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Kevin Clouter • Omaha, NE

Trespassers

Blue was surprised to see a kid at the bus stop. The rest of the city was still sleeping. Church bells weren't even banging yet.

Blue looked up, as if a bus were coming that moment, but nothing was coming. He stood and stretched, though he felt self-conscious about his body in front of the kid, who had a kid's body. Blue used to have one. Eat whatever you want, barely move, and you're lean. Blue was nostalgic for his once lean body. He wandered into the street to look for busses. He moved like an old guy. He would only get larger.

"Sit down," the kid said. "They're not letting us on with you acting crazy."

"You pay a dollar, and they let you on the bus."

When Blue sat, his shirt clung to his body, drawing attention to the feminine curves of his torso. The kid frowned, oblivious to the possibility that he too would look this way and wonder how it had happened. They sat on the same side of the bench and waited for the bus. Blue introduced himself.

"Is that like a nickname?" the kid asked.

"It's on my birth certificate."

"I'm The D, but I can't change my name for another year."

"What's D stand for?"

"People are always asking that." He didn't say anything else.

The D reached into his shirt and pulled out a necklace. He closed his eyes and gripped the end of it and whispered to himself.

Blue couldn't hear The D or read his lips, but Blue decided it was a prayer. He tried to say a prayer. He couldn't remember wanting one as much as right then, but he couldn't remember the words. He was stuck on *forgive us our trespasses as You forgive those who trespass against us*. When he thought about trespassing, he thought about walking on someone else's property, which he'd done. When he was The D's age, Blue tried to swim across his friend's block, jumping in and out of each backyard pool. Midway through, one of the residents came out wearing only shorts. He didn't look interested in forgiving anything. Blue scurried out of the water and into the bushes, but his friend was slow to surface. When he bobbed out of the water, he had a pistol pointed at his head. Blue waited in the bushes until the police left. He hadn't trespassed since. But that couldn't be what God meant. That was just Blue's not getting it.

When The D tucked his necklace back under his shirt, Blue asked The D what time the bus was supposed to come.

"The last bus dropped me off here," he said. "The driver said I could take another bus, except I don't know where it's going or when it's coming."

"Where are you going?"

"Plus, I don't have any money."

Blue didn't push, not while he was piecing together how he'd wound up where he had, an empty apartment he didn't recognize with his car nowhere to be found. His phone dead, his head attempting to collapse itself, his tongue heavy and sickly sweet. Every muscle agreed he'd betrayed his body. The good news was he didn't work until the dinner shift. The bad news was everything else.

Blue played the no more game: no more drinking, no more diving into strangers' stories, no more following those strangers to low-ceiling apartments off US1. Blue wanted to tell The D the world doesn't make sense, but Blue wasn't sure he believed that. He wanted desperately for the world to be fair. Not just for him but for other people too. There was the unthinkable notion that the world is fair, and this was what they deserved.

Blue asked, "What comes after *trespass against us*? It's the Our Father."

"The Lord's Prayer."

Blue held out a dollar bill until it disappeared.

The D said, "*And lead us not into temptation.*"

"That's a good part."

The bus appeared at the end of the street. The D stood on the curb, as if securing his place in line. Blue wondered what the driver would think of his shirt, even as he acknowledged the driver wouldn't care. Maybe being around young people made Blue vain. Most of the waiters at DiMaggio's were older than he was. The youngest was barely older than The D. The youngest was fast but sloppy. The other waiters uniformly despised him for having better things to think about during his shift.

It was an old bus that only accepted coins, but the driver was content to pocket the two dollars. There were no passengers besides Blue and The D.

"You saved me," he said once the bus was moving.

"Someone would have given you a dollar if I didn't."

"But you did."

"Why do you need to be saved anyhow?"

The D laughed incredulously. There was an easiness young

people had that Blue couldn't reach and didn't remember having. The older he got, the less comfortable he felt. Yet he wasn't any wiser.

The D wanted to know if Blue had accepted Jesus Christ as his personal savior.

"Undecided," Blue said.

"I can help."

"That's okay."

"You helped with the *material*." The D was ginger with this word, like he was worried about breaking it. "Let me help with the spiritual."

The bus turned up US1. The buildings looked smaller and dirtier than the buildings where Blue lived. Even the palm trees looked a little dirty. The sidewalks were littered with the newspapers nobody reads, the free papers with trashy ads and angry editorials about city issues nobody understands.

"I don't want to force it," Blue said. "If God hasn't found me, He probably isn't looking."

"You're thinking about it the wrong way."

"I don't think much about it, D."

"The D."

