

VINEGAR PEACE, OR, THE WRONG-WAY USED-ADULT ORPHANAGE

by Michael Bishop

Michael Bishop has published seventeen novels in his career as a freelancer, including the Nebula Award-winning *No Enemy But Time* (1982); *Unicorn Mountain*, winner of the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award; and *Brittle Innings* (1994), an imaginative study of minor-league baseball in the Deep South during World War II and winner of the Locus Award for best fantasy novel. He has written and published two mystery novels in collaboration with Paul Di Filippo under the joint pseudonym Philip Lawson, *Would It Kill You to Smile?* (1998) and *Muskrat Courage* (2000); he recently published a collection of essays, *A Reverie for Mister Ray* (2005); and recently edited the Thunder's Mouth Press anthology *A Cross of Centuries: Twenty-Five Imaginative Tales About the Christ* (2007). His latest book, *Passing for Human* (an anthology of stories about nonhuman creatures of various sorts, well, passing for human), which he and Steven Utley co-edited for Peter Crowther's PS Publishing will feature a haunting wraparound dust jacket by Michael's late son, Jamie Bishop.

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On Thursday evening, your doorbell rings. Two small men in off-white shirts and black trousers, like missionaries of a dubious religious sect, stand outside your threshold giving you scary pitying looks.

Are you Ms. K——? they ask.

When you assent, they say they've come to transport you to the Vinegar Peace Wrong-Way, Used-Adult Orphanage thirty minutes north of your current residence in a life-help cottage of the Sour Thicket Sanatorium, where your father died seven years ago. But *you* don't wish to be transported anywhere.

The smaller of the two small men, seizing your arm above the elbow, says that an *order* has come down and that they must establish you, before 8:30 pm, in a used-adult orphanage—upon penalty of demotion for them and unappealable eviction for you. If you don't cooperate, they will ransack your cottage and throw you out on the street with your musty belongings.

Why now? you ask. Neither stooge manifests a glimmer of humanity. After all, you've been an *orphan*—as they insist on terming your condition—since you were a vigorous fifty-nine. They should show some

respect.

The man holding your bicep smirks. That's why they call it a *Wrong-Way, Used-Adult Orphanage*, he says. You get into one not because you've lost a parent. Your last living child has to die.

Jesus, blurts the other man. That goes against all our training.

You say nothing. You feel as if someone has opened a trap in your stomach and shoved in a package of wet cement. You sink to your knees, but not all the way because the smaller small man refuses to release your arm.

You feel you've just climbed twelve sets of stairs. Someone has injected stale helium into your head, inflating it to beach-ball size.

O God, you cry: O God, O God.

Even to yourself you sound like a scared puppy, not a woman. Your only living offspring, one of only two who bore your genes, has just died in the interminable War on Worldwide Wickedness, probably in a snowy province of R——.

Because Elise and her earlier-lost brother died childless years after Mick, your husband, passed away, *you* have passed from a state of natural, late-life orphanhood to the sad, wrong-way orphanhood of the issue-shorn. Only someone similarly bereft can know your devastation.

Put your stuff in two plastic duffels, the cruel stooge says: Only two.

Please don't make me leave my home, you beg of him. Just give me a knock-me-out so I can die.

Your lightheadedness persists: your dead daughter swims before your eyes like a lovely human swan, but the rock in your stomach keeps you from taking pleasure in her shock-generated image.

Against your will, you must say goodbye to Elise forever, as you once did to Mick and later to your darling son Brice.

Eventually, despite your protests, you cram clothing and toiletries into a duffel bag and some file discs and image cubes into another. Then the cruel stooge and his only slightly kinder partner escort you out to the van

for *transport* to Vinegar Peace.

* * * *

Mr. Weevil, director of this Wrong-Way, Used-Adult Orphanage looks maybe twenty-six, with slicked-back hair you've seen before on leading men in old motion pictures, but he greets you personally in the rotunda-like foyer, points you to a chair, and triggers a video introduction to the place. His head, projected on a colossal screen at gallery level, spiels in a monotone:

The death of your last surviving child (good riddance) in the War on Worldwide Wickedness makes you too valuable (unfit) to continue residing among the elder denizens (constipated old fools) of your life-help cottage (costly codger dump). So we've brought you here to shelter (warehouse) you until our Creator calls you to an even more glorious transcendent residency above (blah-blah, blah-blah).

