

GREG SCHUTZ

SKUNK'S GOSPEL

Where I was raised, tents sprang up overnight, like mushrooms, in the lush heat of June and July. Revivalist preachers, their collars spongy with sweat, their voices bobbing high and low like the Apostles' boat on the stormy Galilee, laid hands on the elderly and infirm. Once, when I was a little girl, my mother raised her arthritic fingers to the pulpit, and the panting, red-faced man took her hands in his.

"I felt the power of His love," she told me and my father on the drive home. "It entered me and the hurt fled before it like a shadow."

I collected hatchlings from our lawn, baby sparrows and starlings that had fallen from their nests to lie shivering in the grass. At the bottom of my shoebox, they scabbled with their claws and stretched half-formed wings. No one could have loved those screaming, starving little things any more than I did; no one could have spent more hours stroking their delicate down. But they died all at once in the night—I woke, and the box atop my dresser was silent. In the morning, my father carried the shoebox to the milkweed and thistles at the edge of the yard and waved it through the air, and the tiny bodies flew for the first and only time. From the porch, I watched them settle into the tall grass together.

My father returned, hands greased with birdshit. He commanded: "Never again with this nonsense."

But the Epistles promised healing powers; like a child, I expected them as my right and reward. And because I couldn't rebel against God when I grew up powerless and plain—that stern old man in the clouds was as impossible to hate as my own grandfather—I rebelled

against my parents instead. At seventeen, I drove my shambling Bonneville as far as a tank of gas would take me and found a job waitressing at a truck stop outside a town I'd never heard of.

By then it was nearly December, and the thought of winter coming raised in me a vague, gnawing hunger. Evan, the short-order cook and dayshift manager, kept eyeing me from the kitchen. He was hungry himself, I thought with a flutter that could have been fear.

I was working a table by the front window one morning, pouring coffee for a trucker, when I saw a man in a ratty overcoat come tilting across the parking lot, kicking through the empty Styrofoam cups and windblown receipts.

The trucker saw where I was looking. "Friend of yours?"

"No," I said, but the man shuffled right up to the window and pressed his face to the glass, peering inside.

The trucker leered. "Looks to me like he'd like to be your friend."

I took the coffeepot back behind the counter. Evan was cracking eggs onto the griddle. "Yeah, I seen him," he said.

"He's staring at me."

"What do you want me to do? I your boyfriend? I run guys off for you?"

Evan, with his bull's neck and muscles that ran like cables beneath his shirt, was the kind of man my parents had spent years warning me against—"No more shame than a dog," my mother might have said. My first day waitressing, he'd told me my rump looked good in my skirt. No one had said a thing like that to me before. He worked the eggs with his spatula now, tearing the yolks, rolling the whites into little puffed mounds.

"Some coot with a hard-on," he said. "Want to run him off, you be my guest. I get paid to cook."

I drew myself up. "All right, then. Watch me."

I stepped outside into a blast of icy air, hoping to prove to myself that I could be brave. But I was disappointed. The man in the park-

ing lot was no threat—just a burnout rocking slowly from one foot to the other. He looked sixty at least, with a round pink face and wattled bird's neck. His eyes were glossy and gummed at the corners, and a delta of tiny red sores spread from beneath his dripping nose.

"What do you want?" I asked.

His breath was the thin blue-white of diesel exhaust. In the high, cracked voice of a ruined choirboy, he said, "Pancakes, hold the flour, milk, and oil."

Meaning—I puzzled it out—eggs.

He recited the line solemnly, as if it weren't a joke but a red-lettered verse from the Gospels. I imagined it was something he'd picked up years ago, and which had stuck with him long after almost everything else had been burned away. The only name he had for himself anymore, I would eventually learn, was Skunk.

"Scrambled?" I asked him. "Fried?"

The wind whipped across the parking lot, slapping at the hem of my skirt and at the flabby white calves I'd always thought of as hunks of uncooked dough.

Skunk hung a crooked smile. "Any way you want it is fine, beautiful."

Who you think's paying? Not him," Evan said that first morning.

"I'll pay," I replied, feeling suddenly bold.

"Your paycheck. But he's not eating in here." Evan waved a pink slab of a hand at the diner around us: truckers and local boys working over their breakfasts while the two other waitresses, women decades older than I was, worked the tables. There were crumbs on the counter, stacked dishes in the sink. "We got standards to uphold."

I lived in a semi-furnished trailer half a mile down an access road from the diner and separated from the interstate by a stand of pines, a muddy ditch, and some cyclone fencing. On dark nights, scrawny

deer came bounding across all four lanes of I-26, lured down from the hills by the scent of corn cribs on the farm behind the trailer park. More than once, I woke to squalling brakes and sprang up onto my elbows just in time to catch the meaty thump of an impact. On my bedroom ceiling, the blue glare of the police lights mingled with the yellow flashers of the wrecker, and in the morning there was just the skinny, dead deer, or pieces of it, kicked over to the shoulder to rot.

