

2015

# Between Heaven and Hell and Heathens

Gabrielle Knock

*Eastern Illinois University*

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Between Heaven and Hell and Heathens

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TITLE

BY

Gabrielle Knock

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**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

English

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2015

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## Abstract

This work of fiction explores the relationship between worshipped and worshipper by dually depicting it as a child/parent relationship and as a relationship between lovers. Written in the tradition of parodies like *Don Quixote* and re-imaginings of myths like *The Childhood of Jesus* by J.M. Coetzee, I use humor and a contemporary setting in my book about a child who could be the second coming of Christ, but who cares more about his mother's approval than he does about God.

### Acknowledgements

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Gabrielle Knock

April 1, 2015

Critical Introduction

### A Messiah's Search For Parental Affection

The fewer children parents have, the more attention they can—and do—give each individual child. As birth rates continue to decline amongst middle class America, we hear more about parents spoiling their children with expensive electronics, parents who refuse to let their children risk their safety by playing outside, parents who are afraid discipline will hurt their child's feelings, parents insisting on giving children participation trophies, and parents who bend over backwards to obey a child's every command. More and more, the relationship between parent and child is becoming one where the child has precedence over everything else. Some of these parents truly seem to believe that their little angel can do no harm; others are rumored to fear their child's wrath. Parents can be said to “worship” their children. But how would a mother treat her child if she truly knew the child *was* God? And how do children feel about being treated like gods? I satirize a certain kind of contemporary parenthood in my creative writing thesis, *Between Heaven and Hell and Heathens*, by answering these questions.

*Between Heaven and Hell and Heathens* is about a child who is believed to be the Son of God by his own mother. He may or may not actually be God; Thomas is not sure himself. He has undeniably God-like powers, but because his Heavenly Father never contacts him, he can only guess about the origin of such powers. His mother, however, is convinced that he truly is the Son of God. She has astronomical expectations for him, and

she treats him with the same fearful deference with which she would treat God. Thomas hates this. He wants his mother to treat him with maternal love, not obsequious worship. But the only way he can think to earn her love is to try and live up to her expectations; he tries to do what Jesus would do. Yet even succeeding in being like Jesus, doesn't earn Thomas his mother's nurturing affection. He becomes a teenager who has never felt loved by his parent, and like many of today's miserable teens, he begins to look for love elsewhere.

The American media's depiction of Christianity is what I most drew from to develop my representation of Jesus and Mary and Joseph. I grew up in a secular household, but growing up in America it is impossible not to learn the basic story of Jesus: *his father was God; his mother was a virgin; she gave birth in a manger; grown-up Jesus performed miracles; then he died for your sins.* The story of Jesus I grew up with was based in part on the explanations of Christian theology relayed to me by children when I was a child myself. To me, as someone exposed exclusively to secondary-source accounts of the Bible, key religious figures were little more than caricatures: *Mary was a crazy lady who insisted she was going to give birth to God; Joseph was a gullible goober who believed Mary; and Jesus was a nice enough guy with magical powers and bad parents.* I had the impression that Jesus got himself killed because he was trying to be the God his parents always told him he was.

I began to think there might be something more to Jesus than my caricatured view of him when I heard the song, "Jesus Etc." by the band Wilco. Unlike standard Christian music, "Jesus Etc." is by no means a simple tribute to a deity's perfection. In fact, while the Jesus of "Jesus Etc." is as full of goodness as any Christian depiction, the song may

actually be seen as sacrilegious. Wilco's Jesus is tenderhearted, but he is not invulnerable: he feels humanity is a heavy burden. He blames himself for what he cannot solve. The song is addressed directly to him, and it lets Jesus know that he is allowed to look after his own happiness too, "Jesus don't cry. You can rely on me, honey. You can come back anything you want." It is a love song *for* Jesus, totally accepting of anything Jesus chooses to do. In a sense, the song flips the dynamic: Instead of Jesus having a compassionate love for humanity, the speaker of the song has a compassionate love for Jesus. Hearing Jesus spoken of not as a benefactor or a martyr, but as an impressionable beloved was beyond poignant for me. It made me want to learn what, if anything, lay beyond my caricature of Jesus. Becoming sympathetic to Wilco's Jesus even made me want to understand Christianity, which had hitherto seemed more ridiculous to me. Listening to "Jesus Etc.," I truly experienced a text's power to instill empathy.

I have since studied Christianity and the King James Version of the Bible in some depth. My studies presented me with a Mary who indeed truly was a young and innocent virgin, a Joseph who was not so gullible after all, and a Jesus who was not a victim of bad parenting. This Jesus, while still a child, was not a novice; this Jesus was not preoccupied with gaining the permission or even the approval of Mary or Joseph; he let them grow frantic over him while he was safe, busy conversing with rabbis. *He* chastised *them* for worrying about him.

This Jesus was much more fervent than the serene figure I expected. He says, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" while being crucified. This can be read as a man calling out to a father whom he had loved, a father who had betrayed his trust. Of course, Jesus is in fact quoting a psalm, but many readers do not know that. Generally,

the biblical Jesus seems detached or frustrated. He repeatedly chastises his followers, “Ye of little faith.” He seems to tend more towards criticism than positive reinforcement. To me, he seems to *act* loving but not really to *feel* love. He may be very kind, but he is also a difficult character to empathize with.

Fictional representations of Jesus, while quite varied, generally present him as kind and inimitable, but ancient ‘nonfiction’ texts, which never got canonized in the Bible, are not so cut-and-dry. One of these texts is the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, which elaborated on Jesus’s childhood. In it, Jesus is not a very loving child God. He kills multiple children for minor slights. Another one of these texts is the *Gospel of Thomas*, which is more a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus by a Thomas, who purportedly was Jesus’s twin. Obviously, any implication that Jesus had a twin would not work in the actual Bible, because that would mean he shared both mother and father with someone else; it would mean he isn’t so special after all, because it is Jesus’s parents, more than anything else, which makes him special.

Later on, fictitious representations of Jesus became less likely to claim to be true but remained largely reverent of the Bible and Christianity. Many of these works were Christian and allegorical in nature, but not all. An example of a non-Christian, but still reverent book, is Jewish writer Norman Mailer’s *The Gospel According to the Son*. Other reverent, but not strictly Christian, books speculate that Jesus traveled to India and then returned with new wisdom (one of these is Christopher Moore’s comedic novel *Lamb: the Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*). These books, which attempt to keep exploration of Jesus’s character true to Christianity (a loving, kind Jesus), typically do not explore Jesus’s emotional relationship with his parents.

In most retellings, Jesus's relationship with his parents is skimmed over. Notable exceptions to this rule include J.M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*, Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary*, and Monty Python's film, *The Life of Brian*. *The Testament of Mary* is from the point of view of Mary, whom is a skeptic watching helplessly as her aloof, yet beloved son brings about his own destruction. This relationship between mother and son serves as an antithesis to the Jesus-Mary relationship I seek to depict; this mother sees her son as human, she worries for him.

The relationship between child and parents in Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* is closer to what I strive to depict. *The Childhood of Jesus* explores Jesus's relationship with both Mary and Joseph, with an unusual focus on Joseph, as a foster father. Jesus is loving but obstinate, while his parents are indulgent and concerned, respectively. However, while their relationship is mutually affectionate, the Jesus in *The Childhood of Jesus* is emotionally disconnected from his parents because he loves everyone. My Jesus is extremely attached to his mother; he continuously seeks to be in his mother's presence, even if that means being paraded around on talk-shows like a puppet.

*The Life of Brian* is heavily satirical, which may account for the fact it is the only representation of a Jesus figure (that I know of) that contains a Jesus (Brian) who is actually more attached to his mother than his mother is attached to him. Brian is foisted into the Jesus roll; he does not choose it for himself. This Jesus is not particularly self-sacrificing, but he still manages to incur worship from followers. However, *The Life of Brian* is not really satirizing the figure of Jesus—it also depicts a real and self-sacrificing Jesus parallel to Brian—so much as it is satirizing the nature of religion; it cannot really

be called commentary on Jesus as a character so much as on a commentary of our nonsensical human nature.

While my novel does contain satirical elements, I strive for an empathetic view of Jesus. My Jesus-figure, Thomas, worships his mother just as much as she worships him, if not more. While this is an inherently funny situation, it could be seen as inconsequentially absurd if there was no reasoning behind it. The reason for his worship of his mother is that Thomas remembers being at one with her in the womb; he is extremely conscience that he is formed out of her and he misses being a part of her body. Emotionally, Thomas sees his mother as his sole creator, even though he believes in God on the intellectual level. Retelling Jesus' relationship with Mary is ideal for depicting the type of co-dependent parent-child relationship that is often criticized in modern media. What mother, other than Mary, has ever had such great expectations for her child? What newborn baby, other than God, would have the intelligence to put what it feels about its mother into words? (Figure 1.)

By retelling this well-known narrative, I give readers a known standard against which to measure my novel. This standard allows me to exaggerate a modern mother's worshipful behavior towards her offspring and remain within the realms of realism at the same time. A normal mother experiencing a panic attack while trying to obey a calm child the is an unrealistic exaggeration and may destroy an audience's suspension of disbelief; a mother who becoming frantic trying to obey a calm baby Jesus is much easier to believe, despite the supernatural elements, and despite not being what one would usually expect of a narrative about Mary and Jesus.

Maintaining some of the audience expectations of a Jesus narrative and juxtaposing those expectations with antithetical twists that do not infringe on the audience's suspension of disbelief, keeps my thesis in the territory of comedy. For example, the audience expects Mary to be a virgin and so my Mary is a virgin. However, in the Biblical narrative, Mary is a virgin because she is pure and virtuous, while my Mary is a virgin because she is sexually uptight. I want to incorporate elements of comedy, because comedy is light, while so much of my subject is heavy.

I strive to weave a balance of the comic, the beautiful, and the tragic in my novel so that the comic illuminates instead of overpowers the narrative. Christopher Moore's *Lamb: the Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*, is a comic novel of the type I am trying to avoid. It too, is a story of Jesus. In it, the characters go on zany adventures. They fight monsters and go to brothels. It, like other books by Christopher Moore, is a fun read. However, the book is ultimately forgettable, despite being about something as serious about religion. It says nothing memorable about its subject and does not pose questions about the subject either. Nor do I strive to emulate the unforgiving satire of Voltaire's *Candide* or Jonathans Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Both novels criticize their targets, but are devoid of empathy for what they criticize. Both ultimately paint an unforgivably hideous world.

I am much more heavily influenced by the comedy in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and comedy in the *Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy O'Toole. Both novels pointedly satirize serious subjects, but each also includes sincere empathy for the targets of their attacks. *Huckleberry Finn* is a critique of slavery, from the perspective of a young racist. In it, Twain manages to incorporate a sincere

appreciation of natural beauty that lets us know that the world is not all bad, and that racists like Huck aren't entirely bad, "The nice breeze springs up, and comes fanning you from over there, so cool and fresh, and sweet to smell, on account of the woods and the flowers" (157.) *Huckleberry Finn* retains empathy for the racist protagonist, but is unforgiving of racism itself.

*A Confederacy of Dunces* unremittingly makes fun of the buffoon of a protagonist, but the reader comes to learn *why* exactly the buffoon is such a buffoon in the first place (because of his codependent relationship with his mother), and the comedy becomes tragic as well. He is a caricature of a 'Mama's Boy' but his 'Mama's Boy' behavior is so entirely unrelenting and destructive, that it eventually irrevocably crosses the line between funny and tragic; the buffoon stops being a caricature and becomes a rounded character, while he does not actually change as a person. Only the reader's view of him changes. The mother is entirely a caricature and the son is entirely a caricature, and they are entertaining, but the text's empathy for these caricatures makes the reader begin to root for them to foil the destiny of their archetypes.

In my own novel, I strive to have similar empathy for the targets of my comedy. My protagonist/main buffoon, though he is my representation of Jesus, is not a particularly good person, which in of itself, is comic. The choices my anti-hero Jesus makes, both good and bad, usually do not come from a sincere sense of kindness, so much as cold logic. He is not malevolent, but he is unable to put himself in anyone else's shoes. My Jesus, in some ways, is a caricature of what Christianity says Jesus is *not*. Biblically, Jesus is self-sacrificing, charismatic, and sure; my Jesus is self-absorbed, awkward, and doubtful. Yet I strive to give the reader empathy for him by revealing the

origin of his actions, and I keep him human with some sympathetic qualities that the Biblical Jesus does not necessarily have. Like Huck, my Jesus has appreciation for nature (he is horrified at the Biblical stories of Jesus sending swine over a cliff and killing a fig tree). And my Jesus is entirely devoted to his mother, whereas the Biblical Jesus commanded followers to love God more than they love their own parents.

Working on *Between Heaven and Hell and Heathens*, I've realized I need to find more of a balance between the gravity and the levity. Right now, I believe my text is leaning much more towards gravity than levity, while I had originally set out to write the opposite. That it is as serious as it is, is not necessarily bad in of itself, but I set out to write an unmistakably humorous novel, and thus I structured my novel after the mostly humorous novels that have most influence me. If I were to make it more humorous, I would need to have more consistent humor at the prose, rather than simply structural level. Including more humorous similes and metaphors, for example, would do much to make the novel more humorous, without changing the plot.

The works of literature that have most influenced me most stylistically (including *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Candide*, *Don Quixote*, *Dead Souls*, *The Painted Bird*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *A Confederacy of Dunces*) are all arguably picaresque novels. A picaresque novel is a novel that follow a roguish (in the sense of being apart from mainstream society for whatever reasons) hero's episodic and usually pointless, repetitive misadventures as he navigates a typically corrupt society. Picaresque novels frequently contain strong elements of satire and have no plot. I did not recognize that picaresque novels are any different from any other type of novel when I began *Between Heaven and Hell and Heathens*, and thus I inadvertently used a discordant mix of picaresque and non-

picaresque elements in the writing of it; I ended up writing a novel that currently fails both as a picaresque and as a traditional narrative, because it fails to be fully one or the other. Like a picaresque novel, *Between Heaven and Hell and Heathens* contains a roguish hero, satire, and virtually no plot.

Yet I've failed to establish the robust stand-alone episodes that picaresque novels are comprised of. Currently, the events in *Between Heaven and Hell and Heathens* neither build upon each other in the substantial cause/effect way of a traditional plot, nor do they convey a sense of stand-alone finality. Turning up the comedy and societal antagonism in the *Between Heaven and Hell and Heathens* could help me establish in my thesis the proper stand-alone episodes of a picaresque; but on the other hand I could try to focus on building up the continuity in what I have already written, and thus embrace a traditional narrative.

I have not yet decided which direction to go, but I am leaning towards purposefully establishing *Between Heaven and Hell and Heathens* firmly within the realm of the picaresque. An episodic storyline with an unpredictable causality could potentially serve to underscore the uncertainty of God/providence in one episode and emphasize God-given free-will in another. The Bible, being comprised of sixty-six different books likely by sixty-six distinct authors, lacks continuity, and I may be able to play off that. Incorporating more comedy could be a relatively easy matter of giving the narrator a more sardonic voice. A strongly sardonic voice could potentially end episodes on quips, rather than the end of misadventures.

However, I am also aware that, while comedy would help give episodes finality, I do not necessarily *need* to shift the balance of *Between Heaven and Hell and Heathens*

more in favor of brevity. The picaresque novel *The Painted Bird* by Jerzy Kosiński, contains absolutely nothing to make the reader smile. About a roguish little Jewish boy, traveling alone through a corrupt society during the Holocaust—it is by far the grimmest book I have ever read. It is also an ironic, satirical, absurdist, and a beautifully written picaresque novel. Episodes usually end when the boy escapes one menace and begin with him about to get entrenched in another. While the picaresque structure is typically more often used by comedies, this structure suits *The Painted Bird* perfectly. The episodic structure lets the reader take breaks from the unrelenting grotesque world of the novel. Ending each episode of horror instead of building upon any single horror lulls the reader into a false sense of, ‘it *must* get better for the boy in the next episode.’ Of course his situation doesn’t get better, and the reader’s hope that the boy will prosper is repeatedly dashed. Compared to a continuous narrative, this repeated resurrection and destruction of the reader’s hope best emphasizes the author’s overall message: there was no true hope for Jews during the Holocaust, only dogged survival.

However, while it works perfectly for *The Painted Bird*, to claim that *Between Heaven and Hell* and *Heathens* could benefit so much from being episodic is not as clear; it seems I need to make my protagonist struggle against unrelenting pressures towards an unwaveringly unattainable goal. The goal the protagonist struggles towards could be anything in a picaresque. In *The Painted Bird* it is a safe home; in *Dead Souls*, it is money. However, almost universally, in these novels the protagonist struggles against society—it is society that makes the goal difficult to attain, not the protagonist. Right now my protagonist struggles continuously to make his mother love him, but I likely don’t focus on that enough, and he does not really struggle against society.

One picaresque exception to this tenet of struggling against society is a Japanese animated series called *The Tatami Galaxy* (based on a novel by Morimi Tomihiko, which has not yet been translated into English.) *The Tatami Galaxy* is about a rogue, is satirical, and is largely plot-less. The protagonist struggles towards the same carrot-on-a-stick goal in each episode, but never nears it. Unlike most picaresque, he does not struggle against society. He struggles against an enemy who only in the end, is revealed to be himself. It is plot-less, but perhaps because it is based on a novel, it achieves more of the episodic quality of the picaresque than a typical episodic television series; each episode does not build upon the former episode with one continuous plot, but they do build on each other in the sense that each episode once again underscores the unrelenting impossibility of reaching the goal and defeating the enemy; no one episode can fully convey the absurdity of the struggle.

I need to decide if, above everything else, I want to emphasize the absurdity of my protagonist's struggle. Right now my protagonist's goal is his mother's love, and he never achieves it, but I need to ask myself if the absurdity of struggling to earn a mother's love is something I want to convey so strongly. Before I make my final decision, I will read *The Adventures of Augie March* by Saul Bellow; it is allegedly as much a bildungsroman as it is a picaresque and therefore it might have more elements of continuity than the average picaresque.

Working on *Between Heaven and Hell and Heathens* I have learned much about genre conventions and plot. Because I favored picaresque novels for a long time without realizing that they might have a label beyond comedy, parody, or satire, I did not recognize that the 'plot' of a picaresque novel is not really a plot at all. Realizing my

unconscious tendency towards the picaresque while writing *Between Heaven and Hell and Heathens*, has made me realize that I want to write in the picaresque style.

Even if I do end up incorporating a continuous plot into *Between Heaven and Hell and Heathens*, in the future I intend to consciously write within the picaresque genre. Picaresque novels are not particularly popular and they may not be very satisfying to a reader who wants a page-turner. However, I like the structure; it adheres closer to the way we think about and experience our own lives than plot-building page-turners do. Our own inner narratives are a series of vignettes that are not necessarily in correct chronological order. Whatever seems unrealistic about the actual content of a picaresque is, in a way, still closer to the real human experience than any hero's journey from point A to point B.

I was unconscious of my plot being almost non-existent when I began writing. I was unconscious of the genre I was writing in in general. I have also come to terms with the fact that my writing was often lacked consideration of the audience on the prose level. Working on my thesis, I have learned to write more natural dialogue and to be aware of each character's voice. I have begun to repeat dialogue aloud to myself. I have learned to recognize when I have over-written purple-prose or to include asides that I think are interesting but ultimately add nothing. It has been difficult for me to cut such prose out, but for a better overall reading experience, I have learned to cut the fat out of my prose and leave the meat. When I go back in to revise the plot, I will be adding in bones. I just need to decide what shape I want the skeleton to form.

