

MYUNG! JOH

## *Her Father, the Pope*

YOUR GIRLFRIEND'S NAME is Angela Bloom, and today you are meeting her father, the Pope.

You wait together outside a coffee shop down the street from the Mall. The two of you are meeting him in half an hour outside the Washington Monument. She keeps telling you that he is a very nice man, that you shouldn't be worried or overly concerned that you will make an idiot of yourself. You ask if he's going to be wearing the hat.

"No," she says. She looks very pretty today, in a white sundress with lace along the modestly high-cut neckline. You begin to wonder how her bra and underwear aren't showing through the white cotton—these myriad delicate tricks all women seem to have—but then you quickly stop yourself. You're meeting the Pope in half an hour, and here you are thinking about his daughter's undergarments.

Angela seems calm enough but you can tell she is nervous because she is smoking a cigarette, which she rarely does unless she's drinking. She blows the smoke far away from herself; a tiny flake of ash lands on the back of your hand, white and delicate as a snowflake. After she stubs her cigarette out, she pulls a piece of gum from her purse and sticks it in her mouth. "Dad hates it when I smoke," she says. "Smell me?"

You stick your face next to hers, near the warm place where her shoulder meets her neck, and inhale deeply. She smells of soap and shampoo and clean sweat, and only the slightest dry

tang of smoke. You want to kiss her neck, but you draw back. Her moist, dark eyes, which are almost too far apart, make her look young and breakable right now. "You're fine," you tell her.

"You are, too, mister," she says, smiling at you. "It's going to be a good day."

"So, do I need to talk Latin or what?" you ask, getting back to the matter at hand. You hope not. The only phrase you can recall from your high school Latin days is "*ad astra per aspera*," the state motto of Kansas. This will get you nowhere with your girlfriend's father. "I don't remember shit from Latin—"

"Calm down, dumbass," Angela says patiently. "He's from New Jersey. People from Trenton don't speak Latin to each other, do they?"

"Okay," you say. You wonder if it would be tacky to ask your girlfriend's father for an autograph, and decide to play it by ear when the time comes.

Thinking back, you realize you were waiting for something like this to happen. She was too perfect to come without emotional baggage, or some sort of pathology, or a pontiff. You were on guard from the day you met her, and got increasingly nervous as time progressed and nothing went wrong. You couldn't force yourself to believe that this thing was problem-free. You started to worry constantly that she would dump you, because especially compared to her, you are so neurotic and altogether useless. Your ulcer came back and you began to break out again for the first time in years.

Angela is a successful public interest lawyer. Every day, she hits the hard, gritty streets of D.C. and saves poor single mothers from being evicted by the arbitrary cruelty of crooked landlords. You, on the other hand, are currently doing freelance writing from your apartment for an aggressively mediocre sitcom, *Call Me Daddy*, which concerns the trials and tribulations of a divorced father living with his two daughters and flamboyantly gay older brother. You once sat down and tried to make a list of

jobs that contributed less to society than your own, and failed. Even "Bookie" and "Phonebook Editor" strike you as more functional than "Sitcom Writer." Sometimes it still depresses you to see your old college volumes of Shelley and Blake on your shelf, bristling with Post-It notes that highlight what you once thought was the evidence of your brilliance. You made peace long ago with your punctured dreams of becoming a Nobel laureate, or at least a hotshot English professor wearing tweed at some university. But when you spend time with Angela you are newly disappointed in how you've let yourself down.

Furthermore, Angela is the type of person you have always secretly called "Milk-and-Honey Women" when you've seen them on the bus. What gives them away, these champions of public transportation and organic yogurt, is how clean they look, like they've just come from a long bath and left all their grime like a second skin floating in the tub. You used to scorn them, but have finally admitted to yourself that you are just plain intimidated. You can't believe a Milk-and-Honey Woman could date someone like you for very long — dirty, helpless, hopeless. Something was bound to be wrong either with her or, more likely, with you.

So in a way, the day Angela told you about her father, the Pope, was the day you had been fearing from the start. You were in bed with her late one morning, holding her and feeling completely content, when she grew quiet and serious. You thought *This is it* and knew she was going to break up with you. Then she dropped the holy bomb.

