



THE KNEELER

The day after I arrived, I awoke to a grey morning, drizzly rain outside. I pulled back the heavy drapes in the main room, a cavernous space, and looked again at my new abode. The room was sparsely furnished with old heavy furniture. This must have been the living room – looked like the set of the interior of the home in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. I had studied O'Neill's play while taking a theater class and could visualize the man and his two grown sons sitting around the table in the middle of this room. I imagined a bottle of whiskey on the table and the chink of three glasses. As the men drank into the night, they talked, doing their best to break each other's hearts, while a doped-up Mom roamed about upstairs. I also had a father who had two sons as had his father.

In a small chamber off the living room, I came across a kneeler. It was wooden with a red cushion for the knees. Something I would expect to see in a church rather than a private home. In the light of a high, stained glass window, I saw that the kneeler was the only piece of furniture in the room and saw how two bony knees had worn away the red velvet of the cushion. There was a picture of Jesus on the wall in a cheap plastic frame, like something a kid would buy at a Woolworth's store. I sort of liked the kneeler. It had a sloped shelf on which to rest the forearms. I could imagine it as a prop for a bit – *The Atheist at Prayer*. I laughed to myself and thought if Babylon was good enough for Rodney

Dangerfield to reside in, it was good enough for me. I wondered if he'd known any of my family here and if they had given him any respect. I laughed to myself. But my laughter stopped when I recalled how my father would say in a dour tone, "It's good to hear you laugh."

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Yesterday, after driving west on Ocean Parkway, I left my old Jeep down the road, deciding to find the house on foot. It would be fun to find it as I walked along the beach. An old spinster great aunt had died, and my family offered me the place in Babylon for a couple of months to clear my head and decide what I was going to do with my life. I was almost thirty.

Writing hadn't worked out, neither had marine biology. And I'd quit my day job. For the last year or so, hanging out in comedy clubs in South Florida, from time to time I'd be asked to introduce comics and even do a small bit now and then. But after being crucified on stage more than once, I had begun to doubt myself, and the random laughter from the audiences had failed to still my inner demons. My folks worried about me and decided that going out of state and getting away from my evil influences would be good for me. I was dissipated, too much alcohol, not enough sleep, living on Red Bull. My comic friends called me Gloomy Gus because I looked so sad. So sad that it was kind of funny. The name stuck, sort of became my shtick.

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Walking in the sand was tough going. Coarse and damp, not the white, soft sand of home. The sun had gone behind a cloud, and a chilly wind had begun to blow. The sea was a dark grey except where the waves broke. Growing up on the Gulf in sunny St. Petersburg had been an easy life. Shorts and flip-flops

most of the time. But my ancestors who had settled in New York and summered by the ocean on the south shore of Long Island must have been hardy folk.

As I trudged along, I took a gulp of Red Bull (my last for a while). Then I saw it. The house had been built on a rise at the top of the beach. On a dune. It was old, dark, and weather-beaten. Images of long-gone and forgotten relatives rose in my mind. The house was sinister. It even had a turret. The gray paint was peeling, and what was left of the striped awnings was torn. A single chair on the porch rocked in the wind. I felt a chill run through my body as I took in the lonely stretch of beach, the rock jetties, and the bleakness of the dilapidated house. More of my parents' tough love. I should have known.

As I climbed the wooden steps to the porch that wrapped the back and sides of the house, I thought of my great-uncle Jerome. He'd been awarded a Silver Star in the Second World War but never made it home. Shot in the back by a German soldier. His handwritten letters had been saved and typed up by his grieving father, my great-grandfather. As I walked along the porch peering into windows, I thought of my great-grandfather whose legs had been paralyzed while he worked as a sandhog digging a tunnel for the New York City subway system – boring through solid rock to feed his family. We had a family historian, my third cousin Pete, who had informed us about all the dead Kellys.

I followed the porch around to the side. Standing upright, all prim and proper, a tiny pair of women's black galoshes, like rain boots from the forties, two little buttons on the side, appeared to be waiting for the return of their owner. They must have belonged to my great aunt who had cloistered herself in this house for decades. Taking the worn key from my pocket, I unlocked the door and stepped inside, only to be enveloped by a day-time darkness.

I had entered the kitchen and found the end of a stale loaf of raisin bread on the table. It fell apart when I touched it, the bread dry and the raisins hard as little pebbles. My great-aunt Teresa's last supper had been meager. Why had this woman renounced the everyday world, choosing instead to live in such a remote place?

I had to get back into town for something to eat. And then I would bring my Jeep closer. Going out the front door and through a border of tall, overgrown hedges, I found myself feeling uneasy anticipating my first night in this strange house by the sea. But I had prepared for it – I had a lantern and a bedroll.