The talking head of Mr. Weevil—whose living self watches *with* you, his hands clasped above his coccyx—remarks that you can stroll inside the orphanage anywhere, but that you can *never leave*—on pain of solo confinement (for a first violation) or instant annihilation (for any later misstep).

The building has many mansions (rooms), *viz.*, 1) Cold Room, 2) Arboretum, 3) Mail Room, 4) Guest Suite, 5) Chantry, 6) Sleep Bay, 7) Refectory, 8) Furnace Room, and 9) Melancholarium. Orphans will, and *should*, visit all nine rooms at some point, for every room will disclose its significance to its visitors, and these elucidations will charge any resident's stay with meaning.

Don't be alarmed, the director's talking head concludes, *if I haven't mentioned a room you view as necessary. The existence of restrooms, closets, offices, kitchens, servant quarters, attics, basements, secret nooks, and so forth, goes without saying.*

A young woman dressed like the men who snatched you from your lodgings takes your elbow—gently—and escorts you from the rotunda. And as Mr. Weevil's body glides smoothly away, his face fades from the gallery-level screen.

Where are we going? you ask the woman.

She smiles as she might at an infant mouthing a milk bubble.

Where are the other residents? Will I have my own room?

That the director included a dormitory in his list of mansions suggests otherwise, but you have to ask. Still, you have begun to think you're in a reeducation camp of some sort. Your stomach tightens even as you tighten your hold on the duffels, which now feel as heavy as old lead sash weights.

Miss, you plead. Why am I here? Where are we going?

She stops, stares you in the eye, and says: Oldsters who've lost children in the war often make trouble. Hush. It isn't personal. We're sheltering all orphaned adults in places like this, for everybody's benefit. You'll meet other orphans soon, but now Mr. Weevil'd like you to visit the refrigitorium.

What?

The Cold Room. Relax, Ms. K——. It's nice. It's a surprise, sort of.

* * * *

It's a surprise, all right, and no *sortof* about it. Your escort has abandoned you inside the Cold Room, which drones like a refrigerator but sparkles all about you as if you were its moving hub. Ice coats the walls in ripples and scales, each its own faintly glowing color.

Effigies of frozen liquid occupy shallow niches about the walls, and you soon find that three of these, interleaved with simulacra of unfamiliar persons, commemorate your dead: Mick, Brice, and Elise.

As if over a skin of crushed Ping-Pong balls, you totter gingerly to each beloved ice figure in turn.

Tears spontaneously flow, only to harden on the planes of your face. You clutch your gut and bend in agony before each image of loss. You sob into the chamber's dull hum, stupidly hopeful that no one's wired it for video or sound, and that your pain has no commiserating spies.

You've done this before. Must you indulge again? Have you no shame?

Over time your tears re-liquefy, and the ice effigies glisten *more* wetly. The Cold Room has grown imperceptibly warmer. The ice on its walls stays solid, but the statues—by design or accident, but more likely the former—begin to shimmer and melt. Do they stand on hotplates or coil about intricate helices of invisible heating wires? Whatever the case, they dissolve. They go. And there's no reversing the process.

So much water collects—from your tear ducts and the de-solidifying statues—that puddles gather in the floor. Even the ceiling drips.

If you stay here out of a misbegotten desire to honor your treasured dead, you'll wind up drenched, ill, and soul-sick.

Freezing, sweating, weeping, you back away. You must.

* * * *

You have a slick card in hand: a floor diagram of the Vinegar Peace Wrong-Way, Used-Adult Orphanage. YOU ARE HERE, it asserts in a box next to the blueprint image of the Cold Room, BUT YOU *COULD BE* HERE.

An arrow points to Room 2, the *Arboretum*. Well, you could use a sylvan glade about now—an orchard or a grove—and because you walk purposefully, the room pops up just where the arrow indicates.

Like the Cold Room, the Arboretum is unlocked. Unlike the Cold Room, it soars skyward four or more floors, although its dome has an ebony opaqueness that hides the stars. You gape. Willows stretch up next to sycamores, oaks shelter infant firs and pines, disease-free elms wave in the interior breeze like sea anemones in a gnarl of current, and maples drop whirling seeds, in windfalls lit like coins by the high fluorescents.