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*Jesus saw infants being suckled. He said to his disciples, "These infants being suckled are like those who enter the kingdom."*

*They said to him, "Shall we then, as children, enter the kingdom?"*

*Jesus said to them, "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter the kingdom.*

—The Gospel of Thomas, Dead Sea Scrolls (22)

## Prologue

In the beginning, Martha had hope. Like a fly repeatedly banging its head against a glass window, she had believed Joey would easily infiltrate her unseen regions. Martha had thought that the two of them were a match made in Heaven: she had wanted to wait until marriage, and Joey had been a man who had been willing to wait until marriage.

Thrust, “Ouch!” repeat.

Martha’s hope lay like a fly corpse on an unclean windowsill. And our hope too, lay dead by then, but not like a single fly. Our hope lay like entire species gone extinct. Our faith in humanity was oceans of singing whales hacked down to the putrid carcass of the last blue whale, beached alone on a trash-strewn shore.

It was with our last hope we decided to watch Martha. Even though we normally find fluttering songbirds and hermaphroditic flatworms more interesting than humans—they come in a much more stunning varieties of colors and more elaborate mating rituals—we decided we would watch and wait and see what would come of Martha’s yet-to-be-conceived progeny. We knew her progeny would be worth watching; we would make sure of it.

Thrust, “Ouch!” repeat.

For thirty-six years, Martha had held on tight to her virginity. She had clutched it so tightly it had fused with her, coiled around her bones, rooted too deeply to give away.

After two years of being married to Joey, at thirty-eight years of age, Martha wept each time she discovered crimson between her thighs. Every month the blood seemed to grow darker and thicker. She felt the end was near. She felt she was flushing globs of herself down the toilet; soon she would be empty. But the months when it didn't come at all—those were worse.

Thrust, “Ouch!” repeat. The bed creaked with each clumsy move as if it were snickering at them, as if it were watching them and judging them.

“I'm sorry,” Joey said, “I'm sorry.”

Martha watched as his thick shoulders shuddered. She thought he was probably crying. Martha knew she should probably comfort him, probably rub his back, tell him it was okay, that she was at fault too. But she didn't want to. He already knew it was her fault too. He already knew it was not okay.

She had failed, and Joey had failed. They had both failed. They could not consummate their marriage. They could not go forth and multiply. They could not go forth and replenish the earth. They could not get Joey's penis into Martha's vagina.

Every time they tried, before Joey had even gotten the tip in—smooth and devil-red—Martha would be crying out in pain, clutching at the sheets, eyes rolled into her head. And Joey, a man who could not harm a fly, seeing her agony, would soon lose all sexual desire. His penis would go flaccid, impossible to resurrect.

Martha sat up from where she lay and touched Joey's clammy back. Sticky, sweaty, hairy, it reminded her of a lollipop dropped on a dirty floor. She

fought the urge to wipe her hand on the floral comforter. It all seemed so unclean. So sinful.

Joey turned to look at her. His grey eyes were shining with tears. For an instant, they reminded Martha of the full moon. They were almost beautiful. Martha glanced towards the window, looking for the real moon, but the curtains were drawn. Even though their window faced the backyard, she always insisted they draw the curtains when they tried to make love. Only a sliver of moonlight sliced the room.

“Joey,” Martha said, “I want to try artificial insemination.”

Joey brought his arm up to rub his hairless skull. Martha’s observed silhouette of his hairless skull and strengthened her resolve. He had an excess of hair everywhere but his head.

“Okay. Fine,” Joey spoke softly, “If that’s what you want. Whatever you want.”

“God said be ‘fruitful and multiply.’”

“Your faith is so beautiful,” Joey said, “I love you.”

Martha nodded. “Thank you. I’ve made us an appointment for Friday.” She lay back down.

Joey flopped over her and nuzzled her neck, breathing in deeply, “We can do that, but I don’t want to give up on having sex either. You’re so beautiful. Amazing. Sexy.”

Martha winced at the last word. It felt so unclean.

“Goodnight, Joey.”

“You smell so good.”

“Go to sleep, Joey.”

“Alright. Goodnight, my darling, my angel.”

His snores switched on and rumbled like an old car—like a machine ruining the environment with its exhaust. Humans are filthy animals.

Martha lay awake listening to the rumble for some time. She had only been to the ocean once, but the duet Joey’s snores always made with the cicadas outside always made her feel as if she were lost at sea. He was right next to her, but she felt alone in the universe. She tried to feel God’s presence in everything around her. She wished she could hold God’s hand, and held tighter to her comforter instead.

An ambulance whined somewhere in the distance. Martha tried not to be envious of its passengers: they who might soon be reunited with God. She shut her eyes.

Soon, she told herself, soon I will be a mother. Martha wanted to go forth and multiply. She wanted to glorify God by bringing another one of His creations into the world. She wanted to never feel lonely again.

She was going to have a son. She just knew it. She had always wanted a son. Even when she was a child, playing with her only doll, her doll had been male, and it had been her son.

She had fed it and burped it and even delighted in changing its imaginary diaper filled with imaginary feces. Of course, she had long ago given up her doll and put away childish things. She had realized at a precocious age (with help from her devout parents) nothing mattered but God and following God's word. She had wanted to be loved, and God would love her even if her parents did not. She had wanted to obey Him entirely, and the Bible said nothing about playing with dolls.

After the dolls, she had only once more assigned true value to something other than God—that puppy her father was going to raise to be a hunting dog. When her father had brought home the puppy, he had warned her not to be affectionate with it, but still Martha would play with and snuggle with it every chance she got. Meaning after school, instead of sitting at the dining room table reading the Bible as she was supposed to as she waited for her father or mother to get home, she was in the backyard lavishing affection upon the chubby golden puppy. The puppy seemed to love her, and unlike God, she could feel the puppy against her skin. That golden puppy became to her a golden calf.

When nothing bad immediately happened after disobeying her father (and God, who says to honor thy parents), her sinning had increased. She read from the teen magazine another girl had brought to school. She did not avert her eyes when the puppy shamelessly licked itself. And she acted like an animal in turn. She read and re-read the Bible's Song of Songs.

*You've brought me into your room, my king:*

*Let us rejoice and exult in you,*

*Your lovemaking better than wine—*

She thought about God loving her and touching her while she touched herself, and she imagined God had the face of a boy from a teen magazine. So it had been her fault when the puppy died. By having Martha's father shoot the puppy, God had saved her from many sins at once. She never again would imagine God's as having the beautiful, pre-beard face of a clear-skinned pop star. She would never again allow herself to value an animal. She told Joey that she was allergic.

Martha believed she had been born to mother a real child, not an animal. And soon she would have a real child. Even if she couldn't have sex, soon she would have her own warm, living, breathing, smooth-skinned, defenseless baby to take care of.

All she needed to do was tolerate the snoring of the ape beside her. She wondered where she could buy nose plugs to stop Joey's snoring.

Then she took a deep breath. She told herself Joey was not in fact an ape; he was her husband. She was supposed to love her husband until death. She should love Joey if only because he was willing to be her husband when no one else would take her. He really was a sweet man, a very patient good man. Martha rolled over and draped an arm around his snoring form.

She felt damp hairy skin and rolled back to her side of the bed. She tried not to imagine she would be lying beside someone else if she had met the preacher at her church before she met Joey. She tried to think about last Sunday's sermon about fidelity, not the proportions of the man who delivered the sermon.

Martha fell asleep and dreamt of sweetness falling from the preacher's lips, a mouth like finest wine<sup>1</sup>.

###

Weeks later, the night after Martha's first insemination, we entered Martha's dreams. We wanted to speak to her immediately, but her first dream was of being chased naked through cornfields by well-endowed black men. We decided it would be unfitting to approach Martha while she was naked, as she would likely feel exposed, so we watched and waited.

The men were about to seize her when she pulled her father's shotgun, which was growing like corn from the soil, and shot them into bloody carcasses. She walked over and palmed one of the corpse's penises. It was hard and large and it quivered beneath her fingers.

The cornfield faded to her next dream; she was still naked and still we waited. This time she was at church in front of the entire congregation. She was giving birth while everyone cheered. The preacher of Martha's church was there and was also naked, and he was holding her hand, telling her to breath. She painlessly gave birth to a clean baby that was already wearing a diaper and looked to be about six months old. Joey, who was the doctor, handed the baby to a man that Martha thought looked vaguely familiar. The man peeked inside the baby's diaper and smiled.

"Thanks Mary!" he said to Martha, "Its another Jesus!"

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Song of Songs, KJV.

<sup>2</sup>Adam's naming of the animals

The man high-fived Martha, Joey, and the preacher. He then threw the baby into the congregation. The baby crowd-surfed until it got tossed into a pen in the back of the church, where many Jesus's, of various sizes and ages, were milling about like sheep.

The preacher smiled at Martha and squeezed her hand. "I knew you could do it," he said.

Martha got up and went to the back of a long line of naked women. The first woman in the line walked up to where Martha had given birth. She squatted and promptly gave birth to a slumped, white-bearded, elderly Jesus that was also wearing nothing but a diaper.

The preacher slapped the woman hard across the face and yelled at her, "We can't use *that!* Idiot!"

Martha was smiling as that dream faded to the next; she was at home cooking dinner. Because this dream seemed less frenzied than the last two, we decided to approach despite her uninterrupted nudity; we reasoned that at the rate she was going it she might very well spend all of that night unclothed in her dreams.

We called to her and she spun around, brandishing a butcher knife that had been a ladle the moment before.

We told her we meant no harm, and she immediately calmed down. She was a bit red-cheeked when she smiled at us and said, "Excuse me, I'll be right back. I need to use the lady's room."

She left the kitchen and returned a moment later, fully clothed. She sat at her dining room table and stared at us. She smiled in an open way she never would in real-life. In real-life, she did not want anyone to see her slightly crooked, slightly yellow, teeth. In real-life, she rarely saw reason to smile.

We then endeavored to speak to her about evolution, the environment, technology, mass extinction, and human 'progress,' even though our hope of her accepting anything we said was like the grey corpse of the last African elephant baking in the sun. Even if our hope in humanity was no more than vulture cuisine stripped of ivory, we are as impartial in all our dealings. We felt obligated to make at least a perfunctory attempt to persuade Martha into a more receptive mindset for the sake of her child and for the sake of her species.

Martha was not receptive. Her dream changed. She had stripped out of her clothes and was trying to sell them at a church rummage sale before she had listened to two sentences about natural selection. She showed the preacher her underwear. She said, "See? No holes for monkey tails. Or penises. Very good deal."

Certainly, we may have been able to correct the problematic aspects of her thought process, but doing so would have gone against our principles.

Martha woke up with only a vague recollection of the dream in which she gave birth to baby Jesus; she only remembered giving birth to a boy, being called Mary, and being told her son was Jesus. Her other dreams, including the one we intervened in, were entirely forgotten.

She took what she could remember about the dream she could remember as a definite sign she was going to be blessed with a healthy baby boy.

###

And it came to pass that the human called Martha confirmed with herself eight times the blue line meant pregnancy. Then she drank as much water as she could and urinated on every stick in the box before she let herself believe in the miracle happening inside her very body. She was going to have a baby. She was going to have a family.

When she was sure, she turned her face up to the Heavens, ignored the glare from the bathroom lights, and thanked God, “Thank you, God, for giving me this opportunity, this chance, to do Your work, and raise one of Your creations. I will love him more than I love myself, more than I love anyone, except You, God.” She felt she had been born to serve others, and other than God, no one could be more worth serving than her own child.

Her child would be adorable, trusting and innocent. Her child would depend on her, love her and learn from her. Her son would finally fill the yawning chasm of loneliness that had been eroding her soul into dust for as long as she could remember.

She called the doctor to set up an appointment, to learn everything she needed to in order to have the healthiest baby possible. Then she called the preacher to let him know.

When Joey came home, Martha was sitting cross-legged on the blue-carpeted floor of the spare bedroom with a notebook, writing down a list of things

she would need for the baby boy. She would need a crib, a car seat, and a name. She would need bottles and binkies and so much more.

Joey knocked on the open door frame, "Hello, angel, what are you doing?"

Martha turned around, startled to see her husband. She had not heard him come in. She looked at his stocky body. Not a very pretty picture. She hoped her son wouldn't be short like Joey.

"I'm making a list of what we need for the baby," Martha turned back to her notebook.

"Uhh, angel, um, I mean shouldn't you wait, you know, at least until you're actually pregnant? Don't wanna get your hopes up."

"I *am* pregnant," Martha smiled at him, lips pulled tight.

"What!?! You're pregnant? You didn't tell me!"

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry, Joey, I must have forgotten with all the excitement. I found out this morning after you left for work. I used all of the pregnancy sticks. I am pregnant. I already made a doctor's appointment."

"That's great!" Joey stomped forward and tried to drag Martha up into an embrace.

"What are you doing!" Martha screeched.

"I'm trying to hug you!"

"Well, don't! You might give me a miscarriage. And look what you did to my notebook." Martha sat back down, smoothing her long skirt. She pressed a hand to her stomach and smiled with the conviction that loving her child and being loved by her child would cure her loneliness.

## PART I: OVARIES' POTENTIAL

*Fortunate is the lion that the human will eat, so that lion becomes human.  
And foul is the human that the lion will eat, and the lion will become human.*

—The Gospel of Thomas, Dead Sea Scrolls, (7)

## Chapter 1—Genesis

There was no spark of electricity, no flash of light, no aesthetic beauty when that sperm penetrated that egg. It was the sight of a white worm squeezing into a rotten apple. It was not appetizing. But then, we suppose, humans can choose to see whatever they want as beautiful. We are not here to judge.

The zygote grew into an embryo and then a fetus. With the fetus's first ability to fire synapses from one neuron to the next, memories that were not its own flooded into its brain. They streamed through the umbilical cord attached to it at the abdomen, the cord that tethered it to its universe.

At first the memories were fuzzy, vague, like the sound from an old radio with a misdirected antenna, but the station was always becoming louder and clearer.

The memories were Martha's memories. Memories of her childhood: rooms brimming with porcelain figurines of angels, austere wooden furniture, splinters biting and snarling from the bureau. There were memories of that engulfing shadow of that man—Father. That shrinking violet woman—Mother. And, almost before language, there was God, Whose warm arms hugged and Whose warning words disciplined.

Then there were memories of school, other children besides Martha: strange and delightful and then—strange and terrible. Being taught math and science—learning that boys were the ones who were meant to have toy robots. Thawing venison, cooking and talking with Mother. Stroking her father's shotgun, wondering how shooting a doe or a stag felt. Wondering if it was worth the mosquito bites and bristles and dirt and cold and waiting. Knowing she would never know. Taught a consciousness of a place, subordinate to man, and subordinate to God. Father's gun, unloaded but aimed, taught her one date not to come back, and taught Martha not to date. She learned fear.

Then the memories included Father—dead, and the accelerated shrinking of that woman—Mother. She should have bloomed out of the shade, but the sun cooked her: she wilted.

The memories were of being alone. Alone with God. Days and weeks and years with Him. Waiting for nothing on a hard church pew. Memories where time did not seem to pass, but must have.

Memories of a bald man, friendly and apish. No need for him. Only Him. But He wanted His people to go forth and multiply. The ape-man doggedly waiting, melting frosted feelings with the brainless warmth of his furry presence, time did not seem to pass, but it must have. Marriage under God to Joey.

Martha's memories conquered the forming mind of the fetus as it floated in-utero oblivion. For the fetus, with its senses still unformed, there were no colors, no sounds, no smells—nothing. Nothing but the past.

Nothing but second-hand memories, until there was something else. There was vibrating, pulsing, warmth. *Bu-bump, bu-bump, bu-bump.* The fetus experienced the bliss of being one with another creature. It had a lifetime of memories, and yet, among all those memories, it did not have one of feeling nearly so safe

The fetus began to record its own memories. It recorded warmth, weightless floating, effortless living and growing. But when it began to think its own thoughts, they were not really its own thoughts at all. The fetus had assumed that Martha's memories were memories of its own experiences. It assumed it was Martha. Its scattered, sleepy thoughts were all based on its assumption it was Martha: ah, I should wake up eventually and go to talk to the preacher... I am so very blessed to be pregnant, I don't even care if I get fat.

It used Martha's memories to recreate Martha's world and identity within itself. Initially, it even still believed it was still going about, living Martha's daily life; it thought itself to be dreaming when it was awake and it dreamt Martha's memories were reality when it was asleep. It was only gradually that the world came into focus for our fetus. Gradually, thoughts became more frequent and sharper. Gradually, confusion set in, as its brain rapidly developed.

Ah. I have been asleep a long time. I should wake up, become more and more, God, why do not I wake up? I need a new alarm clock.

One day the fetus heard a familiar, yet muffled voice, "Swmmm, smmm, lhgt tmme tm wme um, ymm mmm mm ammmintmnt."

And then, even though it did not move its mouth to speak, the fetus heard itself curtly reply, "I'm almost ready, oh Joey, pour me a glass of almond milk."

This felt so real it scared our poor fetus; its immediate response was to pray. After repeating a few Hail Mary's to itself, the fetus decided that its dreams were simply intensifying. That seemed to be the most rational explanation given the symptoms: no control and vivid sensations. Indeed, the hitherto unexperienced sensations were much too vivid for reality. The fetus calmed itself down enough to nap.

Sometimes the fetus would wake into inexplicable passions. It felt enlightened at times and frustrated to the point of kicking at other times. Ecstasy that left the fetus's heart racing for hours, terror enough to have filled the hearts of all the parents of all the first-borns in Moses' Egypt. The fetus even felt a rage that could have drowned the world for forty days and forty nights, and the fetus was still so upset and shocked afterward that it sobbed.

The fetus may have been relieved had it known that the second-hand emotions it absorbed through the embryotic fluid were working like heroine: human brains are incapable of replicating the first high they get off of such a drug, and also why the fetus would never experience such strong emotions again.

Conversely, brains that are exposed to certain sensations early on will have a tendency to develop to a predilection towards such sensations later on in life. Adaptation to the environment begins in the womb.

One day the fetus stretched its limbs and felt as if it had been reborn (not literally, we mean the idiom) but found it had less room to stretch. Reality was getting increasingly undeniable.

It began to wonder in earnest why God was sending it such a strange dream. And what was the dream about, exactly? The fetus considered it might be dreaming of Heaven. But even though it felt almost constant bliss, and even though its world was nothing but warmth, and even though it generally felt more at peace with the universe than it ever had in memory, the fetus decided that it was dreaming of Heaven because Heaven would not be as cramped as the womb was getting (there were too many sinners for Heaven to be cramped).

Could this dream be related to my pregnancy? It wondered. The world was, admittedly, womb-like. In the end, the fetus decided it must have been dreaming of being a fetus. The fetus was far too rational to consider that the dream might be real.

It wondered why would God send it with dreams of being its own baby, but did not, and indeed could not, dwell on it; human fetuses spend about ninety-five percent of the time in various sleep-states.

The fetus grew. It did not breath, and it did not eat, but grew as a seed grows in the earth, wanting nothing, expecting nothing.

It should have known what was happening though, because it did know where babies come from. It should have known when it felt its home deflate and convulse that this was a very natural thing: something that happens to all fetuses some time or another.

But the fetus panicked. It thought that God Himself was rupturing the universe. God in all His wrath, dragging the fetus from the very loins of existence.

The fetus felt it was freezing. It felt its head, torso, arms, legs, all weighed down by a metric ton as gravity hit it for the first time. The fetus had never seen more than a tender red glow before, but now white light was blinding it. It was the worst thing that the fetus ever experienced, so it screamed.

Is this the Rapture? It thought.

And coughed. And screamed.

The awakening of its lungs felt like God's sixth day of creation. It felt itself being attacked with a coarse fabric, and then wrapped in a warm one.

