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## Risorgimento

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# RISORGIMENTO

ANTHONY DI RENZO



RIITA HAMMOND

Anthony Di Renzo received his B.S. in screenwriting from the Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University in 1982. After three years in advertising, a period in his life that he calls the Babylonian Captivity, he returned to graduate school and received his M.A. in English from Villanova University. He is currently a doctoral candidate in American literature at Syracuse University. His short stories have appeared in *Shared Works*, *Cottonwood*, *Studia Mystica*, *Il Caffè*, *Pangloss Papers*, *Quixote*, and *The Church Herald*.

**H**IS FLOCK, not the sun, made Reverend Verger sweat, and he wondered how much longer he could stomach the bazaar. The silverware jingled in his large, clumsy hands, and he scanned the horizon, half expecting the horsemen of his dreams to come galloping toward him in their bright red shirts.

"Jesus, Rev. Are you alright?"

Verger smiled wanly. He was pale and storklike with salt-and-pepper hair and eyes crammed full of pain and bewilderment. The rest of his face was a perfect deadpan.

"It's nothing, Mr. Cipolla. Really," he said.

"Maybe it's the heat. You want a Heineken?"

Cipolla was a pudgy five foot two and looked as soft and pliable as a freshly baked roll. Melted butter seemed to run down his cheeks. He smoked a stogie and wore a red, white, and green T-shirt with a picture of a hammer cracking two walnuts.

"I mean it," said Cipolla. "Heat does funny things ta people." He adjusted his sunglasses.

Verger tried to ignore the caption on his T-shirt, "PER FAVORE, NON ROMPARE I MIEI COGLIONI," which the minister couldn't help translating into guinea English: "PLEASE-A, DON'T BUSTTA MY . . ." Verger turned away to keep from blushing.

"Take my wife," continued Cipolla. "She gets this nutty tic in her eye whenever we go ta the beach. At first, I thought she was comin' on ta the guys. Nearly popped her one, as a matter of fact."

Verger sighed irritably.

"Seriously, though," Cipolla said, "I think a little beer'd do ya some good."

"No thank you, Mr. Cipolla. I'm not in the mood."

"The ol' teetotaler routine, huh, *paisan*?"

Verger started. He wondered if Cipolla knew that his real name was Vergerio. Sometimes he dreamt that Cipolla rode with Garibaldi and his Red Shirts as they chased Verger and the Austrians through the Alps: Verger, a captive, dangled in a bird cage from the rearmost Austrian horse. The Red Shirts were only twenty yards behind and were gaining fast.

"*Hang on, Rev! We're coming!*" cried Cipolla.

"*Leave me alone!*" screamed Verger.

"How 'bout some bug juice?" said Cipolla.

“Huh?”

“Some bug juice,” said Cipolla, and he held up a pitcher. He operated a lemonade stand next to Verger’s.

The minister glanced at the pitcher. It was muckier than a swimming pool without chlorine.

“I’m . . . really not thirsty,” said Verger tightly.

Cipolla shrugged and pursed his lips. “Suit yourself.”

And he smiled and moved his cigar to the other side of his mouth with the tip of his fleshy tongue. A man without arms and legs in a circus side-show would have done it the same way. Cipolla held the cigar there for a moment, still smiling, then made it bob up and down three times. This was his way of cheering up Verger.

A spasm of annoyance shook the minister’s spindly frame. His nerves were stretched taut, and Cipolla’s little parlor trick was the last thing he needed. He hadn’t slept a wink since the bombing, and insomnia had driven him to read the Book of Revelation in the wee hours. Seven-horned lambs and giant locusts jostled in his head. He was sure something terrible was going to happen. He looked up and saw Alicia, glaring at him from the cake stand.

“Some day,” said Cipolla. “A scorcher, but nice. You sure know when to hold a bazaar, Rev.”

“I’m not responsible for the weather, Mr. Cipolla.”

“Aww, come on, Rev. We know you got connections.”

“Connections?” said Verger.

“The Man Upstairs,” Cipolla said, pointing to the sky unnecessarily.

“Oh yes,” said Verger, “Him.”

His eyes grazed on the vending booths, which stood out like toadstools on the front lawn of his church. His parishoners swarmed about them, oblivious to the humidity, buying and selling and gossiping. Their voices mimicked the droning cicadas, hidden in the trees.

“Sure beats bingo,” Cipolla said.

He accidentally blew smoke in the minister’s face. Verger gasped for air. Several of the children thought he was making funny faces at them and jumped up and down in a frenzy of delight.

“Can we please change the subject?” Verger wheezed.

“Oh, no offense, Rev,” said Cipolla. “Just complimentin’ ya on the shindig, is all.”

Some parishoners waved at the minister. Verger winced. They reminded him of those awful marionettes that had frightened him as a child. His father had carved puppets as a hobby and had liked to dangle his more grotesque creations over Verger’s crib: leering knights and fierce-looking chargers; Orlandos, Ruggieros, Carlo Magnos. If Verger would cry, his father would know he had done a good job.

One time the boy had nearly jumped out of his playpen.

“The devil! The devil!” he had shouted.

