

Renunciation

DENTON LOVING

Arlene cursed herself all afternoon for missing Dr. Max's call because she had turned her phone off while she practiced yoga. Attempting—and falling short once again—to speed up her psychological healing and, thus, find inner peace. The message had been vague. Something about an incident and he'd like her to come for an emergency therapy session with Colby. She tried to call Dr. Max back, but his secretary said he was in session, that she couldn't divulge any details about the incident, but he would be available to meet at 6:00 p.m. Could she come?

The message had unsettled her, and now the car was making that squeaking noise again. It sounded like it came from the right front tire, but Arlene couldn't be sure. Car maintenance was one of those things her husband, Starling, had always managed. She should have taken it to a mechanic already, but the noise came and went. When the car was moving, especially if music was playing, the squeak was impossible to hear. Easy to ignore—which had been Arlene's philosophy for a while now.

Sitting in the pickup line of parents outside her daughter's school was when the noise was most noticeable. This was when it was also the most embarrassing.

Often, the noise subsided if she raced the motor or pulled forward, but she was already penned so tightly between two vehicles that there was no room to move.

In front of her was a black Tahoe. It shimmered, obviously washed and waxed recently. Next to it, her Ford Escape seemed decrepit. It was seven years old now, and the only wash it had seen since Starling died was when it rained.

The Tahoe was a grim vehicle with tinted windows. Most of the trim was black, including the bumpers. It was what her son Colby would refer to as “murdered out,” a phrase she didn’t like but also one that refused to leave her head. In this case, it seemed appropriate since the long, sleek vehicle resembled a hearse.

Arlene worried it was unlucky to conjure such blatant images of death. Today would be the first time seeing Colby since she had deposited him three weeks earlier in yet another rehabilitation clinic. He had gone off the grid for weeks before that, living only God knew how until he had been beaten so badly that the policeman who found him thought he was already dead.

Arlene tried to think of something happy when the door of the black Tahoe opened, and a man walked briskly toward her. It was September. By evening, the air would be autumn cool, but the temperature now was well past 80. She rolled her window down, and the afternoon heat rushed into the car.

“Hey, Arlene. I thought that was you.”

She could feel the blood rush to her head, realizing she couldn’t remember who this man was.

“I kept hearing a noise,” he said. “Sounds like you’ve got a bad belt. Have you had it checked out?”

The man’s hair was graying at the temples but otherwise black and full. His face—what was visible around his glasses—was tanned, almost weathered. She couldn’t place him. She had been having trouble recalling people for a while now. The counselor at one of the previous rehab clinics told her it was likely stress. Too much stress in too short a period. Nothing more.

“I’ve been meaning to,” she said.

“It’s tough to get everything done in a day, isn’t it? Especially when we spend half of it waiting for the kids.”

An expression of puzzlement must have seeped through in her pause.

“You’re Colby’s mother, aren’t you?” he said in a confident tone. He removed his glasses. “And Clare’s?” His head nodded toward the school when he said

Clare's name, an acknowledgment of whom she was waiting to pick up. He reached out his hand, and she took it, though her own hand felt limp in his grip.

"I'm Tom Addington. Wiley's dad."

"Oh, right," she said. "You're Wiley's dad." Wiley was the second baseman on Colby's high school team and one of Colby's best friends throughout school. She had known the father vaguely for years. He was a banker, dressed in a tailored suit to fit his trim body.

Arlene had always admired men who dressed well. Starling had cared little about clothes. He had worn suits to work only when he had to. To sell insurance, he argued, it was better to dress casually. He wore khaki chinos and golf shirts. When they had first been married, Arlene pressed Starling to buy expensive suits from Brooks Brothers. For birthdays and holidays, she gave him new ties and silk pocket squares, until finally he pointed out that she was wasting money and energy. He would never wear all of the clothes she kept buying him. He didn't like ties. He wouldn't be caught dead wearing a pocket square, especially the pastel and pink ones she favored.

This had been crushing to her. Sometimes she wondered if this had been the beginning of Starling's decline, when he refused to indulge her in this smallest of ways. Instead of fighting it, she focused on dressing Colby and Clare. They were more pliable than Starling, who constantly pulled away.