Wearily, the fetus began to collect its thoughts.

Why is God doing this to me? Why me? The fetus wondered.

But no, it decided that it must not question God's plan, but accept it. Accept, even as it blinked at a blurred upside-down-world it could not yet comprehend, that this was no dream. It had become a baby. The fetus latched onto a smooth nipple and sucked.

We do not mean 'upside-down-world' as an idiom—we mean it literally; when babies are born the world is reflected in their eyes upside-down because human vision did not evolve to perfection. Within weeks, the baby's brain learns to automatically flip the image right side up. Humans never let their imperfect physical adaptations limit them.

Humans could not wait to adapt fast legs, so they invented cars. They could not wait to grow wings, so they built planes. According to the Bible, they could not wait to see God, so they built a tower.

The baby was engrossed in the Heavenly taste of the milk, but not engrossed enough to prevent it from noticing that it was being stricken with noise. No more were the murmuring vibrations of sounds trapped outside the walls of its mother's belly.

It heard, with distasteful clarity, the voices of other people.

“It's a boy, and he's intact!”

“What a beautiful baby!”

“Congratulations!”

But last voice was music to the fetus, “Thank you, God!” It was the only voice the baby had heard before. The voice it would sometimes hear in the womb. It was the voice it thought of as its own.

The fetus pulled away from the nipple. It noticed that huge arms engulfed it and saw what it thought of as its own face beaming and down at it.

That is me! That voice and that face are mine! The baby tried to control the face it was seeing to no avail. It tried to make the mouth go into a toothy grin, but the face remained close-lipped. Even so, the baby was delighted. It had never before realized how charming its own face could be.

It had given birth to itself. Martha had given birth to Martha; Martha the adult had begot Martha the baby. At least, that is how the baby saw the situation.

Now that baby believed it was both itself and its own mother, and it could not be happier. It never loved itself more than it did now that it knew it and Martha were truly one entity, and that Martha would take care of it and understand it, as no one in all of its memories had taken care of or understood Martha.

At least that is how the baby saw the situation, and it thanked God. It tried to thank its mother too, but when it tried to speak, only a squeak came out. It did not much mind though. Its mother could do all the speaking for it. She would understand it without words.

The hospital room smelt like ammonia, and there were sounds of coughing and a woman moaning in pain somewhere while a man. But Martha did not notice these noises and did not even feel naked underneath the thin hospital gown.

She wept tears of joy upon holding her baby. Its wrinkled and red little face was, as far as she was concerned, the only entity in all of existence. Her precious was a few days earlier than expected, but healthy at seven pounds four ounces.

“We are truly blessed,” she told her husband, who was so happy he could only nod his balding head in agreement.

The baby continued suckling at Martha’s ample breast. It did not mind that her areolas were asymmetrical burnt pancakes, and it made Martha not mind either. The baby soon fell asleep.

“Have you decided on a name?” a plump nurse asked Martha.

“Yes,” said Martha showing off her teeth her, imperfect teeth that the baby would not judge, “Thomas: a good Christian name. He was an apostle.” Martha stroked her baby’s head. She knew the baby did not judge her for having defecated during labor.

The nurse smiled and jotted something down on her clipboard. “Rest well,” she said, “I will be back in a little bit to check on you and with forms to fill out.” As she left the room, she rolled her eyes and clicked her pen.

Martha beheld her priceless bundle and wondered at all the joy, happiness, and love it was sure to bring into her life. So much...

“Babies sure are mysterious, aren’t they, my angel?”

Martha looked up in surprise.

“I mean, all we had to do was mix some fluids and we get rewarded with *this*,” said Joey.

Martha tried to ignore her husband’s depreciation of the Absolute Wonder of God’s Gift, and she succeeded. Martha smiled blissfully at the child, and stroked its pink head with her thumb. She did not mind that the baby was the same color as Joey’s erections. It was her baby, a part of her. She was bound to love it and all its flaws. And besides, she reassured herself, babies stop being so pink soon.

Joey moved his lumbering body from its seated position in the regulation visitor’s chair to a standing position by the regulation hospital bed. He looked down at Martha and the baby.

“Sure amazing. Look at him, closing his eyes, concentrating. As if he were thinking up the most complicated formulas in his little head. Wonder what he’s thinking. Do babies even think, really? Ah, whatever, I love him.” Joey, to Martha’s displeasure, leant farther over her and touched the baby’s pure, soft head with his hard calloused palm, “Ya hear me, son?” Joey smiled, “I love you, more than anything in the world—ah aside from your mother of course.

“Martha, thank you so much for him... he has your nose.”

The baby’s puckered face relaxed.

Martha said, “You should thank God, not me. And *please* try not to wake him up.” She felt the tiniest bit discontented and extremely exhausted.

She and Joey did not find out until a week later that Thomas was the only male baby born that day without Hypospadias. Hypospadias is a birth defect where the urinary hole of the penis is at its base, instead of its head. It is a mostly aesthetic anomaly, easily correctable by surgery. Hypospadias was becoming increasingly common due to all the pollutants the humans released into the air.

Other birth defects were becoming more common too, many of which were far from harmless. Birth defects increased in species other than humans as well. The month after the baby was born, a subspecies of frogs went extinct because of a birth defect that stopped tadpoles from growing legs.

###

"The servant of God, Thomas, is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Martha watched her baby being dunked under water with relief. If Thomas were to die now, he could go to Heaven. She watched as the preacher pulled Thomas back out of the water. His large hands held her baby with such gentleness.

Martha's husband watched the baptism in silence. He later remarked on how amazing it is that babies hold their breath on reflex.

###

The womb had been physical bliss; compared to that bliss, the outside world was figuratively Hell. The baby would have thought the world was actual Hell if it were not for Martha.

The baby could not yet recognize the difference between hunger and flatulence, when it felt discomfort, it only knew it was discomforts. It had no idea what the ailment was or how to remedy it. It could only cry. It did not want to cry but it could not stop itself.

But then Martha could always identify what caused the baby's discomfort and fix it. Martha would pat its back or change a diaper or caress its sensitive skin. She would present a breast to the baby's glistening gums, and the baby would clasp on and draw warm sweet nourishment, and once again they would be one in body, just as they always were in mind and in soul. After all, how else would she know how to relieve my pain that I do not even know how to relieve myself, unless she was me, too? The baby thought. The baby learned to identify the relief of pain as pleasure.

Martha loved taking care of Thomas. She especially loved breastfeeding him, but she loved waking up in the middle of the night to change his diaper. Until she held him in her arms, he would cry. He needed her. Without her, Martha was sure he would die. He belonged to her and her alone. She felt blessed beyond belief; Thomas was the most beautiful thing in the universe and for God to give her such a beautiful existence was the ultimate blessing. God was rewarding her for her life of devotion. She wanted nothing but Thomas to fill her life and wanted Thomas to be her life. When she was taking care of her baby, the loneliness that had been her companion for so long slept. It would only rear its ugly head when Thomas was asleep. Martha wished Thomas would not sleep. Sometimes, she woke him up on purpose only to put him right back to sleep.

Martha also touched Thomas more than other human mothers touch their babies. She stroked his back more; she kissed him more. She spent more time than most human mothers bathing Thomas. She spent more time than other human mothers gently washing his little penis and little testicles, and she may have watched more intently than other human mothers as lukewarm water ran over her son's wrinkled genitals. She thought of how mothers must have bathed their sons since the beginning of the world.

Martha thought of how Eve could not have been happy alone with Adam and God and angels and all the birds of the air and beasts of the land; she thought of how Eve *had* to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil; she must have known all of Eden, all of Heaven, would be worth holding her own slumbering piece of creation.

Martha's bit back tears and held onto her baby tighter when she thought of how Eve must have felt when she had learned that Cain killed Able. One of her beloved sons had killed the other, and so she lost both of them. That must have been her true punishment. Pain during childbirth would be nothing compared to losing a child. Martha forced herself to crush such sacrilegious thoughts beneath prayers.

When Joey said, "I wish I could breastfeed too. You two look so close," Martha looked at her husband with disdain. He plopped on the couch beside her.

Joey leaned over closer to her and her baby. She could smell his breath; it was like over-ripe bananas.

Joey sighed, "You know, it doesn't matter to me, really. I'd love him no matter what, but he doesn't even look like me... He clearly has your cheekbones, but look at those eyebrows and the shape of his eyes. He didn't get those from either of us. He looks almost Middle Eastern. I think there might have given you someone else's sperm."

Martha wanted to hit Joey. "Thomas does *not* look Middle Eastern," she spat.

###

We watched a group of American and Canadian scientists living in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The scientists were the rare kind of human devoted to saving what humans call 'nature' from other humans.

The best way to save nature, these scientists believed, was to convince as many other humans as possible that humans were as inseparable from nature as

any other animal. The scientists conjectured that the best way to convince humankind of this was to prove that humans are indeed animals too.

If a human-animal/child-cub that could be called neither beast nor man were born, the scientists reasoned humanity would have to accept that humans are no more separate from the rest of nature than a donkey is from a horse.

The species of animal that the scientists decided to create the hybrid from was the Bonobo, or pigmy chimpanzee.

Bonobos are as related to humans as chimpanzees, sharing 98.7% of DNA. They are the most peaceful and sociable of the great apes. They are also by far the most sexual; bonobos of all ages engage in every position and combination of sexual intercourse their primitive ape-brains can think of, including face-to-face, felatio, male-on-male, female-on-female, and female-on-male. The female bonobo is the dominant gender in their matriarchal society, and the male is subordinate, and sex is used to placate each other and build social bonds. The scientists so strongly believed that Bonobos were the prime species to hybridize with, as male bonobos are the most docile of male apes that they were even willing to live in the only country bonobos were native to: a country ravished by civil war, rife with child soldiers, called the rape capital of the world.

They already knew that a female Bonobo couldn't get pregnant with human DNA (a Russian scientist had attempted to impregnate female apes with human sperm before and failed). It was going to have to be a human female that got pregnant with, and carried to term, the crossbreed.

The scientists had intense difficulty finding female volunteers to be a

hybrid's surrogate mother. Creating a human-ape hybrid was against the law in countries that thought to legislate it, even the countries that did not legislate against poaching and species genocide.

At first the scientists paid local Iyaelima women to be the surrogates without explaining to them exactly what they were doing. They simply implanted already bonobo-fertilized human eggs in their wombs.

One of the scientists, a geneticist prone to puns, had said, "If you want to make an omelet, you're going to have to break some eggs," in reply to an anthropologist who suggested that not telling the women what they were doing to them might be morally reprehensible.

Predictably, the women kept having spontaneous miscarriages at different stages of pregnancy. The scientists knew they would have to try many times before an infancy with stable health would be born, but the scientists had to travel further and further to find willing women, no matter how much they were paid—a rumor had been conceived that the scientists were trying to bring a demon into the world. One of the women had seen that her dead fetus was too hairy.

The baby found that Martha satisfied desires the baby was not even aware of having, like the desire to be rocked back and forth. With such empathy and such paralleled desires (to be fed and to feed, to be comforted and to comfort), the baby continued to regard itself and Martha as two parts of a whole.

The baby was just getting used to its new world, and life was too chaotic for it to examine the holes in its belief that it and its mother were both Martha. The holes in its theory were that (1) Martha the mother did not seem to be aware that the baby was also Martha (she called it Thomas) and (2) sometimes the baby found itself thinking about things Martha would not normally think about; for instance, it wondered how exactly the glands in Martha's breasts created milk.

Its entire world was Martha; its every thought was about her. It was delighted with that world. It was so focused on her that it did not have time to worship God. The closest it came was thinking that God made Martha and Heaven and earth on the same day.

Within five months of being born the baby, now with a head of yellow ringlets, found that it could sit up and soon after that it acquired the ability to roll over.

It had discovered soon after being born that when it attempted to speak, it was physically incapable of moving its mouth and vocal chords in an intelligible way. It did not mind, but even so, it practiced every day, because it was eager to confirm with Martha that they were one and the same.

The baby felt unpleasantly restricted by its blue onesie—it wanted to lay naked in Martha's arms. It wanted to feel Martha's heart, breath, heart, and soul

against its own same substance. Her skin against its skin. At home, when Joey was at work, Martha dressed the baby in nothing but a diaper as often as she dressed it in clothes. It sucked its thumb to comfort itself.

The pair was at the grocery store. Martha, although they had everything, felt the need to buy something, she did not know what. She was a nesting mother and a human who was born into a consumerist culture. She wanted to fill her shelter to the brim, with diapers, bottles, milk, eggs, potatoes.

They were in the cheese section. Suddenly, she lifted the thumb-sucking baby from the dingy shopping cart seat and held it close, protective. Held close, the baby felt Martha's heartbeat speed up. The baby's heartbeat sped up in turn. Martha gazed hard at the sharp cheddar as a black man reached—only inches away—for the Swiss.

The baby could have smiled a bright-eyed gummy human baby smile at the dark-pigmented man for making Martha's love just that much more tangible. But interacting with the man would have made it more frightened than it already was.

###

Once, the baby woke up in the deep of night. Streetlights splashed through the window. There was a many-colored fish mobile spinning slowly above the baby's head. It was... so beautiful. How could yellow be so... yellow?

It grasped at it, chubby arms flailing, but could not reach.

“Waaaaa! Waaaaaaa!” it called to its other half.

Its other half was there in moments, and the baby with its soft baby-blue blanket was in her arms.

The baby felt her breath like ocean's waves, and her flesh baby was comfort embodied. She smelt like nourishment, almonds, and pressed flowers. The baby forgot why it had been so miserable a few moments before. It forgot what it had wanted and remembered muffled red petals pressed between green pastures and the valley of the shadow of death. It remembered Martha's childhood, parents and God. It remembered the horror of other people's wickedness and finding redemption only in God.

The baby closed its eyes and opened them, surprised. It had almost disremembered the past. It had been living in the present as a newborn; it had forgotten that this was supposed to be a dream; it had almost forgotten that it was not just Martha's baby but Martha herself.

We sure have been through a lot, but it is okay now, it thought at its mother, we have each other. It made a cooing baby noise. By the time Martha tucked it back in its crib, the baby was almost too drowsy to notice that the shadows its crib cast were more inescapable than prison bars.

###

Martha's baby grew like other human babies at first. Maybe it cried a bit less, beamed at inappropriate times, seemed a bit more coordinated, and maybe sometimes its blue-eyed stare seemed soul-piercing and disconcertingly focused, but all was pretty much normal; Martha had no grievances. Martha loved Thomas

almost more entirely than she loved God. He almost managed to fill her chasm of loneliness.

Martha felt she had found what she was best at: being a mother.

Motherhood, more even than the charitable work she did for the church, was what God designed her for. Thomas was her entire pride and all her joy.

Today Thomas is good and happy and adorable; tomorrow he will be good and happy and handsome. And I will help him. Martha's aspirations became so simple.

She wanted to be alone with her happiness. She wanted all of the baby's smiles for herself. She even wanted all of Thomas's tears for herself. Even though Joey was eager to help, she insisted that she always be the one to get up in the middle of the night to change the baby's diaper.

Joey was an annoyance. He would come home sweaty from work and wouldn't even dry off properly from his shower in his rush to take Thomas and play with Thomas. Martha would insist Joey wait until he was completely dry before he took Thomas, but still he sometimes dripped on the baby. Fortunately, the baby could only tolerate so much of Joey's fat palms and boisterous voice before it began wailing, and only Martha could sooth her Thomas.

To Martha, Joey, her husband, who had been the only man to ever love her, became just a man like every other man, a man who would never understand the miracle of birth, or maternal instinct. She stopped dreaming of her preacher too. The preacher was male, and he could not understand the bond of mother and

child. Only God could understand, because the bond would be impossible if not for God.

Martha was logical: there was no way some godless ape-creature of evolution without a soul, a creature made up of simple chemicals, water and dirt, could feel as she felt. Therefore humans were not apes. They had souls. Without God, how could there be such splendor?

###

Martha's venerable radio was on a Christian Rock station. The sound would fluctuate between faith and unintelligible garble. Martha was sitting on the stainless beige couch rocking her baby back and forth in its baby blue baby carriage.

"Ahem," it said from where it was lying, clearing its throat, "Ma—Ma—Matha. He-hewo. Hi. Matha."

Martha's sunny brown eyes just about popped out of her head. She gawped a few moments like a drowning trout. "My baby is a—a genius!" she gasped.

The baby's huge blue eyes reflected her shocked expression, but the rest of its face remained impassive. It took in a deep breath and said, "I know you awe sup-ised wight now," it paused, "But I want to...wet you know I can speak because I was bon with evey memo-y," it paused again, "that you accumulated in youw wife." As an afterthought it added, "We awe the same pe-son!"

Martha froze. A baby saying 'hi Mommy' was one thing, a baby absolutely communicating is something else entirely. She could not say anything.

The baby went on speaking in its penetrating falsetto, “I know you tust me, because I am youw chiwd, and because I am you, but I wiww pwove it to you any way... when you wewe a chiwd and you touched youw genitaws...And youw fathew shot the puppy... You had hoped that God wouwd not notice.” The baby paused for a long time making a rasping noise as it cleared its throat, “But I want to wet you know, Mawtha, I have been thinking about youw (ow pewhaps I shouwd caww it ouw?) wife du-ing these months when I couwd not speak, and I think God fogives you for youw chiwdhood mistake. You wed the Song of Songs be cause you beweived in God to begin with. You have mo than made up fo any such veniaw sins by youw good acts...

“Oh, and I awso know that you mawwied Joey even though you wewe not in wove with him pew-say, be cause you wanted to have a baby. Weww, I am gwad you did!”

Seeing the expression on Martha’s face, the baby did not neglect to assure her that, “You need not wowwy, I wiww not teww Joey youw secwets, ow shouwd I say, ouw secwets?” The baby began giggling with delight.

Martha was, to put it mildly, horrified.

We believe that as far as humans need justification for extreme emotions, her horror was warranted; the baby had only seen things from its own well-intentioned perspective, as it had assumed that it had the same perspective as Martha. It had assumed that because it believed itself to be Martha and accepted itself, Martha would accept it as well.

Martha, though, without the adaptable brain of an infant, could not mentally grasp what was happening in the terms with which they were presented to her; all she could hear was ‘I am you’ and ‘I know all about you,’ coming out of a baby’s mouth. By default she had to explain things to herself in the terms she always used when at a loss: religion. She thought back to the fact that Thomas had been the only boy born in that day with his penis hole in the correct spot. When she first found out about that, she had taken it as a matter of course that God had blessed her for being so devoted in a land of heathens and lip-service-Christians, but she saw Thomas’s lack of a birth defect in a new light. He had been born perfect, while every other baby was born flawed.

Martha fell to her knees, she writhed on the ground, she gasped, she sobbed, and finally she, we suppose we could call it, prayed.

“I am unworthy of your holy presence, My Lord.” She kissed the blanket near her baby’s adorable pink feet, “I am your obedient servant, and—and—and! I’m sorry, My Lord, I do not know what to say.”

The baby stared at her. It took a deep breath, “No, no... no, pwease get up. Pwease. I thought—I mea—you and I wewe—awe the same pewson.”

“My lord... I’m not worthy.” Martha kissed her baby’s feet. A tear fell onto a toenail smaller than a matchstick’s flame. She began sobbing quietly.

“No. Pwease. I am sowwy. I was inconcidewat—not cwyy. Do not cwyy! Pwease, pwease! I am not God! I am sowwy. Not God!” The baby started to kick its feet, and big round tears rolled down its big round cheeks.

The baby stopped crying before Martha did; it was mature for its age. It stared at its mother and waited, its full glistening lips still trembling a little.

“I’m sorry, My Lord!” Martha finally composed herself, “What do you want from me?”

