

Sweet Angry God

By John Pistelli

Apparently it began with a hate fuck. There was a dirtball café, no doubt collectively owned, a few blocks from the art school. He worked there, and she had been watching him for some months, maybe even her entire sophomore year. The first time she went into the place she noticed him, how hateful and stupid he was. Some kind of percussion-heavy music rumbled over the speakers, hissing with analogue static. She thought she felt the tuba thrum in her throat. Above the music she heard him talk to his co-worker as his face glistened in the espresso machine steam. He didn't look at her, not even when his dirty fingernails grazed her palm with the change.

"No, Romanian. It was a group, yeah, I mean they allied with Hitler. Not saying I'm defending them, but, I mean. They were pissed off that their culture was being violated by the modern west. Yeah, they hacked people's heads off. Limbs. Like werewolves, man. Okay, it's fucked up. But today you just push a button. Is that better? This is their marching music."

She kept her eye on him after that. Maybe he was dangerous. She would look over her laptop screen when he came out from behind the counter to wipe down the tables. He stomped around in careless bursts, like a toddler. He had a pervert's goatee and wore bowling shirts stained at the armpits. When she saw his sneakers, so old they'd become fashionable again, she understood what "down-at-heel" literally meant. His body looked sinewy, a bad cut of meat. Stupid-ass white boy. Sometimes she checked certain books out of the library to read in front of him, anything by or about men ready for violence. Marinetti, Mao, Fanon, whatever. His eyes were always elsewhere. Men ready for violence unmade and remade the world. She just lived in it. She wondered if he didn't want to just live in it.

Her sophomore-year final project she called *Men Ready for Violence*. Blood-spatter paintings were arrayed around a screen showing various armies on the march. Their choreography contrasted with the chaos of the red paint. She loaded the artist's statement

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with jargon, quotations from Klaus Theweleit and Judith Butler, so that her teachers didn't call a shrink or a cop. Everyone was polite about it, one professor even enthusiastic. Her classmates looked at her strangely. Especially the girls.

Then the semester was over. One week left before she had to come home to mamá. She sat in the café reading Ernst Jünger. He wiped down her table while she was still sitting at it, his face vacantly smiling, the dirt-nailed knob-boned fingers sinking in the washcloth's soft folds. One week. What would a Romanian fascist do? She reached out and grabbed his wrist hard. Her face must have looked like it couldn't believe what her hand had done. Her nails were red-stained with oil paint. He was looking at her nails and then turned to look into her eyes. He showed smoker's teeth.

The art school was in the Midwest. She grown used to, even admiring of, the landscape flat in every direction, the pale and poisonously polite people. "Changeable weather back there this time of year," she said. "Winter coat in the morning, sundress in the afternoon." She lounged in her sundress on the balcony, sprawled on a rickety folding chair, legs propped on the parapet, contemptuously showing Los Angeles the dusty soles of her bare feet. She told me she wasn't coming home this summer and that she was telling me because I would be the one to understand, I would be the one to tell mamá.

After a year among elms and oaks, she told me, the shag-bearded shock-haired palms on their thin stalks looked like heads on sticks.

And why would I understand, hermana?

She crossed her foot over and tapped the shin of my fake leg with her heel. I think we both hoped for a satisfying *clunk*, like the proverbial crack of the bat, to rise up among the palms. But no luck. Fake legs were carbon polymer these days.

Remember, hermana, how you would run down the hall waving my fake leg in the air and saying, "Come and get it!" Mamá would say, "She's just a child." I skittered after you on

three legs, no longer a child, mute with rage, implacable as something in a horror movie. I came and got it. I broke your nose with it. Bad plastic back then, *clunk*. I could do anything. I had died and come back. You were just jealous.

We got up to have dinner. I waved to the woman in the courtyard below, always in the courtyard, with her cigarettes and satin robe and pink kitten-heel slippers, blowing smoke across the xeriscape at all hours. Old Hollywood costume designer, I liked to think, living in the dark among the dusty dress forms, less alive to herself than they were.

Hermana preceded me through the apartment, down the stairs, into the kitchen. She floated dreamily over the floorboards, trailing red-tipped fingers over the book spines. The man who rented me my room had a large personal library. Books on every subject. He liked to rent to students and told me to read whatever I wanted. His library took me from my own subject. I would wake up intending to research and write all day and find, by dinnertime, that I had read a history of the Spanish Civil War or a theory of haute couture instead.

No good title for my dissertation yet. The current one had too many prepositional phrases. *Transcultural Baroque: Tropes of Love and Death in the Poetics of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and John Donne*. So said my advisor, the kindly old philologist. He also told me to hurry up and write it before I ran out of funding. You think they'll get rid of me? In a city so full of lawyers? I tapped my fake leg. He shook his hoary head, a black man of an older generation, who did not feel he could be cynical about such matters. But a small smile lit his face, such as old men have for incorrigible young women.

