

## CHARITY NEVER

*Matthew James Babcock—Department of English*

This is how I remember it.

At about two in the morning, my daughter started screaming in the next room. You know, going on and on and on, like some kiddie assassin in full Ninja garb had infiltrated her room and locked her in a cage. And so, groggy as I was—I mean, it *was* two in the morning—I tried to nudge my wife out of bed to go take care of her. But she wasn't having any of it. Meanwhile, our daughter was belting out these sustained volleys of frightened wailing in the next room, crying and howling and carrying on like there was some wild animal in there slinking around her varnished pine crib and threatening to leap in and tear her to pieces.

"You," I mumbled to my wife.

"You," she said back. "Your turn."

And so, even though it wasn't my turn, I stumbled out of bed, tripped over a toy plastic barn in the darkness, stubbed my toe on the hallway door jam, and went into her room. She was raving, out of her mind. She was sitting up in the bed (she was only 8 months, mind you), and she was screaming. Her throat had gone dry, and her eyes riveted shut with fear and frantic desperation. As I picked her up, she writhed and shoved me away, screaming more and more, as if *I* were the source of her pain. In the darkness I sang soothing lullabies to her, tried to calm her, but all the while I was getting more angry at my wife, who was slumbering soundly in the next room. As I rocked my daughter, I thought about the argument my wife and I had the night before. In my arms I held one of the two loves of my life, trying to deliver peace to her soul, but the resentment that welled up inside me came like the darkness I was standing in—full, complete, enveloping. It rattled like a load of angry toys down the chute from my head to my heart, and I found myself grinding my teeth and clenching my jaw as I stood there rocking my daughter in her lightless room.

My wife and I had argued about the name for our second daughter.

At first, it hadn't been any big deal. But before long the whole thing had escalated into a shouting match, and neither one of us had had the ability, the love, to turn it off. And the thing is, it was so stupid. We'd argued about a name, and that was it. I'd named our first daughter: Shayla Day. Don't ask me how I picked it. It just came to me. And so, I think my wife was a little put off, you know, wanting to name our second daughter, wanting to have a little more say in our second girl's destiny.

"Carmen," she'd said, sitting on the couch, poring through *1001 Best Baby Names*, which is published by Hawthorne House, Inc. (Incidentally,

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I work for Hawthorne House, Inc. It's a publishing company in upstate New York. Heard of us? I thought not. We're small, but we're expanding, and we're in more countries than you'd probably guess. I'm an advertising executive for them. It's boring, but the travel's nice, and the pay's okay, too. It's just that, after a while, working for a publishing company can get to be a real grind. See, it's kind of odd to be working for a book publisher when you don't even get—or want—to read what your own company puts out. Anyway, that's me: I'm Mick. And I work for Hawthorne House, Inc.) "Anne Marie," she'd said, leafing through the pages. "Michelle, Daphne. Oh, here's one! I just love this one! Listen to this: Simone. Doesn't that just sound wonderful? Simone." And she'd said it over and over again, almost to the point where it got on my nerves: "Simone, Simone."

Well, I guess it did get on my nerves because I'd then said something about naming our second daughter "Charity." And then—and this is what did it to me—she'd said, "Charity? Never!" But she'd said it sarcastically, flippantly, like she was flinging an old dirty sock in my face. "Charity? Never!" Well, and then she'd gone back to reading *1001 Best Baby Names*, and I'd started going on and on about my list of names, names that were names but also virtues: Chastity, Felicity, Faith, Hope. You know, things like that, which I'd insisted were exceptionally nice names for a girl, names that were names but also had meaning. And she'd laughed in my face. Right in my face. And so, well, the whole thing'd gotten way out of control. She'd yelled at me. I'd yelled at her, and our daughter, Shayla Day, had started bawling like an air raid siren once she'd noticed that we were fighting.

So, anyway, as a result, I'd bumped up my business flight to England to that week, instead of the two weeks away. Right then and there. I'd had it, and so I'd called Hawthorne House's travel secretary and bumped it up, right there with my wife and daughter fuming in the kitchen next to me. I don't know why I did it. I just had to get away, you know? And so, the night before the flight, our daughter, Shayla Day, started bawling at about two in the morning, and my wife shoved me out of bed to comfort her. But I wasn't comforted. And I don't think she was either.

