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A REGULAR PARADISE

Matthew A. Ricke

I pass by a teenage girl wrapped tightly in a white sarong. She sits at the water's edge and gathers clumps of wet sand in her hands, sifting it to grain. Her vertebrae extend out through her browned skin like a gothic arch, and her feet are brushed clean by the small waves of the slowly approaching tide. The water is still too cold to swim, but a few children splash around her in the surf and the lifeguards up the beach pretend to pay attention.

Behind me, bikers cruise loudly along the narrow strip of flattened sand between the hotels and the boardwalk. At the Main Street ramp, they roll up and onto Atlantic Avenue, which runs the length of Daytona Beach. I follow them and am instantly a part of the seething Bike Week crowd, large and determined to get somewhere fast, but where I don't know. My old college roommate Joe and I parked in a vacant lot just down the street last night. We slept in the bed of his truck under piles of T-shirts and jeans to keep warm. At dawn, a passing man tapped me on the foot and said, "Time to get up." I groaned and sat, but he was gone. Yawning, I tasted the tar in the freshly paved road as it settled on my tongue. It was thick and almost tangible; black, oily bubbles emerged from the asphalt and when I hopped down to stretch, I popped them open with my bare feet.



Last summer, I showed the kids at the juvenile home how to pop these bubbles if they wanted. The girls shrieked at first, worried about burning or permanent discoloration; the boys were tough and unfazed. It was morning, our break from school time, fresh air before round two. In a minute, we'd file back inside, and, because it was Friday, I'd give them the option to read from *The Odyssey* with me, or attend a Bible study with Mr.

Jim, the poorly dressed man who owned the facility.

“Bible or *Odyssey*?” I asked once back inside, slipping on my hairnet to enter the kitchen. “Because Mr. Jim is here.”

Samantha Byrd, the new girl, colorless in the cheeks and with the palest blue eyes, asked, “What’s *The Odyssey*?” Her head was visibly dented, planed like the roof of a house at forty-five degrees; no doubt she was hit or dropped repeatedly as an infant. I wasn’t allowed to read their case files, but quickly enough I’d learned that if I really wanted answers, the body is always legible enough.

“What’s *The Odyssey*?” I asked. “*The Odyssey* is the story of an old man named Odysseus who’s been trying to get home to his family for like twenty years. He’s lost at sea, everyone’s trying to kill him, all that stuff. I like it, but *it is* thousands of years old, so you might find it boring.”

She’d arrived the night before in the back of a police car, six months pregnant but hardly showing.

“It’s cool,” said Walter, my current favorite. A fat boy with wild ADD, he sat in the corner and read disintegrating issues of *National Geographic* with religious intensity. “Lots of fighting,” he said.

“It’s your typical sad old man story, Samantha. Lots of magic and lots of gods, you know.” I said, “It’s pretty much exactly like the Bible, only it has a more exciting cover.” I held it up and pointed to the crude watercolor; a broken warship struggling to outrun flying thunderbolts. “So,” I asked, “Bible or *Odyssey*?”

“*Odyssey*,” said Walter. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know that’s what you’re talking about, but you ain’t supposed to be talking at all without raising your hand.”

“Sorry, Mr. M.”

“Don’t say sorry, just raise your hand.” He raised his hand and I said, “Yes, Walter. What do you want?”

“Can I write a letter to my mom?”

“Is it letter-writing time?”

“Well then can I read *The Odyssey* with you?”

“Can you give me a moment of peace?”

“Can we stop asking questions, Mr. M?”

“You can stop,” I said. “But I’m still waiting for an answer to mine.”

Samantha was the only one to join Mr. Jim for Bible study. They sat at a table in my office where Jim nervously read and explained passages from the New Testament. Jesus hung on a cross, spoke to his father, wondered where his friends were.

I read Book Five and to the delight of the kids that sat around me in the dayroom, the gods were angry yet again. “Hey Mr. M?” said Walter, “How come these gods are always so upset about everything? I mean, they know they’re gonna live forever, don’t they?”

“Walter,” I said. “I think it’s some sort of ancient gods inside joke or something.”

