

## SIN OFFERING

It was a cool Fall morning: I felt it immediately upon waking up, the way that, coming in through the open window, the lingering chill of the night made the room idyllic for one snugly wrapped in a blanket, such as I was. I dwelled in bed a little while longer, eyes open and staring idly up at the wooden beams of the ceiling over me, appreciating the comfort, like sitting down to a campfire in the Winter, or like handling ice for quite some time and then folding your hands into your armpits. Coldness: relief. Here I had threaded into relief without having had to touch coldness at all.

The air smelled in part like dead leaves. Wet sheets of them were molded over the hills outside, deep oranges and browns, while their sugar maples stood over them naked and unburdened. The air also smelled in part like heated apple cider. My wife, Madeleine, had long been an earlier riser than I.

I lifted the blanket from myself, stretched, and in my pajamas made my way out of our bedroom, down the hall, and into the dining room. It is a lovely room with many drawers. My brother in law, being a carpenter, often surprises us with gifts of practical items of furniture: a wide and shallow chest with a cushion on top fit for sitting on and changing shoes, a hat rack with a hidden drawer in the pole, a squat chest of drawers which Madeleine keeps flower vases on top of, and many more and many more, and much of his gifted furniture has ended up here in the dining room, if we've nowhere else for it. At the table, in this room of drawers, Madeleine sat in a blue dress with a

steaming mug of apple cider in her hands, smiling at me. Across the table from her was another steaming apple cider mug.

I gave her the hand sign for *thank you*, drawing it out, really telling her, *thank you and I love you*.

Continuing to smile, she closed her eyes and rocked slightly in her chair.

I sat down on my side of the table, rumbling my chair across the floorboards as I pulled it out.

Madeleine opened her eyes, set down her mug, and asked, *How did you sleep?*

I told her all about the wonderful morning.

When it was about time for me to be going for the day, I returned to our bedroom, and changed from my pajamas to my suit. Black jacket, black waist coat, blood-red undershirt, black tie. A golden chain hanging in a U from the breast pocket, and another golden chain of the same length hanging higher up in an askew U off of the right lapel. On the right sleeve, embroidered in black onto the equally black fabric, two words, each word on its own line: *Mors Immatura*.

In the mirror on Madeleine's vanity, I groomed and oiled my beard of grey and brown. The hair atop my head, short as it was, needed attention hardly ever, and all the less the more that it receded.

As I passed into the living room on my way out for the day, Madeleine stood beside the table, holding a plucked dandelion. She held it up in front of me. I bowed down, sniffed the sour thing, gave the sun-like yellow flower a kiss, and then stepped in and shared a kiss with Madeleine as well.

We went to the front porch. As Madeleine inspected my dress for any errors, it occurred to me to ask her, *Did we receive any telephone calls this morning, before I was awake?*

She answered, *None that I saw*.

Jason, my brother, an electrician, had wired our telephone so that rather than ringing a bell to alert someone about a call, it would instead illuminate the several red lights that he had placed into all of our different rooms for this purpose.

*Thank you*, I signed, really signing, *Thank you and I love you*.

*I love you*, she signed.

*I love you*, I mirrored to her.

She took my hands, held them for a moment, and then let them go and turned and began inside. I turned as well, and began on my walk into town.

Many days, particularly in the Summer and the Winter, I would be inclined to drive our automobile into town—though the way by road is longer than the way by trail, being able to drive it means that I will not be sweating from the very start of the day. On many lucky days though, especially in Falls like these and in the earlier days of Spring, the weather is ideal for taking the path that winds through the woods, channeling many of the remote hillscape houses into our town.

I was quite alone on my walk this day, aside from the birds and the squirrels.

Coming out to a minor clearing, I saw that something had been constructed here, in the time since my last walk through these woods, which had been three days ago or so.

It was at the center of the clearing, and it was like this. In a circle I estimate to have been fifty feet in diameter, there was a ring of sticks that had been driven into the ground, creating a sort of fence around the rest of the construct. The sticks varied in height, some regions having sticks that rose out of the ground only a foot, such that they could be easily walked over, and other regions more varied, having sticks that rose anywhere between one foot and up to four. Within this fence, at the center, was something that I first thought to be an anvil, and then, as I was coming closer to the construction, I saw that it was similar in shape to an anvil, but in fact a fully symmetrical piece of iron, with a flat top, and broad hooks or horns coming out of the left and right. The area within the fence had a floor fully of sand, distinct from the floor of wet leaves that the rest of the woods had in this season. Besides the iron piece, the only other item within this fence was a slab of grey stone, which I estimate to have been two feet in height, three feet in depth, and five feet in width. Atop the slab of stone was wax residue, distinctly in the shape of there having been candles burning there that have been plucked off. In some places the wax ran in lines down from the slab, towards the sand.

All of this I observed as I passed by, taking the time to tread very slowly and search for any further details. The fence of sticks, the iron piece, the slab of grey stone, and the candle wax upon the stone, are what I recall from that time of seeing it. I continued on into town.

The usual sights and sounds were around in that late morning, mules and horses pulling carts along the streets, distant conversations between men who talked loudly, here and there a barking dog. I purchased a newspaper from a girl on one corner. With this paper in hand, I continued on to my own office, a building which stood alone with a wider gap between it and either of the others up and down the street, with a neatly-kept lawn of grass in the interstitial spaces. The mower, it appeared, had already come earlier in the morning.

No services were scheduled for that day, at my funeral home. I swept and dusted. I now and then spritzed perfume throughout the rooms, in the entrance and in the chief service room. I read the day's paper. I looked over the appointments and services for the upcoming days, and made telephone calls to check in on wellbeing and inquire whether any other person's plans had changed, and reassure that all would be handled here. Throughout the day, a rather slower day than usual, no one placed a call for my office, and no one entered through my door. I do not hurt for business, generally: mine is a field where I am a desired help in an unavoidable thing.

In the evening I decided that I would return home for the day, and make the walk home while there was still some light.

As I again approached the minor clearing, I could see, in the dimming evening light, that there was a man walking upon the sand within the fence. In the days following, as me and the man became friends, I would learn his name to be Fox Question, though I did not know what to call him that evening. That evening, to me, he was only an unknown man.

I paused at the side of the clearing, subconsciously unsure of whether it would be disrespectful to the man to pass by his altar as he was at his ceremony. On the slab of grey stone were seven lit candles, and on the sand before the slab of grey stone was a work of straw and flowers, a miniature statue of a goat.

The man said to me, in a German accent, “You may watch, stranger, if you want to watch.”

I approached. I lowered myself onto my knees outside of the fence of sticks driven into the ground.

The man explained to me his religion.

“My thinking on things is like this. There are Jews, Muslims, Catholics, Protestants. There are the legends of the Sumerians and there are the legends of the Greek. There are Hindus and there are Pagans. Who is to say who is right? I say, I do not know this. But I do notice that many of these gods, they are very interested in what we say for ourselves, what explanation we give to things. And so, I explain. Here, I have broken a rule of the Christian god, and put my seed in this goat. Very grave to Him. But, other gods would encourage this, sharing love with all beings. And so, here, I explain to the Christian god. I tell Him that it is done out of love of His creation. In the way He appears fond of, I give him a sin offering—no flesh, for I must be truthful to my ways and what I tell him, but rather, an offering of what she means to me, that I would craft her so carefully in straw.”

The man burned the straw goat upon the altar. As it burned, he spoke of his love towards her.

After the sacrifice was finished, I continued my walk back home. Madeleine was in bed. I changed into my pajamas and joined her. There, under the blanket, she grabbed me and hugged me.