

Name

by

Andrew Kass

On a Monday morning Reverend Gabriel Blowers fell off a ladder in the rectory of St. Jude Church. Reverend Blowers, having determined that the back hall bulb had gone dark long enough awaiting Deacon Staley's ministrations, intervened. The Reverend's enterprise ran afoul of a rickety ladder and his poor sense of balance, so gravity took over and Deacon Staley found him unconscious an hour later. The Deacon roused the Reverend and helped him gingerly to the parlor settee.

"Oh, Rev," Deacon Don said while sweeping the smashed bulb from the threadbare runner, "I coulda done that."

Marjorie Colin left the church office in the care of Ivanhoe the church mouser and drove Reverend Blowers to the clinic for observation.

"I'm sorry for the fall, Marjorie," the Reverend said, holding a cold compress to his forehead, "but I am quite all right."

"Well, there's no harm in making sure, then, is there?" replied Marjorie, eyes on the road, hands at 10 and 2 on the wheel.

So Reverend Blowers submitted to various tests and probes by brisk clinicians who were not from his congregation.

"You have a mild concussion," Doctor Prasad concluded. "I recommend acetaminophen for the next day or so. Avoid strenuous activity and bright lights for a week."

"May I write a sermon?" the Reverend asked.

“Only do not strain. If you have nausea or headaches, stop.”

Marjorie drove Reverend Blowers back to the church in time for early supper, but the prospect of food was not appealing so he took analgesics against a ringing inside his head. He put aside his evening’s reading as the words danced out of focus in favor of moving up his nightly ablutions and turning in.

On Tuesday morning Reverend Blowers arises clear and refreshed. He even has the germ of his sermon. At the top of a ruled white leaf he writes “When God says rest, lie down.” He gazes out the window at the dangling gutter of the steep slate gable of the church roof, another task on the Deacon’s undiminishing list. *Rest*: he jots the word at the margin. Under that, *Sabbath*.

After the subject, the introductory words are always the most challenging. Something to rally the congregation to attention, “Sleepers Awake” as Bach put it. Even the children...

Suffer the little children to come and forbid them not unto me

He stops. He knows who said that, as well as he knows himself, but his mind cannot dredge up the name. Not God, but close. He could start the computer and look up the quote, of course, but that way lies diversion.

A whine, like the opening tone of Mozart’s *Serenade for Winds in F* stripped of its setting, grows from the edge of his hearing to its only fact. He stares at what he has written.

It is from Matthew, certainly.

...for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

Beautiful. Sublime. At the tip of his tongue.

The recorded carillon chimes the hour. All children should be in school. He thinks of them singing. That’s it—

What a friend we have in...

No not Krishna as the bald saffron-robed spooks at the airport would have it. He shakes his head. You don't see the Jews making such a fetish about Moses: *Moshe Rabbeinu*, Moses Our Teacher, almost affectionate. But beside the point: the New Testament, the Immaculate Conception, the Annunciation, the Virgin Birth, our Lord and Saviour...

???

Gabriel Blowers pushes back from the desk, hands pressed to his eyes. Peculiar. Distressing. He knows, how can he not? This is his life, his vocation. This is who he is, what he does, for whose Name he does it.

He opens the Book, to Saint Matthew: there is verse 8:20.

And Jesus saith unto him, the foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.

Reverend Blowers sits back. What is a—naturalist? Anthropologist?—doing in the Gospel of St. Matthew? The name is interesting, and the words have a certain authority.

He flips back to Chapter 1, start at the beginning.

The book of the generations of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham begat Isaac, and Isaac begat Jacob, and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren...

He mops sweat from his brow with a fresh, thin handkerchief. None of this looks familiar. What has he gotten himself into?

Try Mark:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

There's that name again. It seems fixed and sure here, but once entered through the portals of his eyes the syllables are turning strange and twisted. And Matthew told that Jesus was the son of David, Son of man. Is God's name David?

Time to see the doctor: St. Luke.

Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us...

Huh. Obviously something lost in translation from, as the frontispiece notes, the original Greek, probably via Latin given the times. Translation's always a tricky business, with its genitives and articles and idioms.