Twilight grips the Arboretum.

Out of this twilight, from among the pillars of the trees, figures in cloaks of pale lemon, lime, lavender, ivory, blue, pink, orange, and other soft hues emerge at intervals. They amble forward only a little way, find a not-too-nearby tree, and halt: they decline to impose themselves.

None of these persons qualifies as a wrong-way orphan because all are too young: between thirty and forty. All stand on the neat margins of this wood like passengers with tickets to bleak destinations. Although none seems fierce or hostile—just the opposite, in fact—you prepare yourself to

flee, if your nerve fails you. Your heart bangs like an old jalopy engine.

Pick one of us, a woman in a lavender cape tells you. She speaks conversationally from under a willow in the middle distance, but you hear her just fine. The acoustics here are excellent: maybe she's been miked.

Pick one of you for what?

Condolence and consolation: as a sounding board for whatever feeds your angst. The woman advances one tree nearer.

You snort. You've had more sounding boards than a cork-lined recording room. Why take on another?

The people in coats and capes approach in increments, picking new trees much nearer you. They appear devoid of menace, but you think again about fleeing. Even in this twilight, their pastel garments are tinged by the shade thrown by overarching foliage: a disquieting phenomenon.

Pastel shades, you think. These people are *pastel shades*.

Soon your gaze picks up a man approaching steadily through a sycamore copse, a figure in grey twill pants and a jacket the pale ash of pipe dottle. He has boyish features, but crow's feet at his eyes and a salt-and-pepper beard lift him out of the crib of callow naifs. He wears a mild don't-patronize-me smile and doesn't stop coming until he stands less than an arm's length away.

Ah, Ms. K——, I'm delighted to see you, despite the inauspicious circumstances that bring you here. His elevated vocabulary satirizes itself, deliberately. Call me Father H——. He gives his hand, which you clasp, aware now the pastel holograms beneath the trees have retreated. Their withdrawal has proceeded without your either ignoring or fully remarking it.

You're not wearing colors, you tell Father H——.

Tilting his head, he says: *Colors?*

A host of pastel shades besieged me just now, but you, well, you wear heartsick grey. To illustrate, you pinch his sleeve.

Father H—— laughs. Grey's the pastel of black, and I'm a child of the cloth who *a/ways* wears this declension.

If you say so, you reply skeptically.

He chuckles and draws you—by his steps rather than his hand—into the nearest glimmering copse. Tell me about Elise, he says. Tell me all about Elise.

Later, drained again, you return to the entry clearing still in the father's company, unsure of the amount of time that has passed but grateful for the alacrity with which it has sped. Twilight still reigns in the Arboretum, but the clock-ticks in your heart hint that you have talked with Father H—— forever. You touch his shoulders and yank him to you in an irrepressible hug.

Thank you, you tell him. Thank you. I may be able to sleep now.

The grey-clad pastor separates from you and smiles through his beard. I've done nothing, Ms. K——.

You've done everything.

His smile turns inward: But I *feel* like a little boy who makes mud pies and carries them to the hungry.

* * * *

Padre H—— takes your plastic card, which he calls a crib sheet, and accompanies you to the Mail Room.

If you use this thing—he fans himself with the card, like some dowager aunt in an airless August sanctuary—you'll look like a clueless newbie. He chuckles and shakes his head.

Am I the only one?

Hardly. Soldiers die every hour. But try to look self-assured—as if you belong.

The corridor now contains a few used-adult orphans, some walking in wind suits, some pushing mobile IVs, some hobbling on canes or breathing through plastic masks as they enter lifts or try the stairs. None looks self-assured, but all appear to know their way about. None wears an institutional gown, but beiges, browns, and sandy hues characterize the garments they do wear.

Raw depression returns to knot your stomach and redden your eyes.

One or two residents glance toward you, but no one speaks.

Friendly bunch, you mumble.

They just don't trust anyone they haven't met, says Father H——. And who can blame them? You could be a security creep or an insurance snoop.

Carrying these bags?

What better way to insinuate yourself among them?