Jim’s pathetically monotonous tone carried into the dayroom and distracted me. Wishing I could slap some color into his cheeks and still retain my job, I passed the book on to Walter, who read it with his usual dramatic flair—Poseidon had a deep, bloodthirsty voice. Homer, oddly enough, had a bad British accent. I went back into the kitchen to check on lunch.

Samantha stared blankly at the wall of my office. Her eyes were vacant and ballish, even bewildered. Her hands kneaded the pale blue shirt I’d given her during Intake. Knotting it tightly only to untie it, she used the surface of her thigh like an ironing board, smoothing away the shirt’s wrinkles with her palms. Her sweatpants bore a faint rust-colored smudge, the residue of another girl’s menstrual blood that never came out in the wash. Unaware, I gave her the stained pants with the blue T-shirt after she’d eaten the night before—peanut butter and jelly, macaroni and cheese, milk and an apple—I served her at the table in the dayroom, the food smelled natural but oddly sterile, like a dollar bill that had lived through the wash cycle, or the cinder block walls of the dayroom after they’d been scrubbed spotless during chore time.

Samantha sat mute in my office, being unnaturally absorbed

by the hard wooden chair on which she sat. Christ breathed his last and gave up his body; Jim asked, what can we learn from this? *I'd* just learned that parents in Indiana could have their children arrested for being pregnant and under eighteen; apparently, it is an act of incorrigibility. Simple, efficient, transcending: that God is good I had always taken as a given. Jim muttered nervously about eternal life, but I wanted to ask: do we really have that kind of time? I mean, *Lunch is on the way*. Odysseus struggled on his splintered raft and behind him, Calypso faded away. "Things happen for a reason," Jim said. "God's reasons. Cause and effect, you see?" Samantha smoothed down the hair along the top of her head. She tucked her arms inside her shirt and looked out at Walter as he read. Which reasons are God's reasons? Causality: I cooked hamburger casserole; heat from the stove filled the kitchen.



I follow the bikers down Atlantic Avenue and meet with Joe at Stella's Beach Café. I order a salad and breadsticks without comment, having lived through enough abuse searching for vegetarian options the night before. I'd asked around for a while, finally settling on a slice of shit cheese pizza after one too many vendors had asked if I was some type of faggot.

"If by faggot," I said, 'you mean vegetarian—then yes, I am.'" He stared at me and laughed, sucking on the end of his black, wet cigar.

"I thought so," he said, staring at Joe. "Hey man, as long as you love the one you're with." He handed me my slice along with a paper napkin that didn't look up to the job.

"Hey," I asked, pointing to the sign above his booth, "do you really sell something called the Giant Biker Sausage?"

"Hell yes," he said with a nod. "We are carnivores."

Joe elbowed me in the kidney and said, "You're going to get us killed."

"Five bucks altogether," the vendor said. "Now that's what

I'm talking about."

"Yeah, yeah," I said as I paid.

Joe and I sat down on the curb and he said, "Just try to play it safe."

"Jesus, Nancy," I said. "Just relax already. We're fighting a system here, can't you see that? A dangerous one. It's a dangerous system, and you just want to let them walk all over us, totally reifying my position as the patsy vegetarian and his as the violent, bearded, I don't know, sausage-eating biker."

"But you're wearing a sweater and Converse," he said. "And you are a patsy vegetarian."

"Don't try to sucker me into some absurd semantic argument," I said. "Just give me a minute of quiet, that's all I ask."

"What's semantic about this argument?"

"What's not?" I asked, but the drone of a thousand passing motorcycles swallowed my words. I tried to make a few more points, yelling, but unable to hear, Joe waved me off. When I finished the slice, I leaned back against a telephone pole and closed my eyes.



The edges of Atlantic Avenue begin to fill with parked bikes and cars, their owners trudging toward Main Street, its booze and cover bands. They pass by Stella's, where I stab at my salad with a plastic fork. A group of bikers step, oblivious, over a stain on the dotted yellow line, where Molly White's blood had pooled that morning into a spot no larger than a dinner plate. Seagulls hover over our table, vulture-like but more polite. In the evening heat, the air above Atlantic Avenue undulates as it rises.



I heard it before I saw it.