In town, the village of Babylon, I drove along the main drag until I saw Peg's Diner. Pulling up in front, I saw a Wi-Fi notice in the window. Good to know. As I munched on a big, juicy burger, I thought of the little rubber boots and the raisin bread and how my great-aunt had spent those long hours alone (as I would be doing) in a drab corner of that ramshackle house.

I texted my parents, "Arrived safely. May be off the grid for a while."

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After finding the kneeler on my second day, I continued exploring the house. So many doors, windows, hallways, porches, balconies, the house seemed to go on forever. And I wasn't the only interloper. Raccoons had had the run of the place, and still did, as exhibited by the varied ages of their scattered turds, from old powdery white and dry to fresh moist and glistening. Made me think of Grey Gardens where Little Edie fed Cheerios to her invading raccoons. I headed up the main staircase to the second floor. More of the same. A general state of decay, disintegration, dirt. I found a stack

of bodybuilding magazines, page after page of nearly naked men. What was that all about? I grabbed a handful of *Coronets* from another stack. The debris of my dead relatives became one with my own dismal sense of failure. Nothing left but a gaping emptiness within crumbling walls.

Inside a doorway, I found another staircase, this one leading to the third floor. I panicked at the never-ending rooms and floors. I hurried back down to the first floor and ran out the side door, tripping over my great-aunt's galoshes.

Once outside I headed down to the shore in spite of the drizzle. The wind off the sea blew my hair into my face. As I pulled out the pony holder that held my hair in place, it broke. Not having another one, I decided to let my hair go wild, whipped about by the wind. It felt good. Alone on the beach, I gathered that it was way past Labor Day and the vacationers had returned home.

Going back inside, I strode from the back of the house to the front, exited, hopped into my Jeep, and headed to the village to find the power company. The woman at the counter eyed me a bit suspiciously, must have been the hair, but when I told her who I was and what I needed, she became helpful. "So sad about Miss Teresa," she said. "So where are you from, Gus?"

"Florida. I'm beginning to regret not coming up here while my great-aunt was still living. I wish I could have known her."

I saw that the woman wore a Virgin Mary medallion around her neck.

"Well, she stuck to herself," the woman continued in a loud, brassy voice. "Liked her own company, I guess. Didn't need anyone or anything. I heard that she lived in the old family house by herself ever since her parents stopped her from becoming a nun. She took a vow of silence, after all. Her mother needed help with the old man after the elder son was killed in the war. But Teresa refused and came out here to

live by herself – only eighteen years old. She lived like a hermit. Are you named for St. Gustav the Hermit?”

“I don’t know. Probably. My parents had me baptized, so they had to give me a saint’s name.”

Getting back to the business at hand, the woman said, “Miss Teresa only used the first floor, she saw no sense in wiring up the whole house. Will you be here through the winter?”

“Haven’t decided yet.”

“Miss Teresa got by with a couple of space heaters, and I guess she used the stove in the kitchen, maybe the fireplace. But it gets cold out there. Thought I’d warn you. You being from Florida and all.”

I paid the deposit and said, “Well thank you much, Mam.”

As I left, she called after me, “The name’s Joan, and there’s a barbershop over on Central.”

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Later that day, I had driven back from the village, parked along the curb, and walked along the property on the street side. The front yard had grown wild. I wasn’t much of a gardener, but anyone can pick up dead branches. I discovered the mailbox; rose bushes had grown around it. “Ow, damn.” I pricked my finger on a thorn while opening the dented metal box stuck on the end of a rusty pole. Not much inside. Some yellowed junk mail, and a crinkled letter. I brought the mail inside to sort later.

I walked through to the back of the house. I preferred the beach side. I shook out my bedroll and made myself a little hidey-hole in a corner. As I hauled the rest of my gear in from the Jeep, I imagined myself, for a moment, hauling it back out again. I didn’t want to stay in that spooky old

house. There was a heavy table in the kitchen shoved up against the wall. The lamp on it had a torn silk shade. My eyes followed the frayed cord to an outlet. I turned the lamp on. Nothing yet. On the grimy floor, the checkerboard linoleum had rolled up around the appliances. A battered water heater stood in the corner next to the sink. I would have to wait for the electricity to see if the fridge or stove worked.

Then I put my toothbrush and TP in the bathroom. It was a small bathroom off the kitchen: a sink, a toilet, and a cracked mirror. I guessed I'd have to go upstairs to wash up. But, damn, there wouldn't be any power up there.

I heard a horn blowing out front. The power man had arrived. When I opened the door, he was standing there. "Hey, buddy," he said in a loud friendly way.

"Hello, my name is Gus Kelly."

"I know" he said, and then he giggled. "This will just take a minute," he said, going to the side of the house.