You enter the Mail Room by a door near the screen on the second gallery. This shadowy chamber teems with ranks of rainbow-colored monitors, not with persons, and Father H—— bids you goodbye. (Where is he going? Maybe to hear the confession of a sinful yew?)

A young person in a milky-orange vest approaches. You can't really tell if she's male or female, but you decide to think of her as a woman.

May I help you?

I don't know. I've just come. You hoist your duffels, aware now that they prove absolutely nothing.

Tell me your name, ma'am.

You do, and she takes you to a monitor, keyboards briefly, and summons a face-on portrait of Elise in her battle regalia. Several other people sit in this room (you realize now) before pixel images of *their* dead, trying to talk with them, or their spirits, through arthritic fingertips. You touch the liquid shimmer of the screen with an index finger, and Elise's skin blurs and reshapes after each gentle prod. Your guide asks if you would like to access any family messages in her unit file, for often soldiers leave private farewells in their unclassified e-folders.

You murmur a supplicating Please.

A message glows on the monitor: either Elise's last message or the message that she *arranged* to appear last.

* * * *

Dear Mama,

Do you remember when Brice died? (Well, of course you do.) I recall you telling somebody after they'd shipped Brice's body home, *Elise was Mick's and Brice was mine; now I'm forever bereft*. You didn't see me in the corner, you had no idea I'd heard.

From that day on, Mama, I began thinking, *What can I do to become yours, if I'm not yours now?*

Then it hit me: I had to change myself into the one you claimed—without betraying Dad or Brice or my own scared soul. So I tried to *become* Brice without pushing away Dad or undoing myself.

As soon as I could, I enlisted. I trained. I went where they sent me. I did everything you and they said, just like Brice, and *you sent me* messages about how proud you were—but also how scared.

If you're reading this, your fears have come true, and so has my wish to do everything just like Brice, even if someone else had to undo me for me to *become* just what you loved. With all my heart, I wish you pleasant mourning, Mama, and a long bright day.

Love,

Elise

* * * *

You read this message repeatedly. You must wipe your eyes to do so, also using the linen tail of your blouse to towel the keyboard and your hands.

Upsettingly, you have something else to tell Father H—— about Elise, and indeed about yourself.

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The young woman, or young man, from the Mail Room gives you directions to your next stop. You ride a slow glass-faced elevator up two gallery levels to the Guest Suite, which has this legend in tight gold script across its smoky door:

Grief is a species of prestige.—Wm. Matthews

A bellhop—or an abrupt young man in the *getup* of a bellhop—grabs your duffels. I'll take these to the Sleep Bay, ma'am, he says. Stow them there later, under your cot or whatever. And he swings away.

Old people in brown evening clothes stand at the bar sipping whiskey or imported dusky beer. A gaunt pretty woman detaches herself from the bar and moves insouciantly into your space. Her nose tip halts only inches from your own.

It's terrible when a child dies, she declares, but people *treat* you so well, at least for a while.

You take a step back. Is that right?

Didn't you find that to be true after your son was killed?

I suppose. I didn't know much of anything then. I just sort of—You stop, stymied by the task of saying *exactly* what you found to be true.

An IED transformed *our* son into rain. It fell red, you understand, but he scarcely suffered. And afterward—afterward, everyone was very sweet. For as long as they could stand to be, of course.

You gape at the woman.

To save him from an IED, I could have used an IUD—but that occasion was so long ago I never imagined a child of mine facing such danger. You just don't think.

That's true, you reply, because *You just don't think* rings with more truth than any other utterance out of her mouth.

(And, by the way, has she just equated an Improvised Explosive Device with an intra-uterine contraceptive?)

And, she continues, people's kindness toward the bereaved merits our notice and gratitude. She waves at the bar—at the banks of flowers, an alcove of evening clothes, the teeming buffet, a table of architecturally elaborate desserts.

You say: I'd prefer people rude and my children still alive.

Come now, the woman counters. Bereavement bestows glamour.
Pick out a gown, have a dry martini.

No, you say. You plant a dismissive kiss on the woman's papery brow
and weave your way back to the door.

* * * *

The nearby glass-faced elevator drops you into the mazelike
basement of the Wrong-Way, Used-Adult Orphanage, where you sashay,
as if by instinct, to the Chantry. The Chantry now accommodates Father
H—— and several old-looking women, virtual babushkas, so unlike the
denizens of the Guest Suite that they appear to belong to a different
species.

