

Good Living

Back in the days of the war in Bosnia, I was surviving in Chicago by selling magazine subscriptions door-to-door. My employers thought that my Bosnian accent, clearly manufactured in the nether area of “other cultures,” was quirky, and therefore stimulant to the shopping instincts of suburban Americans. I was desperate at the time, what with the war and displacement, so I shamelessly exploited any smidgen of pity I could detect in lonely housewives and grumpy retirees whose doors I knocked at. Many of them were excited by my very presence at their doorstep, as I was living evidence of the American dream: here I was, overcoming adverse circumstances in a new country, much like the forebears of the future subscriber, presently signing the check and wistfully relating the saga of the ancestral transition to America.

But I had much too much of a dramatic foreign accent for the prime subscription-selling turf of the North Shore suburbs, where people, quaintly smothered by the serenity of wealth, regularly read *Numismatic News* and bought a lifetime subscription to *Life Extension*. Instead, I was deployed in the working-class suburbs, bordering with steel-mill complexes and landfills, and populated with people who, unlike the denizens of the North Shore, did not think that I cov-

eted what they had, because they did not exactly want it themselves.

My best turf was Blue Island, way down Western Avenue, where addresses had five-digit numbers, as though the town was far back of the long line of people waiting to enter downtown paradise. I got along pretty well with the Blue Islanders. They could quickly recognize the indelible lousiness of my job; they offered me food and water; once I nearly got laid. They did not waste their time contemplating the purpose of human life; their years were spent as a tale is told: slowly, steadily, approaching the inexorable end. In the meantime, all they wanted was to live, wisely use what little love they had accrued, and endure life with the anesthetic help of television and magazines. I happened to be in their neighborhood to offer the magazines.

A smokestack of the garbage incinerator, complete with sparks flying upward, loomed over the town like a church spire. Perhaps that was why the deciduous leaves in Blue Island died so abundantly and beautifully, its streets thickly covered with yellow, orange, ocher, russet layers. One day I walked over a dry carpet of honey-colored leaves, up to a dusty porch littered with disintegrating sheets of coupons. A brushy black cat did not move as I walked by; a wooden figure of the Virgin Mary hung stiffly by the bell. Someone shouted, "Come in!" before I rang, and in I walked, into a cavernous dark room reeking of overcurdled milk and beeswax tapers. On the couch, in its center, sat a small priest—the solemn attire, the white collar, the silver-cross pendant—his

toy feet barely reaching the floor. His face and bald dome were blighted with red blotches and flaking skin. In his right hand he had a glass of Scotch, the half-empty bottle on the coffee table in front of him surrounded by the rubble of newspapers and snack bags. On his potbelly ledge, around the cross, there were potato-chip crumbles.

“What can I do for you?” he said, and belched. “Excuse me. What can I do for you?” He pointed at the armchair across the coffee table, so I sat down.

A salesman’s job consists largely of mindless repetition of prefabricated phrases. Thus I offered him a wide selection of magazines that covered all areas of contemporary living. There was a magazine for everyone, whether his interest be in astronomy or self-betterment or gardening. I could also offer a wide variety of titles for a contemporary Christian reader: *Christianity Today*, *Christian Professional*, *God’s Word Today* . . .

“Where’re you from?” he asked, and took a large sip from the glass. The color of the Scotch rhymed with the leaves outside.

“Bosnia.”

“Be not forgetful to entertain strangers,” he slurred, “for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”

I nodded and suggested a few magazines that would open new horizons for him in archaeology or medicine or science. He shook his head, frowning, as though he could not believe in my existence.

“Have you lost anyone close to you in the war? Anyone you loved?”

“Some,” I said, and lowered my head, suggesting intense soul pain.

“It must have been hard for you.”

“It hasn’t been easy.”

Abruptly he turned his head toward the dark door in the back of the room and yelled: “Michael! Michael! Come here and see someone who is really suffering. Come and meet an actual human being.”

Michael stepped into the room buttoning up, the impeccably white shirt closing in on a chest smooth and hairless. He was blond and blue-eyed, incongruously handsome in the Blue Island dreariness, sporting the square jaw of the American movie star.

