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The Cultivationists

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The Cultivationists

Abstract

An excerpt from the novel *The Cultivationists*.

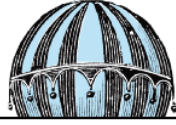
Obie saw his first sign that the Lord was angry Thursday evening when he awoke from his nap to find his erstwhile girlfriend passed out beside him in her rocking chair. He'd tried to clear things up at the start of this second go-round. "Delilah," he'd told her, "I'm writing a book, which means I like to be alone. If you're one of these women that wants to wake up beside a man each morning, piss off," but here she was, threatening to stay all night and onward into his writing time.

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The Cultivationists

by John McManus

An excerpt from the novel The Cultivationists

Obie saw his first sign that the Lord was angry Thursday evening when he awoke from his nap to find his erstwhile girlfriend passed out beside him in her rocking chair. He'd tried to clear things up at the start of this second go-round. "Delilah," he'd told her, "I'm writing a book, which means I like to be alone. If you're one of these women that wants to wake up beside a man each morning, piss off," but here she was, threatening to stay all night and onward into his writing time. What women try to make men do:

1. Curse God and die
2. Glance back at cities of the plain
3. Reveal the secrets of our strength
4. Four four four four— cut off their heads? but no, she'd made him forget his dream, so all he could locate in memory anymore was a red bandanna with a swastika. Conniving devil, he thought, stumbling to his desk. Head throbbing, he lowered himself into the swivel chair. He drank some whiskey. After half an hour he finally dipped his pen in the inkwell, but the nib caught on the jar lid and, in the second shadow of God's mood, spilled ink on the day's pages.

His hands black and his last jar wasted, Obie aimed his temple at the spill and slammed it down. Immediately five-point stars spun in a white swirl as the Lord said nothing. "Good Christ!" he cried. To curse God's silence further, he took up a bottle

and swigged, swigged until he could breathe. Suddenly he knew what the bandanna meant. No one mentioned the Trail of Tears these days; in Europe they'd never heard of it, unlike the Holocaust. The Trail of Tears, per capita, had been more calamitous. Millions of Jews remained alive while Cherokees were scattered in tiny clusters from the Smokies to barren Oklahoma where nothing mattered, nothing grew, and Obie drank and mourned the villainy that let his race live destitute while Israel waged wars sanctioned by the world, they having handled their affairs better, having waited until the film era. If only Andrew Jackson had killed a few thousand more. The 600,000 Rwandan dead were commonly rounded up to a whole million. Your number needed seven digits.

The third and final sign was Link's appearance in his bedroom. The boy seemed to have grown another inch overnight; his head was barely a foot lower than the doorframe as he observed the ink on Obie's forehead. "I need to talk."

"Why aren't you in bed?" asked Obie, not liking Link's ominously low voice. Change was coming soon. Painful to recall how he'd treated his ma during puberty: three years of his selfish anger and then she'd died.

"I don't even have a bedtime," said Link, pushing the door wide. "You give me whiskey to keep me up at night."

"You choose to drink."

"You let me start."

"I get so lonely."

"Bullshit," said Link, but it was true: most of the time Obie felt completely alone. "I'm sorry," he said, taking the fall so things could stay pleasant. Whatever Link wanted, though, it wasn't pleasantness.

"You keep me home because you're crazy," Link said.

"Nobody's crazy around here."

"I've never seen a doctor."

"We're not rich."

“They have free doctors.”

“Now who’s crazy?”

“I crashed through the windshield and teachers smell whiskey on me and none of what you taught for years is true.”

With a sudden jolt Obie realized what was wrong: Link had gone and found Bonnie dead.

“You’ve never done a normal thing,” Link was saying. “You drive wasted. You swear Fontana Lake is evil.”

“Your mother has told you time and time again—”

“You wrote those letters!”

“I beg your goddamn pardon?”

“You’re insane! Insane, insane, insane, insane.”