I brushed my teeth by the side of Joe's truck, rinsing my mouth out with stale water from a bottle I'd opened the night

before. Too foul to drink, I poured what was left into the grass. Joe was refusing to participate in any hygienic act, citing the spirit of Bike Week as his inspiration. When he spoke, his teeth were dull and flat, a permanent whitish moss growing slowly outward from the gaps. It happened while I was pouring out the water.

Losing the oncoming traffic in the glare of the morning sun, a woman backed her truck into the road. Sheet metal is forgiving but loud, and we heard it clearly enough. What happened happened with a pop; Molly White, thirty years old, was thrown from her motorcycle. The bike slid safely between the truck's wheels, coming to a rest in a bed of hydrangeas that surrounded a picnic area. I saw the sliding bike and the sparks as it skidded to a stop. I saw the truck, yellow and domestic. I saw the shocks compress as the wheels rolled over her body. We were eight blocks away.

A man screamed and I knew she would die.

I read about it later in the newspaper, a hundred times in a row, until I wondered if I'd actually seen anything at all.

The man I heard scream was her fiancé, David. He was riding behind her on his own bike. He hit the truck too, but wasn't injured. Molly's lungs collapsed, and David pulled the driver of the truck out by her hair and knocked her down with blows to the face.

Joe ran toward the scene to help but couldn't find the courage by the time he arrived.

I stayed behind and watched as the paramedics and police arrived; shrill sirens cut through the damp air, and absentmindedly, I made the sign of the cross on my chest.

I heard later that she was the sixth biker to die during Bike Week, although the man who told me this mentioned that last year was much worse. Emergency workers collected evidence and questioned survivors, constructing the story of what happened and why. Hotel crowds gathered on the sidewalk, the sirens having called them from their rooms.

The driver of the truck sat on the curb with the police

chaplain. Blood dripped from the gash on her face to the legs of her jeans. The body of Molly White was covered with a blanket and David sat alone over her corpse.

They'd been high school sweethearts who went separate ways after graduation, finding new lovers, getting married, getting divorced. They met again last year and he'd recently proposed.

Sixty stitches later, the woman driving the truck chose not to press assault charges.

The police blamed no one: she lost the oncoming traffic in the morning sun, and backed her truck into the road. I opened a new bottle of water and took a sip. Thirsty, spiritless, tired: I take it as a given that God can do what He likes, but I always forget that He does. It took four policemen and a paramedic to restrain David when his fiancée was finally loaded into the ambulance.



I gave Samantha her own clothes to wear at her hearing. She smiled and left with my co-worker Katie, a round woman with curly hair and a yellow convertible. The top would be up on the way to the courthouse, but Samantha said it looked cool anyway.

Walter asked me why that girl was here. "She doesn't look criminal," he said.

"Oh, but you look exactly like Al Capone, right?"

"Well, at least I'm a dude," he said. "That sort of automatically makes me suspect."

"Oh man, you're gonna fit right in at college," I said. "Honestly buddy; I don't know why Samantha is here. I'm not supposed to know and it's not my business. Which means it is definitely not your business, and finally—you need to raise your hand before you talk."

When Samantha returned from court, I heated up what was left: baked chicken, green beans, and orange slices. I slipped some extra onto her plastic plate because the other kids were

already playing cards and board games.

“Thanks,” she said, picking at the chicken. “I’m pregnant, you know.”

“Really?” I asked, acting surprised. “Congratulations.”

“Judge says the only reason I’m here is ‘cause I’m pregnant. I can go home as soon as I have my baby.”

“Well, congratulations again. Make sure you write us a letter,” I said. “Just give me your dishes when you’re done and you can have game time.” She pushed her food around the partitions for a few minutes, mostly for show, and then she drank her milk. She dumped her dinner in the trash and brought me her plate.

“I’m not really hungry,” she said, sitting down on the couch and staring blankly out the window.

