



Tony Rauch

witnesses (the americans)

I'm in church. The pastor is slapping the pulpit, proudly grinning about how elaborate the church's Christmas pageant will be. ". . . And this year, by golly, we're gonna have the best darned pageant this side of town," he taps the pulpit, raises his arm, points, "That you can take to the bank, my fellow friends in the Lord! We're gonna whip the pants off Our Lady Of Sorrows, that you can be sure of!" he raises his arm to pat his brow with a small handkerchief. "Oh, sure, we've been working diligently, pulling together to improve the flowers on our lawn in the summer, to give the Lord a beautiful home here on earth. But down the road there, at Our Lady, my oh my, they do have some nice flowers too. And the quality of their vestments is of the highest standard. Their collectables of early Americana is outstanding. We need do be doing better in this area. My word, they've even got a more extensive sprinkler system over there than we do. I mean, just look at their lawn. . . Are we just going to sit here and let this embarrassment persist? Huh? . . . Are we going to allow this deficiency in our lives to fester and grow? . . ." he pauses dramatically, ". . . And what of our children, our families? This is a *family* church, after all. A *family* place of worship. A *family* community. . . Oh yeah, and love thy neighbor." And with that he raises his arm and steps back, turning away from the podium and into the grainy, gray background.



After Mass I step out onto the long smooth sidewalk, out through the piles of snow and watch as the pastor is shaking hands. I stop and look off, to make an appraisal of the morning - a clear, gray horizon, and flat, grayish snow as far as the eye can see. I watch the pastor climb into a shiny, long Cadillac and glide off.

I get in my little pickup and putter around for several blocks. I'm becoming hungry and desire brunch. I stop in front of an appliance store. I step out and walk up onto the curb, watching the televisions stacked on top of one another in the form of a pyramid in the window. The colors are smooth and flat, beautiful and calm, inspiring and poetic, but then, to my horror I am devastated to discover that my favorite game show host has shaved off his bushy bushy mustache. My mouth quivers, my knees bend and I go numb. I cannot move. I have dreaded days like these. My worst fears realized - and with nothing to protect me from the mental anguish. I stand silent. The strain weighs me down, the heavy burden about to collapse me. I want to sob gently to myself but am mired in a state of shock so deep that I merely stutter a series of stammering noises, a series of snorts - beginnings with no middles or ends.

Finally, luckily, mercifully, an acquaintance happens along. He grabs me by my shoulders and shakes me from my stupor. He inquires as to the source of my horror and I recount the story, stabbing a finger and stammering at the storefront window. And as I do he looks off into the distance and nods silently. "Yes, yes, I can see that," he whispers, "I can see that," he nods to himself, then looks at me and says, "You, my friend, are a king. A king with no need for jewels or crowns. No. You sir, you wear your crown on the inside."

This makes me feel so much better, to share my sorrow, my disappointment and loss with another understanding, sensitive soul. He proceeds to tell me of a terrifying vision that visited him from beyond several nights before. He describes his vision as his father happening upon him on the street. His father had donned an elaborate Victorian evening gown and was headed for a pub down near the docks. For some



reason they began arguing about the great Armenian coal shortage of 1913 when his father's head began to puff up and form into the shape of a giant muffin. So transfixed by this juicy and succulent muffin that my friend, in his dream, proceeded to lunge at his now golden muffin-headed father and took the liberty of extracting a generous, fluffy bite. He removed a chunk from the top rim of his father's glistening head. He then ran away in great fear and confusion, licking each finger, finally finding himself under a bridge curled in the fetal position and trembling.

"Oh my," I gasp, "That must've been awful. Such a dream."

My friend exhales and stares off into the hazy distance and nods, then for some unknown reason, he just wanders off, vacantly, before I have a chance to reciprocate and console him. I watch as he staggers around the corner and into an alley. A moment later I hear a muffled shriek. It is a cathartic cry of realization.

I feel it best to leave him be, for I have no magic words, no verbal ointment for his inner wounds, and fear I would only make him feel worse. So I continue my way down the block, to a restaurant to gain some portions of brunch with which to fill myself, the idea of a large muffin head washing away the profound disappointment of my mustacheless game show host idol, the vision of a large muffin making me hungry.