My landlord was out for the night, benefit dinner or opera, the humanist lawyer with his thousands of books who liked to rent to people who reminded him of the student he'd been. The dining room bookshelf was for philosophy and the history of ideas. Hermana waited for me to finish cooking dinner. Incurably addicted to her men of violence, she leafed through Georges Sorel, her phone at her side buzzing with ignored text messages. On the rich lawyer's mahogany dinner table she rested her dirty bare feet, crossed at the ankle, anent the fruit bowl with its Bacchic motif.

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The cumin seeds trembled in the hot oil, and then the paprika and garlic. They yielded their aroma on billows of unctuous steam. Skins of cherry tomatoes gently dehisced to offer up red flesh. That was the tenderhearted, lyrical side of cooking dinner. Meanwhile I was bent over the sink. I wrenched the limbs of the raw chicken out of their sockets with a set of wet pops.

We barely ever spoke to each other before the hospital. Since our surnames shared a first initial, we had been sitting near each other in school, a small private school where we all knew one another, for a long time. By middle school we had become different genres of people. He was a guitar-playing jock and I a book-reading goth, albeit we were both in rebellion against the nuns. He would chuckle appreciatively when I corrected, with scorn, our religion teacher's Latin pronunciations. *Muh men toe more ee*. Not *more eye*.

It was strange that he took such an interest when I left school for treatment for the second half of ninth grade. To my hospital room he brought a stuffed dog, and then the poems of T. S. Eliot, and then, like an adult lover, red roses. I called him from the heavy bedside rotary phone, the color of rotten teeth, almost every night. So doomed and tragic, I read him "Whispers of Immortality." I truly whispered it down the line, if you can imagine. Somehow my in extremis became his in extremis. That the emotions can be a project is perhaps a bigger adolescent discovery for a boy than for a girl. Mostly we laughed. We made up caricatured names for the nurses, and he regaled me with the school goings-on I'd missed, even doing all the voices. The night before the leg was amputated, he wrote across the thigh in Magic Marker, "Good-bye, cruel world." I told him I didn't want to die before knowing etc. To a working adult it must sound absurd, but a boy leaping from the precipice of childhood and a girl huddling at the edge of the grave are not working adults. Much later I tried to tell a friend all this, but she said, "He was exploiting you." Then I knew you couldn't tell anybody anything. He quietly shut the door and then came back over and put his head under the sheets. He was reaching up, holding my hands the whole time. After, I drew my thumb across his wet lips. He said, "That'll

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probably be easier when the leg comes off.” We laughed so hard the ugliest nurse came in and told us to be quiet. Old lycanthrope. He had come up with that one, for her hairy hands. But she smiled down just a little at the blood in my cheeks.

Then I didn’t die, and we returned to our separate social groups, and we resumed our distant acquaintanceship. I saw him at a pool party once. He rapped his knuckles on my fake thigh, a good-natured joke without tenderness. Still the cheap plastic days, so the *clunk* was satisfactory. I guessed he was ashamed of something. It might have been better for him, he might have felt more justified somehow in spilling all that emotion, if I actually had died.

For most of my fourteenth year, I stared into a blank ceiling, sun-bright or moon-blue, and knew that I was soon to die, that my life was absolutely at its end. And then I came back, though not all of me. The entire second half of my life has felt posthumous. Like somebody a thousand years old, I see the ruin in everything. From time to time, that intensifies my appreciation for beauty. From time to time, it renders me unable to care about anything. I suppose my revenance must give me a mystique. People seem not to draw too close.

I have always suspected hermana of envying my little apocalypse, ma petite mort. So, with this crazy boy, she sought her own apocalypse, her own resurrection. Maybe everyone should.

Yes, baby sister, I understand.

I swatted her feet off the table with a metal serving spoon. It went *klok* on her anklebone. Her face of pained outrage settled when I set the plate of chicken in front of her and said, “Now tell me about this idiot you propose to run off with.” She carelessly tossed Georges Sorel to the floor.

I thought she would tell me that they were taking to the hills. Guerillas, banditti, a free-love commune at the very least. I saw her birthing a calf, shoeing a horse. As she slouched over her dinner, her teeth wine-stained, I imagined her straight-shouldered, her body tensed against

the recoil of the bolt-action rifle she was aiming at a green-glass bottle halfway across a thistle-spotted field. I saw her face involuntarily crease with tender pity as she interrogated some hog-tied hostage, some senator's daughter. What people we might become in extremis.

