

The Hand that Holds the Tear

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On bad days, Geoffrey smashes everything to bits, but today is a good day. Today, the boys from the vocational school are coming to visit the workshop. Geoffrey presses his access badge against the black square; the red light turns green and he thrusts his shoulder against the heavy metal door. A smell of aerosol vapours mixed with sawn pine welcomes him. And maybe a hint of sulphur.

Geoffrey's work brings him nearer to Jesus. Next week, it'll be his turn to use a fine brush to supply our Saviour with a crop of dark brown hair. This week, he is responsible for covering nativity scenes in artificial snow. That's fun too, but you have to wear a face mask, otherwise the fumes will make you feel woozy.

The source of the love that Geoffrey feels for God and His Son, Jesus Christ, is the love that he feels for his mum. Her words, but mostly her actions, show him every day:

- That God is love;
- How God is love;
- How God's love is in everything; and
- How, above all, God's love is unconditional.

How different this is from the love of his biological father, who called him the R-word before he took off for good.

His mother claims that his biological father is the devil. "I was impregnated by Lucifer," she once said.

The workshop is a hall with large tables arranged in rows and a wide aisle running through the middle. Geoffrey's workbench is to the left of the aisle,

opposite Emily's. Although it is still early, she's already in her seat, head bowed down over her work. Her hair looks like a sandy beach under the summer sun. She wears it in two high ponytails that fan out on either side of her head like palm trees. Her bright orange padded jacket is zipped up to her chin. Geoffrey doesn't understand how she can be so cold the entire time. He himself only wears a T-shirt during work, otherwise his armpits get sweaty from the heat lamps above their desks.

"So," Emily says when she spots him. "Ready for the visit?"

"I was born ready," Geoffrey says. He sits down.

Emily looks unimpressed. "Are you going to clean up your table before they arrive?"

"I think I'll keep my best work out for now, that way our visitors can admire how skilled I am with my equipment." He stands and picks up a nativity scene from his table. "Have you seen this one?"

It's a miniature stable made of cherry wood with a thick layer of glistening powder on its roof, as if it has been snowing for nights on end.

"That one's nice," Emily says.

"I know." He chuckles. "Your baubles are nice too."

"You really think so?"

He nods. "I like the red glittery ones best. If I look at them for a while, it feels like I'm disappearing into the colour, especially with all those glitters."

Her cheeks flush and she returns to her work.

Much rather than in the sparkling red of a bauble, Geoffrey would like to disappear into the vivid blush on Emily's cheeks. She reminds him of the crackle of ice and snow under your boots on a clear-skyed winter morning in the mountains. If he looks at her for too long, his belly starts feeling like a hive of bees making honey.

It's a little after eleven. The boys (and two or three girls) from the vocational school follow their teacher down the aisle of the workshop. They look about two years younger than Geoffrey and smell of sweets and cigarettes. He himself went to vocational school for a while, but he couldn't keep up with the

general subjects. When he was allowed to start in the workshop, he didn't hesitate for a moment. He likes working with his hands.

The pupils and their teacher gather further down the workshop for a short speech given by Carol, the workshop's director. After that, the pupils are getting an extensive tour of the workshop and its amenities.

Three boys lag behind, hanging around in the aisle. Geoffrey reshuffles the nativity scenes on his workbench, so that his best work is on display. The boys look nervous, they circle each other constantly, tittering softly. Maybe their pimples are itchy but they're afraid of scratching them because they might burst open and pus would run out. They do have a lot of pimples, Geoffrey thinks.

He quickly turns his head and faces forward, but it's too late.

"Well, well," one of the boys says, "you like to feast your eyes, don't you? You a faggot?"

The other two snigger. The breath of the boy who addressed him smells like damp bread. He is wearing a sand-coloured cap with dark brown figures on it that remind Geoffrey of playing cards. The cap is so high on the boy's head that it would probably fall off if he moved too abruptly.

"Hey dickhead, I'm talking to you. Do you speak English?"

Hesitantly, Geoffrey looks at the boy, whose eyes are red-rimmed and scaly, as if he were allergic to Christmas spirit. Behind the boy, he sees Emily looking at him with concern.

Geoffrey looks straight ahead again. "Of course I speak English."

"Listen to this, lads," – the boy nudges one of his chums with an elbow – "retard's got a mouth on him." He brings his face closer to Geoffrey's. "Say, retard boy, have you ever fucked a girl then?"

With his left thumb and index finger, the boy forms a circle through which he passes his right index finger. He starts panting with his mouth open. His buddies chuckle. He adds his right middle finger to his index finger and starts moaning softly.

The love of God, Geoffrey knows, is in everything, because God himself is in everything. God, Geoffrey's true Father, is part of all things that exist, and

that is why it's wonderful that so many things exist and why we should cherish them, just as we should cherish people, because they too are able to feel the love of God deep inside their bones, if only they open their hearts to Him.