By the fifth *insane*, thunderheads were gathering in Obie’s mind. Prior to now his hair had stood on end just twice. The first was when he’d found his father’s appendix in the closet in a mason jar labeled *appendix of Obediah Mantooth*. It was his own name, not the jar’s contents, that had gripped him with terror. As for the second, Hannah had been escaping and he caught her and hurt her more than he could measure because God had demanded it in the same tone He now took when he said, “Obediah, open your desk drawer.”

Obie took out the five-million candlepower flashlight he kept in his desk, the closest thing he had to a lighthouse bulb. Wondering if his son would chant *insane* eternally, he drank some whiskey. “Crazy,” Link was saying now in a litany that proved God right to counsel strobing the light rapidly at him.

Obie turned it on and off and on and off, illuminating the pine wall in sickly white. It shut the boy right up. His arms fell to his sides. His pupils widened and then unfocused. He froze still. There was no danger, Obie reminded himself; there never had been. Justified. The first time, they’d been sitting in the sun while Link exegized *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Mid-sentence, he dropped the book, gaped at the sun. “Don’t stare at the sun,” Obie said, but Link blinked back as if they were

strangers. Since then, his spells came about once a week. Doctors weren't cheap—that was no lie—and the condition happened only in light, as if God was entering Link via the sun.

“I'm confused,” said Link, wandering away in standard fashion. Obie followed him to the kitchen with his whiskey, where they both sat down at the table.

“How do you feel now?”

“A little confused.” He was liable to give this answer fifty times.

“You were being mean to me. Do you remember about your dog?”

“Bonnie's dead,” Link said, as if he could see this in a crystal ball. “How'd we get here?”

“We walked here.”

“From where?”

“My bedroom.”

“The bedroom isn't here?”

“It's down the hall.”

“Did we travel here?”

“We walked here.”

“Where'd everybody go?”

Link's eyes flickered so brightly between the blinks that Obie figured thrilling things were happening inside. If they could harness the phenomenon, it might unlock his covenant's secret. He didn't know where to start. “I'm confused,” said Link again, so vulnerably this time that Obie wanted to hug him; still, Link had wounded him by calling him names. He held back. There was an exhausting fifteen minutes of confusion. Sipping whiskey, he answered his son's same questions over and over until Link finally agreed to go to bed.

On the way to his room, he paused again, seeming too puzzled to go on. Now Obie knelt before his son. “Link, you’re confused because you’re sleepy,” he said, full of guilt. What if he learned that Kermit Gant had done a thing like this to Link? He’d kill Kermit, that’s what. “I love you, Link,” he said, crying a tear, which seemed to reassure Link, because Link finally continued the rest of the way to bed.

Obie checked that his safe was locked, drank some whiskey, and took his flashlight out back. He got on the lighthouse trail. The moon was bright enough that he was wasting the light beam on the bed of leaves below as it bounced over rocks, logs, and then a heap of muscle and brindle-striped fur, Bonnie, lying dead by a forsythia bush.

Bonnie’s skin was mottled by blood, and her knee joints pointed the wrong way. “Good Christ,” he said aloud again, bending to touch her wet neck. He felt a fast pulse, about 175. He realized it was his own. For all he’d joked, he’d never dreamed he would one day kneel here and whisper to the stars, “Lord, tell this dog I’m sorry and that I loved her.”

Drinking from his flask, he stood and made his slow way forward. Shining his light ahead now at a path whose leaves all shared the unkind sheen of the flashlight beam, he thought, Fall is a stupid metaphor. Of course he knew that men called things stupid that they didn’t understand, and what he didn’t get was why fall made him feel so empty and despondent. He tried to expel the feeling by meditating with his initials, one *om* per step. Every ten steps he had a heart attack in miniature. He thought, Link’s blank spells are miniature strokes. He and Link were dying and Bonnie too, Bonnie too. Everything was horrible. When his face hit the sticky glue of a spider web, he didn’t even bother to brush it off; he just held a hand in front of himself like a fascist salute from then on, guarding against other webs until the closed-in dark gave way to the open, starlit dark of the meadow.

