

Michael Washburn

Repentance

I.

On that day in August when it felt like the earth had veered too close to the sun and no one wanted to be outside, a knock came on the door of Peter and Mary Shelton, one of the young professional couples in town. Youth is relative, of course. Peter was thirty-six, bitter, and at risk of dying any night of insult to the brain like that famous Welsh poet. The itinerant salesman, Evan Larkin, had a lofty purpose in mind when he turned up on the couple's porch that day with his sack full of Bibles, the brim of a dark hat shielding his piercing blue eyes from the sun.

Mary opened the door.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"I'm not the one who needs help, miss. Your husband gets drunk every night and sleeps around. He's unfaithful. He's spending a lot of his time with a godless woman on the other side of town, but you're choosing not to see what's before you. But I've got something that can help you both."

"Who are you?"

"I've got the word of the Lord here. You both should heed it. I can see you don't want to believe what I'm laying on you. That's Peter's Jeep in the drive there, isn't it, miss?"

"Who are you?"

"Isn't it?"

"Yes. No. What are you doing here?"

"Please be calm, miss. If you take a good look at the tires on that Jeep, you'll notice, in the grooves, some fine red dirt such as is common in the valley five miles to the southeast of here. Does Peter work or shop or have any business there that you know of?"

Mary looked at the stranger, stupefied. Evan was nineteen and looked years younger, and his dress shirt and tie and slacks were as crisp as those on a mannequin in a store window.

"Does he?" Evan repeated.

"I have no idea. I don't monitor my husband's moves."

"Peter's bedding a fiery-haired woman named Linda Miles, who works in the bowling alley and lives in a trailer in the

valley, and it is not well to ignore his sin. Ephesians 5:5. 'For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.'

"Peter's a wonderful man. He'd never carry on an affair. You can leave now."

"Willful blindness will not make the problem go away. Please disabuse yourself of any such delusion, Mary. Deuteronomy 22:22. You both will pay dearly."

"My husband's not cheating on me and if you don't leave right now, I'm calling the police!" Mary yelled. Evan shrugged, turned, and sauntered off the porch and up the street.

Soon a knock came on the door of the Hawke household. We all had heard about the teen who lived there. Jessica was out, as were her parents, but her brother Kenneth opened the door.

"Can I help you?"

"I'd like to offer you a King James Bible. There's someone in this house who hasn't been following the word of God. She could use some daily instruction."

"No thanks, mister."

But before Kenneth could close the door, Evan leaned forward. Kenneth was too polite to slam the door on a stranger, even one this weird.

"The slut that lives here is going to get an STD. But that's not even her real punishment, you hear? A carnal woman who won't repent has eternity in hell to look forward to."

"You really better leave, mister. It ain't nice of you to call my sister a slut."

"I'm trying to save the lot of you. A sinner dwells herein. Heed 2 Timothy 2:22. 'Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.'"

"We can't afford a new Bible right now. You better leave now. My dad'll be home in a minute."

The next door on which a knock came was a few houses up the street, the McFadden residence. Ed came to the door. So far, Evan had not confronted a malefactor directly. Now he had the chance to say exactly what was on his mind to this restaurant manager and real estate entrepreneur.

"Whaddya want?"

Ed peered at the boy with suspicion.

“I want you to accept the Lord into your life and follow His word and adopt an ethical code and stop hurting people so wantonly and selfishly.”

“You forget to take your meds this morning, kid?”

“Mr. McFadden. We do not even need to be privy to the contracts for the last three deals you made. Or pretended to make. For the old houses on the northern edge of town where retirees live.”

Ed McFadden leered at the boy. The sun was brutal.

“Start making sense, kid.”

“As I said, we don’t have to have the contracts in front of us, because it’s obvious what you’re doing, sir. You come in with what seems like a competitive price, and those desperately poor old folk jump at the chance. They can hardly scrape a mortgage payment together one more month. You’ve got an oily lawyer and you make sure there are clauses in there granting you all kinds of leeway to delay closing if X, Y, or Z should turn up in the inspection report. Things will turn up, given the state of those crappy old buildings, and it’s all totally subjective anyway.”

Ed gasped. How did the strange boy know all this?

“You can delay closing if you don’t like the kind of paint on one of the walls or if someone steps on a toothpick, Ed. You put it off ’till those retirees worry they’re going to die before the closing, there’s more than a fair chance, and they’re not going to make their payment one more month, and then you come in with a price way below market even for those lousy old digs, but at that point they can’t say no to you. It’s technically legal, but you’ll go to hell for it if you don’t repent.”

