

After they had married, Margaret “adjusted to the nearness of a man.” What a wondrous, magical transformation that had been as she opened her body to him; the blooming of a beautiful closed bud virgin.

After she became pregnant, like a desert rose she closed against the heat. Morning sickness led to an overwhelming depression founded on an obsessive thought that what she bore would kill her. Gone was the laughing, happy companion, her quick breaths in his ear as he tightly held her in the twin bed they no longer shared.

By the end of the third month, Margaret was spending increasing time in the other scrolled mahogany sleigh bed that had been a wedding gift from his mother-in-law.

Winthrop in the matching bed was awakened by her groans. “May I get you anything, dear?”

“No, no, thank you. Oh, why is this so hard for me?” she whimpered.

Six month’s into the ordeal, Margaret had called him from his duties at the mission church in New Haven. “I must have this out of me. I can not stand another minute,” she had wailed.

Her doctor had prescribed Seconal to help her sleep at night. From then on, Margaret had almost always been asleep. It had occurred to Winthrop that she might be overusing the barbiturate, but he had decided that after the birth they could deal with any lingering effects of the drug.

For three months Winthrop had tended the chrysalis Margaret, standing by when she made her unsteady trips to the bathroom, in case she needed him. She never had.

Winthrop tried to comfort her. “It’s only another week now, not too far to go. I am proud of you, you know. I can’t imagine how you’ve done it.”

“I wish I was stronger for you, Winty. Now go, I’ll just sleep.”

Her due date, when all this would be over, came and passed.

Winthrop mentioned to Doctor Kepler that Margaret had been taking pills six times a day.

Kepler sounded stunned on the telephone. "But she was only to use them at night, only when she absolutely could not sleep. You must take the medication from her."

Winthrop removed the pills from her bedside and found three more full bottles of Seconal from doctors he did not know in the bathroom medicine cabinet.

The next day, Margaret was a screaming, complaining aggravation of resensitized nerves. Three fruitless trips to the hospital, two weeks after her due date, her agony reached a point where something had to be done.

Again drugged, the ordeal dragged on for another 46 hours until the bellicose pregnancy concluded in a Caesarean delivery of a small and lethargic baby with barely the strength to make spastic movements.

Winthrop saw no reason to argue with Margaret's postpartum words, "Never again."

"It is an amazing thing about birth," Dr. Kepler said to him outside her hospital room. He was a charming man, their age, who behaved older with the assurance of routine and experience. "Can you imagine going through that and ever having another child? You put that little baby in a mother's arms and the slate is just wiped clean. We men have no idea."

Winthrop had an idea. "I don't believe my wife shall ever want to have another child. Is the baby healthy? I mean because Margaret took so much medicine."

"The baby will be fine. You watch. In a couple of years, she'll be running around the yard and you'll never know that there was ever a period of slow growth."

They named the child Prudence. Margaret's health if not her figure returned slowly. She did not ask for more drugs and he did not find

evidence in the house that she had returned to her bad habit.

They lived in a poor part of New Haven. His vicarage had only recently come into the status of a mission church. Their living quarters were comfortable. He served his congregation well. Margaret's recovery continued. Three months after the birth, she began to assume her duties as a minister's wife, working in the church with the women's auxiliary group.

Winthrop told himself that it might take longer for her to resume all her duties as a minister's wife. Four months after the baby was born, Margaret had still not "adjusted to the nearness of a man" that which had been their private code for intimacy.

As they read in the small living room after Prudence had been put to bed for the night, he raised the subject by saying the doctor wanted to speak to them about "something."

She sighed and put down her magazine as if waiting for him to be more precise.

He struggled to mentally untwine his proper thoughts of the duties of a Christian wife from his lustful longing for the woman who had reached down to take him into her and had mewed with pleasure as he sank into bliss. "Margaret, I know that you had a bad time with the birth, and I support you in not wanting to have more children, but life goes on, and we should really try to find some way to continue."

"To continue?"

He rose from his chair and took her hand. "The doctor says that there are ways that you can again adjust to the nearness of a man without becoming pregnant."

Her resistance was conveyed with lowered eyes and a tone of a parishioner who has come to explain why there is nothing that she can do. "If you force me I shall comply with your wishes."

"I shall not force you to do anything, my love. Let us just listen to

what Kepler has to say, shall we?”

Behind Kepler’s desk was an anatomical chart pulled down from a roll set above a credenza. He gave them a simple lecture on the human reproduction system removed from filth and pornography by cut-away drawings of organs, their shapes surrounding blue arteries, white bones, gobbets of unknown function and striations of muscle.

With each birth control device he described the doctor mentioned what percentage of failure might lead to conception. He concluded with sterilization, a vasectomy for Winthrop or a tubal ligation for Margaret.

