

Spake, the Martyr

IN MID-OCTOBER, AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS, COYOTES began eating late-walkers like strawberry jam. But Spake knew they really wanted him.

He was the preacher. He preached. Every day out in the quad, frost nipped his grey skin like the lips of a newborn because the students were all his children, and the fact that they would never understand, the fact that they taunted and laughed at him, just made him love them all the more.

He would be the first to admit that sometimes he got carried away and telling that Muslim girl to rot in hell was clearly flirting with too far. But he prayed for absolution so what more could he do?

Spake used to be a bank collector. He collected. The office was an ever-growing tower that sat on a hill, a mast against the landscape. What had started off as a three-storey building was now close to a hundred. It hung over Fairbanks like a gargoyle. Execs claimed they could see the curvature of the earth. The sun rose so low in winter that you could see the back of it from up there.

They kept adding stories and clearing trees and adding stories and clearing trees and then one day coyotes started to pick off students as they walked alone. If you asked PR how much taller the building was

going to get, she would say: “I’m not stopping until I can open the window and ask God where the Dow Jones will close.”

Spake had quit his job on Christmas Eve—didn’t even know it was Christmas Eve until he saw there was no morning traffic. This priest kept calling in all day, going back and forth between scolding him for all his earthly wants and praying to save his soul.

“You’re a part of God’s plan,” the priest said.

A plan, Spake thought. Maybe I am.

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Spake had never seen her before. The barista. Fleshy and cherubic. A pale white presence that hovered behind the register. My child, he thought.

The line was mostly professors, grey haired and smelling of cigarettes. Spake’s shirt was stiff and crunchy from never getting washed.

“Can I have some hot water,” Spake said when it was his turn to order.

“Hot water, hot water ...” She mumbled to herself while searching for the right key. He smelled her cranberry perfume and looked away.

“Sorry about that,” she said once she found it. “It looks like hot water’s free.”

He handed her a wrinkled dollar bill. She smiled and thanked him and he took his place at the end of the counter.

He tried to watch her without staring. She danced as she scanned the register, moving her whole body back and forth. Whenever she found the right key, she gave a quick “Sorry” if the customer was rushed or frustrated. If the customer smiled, she did a mini-cheer like the victor of some prize.

“Next year is a leap year,” said the professor standing next to him.

“Is it?” Spake said.

Outside the coyotes dragged a corpse through the snow, trailing blood behind them like a wet ashtray. It was the first time they had attacked in the daylight.

“Dammit,” the professor said. “I think that was my TA.”

One of the coyotes stopped and circled back to the window and stared at Spake.

Come to us.

Spake gulped.

When his hot water was ready, he pulled loose grounds of coffee from his pocket and dropped them in and sat down in the corner to plan the day's sermon. Bracing himself. They were here to test his faith. He knew they were. He knew the way you can know who's on the other end of a phone by the pitch of its ring. But there's knowing and then there's knowing.

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes and tried to focus on swallowing. But every few minutes he would open them and check the coffee shop register. He was nauseous. This was no way to die, with a queasy stomach.

His nervousness drifted away and he pulled his worn-down King James from his backpack and began flipping through it while he sipped. He crossed one leg over the other. Sat up straight. Just an erudite religious scholar over here, unable to get away from shop long enough to enjoy a coffee. Every few lines he looked up to see if she was watching him, but she was always ringing somebody up or talking with the dude working back there. Some teen boy, nowhere near as erudite as Spake was. They weren't even in the same city—nay, same *state*—in terms of erudition. And that's saying a lot because Alaska is a darn big state.

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SPAKE HAD ALMOST BEEN MARRIED ONCE. Fifteen years ago. A bony redhead named Sylvia. They had met in the office. She worked security and ate pepperoni sandwiches. What really screwed things up was the day Spake went out to lunch with one of his co-workers, Joanna. That night, when he and Sylvia got undressed for bed, she noticed his underwear was on inside out.

“Your underwear is on inside out,” she said.

“I must have put it on wrong after going to the bathroom.”

“You take your underwear *all the way off* when you go to the bathroom?”

Voices got raised. Accusations followed.

And that was more or less how things ended between them. Sylvia wasn't quitting that job, though. She had a kid to watch out for. And every morning when he walked past her, there was always some guy or another she was talking to. Some guy who would tell him, "Hey real sorry to hear you and Sylvia split" in the break room while Spake thought, "Yeah I bet you are you son of a bitch."

