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## The Parable of John

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## The Parable of John

Charley Oates swept the sidewalk in front of the IGA. He did this for free, just for something to do to keep himself out of mischief, as he said. He had swept this sidewalk and worked at the animal shelter since his retirement five years ago.

He wore gray cowboy boots today, his black jeans tucked in, and an orange and black Hawaiian patterned long sleeved-shirt. His gray hair was pulled back in a pony tail, his moustache trimmed neat and thin. John once remarked that Charley looked a lot like Gilbert Roland. Charley rather liked that, but then, he liked most of what John used to say.

He had some other friends here, but not many. It was such a small little town and cliques formed easily; some people could influence others with just a cruel word. There was no such thing as anonymity, but that was what John and he figured out was wrong with the world anyway. Trying to bump along unnoticed. It was just silly.

"Remember, Charley," John has said that night when they came to the agreement in Charley's apartment. They were on their second bottle of wine. "Remember that when we die there sure as heck won't be anything left. We might as well do what we want now."

John had left six months ago; he had finally given up, ignoring what they had agreed upon, weakening and moving on where he could begin fresh. That hadn't worked out either, according to what Charley read in a letter two weeks ago, and it all sounded so sordid and it made Charley sad. He knew how badly John must have felt, not because it happened but because the way it happened. John and he just couldn't be invisible.

Charley paused to concentrate on John, and he did not at first recognize the burly man coming down main street, coming purposefully and hard so that his arms swung the way a football fullback pumps as he crashes through the line.

"You there, Oates."

Charley looked up.

"Don't run, Oates, I'll stomp you for sure."

"I wasn't about to run, Matt."

Matt came very near. His eyes were bloodshot, but Charley knew that wasn't unusual for him on a Saturday morning.

"I suppose you heard," Matt said.

"About John?"

"Who the hell else do you think I'd be talking to you about? I can thank you he's in that jail in Minnesota right now."

Charley hadn't read that in the letter, and he shook his head in despair.

"Well, he's in the slammer now, you bastard. If he'd a never met you none of this woulda' happened, Oates. You've been a pain in the ass in this town for thirty years, and now you've screwed up my brother, too."

Matt jerked Charley forward by his shirt. "I'm not waiting for

somebody else to get a piece of you. You listen to me good. "He tugged and shook Charley. "Next Saturday, I'm coming back into town. I'm walking this street, same time. And I'll be carrying a baseball bat. You better not be here or I swear to Christ I'll use it on you."

He yanked the shirt, popping buttons.

Charley watched Matt stalk away, then straightened his shirt as best he could and resumed sweeping, meticulously gathering the scraps of paper and dust into a tight mound that he would pick up in the dust pan. Then he would return the broom to Molly in the store and go on to the shelter to feed the new dog they had found out by the Jordan farm. During the summer especially, they found a lot of abandoned dogs, perhaps Christmas gifts that the families no longer felt comfortable about and yet could not bring themselves to kill.

He figured a week gave him plenty of time to think, but Charley mainly found himself remembering how it had been. The first time he met John was in the tavern. John had drifted in late and hung alone at the end of the bar. Everyone knew Charley, of course, and it must have been that John wanted to wait until the regulars cleared out. About midnight, he finally came to Charley and said he just wanted to talk tonight, he had a lot on his mind, and he was lonely.

That next Saturday, they had the dinner and the wine, and the Saturday after John and he went into Freeport for fun. They stopped at a resale shop - it was John's idea - and John selected a purple dress for Charley to wear when it would just be the two of them. It was a big laugh, a "hoot" Charley called it, and John said that was an ancient word if he ever heard one.

"I could be your father," Charley said.

"Not you," John said, and they laughed again.

In the next several months, slowly, John explained how he came to realize about himself, how mainly he came about that by realizing how much he hated his brother, Matt, and what he was. When John was eight and Matt was nearly twelve, Matt forced him outside to play one-on-one football. He could still see Matt tucking the ball in, pumping hard at him and smashing him into the ground. He was knocked out and when he awoke, Matt was standing over him, the ball still in hands, and he said that enough football like this would kick the chicken shit out of him.

"I've always been afraid of Matt," John said. "I just know someday I'll have to leave here because of him. I'll have to get away. Maybe it's because of him that I'm here with you, Charley."

"And it's not me at all, with all my native charm."

John did not answer. It hurt Charley, even though he made it sound like he was kidding, but he did not make an issue of it. Through his life, he had been hurt so many times that this small wound was only a scratch on deeper scars.

On Thursday, the news came that John had hanged himself in the Minnesota jail. They were completing the autopsy and the body would be shipped back for burial on Monday.

It was hot and bright on Saturday, the day the body was arriving. Matt told his wife he had something to do before he'd dress proper for the visitation at the funeral home. He left his house in jeans and a cutoff sweatshirt, and he drove fast into town and parked a block up from the IGA. He took the baseball bat from the trunk of the Chevy, closed the lid, and squinted into the bright sunlight. A figure, a woman, came out of the doorway near the store. She walked clumsily, as if drunk early in the day. Matt could relate to that, but he was surprised she was so goofy to wear a dress like that in this town. It was a violently purple dress.

When he walked nearer, and saw who the woman really was, the rage puffed up inside him and he began running, running harder than the day he knocked his little brother out. But Charley did not retreat. He came forward, taking the first blow as if expecting it all his life.

The Parable of John

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## illinois and i

In illinois  
 i could choke on this overcast dismay.  
 The streets  
 that strategically wind behind corners  
 chasing no-sight.  
 around the houses of my accurate neighbors  
 that have loved and hated life with me  
 at nonconforming schedules.

My awkward girlfried and i liked making love  
 in windowed, overcast horizontals.  
 The taste of detail and dead reflection.  
 The endless delta of blue design  
 beneath our skins that pounds disjointedly  
 with our rhythm.

The flora green crotch of summer and orgasmic doldrums  
 sweated my love and exasperation.  
 In this fashion of avenues illinois  
 will fill my cavities with polished driftwood and longing.