“The young man here is from Bosnia. Do you have any idea where Bosnia is, Michael?”

Michael said nothing and strolled over to the coffee table, throwing his shoulders model-like. He dug up a cigarette from the coffee table wreckage and walked out, leaving a wake of anger behind.

“He smokes,” the priest said, plaintively. “He breaks my heart.”

“Smoking is bad,” I said.

“But he works out a lot,” the priest said. “Absent in spirit, but present in body.”

I had a selection of magazines just for Michael, I said. *Men’s Health*, *Shape*, *Self*, *Body + Soul*, all of them covering a wide range of interests: workout regimens, fitness tips, diets, et cetera.

“Michael!” the priest hollered. “Would you like a subscription to *Body and Soul*?”

“Fuck you,” Michael screamed back.

The priest finished his Scotch and pushed himself awkwardly up from the couch to reach the bottle. I was tempted to help him.

“If there were a magazine called *Selfishness*,” he grumbled, “Michael would be editor in chief.”

He refilled the glass and returned into the depth of the couch. He scratched his dome and a flock of skin flakes fluttered up in its orbit.

“Michael wants to be an actor, you see. He is nothing if not vanity and vexation,” the priest said. “But he has only managed to be a fluffer in the odd adult movie. And to tell you the truth, I cannot see a future in fluffing for him.”

It was time for me to go. I was experienced enough to recognize the commencement of an unsolicited confession. I had stood up and left in the middle of a confession before—no doubt adding to the confessor’s flow of tears—because it had been the prudent thing to do. But this time I could not leave, perhaps because the drama was titillatingly unresolved, or because the priest was so minuscule and weak, whole parchments peeling off his forehead. Having been often pitied, I savored pitying someone else.

“I’ve known Michael since he was a boy. But now he thinks he can go off on his own. It is not good that the man shall be alone, it is not good.”

Michael appeared out of the room in the back, his hair

immaculately combed but still quivering in exasperation. He stormed past us and left the house, slamming the door behind him.

The priest finished off the Scotch in the glass in one big gulp.

“We all do fade as a leaf,” he said, and threw the glass toward the coffee table. It dropped on top of the mess, and rolled down, off the table, out of sight. It was time for me to go; I started getting up.

“Do you know who Saint Thomas Aquinas was?” he said, raising his finger, as though about to preach.

“Yes, of course I know,” I said.

“When he was a young man, his family did not want him to devote his life to the church, so they sent a beautiful maiden to tempt him out of it. And he chased her away with a torch.”

He stared at me for a very long moment, as though waiting for a confirmation of my understanding, but it never came—understanding was not my job.

“Be not righteous overmuch,” he said, fumbling the word “overmuch.” “I never had a torch.”

The door flung open and Michael charged back in. I sank into the chair, as he walked to the priest and stood above him, pointing his index finger at him, shaking it, his jaw jutted sideways with fury.

“I just want to say one thing, you sick fuck,” he said, a few loose hairs stuck to his sweaty brow. “I just want to say one more thing to you.”

We waited in the overwhelming silence, the priest clos-

ing his eyes, anticipating a punch. But Michael could not think of one more thing to say, so he finally said nothing, turned on his heel, and marched out, not bothering to slam the door this time. The priest grabbed a couch pillow and started banging it against his forehead, howling and hissing in pain. I took the opportunity to slither toward the open door.

“Wait,” he wailed. “I want to subscribe. I want subscription. Wait a minute.”

So I signed him up for two plum two-year subscriptions. His name was Father James McMahon. For the rest of the evening, I went around the neighborhood telling everybody—the old ladies, the young mothers, the cranky ex-policemen—that Father McMahon had just subscribed to *American Woodworker* and *Good Living*, wouldn’t you know it? A few asked me how he seemed to be doing, and I would tell them that he had had a big fight with his young friend. And they would sigh and say, “Is that so?” and frown and subscribe to *Creative Knitting* and *FamilyFun*. It was by far my best day as a magazine salesman. At the end of the shift, waiting to be picked up by the turf manager, I watched the flickering TV lights in the windows and the sparkling stars up in the sky, and I thought: I could live here. I could live here forever. This is a good place for me.