

Saints

“Terminal,” said Burt, dabbing his eyes. “I just can’t bear that word.”

“Me neither,” I said. “It reminds me of airports.”

“Oh, Ted,” he said, batting at me with a fistful of tissues, trying not to laugh. “Oh, Ted,” he said, moving quickly into a sob. “Oh, Ted, what are we going to do?”

I sat up from my slouchy position on the sofa. I looked him right in the eye and grabbed his free hand and I said, “Garlic.”

This is how I ended up at a garlic sanatorio in Baja, California. Miraculous, the stinking rose. It’s part of the lily family. When it’s crushed it releases a compound that is antibacterial, anticarcinogenic. The stuff can melt tumors. They gave me drugs, too, there. You can be at death’s door and be so happy that you ring the bell yourself. I broke my leg while crazy dancing in my room. That’s how good I felt. There wasn’t even any music!

It was a bad break, too, that leg. A bone pole sticking through a tent of skin. But in no time they (the saints in white coats, the curanderos) came through with yet more pills. It took a while for them to get a lady doctor — a medico — to fix my leg and I didn’t give a hoot, because the santos saved me. I should have gone into shock. I should have died. Instead I floated out of the window and settled onto the limb of a Boojum until help came.

I remember everything, although I shouldn’t. I remember by flutey voice, the flick of my tail, the lightness of my bones, the detachment I felt from the chaos below. That coatlicue, the death goddess, bent over that frail man. And there were things I couldn’t figure. Were there marbled eggs, nestled somewhere in a soft, grassy tussock? Or were they spotted eggs, nestled in a heap of twigs, straw, mud and hair? And where was my mate, the one with the yellow eyes and violet, glossy body?

Two months later I smashed a finger with a hammer to get more goodies, more wings. And that’s when Burt blew his top. He had sched-

uled me for surgery back in the States. I hadn't even agreed. They're still injecting garlic into rats there, I told him. I would not have a private room, and probably would have to share with someone who coughed all night or watched soap operas all day. Without the sea, I'd never sleep, I said. I'd be prodded by fat nurses with thick shoes and varicose veins. They'd put my balls in formaldehyde and feed me applesauce. Burt didn't listen. He said he'd had enough of the quack therapies. I had almost died from the leg break, he reminded me. The macrobiotic diet made me look like a refugee and perhaps I needed more protein. Self-absorption, he suggested, was perhaps a faulty path to healing. What I needed was to be among family and friends, to volunteer and have a piece of chicken and a big glass of white burgundy. This from a man, who, during Rolfing, let another man massage his brain pan. Through his nostrils, no less. This, from the same man who once suggested I drink my own urine.

He'd also bought me Buster. Buster was the result of one of many dreamy, goodie-induced stupors, when I babbled like a toddler. I was getting shots of DADS, diallyl disulfide, three times a week. The magic solution, mixed with corn oil, was supposed to shut the cancer down. The cancer cells were like dirty gin joints in my holy city and DADS was going to shut them down.

Burt rubbing my head (sacral cranial massage) after a DADS injection, said "What can I do for you? Name anything. Anything. It's yours."

"I want," I said, swooning under his feathery fingertips. "I want."

"What is it, baby, what do you want?" His lips grazed my forehead.

"A bird."

"A bird?"

"Yeah."

"What sort of bird?" Surely, I had shocked him, but he was a good sport.

"A budgie. A little yellow pudgy budgie tweetie bird."

"A parakeet?" guessed Burt, who didn't know a thing about birds (actually, neither did I).

"Whatever," I slurred. "Just make sure he's yellow."

Burt, that sweetheart, came back with Buster the very next day. Burt, who spoke no Spanish! How did he manage? I pictured an awk-

ward, flapping pantomime at a pet store in La Paz. La Paz! Burt must have driven 90 miles! A white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel.

“What’s this?” I said, when he presented his gift.

“Your bird.”

I looked and grinned. I tapped at the cage and the bird moved closer, trying to nibble. “I don’t get it,” I said.

“Your bird. You asked for a yellow bird.”

Indeed, Buster was yellow. A peach-faced lovebird with a yellow body, a wee parrot really.

“Well, then, it’s settled,” I said. “He stays.”

Burt! He stood out. He had trouble as a lone guerro. A gay guerro with bleached blond hair! But he tried. Lord knows he tried. He listened to Spanish tapes, but alas, when he tried to trill he made a gagging noise. Words like *arriba* were out of the question. Burt was scared to death of Mexican men (who were smaller than him, even). “What in the hell are they saying, Ted? Are they saying something about me?” he asked again and again.

