

JOSEPH KREIDEL

The Colors of Redemption

IWAKE IN THE SILVER LIGHT OF DAWN, in those few moments before shadow. It's a Tuesday in August and the world appears to be setting its table with the good china. I make coffee; shower and dress quickly while it's brewing: Dickies, *B&D's Landscaping* button-up, steel-toed boots. I wore this yesterday. I'll wear it tomorrow, wash the whole lot on Friday. I grab some coffee and my keys, walk outside.

I live in a duplex on a corner lot in the rumpled part of Delray Beach, Florida. Walk a half mile to the east and you'll need some serious paper to purchase a place for your four-poster bed and collectibles. Here, on the west side of I-95, you can lay your head for saved pennies. All the doors have locks.

The house is peach. Move it 2640 feet closer to where sand meets sea, patch up the ugly places, sow some seed, plant a tree here, a bush there, and you could call this a bungalow, sell it to a yuppie looking for the necessary accoutrements. As it is, a giant billboard squats on the open space of what could be a nice yard east of the house. It's two-sided, shaped like an arrow, situated to sell itself to traffic from three directions. Landlord made enough off of that decision to buy his mistress a used Lexus. Guaranteed himself some strange for the life of the car and the Japanese know how to build them. Cheers. The billboard is fancy: made out of what look to be venetian blinds with smarts. Every 26 seconds the blinds flip and a different ad appears. My favorite is for a local plastic surgeon, Dr. James Donahue. It says, *Be A Better You!* The surgeon's all flesh and sinew—no spirit matter. Hombre's got a smile like a dorsal fin. There's a model next to him: blonde, busty. Her tits are perky and bright-eyed, like good students raising their hands in the front row.

The blinds clatter. *Voila!* There be the goodies waving Good Morning. Christ. Do they or do they not have the answer?

When I signed the papers in '03, after the fun had already started, loads and loads of nitwits seemed to think that asking me "Why?" would lead to Revelation. For them, I think. But they thought it would be for me. Like there are good reasons. Like this leads to that and then onwards and upwards to those and them. Pish. Not on this planet. If I had been foolish, if I hadn't learned that Truth is a shy houseguest and that dragging it out under the harsh light of inquisition is a sad thing like slow death or trampled tomato plants, I might have said, "Because the world is too small. Because I tried Jesus, cried my hallelujahs on Sundays, wore out my knees begging for wisdom and forgiveness and enough light to see by. Because I tried love—the real deal, no fucking around. Because I tried fucking around: took it to women with vigor, my face serious and my questioning parts silent behind high walls. Because it's dust to dust with precious little in between. Tell me, what's left but spilling blood?"

People don't want to hear that shit. Instead, I took to responding with things like: "You ever been to Yellowstone? There are powerlines *in* the park. People towing shiny aluminum capsules behind beefy Fords like they're bound for Mars. Surely there's a better way to see a moose, you know?" or, if the questioner happened to be hiding some T and A, "My, my. Not now, but perhaps after I finish these lamb shanks we could, you know. . . ." Revelation. Ha.

A flag football game. The last week of Basic Training. The Army loves—fucking LOVES—athletics. Per the book, it is on these, the fields of friendly strife, that Joe-blo GI and associates develop the sort of internal geography essential to the sad but necessary task of stomping the life out of any and all living things present on other fields and other days: Teamwork, Heart, Guts, Etc. I ran an out route. I wind milled at the line, left my coverage marveling at the shape and tone of my lower half, chugged hard for ten yards, and then peeled for the corner like I could see the Pearly Gates closing up ahead. Clayport threw high. We'd been running this play since high school and he rarely put the ball anywhere but right in the bread basket. I went up, snagged leather. Big kid from another company t-boned me just as my right foot hit the ground. Snap, Crackle, Pop, Ladies and Gents. The show's over. Draw the curtain. Your star has indeed broken his leg. Hip too. Kid said he slipped. Said the grass was wet. Gideon comes to mind.

A few surgeries and a couple months of rehab and I was out: too many rods and screws holding my bones together to ably serve. The Army said I could go forth and set off metal detectors wearing civilian clothes. The Lord, He works in mysterious ways, don't He? Three months after my release, Clayport and the rest of

my company deployed to the Sandbox, went off to help the Baghdadis settle their differences.

My girlfriend at the time, Samantha Woodrup, a woman whose love for me was like the flickering of silver in sunlight, told me I had a new lease on life, a blank slate on which to draw whatever I pleased. I told her that I'd grown weary of her ill manners and sour poontang, that I was soon headed for the bigger and better and would she please be so kind as to remove herself from the premises. This, of course, was long after my goodness had already up and vamoosed. I saw him going—recognized the shuffle in his step and the faint smells of burnt oil and old tears that moved in front of him and resettled in his wake like pigeons fluttering away from pedestrians and their clap-clap—but I didn't chase him. Fuck him. Fuck him and his horse.