Before long I heard a tap at the door.

"Come on in," I called.

He came in, looking about the house. "Odd," he said, "Hurricane Sandy did a lot of damage out here a couple years back, but this place was spared. Glad it didn't take the red maple. It was planted for Jerome. I guess he'd be your great-uncle, the one killed in WWII. What a shame that was, twenty-four years old. I'll leave these with you," he said, handing me some fuses. "The wiring is old and you're likely to blow a fuse." He giggled again.

Together, we checked the fridge; the stove and water heater it turned out used gas.

The lamp on the table had come on. It cast a yellow stain on the floor. Strands of torn silk like the white feathery hair

of a malnourished child hung from the base of its shade.

“Son. I’m Frank. If you need anything you can always find me in town. You met my sister Joan this morning at the power company.” I saw that he also wore a religious medallion around his neck, his being the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

“Thanks, Frank,” I said. “But I’m sure I’ll be okay. I’m here to do some thinking, taking a time out. Maybe do some writing. I’m a comedian.”

“You don’t say. I never took the Kellys to be funny people.”

“Oh when we get together, we laugh ’til we puke. That’s the tentative plan for this place, family reunions. There’d be room for everyone, we’d be right on the beach, and Manhattan’s not far away.”

“I guess the younger Kellys are different from the older Kellys. The ones I knew were quite solemn, pious.”

“Families change over time. When the Kellys came to America in the mid-1800s, they were religious. Irish, you know. Many devout nuns and priests, I’ve heard. But now we’re a bunch of regular fuck-ups. Oops, probably shouldn’t have said that. My dad would kill me.”

“Gus, things might get weird out here.”

“Weird?” I asked.

“Some folks claim this place is haunted.”

“Hey, I’m supposed to be the one with the jokes.”

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Noticing that I had worked up quite an itch, I searched the first floor for a bathroom with a tub. I needed to take a shower. Next to the little room with the kneeler, instead of a

bathroom, I found a bedroom. The bed was narrow, like a little kid's bed. A crucifix was carved in the center of the wooden headboard. The mattress was so damp to my touch, I jerked my hand away, and the pillow was stained with yellowed blotches of night drool. Rosary beads lay on the nightstand. Large black beads with a big silver crucifix. Like a nun's rosary. I'd heard that Teresa had dedicated a single bead of her rosary to each member of her extended family. And in that way she prayed for all of us. It didn't take me long to notice the funky old woman smell. Closing the door, I swore never to return to the foulness behind it.

I headed upstairs. If I was going to wash, I wanted to do it before nightfall. I walked quickly along the hallway, opening doors and peering into rooms unoccupied for a long time. Behind one door was a bathroom. When I turned on the taps in the sink, a bit of brown water spluttered out, then nothing. The claw-foot tub was not inviting. Seeing there was no shower, I didn't bother with the tub's faucets.

I was tempted to explore the third floor. I imagined that it was full of old junk, some of which could be valuable. I might find some heirlooms to bring back home. Mom would like that. My hand was on the door that opened to the attic stairway, but I panicked and didn't stop running until I was back in the kitchen.

I took a whore bath at the sink. The water was icy cold. I would have to get that gas turned on. Decided my hair could wait until then. I dried off with a T-shirt. It was the end of September and the days had shortened. Shadows from the setting sun played on the walls. The drapes hung, dusty and threadbare, so fragile I decided to leave them open. I figured my hidey-hole was private enough in its corner away from the windows. I felt tired and lonely and sad and a bit frightened in the big old house, so I crashed early.

I had spread out on my bedroll and closed my eyes. My dirty

scalp tickled. As I scratched at my head, I noticed that the hair at the nape of my neck had started to form dreadlocks. Then I drifted off to sleep. In my dreams I once again stood at the bottom of the attic stairway. With trepidation I climbed the stairs and found more rooms and more stairs. As I ascended through the house, the rooms became larger, more opulent, and a whole lot stranger. People lived in some of the rooms, but I didn't know them. I stopped, my heart pounding, unable to go on.

I woke to the sound of something creaking on the porch. The wind must be moving the rocking chair I had seen out there. But as I continued to listen, it sounded more like a heavy body dragging itself along the porch with a broken shopping cart. I sat up and pressed myself against the wall wishing that I had closed the drapes. The sound of the cart and the heft of the body it bore continued along the length of the porch and then faded away. I crept out onto the porch to see if there might be a homeless person hanging around, squatting, thinking the place was still empty. It appeared likely as the reek of piss hit me. My head began to ache. Felt like someone was tightening a vise around it. I didn't see anyone, but the urine stench pushed me back inside.