“Pier Paolo,” his father had said, “*che c’è?*” His foxlike face had needed a shave, as usual.

“The devil,” the boy had sniffled.

His father had laughed. “What devil?” And he had pointed out the puppet’s grandfatherly beard, and the Tablets of the Law tucked under its arm. “You see? Moses. Moses, not the devil. Moses.”

The boy had shaken his head. “Then how come he has horns?”  
 “Light,” his father had said. “When Moses saw God, he grew horns of light.”

**I**NCIDENTS LIKE THIS, Verger believed, had dented his mind, leaving it, despite a superior education, prey to the morbid and the fantastic. He had broken away from the cobblestone processions, from the black-clad old widows who had given him the *malocchio*, but it hadn't been easy. The church he had gone to as a child, located diagonally across from Paul Revere's house, was crowded with wooden statues of the saints, half of whom no longer were canonical. People mumbled their prayers in pidgin Latin and dialect, and there was a strange carving on the front of the altar—a pelican ripping open its breast so that its chicks could drink its blood. There were letters chiseled into the stone: GESU CRISTO, NOSTRO PELICANO. Jesus Christ, our pelican. On Sundays incense would wreath the bird, as the Sanctus bells made the kerchiefed widows weep.

Verger's home life had been no less primitive. His mother had read tarot cards and claimed she communed with the ghost of Garibaldi. She kept his picture in their spice-filled kitchen, along with Padre Pio's and Pius XII's. Sometimes she would go into trances and carry her broom like a standard, a stout little woman with moles on her cheeks and the arms of a grenadier. She relived the Battle of Palermo, the March on Naples, and when she banged her pots and pans together, the boy heard the clash of arms. On the eve before feast days, she would burn sugar to keep away evil spirits; and whenever there were leftovers, she would scrape them into a bowl with a knife, then whisper her sins into the bowl and leave the meat for Confitoor, the cat. It was a black stray, with a white starburst on its forehead, that visited them from time to time. His mother claimed the cat took away her sins. It always ate greedily, flicking its tail.

To come to Peachum, Connecticut, after living in Boston's North End, was to emerge from a dark cave into a fluorescent-lit room. It was a step toward freedom. Why, then, Verger thought, did he have such a hard time returning his parishoners' smiles? He avoided their eyes and rearranged the silverware. Nausea racked his body. He had recognized his own smile on his parishoners' bland faces, multiplied and distorted as in so many fun house mirrors. He steadied himself and looked at the sun. It hung in the sky, bloated and terrible, like the head of John the Baptist, and seemed to pulsate. For a moment, Verger imagined it would plummet to earth and burn up everything in sight. He closed his eyes. The cicadas rattled. *Soon. It would happen soon.* The seventh angel would sound its trumpet, and the last vestige of his harried sanity would be shattered forever by the blast.

“I coulda gone to the beach today,” said Cipolla. “Sun, surf, white bikinis. But the missus talked me inta comin.” He stirred the lemonade with his cigar. “I gotta level with ya, though. If anybody else had thrown this thing, I woulda said ta hell with it. But I like ya, Rev. You're an okay guy. Even if I don't like your church.”

“Thanks,” Verger mumbled.

“Yoo-hoooooooooooo!” a loud voice called.

“Is that my little stromboli?” said Cipolla.

A large woman bounded toward them with the face and figure of an ostrich. It was Mrs. Cipolla. She hailed from North Carolina and used gallons of wisteria perfume. Cipolla had met her while he was stationed in Roanoke, Virginia. She operated the local Century 21 and usually wore a mustard-colored business suit. Today, however, she wore her most striking dress. The print resembled the human stencils on the walls of Hiroshima.

"How's my sweetums?" she cooed.

"Hey, Jenny. We got mixed company."

She playfully nibbled his ear. "You little rascal. Mamma knows you like it when she talks like that."

"Cut it out, will ya?"

She batted her eyes at him. "He's such a shy one in public, Reverend Verger. But when we're alone, my gracious! He's a regular tiger."

Verger wondered how their bed could stand the strain.

"You havin' a good time, sugar?"

"Just ask the Rev here."

"And *you* didn't wanna come! Next week we'll have you in church."

"Jenny, I ain't steppin' foot in there. No offense meant, Rev."

"Honestly, you're impossible. Isn't he impossible, Reverend?"

"He's impossible," said Verger.

"It's not my kinda place, that's all."

"But it's so *modern!* Which reminds me, Reverend Verger. That banner in front of your pulpit?"

"Banner?" said Verger.

"Why yeeeeeecs! The one that says, 'You've no need to make your peace with God because you've never quarreled with Him'? Is that from the Bible?"

"Thoreau," Verger said thickly.

"Oh dear. I don't recall *readin'* a book called *Thoreau*."

"You're too busy readin' *Cosmo*."

The Cipollas laughed. Verger resembled a stalagmite.

"Honestly, I could gobble you up!" and she gave her husband a smack on each cheek. "He's a morsel, Reverend Verger. My very own dumpling!"

Verger polished the silverware.

"Tah tah, honey. You be good now, hear?"

"If I was good," said Cipolla, "what the hell would we talk about?"