Nouri's smoking on his patio when I pull up. I feel better about my place in the order of things when I have to honk, it being that I drive the truck and call the lunch breaks on this crew. Every morning, I pick up Nouri and we drive to the warehouse, meet Willy and Pedro, load our trailer with ride-on mowers, weed-eaters, gas-powered blowers, shears and saws and saws on poles and Hefty bags, and then we go to work cutting grass and trimming trees and shrubs for people who swing big ones and make bucks bucks bucks, people whose homes in Boca Raton, Florida are the size of strip malls.

Nouri stubs out his cigarette on the wall and makes his way towards the truck. He's gangly and concave, moves like thick new leather. Sad brown eyes hoist his bushy brows. Give him a backpack and in one hand some plastic with a red button and watch the stampede for the exits. He looks like *ka-boom*.

"Beautiful day," I say when Nouri opens the passenger door.

"God's own wonder. A flurry of handwork with a cherry on top."

Nouri grew up listening to Tupac, Dr Dre, Public Enemy, and Notorious B.I.G. His English is good. Good enough that the US Army enlisted his assistance translating for the troops upon their arrival in Baghdad. Good enough that Mom and Pops and Little Sis got hacked up by fellow Shi'is who frowned upon Nouri's collegiality with the occupiers. Good enough that Nouri talked the US of A into a visa after rotting for eight months in the Jordanian streets. Good enough that he and I can shoot the shit.

"You do anything last night?"

"One, two, three chicks"—Nouri keeps tab on his fingers—"at the same time."

"Tsk, tsk. Always with the sex, Nouri. What'd you do before you came to this country?"

He sings, "Left hand, right hand, once some Vaseline in a soda can!"

"Raise your glasses!" We both hold our empty hands high. "Long live the American Dream!"

“Here, here!”

This is our routine. What we do every day like clockwork.

In the days between my discharge and his deployment Clayport and I would get sloshed on three-dollar whiskey, the kind of shit homeless drunks buy with their hard-earned nickels and pour down their gullets in fistfuls. Somewhere between when the world would start to shimmy and slide and when my brain receded into the darkness of its own absolute oblivion, I would ask Clayport to hurt me: slaps, punches, burns, anything to bring the fuzz to clarity, to put my bewilderment and all its monogrammed baggage on the 3:10 to Yuma, on the long flight towards arraignment and accountability. With any luck, we’d have ourselves a hanging. We’d burn the body and roast some marshmallows over the ruins; celebrate my return to actual life, which I’ve heard described as movement with purpose. Once, he put a cigar out on my chest. Hurt like hell: one shade shy of heartbreak. It was cathartic, I said. Cleansing. Put the world in contrast.

Nouri and I sit on a bench outside Publix eating our deli subs. The day has turned into the kind of hot that makes you feel foolish, cheesy. Real people don’t live in this shit. The up above looks like a child drew it: the sky is blue; the sun is yellow; there are no clouds. I imagine God in His heaven, laughing and pointing, one hand shielding His eyes from the unbearable silliness of it all. He makes noises that sound like this: *Hoo-hoo! Hee-bee! Better throw some sunblock on, kiddos! This one’s gonna be a real scorcher! Har-de-har-har.*

The morning was a bad dream. The Warren’s was an absolute jungle. A royal fucking mess. Thick weeds filled the beds and crowded the house. You could have lost a baby in the high grass. They’re a new contract so I went to the door to introduce myself and establish friendly relations. Lizards made tracks as I approached, headed for the hills. Their gyrations were a display of real panic. I rang. The woman who answered the door was tall. She had the sort of long, tan, lightly-muscled limbs and tight ass that make a man want to stand up and get recognized: backhand a villain or win the Medal of Honor or some such.

I said, “Good morning.”

She looked at me then looked at her watch. Did this thing with her eyebrows and mouth that translated: “Ah. Too early.” Like if I’d have showed up two hours from now instead of right-this-very-minute-now she’d have taken me in the back room and smacked my ass pink and red. But, alas, too early to screw someone who didn’t wake up next to you. There are rules. She shut the door in my face. I kid you not.

Nouri and I watch as this ancient blue hair, bent and shriveled like old fruit, no taller than a taxi, climbs into her car and, head craned to the rear, drives forward

over a median the size of a picnic table. She is still looking backwards when her bumper comes down on the hood of a fifty thousand dollar Caddy.

Nouri, he sees this and says "Jews." As though we're dealing with arithmetic and this is the sum of his ones, twos, and threes.

I about lose my mind. When I can breathe I ask, "Jews?"

He nods. "Jews," he says. "Jews do these things."

We drive up to the DiPino's. The house and grounds are big enough to play host to the United Nations. I half expect to round the corner and see Kofi Annan sprawled out on the pool deck, sipping a gin and tonic and soaking up some sun, arguing the finer points of world peace and AIDS eradication with Tony Blair and Jimmy Carter. The place is that big. No gardener. Some folks just don't know how to live.

This job takes all afternoon. The DiPinos are particular: they like their greens to look slick.

I walk around back to a ten-foot fence that wraps enough good earth to house a suburban 7-Eleven and toss the rest of my sandwich between the black bars. It lands at the outstretched feet of Tuesday, a cheetah who, I believe, can be counted amongst my friends. She sniffs then munches. Her eyes flicker. Tuesday's got the demeanor of an electron. If she were human I would say she had problems.

