

Of Gods and Women

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THE BUSHMAN and I walked side by side, both of us outfitted in our Sunday best, his patchwork beard of auburn and grey was so long that it covered the burgundy tie his wife had picked out for him. I kept thinking that if he tucked it into his shirt it would look like his chest hair had connected itself to his face.

We trailed The Bushman's wife and daughter who were trying to maintain polite conversation with my parents. The Bushman and I had come to know each other well in the past six months—often at the breakfast table after I stumbled down from his daughter's bedroom, racoon-eyed and half-naked.

'Overhung?' he would ask with globules of bacon grease dripping from his beard.

'You know what you need? Hair of the dog,' he would say as he carved a long slit of a smile into the thickets on his face, before waving me over and piling a mound of bacon rashers on to a plate.

'What was it like having your dad teach at your school?' I asked.

'It was terrible,' she replied. 'I was teased mercilessly, everyone called him The Bushman.'

Our recently polished dress shoes clicked rhythmically against the pavement as he and I discussed the idea of god and religion.

'I think people should be able to believe whatever they want,' I said. 'My concern is when they start to preach their beliefs and force them upon others.'

'There was a girl in our class who's a Born Again Christian. She once chastised me for swearing when I said *shit*,' I said.

'What? *Shit*'s not a swearword!' responded The Bushman.

'That's what I said,' I replied, smiling gladly.

‘Stupid cunts,’ he said with a jocular laugh.

Born in Germany, The Bushman was fluent in both German and French, though his gruff Australian colloquialisms and heavy use of expletives would never make anyone suspect as much.

He maintained an active political voice—his passionate leftist rants against the draconian policies of the government were often published in nationally distributed newspapers. He bounced around the public system teaching for twenty years before opening up his own school for troubled youths hailing from environments of violence and abuse. He brought them in thrashing and full of rage, he let them exhaust themselves against his unwavering patience and then blanketed them with security, education and the knowledge that they were worth a damn.

‘I don’t know what comes after all of this,’ said The Bushman gesturing outwards. ‘But while I’m here I’m going to dedicate myself to the things I can see and feel, to the things that matter to me.’

‘That right there,’ he said pointing ahead to his wife.

‘That’s my god, that’s my religion, that woman,’ he said, turning to me.

‘I live for her, and as long as I can I’m going to do whatever it takes to make her happy.’

His eyes began to glint with moisture and he turned away from me. I knew that he had nearly lost her twice in the past, both times to cancer, once of the skin and then the breast. She’d survived though and he’d only lost pieces of her instead, but I could only imagine what that could do to someone.

‘I think your parents have a great relationship,’ I said.

‘You don’t know anything,’ she replied. ‘She just shouts at him and complains all of the time, and it makes him sad. He’s started hiding bottles of whisky all over the house, and he sneaks sips of them when he thinks nobody is looking.’

‘Really?’ I asked with genuine surprise.

‘Yeah, how do you think it would feel to be treated like shit all of the time by the woman that you love?’

Up ahead, the conversation died and our relatives split into their more comfortable familial pairs. My mouth dried up and my throat felt cracked and splintered like swollen wood because I knew how I wanted to respond to The Bushman. I wanted to tell him about my gods and religion, I wanted to turn to him and say, ‘Frankly, sir, that is exactly how I feel about your daughter. I’m not sure that I believed in anything before I met her.’

But instead, I said nothing, because The Bushman’s daughter had ended our relationship three weeks earlier, she had obtained a job in another city and was moving there shortly. We had agreed to be civil on this day and to maintain decorum for the sake of our families.

And I knew The Bushman well—he wouldn't lie to me. Had I said what I wanted to, he would simply have looked at me with his earnest, youthful eyes, and in the creases of his weathered face there would have been a deep sadness. The Bushman knew—just as I did—that his daughter did not love me. She saw too much of herself in her mother and too much of The Bushman in me.

And so The Bushman and I walked side by side, in silence, the rest of the way to the University.

Following the graduation ceremony, The Bushman found his way to me. He placed my hand within his well-calloused grip and he shook it firmly. He looked at me with fatherly concern and said, 'Best of luck.' He then turned and left, hand-in-hand with his gods and mine.