She giggled boisterously and trotted off. Verger scarcely noticed. He was too busy studying his reflection in a fork. His face distended and splintered. Verger chuckled ruefully. Suddenly, he felt pinned by a relentless searchlight. He looked up and saw Alicia, still glaring at him from her cake stand. Verger smiled conciliatorily. His wife kept scowling and gave him the finger. Verger hoped no one would notice.

"Looks like the little woman's on the rag," said Cipolla.

Verger grunted. Cipolla smiled, showing his tobacco-stained teeth.

"Not givin' her enough at night?"

Verger turned crimson. "I don't see how that's any of your—!"

"No need ta be embarrassed, Rev. Happens ta the best of us."

Verger ground his teeth.

"Take Jenny and me. That girl's got quite an appetite. Sometimes I can't handle her, y'know? I gotta pretend like I got a headache—and I was in the Navy! Well, this don't go over too good, an' I get the ol' waterworks. So

I take her ta this place where they got mirrors on the ceiling, and she leaves me alone for awhile.”

Cipolla laughed and invited Verger to join in. Verger forced a smile and wiped his brow with a napkin. His face became vulnerable.

“Why don’t you like me, Mr. Cipolla?”

“I like you alright, Rev.”

“Then why don’t you like my church?”

Cipolla puffed on his cigar.

“It’s hard to say. It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“But . . . ?”

“I dunno. It don’t look like a church. It don’t feel like a church.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for one thing, there’s no cross.”

“No cross?”

“No cross, no crucifix. You know. In case there’s vampires.”

“But why should that upset you?”

“Because it don’t look right, that’s why. It don’t look like a church.”

“Are you saying a church has to have a cross to be a church?”

“Look, I’m no Holy Joe. I’m just sayin’ it don’t look right.”

“No, no, no. Let’s continue. What’s so important about a cross?”

“I dunno.”

“Exactly. Nobody knows. We hold on to symbols, and we don’t know why. Don’t you see that’s superstition?”

“Then how ’bout Golden Boy?”

“Who?”

“The statue.”

It hung high above the altar of Verger’s church, serene and detached, a thing of gilded brass with an archaic smile. Its arms and legs were outspread, but its feet and hands bore no wounds.

“That thing looks like an Academy Award,” said Cipolla.

“It represents the spirit of man.”

“It leaves me cold. I can’t relate to it.”

“Would you rather worship an instrument of torture?!”

Cipolla puffed on his cigar. “Whatever you say, Rev.”

Verger frowned. Invincible ignorance, he thought.

“Forget it,” said Cipolla. “What the hell. I’m a lapsed Catholic, so who the hell am I ta tell ya your business? I mean, as long as you love these people . . .”

**B**UT VERGER WASN’T SURE if he did anymore. Exhaustion had taught him to fear them. Every time he entered the pulpit, he felt like a burned-out lion tamer. A menagerie of eyes would confront him, ravenous, insatiable. Verger would grip the podium and sweat. He sometimes thought his congregation would tear him to pieces and devour him. Only his need to make contact gave him the strength to go on.

Barricaded behind his lectern, Verger would woo his people. He knew that even the most rational of them harbored neurotic guilt, and it gutted them daily. They had worked so hard for their beautiful homes, and they couldn’t even enjoy themselves. Despite his jangled nerves, Verger’s heart

went out to them. He told them they weren't so bad. It was okay to be human. There was no Fall, and Jesus was a person who had taught about love. That's all they really needed, love. And he would smile so sincerely that they would forget whatever was bothering them, and the famished, wolflike look would dissipate from their eyes.

Then Gracie Osborne would start up and ruin everything.

Gracie was the five-year-old with Down's syndrome. She sat in the front pew of Verger's church every Sunday, next to her glum-faced mother. Verger could never get the child to smile. No matter how hard he tried, her features remained as stern and inscrutable as an icon. She made Verger nervous. Her forehead bulged, her nose ran unchecked. But her eyes were particularly disturbing—gray and intense like storm clouds. Their purity caused Verger to shudder. Whenever the organist played "Good Things Are Going to Happen to You," Gracie would bellow uncontrollably. Just thinking about it froze Verger's blood. That perverse hunger would flare up in his congregation's eyes, and the minister would bite his lips in vexation. What more did they want from him? Wasn't it enough that he was reasonable and understanding? But it was always the same. They wanted to eat his flesh and drink his blood.

"I'm starved," said Cipolla. "What time is it, Rev?"

Verger checked his watch. "Two o'clock," he said.

"We'd be eating now in the old neighborhood," said Cipolla. "Sometimes I sure miss Brooklyn."

And he talked about Sunday dinner at his mother's: the pasta, the sausage, the bread and wine. Verger had tuned him out. He had retreated to the study in back of his head where he did most of his brooding. He was still haunted by what had happened last week.

