

That infernal place was always laughing, more than anything else, louder than the commotional crowds gathering outside the church every morning. Gathering to wait, eventually to go congregate inside the nave where we'd refer to them as *the* congregation. I used to lean against one of the pillars towards the back, behind the pulpit, while the priestess sermonized to *the* congregation *every* morning. The easiest lesson to learn from those days was that it's easy enough to fall into a rut anywhere on earth. Some days I'd sit on the floor, if I didn't want to cast my entire presence out across the room; she kept coloring books and crayons in the closet out in the anteroom and juice boxes in her fridge up in the steeple, so I'd sit on the floor with a coloring book and a juice box and crayons. Some days I'd open the book, other days I'd leave it there on the ground and stare at her ass. I don't like how the interior pages felt. And on a set of the days where I'd opened the book, I wouldn't color in it; on the set constituting the rest of those days, I would. Again—I don't like how the crayons felt rubbing against those interior pages. I always drank the juice, though, if I'd grabbed a carton. But she didn't always have any left, or sometimes she did but they were still sitting in the box they'd arrived in on the truck that came the first of every month, so they weren't cold. I think she had a couple thousand delivered monthly, for *the* congregation. She didn't refrigerate those that were distributed to *the* congregation, and she didn't because she hated them, like I did.

I know that she hated them—the churchgoers—because I asked her one day after her sermons and we had gone back up to the steeple to get high and fuck. That's not as interesting as it might sound, and where it might've been originally, that routine did eventually become a routine (hence my referring to it as such). During our relationship—and I mean the interval starting from the moment I met her and ending when she was killed—I was never quite sure where I stood with her. That was the source of excitement, an unending uneasiness. Not the sex or the weed.

Like I said, I asked her one day after her sermons and our routine why she didn't refrigerate the juice boxes for *the* congregation. She said that she didn't have a refrigerator large enough to chill hundreds of juice boxes all at once (I take issue with this language, but I'll return to this). "That makes sense," I said. "I suppose I should've expected a practical explanation."

"What were you expecting?"

"Not an expectation, so much as it was a 'hey, wouldn't this be funny if it were true?' A hypothetical, absurd sort of expectation, I suppose, in which your refusal to refrigerate the juice boxes was a passive aggressive revolt against *the* congregation for being let's say one of the worst parts of your day."

"That makes sense," she said. "I do hate them." As for the language 'hundreds of juice boxes': for all the times I've thought about these moments, and for all the time I spent in that infernal place, I cannot determine the degree to which she'd been hyperbolizing when she said that. The commotional crowds outside the church looked positively enormous, so much so that I write 'crowds' instead of 'crowd.' Thousands strong, at least. But there are only so many seats inside the nave, and she only begins her sermons—sorry, *began* her sermons—when the street was

empty. I tried counting the heads of *the* congregation on several occasions, but after about 30 I'd lose count or notice that I double-counted or triple-counted the bald fat man three rows back, or the elderly Asian couple who fed me dinner one night, and I'd give up for the day. There was always tomorrow to try counting again. I tried counting the pews—there were twenty, to my memory—and to my eye each seemed wide enough to accommodate maybe three to five churchgoers, but each morning it always seemed like at least twenty people sat in each of the twenty pews. Some days felt like there were hundreds crammed onto a single wooden bench. They sat on top of one another and she sermonized to great piles of churchgoers. *The* congregation. What a strange group. It was always the same people everyday: almost the entire population save for a few of the other vagabonds who were living there in my time and perhaps the clerk across the street. And with only 23 houses that I could see in the vicinity, and without any indication of large drothes of people coming in from elsewhere to listen to my ex-girlfriend the priestess give the worst (or best, depending on your point of view) sermons you'd ever hear out of a Catholic church (or any church, for that matter), the numbers simply never made any sense to me. I don't think they ever will.

I'd been surprised, initially, once I learned that she was who she told me she was: the church's priestess and, indeed, that chapter's only faculty member. I asked her under the same circumstances as I'd asked her about the warm juice boxes—after we'd finished with our ritual, leaning sweatily against opposite sides of the steeple, hotboxing—how she managed to get herself ordained with the Catholic church since it doesn't allow women to get themselves ordained. She told me it just sort of happened. “Nobody stopped me,” she said.

“That makes sense,” I said. “But it was as a hypothetical, absurd sort of expectation, I suppose, that I imagined you calling the Catholic church and telling them you were looking to get yourself ordained. The priest on the other end laughed, and asked you whether you knew that women weren't allowed into the priesthood. ‘Yes, I knew,’ you said. ‘I meant my twin brother. I think of him as an extension of myself sometimes—he's the one that wants to get himself ordained.’”

“‘Well alright then,’ said the priest. ‘Have him drive down to the Catholic church and we'll set him up.’”

“‘Okay,’ you said. And you borrowed a bulky tweed suit from a member of *the* congregation and donned a fake moustache you had delivered a few months ago in anticipation of that moment, and drove down to the Catholic church. You introduced yourself as your twin brother, with as deep a voice as you could muster, and all that you mustered happened to pass the priest's muster, and you got yourself ordained.’”

