

Love God

Jimmy sat in his bedroom, stooping over his desk, trembling with a pencil in his hand. Twenty or so balls of crushed paper littered the messy floor, three on his dirty bed. On the desk, being scrutinized by his terrified eyes, was a love letter.

His shaky hands made fussy lines despite how many times he tried to make the letters perfect. The note read:

Cindy
I love you.
Do you love me?

Yes No

Jimmy

He stared at the paper for a long time. Tears appeared in little beads around his eyes. He snatched the paper from the table, smashed it between his hands, and threw it against the wall. The doorbell rang. Downstairs, his mother's footsteps made a line from the kitchen to the entryway. The door creaked on its hinges, followed by the muffled voices of happy people. The sounds echoed in the hallway and intruded from under Jimmy's door. His grandfather, and his grandmother, voices thick with an old-world accent, made bright conversation with his very-American mother. There was another voice, too, probably Uncle Roman's; Jimmy could already smell rotten alcohol and convenience-store cologne.

"Jimmy!" his mother's voice from under the door called, "They're here! Come down!" Jimmy slammed the pencil on the table and wiped his eyes before dragging himself out of the room.

"Hey, it's Jimmy!" His wrinkled relatives called from the entryway when he appeared. There was Uncle Roman behind them, shutting the door. His button-shirt was parted to reveal a chest of curled hairs, and a medallion on a gold chain.

Jimmy descended the stairs with a heavy thump on every step. He gave a good stomp on the squeaky stair. His grandmother descended upon him with kisses, much like the lion devours the water buffalo.

"Ooooh, my little grandchild! It has been so long. Too long. Look how you've grown! All grown up now. Kiss me like you used to."

"Gran-Gran, you were just here for the Fourth of July." He caught a scowl from his mother, but turned his head so he didn't have to bear it.

His grandfather came and gave him a hug. His bones were so close to his skin, without muscle or fat to cushion his affection. "It's good to see you, grandson."

"It's good to see you too, Pop-Pop."

"Sorry we couldn't make it in for your birthday. Here, I've got a card from me and Gran-Gran."

From the top zipper-pocket of his leather suitcase, Pop-Pop pulled out a shiny piece of folded cardstock with the number 12 written in bright gold. Jimmy opened the card. Nothing fell out.

“Thanks, Pop-Pop.”

“Your Gran-Gran has not stopped talking about you, all the way over. *Oh, he's probably so big, now. Oh, I wonder how his school is going. Oh, we need to invite him to our home over winter and spoil him rotten.*”

Gran-Gran grumbled. “Well *you* don't understand just how much I love our little grandson.”

“He's not little any more, Ma-Ma.” Uncle Roman set a heavy hand on Jimmy's shoulder and shook him. Jimmy felt a bruise begin to form. “Look at him. Reminds me so much of Gregor, I thought this was a dream.”

The entryway grew quiet. The moment stalled. Jimmy's mother broke the tension. “Well, let me show you where you're staying. Gran and Pop, you'll be upstairs at the end of the hall. Rome, I hope it's alright if you sleep on the couch, we don't have any more bedrooms.”

“I thought I could just bunk up with you, sis.”

The room grew colder; maybe the wind was still swirling from the door being left open. His mother recovered the moment. “No, no. My bed is off limits. There's blankets in the living room next to the couch. It folds out into a really comfortable hide-away. Come on, I'll show you two where your room is. Jimmy, will you grab Pop's bags?”

They dragged the suitcases up the steps and down the hallway. The wheels loudly scraped against the iron floor-waffle that emitted heat during cold winter nights. Jimmy set Pop's bags outside the bedroom door and then retreated back to his room.

He ignored his family's voices, despite their directionless words coming through the little crack in his door. He was again stooped over his work, a Mozart or a Rembrandt, the future pulling down on his shoulders, begging him to die in his graven masterpiece.

A long time passed; it could have been an hour, or a day, or seven weeks. The smells of roast duck and steamed cauliflower were floating up from the dinner hall, haunting his nostrils, tearing his concentration. He heard the pieces of conversation that made their sneaky way under his bedroom door. His mother speaking loudly to Uncle Roman; a boorish chuckle returning her words. Down the hallway, he heard the old language being spoken; Gran-Gran and Pop-Pop were praying, the soft click and clack of her rosary, or maybe Pop-Pop's worry beads. Jimmy saw his grandmother's furrowed brow, her religious concentration, the picture of his dead father she'd prop up on the bedside table.

Heavy feet plodded up the stairs. They stopped in front of Jimmy's door. Fat knuckles beat on his door as if trying to force entry.

“Jimmy my boy. What are you doing in here?”

The doorknob turned. Jimmy sprang up, knocking his chair backward. He started kicking the paper wads under the bed, but it was too late. The door was open, and there stood his uncle. Jimmy turned his back to the invader.

“What, Uncle Roman?” His voice cracked.

The boor stepped in and closed the door behind him. In the tiny bedroom, this man was an Odysseian giant, and Jimmy a captured lamb. The monster looked around the room for just a moment, searching the cave for signs of danger. Those heavy feet took two big steps and were already across the room. The monster dropped onto Jimmy's bed, crushing the blankets. The metal springs screamed for help.

