

The Song of Songs

John Haggerty

Word around town is that Marjorie will give you a blow job

if you ask—she will just drop down on her knees and do it right there in the street. People have forgotten why they believe this, but everyone knows it to be true. They also know that she’s crazy, that she’s got a razor in her purse and she’ll cut you for absolutely no reason at all, so they give her a wide berth.

She works the graveyard shift at the Gas ‘n’ Go, a few miles past the edge of town. It’s a little outpost of progress on State Route 93, and it doesn’t do a lot of business. Every once in a while some thousand-yard-stare salesman will venture in to pick up enough coffee and mini-bottles of industrial Chardonnay to get himself the rest of the way to Mobile, but most of the hours of Marjorie’s shift are empty and quiet. She pushes the big floor broom around, adding one more small layer of sheen to it, or she makes sure that the candy bars, the Snickers and Baby Ruths and Butterfingers—sweets that she never allows herself lest the indulgence lead to sin—are tidy and straight. Things are spic and span when Marjorie is around.

In spite of the suffocating heat outside, the store is frigid—her skin is always goose-bumped by the chill of the air conditioner, and the fish-belly glare of the fluorescent lights adds no warmth. At eight second intervals, the security camera pans across the clerk’s station, and she is rendered in monochrome on the tiny monitor beneath the counter. When she looks down and sees herself captured there, she is always sitting completely still.

Outside, swarms of insects rise nightly from the forests and marshes. They converge on the minimart, driven to madness by the oasis of light in the bottomless dark. They flutter around every source of brightness and hurl themselves at the windows with a frenzied energy. When she closes her eyes she can feel them, thousands of tiny bodies crashing against the glass. She imagines the

minimart the way the bugs must see it, astonishing and brilliant and beautiful, and she wonders at the agony of their craving, always one invisible barrier away from the thing they want most.

At dawn, after nodding silently to Amir, the Pakistani man who takes the morning shift, she goes outside to sweep up the bodies. They are dusty and gray in the early morning light. She sifts them as gently as possible into the garbage and whispers a little prayer for the salvation of all of the creatures who have wasted their lives in the worship of false gods.

Sometimes, when the minimart feels its coldest, Marjorie takes out her Bible. She has had it since she was eight years old. She doesn't read it anymore—she finds it confusing—but the leather cover, worn after three decades from its original black to a mottled grayish brown, feels to her like living human skin. She lays it against her cheek and imagines that the loving hand of God is touching her there.

But God has two faces. He is love and wrath both. Jesus loves everyone except for maybe the moneylenders, but his Father says, “The end of all flesh is come before Me, and behold I will destroy them with the earth.” She learned these things in the group home where she grew up. It was supposed to be a secret, but Marjorie could see it everywhere, even in the nuns who ran the place. Sister Brenda was love, saying kind things to the girls, stroking their hair. When Marjorie became sad that her mother had given her up—she imagines herself abandoned on the steps of a church in a snowstorm, like in the movies—Sister Brenda would hug her and tell her that sometimes we have to let go even of the things we love very much.

Sister Nadine was different. Sister Nadine was wrath.

When Marjorie was thirteen, Barbara, the prettiest girl in the home, asked Marjorie to kiss her. She wanted to practice, she said, and of all the girls Marjorie looked the most like a boy. They hid in the pantry behind the kitchen after lunch. Marjorie tried to imagine someone looking at her the way men looked at women on TV but couldn't. Her heart was pounding as she closed her eyes and leaned

toward Barbara. Sister Nadine found them just before their lips touched, and though she couldn't prove that any crimes had been committed, she kept a hard eye on Marjorie after that.

A few weeks later, Sister Nadine caught her reading the Song of Solomon underneath her blanket after lights out. Marjorie had discovered the Song during Bible study, and read it over and over. By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not, she whispered to herself under the rough sheets that always smelled of chlorine. Thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes. The coarse blanket was pulled back and Sister Nadine stood above her, pale and angry, the spirit of death. The nun grabbed her arm and yanked her out of bed, dragging her through the dorm, past the mocking eyes of the other girls, into the nuns' office.

"Give me your Bible," Sister Nadine demanded after she had seated herself behind the desk. She took out a small wooden box, highly polished and inlaid with mother of pearl flowers. Inside it was a razor blade. Sister Nadine turned to the Song of Solomon and began to slice the pages out. "Not all of God's word is meant for everyone," she said. The blade moved smoothly through the paper, making a soft sighing sound. Sister Nadine put the pages into the lower right-hand desk drawer. "The world is waiting for girls like you," she said. "It's just waiting." A few days later, Marjorie crept into the sisters' office and stole the razor blade.

