

EX NIHILO

ORIGINAL PROSE AND POETRY

THE RELIQUARY

Augustine Marie Reisenauer, O.P.

You can sleep in my bed, Jo. I'll take the couch," Jacob instructed as he set his little sister's suitcase and backpack down on his bedroom floor. "I don't suppose it will be more than a night or two, maybe three at most."

"Okay," she almost whispered from across the apartment where she lingered at its entrance, not yet having crossed the doorway.

"Well, come on in. Don't be a stranger. You've been over before, no?"

"Yes, but only two times. The first time you took me to Adventure Universe but you forgot the discount coupons so we had to come back here to get them. The second time I remember that Mom didn't tell me why she let me come, and I remember that I could only stay long enough to play crazy eights with you and Miranda. And I also remember that I won."

He unconsciously winced at the mention of her name. "You would remember that. Say, if you need to use the bathroom there's one right here. And here we come to the kitchen. Do you want something to drink? I think I have some kid drinks. Well," Jacob corrected himself as he peered into the refrigerator, "I can offer you some milk or some water."

"No, thanks. I'm not that thirsty. But I am hungry. Really hungry. When are we going to eat?"

Jacob checked his watch. It was a quarter past seven, although with all the trauma of the day it could have easily been midnight. When his mother had called him at work, he knew instantly that something was amiss, if not a wreck. She never, or hardly ever, called him; never at work.

“Jacob, Mom. Listen. Gramps had a fainting episode at home... something wrong in his head. I’m on my way with him in the ambulance to the hospital in Westchester. I need you to pick Josephine up from school after her practice. She’s still at Beacon Elementary. I need you to take care of her. I’m going to stay with Gramps. I’ll let you know how things go.”

As the situation unfolded, his only remaining grandparent had a ruptured brain aneurysm and had to undergo an emergency surgery. Even after the operation, Gramps’ condition remained fragile and his outcome uncertain. He still remained unconscious under the anesthesia. The neurosurgeon told his mom, who then told Jacob, that these next several hours were critical. Nothing much else they could do. They would just have to wait and keep vigil and see how things would develop.

“We can eat now if you’re so hungry. Let’s see.” Jacob rechecked the refrigerator and then the pantry and then a few cupboards and drawers. “Do you want a peanut butter sandwich, with or without maple syrup—sorry, no jelly—or a bowl of cereal? I have either Tasty Shapes or whole oats.”

“Jacob! Don’t you remember? I’m allergic to peanuts. And cereal isn’t good to have for dinner. Even a kid knows that!”

“Well, those are the choices. That is, unless you want to wait. I can order us a pizza.”

“I can wait... but not long. I’m really hungry. Coach made us run extra hard today because yesterday we lost to a team we were supposed to beat. That was their first win of the season.”

“Okay, I’ll order a pizza. Delivery shouldn’t take more than a half hour. What kind do you want?”

“Cheese.”

“Plain cheese? Is that all?”

“Yes, that’s all.”

After ordering a half-cheese, half-supreme-meat pizza, Jacob told his sister, “It’ll be here in an hour. I forgot that it’s Friday night, after all. Do you want some ice cream while we wait? I think I have at least that.”

Josephine grimaced. “Mom would never let me have dessert before dinner.”

“But Mom isn’t here.”

“But just because she isn’t here doesn’t mean I can do whatever I want.”

“Jo, I’m not going to argue with you. I’m just trying to take care of you. Since you’re starving and since the pizza won’t be here for a while, I thought some ice cream might help take the edge off your appetite.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I can wait.”

“Suit yourself. Hey, come here. I want to show you something.”

Josephine went over to the kitchen windowsill where her brother was standing. He pointed to a fishbowl containing two goldfish.

“I got them last week. Aren’t they the most magnificent color? The one with the bulging eyes is named Jack and the one with the puckered lips is named Jill.”

“They *both* have bulging eyes and puckered lips.”

“I know. I can’t tell them apart, to be honest. I just hope that one is a boy and the other a girl. I want them to have little fishes, lots of little fishes.”

“Remember when Jesus took the two fishes and said some prayers and fed all those hungry people?”

“What does that have to do with my goldfish?”

“I don’t know. I just remembered those two fishes. And I’m hungry.”

“Well, I can’t do anything more about that than what I’ve already done. Let’s see. Maybe we can do something. What shall we do? Do you want to play a game or do your homework or watch a movie?”

“No, none of those. I’m too worried about Gramps. Can you call Mom?”

“Jo, I just spoke with her right before I picked you up. Nothing had changed since he got out of surgery and I don’t expect much has

changed since then. Mom will call us if it does. It won't help if we keep calling her. We're just going to have to wait. Okay?"

Josephine heaved a sigh. She sauntered over to the couch in the living room, plopped herself down, and closed her eyes.