Verger had sat in his den, engrossed in a PBS special. It was a documentary on El Salvador. The film took place during Holy Week in a small mountain village, and Verger had turned on the set during the Good Friday procession. A handful of young men had been executed the day before by a death squad, and this was their funeral. Their mothers and their widows led the rest of the peasants through the streets, preceded by a lean-faced, sinister priest dressed in blood-red vestments. The two altar boys carrying candles looked like junior arsonists. Prayers and curses mingled on the soundtrack. The priest carried a stark crucifix of rusty bars, broken toys, bits and pieces of automobile parts, and barbed wire, which the peasants had found in a garbage dump near their village. The figure on the cross seemed to writhe in agony, as if it shared their pain and resentment. The priest gripped the crucifix tightly. He was a dark-skinned man with blazing eyes, and he stared at the camera and growled something in Spanish. Pale, timid subtitles translated his words into English.

"Here, every hill is Golgotha," he said.

The others took up the refrain.

*"Every hill is Golgotha! Every hill is Golgotha!"*

It was a kind of chant.

The spread-eagled thing on the cross seemed to draw strength from the glowering faces around it. It glittered harshly in the sun. The same metallic gleam shone in the peasants' eyes, like so many nail points. Verger had seen this anger before—on the news, in the paper, accusing him from the cover



of *Time*. It was the same anger that stormed embassies, overthrew governments, and caused riots in ghettos. The priest had infected them all. It was part of the madness of God, a madness Verger had fought for the past twenty years. It was stamped all over the priest's sullen face, a face obsessed by the unattainable vision of universal redemption. Verger knew this look all too well. It was one in a series of looks that stretched all the way back, like a chain of insanity, to the fire and thunder of Sinai. Verger could name other links in this chain: Jeremiah, Savonarola, Luther, Swift. Lunatics and misanthropes who converted the world to anarchy. Verger, however, would not be seduced.

**H**E WAS LEANING FORWARD in his armchair, his neck outstretched like a turtle's, when he heard a childlike voice murmur, "Hey hoy, Preacher Boy. Wanna have a good time?" It sounded more like a plea than a proposition.

Verger turned his head. His wife was leaning against the wall, dressed in a skimpy blue nightie. One leg rested on the bar stool, Marlene Dietrich style.

"Does my man know what I'd like right now?"

"Please, Alicia. Don't start."

She slunk over to him and sat on his lap. "Come on, Peter. Where's some of that olive oil charm?"

Verger ignored her. She began to rumple his hair.

"Come to bed," she whispered.

She was a wisp of a woman with an oval face, pencil-thin lips, and short auburn hair. Verger continued to stare at the set.

"You're a handsome man, Peter. Even if you're getting gray. I still think you're very attractive."

"Aren't you cold in that thing?" said Verger. "It looks like it's made of Kleenex."

"I wouldn't be cold if you warmed me up," she said, and she grinned inanely and snuggled up to him.

Verger groaned. "Don't you think you're overdoing this?"

"I'd swing naked from a chandelier if it would get you back in bed."

Verger threw up his hands. Alicia rested her head on his chest.

"I can hear your heart beat, Peter. Lub dub, lub dub, lub dub. Does your heart beat for me, Peter?"

"Stop clinging to me," said Verger.

Alicia drew back. Her lower lip trembled. "Peter, what have I done?"

"Nothing," Verger mumbled. "Nothing."

"Then why won't you sleep with me anymore?"

"For heaven's sake, Alicia! It's only been two weeks!"

"It seems like months."

"Well, it's only been two weeks."

Alicia pouted. "I don't like twin beds."

"You'll get used to it," he said.

"I don't want to get used to it. I want you next to me."

"You're blowing this all out of proportion!"

Alicia's face fell. "I want you next to me," she said.

Verger did a slow burn.



"It's not like we're *kids* anymore," he grumbled.

"We're not corpses either!"

Verger sighed wearily. "Alicia, try to understand. We've reached a point in our lives where we need more time to ourselves."

Alicia furrowed her brow.

"Separate beds," said Verger, "give us a sense of—perspective."

"That's a crock," she said.

"There's no need to be vulgar."

"A crock of *shit*."

Her eyes were spikes. Verger sucked air through his teeth. It was useless trying to communicate with her. She was selfish, unreasonable, and possessive. All he wanted was a little space to get a new outlook on things. Any sense of objectivity was lost in their bed. She was all over him, like a hungry octopus. She could never get her fill. Her eyes seemed to glut him. Her tongue was forever tasting him. It was suffocating. He had to get away. He already feared it might be too late. Sometimes, when he was around her, he had an overwhelming desire to cry in her lap. Once he caught himself reciting snatches of the Song of Songs while driving alone in his car: *Your breasts are like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle that browse among the lilies*. He was shocked and depressed for days afterwards. Another stunt like that and he would have himself committed.

Verger looked at Alicia. Her eyes were downcast, her features softened.

"Peter," she murmured, "my body temperature's up."

Verger smacked his forehead with his palm.

"Everything's perfect, Peter! We could do it now! It'd work!"

"How many times have I told you, Alicia? Stop sounding like the *Farmer's Almanac*!"

"But it's *seed time*, Peter!"

Verger clicked his tongue.

"The sun's in Leo, Peter. Our child would be a leader."

"Then let an astrologer get you pregnant!"

Alicia sighed. Lines appeared on her face.

"I'm thirty-four, Peter. I'm running out of time."

"No more children," he said.

"Peter, my miscarriage was three years ago!"