Winthrop noticed that Margaret nodded grimly at even “two out of a hundred.”

He asked, “Doctor, is there some way that we can be absolutely certain of not having another child?”

“There is a hysterectomy, where we remove the uterus. But that is a radical procedure that we normally only perform if a woman’s health is threatened or she is having symptoms where that is a problem.”

Winthrop thought that he could convince Margaret to have the procedure but was bothered by a doubt that even zero possibility might not return her to his ideal of a willing and eager partner. “Do you remember in the hospital mentioning how women, I think you used the term, ‘wipe the slate clean?’”

Kepler nodded.

Winthrop was aware that he was embarrassing Margaret, but persevered. “Is it possible for that not to happen, and for a woman to be so afraid, to have such vivid memories that ah, certain, ah, inhibitions make her exceedingly uncomfortable?”

“I think I understand what you are saying. Perhaps, Margaret and I should speak alone for awhile.”

Winthrop returned to the waiting room where he sat with two pregnant women. He kept his expression friendly, hiding why he was

there.

Ten minutes later, Kepler called him back into his office. Margaret was hunched over slightly, her eyes red and tearful.

“I’ve contacted another kind of doctor who might be better trained to handle this type of problem.”

Kepler did not mention psychologist, nor did the man they met the following week ever state outright that they were dealing with was a mental condition. In an office furnished like a combination of study and abstract art gallery, Dr. Loyst suggested that Margaret change her role, put on a negligee and attempt to “seduce” Winthrop.

Margaret was out the door as if leaving a house of ill repute. When Winthrop hesitated to follow her, she turned with an anger in her expression that he had never seen. “Are you ready?” she demanded.

He knew then that no form of birth control was ever likely to return the woman he had come to love and desire in the days before the conception of Prudence. He might as well have been a Catholic.

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For five years Winthrop kept a box of prophylactics hidden in his toiletries, the classical warrior inspired cover a talisman to charm with unspoken magic.

One night, without knowing why it was that night exactly, he lay awake long after Margaret had gone to sleep. As if in a dream, he rolled one of the moist rubber sheaths over his full and demanding erection. His mind was a jumble of words and arguments. “This is going to be a new start,” he prattled as he came to her bed, pulled off the covers, pushed up her nightgown and swiftly removed her panties.

She awoke, screamed, and tried to push him away just as he was on the verge of entering her. “Margaret, Margaret,” he cupped his hand over her mouth to stop her hysteria. “You’ll wake Prudence.”

So urgent was his desire that he was done in a few rapid thrusts. He

sank on her, the long desired bliss giving way to bad thoughts of what would be the result.

He was aware of her beneath him, stiff as if awaiting a blow. He shrank out her and stood beside the bed. The air was cool on his naked penis. He looked down and wondered what had happened to the Trojan protector.

Margaret rushed to the bathroom, packed and took Prudence from the house without a response to his hastily expressed explanations. After she was gone, he found the pale balloon, its head full of his seed floating downward in the toilet and figured that transported there, the prophylactic had performed its function.

In the morning, she had not returned to accept his apology and reassurance. His day's work completed at the church, he returned home with anticipation that she would have, out of her love for him, found forgiveness. Perhaps now, after this poignant demonstration she would come to understand the power of his desire. It being Tuesday, he expected to find meat loaf, mashed potatoes, corn, white bread and butter set upon the Formica kitchen table.

She and Prudence had not returned. He accepted an invitation— "if it was not too late to change his mind," from an elderly parishioner down the street. Returning home at nine o'clock slightly intoxicated by the glass of good port that he had accepted, he found the house dark and was forced to admit that he would have to go to Margaret to bring her home.

He called the comfortable rectory in which the chief priest of St. Mark's was housed.

Reverend Whistler, his father-in-law, childhood priest and role model answered. "Yes, they are here."

"May I speak to her, please," Winthrop said with a mature, Yale accent, British influenced clip to his words.

"I doubt very much that she would accept your call, Winthrop."

“Yes?”

“She has spoken to me of what transpired between you, and I must admit that I do not comprehend fully what I have heard.”

“Comprehend, yes. Well, ah, certainly an unfortunate misunderstanding. Perhaps, if you permit me...”

He knew that he had blundered but before he could correct himself, Reverend Whistler said, “It is not for me to permit or deny.”

“Yes, of course, I did not mean that.”

Without knowing more about what Margaret had told him, Winthrop could not think of how to ask for his understanding. “You say that you did not comprehend what she told you, perhaps...”

“Margaret says that you have abused her.” Whistler’s tone was so cold and convinced of his guilt that Winthrop felt accused of perversion.

“Abused you say?” He managed to sound incredulous.

“Yes, most cruel and despicable abuse.”

“Well, yes, I mean if such a thing were true.”

“You ask me to doubt my daughter?”