"How is Wiley?" she asked.

"He's great. At Vanderbilt. Going to be a biologist. He's obsessed with honey bees. All he talks about is colony collapse disorder. I don't understand half of what he says, but he's good."

She thought of Wiley thriving at a school like Vanderbilt. If only Colby were also starting his junior year.

"How's Colby?" he asked.

She paused, never sure how to answer this question, and then she said, "He's at a rehabilitation center."

Tom's demeanor changed. His smile was replaced with an expression of severe gravity. His forehead wrinkled tight with lines.

"God, Arlene, I really didn't know that. I'm sorry."

"We've had a rough couple of years, but we keep hoping for the best," she said.

"I always liked Colby," Tom said. "I took a bunch of boys camping one time

and woke up in the middle of the night to howls. I honestly thought there was a wolf outside the tent. I jumped out of my sleeping bag. So did everyone else. Colby was thirty feet up in a beech tree, howling. I said, ‘Colby, what the hell are you doing? How’d you get up there?’ and all he said was, ‘The moon! Look at the moon!’ I hadn’t even noticed that it was full and low to the sky. It really was beautiful, and we all just stood there for a long time in the middle of the night looking at the moon.”

Tom laughed, but he looked at Arlene meaningfully, as though he wanted her to understand how important and joyful that moment had been.

She wanted to thank him. Instead, she said, “Looks like the line is moving.”

“Listen. My brother owns that garage on the corner of Jefferson and Third. Right before you get to the hospital. Let him have a look at that belt. He’ll treat you right. I promise.” He pulled a business card out of his wallet and handed it to her. “Call me, please. Let me know how Colby is. And if there’s anything I can do.”

The line moved up a couple of car lengths. The squeaking noise subsided as she pulled forward, but then it began again when she paused.

She tried to remember if Wiley’s parents were married or divorced, but she couldn’t even remember the wife’s name. Heidi. His wife’s name was Heidi—an improbable name, but she knew that was it. Whatever had happened to Heidi Addington? They had always been friendly, often working together in the concession stands at baseball games. How had she forgotten so much about this couple whom she had known for so many years? How could grief play such strange games with a person’s mind?

She looked at the card that had THOMAS ADDINGTON printed in the center. Was he just being considerate? Concerned for Colby? Or had he been hitting on her? As much as she admired men’s clothing, she was clueless about men.

Colby stood on the kitchen receiving dock, absentmindedly watching the field where the horses grazed while he inhaled the smoke of his cigarette. The whole day’s schedule had been altered because of last night’s events. The morning prayer service had been significantly abbreviated. The afternoon group

session had been cancelled as had the scheduled hiking trip around the lake. By lunchtime, everyone was on edge, and several of the boys involved in the fight had been sent home—or if not home, then simply away, some back on the street—and it was likely others would be gone by supper.

Dr. Max had removed Colby from drawing class in order to interrogate him. Dr. Max believed that Colby hadn't even thrown a punch in the fight, but he said that the incident hit too close to Colby's recent brush with death not to elicit some sort of emotional response, that Colby had to dig deep at this moment or else they would have to reexamine whether this treatment house was a match for him.

Dr. Max was well over six feet tall, and he liked to lord his height over the boys in the program as his height was his only advantage to an otherwise weaker physiognomy. But Colby was taller than the doctor. He was broad shouldered and athletic despite his recent injuries. When Dr. Max felt unsatisfied, as he did in his discussion with Colby that morning, he pinched the thin goatee on his chin and wrinkled his brow. As last resort, Dr. Max tried to call Colby's mother, who never answered her phone. So Dr. Max was forced to postpone their conversation, which he said would give Colby more time to think about what had happened.

Colby was scheduled to report to the kitchen to help prepare the evening meal. He preferred his work assignments over the group therapy sessions and the daily activities designed to build trust and to work with the other patients as a team. The kitchen was hot and steamy, but the cooks told him when to carry a tray to the oven and which pots were ready to wash. When he was shoveling shit in the stables, there was an old man who told him which scoop to use and which wheelbarrow, where to dig and where to dump. He enjoyed the stables the best, with its strong smells of horse sweat and manure. The horses were always sniffing at his pockets in search of an apple or a sugar cube. He even liked the dirt and the strain on his muscles as he mucked out the stalls. The barn would have been a great place to disappear with a good book, but books were not allowed in this place.