As I washed her blue plastic plate, I wondered where the baby’s father was on a Friday night. He might have gone to her hearing, although they wouldn’t have been allowed to talk. He could have been older and legal, but he probably didn’t know Samantha was here, wearing sweatpants and eating waxy chicken with a disposable fork. Absent, a relative, maybe even unknown; the only thing I felt for sure was that he was not locked up. At nine o’clock the kids went to bed, climbing onto the waterproof mattresses that exhaled each time their bodies shifted. I made a habit of saying good night to everyone individually, although I was often ignored and occasionally instructed, in a mumbled whisper, to go fuck myself. But this was a good group. Walter, drumming on his chest with his fingers, asked if he could read ahead in *The Odyssey*.

“Sure thing,” I said.

“I want to read about the Cyclops.”

“But we already read that.”

“Yeah,” he said. “But I liked it.”

“Okay, but you’re technically reading back then, not reading ahead.”

“Words, words, words,” he said, dismissively. “Good night, Mr. M.”

I turned off the hallway lights and paused outside Samantha’s

room, where she sat on the bed with her hands in her lap, smiling. In the dayroom, the spotless tables reflected the few bars of fluorescent lights we left shining after lights out. The kitchen sink was filled with sticky bowls of half-eaten chocolate ice cream, half-eaten because it tasted like the industrial plastic bucket that it came in. I clicked on the motion detectors that hung above the hallway of bedrooms and called out a final goodnight. The day ended like this: Samantha said she'd see me tomorrow and I wandered back to my office, where I opened the window and sat in the cooling breeze that trickled through the screen.



On Main Street, we're stuck in a line of pedestrians, all of us sucking down the exhaust fumes that waft over the police blockade that separates the sidewalk from the bike-filled street. My legs are exhausted from walking all day, being tapped awake in the cold morning sunrise by a disappearing stranger; my body sunken, confused, and baffled. I struggle to push my way through the crowd and suddenly, there's a hollow, a space between two buildings, a cell, twelve feet square; I withdraw my body from the snaking mass with a pop and sit on an empty barrel.

Somehow, this space has gone unused, has not been sold. The silence is all the more overwhelming because here, there ought to be and probably was earlier, a Ted Nugent tribute band. Or women selling beer, with flowers taped on their nipples, a river of ogling men rubbing shoulders as they lurched forward in perfect time to the flash of their cameras. I name this place a sanctuary.

A man appears next to me with a stack of novelty hundred dollar bills. His vest sports a picture of Jesus, and a patch that says, *Riding for the Son*. The bills are gigantic and folded in half. He hands them out to passersby, explaining that it's a free gift that will last for eternity and a whole lot more.

"Christian bikers," I whisper to Joe. "Riding for the Son. Where do you think they're riding to?"

“I dunno,” he says.

“Does Jesus tell him where to ride?” I ask, rubbing my chin. “I mean, specifically. Does Jesus give directions?”

“Why don’t you ask him?”

“Okay, well who’s more reliable,” I start. “Rand McNally? Or the Christ?” I light a cigarette and rub my chin again. “How long do they have to ride?”

“Eternity.”

“And a whole lot more, I guess.” I approach the man and ask for a piece of the fake money. Next to Franklin’s portrait, in the tiniest print, is a pared gospel story. Christ is born of a virgin, crucified, and rises again. Best to leave out all his loser friends, I suppose. But his mother made the cut. She sat at the foot of his cross, after all, bathed his body with scented water and placed him in the tomb. And it was her body that carried the boy, pushed him out, and expelled the slick and bloody creature into a manger somewhere and once upon a time. The man distributes the evangelistic cash, and the street begins to fill with the crumpled bills. I wonder who, if anyone, will clean up the mess.

When it’s late enough to drink, we stand up and aim our bodies toward the one bar that seemed as if it wasn’t entirely dependent upon the angry, racist bikers to stay in business. The crowds on Main Street have thinned and shifted; pedestrians have found their bikes and have joined the cruise line, which grows louder and denser as the sky darkens. Salty moisture gathers at the peak of street lamps, obscuring the yellow beams; standing on crates above the crowds, half-naked women sell cheap beer at five dollars a can; college boys on Japanese sport bikes offer rides to every girl they pass, and the police gather at intersections to complain about the noise. Joe, because he doesn’t know how else to say what’s on his heart, pats the Christian biker on the shoulder as we pass.