Your response was incomprehension, followed by disbelief, and then sheer terror. You made her put her clothes back on before you would continue the conversation. What are you doing, she demanded as you shoved her out of bed and threw her shirt at her: I'm trying to explain here.

Explain over breakfast, you said as you leapt into your boxers and pulled your pants from the lamp where Angela had flung them the night before. The truth was that even though you

are an atheist, you had the slightest smidgen of concern that there might be a special place in Hell, an extra-hot brimstone cavern, for those dirty bastards who screwed the Pope's daughter. But you didn't want to say so, of course — you might sound ignorant.

Over untouched cereal and grapefruit halves she explained everything: how her mother had died when she was born, how her father had quit teaching theology and joined a seminary, and how eventually she had been adopted by her aunt and uncle. Her father rose through the ranks and then that was that, really. She still remained close to him, but out of the attention of the media. She didn't tell you until now, three months into the relationship, because she didn't want to scare you away like the others. Her eyes began to brim with tears as she told you this last part, and you could see how much she feared loneliness.

What's there to be scared of, you said, and put your hand over hers. But to yourself you thought, *Now things get hard.*

Angela looks at her watch and says, "We should start heading over now." You nod. She takes your hand and you leave a five on the table, and together you begin walking.

The Monument, sharp and white against the blue of the sky, looms larger with every step. It looks like a giant nail thrust through the ground from below. You are reminded of a poem in which Wordsworth, as a young boy, is rowing his way across a lake at night, and looks up to find that the mountain that seemed so far away is towering threateningly above him, closer and closer with every pull of his oars. The sublime, you recall, is something so vast in size or scope that it transcends human comprehension — it is the source of both beauty and terror.

"There he is," she says, gripping you more tightly. You swallow. "Dad!" she calls.

Yes, there he is. Even from this distance you recognize his face from magazines and TV, but now he is dressed in a cardigan instead of flowing, gold-embroidered white robes. He is about

your height, maybe a couple inches shorter, and he is smiling at the two of you. He is not wearing the hat.

You feel weak with nervousness and an unexpected giddy excitement. You are about to meet the Pope. God's ambassador on earth. First-name basis with Yahweh himself. Probably the only man alive who's got a guaranteed ticket into heaven. Because you forget, for now, that you are pretty much an atheist, and that you have never believed in anything but yourself. Maybe this will be the turning point. You imagine shaking his hand, and feeling divinity flow through you like a stream of liquid electricity. If there is a God, meeting the Pope will be as close as you'll ever get to Him.

When the two of you are a few yards away, Angela separates herself from you and runs to her father, the Pope, and they embrace. You feel awkward as you hover in the background. He looks at you over her head, and you immediately feel that he *must* know you have been sleeping with—*fucking!*—his daughter. Even regular fathers can tell, and you figure this one is at least partly omniscient. He pulls away from Angela and regards you a moment longer.

"*Salve, et pax tecum,*" he says.

Before your palms have time to get damp, Angela rolls her eyes and pokes her father—the Pope—in his ribs. "Dad, cut it out—nobody ever finds that funny." She looks embarrassed.

You laugh nervously in a "Good one, sir!" kind of way, and instantly feel like an asshole.

The Pope chuckles. "I always think it's pretty funny, myself. Pleased to meet you." He shakes your hand with a firm grasp, like a politician or a high school principal.

Over the next half hour, you and the Pope walk slow, large circles around the perimeter of the Monument, getting to know each other. Angela walks between the two of you, with one arm linked through yours and the other through her father's. You realize that if you blow it now, you've definitely lost Angela for good, and the very thought of it nauseates you.

MYUNG! JOH

"Angela tells me you were an English major in college," he says. "I majored in English and Religion, myself. You're a writer now?"

"Uh, yes," you say uncomfortably, praying he won't ask you what you write.

"Writing is a fine and noble art," he says, somewhat vaguely. "Expressions of the human soul calling out through the ages." You wonder what he would say if he knew that last night's episode of *Call Me Daddy* involved the comic hijinks of a transvestite babysitter.