To tackle my fear and relieve the pressure in my head, I got up and brought the kitchen lamp into my hidey-hole. I wanted to do some comedy. Moving the kneeler from the prayer room, I noticed that the shelf on top functioned as a lid and concealed a compartment. I knelt in the grooves made by my great-aunt. How many hours she must have prayed, and for what?

"Good evening, Folks," I said. "My great-aunt Teresa was a very religious person and when she died, she willed her kneeler to me. Yeah, I'm the gloomy one, the one most likely to pray, I guess. (He imagined a slight titter in the audience). Well, my family was so religious, they had many sacred traditions, like holding onto the rosary while having sex. (A laugh that time). So the story goes, according to his

wife, my grandmother, the crucifix on the end of the rosary got embedded in my grandfather's head when he was in utero. And that's why he was such a crazy bastard. (A loud laugh).

Chuckling to myself, I got up from the kneeler, turned off the lamp, and crawled back into my bedroll.

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I woke up with a headache. I thought after a good night's sleep it would have gone away. Took an Advil and headed out for a walk on the beach. More drizzle. While walking, I thought about the bit I did last night. Planned to type it up on my laptop. I sensed defeat though, nothing's funny when you have a headache. I also planned to go into the village for a cup of coffee and see about getting the gas turned on so I could wash my ratty hair.

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And so the days inched by. The front yard was looking pretty good. I freed the mailbox from the rose bush. My daily routine began with a whore bath in the kitchen sink. I would stick my wooly head under the tap, but the weak trickle of water probably didn't penetrate through my dreads to my scalp, ditto the beard. Then I would take a long walk along the shore.

One day at low tide, I noticed breathing holes in the wet sand and dug up some clams. Big motherfuckers! As I knelt in the swash digging with a clam shell, the wet-plop as the sand fell from between my fingers and the scrape of the hard shells when I found a clam filled me with a child-like happiness. With what remained of the marine biologist in me, I recalled the scientific name for the surf clams: *Spisula solidissima*. Then, noticing that the temperature was plummeting, I collected a big pile of driftwood for the fireplace. Earlier, I had bought a high-powered flashlight for future exploration of the second and third floors. I was especially curious about the turret. I

have to admit it. I was scared as a six-year old, but I wanted to check out that turret. I imagined that I would find the secret that would explain why weird shit happened here. And I'd worked on some bits. This religious comedy was new to me, but it gave me something to go with. I was still troubled by headaches, and my dreadlocks pulled tighter. I wondered if they could be related – the headaches and the dreads. Some of the dreads coiled against my scalp, I imagined that soon I would look like a Persian lamb. I'm growing my beard in, too. I'm quite the hairy one. Creepy occurrences were happening, but I hadn't called on Frank, the power man. I didn't want him to think that I was losing it. But whenever I looked for the kneeler, I would find that it had been moved. I kept it in my hidey-hole for inspiration, but someone was determined to mess with it. Maybe a squatter came in when I was out. And my nightmares of never-ending floors and staircases and rooms recurred nightly.

My visitor with the shopping cart had come again. He dragged himself back and forth along the porch, pacing like a man with damaged legs. I sensed that he waited for someone to come home. Perhaps it was the ghost of my great-grandfather, and what sounded like a shopping cart was his canes. I knew he had walked with two wooden canes. Yeah, that's right. I'm starting to believe in ghosts. Must be some comedy there. Boo!

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One evening, I sat at the heavy kitchen table finally getting around to sorting the mail. Most of it was junk, which I tossed. There was a letter addressed to Teresa Kelly. Not knowing what to do with it, I set it aside. I would later forward it to my mom. As I sat there, I happened to rub my hands along the underside of the table, and I could feel deep indentations as if someone had gripped the side of the table so hard with their fingernails that they had made ridges. I had heard that my great-grandfather had powerful arms with

which he brutally beat his sons. Could a kid have made those gouges while being beaten? My cousin Pete was the one who told me that my great-grandfather had been a sandhog who had gotten caisson disease, or the bends, while rescuing another immigrant laborer when a tunnel began to fill with the East River. After spending his twenty-sixth year on a waterbed in a hospital, my great-grandfather – who ended up working for a labor union – was left with paralyzed legs. Hence, his powerful arms and his child-beating prowess. I also connected the awful stench of stale piss on the porch with the fact that he had died of kidney failure, a delayed effect of the bends.

But I had also heard that my great-grandmother gave birth at home on a kitchen table. She may have been the gouger. What a life these people had. Can't find any humor in any of that.