He reached into his pocket, and Blue feared The D would produce a pamphlet. Blue would have to change seats then. The Christian pamphlets were as unreadable as the newspapers littered about US1. The drawings of sad, earnest Jesus unnerved him. The metaphors—God is Love—unnerved him. Nothing should be able to convince anyone of anything in four glossy pages.

"What would help," Blue said, "is figuring out where this bus is going."

"Where do you want to go?" the bus driver asked.

"Palmetto."

"Palmetto! This isn't a taxi."

Blue wondered if the bus driver was looking for a bribe. He had the wrong passengers if he was. Blue yearned for a world he'd never lived in, that probably never existed, where people helped each other because they were people and not because they were Christian or looking for a bribe.

"I'm going up this road here." The bus driver's magnified eyes blinked in the rearview mirror. "Then, after a while, I'm turning back."

The D shrugged. Nobody seemed eager to get anywhere.

"Where are we anyhow?" he asked.

"Hollywood," the bus driver said.

Blue laughed. Finally, a joke he could appreciate. Hollywood! Where were the plastic celebrities and platinum beauties? All he saw were Laundromats and check cashing stores. The men walking these streets weren't famous. They were pushing shopping carts full of aluminum cans and glass bottles. The women weren't waiting to be discovered. They were screaming at their children, who were wrenching free of their mothers' grip, desperate to run. The mothers held tight because they were desperate to run too.

The D turned to the window. Blue wondered what The D saw in the people walking the sidewalks. Did he ignore them completely? Teenagers have a gift for ignoring pain that isn't their own. They're gifted at making pain their own, as well, but so was Blue.

"I'd like you to join me at today's service," The D decided.

"No, you wouldn't."

"You can just sit there."

Blue pulled the cord, and the driver stopped the bus. Blue walked down the aisle and waved goodbye to The D, who shouted the address of the church. The door opened, and Blue stepped into the light.

He hadn't planned to walk to the church, but once he got going, the important thing was to keep moving. The church was a destination, and it helped to have a destination. He'd suffered from the absence of one, though it didn't help to think that way. He kicked a coconut, which was harder than he expected. It began to leak faintly on the sidewalk, or where the sidewalk should have been, and Blue felt impatient for whatever happened next. It hardly mattered what. He stared at each car that passed, as if challenging it to produce a new life for him. More than once, he saw the driver avert his eyes. There were no women on the road.

The heat, even at this hour, was visual. It pulsed, scrambling the air and making him feel crazy. He pressed his palms into his temples. He took large, uneven mouthfuls of air. He wasn't used to walking so much. Walking seemed like the sort of thing that shouldn't affect him, but it did. He resented this. He also resented the birds, their willingness to sort through the trash along the street. They seemed complicit in his unhappiness.

The church came sooner than he expected. Blue could hear the service from the steps. There was only one voice speaking. It reminded him of a classroom. He sat on the steps and tried to make out the words, but he couldn't understand anything. He walked around the side of the church and tried to look through the stained-glass windows, but he couldn't make out anything. He saw shadows or maybe shapes in red and yellow and green. He

wondered if the parishioners—was that the right word?—could see him through the windows, if they were looking.

They would be watching the guy up front, the one Blue could hear. He would be reading from one of the testaments. The story would be tied to something from the news or, failing that, a moral lesson that struck the priest—reverend?—as resonant. Blue considered his moral failings. They seemed less significant than his failure to do anything worth doing. He vowed to be more moral when he finally did something. He looked at the church's steeple when he made the vow, feeling this would make it more legitimate. The steeple had a simple white cross on top. Seagulls sat on each side.

Was it too much to call his walk to the church a pilgrimage? He supposed it was. He returned to the steps, wondering what the churchgoers would think of him. They wouldn't walk past him, not on the steps of a church. They would see him in a distinctly Christian light. They would offer to feed him, clothe him, bring him somewhere to clean up his life. He was ready to accept these offers. It would be a triumph for The D. Blue had some questions for The D like what is your real name and how do you believe in God.

The doors opened with a clap, and a crowd spilled around Blue, but he wasn't the focus. Most people didn't notice him at all because there were shoulders to grip and cheeks to kiss or not quite kiss. There was gossip to regurgitate or swallow. Hats had to be complimented. Blue was astonished. He'd walked a long way to reach this burst of America. He hadn't thought these scenes still existed, let alone in South Florida, where everything is new and all the history is someone else's. Blue looked for a

hat to praise. Someone clasped his shoulder. The D's smile was wide but misshapen, like The D was holding a comment inside his cheek, like he was kind of rolling that comment around his mouth.

"I made it," Blue said.