Three months later he quit to become a priest. When the seminary rejected him, he became a campus preacher.

At the bottom of the rejection letter, it said: "Jesus faced rejection too. This is all part of God's plan."

What plan? Spake thought. What part?

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THE BARISTA WAS BACK THE NEXT DAY and Spake eyed her from a table in the corner. He could use some hot water, he thought. It was hard to focus on the Bible today. Every sentence seemed confounding. An indecipherable web of symbols that neither began nor ended.

She kept a rubber band around her wrist and when she wasn't doing something with her hands, she spun it around. Occasionally it would shoot off and she would go retrieve it from behind the espresso machine or over the counter.

The ring of coyote howls.

Come to us, come to us.

He thumbed the vial in his pocket then stood up and walked over. When she looked at him, he took it out and handed it to her.

"What is this?" she asked in a tone that was hesitant but warm.

"It's bear urine," Spake said. "If you put a few drops on your clothes, the coyotes will leave you alone."

She looked at the unmarked vial.

"I'll have some hot water," Spake said.

"What?"

"Hot water," he said, motioning with his hand. "Like, to drink."

"Oh . . . right," she said, setting the vial down and tapping the register.

"I still have to ring it up, even though it's free," she said.

"You're getting faster."

"Practice," she smiled.

Spake turned to walk over to the end of the counter where the finished drinks were placed.

“Hey,” she said. “You’re that preacher right?”

He said “No” but she talked over him.

“I really appreciate what you do here,” she said.

He looked at her. Ready to be mocked. When he wasn’t performing, it could really hurt. Some of his children had once made him cry at the Sourdough Fuel in front of three or four other customers.

“I’m serious,” she said. “You wear your faith like a new haircut. You walk the talk. You can be misguided sometimes, but I know it comes from a good place.”

“Thank you,” Spake said.

“What are you gonna preach on today?”

“I was gonna do suicide,” Spake said.

“Let’s hear what you got,” she said.

“Well,” Spake said, “I guess I was gonna discuss the difference between suicide as a rejection of God’s gift and suicide as martyrdom. How do you know the difference? Even when you can feel it. How do you know, with an eternity in hell on the line?”

“Hot and ready,” she set his cup on the counter. “And hey, thanks for the bear urine.”

“You’re welcome,” he said.

Come to us. Come to us. Come to us.

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THE COYOTES FIGURED OUT how to open doors.

They were riding the elevators. Going through the dining hall. Sprinting down joggers in the gym.

One coyote had started adjuncting Intro to Fluid Dynamics.

The consensus among students was, it’s hard enough to learn differential equations without hearing Rick’s face get torn off. I’m not coming in anymore.

But Spake still came in. And the barista still came in. She hung from a light on the roof while coyotes snapped below her like sharks.

“What are you doing here today?” He asked her. A disembowelled foreign student lay on the tile next to him. The sonar of howls.

Come to us. Come to us. Come to us.

Come to us. Come to us. Come to us.

“I guess I didn’t get the memo,” she poked down at them with a broomstick. “This bear urine ain’t worth a clam, where did you get it?”

“From a bear,” Spake said. “Where did you think?”

“I don’t know. Walmart.”

“I don’t think you’re going to be doing too much business today,” Spake said.

“No shit,” she said. “What are you doing here anyway?”

He watched the coyotes pull a ladder from the janitor’s closet. “I’m here to preach,” he said. “It’s the only thing I do.”

She smiled. “I really admire that about you. But if you have a sec, I could use some help.”

This is the plan. This is his part.

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SHE WATCHED AS HE WALKED WITH CONFIDENCE to the centre of the quad. Before he spoke he took off his urine-stunk clothes and started preaching like he was preaching to all the souls in hell.

The starving coyotes slowly circled, dancing and juking around and toward him like pistons. His voice never faltered. The first one bit his femur and he stumbled a bit but stayed up. His blood looked like oil against the snow. One got his calf and tore away the paper flesh. He tripped forward and they all moved in. Shoving and biting each other, a chaotic assembly line. The industrial deconstruction of a whole into pieces. The factorial lick of so many bodies in so much motion.

She could hear him preaching until his throat was torn out. She admired him all the more for it and turned away with no more to see.

And up on that hill, they kept building the bank taller and taller. And people still said “Goddamn” where a simple “Damn” would do. And if you picked up all the sins of the world, you wouldn’t weigh an ounce more.