"No more children," he said.

He closed his eyes and fought back tears. He could still see her sprawled on the bathroom floor beside a puddle of blood and tissue. He had numbed himself and cradled her in his arms, rocking her back and forth. Since then, he could never touch her without wanting to weep.

"Peter," said Alicia, "you can't decide this by yourself. Our bodies *belong* to each other. It has to be a mutual agreement."

"I should have had that vasectomy."

"Don't say that!" she said.

She grabbed his crotch. Verger leapt out of his chair.

"What's the matter with you, you—nymphomaniac!"

She was crouched on the chair, a leopardess ready to spring. Her large violet eyes were fierce and hungry.

"I'm *not* a nymphomaniac! I'm your WIFE, goddamn you! Bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh!"

Verger smiled sardonically. She liked to quote the Bible in order to arouse him.

“You were born at the wrong time,” said Verger. “You should have been a matriarch in an ancient Semitic tribe.”

“We live like Arabs as it is,” she said. “Always wandering from place to place, never having a home. How long are we going to stay here, Peter? Three years? Four?”

He looked around evasively. “As long as it takes,” he said.

“Typical. Fucking typical. Just what the hell’s the matter with you, Peter? You and your body are never in the same place. I have to put out an APB on you even when we’re in the same room. What’s the big secret, Peter? You’re an alien? Is this *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*? Or maybe you’re a machine. Is *that* it, Peter? Got a serial number engraved on your cock? You should register it with the police in case of theft.”

Verger sighed loudly and rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger.

“I’m tired of this,” he declared.

“So am I! Damned tired!” and the tears flowed.

“Alicia, please.”

He stroked her cheek. She slapped his hand.

“Don’t touch me unless you mean business, mister!”

Verger blinked in disbelief.

“And don’t expect to be let into our bedroom! You’re sleeping down here from now on! It should increase your sense of perspective!”

“Alicia, you’re being childish.”

“Childless, not childish! And I won’t be lectured to! I’m sick to death of you, Peter! Sick of the very sight of you! I’ll never come near you, never! I’d rather sleep with a block of ice! I’d rather fuck a mannequin!”

She stormed off. Verger tried to follow, but a wail stopped him dead in his tracks. The minister cringed and looked at his set. The peasants marched toward him, square-shouldered and implacable, their faces pebbles embedded in a juggernaut. Verger backed up. The priest held the crucifix like a lance. The bedroom door slammed upstairs, and the bang ignited the crowd. They rushed the cameraperson. A melee broke out. The priest swung wildly with the crucifix. The film crew fled, and everything blurred.

Verger, shaken, turned off the set. His stomach was in knots. The ticking of his clock filled the emptiness in his chest. He knew then and there that there was no escape. A private apocalypse loomed. He did not know what form it would take—whether, like Isaiah, his lips would touch burning coal; or, like Ezekiel, he would be force-fed a scroll of wisdom. He only knew that it would be something like rape, and that afterwards, despite his moderation and good sense, he would be consecrated irrevocably to the madness of God.

He trudged to the closet and got some blankets, shivering.

**T**HE PHONE WOKE HIM at 3:00 A.M. Verger had to fight his way to consciousness, surfacing painfully from great depths like a diver with the bends. The davenport had not been comfortable, and every joint in his body ached. Verger got up and groped for the phone. “Hello?” he slurred.

The voice on the other end of the line was a babble. Something about a fire somewhere.

“Speak clearer,” said Verger.

“*Brother! Brother!*” the voice said. It became wilder, almost a parody.

“Crank,” said Verger, and he slammed down the phone.

That morning at breakfast, groggy and disoriented, Verger read that the black Baptist church had been firebombed during the night. The pastor, Reverend Tooker, was in the hospital, suffering from burns and smoke inhalation. It took some time for the information to seep in. When it did, a tremor ran through Verger’s blood. He glanced at his reflection in the toaster and saw a ghoulish smile on his lips. Verger drew back, appalled, his brain reeling. The call had sounded like a prank. How could he have known? He continued staring at his face.

A piece of charred toast popped through his head.

Verger had visited Tooker’s church when the black man first came to town. It was an ecumenical gesture. Tooker said he didn’t know what ecumenism was, but Verger was welcome. He was a portly, coffee-colored man with oily black hair and a toothbrush moustache. His body seemed to burst out of his suit, and he had bulging, fish-colored eyes. He showed Verger around his house. Mrs. Tooker made waffles in the kitchen. There were orange stickers on the refrigerator door, on which emergency numbers were printed, and a phone list of the local clergy. Verger’s name and number headed the list. He looked at Tooker, who laughed and slapped him on the back. He explained that he liked to keep tabs on his colleagues, and since Verger’s church was the closest, Tooker would call him first if anything came up—like a picnic, say, or a food drive. “Us Christians gotta stick together, bro,” and he introduced Verger to his three sons. Calvin, the oldest, a tall, powerfully built youth, grudgingly shook his hand.

At the service, Tooker placed Verger next to the choir with all the deacons and deaconesses. They wore their loudest Sunday clothes; and Verger, dressed in a stiff black suit, sat among them, dour and uncomfortable. He looked like a put-upon heron surrounded by mocking parrots. The room was sweltering and full of flies, and the pungent odor of human flesh hung near Verger’s delicate nostrils.