These women groan on kneelers before the altar at which Father
H—— stands, his arms spread like those of the military effigy impaled on
an olivewood cross hanging overhead. They wear widows' weeds, which
strain at the seams about their arms, waists, and hips. Maybe the father has
shrived them. Now, though, he blesses a monstrance of tiny spoiled rice
cakes and a syringe of red-wine vinegar, and moves along the altar rail to
dispense these elements.

Ms. K——, he says upon noticing you: 'S great to see you again.

You stand inside the door, appalled and humbled by the warrior Christ
floating in shadow above the altar. It wears Brice's face, but also Elise's,
and surely the faces of all the babushkas' lost children. You see that two or
three of these wrong-way orphans have stuffed their smocks with tissues or
rags, and that a few, whatever their burdens of flesh, look barely old enough
to have *babies*, although they wouldn't be kneeling here—would they?—if
that were true. They gaze up raptly, not at the padre but at the suspended
effigy: Sacrificer and Sacrificed.

The father nods a welcome. Care to join these communicants?

I'm not of your creedal persuasion, Father.

Oh, but you are, Ms. K——. He gestures welcomingly again. The
Church of the Forever Bereft. Come. I've got something better than mud
pies. He lifts the chalice and nods at the monstrance: A *little* better, anyway.

You walk to the front and kneel beside a woman with a heart-shaped
face and the eyes of a pregnant doe. She lays her hand on your wrist.

Our kids didn't deserve to die, she says. Them dying before us turns everything upside-down. And when our high and mighty mucky-mucks aren't having whole towns blown up, they spew bunkum to keep us quiet.

Bunk cum? you ask yourself, too confused to take offense. But maybe you should tell the father how you slew Elise.

Says Father H——: The more the words the less they mean.

—Yeah, say several women. —We know *that's* scriptural. —You said a throat's worth. —Selah to that, padre. And so on.

Let me give you vinegar peace, he interrupts their outburst. Take, eat; take, drink: the flesh and blood of your offspring in remembrance of a joy you no longer possess; in honor of a sacrifice too terrible to share.

He lays a rice cake on each tongue and follows it with a ruby squirt of vinegar.

You can hardly keep your head or your eyelids up. The evening—the devastating news—your exile from your life-help cottage—have exhausted you beyond mere fatigue, and you collapse over the altar rail. Father H—— lifts your chin and pulls your lip to give you the elements.

The babushka with the heart-shaped face braces you to prevent your rolling to the floor. You behold her from one bloodshot eye, knowing you must seem to her a decrepit old soul: a fish with fading scales and a faint unpleasant smell.

The Eucharist *clicks* in: You see Brice and Elise as preschool children. In stained shorts and jerseys, they dangle a plump Siamese kitten between them and grin like happy little jack-o-lanterns. *Click*. In some adolescent year they are videotaping each other with recorders long since obsolete. Then—*click*—you're gaping at a ticket stub, drawn months later from a jacket pocket, from a ballgame you attended the day before you got word of Brice's death. *Click*. Elise poses saucily in an ice-green gown with a long-stemmed rose between her teeth. *Click*. Much too soon: Elise in khaki.

O God, you say under the floating soldier Christ. Forgive, my children, my failure to march ahead of you....

* * * *

Who helps you to the Sleep Bay on an upper gallery you cannot, in your febrile state, tell. But when you arrive, you find this space larger than the fenced-in confines of a refugee camp, with so many *used adults* milling about that it seems, also, a vast carnival lot. TVs on poles rest at intersections amidst the ranks and files of cots and pallets, most of these showing black-and-white military sitcoms from your girlhood, with a smattering in color from more recent years:

There's *Rin Tin Tin*. There's *F Troop*. There's *Hogan's Heroes*. There's *Sergeant Bilko*. There's *McHale's Navy*. There's *Gomer Pyle, USMC*. There's *M*A*S*H*. There's *China Beach Follies*. There's *My Mama, the Tank*. There's *I Got Mine at Gitmo*. There's *Top Gun, 2022*. There's ... but they just go on and on, the noise of gunshots, choppers *thwup-thwuping*, IEDs exploding, and combatants crying out in frustration, anger, or pain punctuating almost every soundtrack.