We’d spent a lot of time on our balcony that overlooked the impossibly green sea, the fakey green Sea of Cortez, him nursing margaritas (rocks, no salt) and me comforting him. When I wasn’t ridding the warm currently of air. Hovering.

The room was swank! It cost more than the universe. We had our own room with canopy bed, an ornately tiled soaking tub, and that sweet view. All day, the rustle of palm fronds. All day, gull noise and that peculiar smell of sea and baking glass. Why had I waited? Where had Mexico been all my life? We’d lived in California for 15 years and Mexico had been next door, a neighbor we’d never visited, the only bordering foreign land, save Canada. Canadian Rockies, who cares! Cold, high frosted peaks, no way! Hot sand, yes. The stunning heat of Baja loosened the damp’s grip on my bones until I had unclenched every muscle. A lifetime of clenched muscles, I loosened in Mexico. My jaw and joints felt oiled with the diffuse light of dusk and dawn. The sanatorio was a hacienda, a dreamy place, whitewashed and breezy. All that tile! So cool against the feet.

Why, oh, why, would I choose an American hospital, I asked Burt. Hospitals: evil smells, masked men, flourescent lights, gurgling sacks of fluid. (You look at your own fluids all day in an American hospital. They’re right there, by the bedside! Your own life juice!)

“Never,” I told Burt. “Never am I going to a hospital.” And then,

for emphasis I added, "Over my dead body."

He'd sob and say, "It's so ironic, so fucking ironic."

And I'd soften and say, gently, "What's ironic, Burtie?"

"We escape AIDS and you get cancer."

And then I'd wisecrack and we'd fight and he'd cry and we'd make up. I let him sleep off his emotions, sleep for hours on end, whereas before, we'd make love until we were limp, until all tension was gone from us.

I've been a slave to the male form since I was nine, when I'd ask my cousin if I could see him naked. He had a nice superstructure and I wanted to see the blueprints. He did it! He peeled off his flannel shirt and then his jeans. The crazy bastard! He charged me a dollar! And I stood there gog-eyed. Burt used to make me that: gog-eyed and dumb as a box of hammers.

The cancer put a strain on Burt professionally, too, poor thing. He had to conduct his floral design (never, ever call him a florist) business at roadside phones. He'd come back to the clinic, and, in my drug-induced euphoria, I'd catch snippets of narcissus, freesia, dahlias and banksia. I'd be wrapped in a terry robe on a chaise lounge with my face tilted toward the water and Burt would chatter. It's hard to admit, but he was killing my buzz. The man I loved! The man who wore my ring! That same man could penetrate the best drug-induced euphoria like a coffee grinder. I'd drift to sleep and, instead of dreaming of men without flannel shirts, I'd be dreaming of orchids. Orchids! I hate orchids! Their alien craned necks and floozy tongues. Ack!

Burt, do me a favor, don't do orchids," I said once.

"Orchids? When?" He looked up from a magazine. He adored the sun, but now with my cancer looming like a nagging aunt, he wore sunblock and floppy hats.

"After I'm dead. At the funeral."

He swatted at me with the magazine. "Don't talk like that."

How sensitive he was. What a pair we were, a hammer and a gardenia. A gardenia — it crumples when you breath on it! It stains from human breath. It gets loved to death.

And then, after swatting me with his magazine, he giggled. A child's laugh. A fabulous laugh. I crowded him onto his chaise lounge. I nuzzled until I found his scent.

"What, then?" he said, trembling.

"What, what then?"

"What flowers, then? What flowers do you want?"

If, and when, I want..." I drifted a little. "I want birds of paradise."

"You got it," he said sniffing into my hair. "You got it. A whole flock."

But even as I loved him, more often than not he annoyed me. He was cloying, like the stench of dying lilies. I told him to go to Cabo, to Mazatlan, for a rest, for some dancing, but he refused. Sometimes when I looked at his teary eyes, I would, for no explainable reason, get angry. When I was supposed to be visualizing peaceable cells, I could feel the cancer cells taking up arms. Only I wouldn't show the anger. I'd go cold. I'd shut down.

Frosty the boyfriend, Burt called me during those wintry times. And then I'd melt a little, and I'd buy myself a little peace with mordidas, little bribes. I'd send him to the zocalo for things. Don't go far, I told him, don't get lost on those dusty roads in that sere landscape of the backcountry, a terrible place of killer bees, cacti and secret airstrips for drug runners. He'd hung a little medal of a saint from the rearview mirror of the jeep because he was trying, because he was scared, and because Catholicism in Mexico is as infectious as a tropical bug. Burt, I'd tell him, go to some little town and get us some good Tequila and pretty fajos. Burt, get us some retablos for the living room. Burt, I'd call, looking for a laugh. Burt, say arroyo,. And he'd say it, gagging.