I pass a boutiqueish eatery. I stand and watch from the sidewalk. I notice my friend in the back, feverishly gorging himself on muffins. He is down on his knees in the hallway, his face buried in both hands, crumbs flying everywhere. He is sobbing. "*I ate my father!*" he screams.

I used to go out to eat with my friends from time to time, but they grew unreliable - gradually showing up late, or not at all. At times we would argue for days about where to eat. Usually I would be the one to suggest a compromise - one day we would meet up here, another day we would gather there. But they would have none of it. One pal would detour for hours, running elaborate and seemingly endless streams of arbitrary errands - more lightbulbs, more bolts and twine. Each of my



good friends grew so unfathomably inconsiderate in time that now it has become much simpler and more peaceful to just eat alone - just me and my breakfast and a Sunday paper. Very simple. No hassles. Or so I've hoped. But I can not even get through brunch without my friends. Sometimes I hide behind plants and watch others while they dine. I fear each of us, my friends and I, have contracted some vague malady or syndrome. I fear each of us will become much much worse before any of us finally breaks down and seeks medical attention to return us to a more reasonable and stable Sunday brunch routine.

The cute little restaurant frightens me. I don't know why I suddenly fear brunch. Perhaps because it is one more thing I am incapable of doing. I can't even manage to get people together for breakfast. It is just another reminder of all the other impossibilities waiting out there, all the other failures.

They drag my friend out the back and leave him in the alley.

I turn back and begin walking through the snowy sidewalk back to my little truck. Snow has been plowed off the street and packed two feet high between the sidewalk and curb. I stand and put the keys in my door and open it. Just then, right in front of me, I notice two cars collide. One car has just slid right into another. Crunch. I've seen the whole thing. No one is hurt. A dog barks absently at nothing from a glistening branch up in a tree. A mysterious black helicopter passes overhead. It zooms along about thirty feet off the ground. A large bull moose trots past. An old lady shuffles by, hunched over and muttering obscenities. A man in an overcoat and top hat saunters by, holding the hand of a monkey. The monkey is walking upright, on stilts, about four feet in the air, and is dressed in a black suit. A small crowd gathers. "I saw it all," I mutter, "from over there," I point, explaining, "the one car slid into the other - the red one into the yellow." The man in the red car hops out. He has caused the accident. He turns and walks up to me. He pleads for me to let him borrow my keys, as if he wanted me to take the rap for the accident. "You need to be somewhere, buddy?" "Just gimme yer keys, OK Pal.



Come on, man, be cool already,” he continues to look back over his shoulder, at his shiny red car and the older yellow car crumpled into it. “Oh, no thanks, man. I’m already cool,” I exhale wearily, assuring him, “You don’t have to go and do that for me, but thanks for offering. . . And stay cool, man,” I act as though he’s the one doing me the favor by letting me remove this burden from him. Then he stops asking and starts demanding, “Aw, come on. Be a good guy already.” I gather he comes from money, and is used to having his every whim attended to without question. “Yes. Yes,” I nod, “I *am* a good guy, aren’t I,” I insist, beaming, “And thank you for reminding me.” “Give me your keys,” he furrows his brow and demands. I pause for a moment as if thinking, then respond, “Eemmm, no. No thank you,” I furrow my brow in annoyance, “The least you could do is ask politely,” I suggest. “At least say please.” “I don’t have to say please,” he points emphatically to his head, “Can you understand that, moron? Huh?” “Well, if you’re going to resume your intemperance then I suggest you go and sit on an egg, Leroy. You ain’t getting no keys. No how.” The guy turns and stomps away. “This, sir, is an accident you clearly started and yet refuse to take responsibility for,” someone mentions as we stand there watching him leave the scene. He stomps off and we begin to mutter amongst ourselves.

We didn’t notice anything after that as we were milling around, getting to know one another on this bright, winter, Sunday morning. I guess we figured he just wandered off to cool out, blow off some steam, but soon he comes back. He returns to delight us with a large metal bar. Apparently he has marched into the garage next to the sidewalk and retrieved a large tire iron or crowbar. It is a comically oversized instrument of destruction. He begins swinging it into my truck, shattering my windshield with one clean blow as if he were swinging it into water. He rears back and attempts cutting large, jagged swaths into the driver’s side door. I applaud his efforts with vigor, for this is all quite an unexpected display. “Yeeeeaaaah,” I clap. Several people scatter like breaking glass, but I hold my ground. I wasn’t about to miss out on



something like this. “Ya missed a spot,” I point with glee. The guy turns to me in disgust and raises the bar menacingly. “You know,” I exhale, as if tired, “Money is simply for emergencies like this,” I shrug, “Me, I’m insured.” He steps over to me and I step back and then someone calls me from the doorway of the tiny restaurant several doors away. I turn and walk down there as the crowbar squinks and gnaws off the metal sides of my compliant truck.