“No, No, of course not. I mean really I haven’t, I’m incapable of, you know, abusing her. I love Margaret very much, as you must know. This is a terrible misunderstanding. Perhaps, I should come over and...”

“That is between you and Margaret,” his father-in-law interrupted him. “If you would like to talk to someone about it, I shall be in my office tomorrow at 10:00 o’clock my usual visiting hours.”

Though couched in the words of an invitation, Winthrop felt summoned.

He sat uncomfortably in Whistler’s outer office with the usual mixture of parishioners with problems, surrounded by the heavy dark wooden furniture that he had hoped would be his some day. He was admitted to the inner office by Whistler’s secretary, a woman he had known since childhood.

The Reverend James Whistler had a large head padded with red flesh and styled white hair. He treated Winthrop as if he was a wayward parishioner, maintaining a detachment from the fact that they were talking about his daughter. Perhaps, Winthrop thought, this is a technique that I should remember, for it makes me better able to freely discuss my problem. But then he could not imagine how he would behave if Prudence's future husband should come to him in similar circumstances.

"I want you to know that anything you tell me here will be held in confidence. I will do my best to listen as a minister, not a father..." the reverend smiled slightly.

Winthrop wondered if at such a strange moment he was making a pun at the juxtaposition of minister and father.

"I am not here to judge you, rather to offer succor, the source and limits of which we are both aware."

Winthrop adopted his father-in-law's detached perspective to the point of phrasing in the second person, "You wake and feel a pressure. It is an act sanctioned by holy bonds. In your dream-like state do you consider propriety or are you overwhelmed by the love for her who is your wife? Yes, your mate has not consented for a long—a very long time, and yes conversation, perhaps counseling should have been undertaken long ago, but you don't think about that. The passion is real, the need to love, to feel love lifts and delivers you to where but for a, how shall I say, unfortunate and unnatural fear there should be welcome and understanding participation, without question or doubt that you should have every right to be there."

The narrowing of Reverend Whistler's eyes and the reddening of his jowls alerted the dismayed Winthrop that he had been hoodwinked into revealing the exact nature of his problem. He realized too late that Margaret would never have spoken to her father of the details of her alleged "abuse."

Winthrop endured a long pause, as if waiting for a judicial pronouncement.

Whistler exhaled strongly as if expelling a noxious gas from his lungs. "I offered you relief, thinking to provide counsel from that greatest store of wisdom that we both serve. However, I find myself at a conflict of loyalties which I can not resolve in any other manner than to remain true to my child. I apologize if I have deceived you, for I truly thought that I could be non-judgmental. I find that I can not."

"But you must understand, that I didn't...take her. That would be impossible in a marriage."

His father-in-law frowned and Winthrop felt the spider's web spinning around him. Further panic would lead to discussing his rape of Whistler's daughter.

"That would be a point of law to be debated by those with training other than ours. I speak now as Margaret's father. I ask that you do not bother her. I shall pray that she will forgive you, for we have another generation to consider. Prudence should have the blessing of a home with both parents. Perhaps, if she asks, I shall attempt to counsel Margaret but for now, I must tell you emphatically, sir, that she has no wish to see or speak to you."

To be called, sir, by Reverend Whistler was a paralyzing sting. Winthrop felt numb.

Whistler stood from behind his large wooden desk and moved towards the door. Winthrop obediently followed.

The Reverend fat, thick hands were grasped tightly behind his back. His cheeks were flushed. "Have you ever thought about requesting placement in a foreign mission? Sometimes a change of scene will break up old patterns. We can better find our way."

"I had not, but I'll pray on it."

Outside St. Mark's, Malvern was going through the change that

occurs at the end of summer when the students arrive at the Academy. The shared frontage on the village green was crowded with station wagons, packing boxes and cases. Greetings and farewells wavered over the town square with overheard bits of excitement and sorrow. Was he no longer worthy of Malvern? Is that what Reverend Whistler had meant by his suggestion? Did he mean that Margaret and Prudence should go abroad with him or wait in one of the old whaler's houses with the narrow walkway on the roof, the widow's walk, to await his return, if he ever did return?

Margaret would never want to move far away from her parents. No, the instruction clothed in advice was to move abroad, alone, somewhere distant and dangerous, to ecclesiastically fall on his sword.

What if a rumor spread that he had violated Margaret? Who would come to his defense? Was he to be ostracized from all that he had known, evicted into a terrifying uncertainty for having relations with his legal wife?

He paid a habitual visit to his parent's store. Mr. Rossono, the old fat Italian, working among the cracked ice and fish greeted him with gusto as a returning prodigy. How much longer could Winthrop expect to be honored if he stayed? An announcement that he was leaving for Africa or Asia would cover so much.