Someone grasped his other shoulder. His knees trembled a little. All these strangers wanted to meet him. All these strangers wanted to compliment him on the decision he'd made about his life. He hadn't made any decisions. The priest arrived last. He carried a brown book with gold pages. It was thick enough to be a bible, but Blue couldn't read any of the words on the cover. The priest opened his arms.

What is it about churches that makes them so eager to save others, even those who look dangerous, who are clearly there for the wrong reasons? Blue looked past the priest and into the church. Blue looked at the ornate candlesticks and expensive windows. He looked for a long time at the giant cross. It wasn't like you could melt it down to pure gold or drag it into a pawnshop. Blue liked the idea of carrying a giant cross down the street. It would be hard to ignore him then. He stepped toward the church. The pews were empty. Blue sat in one toward the front and clasped his hands.

The D sat beside Blue. The D picked up a prayer book. He tossed it from hand to hand, almost dropping it twice, and Blue wondered if maybe he'd misread The D.

"What are you looking for," he whispered.

"Same as anyone. Eternal salvation sort of thing."

Blue wondered how big the cross actually was. It was taller than he was, but how much taller? He wondered how tall Jesus'

cross was. He looked around the stained-glass windows to see if they clarified.

"Minister Dave knows about you." The D put the prayer book back in the wrong place. "Minister Dave and I had a talk after the service about lost sheep."

"I'm ready for something like that."

Blue looked behind his shoulder. Nobody was coming. Nobody was before him either, not Jesus or any of his apostles. Even the cross was empty.

"I can't promise Minister Dave anything." Blue resented that Minister Dave went by his first name: It sounded amateurish.

"My mother wants to meet you. She wants to feed you."

"Feed me?"

"She's way into this."

This, Blue understood, was his eternal soul. He hadn't realized it existed until now, yet everyone wanted it. He'd noticed something greedy in Minister Dave's eyes. Blue stood abruptly.

"Wait." But The D didn't add anything.

Blue walked back toward the doors. A giant window hulked over them. He hadn't noticed it outside. In the window, the Virgin Mary opened her arms, as if inviting people to leave. He wasn't used to seeing Jesus missing from her arms. She didn't look as real without Him. If Jesus wasn't on the cross and wasn't in Mary's arms, where was He?

Minister Dave walked through the doors. His arms were at his side now. He seemed serious and a little sad. He sat in the closest pew and looked toward the ceiling.

"It's a pity you missed today's service," he said. "I suspect you could have taken a lot from it."

Blue looked for The D, but he hadn't moved from the front pew. Blue stayed where he was. He waited for someone to do something that would tell him what to do next.

"We can help young men who want to improve their lives," Minister Dave said.

Blue moved toward the doors.

"Let me talk to him," The D's voice said.

It was even hotter outside than Blue remembered. He didn't think he could walk any farther in this heat. He had an urge to sprinkle holy water on his face. A woman watched Blue. She lit a thin cigarette, the kind only old ladies smoke, even though the cigarettes are supposed to be glamorous. She handed him a crumpled pack.

"Scary in there?" She handed him a lighter.

The smoke filled his lungs. He could feel the smoke curling inward like a hand clenching. His eyes watered a little. Blue wiped them with the back of the hand not holding the cigarette. Even when he exhaled, the smoke didn't leave his lungs. It settled there until it caught fire, and soon his whole insides were burning, and nothing could put out the fire. The woman watched Blue's distress with an empty expression. Her unchecked smoking felt like gentle mocking.

"It's fine," he choked. "I'm fine."

He extinguished his cigarette on the bottom step. He wiped the ash off the concrete with his thumb and flicked the cigarette away from the woman. He'd only inhaled twice.

"He doesn't think I know, but of course I know," she continued. "Comes back at all hours, sees all kinds of people."

Blue recognized he was one of these people. He tried to

understand what that meant to her. Blue had taken her son under his wing because Blue saw some of himself in the boy, something Blue could mold, given time. The changes would be gradual. Small things: looser pants, a looser gait, less regard for the gentlemanly touches she'd worked hard to teach her son. She would know he was gone when he failed to put his dishes in the sink, when he stopped showing up to dinner at all, or making excuses for his absence. She looked at Blue as if looking across the table for her lost son.

"I met your son at the bus station," Blue said.

"He's a good boy when he wants to be."

"I wouldn't worry—"

"You don't know anything."

She inhaled more than exhaled. Blue agreed he didn't know anything but wasn't ready to reveal this. Any minute, the doors would open again, and he didn't know who he would be. For now, he would let her think he was exactly what she thought. A man with dangerous intentions. A man with little regard for his impact on those around him, unless it served his own sinister interests. A man so removed from civilized society he could no longer remember it, let alone understand it, let alone participate in it. Then Blue would let the woman save this man from himself.

End