The Reverend pages forward to the Gospel of John.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Well that seems pretty clear.

So who is this other character, the Son of Man? He clearly appears to be the central figure in the Scripture. The Holy Bible as a generational saga—

But no, Gabriel Blowers had changed his degree from Comparative Literature to Theology while still an undergraduate, trading in the many stories for the One Story, the complicated life for this life. And somehow, in his fall, it has shattered.

Reverend Blowers consults his calendar. Thankfully: no pastoral visits today. He draws on his cardigan and cap and steps out for a walk. Brisk movement often clears the clutter from his mind. Particularly here in early fall – a metaphor not lost on the Reverend – the air is lovely and present, bracing without undue chill, with the first hints of blush in the sweetgum and silver maple lining the old street. Move. Clear the cobwebs. Or at least—

At least, review the range of options should his current state not be temporary.

First of course is that his peculiar mental fog will clear, and all will be well. The mind is unpredictable, the brain complex, and injuries there heal in their own course. In the meantime, he may adapt old hornbook sermons, or update his oldest offerings. He may seek lessons in the Old Testament or prophetic works, which still appear open to him.

In short, as the saying goes, *Fake it till you make it.*

But the sermonizing is the least of it. There is the pastoral work, always difficult for him, his sacred personal devotion. What if...

He crosses a construction zone into the edge of the center of town. People wearing hard hats are rigging steel girders to be hoisted from a long flatbed truck to the skeletal beginnings of a blockish edifice. There is a sign:

Site of the future Woodland Masjid.

Reverend Blowers notices that the tall man in the green hard hat is Imam Quereshi, whom he knows from the interfaith council. He returns a grin to the Imam's wide smile of greeting.

"Impressive," he offers to the unspoken question.

"Ah, it progresses at long last," the Imam says. "We have prayed, organized, saved. Imshallah, we shall have a home for our community of faith before much longer."

Reverend Blowers has witnessed the devotions of the Imam's community. Unshod, unseated, rugs on the floor, all oriented toward Mecca like gulls into a freshening wind. Murmuring, bowing prostrate, rising again in prayer. Words from the Imam. All familiar as a protocol, all alien in practice. Faith.

"Then you can begin to worry about maintaining it," he says, which draws a hearty laugh from the Imam.

“We will climb that mountain when we reach it, eh?”

“Do you—”

Gabriel stops. The Imam is a pleasant chap, a colleague, but not a friend in whom one might confide.

“Yes?” the Imam is inquiring.

“What I mean is,” Reverend Blowers temporizes, “are there ever days when you just can’t seem to get a handle ... on your message?”

The Imam nods.

“Sometimes, yes, it is difficult. But that is my calling, and yours. We do what we must, to our best at the time.”

At that, the Imam is called away to consult on a scroll of plans, they exchange parting words, and Reverend Blowers continues on his way.

What way is this? Into the town center, the hub of this community.

He wishes he had asked the Imam about his Prophet. Thinking about it, he wishes he could remember the name of The Prophet.

At the moment only the fact of walking, of foot contacting earth and passing balance to the next foot, of the bellows of his diaphragm filling his lungs with air to fire these working muscles, feels sure and true. No need of the contorted mental exercises of Descartes. *What if God is deluding my senses?* Centuries before *The Matrix*, but an exercise really in saving his bacon from the ire of the Church Fathers in France. Wasn’t that what the Reformation had been about, a more direct knowledge, study, intercourse—

This house on the edge of Main Street is a familiar place. Where there were family dinners, games and sleepovers and nighttime fevers are now neat, professional rooms whose

daytime occupants are identified by shingles outside. Here is a familiar name: **Beatrice Meyers, M.S.W.**

His steps are pulled up the slate walk to the brick apron, the green door, the antiseptic silence within. Suddenly fatigued, he sinks into a contoured chair designed for transitional comfort. There is a hum in the vestibule, which feels dry and slightly acidic from well-thumbed magazines, aged potpourri, cloying anxiety. He settles into the waiting and detects murmurous hints of voices from other rooms behind closed doors. Tantalizing contours of words without clear shape, like the name or names he has been seeking.