I decided to go to bed. The cold briny air made me sleepy. I had found the space heaters in a closet under the stairs. And I found a floor lamp that I had put in my corner. Strangely, the kneeler stood where I had left it. Turning on the heaters and the lamp, I cozied up under a blanket and picked up a book, a going-away gift from my friend Annie: Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*. As I read about the author's happy childhood growing up in St. Petersburg, Russia, I contemplated my not-so-happy childhood growing up in St. Petersburg, Florida. My parents fought all the time, hurling chairs and the most painful insults at each other while I hid in my room, reading with my hands over my ears. Once again, I was escaping into a book, getting lost in Nabokov's memoir. I wished Annie was here, so we could talk about it. Annie and I were buddies, the person I missed the most. I turned off the light to think about her.

I drifted off to sleep, listening to the rhythmic pounding of the ocean and the water hitting the stone jetty. I dreamt that I had positioned myself on the kneeler in a comedy club. Instead of doing stand-up, I was doing kneel-down. As I bent over the kneeler, the audience laughed loudly. A big guy was standing in front of me. He stood close. I watched as he

slowly moved his big knuckled fingers up and down the fly of his heavy-duty work pants. I was mesmerized by the whiteness of his hand and the coppery-colored hairs that sprang from it. I had this big stupid grin on my face. Then I noticed that the kneeler had turned into a trap. I was held by my ankles and wrists as if I were put in the pillory. The howling audience rolled in the aisles.

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I woke up in the dark to the soft sound of a violin. The piece sounded amateurish but sweet and heartfelt, reminding me of those rare happy days playing Jedi Knight as a child with other children in an empty field, a Tatooine of our imagination. The melody drifted – eerie and celestial, yet impish – from the dark recesses of the window seat adjacent to my hidey-hole. As I strained my eyes trying to see into the darkness, the kneeler caught my eye. It had been moved again. On it, a figure, small and bent and covered in a long shawl, silently fingered a rosary. Then the little creature opened the lid of the kneeler and fondled something inside. First, the music faded away and then the apparition of the woman (my great-aunt Teresa?) vanished. But that nasty smell, that old lady funk lingered. My head hurt, and my face felt stretched as if pulled back violently by my dreadlocks. I put my head in my hands, and the dreads clinging to my scalp pulsated. My fingers became entwined with my hair and rooted to my head. As I pulled desperately trying to free my hands, I broke through and heard a racket that sounded like BB pellets hitting the hard oak floor. I turned on the floor lamp and saw the black beads of Teresa's rosary strewn about the room. Turning toward the kneeler, a dreadful curiosity rose in me, compelling me to see what the compartment held. As I lifted the lid, I saw knotted rope. I lifted the rough, hairy coils out, uncovering what lay beneath them – two chains with straps, one longer than the other, both covered with blood-encrusted spikes.

Wearable barbed wire. I shuddered with disbelief. Gagged by the smell, I dropped the rope. I knew about flagellation, Bergman's Seventh Seal being my favorite movie, but that smell of old blood and imagining my aunt scourging her flesh filled me with a sickening fear.

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Mid-morning of the next day, a knock came at the kitchen door. It had taken me a while to get back to sleep after my fright the night before. So I had slept later than usual.

"Are you there, Gus?" I heard that too loud voice of Joan from the power company.

Then I recognized Frank's nervous giggle. "It's just us chickens," he said.

"Coming," I called.

"Good morning," I said, opening the door.

Joan and her brother Frank stood there with big smiles on their faces. Upon seeing me, their smiles shrank.

"Brought you a few essentials from the village," Frank said.

"Thank you," I replied. "Let me help you with those." The three of us placed the bundles on the table. "You can give me the receipt and I'll repay you when I drive into the village. Need to go to the ATM."

Along with the groceries, they had brought three cups of take-out coffee, and we each took a seat at the table.

"Are you okay?" Joan asked, looking at me with concern.

"Not sleeping well," I said, hoping that that would explain my disheveled appearance.

"If you don't mind me saying so, you look like homemade shit,"

Joan said.

"Now, now," Frank said. "A young guy living by himself is bound to let a few things slide."

"But your eyes," Joan insisted. "What dark circles."

"Like I said, not sleeping well."

"So what's keeping you up at night?" Joan asked.

"Lonely, I guess." I couldn't tell them that I was afraid of an old lady ghost and her rosary beads.

"Nothing weird going on?" Frank asked. "You haven't seen any ghosts, have you?"

"Nope," I said. "This coffee is good. Nice and strong. Just how I like it. You know, Joan, Frank, I'm an atheist. I don't believe in anything supernatural. If I saw a 'ghost' (I made air quotes), I'd figure I was seeing things."

"Have you been seeing things?" they asked in unison.

"Of course not, that would be crazy."

Standing up to go, Frank said, "Tomorrow is Sunday. Have you been by St. Joseph's?"

"Didn't I tell you that I'm an atheist? I asked.