The baby cleared its throat and did not look at her, “I want you to wipe your face, change my diaper, and feed me. And I want you to acknowledge I am NOT God. Please.”

Martha obediently ran to the bathroom to wipe her face and then back to the baby. It stared at her with expectant eyes but did not say anything. Its baby-blue eyes were rimmed with blond, almost invisible eyelashes. For a moment, Martha thought that she had imagined the entire ordeal. She felt an ecstasy of relief during that moment.

“Wew?” said the baby. It coughed a little and cleared its throat again, “Please change my diaper.”

“...Like always My Lord?”

The baby said, “Yes, sorry, and please do not call me your word.”

Martha held her baby as if it were a burning bush. She set it down on the changing table without meeting its eyes.

“I would do it myself, but I cannot,” It explained apologetically as she held its ankles up and together in one hand and wiped its rump with a baby wipe.

The diaper changing took twice as long as ever before, and the baby had to remind its mother not to forget the baby powder.

After she set Thomas back in the baby carriage Martha ran to the kitchen and tore through the cabinets. What do Gods eat? She finally settled on bread, cheese, and wine; she remembered what Jesus had eaten in the Bible. She wished she had fish.

The baby looked at the food in confusion. "I cannot eat sowid foods yet," It gently reminded her. Like the sun turning white glaciers into mud, loneliness melted its insides. It felt its world was ending.

It was not Martha. It would never be Martha, and it would never be one with another person like it had been during those few brief months. It was someone else, but who?

Human babies are born thinking they are they same being as their Mother (with good reason). Humans call this phenomenon the Normal-Symbiotic Phase of childhood development. Every human infant experiences what Thomas did when it becomes irrefutable that their mothers are separate entities from themselves.

We suppose that feeling of detachment, of isolation that they feel as babies, may be a large part of what incites so many humans to act as mindlessly destructive as they do. If they understood the consequences of their actions and their irrefutable attachment to the world, we like to believe that they would not harm the world as much as they do, because they would understand that they were harming themselves as well.

It was peculiar that God did not cross the baby's mind during this time of need. God seems to be able to alleviate in many humans some degree of this feeling of isolation.

Martha could not watch Thomas as He sucked milk from her ugly brown nipple. The act that before seemed enchanting now, with a talking baby, seemed grotesque. It was almost sexual. God had impregnated the Virgin Mary, and Mary had given birth to God; how easy would it be to reverse the order? Had God broken Mary's hymen on the way in or the way out? But more importantly, what do you do when you give birth to a God? What did Mary do?

When Thomas appeared to be done nursing, Martha worked up the courage to ask, "God—should I call my husband?"

Thomas looked at Martha with those unfathomable blue eyes. "Bripp!" he burped. "Excuse me. And I am not God, I just have your memories."

Martha stared dumbly. She wanted more than anything to topple Thomas from her lap and run. Run to the white mini van parked in the short driveway, turn on the ignition, and call her husband. Or call the preacher. But Martha could not do either of those things because she had a duty towards her God, and because she did not want to be sent to Hell: in fact, just as much as she could not do it, she could not even think about doing it, for fear of Hell. She also knew it would be illegal to leave such a young baby home alone.

"Do not leave Joey; there is no reason for him to come home. We own'y need each other." The baby burped and Martha wiped away milky saliva

from its mouth on reflex. The baby snuggled deeper into her long skirt. It mumbled into her clothes, “You awe me and I am you. Pwease...”

“As you wish, My Lord.”

“Not youw lowd...” Thomas murmured. It was falling asleep.

Certain humans will not move a centimeter if a cat settles on them to sleep. No matter how desperately such a human needs to relieve itself, that human will hold its bladder, if a normally unaffectionate feline is deigning to snuggle. Thomas was no longer endearing enough to Martha to keep her from the bathroom. What was keeping Martha from the bathroom was another quality of the baby’s altogether.

###

“I’m home!” Joey announced, slamming the door behind him. His brown leather work boots shed dried mud onto the living room’s immaculate sea-green carpet.

Martha looked up at Joey through wet eyelashes. The baby in her arms began to stir.

“Martha?” Joey watched Martha’s cautious breathing, “Um, sorry for yelling, I forgot again.”

“Joey... I have something. Wonderful to...to tell you... our baby is God.”

“Thomas? Why of course, we all have a little bit of God inside us.”

“No, you don’t understand. Thomas *is* God.”

“Thomas is God?” Joey peeked at the baby. Its eyes were flickering open.

It had Martha’s long eyelashes, but not her brown eyes.

Once the baby's eyes were properly opened, it opened its mouth, "No, Joey, I am not God, I was just bown with Mawtha's memowies."

"Well I'll be gosh darned. Out of the mouths of babes! You can talk. Did you see that Martha? He spoke!—Hi Thomas, I'm your daddy. Can you say Da-da?"

"Don't talk to Him like that!" Martha slapped Joey's hand away, "He is God."

"Am not," said the baby. Its thin eyebrows were almost too light to be seen, but it still managed to scowl darkly.

"He says he's not God, Martha. You are just a genius, aye, wittle Thomas?"

"Joey, don't you know anything? The only reason He would say He is not God is because He is testing our faith."

"I am not God!" Thomas squeaked then coughed a little.

"Why does she think you are then?" Joey addressed the baby.

The baby looked surprised in a way only human and chimpanzee and bonobo babies can look surprised. "Because I wemembew aww hew memowies and I can tawk."

"See? He knows everything about me. He told me something about my childhood I haven't told anyone before."

"What did he tell you?"

Martha never once, in the two years she was married to him, or the ten years she had known him before that, lost her composure in front of Joey like she

did then. "...If He isn't God, why would God curse me with a son that knows all my sins? Haven't I led a Christian life? I do charity work every day, I honored my parents while they were alive, I don't cov-cov-covet my neigh..." She began bawling hopelessly. She could not even prevent her tears from falling onto the yellow fuzz on her sacred infant's head.

"You *have* wead a good wife. I did not mean to make you feew bad! I wove you! How couwd I not? We awe the same pewson." The baby started weeping again as well. Big tears once again rolled down its fat cheeks. They emulated the smaller tears streaming down Martha's skinnier cheeks. It was becoming a regular cry-fest.

Joey rubbed his pink bald head slowly, "Well son, it looks to me like if you love your mother like you say you do, then you *are* God, and you can't convince me otherwise."

Thomas looked at its sobbing mother. "Couwd I pwease take a nap?" it said.

"Of course son—Don't worry Martha, I'll put him to sleep."

###

The baby said, "Joey, I am not Mawtha, am I?"

Joey said, "No, I'm afraid not, you are Thomas."

Thomas said, "I'm lonely. I miss hew heawtbeat. I love hew. I just want to be inside hew again." [high five!]

"Want me to rock you to sleep?" said Joey.

It occurred to the baby for the first time that people outside of itself and Martha existed; Joey existed. It recalled Martha's memories of attempting sex with Joey. It recalled Joey's stout hairy penis with indifference. Sex means very little to a human baby; they have no functioning reproductive organs.

"No." said Thomas, "You honow thy wife, and I wiww honow my pawents. Go to youw wife."

A whimper squeaked through of Thomas's lips the moment Joey shut the door. Even though just a baby, Thomas was not about to fall asleep for a second time that day. It turned its head towards the window and watched the evening sky fade to black.

###

Joey's voice had a tendency to reverberate. "So, my angel, how should we raise a god as a child?" he said as he plopped himself down on the pristine beige couch next to Martha.

"I don't know... the Bible doesn't have much on Jesus's childhood."

"Well if he is God, I suppose we just have to do as he tells us."

The excitement in Martha's voice did not match the expression on her face, "Yes, of course! God's word is law."

Joey smiled. He arranged his thick arm over Martha's shoulders. "See, everything has a way of working out," he told Martha.

Martha sighed, "With God's blessing you are right." Martha disliked the feel of her short husband reaching his stubby arm around her, but despite his height he could sometimes be counted on to ease her of her deepest anxieties.

Joey spoke again a moment later, “Oh, and maybe we should get him checked out for autism. Autistic children have been known to show extraordinary ability at a young age, only to develop complications later.”

“What are you saying?!” Martha pulled away from his arm.

“Nevermind. It was a joke,” Joey said.

“A bad joke,” Martha corrected. She stood up. Her husband could also be counted on to make inappropriate comments.

###

The baby and its mother lived in muffled silence; the baby would make humble requests and Martha would submit. There was only one request Martha would not accept: The request she would stop seeing it as God. When the baby tried to prove it was not God it only succeeded in increasing its mother’s conviction it was. She agreed not to tell anyone else yet, though.

Joey, however, continued to live as loudly as ever. He kept up his work at the plant nursery, and his home vegetable garden, and he kept his bellowing bass of a voice singing as he worked.

The baby quickly expanded into a cherubic toddler. It could crawl around its room, and scoot standing when leaning against furniture or walls like a cautious swimmer holding onto the edge of a pool. The room was tenderly made for baby boys. It was stocked with blue objects and wallpapered with images of Thomas the Choo-choo train. The toddler would only touch its toys to feel the novel textures they had to offer. It knew the square peg does not go in the round hole, but it had never touched a peg and did not know exactly how cold a peg

could be or how slow its toddler hands could be to warm it. Its favorite texture was its blanket that was almost as soft as Martha's skin.

Its favorite object though was a picture book, *Are You My Mother?*, about a lost baby bird. Each time Thomas read the book, it cried. The pictures on the page were smudged with tears.

It was a sight to be seen when it took its first steps on its crooked baby legs. When it found its balance for the first time it laughed with unbridled joy, "Ah-ah-ha. I am bawancing! I am bawancing! It feews so much mowe wike fwoating then I wemembew! Wait untiw I show Joe-wee!" it told no one. It was the first time it had laughed since it had spoken.

Silence was the baby's response. Martha was doing laundry in the garage.

When the toddler fell down no human heard the soft crackle of its diaper, but we did.

### CHAPTER 3—Toddler's Best Friend

Joey got paid in money as a gardener at work and paid in vegetables as a gardener at home. If there was daylight and no rain, he was outside gardening, unless he was biking flat roads lined with cornfields and soybeans. Martha never understood his preoccupation with the outside. She enjoyed the controlled temperature inside human dwellings and the absence of insects.

Thomas did not understand the appeal either, but soon after it was steady on its feet, a few weeks after it first walked, Joey put little socks and little sneakers (only as long as one of Joey's fingers) on Thomas's piglet-pink feet.

"Awe we gowing somewhewe?" it asked. The few times Martha had brought it anywhere it had not worn shoes.

Many humans do not know, but shoes are usually nothing but decorations on human babies; they actually hinder fledgling humans in learning the mechanics of walking.

Joey had just laughed at Thoma's inquiry. Martha would never laugh at a question Thomas asked. She would never laugh at anything Thomas said.

Joey swung Thomas into his arms and covered its eyes with one huge sandpaper hand, "You'll see," he chuckled.

For a moment Thomas panicked. Was Joey kidnapping it? But that did not make any sense; Joey was its father.

It felt Joey tromp through the house like an over-excited hound, then the rough-skinned hand blindfold was removed and Thomas was set on the ground.

"It's a swell day out; I thought you could hang out outside with me." Joey grinned a dog grin, and Thomas could almost see a long strip of pink carelessly lolling out the side of a metaphorically canine mandible.

Thomas said, "Okay."

"Come look at this plant then, Tommy-boy."

Thomas looked at the plant. It was primarily a dull mint green, but it had been frosted over with fine white hairs. “Is it diseased?” the toddler asked.

“No, no. Feel it, not the texture of a diseased plant.”

“Ow! It huwts!” the child snatched back its hand.

“What? Why? How? Are you okay?” Joey crouched down to get a better look at Thomas.

“It was too soft. It huwt.” Indeed, the plant was so soft it over-stimulated and grated against the toddler’s sensitive nerves, like beautiful music played deafeningly loud.

“Hahahaha!” Joey chuckled, “Too soft? That’s why it’s called lamb’s ear. And that’s why boy scouts use it as toilet paper!”

The toddler screwed up its mind to block out that image and reached for the plant again. The blankets inside the house were soft, but the plant was soft in an entirely different way. It was soft like Martha’s breast was soft. It was alive and gentle and without malice. It was pulsating with life in the same way Martha’s breasts were pulsating with life. Just like an inanimate object, yet animate. No one commanded the plants, or the insects, or the birds, or the breast to be alive. No one commanded cells to multiply, but they did. Both plant and mammary gland had no will and yet needed no will to be beautiful. And they were beautiful.

Thomas had stopped breastfeeding months ago.

Thomas looked around. All around the toddler were plants, up above was the sky, and down below was the earth. The plants raised leaves—towards the

sky, towards God, offering supplication while accepting the sunlight that poured like rain upon them. The earth was unmoving, unfathomable, yet candidly alive with many-colored insects and roots just below the surface; the soil was made of minerals pulverized into a brown elixir to nourish and house everything that ever lived and to receive the corpses of everything that ever died. Above, the sky-blue sky enveloped the world like a great caressing membrane, like an embryonic sack. The earth was floating in the great amniotic fluid of the cosmos; there was no possibility creation was an accident. Nothing so wondrous could exist by accident, and everything was wondrous.

Thomas truly understood why nature was a mother and God was the Father. God had planted everything, even the dirt, with his seed, and nature was always pregnant with miracle.

“Why are you crying, sonny?” Joey asked, looking at Thomas who was squinting, mouth ajar, at the sky.

“It, it, it is all so, so... I do not know—”

“Beautiful? Breathtaking? Divine? I’ll tell you now, son, even though you might know more than me, one thing I do know is that there isn’t any one word that can describe nature—”

“Awe-inspiwing.”

“That is a pretty good one,” said Joey.

“The wowlid is so awe-inspiwing, it is painful. Somehow, it is towtuwous. Why does God pesent us a wowlid with such oviewwhelming beauty? What can we

do about it? We cannot create such beauty ourselves. I almost feel we taint it simply by looking at it.”

Joey ruffled the toddler’s golden curls. “Ah, but we *can* create such beauty. Martha made you, didn’t she?”

After that, the toddler was always venturing into the back yard to admire God’s creation. Except during the snowing months, it did not wear clothes as it did so; it did not see the point of wearing clothes that hindered the wind from kissing, the sun from caressing, and earth from massaging its feet. Its soles grew black and thick as hoofs, and the brief baths Martha supervised could not make them thin and pink.

Often, the toddler indulged in the sun’s golden caress too long, and its fresh skin burnt like a lobster being boiled alive. Its nerves felt like Hell fire, and it cried, but even then the toddler insisted on going outside—albeit with a layer of sunscreen and aloe Vera—to lie in a sheet of shade.

The child watched the sprouting birth, pollinizing sex and wilting death of plants. It drank in the wonders of the natural world from that fenced-in box of a human backyard, and babbled unconscious salutations to the wind, plants, rocks and God.

It asked Joey everything about plants and nature, and at first Joey was able to answer, but Thomas, with the rapidly developing brain of a toddler and the knowledge of an adult, was soon asking questions that Joey, and no human on earth, would know the answer to. It asked questions that even we did not know the answer to.

Joey, being a relatively knowledgeable human, could answer, “why is the sky blue?” but could not answer, “do butterflies remember being caterpillars? And if so, do they miss their hairy, hungry, youth? Do they dream about it?”

Years later Thomas read in a book that butterflies, like most other insects, do not dream at all but do go into sleep-like trances.

Every week at church Martha, her Son, and her husband sat quietly on the hard pews. Martha would stare hard straight ahead at the preacher and Joey would fidget until the singing. Thomas tried its best to pay attention too, but found itself staring at the stain-glass window behind the handsome preacher and wondering about the wonder of the light’s refraction. Thomas thought, Martha sees that same light; Martha is lit up by the same light as I am.

Sometimes, during those soft moments, the three looked like a standard human family, and Thomas like a standard human child. During those times, we could get wearied watching. While Thomas was busy wondering about light, we found ourselves wondering about its other questions. Do butterflies envy caterpillars their youth? Some butterflies have no digestive track because they only need to live long enough to reproduce. We wondered if they feel anything when they look at the sustenance of their childhood.

Though the questions were not truly our own, it was an anomalous sensation to be asking questions at all, especially ones we could not instantly have answered (we were too focused on Thomas to learn about butterflies). Each question was like discovering a hole inside that only an answer could fill.

While we had always understood humans on an objective basis, we started to comprehend more just how unpleasant it would be to be human. And we also understood, at a more basic level than ever before, just how empty humans are as well as how compulsively destructive; they purposefully puncture themselves with holes by asking questions they could never know the answer to. It was a disquieting realization.

We felt a sort of regret for Thomas.

###

The kitchen is where Joey and Martha had all of their important discussions. It was suitable because the hard wooden chairs and the unobtrusive blemished table it contained were much less intimate than the single couch of the living room. Martha hated nothing more than intimacy when she was trying to be serious.

Joey would have known Martha wanted to discuss something with him when she was not done cooking dinner, but told him to pull up a chair.

Martha kept her eyes on the broccoli she was chopping, "I am thinking I have given myself enough of a maternity leave."

Joey said, "Are you sure? You planned to stop volunteering with the church until Thomas was in school."

"Yes, originally, but I did not expect to have God as a child. I think God would want me to go back to doing charity." Martha's perfect posture was too much for any human to argue with.

"What are you going to do with Thomas while you are working?"

“I’ll bring Him with me. Naturally, He will not misbehave.”

Joey rubbed his ruddy head, “Umm, angel, maybe it would be better if he came with me for now. I mean, he seems to love plants so much, and I think he would be more, I guess kind of bored if he were with you at fundraisers. I’ll ask my boss, and introduce him. I don’t think it would be a problem because there are often kids his age around, and because he is so well behaved...” Joey let out a puff of air. He was a loud man, but he was not accustomed to saying more than a few words at a time.

Martha frowned in concentration, “But it is my duty as His mother...”

“Don’t worry, angel, you are doing the right thing as long as he is happy.”

“We shall let Him decide.”

Joey smiled, “You know, angel, I noticed you’ve been putting your hair up lately. Let it down once in a while. It’s so long and gorgeous.”

“You think I should? When Thomas was born—before we knew what He was—I was worried that he would pull it, as babies do,” Martha touched the dense bun on the back of her head.

“Yep!”

Martha smiled, “Maybe I will.”

Just then the baby monitor spoke, “Excuse me, I just woke up from my nap, could someone please change my diaper?”

The toddler was torn when Joey and Martha made it decide between being with its mother and being outdoors. It adored Martha, and even when she was

calling it God, it still felt more at ease with her than with Joey. Joey was a mystery.

But it could not deny that Martha was always on edge around it, and it wanted nothing more than for Martha to be at ease.

###

The toddler was uncomfortable in Joey's big hairy arms, and grateful that it was wearing clothes for once—overalls and a shirt to be exact.

Joey carried it through a room filled with diagrams of plants into a dingy office behind the front store. The lanky man in the office stood up and grinned as soon as he saw them.

“Say hello to my boss, son!” Joey bellowed, making Thomas resonate with the sound.

“Hello, sir.” the toddler said, taking time to properly pronounce each letter, which was still difficult because of its lack of teeth and chipmunk cheeks.

“Oh my god, Joey! You weren't kidding when you said your son was a genius!” Joey's boss chuckled, “so 'wil guy youw gonna gwow up to be big and stwong aren't you?” he said in baby talk and without waiting for an answer, “What do you want to be when you grow up? Aww youw hair is so curly.”

Thomas looked at him with a slight frown, “Good question. What *do* I want to be?” And must I be big and strong? Thomas was terrified at the thought of being as big as either of the men—how would it manage not to break everything?