The person in the doorway tells me they are in line waiting to use the phone. They are waiting to call the authorities and report what has transpired. I thank them with a surprised smile. Suddenly, I notice an authoritarian, autocratic former teacher of mine in the line. She is squawking on the squawk box. Finally she gets off and someone hands me the phone, and I begin describing the preceding incidents in rich and vivid prose - explaining the full breadth and width of the situation in bounding, expansive, lyrical passages. People start to interrupt, urging me in no uncertain terms to “just report the accident,” but I feel it essential to fully capture the varied layers and dynamic hues of the experience, the underlying themes and hidden . . . Finally, someone of obviously much lower standards than my own rips the phone from me and begins jabbering on in the most ineloquent and colorless of common banalities and phrasing . . . He goes on and on, merely brushing over many of the subtle and intricate imagery - especially the metallic slap of the metal bar against my windshield. I mean really, it is *my* windshield after all, shouldn’t *I* be the one to recount the timbre and insistence of the pinging? How it rang in the air. The exact sharpness of its “*thwongk*.” How that noise just hung in the cool, still, morning air as if it had no place else to go. It was as if you could reach out and grab onto that sound as it had stopped to linger for so long. I mean, it just hung there in the crispness. What an interesting tone - so sharp, so jagged. I mean, you could’ve reached out and plucked it from the air, it was that solid. You could’ve taken it home with you, given it to a friend for them to display on their mantle. Heck, you could’ve combed your hair with that sound.



The person on the phone continues to leave out many other glaring details as well, I mean it is an incomplete, flat, and entirely shabby report. Totally uninspiring. And missing out on many important subtleties.

The person is all bundled up, just a tiny pink mouth reporting the location and the vandalism the spoiled fiend has perpetrated and feels he is entitled to with impunity. Personally, I am more outraged with the criminal's attitude, his wanton contempt for manners, his belligerence, more than the acts or damage itself.

The authorities show up and look around, then meet us in the restaurant's doorway. "Whaddaya wan" us ta do ,bout it anyways, huh?" was their basic tone. The teacher overhears this and so does the owner and they step over to check out the scene. I watch them nod as they listen. Eventually they pull me into a small office off to the side of the hall. The guy who smashed my car is also waiting in that room. He has removed some of his winter ware to reveal he is merely a boy, maybe twenty years old. Maybe eighteen or twenty-four, I don't know. "I'll give you two hundred thousand dollars to shut your worthless hole," he looks up at the ceiling, examining it with contempt. Then he is silent. He yawns, makes a disagreeable face, and says, "Oh, yeah, and for that miserable glob of goo out there which you have deluded yourself into calling transportation," he spits as if we're all wasting his time. "Well," I shrug, "I'd really just like an apology, that's all. . . A sincere one. Maybe show some remorse. Remorse is a very undervalued emotion." The guy's face is a plum-hued rag, a purple mass as he suppresses laughter. "I have no intention of apologizing to you, you useless glob of objectionable gunk," he smiles slyly, then adds, "I have no use for you. And I have it on good authority that your mother douches with Drano, you disgusting glob of paste," he looks further away. So I say, "Well, thank you for being so judgmental. What would we all do without your insight? Huh, sparky?" His retort is immediate and direct, "Give me your name and address and I'll send you a postcard and let you know when your opinion



matters.” So then I say, “Thank you sir, your suburban entitlement is frightening. It’s shocking me back into reality” But then the teacher and the manager of the restaurant break up our little give and take. One of them puts a hand on my shoulder and walks me backwards to position me against the wall while the other closes the door to isolate us from witnesses. The rich guy is sitting on top of a desk and looking out the window. All is a sort of light gray outside - light gray sky, light gray distance, light gray streets - light gray foreground, background and middle ground. Not a bad color really, just sort of all the same, an endless expanse of “sameness” about it all. Since we are alone I advise him, “Shut yer mouth over there, Junior, or I’ll come over there and shut it for you.” And he replies, “I don’t have to. Now take the two hundred thou and run along. Slither back under yer rock, you worthless pathetic loser. You’re too stupid to waste time on.” To which I say, “Well, actually, no one is stupid *or* useless. Some people are just inexperienced in certain matters, that’s all.” The owner waves his hands as if to instruct us to calm down.