Given his poisoned state of mind, he might have even told his parents of this plan. He was saved from this pronouncement when Rossono told him that Winthrop's parent's were at the bank. Winthrop nodded and hurried back to his car.

Words, words, where were the words? The words that he used so well to explain the lessons of the Scriptures to the strangers who sat in his office and confessed true sins. Where was he to go? To whom could he confess and be absolved of his sin? But what sin? "*Give not thy strength unto women.*" He had been a faithful husband, perhaps guilty of

lust, but lust of wife; nowhere was that discussed or condemned—“... *but she that maketh ashamed is as rottenness in his bones.*”

He had committed no sin. This was Margaret, her disobedience to the laws of God and nature, her betrayal of him. He must not flee. She would be lucky if he ever forgave her. He would be patient, let her realize the wrong and find her own path back to him. Perhaps then he would take her back.

The little house where he and Margaret had spent so many quite peaceful, self-assured moments became his Gethsemane. His moral dilemma was heightened by a sense that it did not matter how wrong she was. If Reverend Whistler found his actions unworthy, subject to legal consideration, then others might discuss his deeds in a similar context. Who would come to know? How would they hear of his alleged crime? How would he defend himself against varied and unidentified accusations? He could barely imagine the words to speak of what had happened in a private, protected conversation much less a public defense.

The coming to her when she was asleep, not asking or waiting for her to awake, placing his hands over her mouth. Yes, these actions if told in vindication could be made to sound as if he was a rapist. She must not betray him. She must return home immediately, before she spoke to anyone else of this. They would move. For the sake of both their families, they should resolve their differences distant from the judgments of so many who knew them.

But how could he reach her? The act was irrevocable. She would never trust him again. Could he count on her discretion? Reverend Whistler was bound by his oath to maintain the confidence of what he had told him. She would not disgrace her family with gossip. The temptation to argue, to plead was irresistible. Where was his strength?

He reached for the telephone only to draw back. To call her would

be to disobey her father. If the reverend thought that Winthrop intended to defy him, he might bring the matter before the archbishop, seek a letter of dismissory on a charge of immorality.

Winthrop's hand trembled as he telephoned the rectory.

The reverend answered.

Winthrop did not speak, feeling criminal, perverted.

"Hello?" Whistler demanded twice before hanging up. Winthrop was irrational, certain that Reverend Whistler had identified him. Silence had not hidden his weakness.

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Two months passed. Winthrop fought a day-to-day, sometimes minute-to-minute struggle not to call or attempt to see his wife or child. They had not contacted him. Inevitably, the gossip spread in his parish, in Malvern. He carried himself with a tight, ironic smile. Pity, reproach, condemnation and questions were reflected from the shell of his determination to never again be the one who revealed what had happened.

To those who asked including his mother and father, he replied, "We are having problems that I do not wish to discuss."

One Saturday as he was preparing a homily to give the next day on the strength and blessing of family, he was buffeted by waves of anger that swamped him in self pity. What right did she have to do this to him?

He drove the old Ford to Malvern. As if guided by providence he saw Margaret and Prudence walking across the lawn before the Academy. He was surprised at the deep feeling of sorrow and longing that opened inside his stomach at the sight of his six-year-old daughter. He smiled with joy. His sandy curly hair caught in a strong gust that seemed to blow Prudence towards him as she ran across the lawn.

"Oh, Daddy."

He nearly wept to hear the passion of his daughter's utterance of

relief as she tightly hugged him. He stayed on his knees so that Prudence could continue to hold him. A glance at Margaret's hostile stare told him there had been no pardon. Before he could offer the apology he had mentally rehearsed to the point of obsession, she said, "You are to blame for what I must do."

She pulled Prudence from him, across the lawn. He did not chase her, arose to one knee and called softly, "I'm sorry."

Prudence turned and looked back at him from beneath her small taut arm encased in a blue felt coat.

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He was surprised and hopeful the next night when he heard Margaret's voice on the telephone in the living room.

"Winthrop, there is some place I must go. I want you to pay for this."

"Margaret, I want you home." All the longing for her that he had felt the past months caused home to tremble on his breath.

"I have made all the arrangements," she said. "Pick me up Wednesday morning at nine-thirty in front of the RKO. Good-bye." She hung up.

The rendezvous in three days incited him to renewed diligence to perfect his arguments on why they should reconcile. The speech constantly played in his thoughts and when he was alone was expressed in spoken rehearsals. He practiced and fretted over the right balance between contrition and the detailing of the moral behavior of a dutiful wife which he reinforced with Biblical, classical and folk adages.

She was waiting beneath the guady overhang of the entrance way to the movie theater. The day was gray, rain-threatening. She moved slowly and unsteadily to the car. He hurried to assist her with a polite touch on the elbow.

She carried a small bag.