At the airport I was groggy and irritated. I wore a comfortable blue business suit with suspenders, a spotted red tie, umbrella, and overcoat. I also carried my trusted and well-traveled oxblood leather briefcase, a paperback crime novel, with a wheeled carry-on trailing behind. We exchanged strained goodbyes at the departure gate B-1.

"So, call me," my wife said, bouncing Shayla Day in her arms. She looked beautiful—they both looked beautiful. But I could see she was still angry. And I was, too, to be honest.

"I will," I said, meaning it but still holding that yellow slice of anger in my heart. "Sure."

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“Think about Simone,” she said, kissing me.

“I will,” I said, kissing her, kissing my daughter. “Think about Charity.”

She laughed and smiled as if tasting something bitter.

“Charity?” she asked, screwing up her face. “Never.”

“Just think about it,” I said, passing through the security check, waving. “I’ll call you. I’ll be home in a week. Bye-bye.”

I waved to them one last time, over my shoulder, as I walked down toward the boarding gate. I was sad, like I always am whenever I leave my wife and daughter when conflicts go unresolved. But I’d had too much animosity for a week and a day. And I’d wanted to get away, just get away for a while, do some work I had to do, and let things cool off for a bit. I was running, plain and simple. The flight was long, and I slept most of the way, watched the in-flight movies, even though they were pretty sappy, and did some reading. I sat next to a Polish gentleman in a cinnamon cardigan who told me the tragic story of his alcoholic sister, a woman he called “Meesha.”

On the way over, as we soared up over the dark purple clouds, over the ocean, and the moon was out turning everything a placid nighttime shade of incandescent silver, I thought about them: my wife and daughter. Why had we fought? What had been the big deal? *What’s in a name?* I asked myself, forgetting who the writer was, the reference. What had happened? It’d been like a volcano erupting, a lightning storm, a pile of books toppling on our heads from a broken shelf. It’d been completely unwarranted, unexpected, unjustified. And yet, we’d fought. And why? For a name? A name for our next daughter? *What did it matter*, I told myself, *what we called her?*

The names came to me again: Simone, Carmen, Daphne. And then mine—Charity. I thought about it, saw the pretty little face that would go with it, felt the fingers curled around my one large finger, listened to the crying, the gurgling. *But it’d fit*, I thought. *And why did she laugh at me? Why does she always have to laugh at me? I like Charity. Charity’s nice.* And I guess it wasn’t so much that I was upset that my wife hadn’t liked my names as much as it was that she’d *laughed* at mine. And when I thought about that, I felt the yellow slice of resentment wedging itself back into my heart, into my throat, and firmly lodging itself in my intellect, like a hunk of bad cheese. Yes. Charity. It would be Charity, I thought. As we touched down in Gatwick, I realized this much: it would be Charity. We would call her Charity. And I would never be laughed at again. *Besides*, I thought to myself, passing through customs and making my way into the comfortable gray drizzle of the London Thursday morning, *she’d grow to like it. My wife needs to understand me*, I thought, stepping onto the Gatwick Express to Victoria Station. *Besides*,

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I told myself, *she needs to appreciate me, to understand where I'm coming from. And, I thought, finding a seat, staring out the train window at the steady gray drizzle, a father's relationship with his daughter is important. It means a lot to him.*

I stayed a day in London to get over jet lag, and the next day caught a train from St. Pancras to Sheffield. The next morning, after a second night's rest, I confirmed some appointments by phone from Sheffield Central and caught a bus, a No. 59, to Darnell. I'd been there before, made the same trip many times, and so the route and the bus numbers were second nature to me. I caught the No. 59 downtown, near Hole-in-the-Road, where all the busses and taxis parked to pick up their passengers. If you've ever seen it, you'll know what I'm talking about when I say it's a busy place. The busses—big topheavy red and beige double deckers—and the taxis cram themselves in to the point that it seems that they won't be able to squeeze out. A few stumpy benches line the walks there, and there's a big black statue of some important figure—I confess, I don't know who—that always has pigeons clambering all over it, whiting out its black sculpted surface with their refuse.