It's all present, he considers, whether I grasp it or not.

He's not feeling better exactly but has stopped feeling worse when a door opens. A grey-looking woman skitters out, not regarding him, not wanting to be seen. As she slips from the anodyne antechamber the bright shaft of the doorway is filled by a luminous figure with Beatrice's oval face appearing in its shadow.

"Gabriel," she says. "This is a surprise."

For a moment he is at a loss in the peace of the room and the balm of her willowy alto. He rises, reeling a bit.

"I was in the neighborhood," he replies. "You look well."

"Thank you," Beatrice replies, a hand on the doorframe. "I have a little window now. Would you like to come in?"

He suddenly is not sure but his feet follow her into an inner room so bright it is painful. There is a neutral-toned mid-century sofa facing a mid-century upholstered chair with a notepad on its arm and a side table before a floor lamp. On the table a porcelain teacup and saucer appear

to glow in the light from the corner windows through the leaves of a robust ficus. He sits in the corner of the couch nearest the windows and angles away from the light and Beatrice.

“So what brings you?” she asks.

“A walk. To clear my head,” he says. “I fell, yesterday. Off a ladder.”

“Oh! Are you all right?”

“Just ... hit my head. Slight concussion.”

“Let me draw the blinds.”

She does, in a couple of brisk steps, setting a flat brightness that is familiar to them both, rousing tactile ghosts long passed.

“So,” she says, resettling, legs drawn up in pale linen trousers, “is it fair to say that you’ve momentarily taken leave of your senses?”

She is smiling, but her eyes are incisive. He remembers that look. It had followed him out of her off-campus apartment into the Theology Department office.

“In a manner of speaking,” he says carefully, recalling when he first felt the pull away from Comparative Literature. “I – I’m having a bit of bother writing sermons.”

“Hm. Since you fell?”

“Yes,” he swallows.

Beatrice takes a sip of tea.

“I’m clearly not a medical doctor, and obviously not your therapist, so I’m curious as to why, after all these years, you came to me.”

The humming in his head has picked up. Even the tight fabric of the couch seems to thrill with it.

“I did not come here, just, kind of wound up here.”

“Serendipitously?”

“Yes.”

“Sitting in my waiting room?”

“I was tired.”

“Nothing called you here, in particular, when your consciousness was not in the driver’s seat?” She arches an eyebrow over her teacup. “Perhaps something you wanted to say, or say differently than you did when we parted?”

Driving, he remembers, a cold night, his old car, empty after she’d climbed out at the edge of campus. Not a good memory.

“Well, maybe there was some sense of circling back, after the way we-- after I received the calling.”

Beatrice sets down the cup and saucer with deliberation.

“Gabriel, since you obviously know where to find me and I am not your therapist, I will tell you that we both know that is not entirely true. It wasn’t then, and it’s not now. You ran to holiness when Doctor Hammersmith opened that door. To me, it looked a lot like running away. I’ve moved on with my life. Have you?”

It is a siren now filling his head. Her voice continues.

“What is it that you tell your congregation every Sunday, Gabriel?”

Somewhere outside the blinding noise in his brain is a dull gong. He opens his eyes, and Beatrice is standing over him.

“And that is our time, Gabriel. Would you like me to call you an ambulance?”

“No,” he says, his brain and lungs full of her patchouli, bergamot, a slight tang of sweat. He wants to stay. He needs to go.

She gives him a strong hand up and leads him to the door.

“I’ll have a referral or two for you should you serendipitously find your way back.”

He is standing outside bathed in the sun’s benevolent light, ruffled by a cooling breeze on the sidewalk of the town. Traffic shuttles by in both directions. It is all open to him. Nothing is open to him. He should see the doctor. He should see his superior. He should go back for Comparative Literature. He should rest and formulate a sermon.

What’s in a name, anyway?

I serve someone or something whose name I cannot utter.

I am Gabriel... something.

I fell.

Now is moving away from then.

I am here, now.

And now...?

Go.

He takes a step.

*