine one day."

Louie turns at the sound of dishes rattling in the kitchen. He hops to the floor and waddles around the corner into the kitchen where Jeanne is setting the table for lunch. He stretches and clamps his beak around the brace running between the legs of Anne's old high chair, pulling himself off the floor and hooking a foot over the brace; suddenly he is standing. Two more such maneuvers puts him on the back of the chair.

"He likes to sit up there and watch me cook. I almost stepped on him once when he was on the floor so I think he feels safe up there. He never gets in the way like that." Jeanne reaches over to Louie and he nuzzles his beak at the back of her hand and then playfully tugs at one of the many rings that line her fingers.

"Ah, ah, Louie. What have I told you about my rings."

"LORD JESUS CHRIST HAVE MERCY ON ME. RAAH."

"He likes shiny things."

[Cut to interview with nephew]

Uncle Frank had that bird for as long as I can remember. He got it when it was just a baby. Fed it with his own hand. The thing about parrots though is that they live a long time, longer than a lot of humans. Sixty or seventy years, maybe. So if you were to go and buy a baby parrot you can almost bet it will outlive you. That can be a problem for the parrot if you don't make arrangements for someone to take care of it. Even if you do make arrangements it's still not always easy for the bird; sometimes they just don't like their new owners. That's why I tried to take care of Louie for a while. Uncle Frank didn't make no other arrangements. I suppose he figured the Lord would provide.

That bird was just too far gone by the time I got him, though. He had sit in there with Uncle Frank's dead body for close to two weeks before I found them. I went on a fishing trip over to Hokes Bluff and when I got back the two of them were there in Uncle Frank's room, only Uncle Frank was dead. Louie was just sitting up there on his

perch saying that prayer over and over.

"LORD JESUS CHRIST HAVE MERCY ON ME. LORD JESUS CHRIST HAVE MERCY ON ME. LORD JESUS CHRIST HAVE MERCY ON ME. LORD JESUS CHRIST HAVE MERCY ON ME."

[Cut back to Kelley household]

"Honey, why don't you let Louie stay here with us tonight? He's been out in the yard with Anne playing most of the day. I'm sure he's tired."

"Why is it you don't like him going with me. It isn't bad enough you don't want me taking Anne; now you gotta go and try to keep Louie from the Lord too." He sits down on the couch to put on the black leather shoes he wears to church. On Sundays he usually wears his church clothes all day, everything except the shoes; they hurt his feet.

"That's not what I mean. It's just that . . . he's had a hard life. I don't know that all that commotion is always good for him." She's pacing between him and the blank screen of the TV. "Maybe if you just took him every now and then."

"He likes it." Bother Paul stands and rests his hand on her shoulder. "You should come and see, really." He hugs her and kisses her forehead and then leaves. Jeanne

watches from the window as he takes Louie from Anne and sits him atop his shoulder. They drive away together.

[Cut to interview with nephew]

Like I said, I tried to keep him for awhile. It was hard, though. It reminded me too much of Uncle Frank with its praying and all. I really tried. I finally decided to give him to that lady from the county. She was there when they came to get his body. She said she had some birds of her own, that she could take care of him if I wanted. Well, I didn't think it was right, her not knowing Uncle Frank or Louie or anything. I said no; I could do it.

A couple weeks later I called her up and asked her if she still wanted him. I felt bad giving him up. I still feel bad. That bird just wasn't right in the head, though. He'd pulled most of his feathers out when he sit there all that time after Uncle Frank died. It was hard to look at him . . . and to listen to him.

Anyway that lady couldn't keep him either. She said he'd started all her other birds to praying also and that it was about to drive her crazy. You get three or four birds all together saying that prayer over and over, I can understand that.

She called me and told me about this place for birds with problems like Louie's. She said there were all sorts of parrots there that had been abandoned or mistreated by their owners. I told her Uncle Frank never mistreated that bird, but I let her take him there anyway. I still wonder about him. I hear they found a home for him. Somebody up near Sulphur Springs.

[Cut to church]

Before the service begins Louie sits in the back of the church on a pew and several children are gathered around him. He sits there and turns, back to front at the voices of the children.

"Hello. Hello. Hello. Hello. Hello," says a blonde-haired little girl.

"Polly want a cracker. Polly want a cracker. Polly want a cracker," says a boy, taking from his pants pocket a partially crumbled cracker that he'd been saving all day for this occasion. "Polly want a cracker."

"His name's not Polly. That's why he's not taking it. Call him by his name," says another boy as he tries to take the cracker from the first boy.

"Hello. Hello. Hello. Hello. Hello." says the

blonde-haired little girl again.

Louie never makes a sound. He just turns from voice to voice as if puzzled by the words. After a few minutes Brother Paul gets Louie and takes him to his place at the front of the church. The service begins and at the sound of the music Louie begins his rocking and head bobbing.

[Cut to Kelley household]

In the morning Louie walks through the house from room to room, checking first on Brother Paul as he dresses for work, then down the hall to Anne's room where she gets ready for school. He lingers there for a moment as she gathers things into her book bag. No one says anything to him and he stays just long enough to see that everything is going as it normally does and then he moves on.

By the time he gets to the kitchen Jeanne has already made coffee and is buttering a piece of toast at the table. Louie climbs up the high-chair and sits, looking at Jeanne.

"Well, good morning, Louie. How's my bird today." Louie sits silently and Jeanne reaches over to give him a piece of her crust. Louie takes it without a word.

When Brother Paul and Anne come in Louie maintains his

silence amidst the chatter and activity. He gladly accepts the few scraps of bread given to him by Anne and Brother Paul. As they finish their last swallows of juice and coffee, Anne and Brother Paul give Louie and gentle rub on the head and Jeanne a kiss and they leave.

[Cut to closeup of Jeanne]

"I've really gotten used to having Louie around. When Paul first brought him home I wasn't too happy about it. I mean I always thought birds were dirty and noisy. Louie isn't either of those things. Well, what I was really worried about was him pooping all over the place, but it isn't like that at all. I have this little metal tray and when I say 'Gotta go potty. Gotta go potty. Gotta go potty.' we walk to the laundry room and he sits on the edge of the dryer and I hold the tray underneath him. He does his business and there's no mess.

"He hardly ever says anything. Except for that prayer. But that's why Paul brought him home in the first place. He's never said anything except that prayer since he's been with us. I thought it was kinda spooky at first. I mean this bird that prays. Sometimes it seemed like he really thought he'd done something to ask forgiveness for. I don't mind it so much anymore. Sometimes I even get him

to say it for no reason, just to hear the sound of another voice. You know when we're here alone.

"I just say it over and over until he starts doing it.

"Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me. Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me. Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me. Lord Jesus . . .

"CHRIST HAVE MERCY ON ME. LORD JESUS CHRIST HAVE MERCY ON ME. LORD JESUS CHRIST HAVE MERCY ON ME. LORD JESUS . . .

"Christ have mercy on me."

"I guess it's the closest I get to going to church."