“Get off my porch!”

“Psalms 101:7. ‘He that worketh deceit shall not dwell within my house: he that telleth lies shall not tarry within my sight.’ Repent, Edward McFadden. You can still avoid the torments of hell!”

“*Get off my property now, you lying sonofabitch!*”

“Ephesians 4:25. ‘Speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another.’”

As Ed moved back inside the house, he heard a few words of yet another line, from Revelation, about a lake of fire. It was scary, apocalyptic stuff. The Jesus freak would not shut up. But when Ed returned to the porch with his .45 in hand, Evan was far up the street. In minutes, the boy arrived on the porch of one of the nicer houses, where Walter Barnes lived with his ill octogenarian father, Nate.

"I know what you're thinking about doing, and I'm here to tell you not to do it," Evan said to the handsome young man who opened the door.

Walter gaped at the curious stranger, with his broad-brimmed hat and his sack full of Bibles.

"I don't need a Bible just now, thank you."

"Obviously you do, or you wouldn't be contemplating what you are thinking about doing, not for a second."

"No, really. It's awful hot. I'm going back inside. Sorry, kid. You won't get your commission this time."

"You are about to make a horrible choice, Mr. Barnes. I'm trying to save your soul."

Walter shook his head, uncomprehending, and began to close the door. Then a voice spoke from somewhere in the house's shady depths. An elderly voice.

"Who's there and what does he want?"

"Shut up, dad," Walter said, and then Evan spoke again.

"Do not put your father in a nursing home, Walter. You don't know what those places are like. They're gross, evil dens filled with rats and filth and seed-stained bedsheets. Disgusting. Don't give another thought to fobbing off the greatest responsibility in your life at this point in time and making it the problem of strangers. Your father needs you."

"Get out of here," Walter said.

"Exodus 20:12. 'Honor thy father and thy mother.' Psalms 71:9. 'Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth.'"

"I said get out of here!"

"What does he want?" the old voice called again.

"I'll call the cops," Walter said, but then the boy left with a shrug.

II.

This is where the story really gets interesting. I was an undergrad at a college in the cornfields, within walking distance of the town. The setting was pretty, but when it got this hot, we wanted to stay in our air-conditioned dorms, downing beers and wine coolers or smoking weed. The administrators began the school year too early. There was no point when the kids just hung out and acted much as they would at home this time of year.

We soon heard about Evan Larkin's visits to the dorms. Access was all too easy. Even today, some people are awfully lax about security on this remote campus in the cornfields. It is not as if things never happen around here, but the sun and the miles of cornstalks in thrall to forces indifferent to the doings of men tend to lull almost everyone.

The boy went through the halls of our venerable dorms, knocking on doors and offering his King James Bibles to students trying to cram for tests and churn out papers on Foucault or Derrida or Marcuse or Dworkin. This time, he relied on a general pitch. *Like students everywhere, you kids here on this campus are living in sin.* I don't think I need to tell you how far he got with his pitch. More than a few of them wanted to know who had let him into their dorm and some threatened to call security. What a crock. The security force on our campus was a sixty-three-year-old man who rode around on a motor scooter growling at kids he suspected of littering or scribbling on the walls.

Though Evan came to see that he was wasting his time trying to sell the good book to these young progressives, he didn't decide it was futile to make his pitch on our campus, full stop. Maybe he had had the ill luck to visit those dorms where a bulk of students agreed with Christopher Hitchens, or maybe the effort to cram and write papers, after a summer of debauchery, put people under unbearable stress. On a campus of more than 1,200 potential converts, he was not giving up easily.

I stood on a stone path in the brilliant light, about midway between the student lounge and a classroom building. Paul Madeira was a radical from Chicago. I had heard him rant when he was drunk often enough to know that if he had his way, all the exploiters and reactionaries and regressives would hang from lampposts, tongues dangling obscenely. Whether it was Paul's real self that came out into the open in those drunken rants or a fantastical self was a question for another time. Right now he was going on about an English professor who seemed indifferent to the un-woke subtext of certain works.