At Piggy’s Saloon, we stand apart from the crowd to observe. The bar is more like a fenced-in outdoor pavilion, the size of a gymnasium, and there’s barely room to walk between the bodies

that crowd the floor. By my count, there are ten cages in which lingerie-clad women struggle to look sexy as they move to songs that were never meant to accompany dancing.

“Is this Black Sabbath?” I ask.

“Nope,” he says, cracking open a Busch N/A, the remnant of an adolescent pact he’d made with God stipulating abstinence in all things—“It’s the Nuge,” he says. “‘Stranglehold.’ Again.”

The closest dancer, brunette and wearing pink, has a system in place. She does the same move over and over again. The man holds a dollar in his mouth, and she beats his face to hell with her enormous breasts, snagging the cash in her cleavage.

“That girl looks like Heather,” Joe says. “She looks just like Heather.”

“You want me to buy you a dance?” I ask. “You know, get your ears boxed by a gigantic pair of tits that remind you of your fiancée’s? It’s only Bike Week once a year.”

“No, I can’t do that. It’s not right,” he says. “I’m just going to watch her dance for a while.” He wanders off to the closest barstool, where he sits down and pretends to scan the crowd. At the front of the pavilion, a spotlight shines on the DJ booth.

“We do this every night,” the DJ says. “It’s tradition, so please sing along.” He waves an American flag back and forth, and one of the cage girls, momentarily freed of her cage duties, wraps herself in a sea-green sheet and holds up a fake torch. Someone presses play.

“God Bless the U.S.A.” Lee Greenwood, I think, although for all I know, it could be the Nuge again. A few people sing along, raising their beers high above their heads. The girls don’t stop dancing and if anything, they seem to be making more money. I spot a guy trying to pass one of those fake hundred dollar bills as a tip, and I think truly, deeply—God Bless the U.S.A. The anthem fades out and another power ballad about love gone awry begins to scream from the speakers. I epiphanize: this song and the DJ are one in the same: he’s wearing vintage Nikes, long hair, tight jeans, and a Steelers windbreaker—the song sports a bitchin’ guitar solo, a double bass drum, and a

section in the middle that seems to be a conversation between the lead singer and the devil—they're both so tremendously behind the times that they've inadvertently fallen right back into being hip. After a few more songs, I find Joe and tell him I'm heading back to the truck.

In the dim light of the streetlamps, I can't tell the difference between the shine of the fresh asphalt and the darker tint left on the road by Molly White's body. Or maybe I'm just in the wrong spot and I'm watching the traffic drive over an altogether different, meaningless stain, because gasoline will discolor pavement, too. But no, this one's the size of a plate, and it doesn't seem to have spread. Bikers have the thickest blood, I've heard; they live in the wind and they drink the rain.

I walk clumsily, my legs trembling and weak. I know Molly White walked this morning, too, if only to her bike, but how different were our bodies then? The sun rose and we both stumbled, sojourners, from sleep into the crescendo of the morning light. Her body lies broken somewhere, the sixth biker to die this week. Half a million more cruise round Daytona Beach, and David, the ex-fiancé, sits somewhere and waits for something. To go home? To collect her body? To get the joke?

In the newspaper, he said he lost it. He watched Molly die and he lost it. He punched that woman in the truck until his hand broke and then he fell on the ground and cried. The chaplain offered his services. Someone else offered a cell phone. He didn't think that any of it was real. Until four police officers pulled him away, he sat on the ground and moaned.

This is what *I* know to be real: Molly White is lying on sheet metal; her skin is ice. I will get on a plane in the morning and go back to Indiana. Joe will never tell his fiancée about the dancer that looked like her, the one he watched for hours. There was a girl this afternoon, no older than sixteen, sitting at the edge of the water, sifting handfuls of wet sand through her hands. Didn't a stranger touch my foot this morning, while I slept in the truck? I try to map out these moments in my head, a constellation to chart the positions of one to another, casual

or causal connect-the-dots, I can't decide. Giant, fake hundred dollar bills are swept up by the breeze and are carried into corners and doorways, under cars. I reach the truck and lay on the hood, smoking cigarettes and watching moths bat themselves to death against the glass shell of the streetlights. They fall slowly.