"You okay?" Jacob asked.



UNKNOWN GERMAN
GOLDSMITH -
ARM RELIQUARY OF ST
LAWRENCE

She nodded in silence without opening her eyes.

"I'll be back in a bit. I'm going to put some clean sheets on the bed and get some fresh towels out for you and check on a couple of things."

He returned about fifteen minutes later to find Josephine still on the couch, unmoved and eyes shut. He went over to her carefully so as not to wake her if indeed she had fallen asleep. As he gently sat himself down next to her, she opened her eyes and looked straight ahead at the hutch. Ensclosed in the middle of the hutch was the television. Even though it was turned off, Josephine's eyes focused on its blank, black screen as though it were turned on. After a few minutes of watching nothing on the television, her eyes began to wander about and notice the various items arranged on the shelves of the hutch.

The display was rather eclectic, but for all that, it was peculiarly united in color. Towards the bottom of the hutch, there was a framed picture of Jacob as boy, not much older than Josephine, catching rainbow trout with his father. Next to it was the lure that appeared in the picture. On the shelf up from that,

there were two ticket stubs to the theater, a brochure and map of manicured gardens, and some sporting equipment. Above that were a broken corkscrew and a handful of corks, a couple of novels, and a cookbook lying open as if someone were taking a short break from mixing waffle batter. Scattered throughout the hutch was an assortment of beauty products, including fingernail polish, lipstick, eyeliner, a hairbrush and toothbrush, and a compact with a monarch butterfly decorating its cover; and wardrobe items, including a pair of high heels and slippers, a skirt and pajama pants, two blouses, a hoodie, sunglasses, half a dozen bracelets, a topaz earrings-and-necklace set, and leather driving gloves. Most of these articles, particularly the worn ones, were orange. However, none were the bright and brilliant tone of tangerine. They appeared rather rusted, the burnt orange of the setting sun, but devoid of its splendor.

After roving over these various things, put on display like souvenirs purchased not so much to impress visitors as to remind oneself of past travels, Josephine's eyes came to rest on a black-and-white photograph propped up by itself in the exact center of the top shelf. The photograph captured Jacob's face and part of some woman's next to him. She wasn't easily identifiable since, from the slanted angle at which the picture had been snapped, her face was cut off above the chin. Jacob's eyes were closed and his expression somber, like someone who had been in a funeral home for much longer than expected. But one couldn't tell whether the woman was smiling or frowning or similarly straight-faced. Around Jacob and the woman there was no visible background. The photograph had been taken at night.

"That was her, wasn't it?" Josephine broke the silence. "And those were her things, weren't they?"

Jacob nodded.

"Miranda Plume," his sister said. "I remember liking her the few times that I met her. I remember I wanted to be like her when I grew up. I thought she was beautiful."

"She is beautiful," Jacob said dreamily.

"And those were her beautiful things, her makeup, her jewelry, her clothes."

"They're what she left here and hasn't come back for yet. For a

while, I left them right where they were, in the corner of the bedroom, in the bathroom toiletry cabinet. But then, as she kept not coming back, not even to retrieve her things, I began to collect them together and place them in the hutch. I don't know why, but it seemed better to have them in one place rather than lying all around. And I couldn't just give them away. I wouldn't even imagine throwing them out. Each of them contains a memory of Miranda. The time we went to see *The Glass Menagerie*, but had to leave after the opening scene because she got sick. The time we drove nearly all night to make it to the Plumes' lake cabin for sunrise, then spent the whole next day sleeping. But as more and more time comes and goes, I'm starting to remember these memories less and less. Already I've forgotten whether we actually played tennis or whether I just bought her that racquet in the hope that someday we might. And I can't seem to remember any occasion when she wore that pleated blouse."

"I remember that Miranda always had the most beautiful clothes and the most beautiful makeup. I once thought she was a beauty queen. I didn't know then why Mom didn't see her in the same way."

"Me either. And I still don't."

"Gramps liked her."

"But his liking her probably aggravated Mom even more. You're too young to appreciate the history between them when it came to relationships in the family. She was always on one side, he on the other. What she thought atrocious, he thought fabulous. What she wanted joined together, he wanted driven far apart. Uncle Edward and Auntie Barbara, for example. Even when Dad left for good with that other woman, not so long after you were born, Gramps took his son's side. He thought, and probably still thinks, that Mom drove him away with all her expectations, her standards, her unbending rules and cantankerous principles. And now, as things have turned out, I'm not so loath to think so myself."

"Jacob, don't turn Mom into the bad guy. Don't you feel bad for her? Don't you feel bad for the way Dad up and left her, up and left *us*? I bet it hurt her as much when Dad left as it hurt you when Miranda left. Maybe even more."