I nodded but said nothing. Carl Hasford and Jason Pratt agreed with Paul or at least dared not challenge him in front of others. Also present were Kendra Jones, who had forgotten more poetry than I had read in my life, and Marcus Gorman, an awkward kid with a sagging belly and a mild form of cerebral palsy that made him drool and walk awkwardly. A few others were there, but I didn't know them.

We stood there listening to Paul, whom few people dared challenge, feeling the heat on our faces and necks and forearms and legs, when the boy in the big hat ambled over the green toward the path, his bag jouncing. He had to know how off-putting his conduct was. No one had a right to go out into the world and correct others, jump the line, bypass the education that empowers people to make their own choices about what to believe and do.

As soon as he reached our cluster on the path, heads turned, faces twisted into looks of disbelief. Who was this freak?

“Hey, man. You’re about two months early for Halloween,” said Jason Pratt.

“You’re in the wrong state, dude. Oral Roberts University’s in Oklahoma,” said Carl Hasford.

“Get out of here, man,” said one of the kids whose name I didn’t know.

Now Paul turned to the stranger, and really took him in for the first time.

“Can I ask what you think you’re doing at an enlightened school?” Paul said as his eyes roamed over the boy’s idiosyncratic garb.

“Hey, man. No one here wants to buy a Bible. Take some friendly advice and leave right now,” said Jason.

“Leave!” Carl repeated.

Kendra began to say something, but then a few pairs of eyes rotated in her direction and she thought better of it. Maybe she was thinking of the treatment one of our number, Marcus, got from people sometimes.

At last Evan spoke.

“You all think I’m a square kid, don’t you?”

We all laughed at his sincere use of such an antiquated term. Square. I had heard it so long ago, maybe in a *Happy Days* rerun.

“Yeah, you cool kids think I’m peddling a load of Sunday school twaddle. About believing in the Lord and living a moral life and helping the helpless and all that. Or I’m just another opportunist trying to pad my wallet. But you will come to see soon enough that what I have to offer is in your best interest. You are all wallowing in debauchery and sin. The Lord’s elect have no illusions about the lives of rich kids or the end toward which you are all bound. There is one path to your redemption.”

Paul gave a laugh I had never heard before and hoped never to hear again.

“You poor fool. Moronically repeating what your ignorant parents told you over the dinner table. You come to this campus where all of our parents are a lot smarter than yours, and we’ve all read more in a week than you have in your life, if you take one book out of the equation, and we’ve got professors who are at the top of their field nationally, and you presume to enlighten us. You pitiful rube.”

Evan took all this calmly, as if he had expected such a reply.

“May I ask your name, sir?”

“Paul.”

Evan smiled gently.

“Well, now. I’m sure that someone as educated as yourself can place those words of yours in context.”

We looked at each other in the heat.

“Start making sense, bumpkin.”

“Paul the Apostle was vicious to the followers of Jesus until his conversion.”

I was afraid our radical classmate would hit this boy. Paul was deeply proud of his radical reputation, and people were watching, but he seemed briefly disconcerted.

“You must know that your presence here is offensive. Go back to your 1950s Norman Rockwell wet dream. Get out of here now. Take that as a suggestion in your best interest,” Paul said.

“Leave!” “Get lost!” “Pig!” “Fascist!” “Scum!” others joined in, until Evan nodded, gave another gentle smile, turned, and walked off. The people in the crowd laughed and spewed more insults at the rube, save for myself and Marcus Gorman, who had a perplexed look. Gazing at his big, awkward features, I wondered what could be going through his mind right now. Maybe Marcus was thinking about the climate on this campus, the ethos of *free speech as long as you agree with me*, the jeers and cries that greeted visiting speakers. Or maybe, after months of acquiescence, Marcus’s thoughts about Paul were taking a new turn. I doubted Marcus had forgotten the time Paul berated and mocked him at a party for adding his name to the signers of a letter in the student paper decrying the scribbling of words on the walls around campus. If Marcus had a problem with it, he was at the wrong school, Paul chided, and went on to say things to Marcus that I would rather not repeat.

On the next morning, I set out on my 8:00 a.m. run full of energy. The sun was high and the air felt vaguely hostile, as if

warning me what kind of day it would be. Even at this time of year, I loved the open spaces and the sense of owning the path cutting through all the acres of corn, so high it would engulf you as soon as you left the road.

Just three minutes into my run, I spotted the dark hat on a shuffling figure with a strap on his shoulder up ahead. The interloper. The emissary of values and creeds my friends loathed. I thought I would pass by without a word. He was on his way out of here and one must not complicate things in any way. But as I drew near, he turned and the recognition in his look was unmistakable. He smiled and nodded.