At the airport in Daytona, I sit at a bar to wait for my flight. I order a club soda and drink it slowly, smoking, trying to calm my wrecked and throbbing stomach. The actual flight won't bother me, it's just the waiting. The waitress, plump and bored, looks like a girl I once knew from the juvenile center. I can't recall her name, and I remember her face only because she shared a room with Samantha Byrd, the pregnant girl with the sloped head.

The ice melts in my glass.

After she attended court and I served her baked chicken, Samantha went to bed. In the morning, she writhed on the floor in pain and bled through her sweatpants. Katie took her to the hospital where the baby was expelled from Samantha's young womb, collected and cataloged by the nurse standing at her side. She spent the night in recovery and was scheduled for release to her parents the following evening.

What part, if any, she played in the miscarriage, I don't know. From what I've heard, it's not an act impossible to the determined mind. While she waited in the dayroom for her father to collect her, I gave her back her clothes. I offered her a bowl of ice cream or a glass of juice, more for my sake than hers, because I couldn't stand to watch her sit there looking empty and unoccupied for another second. A lifeless body, a crooked head, a broken hand; for that punch line, we will wait forever. She thanked me but accepted neither.

I wake up, dozing, at the bar in Daytona. The bored waitress is standing in front of me, smiling politely. There's something beautifully familiar about her face, but her make-up looks like frosting on a cake.

“Sorry,” she says. “I’m heading out, so I need to settle up.”

“Sure,” I say as I hand her the cash.

“So, what are you doing here?”

I ask, “I’m sorry?”

“I mean, are you from Daytona or are you leaving Daytona?”

“Oh,” I say. “I’m leaving.”

“What are you leaving for? This ain’t such a terrible place, is it?” She collects my cup and ashtray and says, “We got sunny skies, lots of young people, beaches, nothing’s too expensive—you know, a regular paradise.”

“Hell,” I say, winking. “Maybe I should stay.”

“Oh, I’m just teasing,” she says, tapping out the ashtray in the trash and tucking her apron into a cubby under the bar. “I’m sure you got people back home.”

Waiting is what I’m doing here.

It isn’t until I’m on a plane again, looking down on snow-covered fields, that I begin to feel, in any real sense, like I am going home. The farmland below is divided neatly into square miles; county roads intersect at right angles, and the odd clusters of mature trees look more like deserted islands than salvific oases; they are afterthoughts painstakingly arranged into the barren landscape that stretches between cities. I’m eating a bag of pretzels, which surprisingly enough to the flight attendant I choose to confront, doesn’t satisfy my hunger. I’ve been trying to read, but the motion of this discount airliner is unforgiving and unrelenting. I can’t stay focused and my attention wanders. Like the night Samantha Byrd went home, and I lost a game of Jenga to Walter, a boy so easily distracted that he couldn’t write with an ink pen without ruining his paper.

Does it matter that Molly White once had a daughter? A picture of the two ran next to an interview with David I read this morning in a Daytona Beach newspaper. A tomboyish girl, smiling at her mother, brown hair cut close to her head; she had large ears and was in love with horses. Once, the girl slipped through her mother’s legs and took a breath. Six years later, she

died of an unexpected blood infection. One year after that, to the day, her mother's body was crushed into the pavement a thousand miles from home.

I read the article closely, but I don't remember the daughter's name. I wrote three letters to Samantha Byrd but she never responded. Joe and his fiancée indefinitely postponed their marriage, and David rode his bike back to Pennsylvania, where he lives alone.

For me, time will treat this like a dream that I'm piecing back together, certain that I'll find meaning, moments after waking. Like a cube of ice wrapped in a clear glass of water, it will stretch and pop; crevices will appear and shift; it will disappear completely but be cooler to the touch. It will be saving, illuminating, anecdotal; something to tell my friends or not: I saw a woman die. Give me a minute, and I'll tease the meaning out. If any god has marked me out again, my tough heart can undergo it. Crucifixion is easy when you're in on the joke. My stomach thumps and flops, rolling through my gut like a misshapen apple. I am going down, that's sure. The plane hits the tarmac and I stand to stretch my legs.