The lighthouse door hung delicately from its upper hinges, creaking as Obie crossed its threshold. It should have been latched shut. Had he forgotten to secure the latch? In the stairwell he coughed in musty air that smelled like a pioneer cabin. He shone the light above but the beam weakened on its way up and revealed nothing.

Climbing, he knew the quirks of each uneven stair: number eleven was brick instead of cinder block; the railing had a gap at seventeen. He wondered if God was dying by half-life. The covenant of works had lasted four thousand years; the covenant of grace two thousand. His own would last a thousand and so on until covenants grew chaotically brief. Around stair thirty-four he saw something emerging from the spiral bend above. He turned off the light and switched it back on, thinking maybe the shape

would be gone. It had grown more prominent. By thirty-eight he knew that the shadow was a man, and on forty-three he understood, and staggered back. The flashlight slipped from his hand and fell downstairs, echoing as it bounced away to leave Obie and Kermit Gant together in the pitch black.

“Insane!” he heard Link’s voice echo as he sank to his knees in ruin before Kermit, who was bound at the ankles and bleeding out of his ears.

Obie retreated back against the cinder blocks. Even in this dark he had to shut his eyes before he reached out to put his palmprints on Kermit’s shorts. He pressed hard against fiercely strong quad muscles, rubbing his fingers in. It was the only way to save Link. In this manner he touched Kermit’s smooth legs, his lycra jersey, his bloody head, until each fingertip marked the corpse a dozen times. He put prints on Kermit’s arms, his palms. He stifled a cry. He drank the remaining contents of his flask. He saw himself stealing out of the valley, but to where? This was his only place. Link had destroyed everything for them both. It was all over. Shaking with spasms of bright hate, he stood and dragged Kermit down a few stairs, praying the dead man’s brothers were competent enough to take a fingerprint.

When your kid asked if he could keep some slobbery puppy, you said no.

Feeling his slow way down, Obie could smell bloody sweat on his hands. Trying to wipe it off, he dropped the flashlight. He reached for it as it fell, tripped, and caught himself before falling too. He’d have wound up like Kermit. He paused, out of breath, as scared as in the desert. Violence beget violence. At school Link was known as a troubled boy, and his grades were Fs: not a pretty picture for the courts.

It had been a misstep, he told himself, to fake Link’s mother’s letters with such extravagant prose, using a typewriter that he hid in the kiln.

Back at the house Delilah was still passed out, rocking with her left foot as she snored. As Obie gulped whiskey, he imagined sedating her more, dragging her to the lighthouse and placing her hands on the body, but instead he felt in her pocket for a cell phone. He took it out, drank the last of the whiskey, and dialed 911. “Emergency,” answered a woman operator before he could change his impulsive mind. “Fire, police, or ambulance?”

“Get me Sheriff Minks,” said Obie, swallowing a knot of fear that rose like acid through him. He was too sober to handle any of this.

“Nature of your emergency?”

“I’ve killed a man,” he told her, as Delilah rocked in sleep.

“Let me transfer you,” she said carefully, as if worried that Obie would change his mind. There was a click and then two rings. “Echota County Sheriff,” said a young male voice.

“This is Obie Mantooth. Who’s this?”

“Hey Obie. Billy Snoderly.”

“Who are you? I want Minks.”

“He’s on his way.”

“Say that again?”

“Looking for Kermit Gant.”

“I can offer some help.”

Suddenly as confused as Link had been during his spell, Obie hung up. He paced the porch. I’m fucked, he thought, wondering if he was dying. His heart felt the size of a horse’s. He went in for more whiskey and found a bottle sitting on his desk, a quarter full. I’ll drink it all that, he thought, and so he did, in four large gulps with nary a grimace, because he had to keep his heart from galloping this way.

Still feeling sober, feeling in fact inspired, Obie opened his safe by means of the combination 10-03-42, Link’s fiftieth birthday. The number 92 hadn’t been a choice. Bending down, he noticed the ink had dried on the desk. In prison there would be time to reconstruct the ruined pages. No Indian gangs: you were either white black or Mexican in there. They would rape him, he thought, and he looked around for more whiskey, because even the cowardly could muster courage to drink themselves to death.