“Hold up a minute, brother,” Evan said.

I decided I wasn’t so afraid of Paul Madeira that I’d be rude to the boy. I stopped and stood there, gathering my breath.

“You know, I studied your face during that encounter yesterday. Your thoughts were perhaps a bit more complicated those of the others on your highly enlightened campus.”

“You think you can walk right onto the campus of an elite private school and people will hail a stranger who looks about sixteen as the Lord’s elect and will hang on his every word. The school may be set in its ways, but don’t think that excuses your arrogance for a second.”

“False equivalence, my friend. They hear the same viewpoints and rhetoric all day, every day. I’m here to offer some of that diversity you hold in such high regard. I’m the enemy of conformity. I’m the agent of all the whispering thoughts you try to banish in the dark.”

The banality of his choice of words did not blunt the truth. I stood there groping for words in the gathering heat.

“Hey, I am living in sin. If I want to die of insult to the brain, like that Welsh poet, what’s his name, that’s my choice.”

“You don’t remember his name?”

“No. I wish we had Kendra here.”

“Come on, Brian. Tell me your night thoughts. Don’t worry, I won’t share them with the enforcers of correct opinion.”

“Who told you my name?”

“The Lord knows all and his ways are not for you to know.”

“Someone said my name and you overheard it and, like many uneducated people, you think everyone you deal with is as dense as you are and you can easily fool me.”

“What do you even care how I know your name? Smell

the air, hear the birds, look at the sun, Brian. Think about the course of the world. Imagine if all the meteorological predictions are wrong. Maybe it's not about to get any cooler. Maybe what you see and feel is the climate of God's world as it hurtles to the heart of the sun."

"You crazy rube."

"Okay, never mind, ignore me and go right on with your jog, don't concern yourself with the rantings of a rube from a fly-over state. But when you run a bit further into this broad bright morning, you may find that the heat and the glare have a way of changing your mind and making you feel kind of unsure about everything. It all has a way of messing with your assumptions."

I stood there, still panting a bit.

"Evan. Tell me why your parents didn't give you a more Biblical name."

He smiled indulgently again.

"Do you really want to bring my parents into the discussion?"

"I really couldn't care less. Tell me how you got so much dirt on this community."

"Oh, I spent some time in the public library and the diner downtown. There are no secrets here, Brian."

"Tell me how many Bibles you've sold so far, Evan. Do you really think you're going to convert a soul? Listen, I'll tell you a secret. I don't like the way things are at my school. There have been some incidents I still can't believe. And I wasn't on Paul's side yesterday. In fact I think his conduct was atrocious. But let me suggest for your own safety that you not show your face on campus again. In fact I think you should continue right on out of town. It really may not be safe for you around here."

He looked around at the tall stalks and the pastel sky.

"I sure don't see danger around us here."

"You know quite well what I mean."

"But you don't get my meaning. Somebody could hide pretty well from the world with a minimum of effort out here. Do you not agree?"

I had to concede the point.

"Maybe you do know something about the recent history of this place. Are you alluding to the Chris Fogel matter?"

He shook his head.

"Ah, well. That was a guy who worked in a bar downtown. And one night he sexually assaulted a young female

student who'd been flirting with guys all night and he grabbed all the money in the register and the back office and took off. He hid out in the corn for days and they caught him when he got so hungry he ventured out to try to burglarize one of the homes over there."

I gestured toward a row of houses on a road parting the stalks west of campus.

"He was dumb, Evan. I happen to know a spot about midway between here and campus where the stalks are tall and you can hear men and dogs approach from a mile away and there's lots of room to dart and hide. He should have stayed there until they decided he wasn't in the area anymore and called off the searches."

Evan nodded.

"It's a tragedy that I didn't get to Chris when there was still time for him to repent and be a moral man. Anyway, I'm sorry I interrupted your jog, Brian."

III.

An eventful day got even more so. The Campus Democrats had a tradition of sending out a tiny delegation from the college to attend town hall meetings. We kids were all so cloistered and privileged and some of us yearned to engage with the community. The car containing Paul, Carl, Kendra, Marcus, and me sped through the hot evening. Kendra inspired us by reciting W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939," a poem that always left me feeling that the choice facing humanity was mutual love or mass death. When the car slid into a lot outside the old auditorium, I saw that there were more cars than usual. We went in and found seats twelve rows up from the stage. Tonight the faces of the moms and dads all around looked somber. Now Carl turned to Paul and I heard him whisper, "Why are the police here?"