Walking to the diner to begin my shift one morning, I found a doe tangled in the collapsed fencing. She'd dragged herself down from the road. Her haunches were a mess of red and white, her hair twisted into bloody spikes, her rear legs folded bonelessly in the ditch, but she was still breathing. Her diamond-shaped head swiveled to watch me.

Back at the trailer, I dumped a plastic tub of caramel corn into the trash and filled it with tapwater. With a fallen branch, I nudged the tub close to the doe. Then I left, in case she wanted privacy before drinking. But when I returned that evening, the deer was dead, her head tipped over into the grass and the water untouched.

"I'm trying to help you," Evan said, using a spatula to bulldoze Skunk's heap of hot scrambled eggs onto a plate. "You can do what you want for a bum like that, but you're not going to like how it turns out in the end."

Skunk returned the next day, and the day after that, until before long his visits had sewn themselves into the fabric of my mornings. As the tractor-trailers idled in murky clouds of exhaust, he came to me, saying, "Hold the flour, milk, and oil," as serious as any preacher. Behind the counter, I slipped the tip roll from my apron pocket and peeled three dollars into the register till, and in the alley between the diner and the Goodgulf station where the truckers showered and played Galaga and paid for their gas, I watched Skunk crouch, plate balanced on the balls of his knees as he shoveled eggs into his mouth. A warm awareness of my own

power and benevolence filled me the way I imagined the food was filling him. Satisfaction floated me through the rest of my shift and beyond, into the long empty hours at my trailer. I came to feel as though—every day for one more day—I was saving him.

“Your boyfriend’s here,” Evan took to announcing whenever Skunk ambled up to the window. He spoke loudly, so that everyone in the diner—dirty-faced men hunched at the counter or in booths along the walls in their crumpled jackets and workshirts, their hairy knuckles collapsed around mugs of black coffee or tented over whitebread sandwiches—would hear. Some grumbled as I carried the eggs out. “What about me, sugar?” a trucker with a braided beard thick as a taproot asked me once. “What do I get?”

His attention reminded me of the way my belly bunched above the waist of my skirt, the way my arms jiggled when I leaned over a table to clear the dirty plates. But I hid my discomfort. “You think that bothers me?” I asked Evan. “You think I care what you say to those people?”

He was pressing a hot sandwich against the griddle. “What ever happened to you, Lizzie? You used to be the sweetest little thing.”

Only Evan, his sweating, grease-spattered bulk wedged between the grills and the stovetop, could call me little. The other two waitresses on my shift were both short and sinewy, their lipsticked mouths filled with teeth the color of cigarette filters. They traded what they called “war stories” about children and stepchildren, husbands and exes and lovers, and treated me as though they were members of a club I couldn’t join. I was new, young, from out-of-town; I was chubby and wide-eyed and probably wouldn’t last the winter; they wanted no part of me. Evan was the only person who really spoke to me, though around him I was afraid—the mere sight of him splitting open eggs with his thumbs was enough to shock me to stillness. The hot sandwich burped grease onto the griddle now, and the grease hissed.

“Guess I got tougher,” I said, hoping it sounded like I had.

"Guess so." Evan jerked a thumb over the counter at the bearded trucker, who was sopping up ham juice with a hunk of cornbread. "But hey – if I was your boyfriend, I'd deck that jerk for you."

If I really was getting tougher, I didn't feel it. When I wasn't at the diner I was alone, and some evenings I felt a mouth yawning open inside me, screeching to be fed. But I didn't know what it ate. My prayers sat dully on my tongue, like chewed-up bits of communion wafer. So I cranked the volume on the radio in my kitchen until the jelly glasses rattled in the cupboards, or else I drove slowly through town, the globes of reflected streetlamps oozing slowly up my windshield.

I always thought I might see Skunk as I drove, but I never did. Once I knew to look for them, though, I noticed others: ragged men puddled in doorways and women hunkered on the steps of the Methodist church, their grocery sacks fat with secrets I could only guess at. Caught in my headlights, they froze. Only after I'd passed could I look in my mirrors and see them trudging off to someplace else.

I wondered where they went. What were they looking for, when they disappeared from sight? Alone again in my trailer, I turned on all the lights, but darkness still crowded the windows. Night after night, deer, panicky with hunger, stumbled skittering and spider-legged onto the highway. They never made it.

As February edged into March, I went a week without seeing Skunk and grew sick with worry. It was the last cold snap of an unusually bitter Carolina winter, and I kept imagining him curled like a comma in a ditch somewhere, his mouth packed with snow. I misheard orders and slopped coffee over the rims of mugs, my eyes tugged again and again to the empty front windows.