I like Sheffield. I've been there many times, and I'll be going back many more, I'm sure. It's a big bother, but there's something about the bustle, the congestion, and the pigeons that makes it perfect for disappearing. It's like whenever I go back there, I can take the city and, like a black enigmatic statue, wrap it around me like a cloak of anonymity and go—just go, walk, take a bus, travel, whatever—and go where I want to go, be who I want to be. You know the feeling? Well, anyway, that's what happens to this advertising executive whenever he goes back to Sheffield. And that day, I felt the same. I'd disappeared. I was sitting on the No. 59 to Darnell, practically invisible.

I'd almost forgotten about my wife, our fight, our daughter's names, our daughter's crying. It'd all blended into the city's wonderfully nameless dull roar. I sat on the upper level of the No. 59, chewing on a sandwich I'd bought at Cobb's of Doncaster, right across the square. It was a Farmer's Cob, I think: turkey, beef, mustard. That kind of thing, your basic sandwich. And I was looking around at the people on the bus with me. It was the usual for the late afternoon crowd: smokers, punks (way out of date), older men, women with plastic hoods and bags of oranges, eggs, bananas, and tea. I sat there, invisible, observing, eating my sandwich, and trying to forget the family squabble from which I'd run. To compensate, I ran over the trip in my mind. I'd done it before. I could see the trip—leaving town center; the bus crawling away like a sick mammoth, and then going up toward Manor Top; leaving Manor Top, and then drifting down Prince-of-Wales Road; the gears grinding, the bus leveling out at the bottom of Prince-of-Wales Road, passing

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under a pigeon-stained flyover, and then hitting the shopping hub of Darnell. Once at Darnell I'd find one of our many U. K. booksellers—R. F. Finch's—do what I had to do there, let the chit-chat break off before it got wearisome, and then reverse the whole thing. Like I said, I'd done it before, and I was looking forward to getting back.

The day was faceless and mizzly outside, people hurrying by, shoulders hunched, hands crammed in pockets, umbrellas jostled by the wind. The upper level of the No. 59 was smoky, too smoky for my liking. And I was thinking about a way I could make this whole thing up to my wife without having to make myself look like I was too much in the wrong. The whole problem was like a three-dimensional puzzle in my head, and no matter how I re-configured it, I couldn't get the cubic pieces to snap together. I leaned my head against the glass, watching the stream of people outside. They hurried past the buildings: past Cobb's of Doncaster, Barclay's, Oxfam, W.H. Smith's, and a flurry of tobacconists and off-licenses. I gazed through the constant flutter of pigeons, waiting for the packed bus to move, and I looked over at the anonymous black statue, counting the pigeons on his head and shoulders. I counted thirty, wishing the bus would move and getting more and more annoyed as we waited.

The square was packed, and the busses and taxis appeared to be gridlocked in a single immobile chain of tires and chassis. All around me, I could hear passengers grumbling. In the lower level someone swore and got off. I watched the young man who disembarked—a dirty kid in a green army jacket and plaid pants, motorbike boots, chains, Union Jack appliqué stitched to the left shoulder—stalk off and blend into the streaming crowd. I watched him for as long as I could. Before disappearing, he looked back and raised his hand in a reversed peace sign—the British bird—yelled something vulgar, and then disappeared around the corner. *Angry*, I thought. *These kids today are just too angry today. There's got to be something they can do to get all that anger out. It's not good to have all that anger stored up inside, boiling over because of little things.* I thought this to myself, leaning my head against the window.

And then I saw him.

Well, I saw both of them.