He tried to appear chipper, even humorous, as if this was a date. She grimly handed him a New Haven address in her handwriting on a

torn scrap of St. Mark's stationary.

"Shouldn't we get Prudence?" he joked.

She closed her eyes and he thought her ill. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Go, just go," she flicked her hands forward.

As he drove, he began the performance of his life. "Margaret, I want to say two things. The first is to apologize and recognize that I have indeed wronged you in a way that is most unfortunate. However, it is also subject to facile..."

He had debated the use of facile or easy, settling on the former because he did not want to infer that anything about this had been easy.

"...misinterpretation and I feel compelled to offer a defense. Not to those who would misunderstand, but to you who, whether you realize it or not, share so much, have so much at stake in this controversy that has shattered our hearth."

He glanced at her to ascertain the impact of his words. The Margaret that he had courted had a poetic nature. This drowsy, unkempt version called for more literal expression. She stared out the windshield with half-lowered eyes. The recognition of the state worked into his consciousness. She was taking the pills again.

He might as well have been back in his living room, practicing, imagining her responses, but he persevered.

It went beautifully, as impassioned and well thought and delivered as if his best sermon. At times he spoke softly, raising his voice oratorically to emphasize a profound point. He calmed himself and like a jazz virtuoso began to vamp, improvising variation on themes, growing giddy with the intoxication of his creativity.

He loved and honored her as no man would. Never again would he do anything to her or with her without her full participation and consent.

She appeared unaffected, continuing to passively view the rain-

streaked windshield.

When he reached what he had planned to be the most poignant part, where he apologized for the sin that every man carries, a waiting beast within his loins, he reached out and seized her cold, damp reactionless hand.

Now he argued for their souls. “I admit my own blame, I swear to you that it will never happen again. But who are we to argue against the will of God that we be man and wife? Let us make the best of our time together on this temporal plane to further the glory of His name.”

A mocking perspective saw him pleading like a radio preacher asking for money. “I would gladly trade my life to absolve my sin, but do not let me die unrepentant in your eyes. Just say that you forgive me.” For the first time he wept.

Still, she did not react. What more could he say? The drug controlled her. He was shouting through a thick chemical wall.

“What do you think about what I said?” he spoke loudly as if she was deaf.

“I wasn’t listening,” she replied in barely a whisper.

He was surprised by his fury, excused it as the product of scorn for that which he had prepared with such effort. Then at concern for her fitness to be the mother of his child. “How long have you been in this state?” he demanded. “Who is taking care of Prudence?”

She was silent.

The fury boiled within his chest and he seized her upper arm, pushing her, then pulling her back, screaming, “Listen to me! I’m right! Can’t you see that I’m right in this.”

They had stopped at a light. She leaned against the passenger door and looked at him with narrow eyes, lax lips, pale complexion. “You’re a beast,” she said as if the words had been caught in her chest since the night he had come to her bed.

He stared at her in shock. How would God, the merciful judge of us all, see them? He, a man who had devoted his life to sacred truths, arguing for the soul of a drug addict who was the mother of his child. Of course he was the one who was right, but he must be humble. He looked back at the road. “Forgive me, Margaret. I only ask for your forgiveness.”

The all-reaching bliss that had made him love the church filled him. He was absolved. If she persevered in her path away from him, he would feel no blame.

She pulled herself to a more erect position. A trickle of drool rolled from the corner of her mouth. She clumsily wiped her face with the back of her hand. “Do...this easy for me? No more words. Made my mind.”

Let God judge their silences, his contemplation, hers the drowsy of a pathetic drug addict swelling against consciousness. He examined his inner being, calmed and focused as if to produce the more perfect resonance. He would not show another indication of remorse or guilt to her—to anyone.

They arrived at the address that she had given him, an old house in a part of New Haven similar to his mission. What kind of lawyer would have his office here? She must have the wrong address.

Margaret opened the door and almost fell from the car.

He reached to help her, but she pulled away and stood in the rain swaying as if looking for a familiar sight.

He hurried around the car. She had moved through a broken metal gate up the path of an unkempt yard.

Margaret rang the door bell. A large woman with milk chocolate-colored flesh hanging beneath her arms opened the door. Dark suspicious eyes glanced at Winthrop’s white clerical collar.

“I called about the doctor?” Margaret spoke like a drunk trying to keep from vomiting.

“Are you Peggy?” the woman asked.

Margaret nodded and stumbled. The woman and Winthrop moved to help her.

“That’s all right, honey. We got you now,” the woman said.

In a small office that looked as if it had been created by the addition of a thin white painted wall in a once larger room, the woman introduced herself as Hildy. “I am the doctor’s assistant. Do you have the money?”

“I’m afraid we have the wrong address,” Winthrop said.

Hildy looked from him to Margaret and back to him.