The three of you pass a juice vendor on your fourth trip around the Monument. "Angela," the Pope says, "would you be a dear and grab us a lemonade. I'm feeling parched."

Your own throat goes dry. "I'll get it," you say a little too quickly.

"Don't worry about it," says Angela, "you got the coffee earlier. I'll catch up with you two in a second." She withdraws her arms and you watch her walk to the end of the juice line, which seems to have suddenly grown to an interminable length. She waves, smiling. You look at the Pope, whose friendly gray eyes have taken on a shrewd edge.

"It's okay, son," he says. "I don't bite. Let's keep walking, shall we."

"Yes, sir."

He does not invite you to call him by his first name. "I don't know how much of Angela's unusual situation she's told you about," he says as the two of you continue your walk.

"Not a whole lot. I mean, just the basics."

He nods. "Yes. So you know about her aunt and uncle."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, let me tell you something, son. It broke my heart to let them adopt her. But you understand, growing up as the Pope's daughter would have been incredibly limiting. The Vatican is no place for a young girl."

"I can understand that — "

"I mean, think about it. Being in the spotlight like that, traveling all the time. It would have been awful for her, not to mention dangerous —"

"Yes, I totally agree —"

"— but it wasn't an easy decision to make. I made it because I felt I had an important calling. We all have our callings—our reasons to live, if you will. I had mine, and you have yours."

You wonder for a moment whether that is true, but out loud you say, "Of course, sir."

"Let me tell you about a story I read once," he says, resuming the walk. "I read it some time ago, it was by a very good writer—his name escapes me now. It has to do with a father, a good man, who goes to tremendous lengths for his daughter. Tremendous lengths. At the end of the story . . ." The Pope drifts off for a moment, pensive. Your heart is beating hard.

"At the end of the story, he says that God never would have given His daughter to us. His son, sure. But never His daughter." He is looking at something far away and a shadow seems to fall over his eyes. "You see, daughters are different."

Suddenly he barks out a laugh. "What a writer! Could've had him excommunicated for that one, hey?" he shouts, and slaps you on the back with a force you estimate as being halfway between *joyial* and *unbelievably hard*.

He stops and faces you. "What you need to understand, son, is that I may be the Spiritual Father to many of God's children, but I am an earthly father to only one."

"Yes, sir."

"And I love her very, very much," he says slowly, lowering his voice. He puts his hand on your shoulder. It feels heavy. "Very much."

You nod.

"I like you, son. You seem like a nice young man. Just be careful with my little girl. Treat her as she *deserves* to be treated." A meaningful look is given.

MYUNG! JOH

"Yes, sir," you whisper.

The Pope pauses. "I'd like to know one thing. And I ask you to be honest with me."

"Yes, sir?"

He pulls you closer. "Is Angela smoking again?"

You are saved when you hear Angela behind you. "Hey, guys!"

The two of you turn to face her. She is standing before you, adorable, lit up by the sun, holding an enormous bucket full of icy lemonade with both hands. "It was a better deal than three smaller cups. I thought we could share," she explains. "I got three straws."

"Sounds just fine!" the Pope says heartily. As all of you lean in to take a sip together, you hope she won't notice the sweat that has formed on your upper lip.

"Mmm, that sure hits the spot," her father says.

"So was Dad bustin' your chops while I was gone?" Angela teases you. You smile faintly. The Pope beams.

As you and Angela ride back to your place on the Metro, you feel oddly disappointed. Everything went moderately well—it could have been a sitcom episode itself. He seemed to have liked you okay, and even gave you a conspiratorial wink as you and Angela sent him off in his limo. Certainly there have been worse meetings with the fathers of girlfriends. And Angela's father *is* the Pope, after all . . . As you reflect on this, however, you feel deflated, confused, and worst of all, the same as you did this morning.

But that evening as you curl up with your girlfriend, Angela Bloom, on the couch in your living room, you remember that you are happy, happy in a way that makes you grit your teeth and shiver on the inside because it is almost unbearable. She is so small that you can envelop her entire body. Her delicate bones make her feel like a tiny, perfect bird at rest in your arms.