And when I saw them, I realized that they'd always been there, but I'd never focused enough on the scene at hand to notice them. In fact, I saw them both because *she* was coming toward *him*. Out on the sidewalk, a homeless man sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk like a dirty, emaciated Buddha. He sat on the sidewalk, his back against Barclay's bank, his filthy, shoeless feet splayed out in front of him. And the woman. She strode directly toward him. And when I saw her, I realized that he had no idea he was the target, but I knew she was aiming at him. I knew, immediately, that she was after him, aiming at him, striding through

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the crowd against the steady countervailing current of bodies to reach him as her final destination, a war ship pushing through a gale toward home port. She wore a conservative maroon uniform, the kind of which I'd never seen. She wore no bonnet, but her uniform—knee-length skirt, blazer, deep maroon dye and somber navy blue borders—gave her away as some kind of religious worker or something like that. She had sandy blond hair, stringy and not well-kept. She wore glasses, slits for eyes, and she didn't have the school-marmish appearance that you'd expect from most religious-type public servants. Her skin was creamy pale, like the color of my redheaded daughter's skin. And she walked with great purpose toward the homeless man. *Hm*, I thought, watching her stride through the crowd, like a duck swimming up a waterfall. *Hm, interesting*. I watched as she came through the crowd. I watched every step, chewing on my Cobb's of Doncaster sandwich. I could see up ahead in the rows ahead of me that the others on the stalled No. 59 had seen her too, and were watching with me.

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So, she came. And he had no idea she was coming. And to be honest, the more I watched, the more interested I grew. It was as if the entire city of Sheffield had zoned out of reality, had slipped from the world of consciousness completely, and that these two—this man and this woman—had been destined to meet for some strange reason, for some reason that none of us on the bus could ever comprehend. But a meeting was imminent. And so, we watched. As she approached, I could see that she was carrying something, something heavy, because she labored to carry it. Her thin but muscular frame tilted to the right to compensate for her burden.

She came closer to the homeless man, and as she came, I could see her features more clearly. She was plain, but she wore a determined look on her face. Her nose was thin, and she wore no makeup. Her hair was parted in the middle, and it blew out behind her head limply in the breeze of the passing crowds and wind, like frail grass. She wore black shoes, and she wore light blue stockings of extraordinary elasticity yanked up to her knees. I could almost guess what she was up to, but the strangeness of her manner made it hard for me to believe. *There aren't people like this*, I told myself, looking around at the reactions of others, still wishing that the bus would move. *There aren't people like this anymore*. But there she was, determined, going against the grain, and carrying something heavy, as if ready to ring a massive gong of doom over the entire city.

She reached the homeless man and kneeled. And as she did, I could see the observers on the upper level of the No. 59 lean forward and squint at her, as I did. She lugged a bucket at her side. And out of the bucket, she produced a bright orange sponge. She pulled it out, wrung out some excess soapy water, and—and I swear I'm not lying—began to wash the

homeless man's feet. There was a collective gasp in the upper deck of the No. 59. Well, maybe "gasp" is a bit over the top. But, hey, I *am* in advertising after all. No, maybe it was a sigh—a collective murmur of shock and disbelief. But we all couldn't believe it.

So she began to wash his feet, slowly at first. And then, as she began to realize the level of tacky, stubborn filth on the homeless man's feet, she began to rub his feet with more ardor, applying more force to her scrubbing, and all the while the homeless man, like a mute ape, didn't appear to notice what she was doing. No, I take that back. He noticed, but he didn't appear to understand the significance of it. She worked and worked at his feet, trying to remove the crust of oil, dirt, and years of Sheffield grime. She worked her orange sponge like a galley slave, but he just sat there, watching dumbly.

He sat there chewing blankly on what looked like a stale crust of bread, looking at his feet as if they weren't even attached to his body. He simply sat there, his back up against Barclay's, and watched with empty eyes as the woman in the maroon uniform scrubbed his feet. He sat there and chewed his stale crust, his ragged hair and matted beard like a smoky gray mane. His face was blackened, too, like a Victorian chimney sweep's. Only here and there did cracks of whiteness break through the ashen smudges on his face, in the creases around his eyes and the corners of his mouth. His pants were slashed and ragged, and he had what looked like the remains of a trenchcoat wrapped around him. So, she scrubbed, he watched, and we watched from the upper level.