The organist, who resembled Ray Charles, caressed the keys almost erotically. His head wobbled back and forth, filled with a toothy ivory grin. The choir sang:

*There is power, power, wonder-working power  
In the Blood of the Lamb!  
There is power, power, wonder-working power  
In the precious Blood of the Lamb!*

Tooker jauntily approached the pulpit and introduced Reverend Verger, who reluctantly stood and smiled. Tooker laughed like he had phlegm in his throat, and Verger, blushing, sank back in his seat. He watched the pastor begin his sermon: eyes closed, face composed. His voice was little more than a sigh.

“You don’t know the hot tears, brothers and sisters. You don’t know the hot tears I shed alone at night.”

Every eye was fixed on him. Verger, however, was looking at the water

pitcher on Tooker's lectern. A squadron of flies performed aerobatics just above the brim.

"I cry, brothers and sisters, because the world ain't saved yet. I cry, brothers and sisters, because the world's forgotten how. I cry because them that hungers and them that thirsts acts like they's filled and whole!"

The tone of his voice had changed. It was halfway between a sob and a growl. He stepped out from behind the pulpit, a savage gleam in his eyes. For a moment, Verger thought he was going to tear off his clothes or toss a bomb into his startled congregation. Instead, Tooker shook his massive frame and proceeded to do a cakewalk. He spoke in a manic singsong about manna in the desert, quail in the camp, the five thousand fed by the Savior. Verger wanted to leave but found himself wedged between two hefty deaconesses. He sighed and endured the rest of Tooker's performance. He had seen vulgar emotionalism before, but never anything like this. Tooker bobbed and weaved, gesticulated wildly, cried and pleaded, dropped to his knees. Verger squirmed. He didn't know whether to be amused or alarmed. Tooker was begging his congregation to feed itself. They couldn't act like the world, the world which had locked itself in an attic and was slowly starving to death. But they weren't the world. They were the children of the Passover lamb. Did they hunger for the Bread of Life? Had the bottom of their guts fallen out so that their insides were howling for Jesus? The *world* didn't understand this hunger—the proud, the rich, the self-satisfied—*they* didn't understand. But ask a brother in Biafra, he could tell you. Ask a sister in Bangladesh, she could tell you, too. Not the proud or the rich, not the self-satisfied. They *spurned* the Bread of Life.

"Do you wanna know *why?*?" Tooker shouted.

He leapt to his feet and snatched the Bible off the podium, shaking it like a tomahawk.

"BECAUSE THEY CAN'T ABIDE THE CROSS!"

The place went wild. People sprang from their chairs. They waved their arms like wind-blown branches, a forest shaken by sylvan gods. Verger broke out in a sweat.

"They can't abide the cross," said Tooker. "They can't abide the fact that they're hungry. They want a free and easy life when our Lord sweated blood in the Garden!"

"The Spirit is on him!" a woman screamed.

The congregation started clapping rhythmically. Tooker was dancing about like a Hopi medicine man on peyote.

"Woe to those who are false to their hunger, who shy away from the banquet of Christ! Woe to those whose heads are fat, who puff themselves up with the yeast of deceit! God will send them the famine of Egypt! God will send them the madness of Saul!" His eyes seemed trained on Verger, the headlights of an oncoming truck. "You worthless bag of bones! Hear the words of Him who has the stars in His hand, whose tongue is a double-edged sword. You say, 'I am rich, I've acquired wealth, I do not need a thing.' But you don't realize what you are: wretched, pitiful, poor, and naked! Do not force My hand! I will wound you in order to heal you. Kill you and bring you to life. Admit your nakedness! Confess your hunger! I give you the Bread of Life!"

"You wanna go Dutch on a pizza?"

It was Cipolla. His Pillsbury Doughboy features were kneaded into a friendly cast. Verger wanted to flatten them with a rolling pin.

“What?”

“A pizza,” said Cipolla. “You look kinda hungry.”

Verger bristled. “I am *not* hungry.”

He was never hungry. He practically subsisted on vitamin tablets.

His thoughts returned to the black Baptist church. After Tooker’s harangue, the whole congregation had cavorted in the aisles like drunken gypsies. One ample woman in a shocking pink dress had playfully goosed Verger. He had left in a huff, bumping into Calvin. “Asshole!” Calvin had said.

**T**HE MINISTER CLOSED HIS EYES. He could still see himself confronted by the newspaper: mouth agape, eyes shocked. Later, while doing the dishes, he had fantasized about visiting Tooker in the hospital. He had felt a need to disguise himself, so he wore flippers, a Hawaiian shirt, and horn-rimmed glasses with a false nose and a false beard. He was sure that no one would notice him.

Verger sneaked past the receptionist and found himself in Burn Control. Tooker’s bloated carcass rested on a bed. His face was terribly disfigured, ashen and blistered, with patches of singed hair. He looked like a sea elephant that had been battered against a reef. Verger cautiously approached. Tooker’s breathing was shallow. His eyes were shut, and tubes stuck out of his arms and nose. Verger’s blood galloped in his ears. Suddenly, one of Tooker’s eyes flared open and accusingly glared at the minister. Verger couldn’t move. The eye burned through his forehead like a laser, and he shrieked and fled the room.