Just then a power jigsaw cuts through the door, cutting, sawing, ripping, forming a circle the size of a dinner plate, rendering the notion of “door” utterly useless. The circle-shaped wood pops out and falls to the floor and a face appears in the hole. It is my friend who was eating the muffins. “Hey man,” he whispers, crumbs encrusted in dry drool clinging to his face, “Take the money, man. Take the money. That’s a hefty load of cake, man.” “No,” I snap, “I won’t let him get away with this, he has to take responsibility. He has to apologize.” “Never!” the guy shouts.

I notice some very attractive young women in the background in the hall, each trying to look in to see what’s going on. There’s this little weaselly guy with them, trying to look in too. At first I consider them to be concerned citizens of my persuasion and ilk, but then I realize they are merely gossipy rubbernecks - whispering amongst themselves, spreading horrible lies, hoping to tear someone else down, and enjoying



every moment of it. “There’s the guy,” the greasy little weaselly guy points at me and whispers to the girls, trying to elbow my friend out of the way, “He’s the one, he’s the one, he’s the one who killed that guy, honest, that’s what some guy told me, honest, some guy, some guy told me that.” “You mean some guy you just made up?” I snort.

Someone in the hall shrieks, “Possessions are meaningless!! Possessions mean nothing!!” This causes a great stir. The people stuffed in the hall became very agitated by this and begin pushing that person out, squeezing him out. I watch as someone’s arm flings by, taking a mighty, arcing swing at the guy.

The owner looks around, “OK, so what . . . what did we all agree on now?” the owner is thinking aloud to himself. He reaches up and holds his chin thoughtfully. “We agreed on, let’s see, what was that? Eighty thousand? Eighty thousand for the each of us? Yeah. Yeah. That sounds about right. That’s fair.” “We didn’t agree on anything,” I shake my head calmly. “Yeah, ninety thousand apiece,” the owner nods to himself, looking down at the floor, “One hundred thou apiece, that sounds good. That . . . That right there sounds about right.”

My friend points his finger in and says, “Look, the guy’s nuts, OK? So it’s nothing personal, dig? It could’ve been me or anyone else for that matter. It just happened to be you. Remember, status is arbitrary,” he advises, jabbing his finger in. “It’s all dependent on the context. Remember when we were in college and you were admired because you could consume the most alcohol? Remember that? Now grab the cake before they change their minds.” “Yeah, man, grab the cake,” the owner says, folding his arms knowingly. “Yeah, come on, be a good guy for once, man,” the guy, the rich kid, whines in exasperation. “Be *reasonable*, man.” “I am a good guy and you don’t know anything about me, mmaaaan,” I point, “And we’re gonna keep it that way, so just keep on guessing,” I shake my head and mutter to myself, “The world is full of idiots who will believe anything you tell them.” “Take it, take it, take the money,” my friend chants. But I just shake my head, “I won’t



accept anything other than an apology and fair compensation.” “Oh, man,” my friend closes his eyes, “take the money.” “No, don’t do it,” the teacher snaps at me, then turns to the guy, “Don’t give him a cent.” “You’re going to apologize!” I point, “It’s a moral imperative. I saw. I saw what happened. I know the truth. . .” “The truth,” the rich kid interrupts, “The truth is what I say it is. The truth is what I want it to be. The truth is what I tell you it is. . .” “I,ve got witnesses,” I stomp my foot. “Witnesses?” the guy laughs and shrugs dramatically. The owner and the teacher turn to each other, shrugging dramatically, sarcastically, to one another in alternating turns. “Witnesses?” the owner shrugs and the three of them begin howling. “Witnesses?” the teacher spits, clutching her stomach and doubling over. She is huffing, giggling and jiggling, her eyes a tight squint. “Ah ha ha ha!!” they all double over, “Oh, ho ho ho, I love that,” clutching their mid sections, their faces growing a bright red. “Witnesses!” they cry and howl, shaking their heads, slapping their thighs, tears betraying their faces, “Witnesses!”