And no one outside even stopped to take notice. That's the thing I remember most. Nobody even stopped—didn't even turn their heads, didn't lift their eyes—to see the unique, symbolic act taking place directly in front of their faces on a street in their bustling city. Sheffield wandered by, hustled by, not even the slightest bit interested. After she finished one foot, the woman in the maroon outfit started on the next. (A compact coat of arms across her back and shoulders read "Sisters of Salvation" in filigreed gold embroidery—by that time, I'd squinted hard enough to see the title).

So, the Sister of Salvation scrubbed at the homeless man's feet, scrubbed with her orange sponge and bucket of soapy water, pumping her elbows and torso as if she were trying to eradicate every remaining stain of evil left in the world. And still, as she switched her tactics to the other foot, the homeless man chewed idly on his bread crust, scrutinizing what she was doing as if it were being done to someone else, as if his feet were not his own.

Farther forward in the bus, someone couldn't take it anymore and laughed out loud, pointing. It was a young man in T-shirt and shimmering green warm-up pants. He laughed, pointing, looking around the upper

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level of the No. 59 to see if any of us would acknowledge the audacity in the woman's actions, the complete ludicrousness of the situation. But we didn't, and he was quickly silent, plucking a cigarette from a pack and lighting it. The young man looked at me, actually. Before turning back to the front of the bus, he looked at me—well, our eyes connected. And as they did, I didn't acknowledge that anything special was happening. I couldn't. I felt like it. I mean, we all could see the amazing, aberrant display of human compassion that was taking place on this common everyday city sidewalk. But for some reason, I didn't give him any indication that I agreed with him, no sign that I agreed that what was going on was indeed weird. And so, he turned away, probably embarrassed that he'd said anything. And I looked out the window again, feeling like a black statue, all spectacle and no action.

And then she finished. Having sponged her small befouled corner of the world free of the sin of dirt, she stood from where she was kneeling, gathered herself, and prepared to leave. All of us, including the young man who'd laughed and pointed, leaned forward and looked at the homeless man. It was, indeed, a miracle. There he sat, still chewing his bread crust, still as darkly gray and dingy as a foggy urban day in England, and at the end of each leg was a bright pink doll's foot, plastic and phony-looking. Where he'd previously displayed two disgusting naked feet, there were now two brand new pink ones, as if a giant doll's feet had been snapped on to replace the old ones. And still he didn't recognize that anything had changed.

Quickly, the Sister of Salvation gathered herself and walked over to the gutter to pour out the dirty water. Her forehead sparkled with perspiration, and her stringy blond hair had matted in moist swirls around her face, creating a flimsy damp frame for her thin, common features. At the curb she kneeled down again, and poured out the dirty water. She held the orange sponge out first, wringing it out. Then, she dumped the grimy water out of the bucket, filling the already filthy gutter with more dirty water. The gutter, we could see, was running with dark green and black slime and water, all the nasty city gunk that runs in the gutters of the world, but especially in Sheffield. She poured the water out, and it even looked like she was humming or singing to herself, a hymn perhaps. Her lips moved, and a distinctly transfigured look of bliss came over her face, landed on her lightly like an angel pigeon. And for a moment, I thought about my life, about all our lives, the running we do, the selling, the advertising, and how we really don't take account of the trails of muck through which our feet drag us. *We don't stop*, I thought to myself. *We don't stop to look around. We're angry. We're just flying around.* I thought of my wife and the many buckets she'd

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hefted, the struggle of life into which we'd brought our daughter. And all because of this Sister of Salvation.

But then he flew—at her. Flew from where he was sitting. And as he did, we all sat up, jumped back. Some of the people in the upper level pointed, and I heard a woman scream in the lower level. For no apparent reason, the homeless man jumped up and hurtled like a dark ghost at the Sister of Salvation. With superhuman vitality he jumped up, and in an instant he seized the unsuspecting saint in his arms. He grabbed her from behind in a bearhug around her midriff. And the amazing thing is, she didn't scream. At first, when she saw the dirty arms around her, she jerked: once. Only once. Like a single bolt of electricity shot through her and then numbed her. Once, weakly, a mere spasm of nerves. And then she went completely still, like a stiff doll. He, however, was animated and excited.