Baer, the dietitian, pushed the door open behind Colby. He said, "Dr. Max wants you. Says to go straight to his office. Your family's here."

Colby's lip curled at the word, recalling portraits of his former household, which included his father, who most definitely was not here because he had

died just over a year ago. So Baer was wrong, or at least, he was not exactly right. *Family*. There was no good way to divide the word in half to define only a fraction of the whole.

Clare was sitting in the small waiting area outside the office. When Colby walked into the suite, she looked up and smiled. Somehow, her emotional attitude toward him never visibly wavered. When he was there, she was pleased. When he was an asshole, she told him but in such a way that he never doubted her unconditional feeling for him. When he had awoken in the hospital, bruised and broken, it was to her voice reading to him from one of the religious biographies she read over and over again. To be so much younger, she seemed the only reliable face in their alleged family, despite her quirks.

“Hey, Clarabel,” he said, and he sat down in the chair beside her. “How’s life on the outside?”

“Boring without you,” she said. She leaned over to hug him without leaving her seat. “Your bruises have almost all gone away.” She reached over his left eye and rested her hand softly on his skin. “This one I can still see.”

“They’re getting better,” he said, brushing her hand away, but not unkindly.

She tugged on his chestnut beard, and without having to say so, he knew that she was thinking how their mother would disapprove.

“They’re waiting on you. Dr. Max said to come in when you got here.”

“They can wait. What are you reading?”

She handed him a heavy book with glossy images of the saints. He flipped through it, his eyes overwhelmed by so many colors.

“You can keep it if you want.”

“They won’t let me have any books here. You know, this is Christian rehab. Unless it’s the Bible, it must be Satan.”

Clare snorted. “That’s crazy. This is a book about the saints of the Christian church.”

“Doesn’t matter. Not worth fighting about. Tell me about it. Is it any good?”

She flipped through the first part of the book until she found the pictures she wanted.

“Look at these,” she said. “They’re frescoes from Italy. By an artist named Giotto.”

“They’re beautiful,” Colby said, turning slowly through the pages. The colors were soft and realistic in a way that the people in the images seemed alive.

“Who is this, Saint Francis?” Colby asked.

“Yeah,” Clare said. “This is *Exorcism of the Demons of Arezzo*.” The name of the Italian village rolled confidently off her tongue, and Colby knew that she would have researched the pronunciation and probably read about the place many times since her fascination with the saints began. In the painting, the city rose to the sky in towers of gold and rose and blue, all surrounded by a formidable white stone wall.

“Look at the demons,” she said. “Aren’t they wonderful? I mean, the way he painted them. Each one is unique.”

“Shhh. Say that too loud, and they’ll want to exorcise us both.”

She turned the page and explained the image of Francis on his death bier in front of San Damiano.

“See how bright everyone’s clothes are? It’s interesting because Francis’s father was a cloth merchant.” She turned the pages backwards until she found the painting *Renunciation of Worldly Goods*. “See here how the colors in the peoples’ clothes shift so they’re darker at the edges? See what he’s doing with light and perspective?”

“Is Francis naked?” Colby asked.

“His father sued him for stealing his cloth. So Francis took off all his clothes in the middle of everyone and gave them back. He said he chose God as his father over his earthly father, the cloth merchant. It was the beginning of his life as a saint.”

“So Francis was a freak,” Colby said.

Clare laughed, but she said, “It was a symbolic gesture.”

At that moment, Dr. Max opened his office door and ushered Colby inside. His mother rose as he entered, and he could tell that her focus was zeroed in on the shaggy hair on his face. She hugged him, but her first words were indeed about his beard.

“You have such a beautiful face. Do you have to keep it covered up with hair? Can’t you at least keep it trimmed? And you smell like smoke,” she said, burying her nose into his faded T-shirt.