But no, the crazy boy was only making a movie. Hermana would remain safe in our world of representations, as I would in my labyrinth of books. I had been outside once, though, for whatever it was worth, so I would probably always think her a little bit shallow. I would never quite regret breaking her nose with my fake leg, shedding her blood on mamá's carpet.

"He read me some of the guy's writings. Do you know them? Pretty wild shit, right? Like, God *hates* you. He's holding you over the pit of hell like you're a loathsome spider. Not only that, but hell is all around. It's in you right now, just burning a little, but you could catch fire all the way at any minute. In a minute you could be in hell. Supposedly he read this sermon very calmly, in a mellow voice, but the people in the congregation were fainting and puking. So I asked him, this was after we did it the first few times, when we finally started talking, I asked him, why would you want to make a movie about this creep? But it turns out he was very complicated. Other things he wrote are very beautiful."

Hermana pulled Jonathan Edwards's "Personal Narrative" up on her phone and read to me from the eighteenth-century divine's nearly opiated, self-pleasuring and self-hypnotizing prose about his personal relationship with God, whom he characterized, again and again, in contrast to the angry God of his most famous sermon, as sweet.

"It has often appeared sweet to me, to be united to Christ; to have him for my head, and to be a member of his body: and also to have Christ for my teacher and prophet. I very often think with sweetness and longings and pantings of soul, of being a little child, taking hold of Christ, to be led by him through the wilderness of this world. That text, Matt. 18 at the beginning, has often been sweet to me, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children," etc. I love to think of coming to Christ, to receive salvation of him, poor in spirit, and quite empty of self, humbly exalting him alone; cut off entirely from my own root, in order to grow into, and out of Christ..."

She had been reading the wrong books to catch his eye, it turned out. It wasn't violence he wanted, though he knew that violence might be needed to bring about "abstraction of soul." Into the labyrinth of texts and then back out of it. Sor Juana selling her library. Donne begging God to ravish him. Good-bye, cruel world.

"Eventually he became too zealous, denouncing people by name from the pulpit. He was sent packing and became a missionary to the Indians for seven years in the wilds of Massachusetts. That's the working title for the movie, by the way, *The Wilds of Massachusetts*. He's written most of the screenplay, all about Edwards's years in the wilderness, what he might have learned as he was trying to teach the Indians. He has the guy's collected works, volumes and volumes, by his bed. So we go to Massachusetts in a week to look for funding. It turns out he's distantly related to Edwards on his mother's side. They were Midwest missionaries in the eighteen hundreds. That's how come he grew up in Minneapolis."

The minister feverishly beguiled in a wigwam by a bare-breasted brown-skinned princess, the camera lingering on the sunlight at play in deciduous leaves. I hated this film already. And you, hermana, you're more akin to los indios than to the minister. Don't let him cast you as the minister's child-paramour. How come, she says: just a child. I had had too much wine. I reached over the table and stroked the stubborn diagonal of her nose.

"You can explain this to mamá?" she asked, earnestly, giggling.

Nothing makes sense, but I can explain anything.

"You trust this stupid boy?"

"He wouldn't hurt a fly. The violence is just a metaphor."

Tell him to call it *Sweet Angry God*.

As the only person in Los Angeles without a car, I fancy myself a walking rebuke to the motorists. I even play up a limp sometimes. I'm on one foot, what could your excuse be?

I accompanied hermana in a taxi to the airport. She would fly first into Minneapolis and

then into Boston. Further and further east.

Then I took an overpriced shuttle back to the city. It was going to be another drought summer. Even the pink-walled motels beneath the highway looked as if they were made of sand. I read on my phone that coyotes in the canyons were becoming a problem, and even the children of the stars could have their arms or legs chewed off. Eventually the sand and the teeth would reclaim this city. The dunes would shift in the wind over strewn limbs. Eventually death would leave its scar on my baby sister.

I smoked a cigarette in the courtyard with the old costume designer. The night wind started to come on. She gathered me for a moment into her satin shawl, she covered my bare sundress shoulders.

In the sunset, I reclined on the balcony, my real foot and my fake foot both propped on the parapet, silhouetted in the orange and purple glow so that I could not tell flesh from artifice.

The End

John Pistelli bio: John Pistelli was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He now lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he teaches literature, writing, and related subjects. His fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in *Rain Taxi*, *New Walk*, *The Millions*, *Revolver*, *The Squawk Back*, *Winter Tangerine Review*, *Atomic*, *The Stockholm Review*, *The Harpoon Review*, and others. His novella *The Ecstasy of Michaela* was published by Valhalla Press in 2012. Find out more at johnpistelli.wordpress.com