Reverend Verger spent the rest of the week trying to tame his guilt. Rabbi Rappaport had called on Wednesday and invited him to a rally that Saturday protesting the bombing. Verger, regretfully, had to say no. The bazaar was on the same day, and he couldn’t cancel it. He buried himself in the preparations. He sat in his kitchen and thumbed through missionary magazines, looking for pictures to cut out. These he would later paste on white cardboard and attach to some of the booths. He chose only those pictures that were the least offensive. Verger’s task wasn’t easy, however. Most of the photographs were repulsive. One showed a child of two or three playing in a pile of garbage. It was stark naked but so filthy and scab-ridden that it was impossible to tell what sex it was. It had a sallow, shriveled face and large rheumy eyes that radiated pain and bewilderment. A horsefly rested on its cheek like a repugnant beauty mark. As awful as it was, this was the picture he eventually thumbtacked to his booth, with the words “HELP THE POOR UNFORTUNATES OVERSEAS” printed above it in squiggly black marker. Verger blamed his taste for the Gothic on the nuns in parochial school. With a shudder, he recalled the films he had been subjected to in Sister Fidele’s class.

Sister Fidele had been his confirmation instructor, a short, squat nun with hefty arms and the voice of a drill sergeant. Her face was as ancient and austere as the Mask of Mycenae, and, like Virgil, she led him through Hell. He saw tar-paper shacks and garbage-dump settlements, basketball bellies and sugarloaf heads, walking skeletons, demon children, lepers, one-eyed beggars,

mothers with rings in their noses nursing dying babies with their desiccated breasts. It always made Verger's head spin, and occasionally he had to rush to the bathroom.

Every time Sister Fidele was about to show a film, she would say, in a throaty alto, "This is the face of our Lord." Verger would become more and more outraged as the movie progressed—not because he thought what she had said was a lie, but because a resentful, wordless conviction inside him told him it was true. And if God could look like that, Verger wanted nothing to do with Him. He stopped attending classes and refused to be confirmed. It was the beginning of his independence.

In high school he discovered Emerson and Thoreau, and he lost himself in their words. At Boston University he became a Unitarian. His parents didn't object at first. They thought it was a phase; and though devout Catholics, they hated priests and believed in private worship. But when Verger announced that he was entering the ministry and changing his name, they became irrational. His mother scratched her face and wrung her hands. His father stamped his foot and threatened. Verger tried to explain that it was nothing personal, that he loved and respected them and was grateful for their support; but this was something he had to do. It was a symbol of his new life. He wanted to be like normal people. He didn't want to stay in a ghetto. He didn't want to belong to a church that made suffering a virtue. He looked at them appealingly. They gathered all of his photographs in the house and burned them in the kitchen. When he went to the seminary, they sent him a mass card with his name on it and with a black cross burned into the face of St. Peter. At that point Verger realized that the price of true selfhood was loneliness. He bowed his head and accepted his fate.

Since then, Verger had never regretted his decision. He knew he had been right. But he sometimes wondered if being right was worth the outlandish cost. As his selfhood became more authentic, his loneliness became more pronounced. Initially, he believed this isolation gave him a certain dignity. But as the years passed and his alienation increased, Verger began to feel ridiculous. A head-on collision was a tragedy. A fourteen-car pile-up was the stuff of Keystone comedy. Dissatisfaction led him to commit inexplicable grotesqueries. He and Alicia had lived in eight parsonages in the past fifteen years; and no matter how picture-postcard perfect a town might be, Verger always found something that depressed him. Whenever he moved, he felt himself dogged by laughter—his mother's laughter, his father's laughter. Sometimes he thought God Himself was laughing at him; and he pictured Christ as a practical joker, a joy buzzer hidden in His hand, who asked every poker-faced doubting Thomas to probe the nail print in His palm.

These thoughts haunted the minister late at night, when, tormented by insomnia, he would page through the annotated Apocalypse his father-in-law had bought him. There were illustrations by Blake, and the Four Horsemen reminded Verger of the Red Shirts. Whenever he nodded off, he found himself suspended in a cage, bumping against the flank of a horse.

The Austrians were panic-stricken. They shot through Simplon Pass, pursued by the Red Shirts. Mountain goats watched the rout. Up ahead was Switzerland, where the air was cool, the clocks were precise, and neutrality was a way of life. The two cavalries turned a bend, the Red Shirts gaining.

"Hurry!" cried Verger. "Hurry!"



But he didn't know if he was cheering the Austrians or the Italians.  
Warning shots fired overhead. Garibaldi drew his saber.

"AVAN-TIIIIIIIIIIII!"

The Red Shirts, roaring, charged ahead and overtook the Austrians.

**T**HERE WAS A LOUD CRASH, followed by screams and shouts. Verger gasped. A youth armed with a large, heavy chain was running amok through the booths. He tore into them like a marauding bull, upsetting them, smashing them to pieces. A partridge-shaped woman got in his way, and he punched her in the stomach. When her husband tried to grab him from behind, he wrapped the chain around the man's neck and kned him in the groin.