One by one, the boy adds the other fingers of his right hand. With each added finger, he moans a little more keenly, until his whole right arm moves back and forth between the fingers of his left hand.

Emily opens her mouth to speak. Geoffrey looks at her and shakes his head.

The boy stops moaning. "Over here!" He points at Emily. "This traffic cone right here. That's a girl, right?" The boy takes a few steps towards Emily and looks at her inquiringly. "Where are your tits?"

Emily looks at her hands in her lap. Her little palm trees are standing perfectly upright. Her head is a deserted island.

The boy turns back to Geoffrey and points a thumb over his shoulder. "Have you ever stuck your pecker in that traffic cone?"

A low baritone echoes through the workshop. "Dwayne!"

The boy jumps upright and salutes his teacher as if he were a soldier in the army.

Carol begins her speech.

Geoffrey is not an R-word. The only thing that's a little off about him is that his brain sometimes short-circuits. On these rare occasions, there's nothing but electricity up there, his head telling the rest of his body: "Sort it out yourself, I've had it."

There's medication for short circuits, very heavy medication. He takes it every day. As long as he takes his meds, there's nothing wrong with him really. "Sometimes I think you're the only normal person in the world," his mum once said to him. "The rest of them had better start taking pills."

Carol has been speaking for less than half a minute when the boy—Dwayne—turns around again. He has his phone in his hands.

"First, you have to learn how to do it," he says, tapping the screen of his phone. He turns back towards Carol and holds his phone behind his back, the screen facing Geoffrey. A video is playing:

A naked woman is leaning forward. She is holding on to a low wall with her arms outstretched. Behind her is a stallion. The horse comes forward and puts its front legs on the wall.

The sound is off, so Geoffrey doesn't hear the woman scream; he only sees the grimace on her face and how it simultaneously expresses pain, fear and regret. He averts his gaze.

After what feels like an eternity, Dwayne puts his phone back in his pocket. He turns around smirking, and whispers, "Try *that* on the traffic cone."

Geoffrey looks in the direction of the nativity scenes on his table, but all he sees in front of him is the horse. He tries to concentrate on the knowledge that God is love, how God is love, how God's love is in everything, and how God's love is unconditional, but it doesn't help. The hatred he inherited from his father liquefies his mind. His thoughts come leaking down like molten rock, seeping through every fault line in his body.

He gets up from his chair and quietly crosses the aisle to Emily's desk. She startles. From her table, he takes a small metal ornament that looks like a long teardrop with a sharp tip. It has a ribbon attached to it, so that it can be hung on a Christmas tree.

Emily looks up at him and anxiously shakes her head.

Geoffrey steps up to Dwayne and positions himself behind him. He wraps a blue-veined forearm around Dwayne's head and pulls it to his collarbone. Dwayne's cap falls to the ground. Geoffrey raises his right hand—the hand that holds the tear—high up in the air. There are shouts in the workshop, but Geoffrey pays them no mind. All he sees now is Dwayne's carotid artery, open and bare, pretty and pulsating, a maple tree waiting to be tapped.

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Geoffrey sits at a table in a room lit by strip lights and heated by an old-fashioned radiator placed under a large window with bars behind it. The sky beyond the window is thick and black as treacle. His mother is sitting next to him, murmuring prayers, her head bowed down and her eyes closed. The two

chairs on the other side of the table are empty. There is a coffee mug on the table with a picture of a tomato with little black wires for arms and legs, captioned "I love you from my head to-ma-toes."

The door opens, a man enters the room. He is wearing a navy blue blazer over tight-fitting jeans. The pocket square that protrudes from his breast pocket is immaculately white, as is his shirt. He is not wearing a tie.

"Hello Geoffrey, hello Chrissy," the man says.

"Hello sir," Geoffrey says.

The man sits down on one of the chairs. He folds his hands on the table in front of him and looks at Geoffrey and his mother in turn. He unfolds his hands and slides the coffee mug a little further away from him, turning it at the same time so that he can read the caption. A smile appears on his face. "Tomatoes," he whispers to himself.

His smile fades. "People call me Luc," the man says to the coffee mug. "It's French." He turns to Geoffrey. "I'm your dad."

Geoffrey doesn't quite understand what's going on, the only thing on his mind is the horse's dark brown dick. Almost black.

The man mimics the sound of an iron lung. "I am your father. Luc." He reaches across the table and, with an index finger, pokes Geoffrey's nose twice. "Dad-Dy."

"Don't touch him," Geoffrey's mum hisses.

Geoffrey looks at her sideways, but she keeps her eyes on the table. Her shoulders have crept up, as if she's trying to hide her head in her body.

The man brings his face close to Geoffrey's. "You're lucky," he says. "The judge and I are best friends." He winks and pokes the fleshy tip of Geoffrey's nose again.

He sits back up and grazes the coffee mug with an elbow. The mug tips over, a coffee stain spreads across the table top. The man curses God.

Geoffrey wonders if the woman died from having sex with the horse. And, if not, how painful the rest of her life must have been.