“I love babies,” Joey's boss told Joey, “He has such adorable little blond ringlets! And he is so smart! I know he doesn't get it from you.”

The adults laughed. Thomas waited patiently and wondered why the man was talking about it as if it were an inanimate object. Afterwards, Joey carried Thomas out into the plant nursery, which was a large rectangular lot surrounded by a short wrought-iron fence, filled with various plants in and out of pots, as well as an artificial stream and fountain. It was more pictorial than most plant nurseries were as sometimes elementary school classes went on field trips there, and the students from the small nearby university were encouraged to garden in a section, which was grown as a donation to the university's cafeteria. Joey had been a catalyze for this symbiotic relationship—he had cut through miles of red tape, and it had taken years to convince both the university and his employer there was no harm in it.

Joey handed Thomas a grey block cellphone and told it, “Since you're a genius, and this place isn't very big, I suppose you can wander around by yourself, but call me if anything happens, my number is speed-dial two.”

Thomas put the phone on silent and slipped in its front overall pocket. We were considering how the world would be improved if all human children had grown up around plants like Thomas was, when it occurred to us Joey's relaxed parenting might get most human children killed.

###

The toddler had been going to work with Joey for an entire week before it encountered the cat.

The cat was small and entirely black, discounting the white paws it glided on. When Thomas first saw it, it was sitting under a Chinese pistachio tree licking its pink puckered anus with the dignity of a politician who believed his own lies.

The toddler approached slowly. In all of the memories the toddler had inherited from Martha, only the one about her puppy's death had anything to do with animals. This was foreign territory.

The toddler was clumsy and stumbled, making the leaves crackle and alerting the cat to its presence. With gymnastic plasticity the cat turned its head towards the toddler. The cat looked at the toddler with cavernous yellow eyes.

The toddler held perfectly still, but the cat sauntered away anyway, disappearing between potted fig trees. Thomas sat down and waited, hoping the cat would return.

The sun was high in the sky, and still the cat did not return.

"Whatchya doing there, son? I was looking for you, and I called you, it is time for your meal." Joey's shadow quashed Thomas.

Thomas squinted up at Joey, "I apologize; I must have lost track of time. There was a cat, and I was waiting for it to return."

"Aww, who could be angry with you, Thomas?" Joey's face held a look of absolute adoration.

Thomas trembled; remembering all those years Joey had spent trying to woo Martha and how when Martha finally did agree to go on a date it was only to make him give up. Yet Joey had turned out to be a much kinder and much more charming man than she had given him credit for. On the first date they had had

Italian food. Martha had gotten lasagna and Joey had gotten pizza. The food was average but Joey had made her smile.

“Was the cat black with white paws?” Joey went on talking as he scooped Thomas up into his big, strong, and hairy arms.

“Yes,” said Thomas.

“I know that kit-cat,” Joey chuckled, “I’ll show you after you eat.”

“See, here it is. I feed it every day. I think it’s a stray.”

The cat meowed and slithered eagerly between Joey’s legs, “Here, Thomas, hold out your hand while she’s in a good mood.” Joey squatted down and engulfed Thomas’s tiny wrist in his big paw. He guided the small hand towards the cat. The cat delicately sniffed it, and then, after a moment’s consideration, rubbed its purring face against it. Seeing the size of its head against his fist, the toddler forced itself to not flinch away.

Joey released Thomas’s wrist and fished a can of tuna from his pocket. He cracked the can open, plucked a large piece of tuna out, and ate it. He licked his fingers, and set down the opened can of fish.

The can of tuna, labeled dolphin-safe, contained a wild tuna fish that had yet to reach sexual maturity. It was a fish that would now never reproduce, and a single fish whose death, in its small way, contributed towards the breakdown of the sea’s ecosystem. It had been caught and slain in a net with an endangered sea turtle, two species of endangered fish, and many fish that were not yet endangered, but were useless to humans. No dolphins were killed, but their food

source was. And the same boat that tuna fish died on had been the final resting place of several dolphins. The guidelines that stipulated the label “dolphin-safe” tuna were almost entirely unregulated.

The cat lost interest in Thomas’s hand and began gobbling down the tuna, purring loudly.

The toddler smiled. “He is so hungry—oh, I am sorry, it is a she right? What is her name?”

“Ah, I don’t know if it’s a girl or not. I just call her a her, because it’s easier, and cause I feel like ‘Kitties’ are girls. Doesn’t really matter though, if it’s a girl or boy cat. A cat is a cat is a cat.”

Thomas scrunched up his face, “So its name is kitty?”

“Ah, no, it doesn’t have a name—as far as I can tell. And I didn’t really feel right calling it by a name, ‘cause it is purely a cat; givin it a name is like asking it to be more than it is.” Joey rubbed his head, “Though I guess it’s sorta presumptuous to think it doesn’t want a name—you can name it.”

Thomas smiled at the cat, “No, that is all right, thank you<sup>2</sup>.”

The toddler now had something to look forward to at Joey’s work to other than the plants.

Thomas would say, “What secret are you not telling me, cat? You know God’s creation better than humans do.” And the cat would meow in reply.

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<sup>2</sup> ~~Adam’s naming of the animals~~

The cat would look to the toddler for petting, play, and body heat. It would rub against the toddler enough to knock it down, and the toddler would release a peal of laughter. The toddler rarely laughed, but when it did, it was an innocuous sound.

Laughter is one thing we like about humans. They are not the only species that laughs—rats laugh too—but human laughter is less predictable. For humans, laughter seems to be an organic response to certain particular yet unpredictable aspects of their environment. They laugh when things are incongruous, but they also laugh when they are tickled, and they laugh when they fall or see others fall. But they do not always laugh when presented with the same stimuli. To humans, sometimes being tickled is painful, sometimes the incongruous is frightening, and sometimes falling is dangerous. What causes certain things to make them laugh, and the same things not to in altered circumstances?

The cat was the toddler's first and best friend. They patrolled the green and flowering grounds together, ate together, and were together constantly. When the snow came, and the plastic of a greenhouse roof went up, the cat warmed Thomas with its body heat. The cat seemed to know that Thomas was only a kitten, and was always very gentle. It even took to licking Thomas with its little pink tongue, and Thomas did not find being licked by a pink sandpaper tongue that doubled as toilet paper to be too repulsive.

Thomas was standing staring into the fountain one day when the cat brought it a dead bird. It laid the bird tenderly before the toddler's feet as if making an offering to a pharaoh.

Thomas stared at the bloody little mass. The cat beamed, ears and whiskers forward. The toddler screamed and screamed.

The cat slunk away.

A woman passing by with her child pretended not to hear. But it was impossible not to hear. The toddler, like all human toddlers, had an odious scream.

Joey came sprinting up and swung the toddler into his arms. The toddler buried its face in Joey's hot chest and sobbed something. Joey rocked it back and forth and stroked its small, warm, back.

"There-there-there is a dead bird," Thomas managed to say, " And the cat killed it!" The sobs renewed themselves with fresh energy.

"There, there, there, there," cooed Joey. Sympathetic tears welled up in the man's eyes but they did not fall.

"Waaaaa!" screamed Thomas.

"Here—I have an idea—let's give the bird a proper burial."

The toddler started breathing deeper. It began to calm. It would have accepted any solution at that moment. Joey was damp and smelt like sulfurous sweat.

Joey told Thomas to wait and he ran to get his spade.

The toddler was already scratching a hole in the ground with its small fingers by the time Joey returned.

“Thomas, calm down,” Joey pleaded, “I have a shovel, you shouldn’t dig in the dirt.”

The toddler did not look up. Wiping tears had smeared dirt across its face. “I must create the hole myself. Otherwise—otherwise, it is sadder.”

Joey sat down next to the toddler and rubbed its back as it dug. The toddler’s little hands were stained brown. Dirt was underneath its porcelain doll nails.

The hole was as deep as the toddler’s forearm, when Joey said, “Enough.” He went to pick up the bloody mass of feathers with the spade.

“NO Joey.” Thomas picked up the bird. It was sticky. The bloody mass of matted feathers had been a bird with a yellow stomach and brown wings.

Joey opened his mouth and was interrupted.

“NO Joey. I am sorry. It is not dirty. Do not say that it is dirty, the bird is part of God’s creation.”

“Out of the mouths of babes,” Joey said, his voice soft for once.

Thomas tried to blow life into the bird’s mouth in a sticky baby version of mouth-to-beak resuscitation but only managed to make the bird’s delicate ribs pop, and Joey snatched the corpse away.

“Putting your mouth against it *is* dirty,” said Joey.

“Lay it down in the hole, Joey,” said Thomas.

It was only after prayers were said over the hole the bird was buried in, that the toddler collected itself. But animals have souls subordinate to humans, they do not really have proper souls, it reminded itself, even Jesus did not hesitate to prioritize a single man's life over the lives of a whole herd of pigs, when he sent the demons into the pigs and then drowned them. Tears flowed with renewed vigor down its face.

The toddler coughed when Joey made it rinse its mouth with mouthwash.

Thomas never ate meat again, and neither did Joey or Martha. Thomas explained that because animals do not have God's favor as men do, they deserve as much time and happiness on this planet as they can get—and it pointed out that before the flood the children of Adam were vegetarians by God's decree.

Truly, Thomas was a good child.

The bird that the cat had killed was the last female of its kind. If the cat had not killed it, it would have laid eggs the following week, but its offspring likely would have eventually been killed by the domesticated species of feline that many humans delighted in: a species that humans have allowed to decimate countless of populations of birds and rodents.

###

Thomas and the cat were slow to reconcile. The cat was not happy with how the gift had been received, and the toddler was not happy with receiving such a brutal gift.

The cat forgave Thomas first. The toddler was sitting in the shade of a palm tree when the cat came, and rubbed its purring black head against the toddler's knee. The toddler sullenly refused to look at it. The cat took no notice and settled itself against the toddler's legs.

"Purr," it told Thomas.

Thomas sighed, "I know you are a cat. And I know cats hunt to eat, but you did not murder that bird to eat it. Why did you have to destroy one of God's creations? Why would God create one creature to murder its brother? That is too sad. If there is a Hell for cats, you should go there."

Tears wetted Thomas's cheeks, but the cat only purred louder. Upon hearing the toddler's voice its whiskered lips seemed to twitch with a smile. Still, Thomas did not forgive the cat.

The toddler had not sat with the cat for a week. It tried to ignore the loneliness its companion had left in its heart, but found itself looking for a black shadow all over the garden grounds.

Human adults asked the preschooler if 'he had lost his parents.' And Thomas would reply, "No. I have not." So firmly that no one pursued the question.

The cat was hissing and battered in an overturned trashcan. The cat was hissing because a male human child of about four years was throwing stones at it. The trashcan clanked loudly when the child missed and clanked more softly when

the boy hit his mark. And clank the trashcan did, softly and loudly, for there was no lack of stones around in the stone garden.

The cat looked much smaller than the last time Thomas had seen it. The flabby little boy laughed with glee whenever he hit the cat and whenever the cat yowled.

Thomas ran up and grabbed the boy's arm. The boy shook Thomas off in annoyance, "Stop it," The boy said and picked up another rock.

"No!" said the toddler, picking itself up, "*You* stop it!"

The little boy sighed, "You can't have a turn," he told Thomas, "You're too little. You need to be a big boy first, like me."

He threw another stone with his stout arm. The cat meowed, and the meow clawed ribbons out of Thomas's heart.

"No," said Thomas, "I do not want a turn. Please stop hitting the cat; it is our friend. Would you like it if someone hit you with rocks?"

The boy scowled at Thomas, "He started it. See?" he showed Thomas a delicate scratch on his leg. "I'm pretty brave," he added.

"Please, the cat is one of God's creatures," Thomas cried, and upon saying so, it knew it was true and knew that the cat had not killed the bird with any evil intentions, but only with the simple, instinctual intention of making Thomas happy. It was no more evil for killing the bird than a flea is evil for sucking blood. God had bestowed upon it its nature.

CLANK, CLANK, *clank*, YOWL.

"I will give you one more chance," said Thomas.

“No. Its mine.”

Thomas picked up a stone, an oval stone cool and grey to the touch, and tackled the older child.

“The,” the toddler pounded, “cat,” Thomas pounded again, “is,” once more Thomas pounded, “God’s!” and kept on pounding. It was convenient that the boy was soft as dough to begin with.

Why are humans so drawn towards their own destruction? Why did humans burn nicotine when they were releasing toxins into the environment and their lungs? Why did they spray chemicals on their food to kill insects when it was slowly killing them as well? Why do they go to war, when the only thing to be gained from violence is violence? We are too rational to understand such absurdity, but it seems that destruction is something they are born to.

The boy was too shocked to defend himself, and though the punches of a toddler could not much hurt even a five-year-old, a rock could. The boy cried. The cat was able to limp away during this transaction of violence for tears, and Thomas never saw it again.

The boy’s mother found the children in quite a state. Thomas, with cavernous blue eyes, sat watching the boy while the boy lay whimpering like an overturned turtle. A turtle with a split lip and a face painted purple, red, and blue.

The mother looked from Thomas to her son and said, “What would your father think if he found out such a small boy beat you? We are going to have to lie and say it was a six year old.”

The mother reported Thomas to Joey’s boss. Joey’s boss nodded as she explained but burst into laughter when she left, “Ha! Your little guy already beating up that chubby monster! He’s gonna be quite a man, Joey!”

Joey’s reply was half-hearted.

He took Thomas, whom he had been holding on his hip, outside and set it on its feet. “What was that about?” Joey asked.

Thomas craned its head to look Joey in the eye and said, “He was throwing stones at the cat. I am wrong for resorting to violence, but I saw no other option. And as he will not do it again, I will not regret my actions.”

Joey said, “Well, if something like that happens again, call me or another adult.”

Thomas’s face remained impassive, “He was such a small child. Is cruelty part of human nature, do you think, Joey? Adam and Eve were not cruel, just disobedient...”

Joey smiled, “You know Thomas, I don’t know. No one does, for sure.” His smile tumbled from his face.

The sky was blue, the clouds were white, and the grass was green. Thomas could hear laughter in the distance and birds singing nearby.

“I know, Joey,” Thomas said, “I know we have original sin, from the fruit, but why would God give cruelty to a child who does not even know what cruelty

means? The cat did not know what cruelty means... and it was always-always-always—kind—I was mean to the cat, Joey. I judged it wrongly for trying to be nice to me. It did not know—I did not *know*.

“Joey, when Martha was a child, she was teased by other children for being too religious; they even put gum in her long, pretty hair. But despite their cruelty she learned to forgive them, and did not question God.

“Joey... I have all of Martha’s memories, so why did I have to go through this? Should not I have known better? I *know* what it is like to be an adult, to be mature, so why did not I take the high road? Why did not I forgive the cat, and why could not I stop the boy without violence?”

Joey’s smile returned, “Those are some deep questions Thomas. It is good for you to think about, but only you can answer them.”

“I guess it means I should not judge, and leave that to God... But... I enjoyed punching the boy. I loved it.” The toddler’s golden ringlets of dead protein glistened in the sun. Its eyes glistened as well. In that light they were the brightest blue of innocence, “I think, Joey, I think I should stop coming here. I will go with Martha from now on.”

It was strange for Thomas to see Joey’s eyes water so swiftly. Joey was always so steadfast and full of strength. He had always supported Martha without complaint, but now, though he did not cry, he sniffed, his face reddened and his voice broke a little. He smiled, “If that is what you want, Thomas.”

Thomas remembered how Martha had been so aggravated at Joey for eternally smiling, but Thomas felt grateful for that dogged, lopsided smile.

Thomas spent less time appreciating the splendor of nature and more time trying to remember the life Martha had lived. She had learned the pain of involving herself with animals, and the pain of involving herself with humans. She had learned through life that she could trust God and that God would never forsake her, or give her pain.

Yet these memories were retreating deeper and deeper into Thomas's mind. Thomas could easily recollect facts Martha had learnt in life (like how using condoms results in penile cancer in men, and homosexuality results in Hell), but Thomas was losing her lived experiences and thoughts. In some ways though, it was happy to have the memories fade. It found it difficult to live as Martha did.

The preschooler realized that rather than having the gift of its mother's memories, it would have found more pleasure in the gift of normalcy. Martha would have found more pleasure in Thomas being normal as well. Thomas wondered if God were punishing Martha, with the abomination of a child she had and felt pity for her, and guilt.

The preschooler often found itself longing to be like other preschoolers. It prayed to God daily for an answer, for a sign, to tell it why it was as it was.

## CHAPTER 4—Christian Science

Martha was delighted to have Thomas back in her care. Like many humans, Martha had the tendency to covet what her neighbors had. When Thomas had been spending so much time with Joey, she had forgotten how uncomfortable she was around her God and grown unconsciously jealous of Joey.

“Why, yes! Of course I will bring Thomas to volunteer at church with me.” She told Joey, even turning away from the beets she was cutting to smile at him. The knife glistened a enflamed pink.

Upon hearing this the preschooler, standing unnoticed in the doorway, blushed. A shy smile tickled its lips. It was surprised to hear genuine enthusiasm in its mother’s voice.

Thomas wished to sit in the front with Martha, or even better, on Martha's lap, but the baby-blue car-seat had to go in a back seat. Thomas did not glance out the window at the white and brick houses with their trims of different colors and the lush green lawns that needed no sprinklers. The toddler was fixated on Martha's bun.

"What are you volunteering for today?" it said, trying to make small talk.

"The church is holding another rummage sale to collect donations for cancer research. We have been at it all month. Kenny's niece died of leukemia."

"That is delightful—the donations I mean. Are the donations doing well?"

Thomas watched Martha's bun turn, as she looked down a crossroad, "Not as well as we had hoped; there are still children dying of leukemia every day. But no matter how useless it seems, I will keep working at what You approve of and praying for them."

Martha made a sharp turn into the small church's large parking lot. Half of the parking lot was sectioned off for the people who were already shuffling around with chairs, runny noses, foldable tables and racks of faded clothes. The sky was the color of lint. No one cast a shadow.

Martha unbuckled her seatbelt and slammed the door. She opened the door where Thomas was struggling with short fingers to undo the car-seat to no avail. Martha undid it, lifted the toddler up, and set the toddler on the ground. Thomas marveled at Martha's strength and dexterity.

Martha led Thomas through a throng of people, who were saying "How cute!" and "That must be Thomas!" to introduce the toddler to the preacher for the first time since it could speak.

The preacher was a man who looked young for his age. His wrinkles were laugh lines, and he had thick nickel-colored hair. He was reiterating the plan for the day to one of his sheep when Martha walked up with Thomas. He turned to smile at her.

At first the preacher did not notice the toddler, who at only a couple of feet off the ground, was below eye-level. When he did, his smile reached his eyes.

“Ah, you must be Thomas. You’ve grown so much! Hello Thomas, I’m Preacher Kenny.”

Thomas offered its hand to shake and tried to smile, “Nice to meet you.” The preschooler felt strange watching its hand being engulfed in the preacher’s. Thomas wanted to like the man, and it remembered what it felt like adoring him in Martha’s memories, yet the emotion that riled up in its stomach was nothing like affection.

The preacher’s grin widened, “So polite! What’re you doing while your mother helps out?” The preacher was clearly addressing his question to Martha.

“He’s very well-behaved. We won’t have to worry about Him at all,” Martha smiled and flushed.

Thomas sat on a cement bench with a box of apple juice from concentrate and a rattle.

The preschooler spent the next few hours eavesdropping on the religious flock, which for the most part did not pay attention to it, as there was already a woman designated to watch after Thomas and the other two children. Martha had wanted to say that Thomas did not need to be watched over, but she could not explain He did not need watching without also explaining that He was God.