I crouch, say, "You raised in a barn, Tuesday? Eat like a lady: chew, converse between bites."

She flicks her tail, feline for fuck off.

"Bitch."

From behind me: "You're doing what, exactly?"

I've been feeding this cat for two months, never been busted. I stand and turn, see Mr. DiPino. I've got inches on him. His face is mostly nose, for him a bulbous, fleshy appendage the majority of which sloughs off to the left and just hangs there, droops. His hair is flat black and chrome, cut close. His eyes are buried.

I look from him to Tuesday and back to him: "Trick question?"

"Oh fuck me. A real cowboy." I listen close: nothing in his voice but words.

"No cattle, Mr. DiPino."

He snorts, says, "Tuesday?"

I shrug. "I see her on Tuesdays. Keeps me straight."

Mr. DiPino laughs hard. One burst. He's got the kind of laugh that doesn't change keys for the singer.

I flick my chin at Tuesday and ask, "Why?"

Mr. DiPino surveys his kingdom; looks me in the eyes. He turns his face to God Almighty and opens his palms, says, "What? The animals get to be free?"

Bzzzzz. Shlomp, shlomp. Clickety. Clang. Smack.

Mr. DiPino turns and walks away, says softly over his shoulder, “Do your work. Don’t feed the kitty.”

Clayport took to sending me letters from downrange.

Dear Tree, You’d love it here. The sun shineth. There’s food aplenty. And the women—most of them, at least—are completely covered head to foot. Perfect place for a homo like you. Love, Clayport

Dear Tree, It’s taking me forever to jack off over here. Me dong looks like grilled sausage. Please send a small, live woman. Yours truly, THE ‘BADDEST MOTHERFUCKER IN THE VALLEY

Tree: Today was a bad day. There are no hills. I feel like I can see the whole long plain of the future stretched out in front of me. It gleams, but I know for a fucking fact that it’s a mirage. —Clayport

Oh my. Today, after a firefight in the ‘Big City, in those moments of loud silence after something awful when you can hear everything on the whole goddamn planet, one of the dudes in my platoon, ‘Beau Peep (his real name’s Charles—we call him ‘Beau Peep because his girl is one ugly fucking duckling and in Arabic you put the possessed in front of the possessor and lose the ‘of’: Peep’s ‘Beau = ‘Beau Peep), he starts screaming, “Proclaim the mystery of faith, motherfuckers! Jesus came! Jesus wept! Jesus died! He’s coming again, motherfuckers! He’s coming!” He keeps screaming this until our First Shirt comes up behind Peep, clamps a paw over Peep’s mouth, and starts rocking him back and forth, saying, “Shhh. Shhh. Shhh.” Creepiest shit I ever saw, Tree.

Dear Tree, Remember in Basic after our first beat-down when I started to honk and Sgt. Wallace yelled “Puke on your buddy!” and I turned and blew my shit all over your boots? Please return that meal ASAP. I’m hungry as shit. —Clayport

In the last letter I received, Clayport told me that some jokester in his company had written on the shitter wall: “Here. Believe in the trees.” This was in Baghdad.

Some number of breaths later Clayport was killed by an IED. The cleanup crew pulled his left boot—and foot and ankle—from the branches of a date palm. I know because I was foolish enough to ask around. Sometimes I see his torn and snarling humvee. I see the body of this dead boy, my best friend, Bobby Clayport, lying on the road, burst at the seams like an old baseball, guts crawling toward the

river, an empty complex of water and salt whose spirit matter used to look very much in line and shade like my own.

Dusk. The world is muffled, hazy. Bone-weary. I turn onto Nouri's street. The Persians, back when they were called Persians, claimed that you could know another man by the thoughts that you think when the two of you sit in silence. I think of dry leaves in November and the rattling sounds they make when the wind blows. Nouri's soul, I know, is paper thin. There are gray hairs on his heart muscle.

I stop the truck in front of his place. Nouri gets out, says, "Another day, another dollar. See you in the future." I watch him walk slope-shouldered to a door that has nothing behind it but a few pieces of cheap furniture.

Try this. Go to your priest. He will have shaggy eyes and smell like a library book. Ask him where redemption lives.

He will point to the cross and say, "In the blood."

Riddle me this: Who among us got saved when boy Jesus bashed his thumb with his carpenter's hammer and dropped blood to the Holy Land's dust? How many drops does it take to tip the scales, to swing Judgment?

I grab a Shiner from the fridge. The walls are thin and I can hear the neighbors and their clunking and moaning and Oh oh ohs. I remember reading somewhere that nine out of ten men would be willing to hang off a roof to watch people screw. The Oh oh ohs crescendo. I raise one fist to share in their uplift.

I flip on the TV. Reality show. A handsome couple and their handsome friends are on a tour boat in Paris drifting down the Seine. They pass the Eiffel Tower. The female half of the couple—she's beautiful and looks to be dumb as grass—offers: "They should make that into a ride. Like a Stratosphere or something. That'd be more fun." Her man, he hears this and shakes his head real slow. Picture agony in business attire on a hot day: sweaty, bushed, holding it together. His voice like crunching steel wool, he says, "Goddamn."

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