“Would you ask Christ to trim his beard?” Colby asked, stepping away from her.

“Don’t be sacrilegious,” Arlene said in a loud stage whisper, which didn’t keep Dr. Max from hearing her. “I brought you the clothes you asked for.” She

handed him an old gym bag.

“I don’t think he meant anything by it,” Dr. Max said. “He knows very well he isn’t Christ.”

“I could be Christ,” Colby said, opening the gym bag. “How would you know? Don’t you believe that Jesus walks around like this sometimes?”

At the top of the gym bag were a pair of boots.

“What are these?” Colby asked, fingering the intricate stitching on the smooth leather. There was a tag that said GENUINE OSTRICH. “Ostrich leather? Are you crazy? What are these for?”

“You said you wished you had boots when you were working in the stables,” she said. “Don’t you like them?”

“You don’t shovel shit in boots like these. These are the kind of boots you wear to a pride parade.”

“Don’t say ‘shit,’” she said in another one of her whispers.

“Colby, that’s enough. Forget about the boots. I asked your mom to come today because I want you to tell her about what happened last night.”

Colby stroked his beard, trying to pull it down as if he could hide it. His mother’s presence had made him feel hairy and unexpectedly ugly, and he couldn’t forget about the boots.

“There was a fight last night,” he said, but that was all he said. Dr. Max and Arlene waited for him to go on, but he wouldn’t speak anymore.

“Were you in the fight?” Arlene asked.

“Why would I fight with anyone?”

“Colby,” Dr. Max said. “Three weeks ago, somebody beat you so bad that you almost died. Your mom asked a reasonable question. Tell her what happened last night in the dormitory.”

“There was this boy that got beat up last night. His whole family is a bunch of white supremacists. This place puts him in a room with half a dozen black boys, each one just waiting for him to say ‘nigger.’ As soon as he said it, those boys let him have it. He couldn’t understand why they beat him up. He said he didn’t mean nothing by calling them niggers. He said in his family that’s what he was taught to say. One boy said, ‘Well, too bad for you that your family is so ignorant. Now’s your chance to get some education.’”

“My God, that’s awful,” Arlene said. “And you saw the whole thing? What did you do?”

"I didn't do anything. It wasn't my fight."

"Isn't doing nothing just as bad?" said Dr. Max.

Colby didn't begin to know how to answer that question, as if there had been a choice made inside his head. There'd been no choice. He had watched the fight as if suspended above his body and separate from any feeling of human connection to any of the boys involved. Instead, there was an awareness of extreme powerlessness. He never asked himself what was going on in front of him or why it was happening. There were no answers to those questions or a million answers to those questions, but either way, it was all pointless, and he would rather just be somewhere else, even if it was back on the street when his feet ached from the days and miles of endless walking. If he could have been somewhere else, anywhere else, instead of watching that poor, stupid bigot getting the shit beat out of him, he would have gone there, but he couldn't. So he just continued to watch as it all happened in front of him.

"You must have been so afraid," his mother said. She reached for his hand, but he recoiled.

"I wasn't afraid."

"Why not?" asked Dr. Max. "You just suffered a traumatic experience that was very similar. Then this happens in front of your eyes. Didn't you feel any fear?"

"What happened to me wasn't similar at all," Colby said.

"How so?" Dr. Max said.

"I don't know. I told you, I don't remember getting beat up."

"Don't you remember the pain? Didn't you feel sorry for your body, for what they did to it? Don't you feel sorry for the boy who got beaten up last night?" Dr. Max said.

"He was kind of an asshole. He maybe deserved to get beaten up," Colby said.

"Don't say that," Arlene said, and she began to cry.

"Colby, you're either not being honest with me or yourself," said Dr. Max. "You won't get better until you hit bottom, and if getting beaten almost to death wasn't your bottom, then it's scary to think what your bottom will be. You've been here three weeks, and you still haven't told me how you got beat up or why you left home and were out on the streets."

"I was walking," Colby said. "I like to walk around and see things."