Pieces of the forbidden word of God still float through Marjorie's head, though she hasn't read any of it in many years. He will lay his head between my breasts, she thinks. His left hand should be under my head, and his right hand should embrace me. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.

When the minimart is very quiet, she fantasizes that she works at a gas station near a busy interstate off-ramp close to Disney World. Great recreational vehicles pull up and unleash swarms of chubby children who run amok in the air-conditioned freedom of the store, pulling fistfuls of candy from the display racks and scattering them

across the floor, screaming and tearing around, their arms flailing wildly overhead. She catches the eye of the parents and gives them a comforting smile. They look so tired. They are ashamed of their offspring. But she is here to help them.

She cleans up after the children and soothes them all with stories from the Bible, Jesus casting out demons and making lepers whole. Afterwards, the husband, a brown-haired man with kind eyes follows her into the stockroom. He is wearing a yellow polo shirt and brown khakis. He thanks her. He is overcome by gratitude. He puts his hand on the middle of her back, just beneath her shoulder blades. His palm is warm, and the pressure is firm. She thinks she would like that.

I sleep, but my heart waketh, she thinks. It is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my love, my dove, my undefiled.

Outside the minimart, life has gotten away from God. It was perfect when it was penned up in the garden, but Eve, in her wickedness, let it all out. Now it's everywhere, and He can't do a thing about it. It is in the ants and mold that collect on a slice of bread left on the counter overnight. It is in the rats that rustle through the garbage in the vacant lot near Marjorie's bus stop. It is in the maggots squirming on the road-kill carcasses that dot the shoulders of the highway. It presses in on everybody from all sides, it is the heat and the humidity and the fetid odor of the swamp. It drives people to madness, and there will be no deliverance until Judgment Day, when Jesus will return to make things clean again.

The boys race around town in their muscle cars, making them roar like beasts. Girls ride next to them, lips a glossy pink, crosses hanging between their breasts. On Saturday nights sometimes a car will pull up to the curb next to her while she waits for her bus. "Blowjob," the boys will shout, and then they tear away, cackling like crows. The men from town come to the minimart for the dirty magazines. They arrive in the dead of night, looking furtively around, and then bring them to the counter, the *Hustlers* and *Gents* and *Juggs*.

Most of them won't look at her as she rings them up, her fingers quick on the greasy keys.

One day at the supermarket, Marjorie sees an old woman in the produce section, and the idea springs into her head that it is her mother, that she has come to reclaim Marjorie, her soul cleansed, her sins redeemed. Marjorie approaches her, and sees that the woman is running her hands aimlessly over the peaches. Sensing Marjorie's presence, she turns to her. "Honey," she says, and Marjorie's breath catches in her chest for an instant. "Could you help me? My cataracts have gotten so bad," she says. "I can't see them at all anymore. They're just going in a pie, but I still like them to be perfect."

Marjorie wants to throw herself at the woman's feet, to wrap her arms around the woman's legs, to bury her face in her dress. She looks over the peaches, pressing their firm flesh, rejecting any blemish, handing them over one by one. Their hands touch with each peach; the woman's skin is soft and warm. "You're a nice person," the woman says. "You're very nice."

A younger lady, someone in middle-age, comes bustling up. Seeing Marjorie there, her eyes narrow in disgust. She pulls the old woman away, whispering fiercely in her ear. Marjorie can only hear snippets of what she says, Marjorie, crazy, whore, the usual words. The old woman's mouth opens in alarm and she drops the bag of peaches. They are so ripe that they split as they hit the floor. After the two women leave, Marjorie picks up the fruit and buys them. They are heavily bruised and already going bad by the time she gets them home.

That night, she steals one copy of each of the pornographic magazines. She trembles all the way home on the bus, thinking that the police will sniff out her crime. In the small room she rents in the back of a large gray house that always smells of cat urine, she takes them out and examines them closely. She puts her body into the positions of the women. She studies the men's penises. But most of all, she looks at the faces. The men always look so angry, and the

women as if they are in terrible pain. Perhaps, she thinks, this is God's sacred plan. Perhaps this is the way that women are given to understand the suffering of Jesus.