Paul shrugged. We sat there waiting impatiently for the proceedings to begin. At last a figure mounted the stage. It was the chief of police, a stout man named Joe Hoyt. He cleared his throat and jumped right in.

"For those of you who have not heard, we have some very bad news tonight. As you know, this is one of the safest communities in the state. It is rare that anything serious happens here. This afternoon, we had our first homicide in ten years."

Gasps and cries rose into the air. Couples hugged each

other and parents whispered to the teens.

“Nate Barnes, an elderly citizen living at 52 Drury Lane, got into an altercation with his son Walter, and it grew very heated. We gather that an itinerant Bible salesman had recently been to the house and had said some things, in the presence of both Walter and his father, that led to this argument. At some point Nate produced a .22 pistol and fatally shot his son.”

The cries were loud and shrill now. Parents looked at each other, aghast, questioning the wisdom of bringing young people here. Such violence was almost unheard of in the town. My friends and I looked at each other with bemusement. We were too jaded and cool to let anything unnerve us.

“We do not know the exact content of the discussion between the itinerant salesman and the residents of 52 Drury Lane. But if we are to believe statements that Nate made to the responding officers, the salesman had convinced him that Walter was bent on putting Nate in a retirement home where he wasn’t likely to last more than a month or two, and that Walter had plainly malicious motives.”

The gasps and cries rose even higher. Paul chuckled in the seat next to me. Then, to my amazement, a girlish voice called out from the fifth row.

“It’s true! It’s true!”

People called out in indignation. A few strangers in the rows in front of me got up. Craning my neck, I saw a trio of adults escort the girl out of her row and up the aisle toward the door. The chief of police went on.

“I wish I could say that’s all the bad news we have tonight. But a resident of 60 Drury Lane, a girl by the name of Jessica Hawke, has run away. She got into a really nasty spat with her parents about her lifestyle and her alleged promiscuity and drug use. From what the Hawkes told us, she screamed at them and said she never wanted to see their faces again and then she put some things together and slipped out. This too seems to have flowed from an exchange that the Bible salesman had with her brother earlier the same day.”

All over, people wailed and shouted and clasped their palms together as if in a contest to project the most concern for the girl and alarm at the conduct of Evan Larkin. The problem here was that he was, in a sense, on their side. They didn’t like an interloper from out of town disrupting the lives of their friends and neighbors, but he brought the word of God.

“Finally, it’s not quite as serious a situation at this point, but yet another member of the community, Ed McFadden has gone and holed himself up in a hotel downtown and refuses to see anyone except his lawyer. It appears that he related something of his brief exchange with the Bible salesman to the mailman, thinking they were speaking in confidence. Now it’s all over town that some suspect McFadden of shady business dealings, and he has received abusive and threatening communications even from his own investors in a restaurant deal. I am not liberty to say more.”

It was hard to know what he could have said that might have turned the audience’s passions more decisively against Ed McFadden, a smooth-talker who had conned retirees out of a good deal on the one asset they clung to so late in life. Why anyone would have become a partner of his was a mystery.

“We have not been able to locate the itinerant Bible salesmen, but we are actively searching with the help of reserve officers and volunteers. If you see him, please do the right thing and turn him in. I ask all of you to remember that everyone is presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. He is only a person of interest at this point.”

The chief of police shuffled off the stage, and the mayor, Marty Welch, took his place.

“I’d like to put in a word for my good friend Ed McFadden. He is understandably upset by what has gotten out. But rumors are precisely that: rumors. He will make a statement in the next few days and we ask that people let him conduct his affairs in peace and privacy for now.”

This drew boos and, from a few of the teenagers, catcalls targeting the mayor’s prim and nerdish appearance. Next on stage was Father Kirby.

“I remind you to be wary of those who proselytize for their personal gain and who spread malice and lies while claiming to speak in the name of our Lord. I sense that the boy who went door to door yesterday is a misguided soul with dreams of grandeur far out of proportion to his experience and maturity. I know how upsetting today’s news is for everyone. Place your trust in the Lord to see us through this difficult time. You know who are His true representatives in this community. If any of you have questions or need guidance, I and Father Sloan will be here for you.”