Evan cornered me as I carried a plastic tub full of dirty dishes behind the counter. "Listen, Lizzie. You're asking to get shitcanned."

I hefted the tub from one hip to the other. "You're shift manager. Are you going to shitcan me?"

I don't know whether it was my tone or my expression, or simply that he'd never heard me curse before — an impurity from a woman's lips was something my parents would never abide, and the bitterness of certain words still stung my tongue — but at this, Evan's entire face pulled down in a puggish, earnest frown.

"Maybe not," he admitted. "But don't think I don't know what the problem is. That old dog of yours — you'd think he left you at the altar, tore your heart out."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I lied. Outside, bare branches and the radio aerials of tractor-trailers sagged beneath beards of ice. For three days, wet, feathery snow had fallen at dawn, pellets of sleet at midday. I let my faucets drip all night so the pipes under the trailer wouldn't burst, and, lying on my mattress in the dark, I fell asleep to cold water tapping the bathroom drains on the other side of the wall. Dreaming, I found myself living once more with my mother and father in the house I still couldn't help but think of, whether sleeping or awake, as home, and daybreak saw me waiting for my morning coffee to spurt out onto the linoleum — at least then I'd know where the hole in me was. I walked to work past the skeletons of dead deer, their ribs interlocked like steepled fingers. Without Skunk, I'd surely lose all hope.

"Please," Evan said. "Just pull yourself together, all right?"

I set the tub beside the sink. "Leave me alone."

"Alone," he repeated. "Really?"

I felt his eyes linger on me as I wandered, dazed, to the front of the diner to bungle another order and go tipless again.

"Maybe you could try talking to someone for once," he called, but I ignored him.

That evening, I drove to the county shelter, where the frost lay in fronds against the windows and the woman doing crosswords at

the front desk eyed me and said, "You lost, honey?"

I was looking for someone, I told her. "He calls himself Skunk."

"In here," she said, "we show people the respect of using their real names."

"I don't know his real name. *He* doesn't know his real name." But she'd already turned back to her crosswords.

The overhead fluorescents occasionally sputtered—as if in sympathy with, or mocking imitation of, the wet winter coughs of some of those who shuffled between the dinner line and cafeteria tables at one end of the room and the rows of collapsible metal beds at the other. Like everyone else there, I wandered aimlessly. No one paid me much attention. They saw a fat girl, her eyes darting about the room and her soft pink fingernails, where they peeked from the sleeves of her ratty parka, notched and torn by her nervous teeth. I could have seemed neither trustworthy nor threatening. I probably looked like a runaway. I was one.

"Do you need help?" a man standing near the end of the dinner line asked. His coat was worn and his cheeks were hollow beneath a scabby beard, but he stood close to me with an air of habitual authority. His voice was slow and soothing, his vowels buoyant.

"I'm looking for someone," I told him.

From his coat pocket, he produced a folded slip of paper. "Maybe this is what you're looking for."

It was a tract, of course. I sat at one of the tables, across from an old man who aimed a wet grin at me. On the front of the pamphlet was a drawing of a man and woman clothed in rags, their faces twisted by despair, raindrop tears sprinkling from their eyes. "I Have Nothing To Eat," said the man's speech bubble. "I Am Broken Hearted," said the woman's. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*, said the caption.

I opened the tract. The same man and woman were smiling. They stood straighter now. Their clothes didn't appear as ragged as before, but instead seemed to wrap them like robes. "Jesus Loves Me!"

said the man. “This I Know!” said the woman. And behind and between them loomed the tall, handsome, bearded young man I was so familiar with. His smile was inscrutable, His arms outstretched. The caption completed the Beatitude: *For they will be filled!*

The back of the tract had a map and directions to a church in town. Tall letters proclaimed, *Speak His name and you will be saved!*

A woman approached, tall but stooped, her shoulders hunched like a perched bird’s. She wore pink galoshes and dragged her feet like a child, scuffing her toes and tripping over invisible obstacles. She sat beside me, slipped a pill from her pocket into her mouth, and swallowed. Her throat clicked.

Meanwhile, the old man across the table had stood. When he’d caught my eye, he flashed me another gummy grin, his shiny, wind-burned face creasing. Carefully – with the same reserve I saw in every image of Jesus, who often smiled but never showed his teeth – I grinned back.

His smile spread. He pulled down the top of his sweatpants. Like the tiny arm of someone struggling to lift himself up and over the waistband, his penis flopped out.

There was nothing awful or even all that strange about it. I’d never seen a man’s penis before, and all I could seem to think about were the many other things it resembled: a bitten, bloodless tongue, a grizzled hinge of jerky. After a few moments, the man shrugged, flipped the thing back into his pants, and left.