Margaret removed a white envelope from her purse and handed it to the woman.

Hildy counted out seven twenty-dollar bills.

“What kind of doctor is this?” Winthrop demanded.

Hildy’s expression was now clearly one of suspicion.

“Don’t pay any attention to him,” Margaret slurred, “He’s...he’s the father. Let’s get this over with.”

The possibility of what Margaret intended to do caused him to rise in his chair as if he could for the first time see over a previously unimagined level of calamity. But it was impossible. He had taken precautions. How could Margaret have ever found such a doctor? She had transformed into one of the factory girls from his congregation. This was definitely a sin, a mortal sin, besides being illegal. Yet the Council of Bishops had recently held discussions about this, that perhaps if the laws were changed...not like the Catholics...why was he thinking about church policy at a time like this? This was her punishment for him. She wanted him to see this, to pull him down with grasping monstrous arms into hell.

Hildy said, “You can wait here, father, if you would prefer not to be seen.”

Speak. He must speak. Where were the words? This was no longer

about the two of them. Greater, more meaningful, planes and relevance, dimensions were in play. Where was his moral authority, any authority to control her, to stop her?

Past the flimsy partition, was a living room. A long step brought him to Margaret's side. He pulled her to him and whispered, "What do you know about this? Women die."

Hildy waited near, eavesdropping, as if ready to judge them unworthy of the doctor's services.

Margaret drew herself up and with a surprisingly strong voice given her barbituric delirium said, "Damn you, Winthrop. This is your sin I am expunging, not mine."

Shamefully, his reaction was embarrassment that Hildy had heard the accusation.

Before he could respond, Margaret had moved ahead of Hildy, away from him.

He imagined physical strength that would pull Margaret, courage to shout his accusation, to denounce the criminal act. Words like aiding and abetting ...inequity...liability flowed through his mind as through a broken net, no longer fit to catch meaning.

He hurried after her whispering rapidly, "Let me bear this sin in God's eye, Margaret. He will forgive us the thought and plan, but never the deed."

Like Eurydice descending into Hades, she looked back one last time, her doll button eyes glazed by the drug. "I can't go through that again. If you truly love me you should know that much."

At the moment that he sensed a point of contact from which they could discover a shared vision, the plutonian Hildy led her through wooden doors. "That's all right, honey, the Doctor knows what he's doing."

The doors were slid shut by the monster. He was left in a still

functional living room, a couch, a faded lithograph of a garden. A whiff of alcohol mingled with the common aroma of the decay of fabric and dirt of an old house. He waited for the inspiration, prayed quickly before thinking that he was wasting time.

He should call her father, but an evil thought stopped him. She had brought him here to compound the act. How would he ever explain how they had ever come to be here? He would never be able to disassociate himself from this.

He must act now or finally and forever lose whatever pretense he might have at a virtuous resolution of the conflict. Weakness, the shattering of self-image, dropped him into a dining room chair, the dead weight of a steer with a bolt shot into its head. He listened as if for a coming attack at the slight creaks and occasional unidentifiable sounds of the old house. At this supreme moment of moral crisis, he did not pray, or seek God's help. He shrank not to be noticed by the All-seeing eye.

But was not this when God found you with the guidance of moral clarity? Another bolt entered his brain, a childish fear of abandonment. God would not come to him, unless Winthrop demonstrated virtue, defended the right, delivered himself completely to the guidance.

The vast evil that he faced made him feel small and inept. Courage, where was his courage? Where was his hope? Betrayed. He had betrayed faith. The lives of the saints, the courage of faith, even the most humble in the face of the most overawing evil had found the righteous path if only to die. Saints in whose company Winthrop had since childhood thought himself capable of joining looked down on him with scorn. But in the stories of the martyrs there was no mention of the witness, of the nameless face that looked and turned away as if nothing disturbed the normalcy of atrocity.

“Suffer me that I may speak; and after that I have spoken...” he

whispered.

Job's answer was an echo in Winthrop's mind, "mock on, mock on, mock on, mock on..."

Winthrop tried but could not rise. After all, what did this have to with him anymore? There was only so much that one man could do. He would divorce her. He imagined himself in Africa. Ten years from now, perhaps he would return with slides of his open wall, thatched roof church that he had built, dark light reflecting faces, white smiles from wooden benches or used school desks shipped from an inspired midwest congregation, recordings of odd accented chorus of old hymns "...hallay, hallay..."

Winthrop jerked, pushed to awareness, by another presence entering the dark cave. Hildy passed through in response to the faint chiming of a bell.

Winthrop returned her smile with a stare. "...by *wicked hands*..."

With the precision of a Nazi train delivering another load of Jews to Dachau, a young woman was brought into the living room and seated in an old stuffed chair facing Winthrop. She appeared to be college age, pretty and emphatic in her fear and sorrow. After Hildy had left her "for just a few minutes. It's to help the doctor." Yes, to help the doctor murder his child, to cast his wife into purgatory.