“That makes sense,” she laughed. “But I just took over for my parents and nobody said boo. There was never any big fuss over a woman on the pulpit, which had also been the case when my parents were around. They alternated who'd be sermonizing for the day, each day, and sometimes they took turns mid-sentence, mid-sermon.”

“How would they manage that?”

“I don’t know!” she laughed again. “I never paid attention to what they actually said. And—as far as I can tell—*the* congregation doesn’t either. I sermonize everyday and nobody says boo, and thus far there hasn’t been a single thing I’ve said—not a single line I’ve crossed—after which somebody said boo. And you’ve heard me up there. ‘*The* congregation,’ I’d begin, as though I weren’t quite addressing the churchgoers themselves. ‘My fellow man. My fellow woman. Countrymen, lend me your ears. Four score and seven years ago I had a dream of many years later, when Colonel Aureliano Buendia faced the firing squad.’ I go on like that for awhile—they seem to like it when I vamp. On the shorter days, the days when I’m bored, all I do is rip off openings for a few minutes and let *the* congregation out on its merry way.”

“It blows me away that you can get away with that.”

“On the longer days, the days when I have something to say—well, again you’ve heard me. There was the day I spent an hour gesturing towards Jesus as the singular source of inspiration for the Holocaust. I spent another day—”

“—was I there for that?”

“You might’ve been.”

“That seems...”

“Outrageous?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“But you got away with it.”

“Well, nobody outraged. Nobody said boo.”

“Jesus.”

“As Hitler, right. And then I spent another day describing the sorts of prostitutes I’d hire if I used the church’s proceeds to convert it into a brothel. That day was curious, because I swear the bald fat man had an erection but he was staring blankly ahead of himself for its entire duration.”

“Interesting case of an unacknowledged physiological response.”

“Right, but wouldn’t you notice a sort of draftiness around your crotch where the fabric’s been lifted up, or maybe the hormones? Isn’t that the type of biological change your brain is meant to alert you to?”

“I suppose. He could’ve been asleep, or in some subconscious state wherein it takes significantly more ‘stress’ to bring him out of it.”

“I suppose.”

“It makes sense.”

“Right, that does make sense. I did a themed series of sermons for a week or two.”

“What was the theme?”

“‘Contradicting the church.’ I made posters and put them up all along the street.”

“‘Contradicting the church?’”

“‘Contradicting the church.’”

“So it’s what it sounds like.”

“It absolutely was! I did a pro-choice day first, and I went through as much of the church’s political platform as I cared to. When I got bored, I stopped, and did one more day just advocating atheism.”

“Wow.”

“And you know the best part?”

“There’s more?”

“Absolutely!”

“My head is spinning. How could there be more?”

“There is.”

“Jesus.”

“As Hitler, right.”

“Alright, well what’s the best part?”

“I’m lying to you!”

“Oh. Are you?”

“Do you think I am?”

“It makes sense,” I laughed. “But I’ve never paid attention to what you actually said, so I couldn’t say boo for certain.” My laughter continued and I let it end peacefully, fading into the smoke. With my eyes shut, I saw the one street with the 23 houses along it, the church in the center of one of the two rows, the clerk’s office across the street, the inn down at the side where I came in with that strange woman months before that moment, and the buildings along one side of the street all collapsed into a small dark park with a metal fence dividing it from the sidewalk, sidewalk divided from the street, and a lamppost with a large glass sphere all lit up sitting at its top. And the small dark park with its metal fence and the modern lamppost on the sidewalk multiplied, or it extended itself modularly; instances of the same scene lined up all alongside one another.

“Hey—”

“—fuck, what?”

“What?” The lampposts were still visible in the smoke caught in the steeple.

“You broke my concentration.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. It just occurred to me.”

“What did?”

“That old guy who attacked you?”

“Sure.”

“He might say boo.”

I coughed. “Maybe. I’ve never seen him inside.”

“He doesn’t come in for mass. I think I saw him make off with a juice box, once, though.” She coughed. “Why did he attack you?” I responded with the reason appropriate to that particular occasion; I say this because I do not remember what it was. “Oh. Well, it was

more brazen of him than what I've come to expect from your stories." I was beginning to lose sight of her silhouette in the shade and smoke.

"Can you open the shutters?"

"You're not leaning against them—"

"—no."

"Sure."

"Some of my stories about him were a bit exaggerated," I admitted. "But even so, I agree—and I don't know what I'm going to do about him." She stood up to reach for the rope in the center of the steeple; or at least I heard her weight shift onto the planks corresponding to the center of the steeple. The wooden panels along the walls began to shake and slivers of light flickered into the fog and shook quietly on the floor around my legs—would that there were something beautiful to write about the moment the light breaks through and pummels the smoke into dust, pummels that dust into an invisible oblivion, that there were something romantic to imagine in the two of us at the top of her church, the two of us sprawled out across the landscape sprawling out before us, something glorious and revelatory you would experience were I a better writer; but it was always as foggy outside as it was inside when our ritual came to an end. She reached out her hand for me to grab it and stand up to embrace her. She rested her palms on my waist, looked up with a sort of vulnerability a lesser primate might take as submission—eyes wide, staring right into mine—and I remember thinking I was always going to remember that moment. When she let go she told me that I shouldn't take what Arthur said to me that night too personally, that he's just sort of anal.