Now to my dismay, Paul stood up. One of the young

people down by the stage came up the aisle, reached over me, and handed Paul a microphone. I sensed that Paul's thoughts were in sync with my own, to a point, and I felt queasy.

"Good evening, Father Kirby. Today's news is tragic. With all due respect, I think you're in kind of an awkward position here. From what we've heard tonight, it appears that the boy, the stranger from out of town hawking Bibles, didn't really do much more than quote the Good Book verbatim and extrapolate from it. I don't think you can criticize him for bluntly stating what you yourself aggressively urge people to read and assimilate. I realize the shock and sadness that a lot of people are dealing with right now, but I think it would be well to ask some hard questions —"

The priest interrupted.

"Young man. The accounts suggest that this boy did quite a good deal more than quote the Bible."

"No. Not really. He extrapolated from what the Bible says. Nothing he allegedly told these people today is out of keeping with the literal language of the Bible. Which is why I think you could ask some hard questions —"

"This is a discussion for later, young man. You can see how distraught the people all around you are."

How I wished Paul would shut up. But my radical classmate went right on.

"— ask some tough questions about the compatibility of the Bible with contemporary mores. You do know how old the Bible is. You will stunt the development of young women like Jessica Hawke, and young people generally, if you force on them an ethos that has no place in the contemporary world. It's a nasty anti-humanist piece of text. That's one of the underlying causes of the tragedy we may be dealing with here."

"Paul!" Kendra whispered. "Do you want them to lynch us?"

I told myself that the people around us were civilized men and women, not a bunch of savages, but I felt queasy as ever.

The priest, looking faintly ruffled, spoke again.

"You're distraught and not thinking clearly. That is totally understandable. If you come to me —"

"If Jessica Hawke doesn't come home alive, I blame the Bible! But don't worry, she won't suffer a second death in hell. There is no second death or resurrection. There is no heaven or hell. The Bible is a pile of lies!" Paul yelled, before the kid took the mike back from him.

Under the gaze of scores of hostile eyes, we quickly left the auditorium.

I sat in the student lounge the next morning, sipping coffee and poring over a passage in Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* as brilliant light streamed through the big glass façade. In my peripheral vision, I saw that two uniformed cops had entered and a girl whose name I didn't know had just pointed me out to them. My friendship with Paul gave me even more celebrity in this place than I realized.

They were a couple of veteran cops from the town, no doubt with many bitter memories of dealing with college kids.

"We're talking to everyone in the little group that spoke with the Bible salesman yesterday," said the older cop.

"We gather you were in that crowd. Did he say anything about someone he knew in the area or where he might ago?" asked the younger.

I wondered who had given my name to the cops or told them I was often in the lounge at this hour.

"Oh, I think he knows us all better than we might like. But, no, he said nothing that could help your inquiry," I replied, feeling at once that I had worded my answer the wrong way, I was too blatantly trying to close an avenue of inquiry.

But they nodded politely and left.

Two hours later, I sat in Professor Jackson's class watching the look on Paul's face change. Paul seemed unable to mask his contempt for the venerable professor's devotion to the canonical status of certain works. The whole point of an education, as they say, is to teach critical thinking. Paul raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Madeira?"

The professor was so old-fashioned.

"You know, if you strip away the pseudo-poetic language, *Heart of Darkness* in essence is a racist fantasy in which the European, the representative of what is legitimate and established, ventures out into the world to face the Other with growing revulsion and horror. It's good reading for 1950. Tell us why you'd assign this text today, knowing full well the impact something like this is sure to have on your students."

There came applause from some parts of the room. The elderly professor looked befuddled and I could see Paul relished it. After an awkward pause, the professor strolled right into Paul's trap.

"You may think Conrad is the devil, Mr. Madeira. But I

wonder what your education would be without the opportunity to explore a spectrum of viewpoints.”

“That’s the point, you dinosaur!” Paul exploded, and we thought the professor would have a heart attack.

“Please calm down.”

“I’ll be happy to calm down when you tell us when you plan to assign the narrative of a Congolese, maybe female and queer but at the very least a Congolese, who goes to London and explores and ventures deep into the heart of this strange place, where the natives flout all the norms of human conduct. Especially when it comes to transparency in fiscal matters and respect for minorities. The story could take place before or after the Brixton uprising. But it should leave no doubt about how bizarre and alien life in a Western capital is and has always been!”

