

Holy Water

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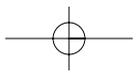
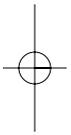
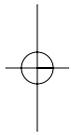
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Riverfire

The river is burning down.

Or is it up? The river is burning up. More than a hundred feet up. And since his boat is upwind from the night-burning pit furnaces to the south and stars are shining defiantly in a sky that rarely allows them to and the white-tipped lesser Himalayas loom on either side of the valley to the east and west, he thinks that this is a disturbingly beautiful thing. This riverfire.

They didn't tell him about this phenomenon at the executive briefing in Manhattan. The exit interview at the home office. Nowhere in the Winning Business Abroad Six Sigma PowerPoint presentation does he recall hearing anything about a body of water consumed by flame.

All they told him was, In this economy, be thankful you have a freakin' job.

His groin aches. The epicenter of phantom pains. The karmic vortex. The fleshy receptacle of damaged memories. Formerly known as his testicles.

The fire is highest where debris collects in the crooked river's bend.

He is a big believer in the symbolic weight of what song is playing at a particular moment. And if a song isn't playing, he will assign a song to the moment and force the symbolism, revel in the false epiphany. His suggested sound track for this moment would be Spoon's "The Beast and the Dragon Adored."

"That's beautiful. Is it some kind of welcome ceremony organized by the villagers?" he asks, even though he knows that this isn't some kind of

welcome ceremony organized by the villagers. He knows that the river up here was coated with a black skin of waste that was waiting to burn. Daring someone to light the match.

Like what? The Cuyahoga. Near Cleveland in 1969. He is too young to remember the actual fire but not too young to get his history from R.E.M.'s "Cuyahoga."

This is where we walked, this is where we swam . . .

"It is not a ceremony," explains his corporate liaison/host/executioner. "It is toxic, this river." The man waves at the flaming water as if it is a hyper-kinetic child. "Sometimes it does that."

Henry and the corporate liaison exchange a glance that signals a transition in their relationship. The end of bullshit. Previously the liaison had told him that a pro-democracy demonstration in the capital city was a birthday celebration for the king, that the black ash that fell like nightmare snow on Shangri-La Square was volcanic, and that his country was a human rights champion despite the fact that it still hasn't abolished slavery.

Let's put our heads together, start a new country up . . .

He sees this as a bad thing, this sudden telling of the truth. He decides that the end of bullshit means they no longer care what he thinks. His hosts. His corporate partners. The diminished bureaucrats of a fading monarchy. Because someone to whom they have decided to tell the truth is obviously someone who no longer matters. Out of the corner of his eye he sees the Madison Avenue PR exec brought in to work the same spin magic her firm did for the Beijing Games staring at her out-of-service iPhone and quietly weeping.

He decides to give the corporate liaison another chance to lie. To help matters, he even spells out the premise of the lie for him. "Maybe there was, you know, an accident. A tanker spill or a factory mishap. Perhaps the Chinese . . ."

The liaison shakes his head, lights an American cigarette. "No," he answers. "Even rivers burn. This one . . . toxic, twenty-four seven."

Cuyahoga, gone . . .

No one told him about any of this. No one told him about the corruption, the poverty, the malaprop billboard in the half-built "Free Zone" touting "Quality Manufactured Gods." No one told him that the nonparty constitutional democracy to which he was being extra-sourced was actually an unhinged monarchy which is, when the UN and Amnesty International aren't looking, a dictatorship. No one told him about the delusional, profit- and Bollywood-obsessed despot in waiting. And no one told him that his five-star "spiritual eco-lodge" with a private bathing garden, infinity pool, and extensive spa menu was also a warehouse that sat on a hilltop less than a mile from a water-challenged village with one occasionally working pump that tapped into an aquifer of the most polluted and, as it turns out, flammable river on the planet.

Which would have been nice, since he works for a recently purchased subsidiary of an American-held bottled water company whose mission statement, printed on the cover of its lavishly produced annual report, is "Bringing fresh water to a thirsty world."

No one told him. But then again, it's not like he'd asked a whole lot of questions.

"What do you put it out with?" Henry asks. The liaison doesn't answer. He just watches the flames.

But the front man from the yet-to-be-dispatched U.S. congressional delegation, a young Republican who vomited over the side of the boat less than ten minutes ago, does have an answer. "You put it out with truth," he says. "And courage."

This elicits laughter from the in-country deal-maker for the biggest brand at the gates, the Walmart delegation, which is just waiting for the proverbial green light. The wink and nod from the palace. He removes from his lips the stem of a silver hashish pipe that had been passed to him by an Australian corporate mercenary. "Courage? My God, son. Don't start going all John McCain on us now."

Randy Newman had a Cuyahoga song too. "Burn on, Big River."

He squirts a glob of Purell into his left palm and rubs as if it can kill nightmares and coups d'état as well as 99.9 percent of most common germs.

Before he left New York he did the most perfunctory of searches. Google. Lonely Planet. An old atlas. It's all he had time for, considering what he left, how fast everything happened. His boss called Galado a

chance to start over, an opportunity to lose his inherent wussiness. His boss's boss called it, via e-mail, history waiting to happen, the next Bangalore. Wikipedia called it "a secret and mysterious kingdom, long isolated from international politics and commerce."