A few weeks later, a stranger walks into the store. She looks up and he is standing just inside the door, a sarcastic smile on his face. He is dressed in a black velvet jacket and a black t-shirt. It looks as though his dark, curly hair hasn't been combed in days. A cigarette hangs from the corner of his mouth. He is sweating from the heat.

After watching her for a while, he walks slowly through the rows of merchandise. You can't smoke in here, Marjorie thinks, but says nothing. He drops the cigarette to the floor and grinds it out under the toe of his shoe, which is a gray suede and sharply pointed. She wants to take out her dust pan and sweep the butt up, but stays still behind the counter.

He picks up a bottle of salsa, examines the label for a moment and then throws it against the wall with startling force. It shatters, sending red salsa bleeds toward the floor and onto the white tile. Marjorie catches her breath. She thinks she should look away. She should call someone. She is afraid that things will get out of hand.

He walks to the wall of glass-doored coolers in the back of the store, reaches in and takes out a can of Budweiser. He opens it deliberately, watching her as he does. He drinks half of it and then slowly turns the can over, dumping the remaining contents on the floor. He walks toward her, pulling the stock, bags of chips, bottles of sunscreen, off the racks as he moves. Marjorie puts her hands in her lap so that he can't see them shaking.

When he reaches the checkout counter, he stands and looks at her for a few moments. Then he leans forward, reaches out and touches the nametag pinned above her right breast. She is having trouble breathing, and the spot where he touched her, even through the polyester and plastic, feels as if she has been burned.

"Marjorie," he says. She looks at his face for the first time. She realizes that she hasn't done this before, hasn't had the courage to look at him. He isn't handsome—his cheeks are acne-scarred and

furrowed. His eyes are too small and too close together. He holds her gaze. He doesn't care what she thinks of him. His skin is gray.

"This place is fucking disgusting," he says with a little smirk. "Doesn't anybody ever clean up around here?"

There's a long pause. Marjorie can't trust herself to speak. She feels hot. Where, she wonders, did all of this heat come from?

"You know, you're quite the topic of conversation in town," he says.

"Me?" She tries to dry her hands on her polyester slacks, but they come away still wet.

"I almost drove right through this little shithole burg. Almost drove right on by. But I stopped to knock a little dust off, wet my whistle. I'm having a few drinks and I ask if there's any possible way to have a good time in this town. Well, those barflies look at each other, and they kind of laugh. And then they mention you. Marjorie. Crazy fucking Marjorie." He reaches out and strokes his finger along her cheekbone. There is sweat on her forehead, prickling her hairline. "Why do they say those things about you?" he asks.

"What things? What do they say about me?" Her voice, even to her, sounds small and meek.

"Oh, they talk. They talk and talk."

"It's not true," she whispers.

"Why would they say it if it wasn't true?" he asks. He grabs her hair and roughly moves her face from side to side, squinting at her profile. He smells like whiskey and bitter cigarette smoke and sweat.

He releases her, and the back of her head burns where he grasped her. "Come here," he says, stepping back from the counter.

"I can't," she says.

"Come here."

She walks around the counter to where he is standing.

"Your friends in town, they say that all I have to do is ask. Is that true?"

Marjorie stands in front of him, eyes fixed on the floor.

"You want to make it hard on me?" he says. "Okay, let's do it

your way.” He pauses, staring at her. “Give me a blow job.”

She has performed oral sex once, decades before, on a man named Jack—Jack Burzinski—who owned an insurance office where she worked as a temp. Sister Brenda got her the job when she turned eighteen and had to leave the home.

“Anything for the sisters,” Jack said when she and Sister Brenda first showed up at his office.

Jack was a blustery, round-faced man in his late forties. She was the only person in his office. He was in the middle of a tight spell, he told her, but things had to get better eventually.

She loved her job, making neatness out of the chaos of Jack’s files, answering the few calls that came in. She saw the cycle of holiness in the insurance business, the acts of sacrifice and virtue in the premiums, the grace of the Lord in the claims paid out.

Her desk was brown and had one wide central drawer and two drawers each on the left and right of the knee well. It was the first thing she had ever felt was hers. She knew each place that the vinyl laminate was chipped or blistered. The wrath of God for the sins of the world had been visited even on the desk, and she sometimes caressed its lesions, the signs of perdition and redemption, the beginning and the end of pain. At the very back of the bottom right drawer, someone had carved the word “cock” with a ballpoint pen, going over and over the letters until they were embedded in the soft pine, black with ink like a tattoo, ridged like a tribal scar. She stared at it for minutes when she first found it, and she would sometimes, when Jack had left the office on an errand, sneak her hand back there to run her fingers along each letter in turn.