Now there came cheers and claps and the professor teetered and wobbled and nearly fell down. Happily for him, it was just about noon.

I wandered around the campus in a daze, unable to believe what writing instructors call the unexpected inevitable. It had erupted from my friend Paul and I could not call that friendship into question. I avoided the gaze of other kids on the paths until I passed under the ramp leading to the library’s big glass doors and came face to face with Marcus Gorman. He was not drooling just now.

“I see I’m not the only one who is sensitive to his standing here on this diverse campus,” Marcus said.

I stood there in the heat, rubbing my eyes, trying to collect my thoughts.

“Come again?”

“I saw you lurching and shaking on the path like you were afraid a hostile breath would knock you over.”

“Marcus. If you haven’t figured out that I have problems with the intellectual reign of terror, then you’re not observant at all.”

“If you asked me what bothers me most, it’s the temperature on this campus. And I don’t mean the heat, duh. The political temperature. Feels like we never get a break from it, Brian. And we’re all so young and hotheaded to begin with. It’s not healthy. Man, I know people who keep guns on campus.”

I had to laugh nervously at that.

“Really? Shotguns, Uzis, machine guns? Sounds like an urban legend to me.”

“You mean rural legend.”

I laughed again.

“Yeah, Marcus. You know, I was only seventeen when I started here and to me, this all feels like a continuation of high school. It’s not a happy time and I’m not even really sure that it’s meant to be, that that’s the point. The worst thing you can do is to —”

“*Brian*. I can’t stand to see the popular kids parade past me and get all the praise when I’m every bit as socially conscious and a lot smarter about it. And with none of their self-righteousness. But I do know that it’s partly my fault. I can’t just wear my social conscience on my sleeve, I’ve got to go out and do things. And I’m going to, *Brian*.”

“That’s great, Marcus. I just hope it takes a form that’ll make us all proud of the Marcus we know.”

“Oh yes, it will. Carl and I have been following China for a long time, you know. And our president has gone over there and made all the issues about trade and military treaties and such. Not a whisper about the Uighurs and the unspeakable things happening to them over there. The massacres and the detention camps. So, Carl and I are building a shanty, you know, like the ones they had during the apartheid era when protests were going on all over, on every campus. We’ll post a lot of a photos and texts and raise awareness. This could actually lead to something, *Brian*. We could get into the news.”

I had my doubts about that but the last thing I wanted to do was discourage Marcus Gorman from getting up and doing something. Maybe it would make him popular.

Lying in my bed sometime after 11:00, I turned to the screen under the open window and looked out through it at the corn. It was cooler and the night was peaceful, soothing.

There were so many warring doctrines and I did not know what to make of anything. I needed guidance as much as anyone. That did not preclude my helping another person.

I filled my backpack with snacks and bottled water from my mini fridge and set off. I heard brief laughter and muted words in Jason’s room as I slipped out, but thought no one saw me leave the dorm. The grounds lay empty under a bright round moon. When at the edge of the corn, I looked quickly around again in every direction. Then I set out into the rows with a precise point in mind, my feet clumping on the loose dirt.

I moved up the space between the high rows, probing

left to right, right to left, trying to fathom the dark depths between the stalks. There was so much space, you could hold orgies or plot murders or the overthrow of the state or really whatever the hell you liked. I wandered and scanned some more until, with impeccable stealth, a form moved up out of the dark to my right.

“I don’t know what law they think I’ve broken,” Evan said.

“Then why don’t you turn yourself in? Or just go about your affairs like anyone else?”

“I heard what’s going around. They think I incited an old man to murder.”

“Arguably, you did.”

“You live on a campus, Brian. You of all people know what happens when the bar is set too low for incitement.”

“Oh, I know. Just disagreeing with someone is a crime nowadays, because of the inferred implications of what you say. But even now, our arguments usually don’t lead to someone getting shot.”

“You think I’m a product of my rigid upbringing but you live under tyranny, Brian. You’d overthrow it if you had a clue how to go about doing so. I’ve talked to one of your friends recently.”

“I find that hard to believe. Which friend?”

“Someone I know you care about. In your mind, are you the latent apostle?”

“No. I don’t give a damn about any religion. But look, it’s very late and I have an exam tomorrow. Are you hungry?”

I was right about one thing.

In the morning, the cops were back in the lounge. I was hoping to get through the denser parts of the *Second Treatise*. The older cop addressed me sternly.