The co-ed stared at the faded patterns of a Turkish artisan as if to find a way out of the perdition of the evil cave.

Why was she alone? Stupid, of course she did not have a husband. That is why she was here. No husband would allow this to happen.

Winthrop reached up and removed his white collar.

At that moment, a loud sob penetrated the sliding wooden door, then a pitiful wail of the damned.

Would this fantastic day of sight and comprehension of unimagined horrors ever cease its mad lecture? Winthrop rose towards the sound,

turned towards the front door to flee, then collapsed back into the chair.

The house momentarily returned to its private sounds. Acid burned inside Winthrop.

He heard Margaret cry followed by the muffled sound of a man's voice. Surprising action came as an accident. Perhaps, it was the evidence of another man causing her pain: doctor, abortionist, murderer, violator of his wife's womb. From victim to defender Winthrop threw open the sliding wooden doors, breaking their barring enchantment.

Where the dining room table should have been was a perverted chair with Margaret's feet strapped by leather bands to stirrups that held her naked thighs apart. A Negro was bent over her holding a clear plastic tube attached to a device that looked like a glass encased concertina. Her vagina, place of mystery that he had rarely seen was spread as a red wound by a hideous tool.

Winthrop flailed at the equipment, knocking over a thin stand holding a bottle. He tore at the bindings, yanked the foul metal phallus from within his wife.

The doctor tried to restrain him, as did the stronger Hildy.

"Sir," the doctor said, "You will hurt her. See, there you've cut her. I can't be responsible for that."

"You ain't getting none of your money back," Hildy said.

"We've changed our minds. I can not condone this." Winthrop pulled sombulent Margaret to his chest. "Please, please, just permit us to leave."

Neither interfered with his clumsy escape.

Margaret was a limp weight. Her barely open eyes did not appear to see him. He dragged her from beneath her arms, the pale green gown in which she was clothed pulled away from her naked back. He tried to cover her while not losing his grip and movement out of the evil confines of the abortionist's operating room.

The shocked co-ed stood as if witnessing a corpse and fled out the front door ahead of him.

“Hey! Hey, wait,” Hildy called.

Bent back, he dragged Margaret on the rain soaked cement to their car.

He rolled her over and lay her across the seat from the passenger side, ran around to the driver’s side and pushed her up to a limp sitting position, returned and closed the passenger door.

Margaret rolled her head and gurgled, closed her eyes and snored in a regular sonorous rhythm.

The green revealing gown in which she had been clothed was wet with blood, not red as from a cut, but darker, bluer almost black, thick and clotted.

His prayers that she not die were interrupted by his dilemma of where to take her. How would he get her into their house without the neighbors seeing the priest dragging his nearly nude and bleeding wife?

He must take her to the hospital. But that was a confession that he could not make. He would take her home, clean and dress her, pray for the Lord’s mercy that she not die. But their house was on a block in the city where many did not work. Even in the rain, too many bored eyes would be watching the street. Without a driveway to get close to the house, he might have to drag her down the block. No, that was unacceptable.

His church was set on a quarter acre within a landscape of two-story apartment buildings and small stores. He drove across the wet lawn, turned sharply around the thick trunk of a maple, and parked the car so that the passenger side was abreast of a metal fire door that led into the vestry.

He hurried to the front, unlocked the chapel, pushed the bar to slowly open the rear metal door, glanced at the row of unused clothes

lines and gardens let go for the winter, judged that he would be shielded from all but a few backyards, yanked open the car door and dragged his wife into the church.

They were alone, locked in. Nobody would be coming to the church. It would be better to move the car, so as not to cause a curious visit, but he might have to take her away by the same route. Where could he put her? In what could he clothe her? He had to attend to her wound.

She lay on the floor. The gown pulled up over her right shoulder. Her soft full white breasts spread towards her arms with the motion of arrested waves.

He bathed her with a gray dish towel and a pot of hot water from the small kitchen next to the vestry. The blood came up from the pale skin of her inner thighs. He wrung the towel. The metal backed water turned a rose hue. Then, he bathed her vagina to reveal a complex construction of skin with folds and contours that varied from liver to pale pink.

For a moment he stared at that which had been the instigator of his delirium the night that he had come to her bed. The organ had the appearance of something constructed by the Maker more for exit than entrance. He thought it ugly and vile and shuddered as if he had swallowed an antidote.

He dressed Margaret in an ankle-length white choir robe and dragged her another forty feet into the chapel up the one step of the carpeted sacristy beneath the reredos mural of the Ascension. He cleared the silver chalices and bowls, laid her atop the communion table, another choir robe for a pillow. Outside the rain lashed against the church. Dim light illuminated the stained glass. Wilted hot house lilies drooped at the corners of the red carpeted stage from which he preached. He lit tall white cylindrical votive candles so that Margaret had the appearance of a corpse set out for mourning.