"Give over, love, do some'it," an old man said.

"Aye," others said.

But nobody moved. Nobody outside even stopped, as the wild urban wolfman grabbed the Sister of Salvation around the waist and began to strip off her shoes and socks, like a frenzied monkey shearing the rinds from a bowl of fruit. First, he yanked off the shoes, ripping off the laces, and she just sat there, too shocked to look anywhere but at the ground. One shoe, and then the next. Her shoes went sailing over the crowd, out into the street. One bounced off the roof of a waiting taxi, and the cabby got out, retrieved it from off the roof, examined it quizzically, and tossed it into the street.

Then, driven by a visible relish for action, the homeless man peeled off the Sister's light blue socks, and her innocent naked feet and legs shone whitely in the revelatory light of the gray Sheffield sun. Still, she was stunned. It was as if she and the homeless man had been instantly interposed in space and time, switched by godly hands playing puppets with their lives. He was alive, and now she played the paralytic fool. With a dignified air of great purpose, he took her unspotted white feet, one at a time, and began to smear them with handfuls of mire of the gutter.

The bus was instantly buzzing with shock and amazement. A few bus horns blared, and some taxis gunned their engines. There were shouts, but nobody intervened. Nobody dared to. Handful after handful, he smeared the black city gunk from the gutters onto the Sister's pure legs and feet. And with each scooped handful, he grew more animated, more alive, more determined to do a good and complete job. He even sang to himself, it looked like—sang songs of revival and wonder as he blackened the legs and feet of the Sister of Salvation in his arms. Before long he'd completely covered her feet and ankles with gutter slime. Then, convinced that his job was complete, he walked off, leaving her to sit on the curb,

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her hair tousled and wet, her feet and ankles wearing what looked like high sophisticated boots of stylish urban gunk.

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And still, even as he disappeared in the crowd, she didn't move, still wearing that same dumb stare on her face, that look of horror unrealized, the orange sponge gripped in her white-knuckled fist. And still, no one stopped. Nobody appeared to notice that anything had been done. Now, I wanted to help her. I did. I wanted to get up and do something. But, I realized, I had a business appointment, and I reasoned that I'd be late if I didn't get out on this No. 59 to Darnell. I was late already, I reasoned to myself. I wanted to get up, to pry myself from my seat, but an invisible strap across my lap wouldn't let me be released from my perch. The very air in my lungs had been stilled. I looked down; I hung my head. I put my head between my hands. It'd been such a long trip, I conceded. Such a long trip, and I was still exhausted from thinking about my own troubles: the names, my daughter, my wife. The flight had been so long, and the train ride, too. I stared at the floor. It was dirty, and a few Coke cups and crisp packets littered the floor.

I wanted the bus to move, to pull away, to just leave right then and not make me deal with what I was seeing anymore. And then, just as I thought that, the bus jerked, and I heard everyone heave a sigh of relief. A few people actually cheered. I looked up. The No. 59 to Darnell was actually moving, past the black statue and pigeons, away from the trauma and grief of the busy sidewalks. The bus lurched forward, and I felt the raspy baritone engines rev up. As a gesture of concern, I looked out the window for the Sister of Salvation, wishing her some kind of benedictory saving grace, some kind hand of munificence in the teeming indifferent crowd.

But she was gone.

I looked around, searched for her outside on the sidewalks, scanned the crowds for her among the fleet of cars, busses, and taxis. I looked back at the black statue of the unknown hero, but he didn't know where she'd gone. I looked around at everyone on the upper level, but they were all staring down at the floor, as I had done, as if to avoid looking ahead to the future they might have to face one day.

And it was all because of her.

Like a wrecked dream, she walked unsteadily down the aisle of the upper level on the No. 59 to Darnell, trying not to breathe the smoke. She carried her soiled shoes and socks in her hand, and she was searching for an empty seat, trying not to fall over as the bus rocked back and forth like creaking galleon, nosing its way into the traffic and up toward Manor Top. She stepped back toward me, toward the rear, moving cautiously. Her eyes were glazed, and her jaw was set. She'd been crying, but she wasn't hysterical. A few black smudges dotted her China doll's cheek,

and her glasses had become fogged. She chewed her bottom lip, teetering precariously between standing up and falling over. She grabbed for the seat backs and chrome poles to steady herself as she moved toward the back, closer to me and the rear of the bus. Her feet were still bare, still smeared with street slime. She picked her way carefully through the trash in the aisle, as if tiptoeing across the miniature spires of one hundred holy cities.