"Yes," said Joan. "But nobody's really an atheist. Certainly not a Kelly. The Kellys never missed Mass on Sunday or Rosary and Mass every Wednesday evening. Well, if you need anything, you know where to find us."

"Thank you for stopping by," I said, closing the door behind them.

I hurried into the bathroom to look at my face in the mirror. I wanted to see what Frank and Joan were so concerned about.

The mirror was small, corroded, and cracked, so it was understandable if my face appeared distorted. Nonetheless, I was disturbed by what I saw. My face appeared stretched, my nose slightly flattened, my eyes half-closed, and my mouth really wide, like the stretched-leather face of a mummy I had seen at the King Tut exhibit back home. My beard had grown in willy-nilly, and my hair – I'd never seen anything like it. The dreads snaked all over my head – Medusa-like.

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Later that day, hoping no one would notice my freakish appearance, I drove into the village. The fall colors were amazing. The trees! And the brisk air, so refreshing. The never-ending drizzle had finally let up. My mind felt sharper than it ever had in sleepy St. Pete. I stopped by the ATM and then the power company to reimburse Joan for the groceries. After that, I headed over to Peg's Diner. I missed the Internet. I took my laptop in and ordered up a burger and fries. Had an email from my mother. She said that she had received the letter I had forwarded to her, the letter I had found in the mailbox addressed to Teresa Kelly. She went on to say that it had been sent by Pete who sometime after he wrote the letter had been put in an old folks' home for dementia. In the letter, however, he had promised to fulfill a final request of Teresa's, to give her kneeler to her grandnephew Gus Kelly.

I thought how I had been joking when I pretended that she had willed her kneeler to me. It was part of my act. I felt suckered, as if the kneeler was a trap that had been intentionally set for me.

My mother wrote, "It's nothing you'd be interested in, but if you find it, bring it home. Your father may want his aunt's kneeler. And it could be valuable."

As I scrolled through, I saw Annie's name, Subject: miss u.

Now that made me happy. I told her that I missed her too and was enjoying the book she had given me.

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Driving back to the house, I was confident of a good night's sleep. I had eaten a big supper and was happy about Annie's email. I shrugged off the bad dreams and the hallucinations; it was obvious to me that living in this shithole of my dead relatives put bizarre junk in my head.

I bedded down in my hidey-hole with Annie's gift, *Speak, Memory*; reading it would bring her close to me. I found it reassuring to read that Nabokov had experienced mild hallucinations at a young age. Before long, I was asleep, dreaming of the upper stories and the turret. I found a winding stairway in the turret, which I began to climb. There was a room at the top that I wanted to see. But the steps were unending, and with terror I realized someone hovered right behind me. I woke with a start.

As I settled back down, I heard a noise outside, a clumpy, jangly noise. It sounded as if someone wearing heavy boots clambered up the wooden steps. The boots sounded loose, untied, unbuckled. Yes, that was the jangle, the buckles. The sound stopped before reaching the porch.

Once again, I sat up and pressed myself against the wall. Then I heard a man's thin voice coming through a crack in the window. It sounded hoarse and dry. It could have been the wind. Then I closed my eyes and felt cold breath on my ear. The breath was foul, like stale pipe tobacco, that is, if the pipe had spent the last seventy years in a grave. The voice, now next to my ear, spoke in an angry whisper:

I've just been cleaning through my pockets and came across a little card upon which were prayers to be said at the battlefield printed by St. Anthony's Guild. Also along with it a letter, requesting I memorize same. I had to smile when reading – "When dread & Terror fill my heart/ Help me to act the soldier's part." Honestly these barbarians don't fill me with dread and terror. As far as I'm concerned the more of these fiends I can annihilate before they get me the better. If you could see the filthy snapshots and drawings most of these vermin carry in their pockets. If you'd seen the lowest of tricks used on our men.

I remembered those words as if I had read them somewhere. Yes, they were from a passage in Jerome's letters sent home from the war. The voice stopped, and I trembled with fear. I imagined that he wore his boots untied and unbuckled because his swollen feet had been frostbitten and gangrenous. He had fought in France during the winter months. Saw many of his men die and their corpses freeze before his eyes. Again the killer headache, again the tightening of the dreads. I heard what I knew now to be combat boots descending the stairs onto the beach. He must have passed by his red maple in its glorious fall colors. My great-uncle Jerome, before going off to war – or so the family story goes – had vowed his virginity to God.

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Some days passed, I was losing count, the wind howled and the old house creaked and groaned and popped. I thought of going into the village to the barber's, but I didn't want to risk it. I looked like a serial killer. I figured at first glance they would Baker Act me – or was that just what they did with crazies in Florida? I would have to cut my hair, but I feared making it look worse. I wanted to explore the attic and the turret, but I was too chickenshit. Safer to stay in my hidey-hole these days. Terrible odors still assailed me: the old lady stink, the reek of piss, and the tobacco from the grave. And along with the wretched smells, I continued to hallucinate

sounds of people walking about and images of a tiny shawled figure.