One night when she was working late, he came back to the office after what he had told her was a business dinner. He stood leaning against the wall, watching her work. His face was red, and his suit was wrinkled. “Hard worker, I’ll give you that,” he said. “But you’ve got to learn to relax. Too goddamned serious all the time.” She smiled at him, not knowing what to say. He watched her work for a few more moments. “Come here,” he said. “I’ve got

something to show you.” He put a firm hand on her back, a hand that she could feel outlined in fire. He was wearing some sort of cologne; she wished that she knew what it was called. Names whirled through her head. Frankincense. Sandalwood. Musk. It mixed together with the smell of alcohol in a way that made her dizzy.

He led her outside. Behind the office was a narrow alley. The cheap Chinese restaurant next door made the place smell like rancid meat and old grease. He pulled her close to him and moved her hand to his crotch. She had never touched a penis before, but guessed what it was from the whispered conversations with the other girls in the home. He pushed her to her knees in the slimy gravel. This is love, she thought over and over. This is love. Afterwards, she stood up, the strange taste of his semen still in her mouth, reaching out to him. He pushed her away and left her there, confused. She spent a few minutes picking grit out of the skin of her knees. When she got home she saw that her best skirt was ruined.

When she arrived at work the next morning, Jake took her into his office and told her that he was going to have to let her go. Tough times, he said. Nothing personal. Marjorie nodded and walked back to her desk. He followed her. “You can’t stay here, Marjorie,” he said. “You have to get out.”

When the police showed up, Jake told them that she was stalking him and that she had made inappropriate advances. I’m a married man, he said. Happily married. Everyone knows that. When the police searched her, they found the razor in her purse. Looking through her desk, they saw the word that had been carved there. She spent a long time in the back of the patrol car, which stank of urine and vomit. She would have liked to clean it, but her hands were cuffed behind her back.

“Bitch, I said I wanted a blow job.” The man is becoming agitated now, bouncing a little bit on his toes. Her eyes meet his and she sees what will happen if she refuses him. A vision of the mighty wrath of God is visited upon her. He will hit her. Tentatively at first, just a slap across the face, but then harder and harder, until his full

force, the sum of all of his muscles and weight, is behind each blow. She will move away from him, her hands covering her face, but he will hound her around the room, punching her again and again. She will give out little involuntary gasps as his fists land. She will hear a great crack in her head as her jaw breaks, she will feel the grate of her ribs moving, bone on bone, and bits of her teeth sharp on her tongue. She will lie sobbing amid the splatter of her own blood.

Her body shakes with fear. Her eyes dart frantically around the store, searching for some avenue of escape, lighting briefly on the racks of cookies and cupcakes, the display boxes of motor oil and antifreeze, the coolers of soda, the fluorescent lights above, the glossy tile below, until finally, exhausted, they land on his shoes. They are cheap and flimsy, the leather thin and stained. The shoelaces have broken and been knotted in several places. She feels a sudden pity for those shoes, pressed into such hard service. When she raises her gaze, she sees him with a startling new clarity. The nap of his jacket has worn through in spots, and the cuffs are frayed. His neck is dirty, and his eyes, when she meets them, look nervously away. Suddenly, she knows him, knows everything about him—that his life has taught him brutal lessons about dominance and violence and the consequences of weakness. That he is sad, and he is angry. He has failed and failed and failed again. His life is empty, desolate, dry. He has been damaged by the world, crushed and deformed into the tired, shabby man who stands before her now. She thinks again of the beating he would give her, of the secret horror that each blow would force him to carry for the rest of his life, that he would never be able to forget the feeling of his knuckles on her bones. Poor boy, she thinks. Poor boy. She realizes then that she alone can save him from this, and the knowledge fills her with an irresistible rush of joy. I am a wall, she thinks, and my breasts like towers. She is mighty, invincible, full of light. The minimart, its sterile floors and orderly rows of goods, looks to her now as the insects outside must see it—a miraculous ark, ineffably radiant. She falls to her knees before him, her body incandescent. My love is a river, she thinks. My love is the

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ocean. My love is brighter than the sun. She is the word of God—immaculate, stunning, finally whole. For love is as strong as death, she thinks. Love is as strong as death. Love is as strong as death.