

The Burning Monk

Just before lunch the burning monk kneels within his smock, pulls off his thongs, and nudges them to the side of his mat with his big toe. Patty and Ira are on the couch watching TV. Ira holds the bowl out to Patty so she can reach the popcorn. Her face looks hazy and blue in the TV light. The rubber soles are badly worn from the endless walking the burning monk has undertaken over the years. Pilgrimages. I warned him it would come to this.

"The tenth anniversary," Ira says. He means the war.

Patty tugs the blanket up around her neck and asks Ira if she can wear his socks, her feet are so cold. She isn't serious. The door buzzer buzzes. "I'd rather watch *Spartacus*," she says. It's Guy and Linda at the door, both wearing hairy gold alpaca sweaters. Ira lets them in.

Guy eyes Ira.

Ira eyes Guy.

Guy puts a powerful headlock on Ira for old time's sake. For the life of him Ira can't get free.

Linda says it's nice out and draws the curtains to let in the sun. There, swimming like a plant on the bottom of the pool three floors down, is Ilene, Ira's Japanese neighbor with the long perfect hair. The burning monk nods and grins and returns to his mat. I can tell he's only kidding around.

Patty puts *Spartacus* on. She is worried for Ira, who can't stand it anymore. Guy is humming the "Marseillaise." As a counter, Linda sings "Waltzing Matilda." This soothes Guy. Then she breaks into "Bingo Was His Name-O." Clap. I-N-G-O. Ira drops blue-faced on the couch next to Patty.

Guy is still singing: "Clap. Clap. Clap-Clap-O."

"The slaves are uneasy," Patty says. "They're about to rise up."

The burning monk exercising on his mat. In. Hale. Ex. Hale. In. Ex. Hale. Hale.

"Can't happen without *Spartacus*," Ira says, panting rapidly. "No way."

The burning monk hasn't much English (a quick learner, though), so I fill him in on the gaps he hears in the conversation.

"This is his best movie," Patty says. Guy and Linda agree.

"Definitely in the top five," Linda says. "Either this or *The Detective* or *The Harder They Fall*."

"Was he in that?" Guy wants to know.

Ira changes the channel back to the show about the war. Hunting the tiger. Hauling the wounded forgetting the goners. Unnerved hoardes at the embassy gates. The burning monk rises from his mat and goes to the window. I pat his shoulder, delicately, to cheer him. A harnessed woman pulling a cart loaded with children passes in the street. One of the children has a radio that sings, "Two become one, under the bamboo treeeee."

"Sure he was in that," Linda says.

Patty goes into the kitchen but forgets what she wants there. For a long time she stares at the miniature-nineteen-twentyish-wall-telephone-magnet stuck on the refrigerator door. Nobody calls. She returns to the living room with a bowl of grapes, red, seedful. Ira sends her back for the sandwiches. "And some nice rice for you," she says, opening her hand to the burning monk. A steaming bowl on the burning monk's mat.

Linda, who has studied the laws of History at Brown, Penn, Pitt, and Indiana State, says: "Did you know that near the end of the fifteenth century, the endless complaint of the frailty of all earthly glory was sung to various melodies."

I know that.

During the next seventeen seconds (the span Linda intuitively allows for thinking on the matter), I have nineteen thoughts; on average, a brand new one every .89 seconds:

A red movie of a leaping whippet clapping a frisbee in its jaws. A black-and-white picture of Oscar Ravez with upturned eyelids. A family of sparrows panicking from tree to tree. One pi minus three pi is negative two pi. A flying raccoon queen wielding an alpinist's two-headed ice axe. Four identical snowflakes. A blue picture of Long John Silver. How delightful really Patty's tits are. Fatty Arbuckle as a featherweight fighting for the title. Ooky ooky ook. I was framed I tell ya framed. A palmful of shaving cream peppered with stubble. The Invisible Hand of God. Boiled cabbage odor. Linda's aren't as nice not nearly. Dotless dice thrown. Our bodies why do we forebear? The artifice of consciousness. How many footballs can fit in a—

"I didn't know that," Ira says.

The burning monk hasn't touched his rice, not so much as a grain. Even though it's too pasty for my liking, I pretend it's just about the best rice I've ever had—scoop after scoop, sucking my fingers clean of it—hoping my friend will take up his spoon.

Patty changes back to *Spartacus*. Linda has finished all the sandwiches and is working on the last grape. With the nails of her

thumb and forefinger she catches the seeds in her mouth and drops them into the ashtray from the Tropicana Hotel, Las Vegas. It's the very end where Mrs. Spartacus lifts up Spartacus Junior so Spartacus Senior can have a good look. Then she spirits the infant away. Mile after mile, as far as the eye can see, thousands of extras somewhere in the Italian countryside quietly bear their crucifixions. Guy hurries into the bathroom, where he weeps. "I can't help it," he says from behind the door.

It is warm, and the burning monk has been exercising and not touching his rice, so Patty mists him with the plant mister. He is grateful and smiles, and after Patty mists the African violet plant, the spider plant, and the little baby plant without a name card, she mists the burning monk again. He says it's a wonderful invention, one wonderful thing.

Guy emerges from the bathroom with a pair of enamelled red bongoes. He says he found them in the clothes hamper. He squeezes them between his knees. He can't resist, for old time's sake: ponk-poppa-totta-ponk. Ponk.

Ira changes the channel and turns up the volume. The burning monk takes his can by the handle and pats the pocket of his smock to make sure that he has everything he'll need. He says it's time for him to go, word has come down, so long, thanks for it all, thanks all around. Patty can have his mat, Ira his thongs. Guy and Linda don't get anything. I was afraid of this moment, but I know that what's on his lung is on his tongue. The can is heavy for him—I offer to carry it but he resists, he can manage. From the landing I watch him descend, heaving the can along as if he had a bad hip. Then I follow him.

Ilene is towelling herself by the pool. When she's dry she twists the towel into a turban on top of her head. The burning monk heads for the street, where the people are. Patty and Ira and Guy and Linda follow Ilene's example. Soon they're all wearing towel turbans, too. They wave at Ilene from the window, and Ilene waves back. Linda was right, it is a nice day. On nice days all things open, and the burning monk finds a nice little spot in the middle of the street and sits there, a lovely little lotus, opening.

A half-circle of warm wet faces. They spill from the sidewalk in front of the barber shop: SIX CHAIRS NO WAITING. I point out to Ilene that the intricacies of the burning monk's face are of a lifelike delicacy. She tells me that all warm things fall to the cold and remembers how when she was a girl she used to help her grandmother into sweaters. "The world has its own imagination, don't you think?" she says. Then the gasoline-splash and the flick of the match. I think I love you, Ilene.

The fires flap and pop like little flats. The burning monk tips

and then topples fully on his side.

A pickup truck crowded with three men in green gardener's clothes comes to take the body away. The leader recommends a period of waiting.

A boy with a blue rattail combs some of the ashes into a cloth that he has ironed exclusively for this purpose.

The men of the truck are tired of this sort of thing.