“Until your feet become swollen and bleed?” Arlene said through her crying. “You were gone for so long I thought you were dead, and you wouldn’t call, and then you were almost dead. And I had to drive down to that horrible emergency room in Atlanta, and you were bloody and beaten up, and I thought I was going to lose you.” Her crying progressed to heavy sobbing, and she became impossible to understand.

“Colby, I’m not seeing the kind of progress I expected from you,” Dr. Max said. He pinched his goatee again, and his forehead was so crinkled that he looked as though he were in physical pain. “You refuse to tell me what happened to you the night you almost died. You refuse to talk about your father’s suicide. We have to destroy this armor you’ve built around yourself, even if you feel exposed. I want you to pull off the layers until you can tell me something true.”

But Colby had told them both the truth already. He didn’t remember. He didn’t remember what he had drunk that night or how it had wound up in his hands or who had given it to him, although he didn’t believe he had done anything wrong. He didn’t remember the man who had attacked him or why. He didn’t remember his physical pain until after it was all over and he awoke in the hospital with Clare reading to him. He didn’t remember the feeling of death that must have been present, that must have grabbed him as surely as it grabbed his father in that moment when he swallowed a lethal dose of pills. He couldn’t remember the last time his dad had been happy; neither could he remember any reason for his dad’s unhappiness. Sometimes, he couldn’t even remember his father’s smile or the timbre of his voice.

When they were younger and their parents went out for dates or to parties with friends, they left Clare and Colby at home alone. They spent those long Saturday evenings on the living room couch, Colby silent most of the time, absorbed in playing games on his tablet, attacking villages, fearlessly leading digital clans into battle. He pretended he was too grown up for The Cartoon Network or Nickelodeon, but he let her watch whatever she wanted. They had pizza delivered, and then Colby microwaved popcorn. The sound of the kernels exploding and the feel of the warm, greasy bag as they handed it back and forth had felt completely reassuring. On these nights, Clare pretended that she and

Colby were the only two people left in the world. That it was up to them to build their lives in whatever form they chose.

Something akin to that feeling had returned to her as they sat in the waiting room, admiring Giotto's frescoes in her book. She read more about how frescoes were created with plaster, how he would have painted them when the plaster was wet, so the pigment mixed with the plaster as it dried. These images she loved so much would look completely different if Giotto had painted on wood or canvas.

Both Colby and Arlene were red faced and teary when they left Dr. Max's office. Arlene told Clare they were staying for dinner, and Dr. Max suggested Colby carry his gym bag of clothes to the dormitory before meeting them there.

"Try on some of the new clothes I brought you," their mother said. "And try on your new boots."

Clare could sense Colby's skin tighten around his jaw, but he said nothing.

Dr. Max escorted them through the cafeteria line and helped them find an empty table before excusing himself. Clare found the institutional food to be even worse than what she got at school. When Colby arrived with his tray, he wore a new pair of chinos and a robin's-egg-blue button-down shirt with a polo horse embroidered in stark white on the left side of his chest.

"You look so nice," Arlene said. "I saw Wiley Addington's dad today. I didn't know they had a child Clare's age." She turned to Clare and asked, "Do you know who I'm talking about?"

Clare shook her head no, wishing to end the conversation, although she knew very well that her mom was talking about Susan Addington, a girl a year ahead of her. Susan was not unlikeable. In fact, it was Susan who had protected Clare one day in the library when other girls were making fun of her checking out more books about the saints.

"How many times have you checked that one out?" one of the girls said.

"Leave her alone," Susan said. "Her dad just died."

Clare could tell by the other girls' lack of a reaction that this wasn't news. It confirmed that the thing Clare hadn't been able to speak about, the thing that felt like her biggest secret, wasn't a secret at all. Clare didn't feel especially grateful for Susan's clumsy rescue, and yet, for the moment, it felt as though her father's suicide could be swept under the stacks in the library for someone else to deal with.

"He was so nice," her mother said about Mr. Addington, "and I couldn't

place him for the longest time. Are Wiley's parents still married? I didn't get a chance to ask about her."

"I guess," Colby said. "I don't know."

"Don't you ever talk to Wiley?" Arlene asked.

"Why would I?" Colby said.

"Because he was one of your best friends. His dad said he's going to be a biologist. You should call him. You know, not now. When you leave here. When you're back in school."