He didn't respond. Instead, he got up suddenly from the couch

and went straight into the kitchen. He headed for the freezer and dished himself out a bowl of ice cream and poured himself a generous portion of vodka. He sat hunched over on the counter facing the window with his back to the living room where Josephine remained alone. Jacob started gulping down the ice cream and the vodka together without much pause to appreciate either one. His relentless pace was abetted by his refusal to release either dessert or drink from his grasp. If he got a headache, his brisk and muddled ingestion would have precluded him from recognizing whether it had come from the ice cream or the alcohol. But it didn't seem to matter much to Jacob. He was engrossed in what he had set before himself. When both the bowl and the glass were empty, Jacob sat for what could have been three minutes or thirty, staring blankly at the empty dishes.

All of a sudden, something snapped him back to present reality. It wasn't anything altogether from the outside, like the backfire of a car engine or the siren of an ambulance or the voice of his little sister. It was something more from the inside, a lackluster flash of orange within his mind that at once faded into darkness. Jacob reentered the present and lifted up his eyes. As they came to rest on the goldfish, he noticed how, in the background light of the setting sun streaming in through the window, the two fish appeared to be flying rather than swimming. From his perspective, the light of sunset somehow vaporized the visible contours of the fishbowl and the goldfish now seemed to drift their way through the atmosphere. It seemed that nothing was keeping them back from floating through the window and leaving nothing but a memory of their existence, if that.

The doorbell rang.

"It's the pizza," Jacob said to the adjacent room. "I'll get it, Jo. Sit tight."

When he returned to the living room with the pizza and some water, he found Josephine lying curled up on the couch outfitted in the pajama pants and hoodie that had been shelved in the hutch. Her arms and legs came up short of the length of the sleeves and leggings. Somehow this gave him the impression, not so much that the clothes were too big for her little body, but rather that her body was

too small for the perfectly sized clothes.

“What are you doing wearing those?” Jacob interrogated.

“I’m cold.”

“Didn’t Mom teach you how to ask?”

“I did. Don’t you remember? You said, ‘Suit yourself.’ So I suited myself.”

“I did not.”

“Yes, you did. I went into the kitchen and you were sitting on the counter eating your ice cream and drinking your water. I asked, ‘Can I wear some of her clothes?’ and you said, ‘Suit yourself.’ Don’t you remember?”

“Not in the least. How strange. But it doesn’t matter now. Take those things off before you spill grease and sauce all over them.”

“But I’m cold.”

“Don’t you have some warm clothes in your suitcase?”

“No.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t. Why didn’t you pack any?”

“You helped me pack.”

“Fine, I’ll get you some of my clothes.”

Jacob retrieved from his bedroom a pair of sweatpants and a long-sleeved shirt with the face of a tiger on its front. He handed them to his sister in exchange for Miranda’s clothes which he promptly and meticulously re-enshrined in their proper place in the hutch. After Josephine got dressed in them, Jacob rolled up the sleeves for her so that she could eat more easily and less messily.

“Alright,” Jacob said opening the lid of the pizza box. He served Josephine a piece of cheese pizza and himself a couple pieces loaded to overflowing with all kinds of meat from all kinds of parts of all kinds of animals. “Bon appétit.”

Jacob began to devour the pile of meat.

“That’s the shortest grace I’ve ever heard,” Josephine complained. “And you didn’t even make the sign of the cross.”

“That’s because it wasn’t grace,” Jacob managed to say without letting too much meat fall from his overfull mouth. “All I said was ‘May you have a delectable, delicious, and altogether yummy meal.’ Nothing else. Nothing else to say really.”

“Mom always prays before we eat.”

“Well, this isn’t her place. It’s mine. When we eat here, we don’t have to say grace.”

Josephine remained silent. After a minute or so, she picked up her cheese slice. She said, “Thank you,” and began to eat.

Although she hadn’t looked at him when she said this, Jacob nevertheless responded, “You’re welcome. I hope your cheese slice is as tasty as all this savory meat.”

Except for a couple of slices of plain cheese, they finished the pizza, eaten mostly in a heavy silence. After dinner, as they sat on the couch, each absorbed in their own thoughts, Jacob’s phone rang in the bedroom. Their mother called to inform them that Gramps had taken a turn for the worse and his condition was rapidly deteriorating. Although they were doing all that they humanly could, the doctors didn’t expect him to survive through the night. She would call again should anything change. Her voice sounded like it was on the edge of breaking down and bursting into speechlessness.

“Mom, are you okay?” Jacob asked.

“How can I be okay?” she responded from half a world away. “For a long time, I haven’t been okay. But I’ve grown used to it. I’ve grown used to Gramps and your father and now you not being with me, not being on my side. I have no one else now but Josephine. Take care of her for me. Listen, I’ll let you know how things turn out with your grandfather. And Jacob...”

“Yes, Mom?”

“I... I want you to know...” There was an uncomfortable pause. “Just take care of Josephine.”