They sat there for an endless moment, in silence. Roman looked round the room, eyes obscured behind large, creased eyebrows. He turned his stubbled chin towards the floor, then reached to grab one a piece of paper. Jimmy made a tiny squealing noise; he would have stolen the paper out of the giant's hands if he wasn't so afraid. He watched in terror as Uncle Roman unwrapped the cast-away letter. Uncle Roman's face was ruffled with concentration, then it opened into a smile like a blooming spring flower. His black eyes turned from the paper and attacked Jimmy from behind a stupid grin.

“You are in love, my boy! What is her name?”

Jimmy leaned forward a little and looked at the note, to make sure he hadn't forgotten to write her name on that draft.

“Umm... Cindy?”

“Ah, Cindy, a beautiful name! Tell me about her. Is she beautiful?”

Jimmy didn't speak. He couldn't speak. He could barely breathe.

“Come on, Jimmy. Tell me about her.” Uncle Roman gave the boy a punch on the shoulder, already crushed by the careless squeeze.

There was an long pause. The giant's stare was unnerving. “She... she's... pretty.”

“She's pretty!” His head rolled backwards and the barking roar of a sea lion shot out of his hairy throat.

“She's pretty and she has blonde hair and I've wanted to ask her to be my girlfriend since the second grade. But she likes Tommy and Stuart wants to be her boyfriend too so I don't have a chance.”

He was panting. A sprinter lost Olympic silver. His head sank into to his lap.

“My boy.” Uncle Roman put those giant hands on Jimmy's head. “You are your father's son. You do not know this yet, but you are very good with women. But my lord, you were not going to give her this crap were you? A piece of paper to woo a woman? That is not the way at all.”

Uncle Roman put his massive hands over Jimmy's ears and twisted the boy's small face to look into his own. Those little eyes were wet and filled with sadness.

“I have been a very lucky man. I am fantastic when it comes to seducing women. You are a very lucky boy, to have an uncle like me, and a father like yours was. Let me show you something.”

He reached into the pocket that was buried under his enormous legs. He clasped something in his hands, and brought the closed fist under Jimmy's nose with the dirty fingernails pointed upward. Slowly, he opened the fleshy cage. In it, he held something smooth, like a tumbled sea shell, skinny and shaped like the finger of a newborn baby.

“Do you know what this is?”

Jimmy shook his head.

“It is a badger's penis.”

The boy tried forcing himself backward from the blanched fossil, but Uncle Roman's giant hand was still grasped behind his head. The smell rising to his nostrils was either the sweaty palm of his monstrous uncle, or the stench of an ancient and unwashed badger's penis.

“Everybody knows, in the old country, a badger's penis makes the person who carries it a god of love. A badger's penis in your pocket boosts your confidence. It loosens your tongue, and the subtle smell of it attracts any lady you could ever want, and many who you would never want. I have carried this badger's penis with me since your father married your mother. He gave it to me when he knew that she would belong to him forever. He had always told me, when we were drunk and our mouths were free, that it was because of this penis that he could woo your mother so well.”

Jimmy's pupils grew larger. His gaze was fixed on the penis of a dead animal and the hands of his kinsman who held it like a religious artifact, like the sandals of Christ.

“I still remember the day he killed the poor thing. He killed the badger himself, with his own hands. He came home after walking through the woods, covered in oozing red scratches, smelling like skunk urine. He swung the thing by its little tail, all the way home. Its anus was dripping with yellow puss and feces. He dropped the badger by the door and went to his room, to collect his hunting knife. He told me later that he'd forgotten to put it back in its leather before he had gone into the woods. He had to kill the creature with his bare hands. With his bare hands! He took the badger outside and cut its penis off, and hung it outside on a little string so the sun could dry it.

“Well, he gave me this badger penis, his most important possession. After so many years of carrying it, there is no woman who can resist me. But I have learned how to be the master of attraction. I do not need this any more. It is for you, little Jimmy, son of my brother, it is for you.”

He took his hand from the boy's neck and pulled the little wrist towards him, pushing the fossil into his nephew's palm and closing a hairy fist around it. Jimmy's hair stood, electrified. The badger penis was rough, like a dry chicken bone, and almost as large as his smallest finger. He held it up to look at it. There was a little crease at the tip, and a hole at the other end where his father had put a piece of string; yellow and decaying threads held together despite the anger of time.

Visions of the future intoxicated his mind. A beautiful girl in the passenger seat of his first car, a view of the city from the lover's hilltop; he, a famous hero with bulging muscles, saving beautiful women from criminal intentions and taking them to the top of a New York City skyscraper, to make love under the glowing sky; and Cindy, her smile, her kiss, the penis of a badger in the pocket of his

jeans, stiff and powerful like the sword of an ancient king.

“Yes, my boy. Yes. You feel its power. That is the power of a love god. Not in these silly words on dying paper, but in the breath of burning passion, issued from your throat in the moments of ecstasy when you are wrapped by the arms of a beautiful woman. You cannot build the fire of passion with your ideas of love, my boy. It is with your breath that you win a woman's heart.”

They sat for a long time. It could have been an hour, or a day, or seven weeks. Jimmy held the badger's ancient penis carefully in his hands.

“Uncle Roman?”

“Yes, my boy?”

“Did you make all of that up?”

“Jimmy, my boy.” Uncle Roman smiled wide, revealing all of his teeth, including the gold one that sat near the back of his tongue. “Would I ever lie to you?”