Christians believed God hadn’t wanted to remain a man, thought Obie as a distant siren wailed; their religion was thus built from man’s point of view. It was a dream of God, thought man, to descend to earth for proof of fleshly pain. Movement into future was the becoming-God of God, or His forgetting that He’d been a man. Obie was

teaching people to worship God from God's point of view. He alone knew what a brat God was.

There was a chance he was being brought to justice just so Judge Breeden could hear him preach sooner.

When the siren arrived outside and died, Obie staggered out to behold the pockmarked ruddy face of Sheriff Junaluska Minks, who was kicking a hubcap out of his way as he marched forth between the junkpiles. He wore his black hair in a ponytail that swung around his neck when he drew back his head to announce, "Glad I don't have to wake you. Looking for Kermit Gant."

Minks climbed the steps and saw Delilah sleeping. "They say you're calling yourself full-blood now," he said, "but your son still can't get into our school."

"Link's with his mother out west." said Obie, staring into the yard. He had to keep track of what happened, for Link's sake if not his own.

"Have you seen Kermit?"

"Yes, Sheriff, I have."

"Where?"

"Be patient. I'll explain."

"I can arrest you for those junkpiles. Public health."

"Have a drink with me, June," said Obie, thinking how Indians could be the most self-righteous people on earth.

"If you were on the tribal rolls, you'd have heard about my efforts toward temperance. I got the biker bar shut down."

"Sheriff, I killed Kermit."

Nodding like he had no time for this, Minks shook Delilah's arm, but she kept on sleeping.

"That's assault," said Obie.

“You’re wasted.”

“It’s my house.”

“But I don’t have to listen.”

“I confess as sure as I’m Cherokee,” said Obie, just to confound the sheriff, even as he felt confounded himself: he was forgetting something big from just moments ago.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Polygraph me.”

“Are you two having an affair?”

“Kermit threatened my son.”

“Did Delilah help?”

“Do I have to Mirandize myself?”

This finally got a rise out of Minks. Reacting like Satan to the harrowing of hell, he stretched an arm out to punch Obie. Obie flinched, but it turned out Minks was stopping his fall. They sat down, and he closed his eyes. He dreamt he was being led in chains to Calvary, except it was too cold; Calvary was hot. He hadn’t told Link where to hide. That was the forgotten thing: Link. Link had to learn what was happening. Delilah would tell him, if Dwight Gant wasn’t busy diddling her by then to his heart’s content. Link’s fate rested on a dumb drunk. The covenant of grace was collapsing, and Obie was going to throw up. He put his hand on his stomach and prayed, but what to say? “God bless the moon and God bless me,” and next thing they were parked by Fontana Lake and he was sideways in the squad car while Minks scraped vomit off his shoes with a windshield squeegee. With horror he remembered opening the safe, leaving the door wide. He almost told Minks as much. When he caught himself, his mouth hung open until he drooled. “Your mother would be ashamed,” Minks told him, and he couldn’t even count coup in reply, because he was handcuffed. He held his pinky finger out to try, hoping to touch the sheriff’s uniform—never give up—but Minks moved away toward the radio and said, “Emmett, come in, Emmett, come in, over, meet me in town, over, Reverend’s got something to tell you about your brother.”

John McManus is the author of the novel *Bitter Milk* and the short story collections *Born on a Train* and *Stop Breakin Down*, all published by Picador USA. He is the recipient of the Whiting Writers' Award, a Fulbright Scholar grant, and a Creative Capital Literature grant. His fiction and non-fiction have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Tin House*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Oxford American*, *The Harvard Review*, *StorySouth*, *Columbia*, *Paraphilia*, and *Night Train*, as well as the fiction anthologies *Surreal South '09*, *Surreal South '11*, and *Degrees of Elevation*. His MFA comes from the James A. Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas. McManus is a professor of creative writing at Old Dominion University in Virginia, and he also teaches in the low-residency MFA program at Goddard College. He is contributing editor for *Fiddleblack*, a literary journal dedicated to creative writing with a strong sense of place.