And as she approached, I heard her sniffing, trying desperately to keep her crying boxed up inside. There was a strange look about her, though, not a look of fear or sadness but one of grim determination. She wasn't shocked anymore. All shock had been burned away, replaced by an imperceptible veil of clarity and grim, haggard reason. She wasn't the dumb doll who'd been bearhugged by the madman on the street, the madman she'd condescended to help. She stumbled again up through the unforgiving terraces of the awake and the living, even though she was a walking shambles, looking simply for a seat where she could plant the shattered wreck of her life. And then, I looked around again and realized something. All the seats, I saw, were full. And as the No. 59 labored steadily up the hill, out of the city, toward Manor Top, no one had yet offered to help her, nobody had yet reached out to offer assistance.

Out of instinct, I found myself rising. Effortlessly, and without thought, I rose, taking with me my coat, my briefcase, my sandwich. I rose, lifted by a quorum of invisible hands, to give her my seat, indicating with a gentlemanly gesture that she could have it. And for a moment there, as the No. 59 rocked drunkenly back and forth through the towering urban sprawl, we faced each other, two lost species clapped in a back room on the ark, both grasping for a handhold, both gazing at each other in silence. A few people stared at us. Others ignored us completely. The Sister of Salvation looked back at me—through me, as I stood there, gesturing like a statue for her to take my seat.

She looked back into my eyes as if trying to find the hidden light there, the kept secret that the city hadn't yet been able to translate. She wasn't sad anymore, I could tell. And I could tell that almost everyone was now watching our standoff. She wasn't shocked or surprised. She merely smiled—not a big smile, not a happy smile—merely a confident upturning of the corners of her mouth, and she let her head cock to one side as if weighing the intrinsic merit in what I was doing, as if performing an on-the-spot quantification, a snap judgment, a smug tallying up. Disarmed, I smiled back, gesturing toward my seat again. And in one motion, she shifted her dirty socks and shoes to her other arm, her left arm, to free her right hand. And the slap she shot across my face was a vicious thunderous clap severing earth and heaven. Smart, and final. Like a taxi backfire, it sent the troops of birds in downtown Sheffield

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scattering, flapping for the sanctuary of the skies, toward the embrace of the gray and sunny cathedral heights. My head rocketed to the right, my cheek stinging with the crimson pain. My neck was thrown out, and I dropped my briefcase and wrapped sandwich.

“You!” she screeched in a halting Yorkshire accent. “*Ow dare ya? ‘Ow dare ya! Can’t find me own seat, that it? Can’t bear to stand, that it?’*”

“Sorry,” I muttered, swaying, holding my ringing face.

She was raving.

“*Can’t stand on me own!*” she went on, screeching above the noise of the bus, shaking her socks and shoes at me. “*That it? A helpless woman, eh?*”

And that’s it. That’s all. This is how I remember it. Except when I got back to my room at the bed and breakfast I was staying in, I called my wife. She answered the phone, and I could hear our daughter, Shayla Day, calling to me in her baby language in the background.

“I miss you,” my wife said. “It’s weird—”

“Me too,” I said. “I’m coming back. I’m—right now—”

And then, I don’t know why, but something inside me weakened and gave way. And I didn’t know what it was—I didn’t want to admit it—but it was that wedge of yellow in my chest, softening and falling apart, breaking up into small pieces and taking on the shape of vanishing pigeons, rising only to be consumed in the daily gray fire high above Sheffield, city of cities.

“And Simone’s fine,” I said. “Sorry. I was—I don’t know.”

“No,” she said. “I like Charity. Charity’s good. It’s—”

“Charity?” I challenged, laughing, the laugh catching in my throat. “Naw, Charity? Never.” ∞

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