I worked on my new comedy act. I still had the kneeler in mind as a prop. I knelt on it. I wanted to make fun of religion, but so many others had already done that. Some of the greats: Richard Pryor, George Carlin, even Louis C.K. Didn't see what I could add. Like the bit about priests fucking little boys in the ass. That was apparently accepted by the Church, but masturbation was a sin. Well, I guess if you had a ready supply of little boy ass, you wouldn't be tempted by the devil to jerk off. Was that funny? I suspected that religious comedy had already been done – only better. I opened the lid of the kneeler and put my hand in, the rope and chains pricked my skin. I pulled out the knotted rope. After taking off my shirt, I lashed my back swinging the rope over my shoulder. The rope scored and burned my back and the palm with which I grasped it. I took the larger chain out, and using the leather straps on either end, I tied it around my waist. The tighter I pulled, the more I pricked my flesh. The shorter chain I tied around my right biceps. With the spikes breaking my skin, I gave my back a few more lashes. My curiosity satisfied and feeling a rush of endorphins, I put the rope and chains back into the kneeler.

< [11](#) >

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To my surprise, that night I had a happy dream. I go into this club, and I put the kneeler on the stage. I kneel on it and say, "I just spent two months in an old house with the ghosts of dead relatives, and I've been praying like shit ever since."

Gasps and guffaws. And shouts of "Welcome back, Gus."

*

My parents had suggested that I stay for a couple of months,

be back home for the holidays. Before it got really cold. I figured I'd head back in time for Thanksgiving. That meant I'd be spending Halloween, my favorite holiday, here.

*

One afternoon, I was so cold that I figured it had to be warmer out in the sun. I hobbled out on stiff legs to the tool shed for a pair of pruning shears. Earlier, I had seen a pair with bright red handles that should be easy to find. I had oiled them and sharpened them up a bit. Yes, they were propped against the rusty blades of the push mower just where I had left them. There was also a pair of gardening gloves, stiffened with age, which I grabbed to keep my hands warm.

Out front the hedges rose above my head. The reaching warmed me up. The rigidity was leaving my body, and it felt good to stretch my limbs. I wasn't at it for long when a taxicab pulled up. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw Annie paying the driver.

"Hi, Gus," she said as casually as if we'd been hanging together the day before.

"Annie, is that you?"

"You didn't think I'd let you spend Halloween all by yourself."

"But how did you get here?"

"By train. Amtrak, then Long Island Railroad. Took a taxi from the station."

"I don't know what to say. The place is a mess."

"That's how it should be – for Halloween. But aren't you rushing it? What's with the hair?"

"Let me help you," I said, reaching for her backpack.

"But seriously, man, you look different, like an aging celebrity who had work done."

"You never saw me with dreads and a beard. I'm the same ol' Gloomy Gus," I said, faking a crazed look. "Come see the best spook house ever."

"Yikes, it is spooky, and that's strange," said Annie when her eyes fell on the prayer kneeler. "Why do you have an antique French *prie-dieu*?"

"This thing?" I asked. "What did you call it?"

"A *prie-dieu*, it means Pray God. Saw one on *Antiques Roadshow*."

"It's the prop for my new routine."

"I can't wait to see that."

< [12](#) >
*

Before we knew it, it was Halloween. I had built a roaring fire in the fireplace with the driftwood I had gathered. We were sure there wouldn't be any trick or treaters stopping by, so we planned our own party. I had helped Annie set up a hidey-hole next to mine, and we discussed our plans.

"I think it would be great fun to tell ghost stories," I said.

"I don't have any," Annie replied.

"That's okay. I've got enough for the both of us." Then I continued, "After we're good and scared, we can check out the turret."

"Sounds like fun," she agreed. "And after I show you what I have here, you'll see that it will definitely be fun." At that, she took from her backpack a bottle of Jack Daniel's and a bag of weed.

“I’ve been sober for weeks,” I said. “This is going to be the best, fucked-up Halloween ever.”

I hied myself into the kitchen and grabbed a couple of coffee mugs while Annie rolled a fat doobie.

We sat cross-legged on the floor, facing each other. I poured the drinks and Annie lit up. After sipping and smoking, I felt fine. Maybe a wee bit paranoid. I had found some candles in a drawer in the kitchen, and their flickering light added the perfect touch to our scary night. I told Annie of my recent ghostly experiences, about the old lady wrapped in a shawl saying her rosary on the kneeler. The sweet, tender music of the violin, and of course the funky smell of my great-aunt’s bedroom. I mentioned how her rosary had ended up tangled in my dreads.