The young woman—anyway, the young *person*—from the Mail Room waves at you across an archipelago of pallets.

Ms. K——! she shouts. Over here, over *here!*

And you stagger toward her through the crowds, past heaped and denuded cots, past old folks and younger folks: some blessedly zonked, some playing card games like Uno, Old Maid, pinochle, or Cut Throat, and some gazing ceiling-ward as if awaiting the Voice of God the Freshly Merciful. One bearded old guy chunks invisible missiles at the actors in *I Got Mine at Gitmo*.

Barely upright, you make it to the person who called to you.

These are your duffels, she says. This is your pallet—unless you'd like to look for something nearer a wall.

Where are the restrooms?

She points. Through there, Ms. K——. You peer down a crooked aisle of bedding at a wall of wrong-way, used-adult orphans obstructing any view of the lavatories she has tried to point out. I know, I know: Just walk that way and ask again.

No, you say. No. You crawl onto the raised pallet—it's resting on a

pair of empty ammo crates—and curl up in a fetal hunch between your duffels. The woman, the *person*, touches your shoulder gently, and departs.

Before you can fall asleep, a line of people forms in the aisle. Your pallet rests at its head while its tail snakes back into the depths of the bay like a queue from Depression Era newsreels.

Everybody has photographs or image cubes of their slain warrior children, and as the line advances the people in it squat, kneel, or sit to show them to you, even though you see in each face either Brice's or Elise's, no matter how minimal the resemblance or how weary your vision.

—Very pretty. —Very handsome. —A smart-looking fella. —What a shame you've lost her. —How can he be gone? —Golly, what a smile...!

You compliment ten or twelve orphaned parents in this way until your tiredness and the faces of Brice and Elise, rising through the images of these other dead children, make it impossible to go on. Still horizontal, you press your palms to your eyes and shake like a storm-buffed scarecrow.

Leave her alone, somebody says. For Pete's sake, let the woman rest.

A hand shoves your head down into your rough olive-green blanket, but the voice that you attach to the hand's body roars, *Heal, O Lord, heal! Take her hurt away tonight, and torment her no more!*

But you don't want that. You don't. All you want is sleep and the honest-to-God resurrection of three particular persons, but sleep is all you're likely to get. Somebody big perches on the pallet edge and lullabies in a guttural whisper *All the Pretty Little Horses*; he kneads your spine with fingers that feel more like metal bolts than flesh and bone. And despite the Sleep Bay's din and stench (and despite the hole in the middle of your chest), you drift down into a Lost Sea of Consciousness and let go of all pain but a last acrid fuse of heartbreak....

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A twin rumble ghosts through the Sleep Bay, an outer one from the old orphans waking to face their pain afresh and an inner one from your complaining gut. You sit up and peer about at this new Reality.

The lavatories have to be packed—so, casting about for a solution, you find a wide-mouthed jar inside one of the crates supporting your pallet. After shaping a tent with your blanket, you relieve your bladder—no easy task—into the jar and stand there amidst the chaos wondering how to proceed.

Slops! Slops! cries an electronic voice, and a simulacrum of a person, smaller than the small cruel man who helped transport you from your life-help cottage, rolls through the crowd with a slotted tray hooked to its midsection.

It takes jars, bottles, beakers, and suchlike from other bleary residents and rattles them into the partitioned tray going before it like an antique cowcatcher. You hand over yours uncertainly.

The simulacrum—a *dormitron* or a *refectorian*, depending on its duty du jour—asks what you'd like for breakfast. You recoil at taking anything edible from this rolling slops collector, but say, Some toast, I guess, it really doesn't matter, to keep from stalling it by saying nothing. It rolls on.

Another *refectorian*—for at mealtimes the Sleep Bay becomes the Refectory—cruises up behind a serving cart, the cart a part of its own fabricated anatomy, and lets you fumble at its topmost shelf for a cup of tea and a slice of toast and persimmon jam. Other such simulacra tend to others there in the bay, sometimes dropping plastic crockery or spilling sticky liquids. From a few pallets away, a woman as thin as a spaghetti strap sidles into your space.

What did your children like to eat? she asks.

Ma'am?