From the first pew, he watched her. Her straight brown hair fell over her shoulders. Her hands were folded on her chest. She maintained her death pose without movement.

What if she was dead? What if he had murdered her by bringing her here rather than the hospital? All he craved was to find a connecting path out of this twisted maze back to the known course his life had been before he had sinned. Yes, it had been a sin, for sin in all its forms is but an imitation of the fall from grace, cast from the comfortable and the known into question and doubt. He knew now that he had sinned. In that way they were joined in mind and spirit. If God gave him his sanctified life back he would never, ever, be tempted by flesh again.

Her hand dropped from her chest and as if a weight pulled her body from the narrow table. Before he could reach her, she appeared to have caught her fall enough so that she fell into his arms.

He helped her sit up on the floor and lean against the table. Her pupils were enlarged as she stared at him, the candle-lit pews and back to him. "I...I'm," she tried to speak, then felt and looked at the choir robe in which she was clothed.

"I'll get you some tea." He felt embarrassed, fearful of her reaction to what he had done.

He lit a burner and ran tap water into a copper kettle. She remained propped against the altar table when he returned while the water boiled.

"Is it over?" she asked.

"No, I stopped them," his whisper expanded in the hollow of the chapel.

She made a sound that was a mixture of a deep sigh and a groan. "What am I going to do?"

He took one step towards her then stepped back and made no response.

She looked at him with a curious expression. "It was a mistake

bringing you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You despise me.”

He should despise her, but he did not. She was the path back to grace, only together could they return. This fantastic day had taught him the futility of words. Again competing silences, but now without superiority he felt the exhaustion of the vanquished. The faint whistle of the boiling water mixed with the sound of the rain. “I’ll get your tea,” he said.

\* \* \*

Two weeks later they ate dinner as a family in the rectory of St. Marks. Winthrop felt uncertain if he had been accepted back into the fold. He and Margaret sat beside each other, Margaret’s mother and Prudence opposite them, Reverend Whistler at the head of the table. The lamb had been carved by Reverend Whistler. Winthrop’s mother-in-law served side dishes from two china bowls. Margaret stirred beside him.

“I went to the doctor, Friday,” she said in a faint voice.

“What did you say, Peg?” Reverend Whistler asked loudly as if to encourage Margaret.

“We’re going to have another child,” Margaret said and cleared her throat.

“That’s wonderful!” Winthrop’s mother-in-law came around the table to hug Margaret.

Prudence looked at him and he felt he had to say something to her. “You’re going to have a little brother or sister.” He glanced at Reverend Whistler.

Mrs. Whistler said, “James, what’s the matter with you? Didn’t you hear?”

Reverend Whistler grinned. The red tops of his cheeks climbed to

his crinkled eyes. “That’s good news. I’ll say, that’s mighty fine news

No congratulations were offered to Winthrop.

After the meal, they walked out into the first truly frigid night of the year. Margaret and Prudence had gone down the walk to the car. Reverend Whistler stepped outside and put his arm around Winthrop’s shoulder. “Make the best of it, my boy.”

Winthrop smiled but saw only threat in his father-in-law’s expression.

\* \* \*

Margaret was wheeled into the delivery room two weeks before she was due for the scheduled Caesarean. As far as Winthrop could tell, she had found a proper dosage of the Seconal so that she had functioned during the day caring for Prudence and did not overtly behave as if she had a problem.

Winthrop did not try to correct her, avoided physical contact except for the few times that she had offered him her cheek when he came home from work. If he walked very quietly, made no sudden movements, he felt as if he had found a very narrow path of grace.

On the rolling bed, Margaret clutched her father’s Bible to her chest and closed her eyes when Winthrop gave her slender arm a squeeze of encouragement.

Winthrop waited in the room reserved for the immediate family. He sat at a small desk to write a sermon on the hospital stationary.

He wrote the date and the title, “THE FOUNDATION OF COURAGE IS HOPE.” The words came easily as if we are all given one bit of wisdom to impart, and this was his.

The sermon was complete when Doctor Kepler came to bring him to see his new baby girl, a squaller, healthier in appearance than her sister had been.

“What are you going to name her,” a nurse with a clipboard asked in the recovery room.

Winthrop looked at his pale, barely conscious wife in whose arm the red-faced swathed baby lay crying. “I think I should like to call her Hope.”

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If you are interested in beta reading *the Chains of Bondage* please contact the author at: [oshins@jeffreymarcusoshins.com](mailto:oshins@jeffreymarcusoshins.com).

The novel is 200 pages long.