The babysitter learnt quickly that Thomas was an intelligent and well-behaved child. Too well-behaved for her to play with. He did not smile at what sent the other two children into gails of laughter.

There was interspersed, “Oooo, so cute,” from sheep who had not yet realized the Games like peekaboo and patty cake were about as interesting to Thomas as watching paint dry. It would politely participate but it would express no amusement at a silly face revealed from behind hands.

That first day was spent idly shaking the rattler while listening to conversations of adults who seemed to think of it as part of the wall that it was leaning against.

“I am so glad we can do just a little for the cause, even a drop in the bucket helps...”

“Next time I think we should raise money for...”

“That is Martha’s child right..?”

“He—it is a he, right? Is surprisingly cute considering how Martha is. And Joey. No offense to them. We are all beautiful in God’s eyes.”

“Ah, I think that even though he is very pretty, and his hair is a little long, he is a he; I think I heard his name is Thomas. But he *is* somewhat creepy if you try to play with him. Like that child from *The Omen*, I think that movie was the *Omen*. All quiet like, weirdly mature...”

“No wonder Martha is suffering from post-partum depression. She is in my prayers.”

“Ah, I don’t think she is though. She doesn’t seem much different to me. It’s probably just that the apple does not fall far from the tree. I mean there is *religious* and then there is *Martha*. She is such a...”

“Ah, enough of this negativity.”

“That’s right, we should pray for her. We are here for God today, not gossiping.”

Even with the grasp Thomas had on language, it did not understand what the meaning of the adult talk was. Martha was infallible in Thomas’s eyes. She was always putting her charity work for God first. Those adults seemed to lack logic.

That day was a happy day for Thomas. It was an exhausting day of warm attention from both the congregation and Martha (who had checked on it periodically to make sure her God had all He desired and because she wanted to reiterate to anyone watching, that she was His mother). And after a day of such affection the toddler had not experienced since before its first words, it felt bold. When they got home, it casually brought a plastic toy train out to the living room, where Martha was sitting listening to the radio set to a classical Christian music channel.

Her eyelashes were resting on her angular cheeks. Her head was tilted back and her long almond hair was draped over her strong yet womanly shoulders. Her voice was Thomas’s favorite sound—and it was humming discordantly along to the music. Each time her voice missed a pitch Thomas got goose-bumps. When her voice was off-key, it was more clearly her own and all the more beautiful for it.

The preschooler did not watch the toy train it was pushing back and forth on the carpet. It watched the purring queen. Slowly, quietly, gently, the child left the train, and walked over to its mother. Its head craned to watch her resting face. The toddler remained

frozen like that, in awe, before it walked around the coffee table over to the couch and, with effort, managed to hoist itself up.

Martha was still humming, when her preschooler pulled itself onto her lap.

She shrieked and stood up. Thomas toppled from her long brown skirt to the coffee table. Thomas's face mirrored her panic. Thomas had reinstalled the fear of God in its mother.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Martha panted. She bent down to pick Thomas up, but thought better of it, for she was afraid, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

Thomas's face momentarily crackled like a dry leaf, before flattening into stone. "Do not worry about it. I was wrong to surprise you like that. I am the sorry one."

Thomas smiled at Martha. Even when insincere, it had a darling little smile, but that was lost on Martha.

"Ah! Thank you my Lord!" she said.

Thomas looked up at her. It knew her completely yet could not understand her. Or maybe did not want to understand her. The preschooler slid off the coffee table and went back to rolling the toy train. It repeated, "Chuga-chuga-choo-choo. Chuga-chuga-choo-choo," until it no longer felt like crying. It thanked God for at least being able to be in the same room as its mother.

###

The next day at the soup kitchen in a nearby town people were less interested in the toddler.

"Did you hear? They just came out with an app that will turn your oven on and off," a pair of young humans spoke within Martha's earshot.

“If only those ‘genius’ scientists would work towards something good and Christian rather than just trying to prove ‘evolution’ or make faster computers. Instead of making phone apps, they should put their brains to better use. They should try to cure hunger or cancer instead of improving a machine that causes cancer in the first place. It is immoral to not use the skills God gives you to the best of your abilities.” Martha said.

“Umm yeah. But cellphones don’t cause cancer.” The young humans found an excuse to go somewhere else.

Thomas was standing unnoticed by Martha’s modestly shod feet. It burped up a little bit of the applesauce it had eaten earlier in excitement; listening to Martha, the toddler realized what God sent him to earth to do.

“Um, excuse me Martha, on the way home could we stop by the library so that I may get some books?”

###

The stack of books the toddler requested weighed more than it. And they were all science books. Not a Bible among them.

The librarian smiled at the stack of books Martha dumped in front of her, “This is some heavy reading. Oh, before you go, you should stop by the children’s section and allow your son to pick out a book, it is never too early to start teaching the alphabet! I started teaching my little girl when she was one—she’s four now—and she already can read by herself! She insists on reading *If You Give A Mouse A Cookie* to me every chance she gets. It’s sooo cute.”

Martha’s lips turned up into a crescent, “Maybe next time.”

She was worried. Thomas had not explained the reason for the books, and Martha was afraid to ask. What purpose could Thomas possibly have for reading books that were probably written by atheists? For a moment the thought flitted across Martha's mind that maybe Thomas was not God after all, maybe He was the antichrist. She crossed herself and reminded herself that Thomas *must* be God. God would not let anything so horrible happen to her when she had always been so devout—even Job did not have to give birth to the antichrist when Satan tested him.

###

Thomas never touched his toy train again. Thomas read. The toddler would go with Martha during the day, read while she volunteered (causing rumors among the congregation that the child was likely autistic and/or only pretending to read) and then read at home. Once a week Thomas and Martha would stop by the library to return and check out more science books. Soon Thomas had finished with the local library's science and mathematics selection and was ordering books from university libraries.

The toddler's reading was only ever interrupted when it paced back and forth or by Joey, who would sometimes insist on games such as Tickle Monster, (a game consisting of Thomas trying to run by Joey without getting caught and tickled) and airplane (a game where Joey would lay on his back, hold Thomas's hands and rest Thomas's belly on his feet, hoisting the preschooler into the air.) If it had been asked Thomas would have claimed to be annoyed by the interruptions, but at such times laughter never failed to hiccup out of its plump little lips.

Martha always left the room when Joey began his carping. She was so embarrassed for him to be acting like such a fool with God, just because He looked endearing. Joey was lucky that God was so tolerant.

During their vegetarian dinners, Thomas would ask Martha about her day. Martha would explain her day concisely, and then Thomas would tell Joey of the most interesting facts it had read. Thomas liked to see Joey's enthralled expression. Soon though, the facts that were interesting to Thomas were beyond what Joey understood.

He said to Thomas, "Small Messiah, why are you reading so much anyway? And all that heavy sciencey stuff?"

Thomas replied, "Well. You will find out when I am done if I succeed. I do not want to raise your expectations too much. I will tell you though... I... feel arrogant thinking I can do this... but God gave me a brain that learns very well, so I think this might be His plan."

Every night during dinner Martha's father used to denunciate to her and her mother the sins they had committed during the day. It struck Thomas how different Joey was from Martha's father. One of the books it had read had claimed that women are drawn to marry men like their fathers. Thomas had smiled when the passage went on to claim men marry their mothers, before it realized that one must not believe everything one reads, and that some language is only parabolic.

Thomas refused Christmas and birthday gifts for the first years of its life (though Joey still insisted on getting it useless trinkets) but the month before its fourth year of

life, the toddler requested, rats, high-quality science equipment, and a certain kind of high-power computer.

Martha used a good chunk of the money she had inherited from her parents to buy it all, and another good chunk to modify the equipment so that the preschooler could use it.

The garage, emptied of the boxes that had been filled with Martha and Joey's pasts, became a grid of shining glass, metal, and wires. Once silent but for the laundry machine, the garage now hummed with the noise of technology and lab-rats running on wheels.

Joey took extra shifts at work to pay for the now ever-flowing demand of supplies. Neither Martha nor Thomas noticed Joey's increasing absence. Joey often said that he found nothing cuter than a preschooler in goggles and a lab coat scowling at vials.

But Joey was always at work when Thomas actually stared at vials. He never saw the preschooler's apathetic expression when it pulled vials of blood from squeaking rats or injected modified blood right back into them.

Nor did he see the child weep, praying to God and apologizing to rodents, as it took the little orange plastic spade Joey had once given it, and buried dead rat after dead rat under Joey's apple tree. Thomas chose that spot because Joey rarely dug around the tree. Once though, Joey did turn over the dirt there, and he came across a not-quite-fleshless half-of-a-rat skeleton. Joey regarded the corpse, which his spade had cleaved in two, and buried it again. He went to weeding by the purple roses.

Martha was almost as aware of Thomas's actions as we were—of course she did not understand what she was seeing like we did. She could never enjoy food when she was in His presence.

###

On Sundays the family went to church and afterwards Thomas carried the rat cages outside for an hour, so the rats could enjoy the sunshine.

The child would sometimes lie on its back and observe the clouds that looked like Martha, rat organs, and God. It watched as those misty images of evaporated H<sub>2</sub>O twisted like DNA. It listened to the cicadas drone like an over-taxed computer.

When there were not clouds, Thomas watched a sky filled with blue.

Thomas would let the mosquitos bite it without swatting, and it was covered in pink bumps until Joey started spraying it with insect repellent that hurt the atmosphere as it protected Thomas from bug-bites.

The pollen that made it sneeze and rained down from the neighbor's pine trees reminded Thomas of blood. The child was increasingly unresponsive when Joey tried to goad it into games. The time had come to put aside childish things.

###

During dinner, after they had said grace, and after Martha had cut up spaghetti for Thomas, it told them.

The four year old human sitting before Martha and Joey solemnly held up a vial filled with a viscous white liquid from the pocket of its blue cargo shorts, "This is it. This is the cure for all diseases; at least all diseases white blood cells can combat. I am sorry it took so long."

Martha and Joey sat and stared while their spaghetti cooled.

Joey eventually swallowed the carbohydrates he had been chewing and said, “Really?”

The child nodded, “Yes. Well, at least theoretically, but I am 99.89 percent sure it will work. I need human test subjects and cooperation with bigger labs. I would test it on myself, but I worry that testing on a healthy child with a child’s immune system would skew my results.” The child stabbed spaghetti with its fork, and tried to fit it into its mouth without spilling.

Martha’s wooden chair skidded back across the green tile as Martha stood up. “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!” she ejaculated, “We’ll start looking for ways to distribute it to all good Christians tomorrow!” Martha was exultant with God’s cure and rapturous to finally be sure that Thomas had not been doing the devil’s work.

Joey though, laughed so hard he almost choked. He took a swig of water and then said, “So that’s what you’ve been working on all this time? I’ll be darned. Congratulations, Thomas, huhuh, amazing. I knew you’re a genius but, but, this is just wild. We’ll help you whatever ways we can.” Joey took another bite of spaghetti, strands hanging over his chin for a moment. He wiped the tomato sauce away with a napkin.

Thomas blushed with pleasure. It watched Martha, who had not yet sat back down.

“Oh, but first things first, I’ll call a patent attorney tomorrow,” said Joey.

“Actually,” Thomas could not help grinning now, his crooked baby teeth showing, “We do not need to get it patented; we do not even need to find a way to

distribute it,” its eyes glistened like the blue summer ocean, and its face flushed red as coral, “I already figured out how to distribute it for free.

“You see, the cure is a splice of white-blood-cells and virus; it is alive and self-replicating within the bloodstream, and can be distributed very simply by a cure-carrier exchanging a single drop of fresh blood with a disease-carrier. Like that, the cure could spread more exponentially than disease itself.”

###

A month before the child was old enough to go to kindergarten, its cure for every disease that could be cured by perfect white blood cells began to be distributed through churches. Two humans, one with the cure in their blood, and one without, would cut their palms, and shake hands. Typically, this bloody handshake was preceded by the one with the cure telling the one without the cure they were only saved in body; if they did not accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, they could not be saved in soul. The cure spread fastest in the Christian community first. Non-Christians initially thought the cure was nothing but a religious delusion.

But soon those unbelievers came to believe in the cure as they watched the blind see and cancers cured. And the cure was such a miracle they even began to have faith in the God the Christians who distributed the cure. They spread rumors that a small Christian boy had invented the cure, but nothing was clear.

Meanwhile, hospitals panicked as they lost revenue.

And though Martha seemed happier, she still would not meet Thomas’s eyes.

###

“Why don’t you stop, my son? I thought you’d stop in your lab when your cure was spread.”

The six-year-old Thomas looked away from the tiny things reflected in its microscope and looked up at the huge Joey standing in the doorway. Its eyes seemed sunken in its young head. It had hardly slept the last two years of its life.

“I will find a way to combat all other maladies of humanity.” It held its left wrist in its right hand.

“Thomas... you don’t have to do that. I’ve tried to respect your wishes, but you’ve done enough; you hear how tired you are? You’re a child. You need a break. You’re working yourself to the bone.”

“You mean cartilage; children’s bones are mostly made of cartilage—that stuff that keeps your ears upright. For some reason, I have a hard time imagining that my cartilage could get any harder as bone...”

“I am sorry, Joey. I cannot stop now. Anything I am capable of doing to help humanity, is my duty to do. I would be sinning just by being still. And Martha agrees with me,” Thomas hoped that Joey would leave it alone soon so it could go back to work. Its brain was full of ideas for genetically altering avocados to be able to grow in the desert.

“Thomas. You’re not some savior, you are a kid! You aren’t even past puberty. You’ll die if you keep going like this.”

The child gagged a little, and the desert avocados left its brain, “What do you mean I am not a savior? That is what I have been saying all along! I know I am not! But you... you always said I was...”

“I’m sorry, my son, I... I lied for Martha’s sake... She needed to be able to rationalize your brilliance,” Joey stared at some point beyond Thomas’s head. He did not look the child in the eye.

“That is a sin, Joseph.” The child’s voice echoed Martha’s. It was a voice sharpened on a whetstone.

“I know... but, Thomas, how can anything that makes the woman I love happy, be a sin? I... I know am a fool Thomas, but I wanted her to be happy. I just wanted to make her happy. I lied to you about the cat too because I didn’t want you to be unhappy. But Thomas...”

“What about the cat?” Thomas felt nausea.

“That little boy broke her jaw beyond repair... she was too injured, I had her put to sleep so she wouldn’t suffer.”

The child stared at Joey. It felt it was looking at something ridiculous and weak and stupid. It felt strong, and big, and intelligent, even though Joey was so much bigger and stronger. It took a breath to calm itself. But the feeling of hugeness only grew. The child felt as if its feet were light years away and that its blood was full of echoes. Its sentience screamed for Joey to help it, for Joey to catch its hand, to keep it from growing any larger, from getting lost in the giant universe of its own body. But its scream was unheard. Martha’s beautiful hands were always over Joey’s pretty ears.

The child thought, why does Joey love Martha more than me? And how does he not know that I love Martha more than he ever could? I grew up inside her: her flesh is my flesh. Why does Joey love Martha more than me?

“Thomas... I don’t believe in God.” Joey peeked at Thomas’s face and rushed on, “Or Jesus. Or anything like that,” he took a breath, “I mean, I used to, when I first met Martha I did. Or at least I thought I did...but I always struggled with my faith. I couldn’t stop myself from questioning.

“That’s a big part of the reason why I fell in love with your mother—she was so sure of herself. I loved that about her. I never wanted to—”

“When?” Thomas whispered, “How could you?” It wished it could burrow right back into Martha’s vagina. It wanted to live forever in a place where none of this would ever happen, a place where Joey could love both it and Martha equally. It wondered: if I had been his daughter, would Joey have chosen me?

Joey said, “I’m so sorry, Thomas. I stopped believing around the time Martha got pregnant. Now... I can only believe what I see. And when I see my wife hurting, or my son slowly killing himself—I don’t care what the Bible says about serving God—I want to make my family happy.”

Suddenly the child felt small again. It was aware of how microscopic it was, not the awareness of its own insignificance—but the awareness that in the scheme of things it—its emotions, its consciousness, its body, its tribulations—were smaller than an atom of an atom and as important as a proton. Yet, it managed to feel an enormous vulnerability. It understood that at least a thousand and one angels could dance on the head of a pin.

Only a thin membrane of skin was between the child and pain, between Thomas and obliteration. A rock, a man, a woman, could break the child in less time than it takes for the world to spin on its axis. The child’s every nerve writhed with tininess, and its body flashed with voltage as small and invisible as the child itself was. Thomas was

experiencing what we feel so regularly that we do not even notice.

How could Joey betray me like that? How could he lie like that? Sinful! So sinful! A Christian could never do such a thing. Had I known, I would never have even gone on one date with him, I never would have even *laughed* at him... For a moment the child forgot that it was Thomas, not Martha

Angry tears welled up in the child's eyes. Its face twisted scarlet, "I will not tell Martha," it muttered, "And I will not stop my research, either. Goodbye Father."

The child held perfectly still. Joey made as if to walk towards it, before turning and leaving the room. He did not try to hide his tears.

Thomas remained still for a long time, before returning to the research. The slide on the microscope had somehow gone out of focus and had to be readjusted.

###

## CHAPTER 5—Veggie People

Thomas did not go to school when five, nor when it was six, nor seven. Martha signed Thomas up for homeschooling because it was too busy with higher intellectual pursuits to go to actual school. After the cure, the child helped to resolve world hunger through genetic modification of seeds. It created bountiful and resilient vegetation. The plants were sterile, but the seeds were the important part, and a new batch could be modified for each crop.

Well-fed and healthy, humans found less excuses to kill each other as well. They had more children too, thinking, “This isn’t such a bad world to bring a child into after all.” The human population went up and up.

And as the human population grew at a rate never before seen, the secretive child’s popularity grew. It grew most among those with faith, because everything Thomas created was initially distributed through Christians. Thomas became known as Baby Jesus 2.0, a term made popular by an Internet meme, which depicted a rare photo of the child, with captions like, “Is five, cured cancer. Still modest.”

Still the child remained mysterious to the humans, and refused to give interviews to the reporters, and even the scientists, who were desperate to converse with it, as well as study its brain.

Joey also declined to grant interviews, but Martha would sometimes, for Thomas had never said she could not, or should not.

###

Thomas was finally persuaded to grant an interview when Martha pointed out how good TV is for spreading the Word of God.

The first interview the child agreed to grant was an interview with Glen Beck, partially because it would not be filmed before a studio audience, and partially because Martha insisted that Fox was the most Christian broadcaster that could interview Him.

They arrived at the studio tired after a long first class flight (that Fox had paid for.) It was the child's first flight. (Martha had flown for the first time herself a few months before on her way to interview a popular preacher). During the flight Thomas sat in a window seat and looked out of the window, at the brown squares and green circles of farmland far below, and wondered if God's view of earth was at all similar. The clouds from above certainly did look like Heaven, so Thomas marveled at how cold and insubstantial as mist they actually would be to the touch.

The child also reflected on the perfection of a God who could create the laws of physics in such a way that planes could soar high through invisible, and thin, air.

Both Thomas and Martha were hustled into the studio to get their makeup done. The makeup artist told Thomas "Haha, I know this may seem weird for a boy, but even presidents get their makeup done before going on TV, I mean it isn't like Obama is *naturally* that pale, you know?"

The child enjoyed the feeling of foundation and powder on its skin. Makeup smelt good. And the child felt just a little bit happy about its pretty reflection.

Martha had rarely worn makeup as she had dismissed it as a worldly indulgence, but it seemed familiar, and right.

They met Glenn Beck a little bit before the actual filming was to take place. They were already seated on the couch for the interview, when he sauntered up holding a double shot latte.

“Hey kid, you must be ‘Thomas, the wunderkind!’ you know who I am?”