"Who said I'm going back to school?" Colby said.

"Why wouldn't you go back to school?" Arlene said. "We don't have to talk about that now. Let's talk about something else. Do you love your boots?"

"No, I do not love my boots," he said. He scooted his chair away from the table and then reached down to his boots, his hands tracing the polished leather. With some effort, he twisted until his heel and foot emerged. He repeated with the right.

He set the boots on the corner of the dining table.

"What are you doing?" Arlene asked. "Put your boots back on."

He pulled off his socks and threw them at her.

"What are you doing?" she said again. "Stop it."

As he stood, he unbuttoned the shirt, pulling it off and throwing it, too, on the table. Now he was standing and shirtless. The other residents' conversations halted as they turned to watch. There were catcalls and laughter.

Someone yelled out, "Shake that ass," and someone else said, "I always knew he was rat-shit crazy."

He unbuttoned the chinos and pulled them down, his underwear with the pants. Clare marveled at how his face was both manly and childish at the same time, some parts like their father's face and some parts uniquely Colby's since birth. She didn't want to look at his body, all sharp shoulders and jutting hips. The skin over his ribs was still shockingly purplish from the beating. The marks looked like lavender flowers after the height of their bloom. She wondered how Giotto would paint Colby's bruises. He was thin, and though he was tall, taller than Dr. Max and almost any of the other patients at the facility, he looked so small, standing there without any worldly costume.

"What's happening? Colby, what are you doing?" Dr. Max said in a weak voice, appearing from somewhere unknown.

"I don't want these boots or these clothes. They're not mine. I want my clothes. I want my clothes and my room and our house like it used to be. I want my dad. I want my dad to still be alive. And I want her," he said, turning to Arlene, "to listen. Quit making me something I'm not." As Colby grew louder, the dining room grew quieter, an involuntary audience now fully invested in what would happen next. For a second, Colby closed his eyes to compose himself. "If you can't listen to me, can't hear what I need from you, then I won't ask anymore. From now on, I won't ask you for anything."

Dr. Max pulled a tablecloth from a nearby table, not caring about the knocked-over salt and pepper shakers as they rolled to the floor. Haphazardly, he draped the cloth over Colby, wrapping it around his waist and steering him out of the dining hall.

The room was still silent except for Arlene's weeping. Clare knew she should get her mother out of there, but neither of them seemed inclined to move. Clare thought of the expression on Colby's face. There hadn't been the anger she had seen so many times before. There was no fire flashing in his eyes. There wasn't the indignation he had expressed so many times before, righteous or not. There was merely a tired boy, naked and thin, a wisp of the brother she had always known. He had been beaten up, and he looked so tired.

Clare stroked the spine of her book, safely tucked under her leg. Was this in some way her fault? There was no doubt she had implanted the idea. Colby wouldn't have known the story of Francis's renunciation if not for her.

It was fine to read about the saints and their impulsive, sometimes violent ways, but it frightened her when people in her real life acted crazy.

The week before their father killed himself, she had held the ladder for him while he hung a bat box on the back side of their garage. He had built the box himself from plans he found online. It was the first time in a while that he had taken an interest in the world. Just two days later, he found bat guano on the side of the building, and he was so pleased that he planned to build another bat box to hang near the woods in the backyard.

But the new box had not been built. Instead of leaving a suicide note or any explanation for his actions, there were only diagrams and blueprints for bigger bat boxes, plans inexplicably abandoned.

Right after her dad died, Clare thought the death itself was the worst thing that could happen to them all, but then Colby went missing, and then he almost

died and went to rehab, and now this. An idea was growing with Clare that her dad's death wasn't the worst thing. It was just the beginning.

Her mother cried, rocking in her seat, clutching Colby's leather boots to her chest, and Clare thought how she would try to console her mother on the drive home. She thought of the saints pictured in her book, all of them full of spirit and fire. They weren't passive beings who handled things well. They didn't sit back with patience and understanding. They were passionate people who committed big actions. Unforgettable actions. Saints were not normal people.

Clare couldn't remember what normal felt like anymore.