Your dead kids—what'd they like to eat? You can get it here, whatever it was. I always do—what mine ate, I mean. I eat it for them and feel connected to them the rest of the hideous day.

Our son liked cold pizza, our daughter even colder fresh fruit.

Want me to get you tidbits of those things?

You hesitate.

The strap-thin woman mumbles into a diamond of perforations on her inner wrist. They're on their way, she tells you afterward.

And so you wind up with two slices of cold garbage-can pizza and a bowl of even colder cantaloupe, pineapple, muskmelon, and kiwi wedges, which you down between bites of pizza. Your benefactor watches in approval, then asks you to tell a breakfast story about Brice and Elise.

A breakfast story!

You think first of a morning on which teenager Brice sat slumped at the table, his eyes lazing in their sockets like gravid guinea pigs. Mick directed him to have some juice and cereal, to clean up afterward, and to take his sister to school, but Brice dawdled. Stop dicking around, Mick cried. Then, infuriated, he wrestled Brice from his chair, apparently to frog-march him to the cupboard, but Brice flopped deadweight to the floor; and though Mick twisted, prodded, and even tried to *snatch* him erect, neither his body nor his smirk budged, and he remarked, dryly, that Mick's parenting skills had gone so far south that he'd just resorted to all-out *child abuse*. Stunned, Mick let Brice go and stormed outside. You and Elise exchanged stunned looks of your own.

Come on, the woman prompts again: Every mama has a breakfast story.

So you tell about the time when Brice and Elise, then nine and five, got up early one morning and made Mick and you breakfast in bed: mounds of toast, two eggs each, orange juice, and so on. But thinking it olive oil, they had scrambled the eggs in rancid tuna juice, and despite their hard work and the eggs' lovely sunrise yellowness, you had to throw them out.

The eggs, you say, *not* the kids. Mick and I felt like total Egg Benedict Arnolds. Just like I feel now.

The woman laughs and then purses her lips in sympathy. Good story, Ms. K——. Just remember: You'll *a/ways* feel like that. She grimaces grotesquely, as much for her sake as yours, and places a call via her wrist perforations to somebody in another part of the Refectory.

Meanwhile, the servitors roll on.

* * * *

Feeling each of your years as a blood-borne needle of sleet, you ride a glass-faced lift to the Chantry level and follow the wives of two sick old

men to the Furnace Room, which turns out to be an intensive care unit (ICU) for last-leggers and a crematory for those who don't make it. Indeed, when you arrive, an orderly slouches past pushing a sheeted figure on a gurney toward an oven down a claustrophobia-inducing tributary corridor. You think about following this gurney but instead continue to tag along behind the ICU widows and at length reach the care unit's hub.

The arc of the hub's perimeter is lined with windowed rooms in which you can see the orphans in extremis. They lie here in weirdly tilted beds, attended by dormitrons and tightlipped RNs. Tubes and electrodes sprout from their bodies like odd mechanical fungi. All of them seem to be equipped with oxygen masks, tracheotomies, or respirators. Even over the machines laboring to sustain them, you can hear them breathing from fifty or sixty feet away.

Father H——, a grey silhouette against a luminous white backdrop, stands at the bedside of one such person. His posture tells you he is listening to the patient's whispers or measuring his or her laggard unassisted breaths. The TV set in this room, muted, runs through a succession of familiar images from the War on Worldwide Wickedness: statues toppling, buildings dropping in cascades of dust and smoke, warriors on patrol through rubble-strewn courtyards or past iced-over stone fountains.

The patient couldn't care less. Neither could you, if this enterprise had not also devoured Brice and Elise, many thousands of their contemporaries, and so many civilian *slammies*—as the media now insists on calling civilian natives of foreign war zones—that not even the Pan Imperium can number them.

Mr. Weevil, the director, enters from an outer corridor with several cronies, five or six small men and women, wearing ivory smocks and sneakers. They float past you to a treatment unit. Mr. Weevil slides the glass door open and calls the doctor and his team to the portal to report on the patient's condition.

Dr. S——, a cadaverous Dravidian with lemur eyes, flatly and loudly says that his patient is a near goner whose lungs need help, whose liver has badly deteriorated, whose kidneys have failed, and whose blood, despite a full course of antibiotics, still teems with pernicious microbes.