Thomas looked from Martha to Glenn Beck in confusion. What wunderkind?

“No. I do not know who you are.”

Glenn Beck smiled, “But you’re going on my show, you should at least know that much.”

Thomas rattled its brain, “Glenn Beck?”

“The one and only!” Glenn Beck directed his gaze towards Martha, “And you must be this young scamp’s mother, Martha, right? Pleasure to meet you.”

Glenn Beck’s words and porcelain veneers caused Martha to have a biological response that made her cheeks redden.

“I’ll give you two my autograph after the show,” he winked.

“Alright!” said the cameraman, “Rolling in, five, four, three, two, one.”

“Many people have lost faith in recent decades with silly claims like ‘people only care about themselves’ and ‘God is dead’ but here with me today is one special little boy and his mother who are here to prove that’s not true.

“I’m sure everyone in my audience has already heard about the amazing and mysterious little boy who cured cancer, world hunger, and a whole lot of other things, and I am proud to say that here he is today on his first television interview on my, Glenn Beck’s, show.

“He chose my show because he and his mother realized that in this world that does not value faith enough, my show stands out as wholesome and Christian.

“Now Thomas here, is pretty smart, aren’t you? You are only seven but you have knowledge of biology and chemistry well beyond that of a normal graduate student?”

“Yes. I suppose.” Thomas blushed.

“Ha, that’s not a big deal. I knew all that by the time I was three,” Glenn beck joked.

Martha laughed and Thomas took that as a cue to laugh too. We did not understand how the joke was funny.

“Now Thomas, I have a test for you, do you think you can beat this test for me? There is a chalkboard behind you, and on that chalkboard are some pretty complicated graduate level equations. Do you think you can solve them?”

“Yes.” Thomas went to the board and started calculating.

“So, Mom,” Glenn was addressing Martha, “He has always been pretty smart, right, he started talking as soon as it was physically possible for his vocal chords to make the right sounds?”

“Yes, that is right. It was a miracle.”

“That’s nothing, I began talking before my vocal chords were even formed—you know what I said? Waaa! That’s Indonesian for ‘feed me.’” Glenn Beck laughed.

Martha smiled and nervously rubbed her hands together.

“How’s it going over there, Bud?”

Thomas looked over, “Almost done.” The child had a smudge of chalk on its nose.

“What a smart kid. So. Martha. It seems that you guys gave out those cures for free, right? Why did you two decide to do that, instead of making money?”

“Well. Thomas and I both strongly believe that was the Christian thing to do.”

Glenn Beck rubbed his hands together, “Goes to show we really don’t need to raise taxes for ‘healthcare reform’ we just need good kids raised in good Christian homes, like Thomas.”

“I am done.”

“Perfect! Right on time!” Glenn Beck laughed, “I’ll check over your work while we go to break.”

During the break Thomas wondered why Glenn Beck was a talk show host if he could solve graduate level equations.

“And we are back! I, award-winning talk show host, Glenn Beck am here to interview—the first time caught on tape—the famous child genius, Thomas Cypress and his mother, Martha Cypress.

“Thomas, I had you solve some equations, didn’t I?”

“Yes.”

“That’s right, on that chalk board behind you! And the proof is on your nose!”

A normal human child might have been embarrassed, but like us, Thomas saw no logic in embarrassment as it wiped the chalk away.

“How cute! Well, I looked over your work, and congratulations! You got it all right!”

Thomas nodded, wondering how Glenn Beck could have checked the work without looking at it.

Martha nodded more vigorously, “Yes, He is never wrong.”

“Well as a reward I got you something, Thomas. Do you want to know what it is?”

The child at this point was staring off into space. Like us, it did not see the logic in Glenn Beck's questions. It hardly registered what Glenn Beck was saying, as it was busy thinking about the cure for *Methemoglobinemia*. "No," slipped truthfully out of its mouth.

Glenn Beck was a professional, "Ah really? But I went to so much trouble to get it. You're going to make me cry—" he laughed.

"I'm sorry!" tears built up in Thomas's eyes. It did not want Glenn Beck to cry.

"I'm kidding, kiddo. Don't worry Mom, I got something for you too. Alright, bring it out."

Glenn Beck was handed by one of his underlings two books, a DVD, and some necklaces.

"This is for you, Thomas, do you know what it is?"

"No."

"It is the complete set of the movie *Veggie Tails*! Look, I know you are a genius, and already Christian and all, already, but every child can benefit from the additional instruction of veggie tales, *plus* it is also entertaining, and even geniuses need a break every once in a while, right?"

"Thank you."

"Thank you very much sir," said Martha.

"Hahaha! I haven't even given you anything yet mom! Here, since you are so impatient, I will give it to you now!" Glenn Beck beamed at his own generosity that winked back at him.

“Here it is, two cross necklaces, signed by me. One is for your husband who unfortunately couldn’t make it today. So you can keep God near your heart at all times, and so when you see my name you will know that you are in my prayers.”

“Thank you very much,” Martha smiled and put one of the wooden crosses around her neck; it overlapped the silver one she was already wearing.

“And don’t think I forgot you Thomas! Here is a cross for you as well.”

“Thank you.”

“I have one more thing for each of you. For you, Thomas, I have my book: *Glenn Beck's Common Sense: The Case Against an Out-of-Control Government*, which is by me, and also available on my website. I hope it will teach you how to be a good American.

“And the last thing I have is for you mom, *How to Tell if Your Child has Asperger’s, for Dummies*; now I’m not saying he has it, but I do understand Thomas is not very social, and the last child genius we had on the show had Asperger’s, and Thomas has never been tested for it right? Better safe than sorry!”

Martha was appalled; Glenn Beck had just accused *God* of having mild autism!  
“He does not have—“

“I’m sorry folks! That is all the time we have for today! Join me on my next show when I will discuss how those ridiculous democrats are against the tasty, new, and old, sport of whale hunting.”

Thomas could not take any food but almond milk for three days after it saw *Veggie Tales*. The child had been horrified at the thought of eating something that had lived in any sense, as vegetables were also the creation of God, and might also have

souls. It remembered when Jesus had smote the fig tree in the Bible for being disobedient, and could not think of a reason why He would have done that if the fig tree were nothing more than an inanimate object. In some ways that child was as human as any other human child with such spurts of irrationality.

Martha did not want to interfere with God's doings but Joey finally persuaded Thomas to eat by saying, "Vegetables and fruit evolved especially to be eaten, otherwise they would not taste so good, be so easy to catch, and be as digestible as they are. I mean to say God made vegetables so that they may be eaten. You can read it in genesis."

Thomas had whispered, "Fine. I will eat."

#### Chapter 6—Thomas and Twins

Martha took a deep breath, and rolled her eyes underneath her eyelids, "I would just like to reassure you, My Lord, that though we are going on Oprah because it is an excellent way to spread your word, I am aware that she is still an *African American* woman."

Thomas raised confused blonde eyebrows. Why was Martha saying this, it wondered. What relevance was Oprah's race?

Then bobbed to the surface of the child's fluid mind, memories of Martha's neglected since its birth: the memories of apprehension and repulsion associated with dark skin, memories of crossing the street to avoid such a person. Where did these memories come from? Why this association, this fear? Thomas could think of none. There was no discernable root, and no discernable branches, racism, and fear of the unknown floated like a burning vapor in Thomas's very blood.

The child now feared the interview just minutes away. Would Oprah smell its fear and, like a great dumb thing, turn wild with rage and swallow Thomas whole, like a great, black, jungle serpent?

The glare from the studio audience was blinding. Thomas squinted out into the glaring darkness, surprised and relieved. It was Thomas's first interview with an audience, other than a church audience, and was its first interview on Oprah.

But when the audience clapped, Thomas, as young as it was, very nearly peed itself. It had to squeeze its legs together to prevent leakage. The audience was many people, in the darkness, invisible and judging. They wouldn't say anything to it, but they would expect something. Like God.

Thomas had to swallow anxious vomit when Oprah asked him "What it felt like to have cured so many people—saved so many lives, and still be so young?"

"I did what I believed to be right. As a Christian, with the ability to do right, it would be immoral if I *did not* attempt do all I was capable of. I do not believe myself to be any more morally upright than any other Christian who does her best, just because I may have more of an ability to be good. It is good intentions, not deeds, which make one a good Christian. If a Christian does not have time to do good, God will not find fault with them as long as he or she *wants* to do good."

"Oh, what a well spoken young man!" Oprah smiled.

Thomas did not notice the slightly patronizing tone, but we did. Just because he was a child it was 'cute' that he cured so many diseases. Tsk. Humans. But we could not have been more disappointed than we already were by their previous behavior.

“I bet all that time in the lab restricts your free time, but do you ever do things a normal child does Thomas?”

Thomas hesitated, a normal child? What did normal children do? Slowly, it shook its head.

Martha smiled as well, “Thomas has been very hardworking for the sake of Christians.”

“We have a surprise for you today, alright bring them out. Sally, Martin, come here. Say hi to Thomas.”

Out walked a woman, followed by two children. A girl and a boy, both pale, both freckled, and both had the sort of white-blond hair that is peculiar to human children of northern European descent. The boy was wearing a baby blue button down shirt and khaki shorts, the girl was wearing a matching baby blue dress.

“Hi.” The children said.

“Hello,” said Thomas and Martha.

“Sally and Martin are fraternal twins, and they both have you to thank for being here today Thomas. Both children suffered from cancer, and your cure saved them Thomas.”

“Thank you so much!” the woman who must have been the children’s mother sobbed and plopped down on a seat.

Thomas was surprised; it had not much considered the actual individuals who its cures would save. It felt its work was something private, between no one but itself and God. Thomas cast Martha a look and wondered if its cure would somehow seem more impressive now that they were meeting actual people it had actually saved.

Then Thomas wondered what the children had been exposed to so that they, though not identical in genetics, had both gotten cancer. Radiation? Chemicals? Asbestos? Too much diet soda?

“Thank you!” the children said.

“You are welcome.” Thomas said.

The children were about Thomas’ age, maybe a little older. Thomas was distracted by the sequins on the girl’s dress and found itself wanting to touch the dress—it was so poufy—it has such frills and lace, such a pretty dress. It was the first time in years the child had been up close to other children, the first time so near such a pretty dress.

Thomas thought, I wonder how I would look in a dress like that? Pretty? But blue? Purple is better... No. No. I do not want one. I do not want one. What? It is just that the girl is pretty. Yes, she is pretty. Ah! No. I do not care if she is pretty. I am not a lesbian—no! No. I do not mean that. I am a boy! What I mean... No. God! I am sorry. I am sorry God. Please forgive me. I am normal... I am... Liking girls does not make me a lesbian. I am not Martha.

To divert itself from those distressing thoughts the child directed its gaze to the boy instead and to its increasing terror found that looking at the boy meant appreciating the boy’s childishly handsome face.

Thomas stared at the ceiling and tried to let god know, I am not gay either.

Thomas’ insides felt like a shaken can of soda, fizzing, getting ready to explode. Anxiety as it had not felt in years. Tears brimmed in its eyes.

Oprah and the family, mistook the tears as tears of joy; they thought that Thomas was touched at having cured the children, not tormented from attraction to the children.

“Thank you! Thank You!” the family chanted.

Thomas experienced something that it had only recollections of from Martha’s memories: a head splitting migraine. And finally. Finally for the first time in its life, it could not take it anymore. The tears flowed fast as the words, I wish this chair would just engulf me so I could disappear! ran through its brain.

Oprah sprung up, “Holy—“ she may have been about to exclaim ‘shit’ but caught herself.

For Thomas’s unspoken wish that the chair would engulf it came true. The chair, a typical, plain, talk show armchair, as if by magic expanded, crumpled, changed shaped, and wrapped around Thomas.

Thomas yelped, and sprung out of the chair, which went partially back to its boring normal shape.

The audience gasped, and the family gasped, and Oprah gasped. Thomas panted.

Martha was the only one besides Thomas who did not gasp. She stood up, very deliberately and said, “This child before you is God. He is the Father Almighty, second coming of Christ, and has just displayed His true power for the first time. I knew this would happen some day. Go ahead, Thomas, My Lord, show them.”

Thomas a few moments before had for the first time, displayed telekinesis. If Thomas had been instructed on how to use it, it would have likely manifested itself earlier, and not have burst forth due to an emotional overload on national TV.

The audience had mixed reactions to Martha's announcement. Some kept quiet, some fainted, some shouted amen, some yelled that she was a sinner, and some yelled worse.

Thomas, then, more than a normal human could ever hope to, showed a remarkable rate of recovery. The child assessed the situation and realized the depth of Martha's claim... and the shame that would come upon Martha if she were found to be lying. For such disappointment, such sadness, such shame, to fall upon its mother's head—the thought was more than the child could bear.

And with that thought in mind, it was not difficult for the child to choose to do the first conscience sin in its life. It took a microphone from Oprah's unprotesting hands, and spoke into it, which was completely unnecessary as it already had a microphone fixed to its own head. The effect was a slight echo in its words.

"Yes. Martha says I am a child of God. Martha does not lie." It hoped by saying 'a' child rather than 'the' child, the sin was lessened.

At this point the mother of the children fell to the floor before Thomas, dragging her children with her, "Yes God! I believe it, God! You are only a child yourself, but you healed my children!"

"Yes. That is right. I have healed the sick. Like Jesus. And." Thomas looked at the chair; an instinct taught it how to will it to return to its original shape, which it did to both its and the audience's astonishment.

Then Thomas willed for a piece of bread to appear in its hands. A piece did.

"Look up. All you see is the ceiling, yes? I will make bread fall from that ceiling.

“This is no magic trick. I am no magician. After all, what need have I, who has cured so many of the plagues of humanity, to dabble in such trickery as magic?” Such highfalutin words came naturally to the child who, while well-read in science, was better versed in the language of the Bible.

Bread fell from the rafters—mostly whole wheat—and pelted the audience. The loafs were soft so no one got hurt, but some of them were undercooked or stale.

The audience writhed around as if processed. No one present, audience or TV crew did not find faith in Thomas. The sight of the somber and beautiful child appearing to be unimpressed by the excitement around it was as much of a miracle as the telekinesis itself.

Thomas had already scoured away years of jaded disillusion from whoever had heard of its good deeds, and jumping from faith in Thomas as a healer of humanity, to faith in Thomas as God, was not such a big leap, especially for humans that wanted to believe, as most humans did.

Even Oprah fell to her knees before Thomas, crying out, “I believe too! This is real! I didn’t know this was going to happen!”

Thomas was exhausted. As anyone would expect from a child who had overexerted itself using telekinesis on a large scale and who had just encouraged over thousands of strangers to worship a golden calf.

The episode aired nonstop on Oprah’s channel for a week before Oprah began filming new episodes in which she would interview the members of the audience who had been there on that faithful day, which became known as T Day. (T as in Thomas.) The story was covered in every major newspaper and magazine around the world.

Some humans were incredulous and some readily accepted it. Martha booked Thomas on more talk shows and news shows than ever, and each time Thomas completed some hitherto untold of feat, such as walking on water. One evening it even made trout rain from the sky; the shows Thomas was a guest on decided against doing that again because it created quite a stink: those who ate the fish got food poisoning, and it was much more painful to have fish fall from the sky than bread.

Thomas in its private heart-of-hearts also regretted the trout incident because it did not know exactly where the trout had come from. Were they living somewhere beforehand, swimming simple scaly lives, when Thomas had conjured them to their deaths?

A crowd favorite was when Thomas turned water into wine. Thomas could never seem to turn water into wine with less than eight percent alcohol by content, and the slightly more inebriated crowds were much more adulating.

More and more people believed in Thomas, just like Martha always had.

Even Thomas began questioning. If it were not the Son of God, how could it manage all of those supernatural feats? Perhaps it was the second coming of Christ after all.

But if that were the case, why did not God ever send a message, or give any sign at all? In the bible God did not hesitate to talk to believers, especially those granted power... Maybe He was angry? Maybe Thomas was beyond redemption? Maybe the powers were an elaborate ruse from the devil? But surely it was God's will that it do these things.

Whatever the case, Thomas could not stop. The child could not stop despite the fear each time it used telekinesis something would go wrong. It was an immense power to handle. Thomas kept feeling as if with just a crack in its control, a bomb would explode, and incinerate.

Thomas could not stop though; Martha's happiness was at stake. Thomas would do whatever it could for her until it died, though truth be told, it, in its heart-of-hearts, hoped that that would be sooner rather than later. But surely it was God's will.

###

To spread the Word, Martha agreed to have Thomas do an interview with Bill Marah. She thought that Thomas having a debate about religion with a skeptic would help persuade the last few nonbelievers. For this interview, she did not want to accompany Thomas, because some of the nonbelievers believed the child was a hoax, and Martha was its puppeteer.

Bill Marah greeted Thomas, "Today, I get to do a very special interview, with a very special little boy, a boy that some people are even saying is the second coming of Christ, a boy who brilliantly has cured many diseases. You all know him as Thomas Cypress."

Thomas greeted Bill Marah, and sat down on an uncomfortable chair without being asked to. It's child-sized legs swung without touching the black floor.

"So," said Bill, "Lets get down to brass tacks. How can an otherwise very intelligent child, a child so smart people want to study him, believe in an imaginary man in the sky? You might as well believe in Santa Claus."

Thomas felt a bit annoyed by Bill Marah's excessive jump in logic, "That analogy is invalid. Santa does not make the rules, Santa breaks God's laws of nature, without being a Christian vehicle of God. There is no way that the two can coexist, and there is no way that Santa can exist on his own because he does not have the authority to break natural laws—if he did, he would not waste time going from house to house, but make all the presents appear in all the houses at once."

Bill Marah frowned, and looked at his notes, "That still doesn't explain the existence of God, Himself. He can't exist. There is no evidence, and the burden of proof rests on the believers."

Thomas breathed in and out, Bill Marah was being increasingly illogical, it make the child feel unchristian violence in its tendons, "Trying to *prove* God is..." Thomas took a breath, "*illogical*. You cannot achieve true faith through physical proof, faith is supposed to come from within. Christians can lead the donkey—I mean horse, to water, and help them access the faith within, but we can't make the horse drink..."

"All the proof we should need is the beauty of nature, and God's bountiful gifts to us. Why do you ask for proof as to why God exists, when you do not ask why beauty exists? It does not make sense that we perceive beauty to exist when there is no evolutionary benefit to it—in fact, some of the most beautiful things—the white tundra, the Bengal tiger, are the most dangerous—yet we find them to be gorgeous. Or have you never felt the beauty of nature?"

"Or perhaps you have never had medicine either? Why would medicinal, nonedible plants evolve to be beneficial to man? It is not like we spread their seeds, or gave anything to them: they are one of many gifts from God."

Bill Marah attempted to say something but Thomas, who was a truly beautiful child, did not pause.

“And laughter. What is laughter if not another gift from God? Why would man evolve laughter, and a sense of humor, if not for pure luxurious enjoyment?

“It is a gift from God. And we are not lizards, we can care for and help each other—if we choose, we are not bound to instincts, we can override our upbringings, we are truly the only animals to have free will, truly made in His image.”

Bill Marah said, “That proves nothing.”

Thomas smiled, “I’m not trying to prove anything.” It relaxed.

Bill Marah said, “Do you really believe the words of dead guys who lived long after Christ? What about the biblical inconstancies? What about the fact that the biblical stories have many similarities to other legends? What about all the horrible things God does in the Bible? So many logical inconstancies.”

Thomas laughed, “It is completely illogical to try and comprehend God, and how God works. That is a basic tenant of both the Bible and Christianity. Do you understand even the most basic of neuroscience? And yet you expect to understand God? I cannot understand God, and yet I understand advanced neuroscience as much as any human alive does. You can say it is false all you want, but that is just proof you cannot accept a very basic, and logical, tenant of Christianity, and your lack of acceptance reflects poorly upon yourself. I will pray for you.