"Jesus Christ!" said Cipolla.

The young man continued his rampage, knocking over booths, swinging his chain. A ferocious joy burned in his face. He stopped and trained his eyes on Verger, an animal that had spotted its prey. It was Calvin Tooker. He smiled and strode over to Verger, all six feet seven and one-half inches of him. He was naked from the waist up, and sweat glistened on his body. He stared at Verger and spat, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Yo, blob," he said to Cipolla. "Gimme a drink."

Cipolla started, but said nothing.

"A *drink*, a *drink*, butterball. You from another planet?"

"I was born in Brooklyn," blurted Cipolla.

Calvin wound the chain around his fist as if it were a string of pearls.

"What'll it be?" Cipolla said hoarsely.

"What the hell you think it'll be, fool? You ain't got but one thing."

"Yeah, right," said Cipolla.

The pitcher shook as he poured some lemonade into a styrofoam cup. He handed it to Calvin. Calvin took the drink and stepped over to Verger. He raised his cup in a mock toast.

"This Bud's for you, man," he said.

He took a swig, gargled loudly, and squirted the drink in Verger's face. The minister was paralyzed. Calvin took a huge bite out of his cup. His jaws worked slowly, like a sullen water buffalo chewing its cud. Verger was certain he was the main course.

Calvin swallowed hard and scowled. His eyes fell on the picture thumb-tacked to Verger's booth. He tore it off and perused it grimly, then chuckled and looked at Verger, smiling sarcastically.

"It's a real Christian thing you're doin', man. A real Christian thing." He crushed the picture and tossed it at Verger's feet. "Helpin' them poor unfortunates overseas. You're a saint, man. A regular saint."

The sun glared over his shoulder.

"Of course," said Calvin, "it must be kinda easy fo' you. I mean: they're so far away an' all. You don' have ta deal with 'em—do ya?"

Verger stared at the paper ball by his feet.

"But I guess that's your specialty, huh, preacher man? Everyone's got a specialty nowadays. Fo' instance: it just ain't yo' thing ta answer phone calls from niggers. It just ain't yo' bag—right?"

"Calvin, let me explain—"



“Ooooh, no need to *explain*, man. I can dig. We’re just a little too close, tha’s all. We ain’t cute and cuddly like them gook poster kids.”

He leaned over the counter, his face six inches from Verger’s. It was fleshy, mean, and ugly, like the face of a grouper.

“And we *smell funny, too*—don’t we, preacher man? We smell funny, we like chitlins, and we make terrific dancers.”

He started singing “I’ve Got Rhythm” and punctuated the first few bars by karate-kicking Cipolla’s booth into toothpicks. He glared at Verger.

“Son, *please*,” the minister squeaked.

Calvin brought his fist down on the counter.

“Don’t you ‘son’ me, motherfucker! Don’t you *ever* ‘son’ me.”

Verger’s legs shook. Calvin raised a bayonet-like finger.

“Where the fuck were you, white man?! Where the fuck were you when my Daddy needed you?”

Verger’s lips tried to form words. Calvin pounded the counter.

“Answer me, goddamn you! Stop gapin’ at me like a dummy!”

The minister couldn’t speak. Calvin disgustedly shook his head.

“You ain’t real, man. You ain’t even real.”

Verger pleaded with his eyes. Calvin spewed obscenities. He snatched two forks off the counter and raised them over his head. Verger quickly shut his eyes. Starbursts flashed as the prongs pierced his scalp. The pain radiated to every part of his body. He felt his limbs jerk. Colors swirled before him: lightning-bolt blues, sulphurous yellows, bloody reds. He was falling, falling.

“*Peter! Peter!*” he heard his wife cry.

He tried calling to her, but blacked out.

**W**HEN HE CAME TO, it was as if he had been dropped from a great height. He lay sprawled on the ground, afraid to get up. A cocoon of crushed paper was four inches from his nose. Dazed, he slowly uncrumpled it. His eyes focused. It was the picture of a child. Verger dimly recognized it. He studied it with the vague impression that he was looking at himself. Something grabbed his hand. It was soft and delicate, almost frail, but it held him firmly.

“Peter, speak to me.”

“Take it easy, *paisan*. The ambulance is here.”

Verger painfully turned his head. A stranger said there was still hope: the forks hadn’t punctured the bone. Verger bled steadily. His skull throbbed.

“Alicia?” he said.

A pale, chunky face hovered over him. It had large, gaping sockets where its eyes should have been and smoked a thick cigar. Verger squinted and craned his neck. Another face gradually formed in one of the sockets. It wore an expression of shocked outrage, and its eyes seemed ravenous for something ineffable. Two shafts of light, like horns of fire, emanated from its head. Verger swooned.

Soft, familiar hands eased back his head, as two figures in white gently lifted him into the air.





*Figure 1. First Onondaga County Courthouse (from painting, LaFayette at Onondaga Hill, by George Kasson Knapp). Courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association, 311 Montgomery St., Syracuse, NY, 13202-2098.*