“We found the runaway girl, Jessica Hawke, behind the bowling alley last night.”

“Hey, great!”

“With her face purple and her throat full of caked vomit. She swallowed all the pills she took with her.”

The runaway had taken her own life. I feigned shock and denied any knowledge of Evan Larkin. They asked whether I knew where they could find Kendra Jones. I wondered what they had on that nice girl.

When evening came, I sat in my room for hours, taking peach wine coolers from the tiny fridge, grateful for the odd

breeze wafting through the windows. Bit by bit, the tension left me. Then the phone rang.

“Brian? Marcus here.”

“Hey, man.”

“The shanty is gone, Brian. Demolished. Ruined.”

“What the —”

“The unexpected inevitable. That’s what Professor Jackson would call it, not that anyone should listen to an old coot with one foot in the grave, anyway.”

“Oh, man. You mean the shanty you built for the Uighurs, to raise awareness and all.”

“Paul and Jason and a few others came by with hammers and wrecked it right in front of me, Brian. Right in front of me. Oh, I cried. I pleaded with them. I got down on my knees and begged. You know. . .”

Marcus choked up.

“This is crazy,” I said.

“You know the reason Paul gave?”

“No. Calm down. This is completely nuts.”

“He said I was trying to discredit the work of a Democratic president. And not only that, but the first African-American to hold that office. For ignoring the Uighur issue on his China trip. That’s —”

His sobs rose.

“That’s not at all what I meant to do. I wanted to call attention to the plight of a minority. I swear!”

“Marcus. You don’t have to convince me. This is fucking insane. You should file harassment charges.”

“Oh, yeah. I wonder where that would go. Maybe in Paul’s mind, there’s an inverse symmetry here. He was striking back at those racists who wrecked the antiapartheid shanties in the early nineties.”

“Those are the words of an incoherent mind.”

Marcus began to cry harder, then hung up. I was sorry for what I had said. Sort of. It was true and I was in no mind to call Marcus back and say sorry. He had bothered me. I owed him nothing.

Later I lay in my bed with my head turned toward the window, through which the winds came strong now, caressing me as I drifted off. Gazing out over the corn standing tall in the moonlight, I thought of how markedly my sense of things diverged from my apocalyptic imagination. Out there in the dense

rows there were no white horses or gorgons or demons or hydras waiting to fulfill a commission handed to them directly from hell. There was only a boy who overcame his shyness daily to fulfill a mission to inspire souls he at once disdained and loved with a will to transcend the venality and barbarity of their sordid lives and reach a spiritual state in which they could walk across a path of clouds to meet One who had suffered and died with a selflessness Evan Larkin dreamt of emulating. The boy out there in the moonlit night hoped defiantly as this cluster of rock, gases, water, and dust hurled through the ether of an unfathomably vast cosmos.

In the lounge the next morning, the cops approached me again, to disclose that a gunman had fired a high-powered rifle and blown off Ed McFadden's head while the latter stood in the window of the hotel in which he had holed up. The state police were coming and they were confident of finding Evan Larkin soon. Still I repeated my denials.

Then in solitude I thought about the matter some more, and imagined Ed's head at the moment of impact. I thought of his family. And of certain ancient injunctions and commandments. That did it. I walked through the streets of the town to the police station and entered the lobby, where to my surprise Kendra Jones sat on one of the gray plastic chairs. I gathered that she had reached out to the police as a confidant of Evan Larkin. Still I wished to give a statement.

No one knew who had bought the rifle used to kill Ed McFadden. The only gun owner I knew personally in the area was Marcus Gorman. The events that were to unfold over the next few days fed my imagination and gave me something new to turn over as I drifted off to sleep in my dorm room.

When I fell asleep, it was with an image of Marcus cleaning and loading his Ruger Mini-14 semiautomatic rifle as the verses of Revelation flash through his mind. He loads the weapon's magazine a round at a time.

"Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city."

Marcus slides another round into the magazine, presses it with a finger to drive it firmly into place, thinking of Paul's hip lair in a building off campus.

"And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death,

and with the beasts of the earth.”

Marcus slides another round up into the magazine until he hears a little click.

“And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.”
Another round. Another discrete click. Paul has been on his mind constantly.

“And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.”

Another round. Click. The magazine is full. He chambers a round and releases the safety. All ready now. The night is warm and still.

“For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?”