“And as for the myths with similarity to the Bible, that is all the more validation to His existence—they are accounts from non-Christian perspectives that prove the Christian perspective.”

Sweat glistened on Bill's brow, "Um, so you listen to a voice in your head? And talk to an invisible man?"

"Unfortunately, I have not heard any voice in my head but my own. And as for praying to God, I do pray to Him, but only to pay homage; as I am not presumptuous enough to ask for anything."

Bill Marah's grimaced, likely he was thrown off by debating a child instead of an adult, "Moving on, I heard you have powers? What are you, Siegfried and Roy? I don't smell any white tiger. Ha, ha."

Thomas said, "Yes, I have powers," whereupon the child made Bill Marah float, and then green red-eyed tree frogs drizzle gently from the ceiling (they all survived the fall, and were later taken to a local zoo), "I think though, that my ability to help humanity with my medical treatments is more of a gift."

Bill Marah yelled and lifted his feet off the ground to avoid the frogs, "Ha, you think that just because you can pull some trick, I will believe in God?!"

Thomas sighed, "No. I do not believe my unusual ability should persuade anyone to believe in God. As I said, true faith must come from within, not without, I cannot make a donkey drink or talk, but if my ability awakens the true faith within, I believe that is good."

Soon after Bill Marah converted.

###

At that Zoo, which now had far too many frogs, there was also the last female giant panda, going through her last estrus cycle. There was a male panda with her, but the two pandas would not copulate in their small enclosure without the normal mating rituals

of those black-and-white bears, which requires a minimum of three males for a violent panda orgy.

The end was near for pandas.

###

As we expected, there were some repercussions to the steroid-like strengthening of the Christian faith. Some effects were good and some were bad. As we like to be positive, we will start by explaining the good effects.

Many humans, with their renewed fear of hell, and renewed yearning for heaven, acted kinder. They smiled at each other on the street (even in Russia) and often went out of their way to be kind.

Thomas's very existence disproved the cynics who believed there were no good people, no unselfish kindness, and nothing to look forward to. Christianity gave most humans something in common.

Even though the majority of Americans claimed to be Christian even before Thomas, the renewal of faith, and good health, made them kinder. They donated to charity in earnest and spent more leisure time volunteering. Crime rates went way down because not only was there less reason to commit crime due to humans being more apt to share wealth.

But of course we must remember that the basic base human nature cannot be changed.

While unwed pregnancy and divorce went down, marriage, general pregnancy, and spousal abuse went up. Christianity became a validated excuse for homophobia and sexism.

All of American society was directed in a new way. Movies, TV and books were made Christian, with wholesome themes and morals. However, they were less entertaining.

Politics too, were affected. Politicians to be reelected would confess to sins, and have “forgive me for sinning” campaigns to prove who has more faith. In fact, the bigger and more devious the sins, the higher public support would be. The sins they confessed to included, and were not limited to, not honoring their parents, envy, and rape.

Many non-christian religions shrank, partially due to members converting to Christianity, and partially due to prejudice from Christianity on minor religions. Most religions that remained embraced Thomas as at least somewhat holy.

Many businesses began to give Christians discounts. Movie theaters gave discounts to Christians, restaurants had a Christian Special and even grocery stores cut prices in half for those who claimed to be Christian. The economy suffered, but no one went hungry.

Christians would often shun skeptics unless they were on a conversion mission; they feared that they would be tainted.

Some took this fear to the extreme. They targeted nonbelievers with hate crimes and bullying. Despite Thomas’s discussion with Oprah about the immorality of hate, many convinced themselves that intolerance was God’s will—they believed that nonbelievers should not only be punished in hell, but on earth too.

The few skeptics there were who believed Thomas's powers were a hoax became fewer and fewer, and quieter and quieter, until most learned that keeping their skepticism to themselves was the easiest way to live.

Cities grew like weeds, and pollution exploded despite a greater and Christian effort to live 'green' lives.

On a personal level, Thomas was recognized everywhere it went. The child would be mobbed with admirers desperate to touch it. Thomas disliked leaving the house more than ever, but had enormous self-control was therefore always very cordial and kind to those that approached it.

###

"What other maladies are left to cure?" Thomas asked on the way to its next public appearance. It sat in the back of Martha's minivan. Its forehead was pressed against the glass as it stared out the window at the placid cows they were driving by.

"Homosexuality." Martha said, "It's not fatal, but it's worse to be sent to an eternity in Hell than die of disease." There were many admitted homosexuals left with the Christian reawakening—but there were some.

Thomas stopped looking out the window. For some reason it was suddenly carsick. It considered asking Martha to pull the car over, but it did not want to inconvenience her. It swallowed its vomit.

Soon after that day, Joey walked in on Thomas sitting cross-legged on the sea-foam blue carpet while practicing its telekinesis: it was floating the beige living room couch off the ground. It would have been an unearthly sight to see for Joey, a beautiful blonde-haired eight-year-old boy, staring at the floating couch so intently he looked as if he wanted to murder it.

Martha was at the grocery store. Thomas dropped the couch with a loud clack as soon as Joey entered the room. Joey and Thomas had not been alone together in months; Thomas had made sure of it.

Thomas got up to leave the room, but Joey did not pause even to take off his boots. He caught the child by its fragile shoulder. Crumbs of dried mud were scattered across the carpet like trash in the sea.

“Joey, Do you still believe that I am not God?” the child asked without turning its head.

“Well, son—“

“Do not call me son. I am not your son.”

“...Thomas,” Joey’s voice came out hoarse, “Thomas, do *you* think you are God? I’ll take your word for it... But whether you are God, or not, I want you to be happy, Thomas. And anyone with eyes to see can see you’re not happy. Talk to me, Thomas, what can I do..? I’ll do anything.”

Thomas turned; its blue eyes met Joey’s grey. “What makes you think I am not happy?”

Joey smiled and shook his head, “Thomas, I don’t understand that sciencey stuff you do, but I do understand you. I’ve known you your entire life, and I’ve known Martha even longer.”

“You said yourself that I am not Martha.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

Thomas noticed ugly new wrinkles on Joey’s face. The child took a deep breath. It did not understand why it felt such rage. It was not used to anger, and it was frustrated that it had the feeling. The unfamiliar frustration made it even angrier.

It remembered its toddlerhood, when it had beaten the boy with a rock. It remembered when Martha had slapped her own mother across the face after Martha’s father had died. Her mother had been maddening, insisting that she could not live without her father. The slap had stung Martha’s hand and made her mother’s soft brown eyes snap into focus. She had looked at Martha for what seemed to be the first time and the last time. Then she had called upon God to save her sinful daughter.

Thomas said, “What can I do to save you, Joey? I do not want anyone to go to Hell. It is not too late to be saved.”

Joey’s hand dropped from Thomas’s shoulder and the way his eyebrows moved made Thomas queasy.

It managed to keep its voice calm, “Do you want to go to Hell, Joey? Do you want to experience fiery torture? Do you want to be frozen, melted with acid?” Thomas imagined those things happening to Joey and felt its stomach twist, but its stare remained steady, “Do you want to have your eyeballs plucked out of your skull and put in backwards? Do you want to have blood stream from every orifice in your body? You

would smell and taste horrible things, hear awful metallic screechings, and everything would be the opposite of all that you love. Hell is unimaginable. Hell is Hell. And you are heading there.” The child kept right on imagining those things happening to Joey, staring at Joey all the while.

Then it had to blink. When it opened its eyes it screamed.

Thomas had inadvertently killed Joey. Sprawled in front of the child was a corpse that looked to have suffered the same tortures Thomas had just described. Thomas recognized Joey as a bloodied and blackened mass of flesh.

Telekinesis is an extremely dangerous tool in the hands of someone who does not know the necessary safety precautions. Thomas’s misuse of telekinesis should be a lesson to all of us about the dangers of negative thinking.

Thomas screamed some more. It screamed and then broke down to the floor in sobs. There was a knock on the door, probably from a concerned neighbor, and Thomas yelled, “Go away!” before it remembered to add the, “please,” to the end.

Thomas sobbed there for twenty-four minutes and thirteen seconds before it tried to pull itself together and use its telekinesis to convert Joey back into his original shape and against all hope, back to life. The child was so distraught it did not even consider that bringing the dead back to life might be against God’s will.

When the child attempted to change the bloody mass back to what it had been, it tried to imagine Joey. But it could not. It could imagine a man, a short bald man with hairy arms, but that man was not Joey.

The mass took on the form of the man who was not Joey, and Thomas could see that all was hopeless. The corpse of the man who was not Joey was dead, and Joey was dead.

Thomas stood stalk still waiting for Martha to return to hand it over to the police. It deserved to go to prison—no it did not deserve to go anywhere, it deserved to die, but suicide would just be another sin. Hopefully the courts could grant its death for it. It wanted desperately to be put into the eternal Hell that it had prematurely sent Joey to. Then its guilt could be replaced by an easier pain.

###

When Martha came home and discovered the Son of God standing in the middle of the floor watching a corpse, she took it remarkably well. She took it even more remarkably well when she found out the corpse used to be Joey, and Thomas had killed him.

“It was an accident,” the child said.

“Well. Thomas, it was Your will.” She said, voice monotone, “And I suppose he is in Heaven now, right? In a better place, right? He is happier there. Right?” Martha stared not at the corpse, but at the drying brown drops of blood on the carpet and the dirt Joey had tracked in. She wondered idly if it would be possible to clean the blood but leave the dirt forever.

Thomas hesitated. It had not stopped looking at the corpse since even when Martha had entered the room with her bags of groceries. “Right,” it said, “A better place.” The child did not want to hurt its mother as well.

“Then we would be doing him an injustice to mourn him becoming happier in Heaven, right? Being united with You, more profoundly. Right? He was a good Christian after all, right.”

Thomas said, “Yes. He is happier now.” The poor child was beyond even caring that lying was sinful.

“Right. Well. Then...I suppose we should dig a hole now. I think the garden would be best. Joey would have liked to be buried among his plants.”

Thomas did not move.

“Or I could dig the hole myself. I think Joey had a shovel in the garage so it shouldn’t be too difficult...good thing it isn’t winter. I don’t know what we’d do if the ground was frozen.”

The child finally tore its eyes away from the carcass, “Why would you dig a hole?” Its eyes were bloodshot. That and its agonized expression made it look a *little* bit demonic.

“Why?” I just said, to bury Joey.” Martha’s hands were fidgeting. Growing conscience of herself, she grabbed the wrist of one hand with the other, “Thank goodness he doesn’t talk to his family anymore.”

“I think... I think Joey should be buried in a Christian graveyard.”

“But how would we explain the body then? It doesn’t look like Joey. And I don’t know how we could explain it without admitting you did it...”

“I *did* do it.”

“Yes... but... if people find out they could lose faith... and... you... could even go to juvenile hall.”

“I belong in jail.”

Martha’s voice climbed an octave, “No. NO. You’re testing me. *No*. People might lose faith. They might stop believing in you, God, if they find out you killed someone...” her voice climbed higher. Sharp enough to cut Thomas’s ears.

She looked like a rodent being squeezed. Thomas did not want to squeeze the rodent more.

The child unsteadily walked out to the garden. Using telekinesis, it moved a great chunk of soil by a tomato plant filled with hard green tomatoes. Hole dug, Thomas went back and dragged the corpse into the hole. The body was room temperature, and the flesh still felt supple—alive. Thomas had to repress the urge to regurgitate its quinoa lunch. Martha put away groceries.

The body fell into the hole with a thump. Thomas looked at it once more—to check to see if it was alive—it was not. Why was its face that of a stranger? Thomas should not have had trouble remembering what Joey looked like.

After Thomas put the soil back over the corpse a human eye could not have distinguished the grave from the rest of the yard. Thomas had the odd impression that it had buried itself right along with Joey. This is the end of my life too, it thought, but was I ever alive or have I always been animated clay?

“I am never using my powers again,” it told Martha as it walked past her, into its room. Thomas shut the door quietly.

## CHAPTER 8—XY Puberty

We waited as the next seven years of the child's life passed without time. Each day was the same as the last. The child flipped through the Bible. Its prostrating mother served food that it chewed.

Grind, pause, grind. Thomas sometimes took three hours to finish one meal. Sometimes it would vomit a little bit, but always discreetly. If its mother found out she would have gone to too much trouble to find something else that it would have been equally reluctant to eat. The only thing it could stomach without issue was almond milk, which it drank three glasses of every day. Thomas became increasingly aware of the distinct and unique, pungent, and nauseating tastes of food

Its tongue had worked fine before, but as Thomas's world shriveled to the size of a bedroom, sensations grew. The child was growing too aware of everything. Its own increasingly foreign body with its strange almond musk, an extra appendage that was growing and pulsing, between its legs. All was too real. Thomas was too alive, and Joey was too dead.

A restlessness grew inside the child that could have made it wander the desert for forty years. Yet the only thing it would do was read The Bible on its forever-made bed; In asceticism it had given up on sleeping under the orange comforter even on the coldest nights. On such nights it would sit awake, shivering. It prayed aloud in a whispered voice. The most painfully cold nights were the nights that almost allowed Thomas to relax its ridged body and numb its rigid mind.

The moon cast a hard light on the Thomas the Choo-choo-train wallpaper that no one had thought to change.

The worst times were those mornings that sang with the voices of birds and illuminated golden specks of dust floating in the air: birds and dead-skin cell dust was proof of the grace of God even within Thomas's imperturbable walls. That even Thomas's own sinful skin could shed into a dust of such beauty was so heart wrenching that Thomas almost chewed holes in its cheeks to block out the beauty. It did not deserve God's grace, it deserved God's wrath. The guilt of pleasure was, to Thomas, more torturous than any physical pain.

The tender almost sexless child's body grew less tender each day. The vital muscles and what vigorous baby fat had not melted away by harder work now withered away to reveal pale skin and bones, even as the hair darkened, sprouted, and thickened.

As much as Thomas would let it thicken. The child's one hobby was to pluck out the hairs on its head in such a way that its mother would not notice. The dense hair was embedded deeper into its skull than the hair on most humans. With each pluck it flinched in pain. A lonely caged parrot will sometimes pluck every feather from its body, a process that will eventually kill it.

Thomas's body stretched longer, and its face stretched longer as well. Its face was the face of a sinner, but still that of an angel.

Purple eyelids with the longest eyelashes we have ever seen flashed over eyes that were huge, blue and shocked in their sockets. Its jaw became the opposite of a woman's jaw. The only thing about it that remained soft: the lips.

The youth moved nothing with its mind. Not even thoughts. In its head was nothing but images of Joey's anonymous corpse, Martha's memories of Sundays, and Hell. And still that youth's hushed puberty was not that much worse than any other human's.

Martha watched her child-God's ossification in pious silence.

She did not understand why Thomas was taking Joey's death so seriously. Yes, Joey's passing was sad, but such must have been God's will. Right? And Joey was in Heaven now, after all.

That being said Martha was deathly lonely, and even more deathly bored. Her husband, and only friend, was dead, and her God was catatonic.

She spent her days doing real and nonexistent chores, and making elaborate meals. With some trial and error, she kept up Joey's garden. Sometimes her tears would water the plants with her, but she did not understand why. Wasn't it God's will that Joey died? So why were her eyes acting so unchristian?

Martha would make a vegetarian version of every meal she could conceive of. She read cooking magazines at the local library hidden in a back room.

Sometimes she was called for an interview and she never refused the chance to spread the word, but speaking about Thomas was increasingly frustrating when the public demanded to know, "What exactly is He up to these days? And when is He going to reemerge, and lead us all to salvation or die for our sins?"

She told everyone that Thomas had gone with Joey to a hidden location to fast and pray, but no one seemed to think this was an adequate answer. Calls for interviews

were fewer and farther in-between as male theological experts who could speak at length about little were more interesting. Rumors sprang up. There were rumors that He had already died for the humanity's sins. There were alleged sightings in around the world. Once, there was even a look-a-like who claimed to be Him. People were starting to believe in the imposter despite Martha's protests, until it got leaked that the imposter was in fact female. Her parents were jailed, and the girl was murdered in the foster-care system.

Martha vacuumed that blue green rug twice or three times a day. The dark stains of dirt or blood remained. She could not focus on reaching God in prayer, and wondered if she was even trying to reach Him the right way when He was in her very own house.

The only thing that punctuated her dull life was church on Sunday, but even Church grew tedious; too often she had to correct the preacher afterward on his inaccurate sermon. Before Thomas had cloistered Himself, she had enjoyed pointing out to the preacher where he was wrong, but now, she sometimes wondered if there was a point.

She wanted to talk to Thomas, but she was afraid. He could smite her like He smite (smit?) Joey.

Sometimes she would light candles outside His door and pray, speaking fast and low about her adoration, love and fear. She was never sure if Thomas actually heard her. She only sounds she ever heard from his existence was His breathing and His toilet, sounding like a soul leaving the body with a swish, flushing in the middle of the night like.

Yet she saw Him three times a day, when she brought Him food and almond milk, to which He would say very politely, and unvaryingly “Thank you. ”

Martha would respond, “No, it is I who should be thanking You.”

Her God would reward her with a quiet little smile, and then a gentle shut of the door.

She would see Him once more at the end of the day when He brought empty plates to her. He only ever made one request, and that was for smaller serving sizes. Martha understood that Gods probably do not have to eat much, but even after that request she had difficulty not giving Him generous portions. She had the strange urge to feed Him as if He were a normal growing son. It seemed to Martha that His “thank-you” deepened overnight, changing from the genderless voice of childhood, to the high voice of a young human male.

Sometimes she would get other inappropriate urges. Once, she, without thinking, reached out to caress His thinning face. Thomas had looked at her with His wet blue eyes as if she was Abraham and she had just attempted to sacrifice Him. He looked... unhappy.

Martha never got that urge again, but she did get the urge to cut His growing hair. It was long and dark. It did not suit His button down shirt and kaki pants. It made Him look like a pale Middle Eastern desert rat that, for the first time, was trying on restraining western clothes. But Martha controlled her urge when she remembered Jesus had long hair and Samson with his long hair.

He was so skinny, but that’s how Jesus upon His cross was too. What about His eyelashes, did God have eyelashes like that? They looked like metal.

Martha had one hobby. About once a month she would go to the local mall and go shopping for her Son. She would stop by GameStop and look for good Christian video games (which were getting increasingly common with the Christian revival), and then go to the bookstore to look for good Christian books (they had so many beautiful copies of the Bible), and her favorite of all, go to clothing stores and look for good Christian clothes.

If she needed help she was always sure to find the most ignorant, sinful-looking employee with dyed hair or an inappropriate piercing who was less likely to recognize her as Martha, Mother of Thomas, and Her Holiness.

She would look through button-down shirts and kaki pants and try to find which would suit Thomas the most. She would buy many things and then, only halfway to the house, go back to the store to return all.

Except sometimes she would not return an item, in the hopes that Thomas would like it. Yet, she could never bring herself to give Him anything but clothes and those rarely. Only when too much of His boney ankles showed at the bottom of His pants. She thought it was presumptuous to try and pick out gifts for God.

She remembered Joey, and Joey's inane gifts to Thomas. Thomas never used that little baseball-mit Joey had bought Him; where was it now?

She never allowed herself to think of what life could have been. She kept her hope securely in the present, her happiness in the future, and her trials in the past. She did not allow herself to think about what Thomas must be thinking, or if He was happy, or if Gods can even feel happiness; you do not question God. She led a sinless existence.

We almost got bored watching.

TO BE CONTINUED IN PART TWO