“Okay.”

He hung up the phone and returned to his sister in the living room. She was holding the framed picture of their father and Jacob as a boy, which she had taken from the hutch. Josephine spoke first.

“Gramps is going to die, isn’t he?”

“Maybe. It doesn’t look good, but we’ll have to wait and see. Mom will let us know.”

“I’m worried.”

"I know. I am too. Nothing much we can do, though. Hey, maybe you should try to get some sleep. It's rather late for you and, besides, there's not much sense in staying awake worrying."

Josephine returned the picture to the hutch and started sauntering off to the bedroom. Before she got there, though, Jacob stopped her.

"Jo."

"Yes?"

"Give me a holler if you need anything, okay?"

"Okay."

"And Jo..."

"Yes?"

"Don't forget to say your prayers. Mom would want you to say them."

As Jacob lay on the couch in the darkened living room, waiting impatiently for sleep to put an end to this day he would rather forget, his mind went back to Miranda. He somehow came to the night he was planning on proposing to her, the night captured on the single remaining photograph that he had of her. She had taken all the others with her when she left, but somehow overlooked this one. Perhaps she didn't recognize her own chin. Perhaps she did, but didn't mind leaving such a small portion of her face for him, a portion that would increase more and more for him the longer she remained away. It increased in proportion as the rest of her decreased and receded from his memory.

Little by little, Jacob had begun to find it difficult to recall particular episodes in their life together. Then, the more familiar things she often would say or do began to fade. Soon enough, even her features and appearance started to pass into oblivion. In a desperate attempt to stop, or at least hinder, the peeling away of his grasp of her, he clung to the tokens of her presence, not the least of which was the portrait of her chin, the last vestige of the beautiful body he had once so delighted in.

Jacob focused on her chin that night, motionless and emotionless, unmoving and unwilling to reveal a smile or a frown, to forecast a

yes or a no to the question he was unable to ask her. Before he had the chance, Miranda, from out of the blue, told him she was leaving. She didn't attempt to give either an explanation or an apology. She bluntly said that that was the way it had to be. She needed space to drift. And so she drifted. She abruptly departed from him that night and slowly began to fade away from his memory. Her still chin was the last of the day's contents that occupied his mind as sleep finally overtook him.

Sometime in the middle of the night, Jacob awoke to his little sister's shriek. He jumped up and hastened into the bedroom. He switched on the light to find Josephine sitting upright in bed, visibly shaken, her face streaming with tears.

"Jo, are you okay? What's the matter?" he asked as he sat down beside her and put his arms around her trembling body.

"It's Dad," she said through sobs. "Dad's gone. The thing in his head..."

"No, Jo. Not Dad. Gramps," Jacob tried to correct her, thinking she was confused. "It's Gramps who has the thing in his head. But we're still waiting to hear from Mom if he's okay. He isn't gone yet. Listen, forget about it and try to get some shuteye."

Jacob kissed her forehead, laid her back down on the bed, and tucked her back in. As he turned out the light, he reassured her, "It's all okay. Everything will be okay."

Without turning on any lights, he went into the kitchen, opened the freezer, and groped around in the darkness for the bottle of vodka. Taking several swigs, he sauntered over to where he thought the window might be. The night was so dark that he wanted to see whether the moon hadn't in fact passed out of existence, and whether the orange glow from the street lights hadn't been blown out. He could see nothing. He wasn't even sure he was anywhere near the window.

But as he turned around, lifting the bottle for another swig, he accidentally knocked it into something. He heard the sound of glass clinking and then of glass crashing on the floor. Jacob felt the lukewarm water on his bare feet and began to feel the pricks of pain

from where the shards of broken glass had pierced them, releasing the blood within. After this curt hiatus, still standing in the pool of water becoming ever more mingled with blood, Jacob continued to lift the bottle to his lips. He took several more swigs of vodka as he listened in vain for the sound of something flopping.

Augustine Reisenauer entered the Order of Preachers in 2006. God-willing, he will be ordained to the priesthood in May 2012.

SONNET

Gabriel Torretta, O.P.

At the city limits a traffic jam
 Stood stuck facing a battered metal sign:
 “All Exits – Lodging, Gas, and Food” – then some
 Logos to tempt all man’s desires in time.
 The long-traveled longed to stop but didn’t dare,
 Afraid perhaps of bedding down too soon;
 Others, wrenched from hope of home, seized despair –
 Poor exiles, driven mad by plenty’s tune.
 The city spat its own into the fray,
 Who clogged, then blocked the route in feverish flight
 From cold, unrestful rest and bitter play,
 Fleeing unquenched desire with all their might.
 Lanes, too, like graves, one day will yield their dead.
 Dying, want and hope will as love be wed.

Gabriel Torretta entered the Order of Preachers in 2008.