Annie appeared to be interested in my ghostly tales, but, of course, she was stoned. I then told her about the sounds I had heard coming from outside. The heavy body struggling along the porch with the aid of two canes that I had at first mistaken for a shopping cart, and then the combat boots with jangling buckles. I mentioned how the porch stank of piss when I snuck out to investigate. I told her about the voice that spoke to me in the darkness, how his angry words smelt of rotting flesh and stale tobacco.

Annie moved closer to me. I could tell I scared her, maybe she feared I’d gone mad. But then she laughed and said, “My you’ve had a most sensuous time in Babylon – so many extraordinary sights, sounds, and smells.” She was an atheist. She didn’t believe in ghosts either.

“Come on,” I said. “Time to hit the turret.”

With flashlight in hand, I led her up the first flight of stairs. We walked along the hallway on the second floor until I found the attic door. She walked behind me with her hands gripping the waistband of my jeans, her fingers curling in the

belt loops. I started to think there might be real fear behind her laughter. We climbed the stairway to the third floor. I knew I was scared.

“Now, the turret must be to the right,” I said. “It’s probably behind one of these doors.”

I eventually found the door. Behind it wound an old staircase.

“Just a little bit further,” I said to reassure Annie – and myself.

We climbed with the jerky beam of the flashlight showing the way and making shadows on the walls. When we reached the top, the light of a hunter’s moon streamed through the windows into a circular room. It was one of those big red moons. With its sanguine light and my flashlight, we could see that the room was in disrepair. Cobwebs hung from the windows. Chunks of plaster had fallen from the ceiling. Broken glass from the windowpanes lay on the floor. In its day, it must have been spectacular with its panoramic view. But its day was done. Everyone who had ever lived here was dead. The specter of decay had eaten into my soul, but I knew I didn’t have a soul. Why did I even think that?

“Over there,” Annie pointed. “What’s that?”

At first it looked like just another of the many piles of rubbish that lay about the house. As I aimed my flashlight at the top of an old chest with missing drawers, I could discern several items tossed on the chest: a warped violin, a pair of combat boots, and two wooden canes.

Annie screamed in terror. And grabbed me.

Then she laughed. “I get it. You put those there, planning to include them in your ghost stories. Damn good trick, my Halloween buddy.”

“But this is the first time I’ve been up here,” I replied, my

throat tightening in fear.

“Yeah, right.”

< [13](#) >

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We hurried back down to our hidey-holes, took another hit off the bottle, decided we'd had enough weed, and passed out.

*

It wasn't long before I woke up. Glad that Annie believed I'd just played a Halloween trick on her, but I knew differently. I had a terrible night, dreaming frightening dreams and waking to insomnia, a pattern repeated over and over again. At one point, awake or asleep, I didn't know, I was dragged to the heavy kitchen table and placed on it face down. I choked and retched as I breathed in the foulest odors. People around me prayed in Latin, *“In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.”*

As I struggled to get up, they pressed my body hard onto the table. I grabbed the sides of the table with my hands, finding the impressions of another's fingernails, the ridges I had discovered shortly after arriving here. One of the people held my head down while another tugged at my shorts. This can't be happening. A man's heavy body was being supported as it struggled to crawl on top of me. He grunted as he shifted his massive arms and torso on my back. He thrust his hands, powerful hands, into the tangles of my hair, twisting and pulling hard, as if planning to use my hair to hang onto for his brutal ride. His legs flopped helplessly about without any weight or strength. They felt shriveled, but the weight of his upper half was bone crushing. I heard the rattle of canes falling to the floor. And I knew then that my long-dead great-grandfather, the patriarch of the Kelly family, had mounted me.

The others prayed, "*Gloria Patti, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto. Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.*" I recognized Joan's loud, brassy voice, and I heard Frank, with his nervous giggle, egging on the ghost of the man who moved methodically on my back. An old woman's voice whispered, "My father, thy will be done," and a young man cried, "Dread and terror fill my heart, Oh Father. Help me to act my part." Although I tried to hold my breath, the sickening old lady odor and the putrid reek of gangrenous feet, along with the burning smell of urine – all invaded my nostrils.

Then came a piercing pain as if my lower body were being torn apart. I recalled a scene from *The Dunwich Horror*, only instead of Sandra Dee on her back on an altar stone, it was me on my stomach on a kitchen table. How could the man who got the bends rescuing a fellow worker in the underwater tunnel do this to me? How could the brave soldier with a Silver Star do this to me? And how could the woman who spent her life in prayer do this to me? I didn't understand.

The monster on my back hissed in my ear, "I'll make an altar boy out of you yet."