No one else seemed to have noticed. The woman laid her head on the table, facing away. Her arms were stretched across the table, her fingers molded around the Styrofoam cup.

The man and woman on the tract stared up at me. The captions above them bellowed salvation in a boldfaced font. But what good was a promise that was always retreating – hiding in the future tense, remote from present need? Beneath the revival tents, people had toppled into the aisles, crying, “Come down *now*, sweet Jesus!” But

no one had seemed too disappointed, afterwards, at the silent scudding of clouds that was the sky's only response.

I reached out and touched the woman's matted hair.

She flinched, fingers squeaking against the Styrofoam cup. Then, slowly, she surrendered to the touch. I worked my fingers down the length of her hair, feeling the gluey tangles separate. It was not all gray – single strands of cinnamon and chestnut caught the light and burned. Gently, the woman pressed against my fingers, the curve of her skull rising to fill my palm.

"Honey," I whispered, "what are we supposed to do?"

But my hand did not throb with awakening power, and the woman did not rise, sober and sane, to find all she'd lost returned to her. All that happened was I stroked her greasy hair until the lights started flickering out and the lady from the front desk came by to ask if I was going to stay the night.

I called in sick for three straight days and sat listening to sleet tapping at the door and knots of ice popping like knuckles beneath the rivets of the roof. On the fourth morning, Evan said, "Goddamn it," and hung up on me.

Minutes later, his truck pulled up outside. He knocked once and opened the door without waiting. "I'll carry you if I have to," he said. Then his face emptied. "Oh, Lizzie, look at you."

I sat back on the sofa, pinching my bathrobe closed at the throat. "Go away, Evan."

"You're not sick," he said, pouring himself through the doorway, "you're just sad. You need to come back to work."

"Has anyone seen Skunk?"

He closed the door and looked down at his thick fingers gripping the knob, as if embarrassed by what they'd just done. Because the room was small, and because neither of us were, we seemed pressed close together. The oily snick of the latch was an intimate, bodily

sound. This was the first time, I realized, that anyone other than myself had been in the trailer.

"Maybe he just moved on," Evan offered.

I pictured the diner. One of the old waitresses would be scooping grounds into a filter; the other would be alone in the corner with a glamour magazine. In a few hours, following their predictable daily rhythm, truckers and millworkers would begin filling the room for lunch. I could almost hear them, the grumble of their laughter and the laughter in their complaints. Their utter indifference to which was which.

"I don't believe in God anymore," I said.

It was the worst thing I could think to say. I understood that I was making a promise — one that I'd be held to, down the line, for years to come.

All Evan said was, "Well, you don't get time off for that."

In my kitchenette, that morning, he cooked me breakfast, an omelet made with cheese from which he scrubbed scaly blue mold and slices of pressed supermarket ham he tore into strips. I stood at the counter and watched his heavy hands grow nimble, weightless with purpose. "Comfort food," he said, setting the steaming plate in front of me. The first small bite spread warmth through my chest and reminded me of my hunger. Then, panting and snorting in a way I could hear without being able to control, I ducked my head and ate as though I couldn't remember the last time I had — which was, in fact, the case.

Afterwards, I wiped a hand across my lips, licked my salty fingers, and looked up at Evan, forcing my eyes to meet his. His face was as broad and open as a dinnerplate. He had a thick, pooching lower lip and a red nick on his chin where he'd cut himself shaving.

He took the plate and turned away. "Go get dressed."

Behind the closed bedroom door, listening to the hiss of hot water in my sink, I stood naked before the full-length mirror on the

closet door, doing what Evan had first requested I do: I looked at myself. I studied the folds of nude, goosebumped flesh, the fragile pallor of vein-laced skin, with a fondness that surprised me. Here was my burden, the thing I'd been given to care for. It felt like love.

Then I did the bravest thing I'd ever done: I listened for the sounds of Evan in my kitchen, and, when I'd gathered breath enough, I spoke his name.

He took a few steps; the trailer creaked around him. "What is it?"

"Evan."

He was standing right outside my door. "Lizzie?"

"Come here."

He filled the open door and froze. "Oh," he said—a long exhalation, breath flowing out of him until it seemed like he'd never speak again. I'd known, of course, from my first day at the diner, what he wanted from me, but I'd never once thought that I had the power to answer that need—or that my own needs, in fact, might be the same. Sometimes, like Skunk ordering pancakes, we're helpless to name the thing that can save us. We can only hold our hands up and hope. So I held my hands up to Evan; I let his hands hold me. When he cupped my breast, I gasped. Here was a new sensation: the weight of my own body being lifted up. As he lowered his face to mine, I closed my eyes, tipped my head back, and opened my mouth like a baby bird.