"Wow, what a shit-hole," he hears the Walmart guy say as they skirt east of the fire and drift past a shoreline village. Women with buckets are wading into those sections of the water that are not burning. Children are running along the river's edge, keeping pace with the slow-moving boat.

He's not sure where they're taking him. Either to a party in his honor, he thinks, or to kill him, to preserve what's left of theirs.

His soon-to-be ex-wife called it the perfect place for him to suffer the slow and painful death he deserves.

The woman with whom he thought he was falling in love called it something too, but he can't be sure, because she said it in a language he doesn't understand.

He doesn't know and no one told him anything.

Yet here he is. A newly made VP of global water, investor relations, for a company whose headquarters he's never seen, whose founders he just met, and one of them is huddled somewhere in the hold of this boat, on a burning river in a country he didn't know existed three months ago.

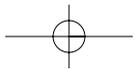
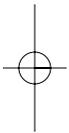
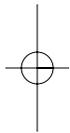
As they reverse engines and slow alongside a floating dock at the far end of the village that his suspiciously beaming colleague has just called a shit-hole, he looks at the people gathering to meet them, to throw them a line, their faces aglow with hope and reflected riverfire.

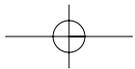
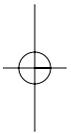
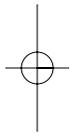
Or is that hate instead of hope?

He listens for the symbolic song to accompany the moment. Perhaps a chant supplied by the locals or faint notes from a far-off boom box. Then, hearing only the wailing of strangers, he attempts to assign one. But this moment needs more than one song, he decides. It needs a sound track. A playlist.

A mix tape for the apocalypse.

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Here Lies

Depending on where he wakes up, Henry Tuhoe's train ride is either a life-affirming journey through a pastoral wonderland of lakes, woods, and river palisades or an oppressive death trek through the biggest cemetery ghetto in the world.

Today it's all cemeteries. Gravestones of all shapes, denominations, and price tags, a mile-long stretch of a half-million granite guillotines on either side of the tracks, pinching in.

Lately, even on those less frequent occasions when he does happen to awaken and look out upon a glorious stretch of river, the tacking sailboats and tug-drawn barges, he sees nothing. He doesn't see or feel the beauty of any of it. Instead he sees only the slack tide of the river inside him, separating anxiety from despair, and the only thing that he feels is regret. Regret for not having even the smallest urge to take some kind of meaningful action, to pursue something even remotely honest or admirable regarding . . . well, anything.

Which is to be expected when one is living a middle-manager, commuter life at the age of thirty-two, when one's wife, who of late has taken an interest in the occult, recently insisted that one get a vasectomy and then rarely lets one touch her anyway.

This morning, awakening to the gravestones, Henry sits up in his window seat and sees everything. Every plot, every marker, every mass-molded ornament in all of its excessive, maudlin detail. From the crudest unpolished stones, for which even the word *slab*

would be an overstatement, to the condominium-sized mausoleums of those who felt obligated to say *fuck you* to their neighbors, even in death.

The song in his headphones is “Fleeing the Valley of Whirling Knives,” by Lightning Bolt.

In these first waking moments, as the train jerks and shudders toward Grand Central and the sleeping businessman next to him leaks drool on the keyboard of his laptop, oblivious of the soft-core love scene from a Hong Kong action flick playing on his screen, Henry thinks of how his life to this point has been so precisely planned and ordered, the conscientious fulfillment of limited expectations. So much so that he decides if he were to write down how the next fifty years of his time on earth will play out, he is certain that he would get a troubling amount of it right.

Last week on the 6:18 into Manhattan the train slowed to a stop just below Tarrytown. After ten minutes the engineer announced over the PA that because of police activity on the southbound track they would be backing up and switching to the northbound. Henry sat up and looked out at a gathering of forlorn police and MTA officials contained in a ring of yellow tape, stooping over a body bag just beyond the shelf of the Tarrytown platform. Later that day he read on Twitter that it was a suicide. Not the first track-jumper he’d heard of, but seeing the body bag as dawn broke over suburbia had affected him.

On the way home that night, passing the scene, he thought, If you do it in the morning, you hate your job. If you do it in the evening, you hate whatever it is you’re going home to.

Looking back out the window this morning, he can’t help but feel that these graves are all his, and that he lies rotting beneath every last piece of stone, every cross, every Star of David, every pedestal-mounted archangel twisting skyward. He lies beneath the faded miniature military flags, the wreaths of white carnations, the single red roses, and the tilted vases of flowers plastic and dead. He lies beneath the rain-smearred Polaroids, crayon notes from children and grandchildren, yearbooks signed by teenagers who weren’t in the car that night. Beneath the Barbie dolls and baseball gloves and dog biscuits, the footprints of grave dancers and the stains of

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grave pissers. Beneath the paperback copies of Wordsworth and Whitman and Danielle Steel, the half-drunk bottles of fine champagne and small-batch bourbon, twenty-five-year-old tawny port and brand-stinking-new Mad Dog 20/20.

He lies beneath all of it, staring into the wet press of earth above.

Henry Tuhoe, all of thirty-two, without the slightest inclination to rise.

Yet he does.