There was a lush courtyard at the hacienda there that I loved. I'd take Buster there, where there were other birds. Buster let me stroke his fat little head (he was lonely, a single lovebird, after all), but when Burt tried it, Buster sunk his beak deep in to my lover's finger. The ruckus! Burt wailed about infection and rabies until I calmed him. Also, Buster, who normally babbled in a tinkley, sing-songy way, positively screeched when Burt got too close to his cage.

"Did you hear that? Did you? That's ear-shattering," Burt would say.

Sure enough, Buster was screaming his lungs out, fluffing up in defense of attack, flapping, futilely flapping, his wings. His little bird tongue wagging. Licorice eyes wide.

"Beady-eyed bastard!" Burt made claw hands at the little bird.

Another time I caught sweet Burt rattling Buster's cage. My Burt, lover of cats and plants.

I had to calm both of them. Throw a towel on Buster's casa. Make Burt a margarita. Some days I was nursing Burt, and not the other way around. He was scared to death of death. And Buster, little Buster,

who had no nose — perhaps he smelled that sheer terror on my lover's breath.

Finding Bur in bed with a little Mexican hombre was not that bad. Who could blame him? He'd been under a lot of strain, poor thing. The water was making his hair bad (like hay, actually) and his skin was perpetually dry. I wasn't mad! I was laughing so hard I slapped my leg, the one in the cast, and it hurt like hell. The Mexican guy had a little cigar butt of a dick and was so scared that he left with a pillow around his little brown waist. As if a 13--pound man in a hip-length cast could have given him any trouble! It was eye-wateringly hilarious, it was!

"So," Burt wanted to know, "just-what-was-so-fucking-funny?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'm sorry, Burt, I don't know. Honest."

"You need help," Burt said.

"That why I'm here."

"You're a drug addict, Ted." He crossed his arms.

What could I say? Yes! I said. Yes. This, from a man who didn't take aspirin. Who got woozy on white wine. I loved drugs! Shamelessly. Drugs! They were flying machines. They reminded me of good things to come! Of freedom! Of lightness. Whereas sweet Burt was a weight. An anchor of pity, so heavy he was with fear and dread.

"I'm getting better," I said calmly. Oh, the more calm I was, the more emotional Burt got. That was the way things worked. There were roles. It happens. Roles happen. He was the wife.

"You're confusing high for better."

He'd stumped me on that one. "How do you know that?"

"I can see it. See it in your face," he said.

This was true. I looked like a puffy cloth doll with receded eyes and floppy body. Had once been a big guy. Six-two in flats, Burt liked to say. But now I was a wee thing. A Burt-sized thing.

I couldn't explain my bouts of hysterical laughter. Non-terminals don't understand.

"So," I said, changing the subject. "You wanted emotion from me, now you have it."

"And what the hell emotion is that?" Burt's face was flushed. Storm a-coming.

I said, as tenderly as I could, "I'm happy! Happy for you Burt. You deserve a lover. You deserve happiness. You deserve better than an impotent man who reeks of garlic." It was a heartfelt statement born from the lucidity that only a dying man can have. I did want Burt to

be happy. I wanted everyone in the world to be happy.

“Peace on earth, goodwill to Burt!” I hooted.

He stamped his foot at this and hollered. He’d lost a big client because he’d ordered the wrong kind of lilies — or was it orchids? — because he was stressed out, because I wouldn’t listen to reason. Because I wouldn’t have radiation or chemo or surgery. Because I wouldn’t let them do it, those masked doctors, those organ bandits. I wouldn’t let them do it because I was sentimental about my cojones and a million other reasons.

Burt pleaded: He had needs too, couldn’t I see that? Couldn’t I just eat a lot of garlic at home?

That’s when I laughed again, and that’s when he hit me. Hard, with a ringed fist. I went backwards into Buster’s cage, which crashed to the floor tiles. Before I knew it I was face to face with the midget parrot, who, unharmed, twittered noisily, then settled, peering at me, gnawing nervously at his bards with his little curved beak.

I had landed on my left arm, which made the sound of bubble wrap being stepped on. Luckily, Burt had felled me near a phone. Then my sweet Burt dialed the number for me and put the receiver next to my panting mouth. Venga! Soon the saints would come — I’d dreamt they were nuns with wings! Those goodie-bearing nuns. Just the thought of them took my mind off the fact that my cement leg had buckled and was crumpled beneath me at an odd angle.

My bones were hollow and light now, like bird bones. Soon I’d take flight.