None of this person's organs retains its original life-sustaining function, says Dr. S——, and he must soon die. I say *must* in the sense of an imminent inevitability, not as a Hippocratic recommendation.

The doctor might just as well have spoken over a PA system. His words echo through the hub like the pronouncement of a god.

Helplessly, you step forward. I'll bet he can still *hear*, you say.

Everybody turns to look. You bear their gazes as the Incredible He-She at an old-time freak show would bear those of a paying crowd.

What? Mr. Weevil says. What did you say?

I said I'll bet he can still *hear*. Hearing is the last of the senses to go, so even this patient may still be able to hear you.

Dr. S——'s mouth quirks sourly. And what good does *that* do him? None. No good at all.

The director and his cronies agree, as do the RNs and the promoted dormitrons at the doctor's back. You dwindle before them like a melting ice statue in a time-lapse video. Amazingly, not one of these obtuse brains gets the poignant underlying import of your observation.

Mr. Weevil turns to address the doctor: Every life has huge merit, of course, but we *really* need that bed. *Carry on!* He and his smock-clad retinue exit the intensive care hub while Dr. S—— and *his* team fall back into the treatment unit to await the convenient inevitable.

Appalled, you walk about the hub in rings of increasing size until Father H——comes out and hails you as he might a lost friend. Ah, Ms. K——, what a surprise and a treat to see you!

What day is it, Padre?

Friday—another *good* Friday—why do you ask?

You hear the stress on *good*, but not the Easter-designating capital G that would turn your fugue into an enacted allegory. You note that it's been little more than twelve hours since two cruel stooges informed you of Elise's death.

And a little over two years since you learned of Brice's, he says gently.

You smile and ask after the women who journeyed to the Furnace Room to visit their spouses.

Their hearts will grow heavier soon, Father H—— says. Given their ages, how could they not?

They'll die without seeing the war's end.

War Is Peace, Orwell said. Besides, who will? Who sees anything well finished, even one's own life? It's little different from those medieval stonemasons who worked on cathedrals.

I don't like your analogy, you tell him.

Father H—— laughs heartily. Of course you don't: it stinks.

* * * *

Moments later, he leads you to the mouth of a nearby tunnel.

Care to visit the ovens, Ms. K——?

You like this question less than you did his cathedral analogy because it suggests an analogy even more distasteful. But what else do you have to do?

Okay.

As you walk, the father offers you a rice cake and an ampoule of red-wine vinegar from a communion kit sewn into his jacket lining. For your spiritual sustenance, he says, but you bemusedly shake your head.

Two gurneys trundle up behind you, one pushed by a dormitron, the other by a young woman in uniform. To let them pass in tandem, you press your backs to opposite walls of the tunnel. The first gurney takes a corridor to the left; the second, bearing not only a body but a casket draped in a flag of the nation's newly adopted colors, swings right. You raise an eyebrow at the father.

Vinegar Peace cremates our war dead as well as wrong-way orphans, he explains. Which way would you like to go?

You answer by angling right. Far down this corridor you see a wide brick apron before double crematory doors and ranks of scarlet-draped

caskets before these doors. An honor guard in full-dress stands at formal ease to one side of the tunnel; a military choir on crepe-decorated risers to the other.

Both contingents await you in this incarnadine cul-de-sac; in fact, when you have almost drawn close enough to read the soldiers' nametags, they crack to attention and a pitch pipe sounds. They then begin to sing, the expanded honor guard and the choir, as if triggered by your arrival as auditors. You recognize the melody as a halt-footed variation on an old hymn's tune:

* * * *

*If we were ever sorry,
Oh, we would never tell—
We're gravely in a hurry
To sleep at last in hell.*

—

“Pro patria mori”
*Is our true warrior's cry.
We never, ever worry;
We boldly spit and die.*

—

*Out for patriot glory,
Brave maid and gallant stud,
We all revere Bold Gory—
Its Red, its Wine, its Blood!*

* * * *

The choristers conclude fortissimo and stand at ease again. The Red, Wine, and Blood—Bold Gory—has recently replaced the Red, White, and Blue—Old Glory—, and these soldiers gladly hymn the new banner's praises.

Two members of the honor guard open the double doors of the oven, and Father H—— nods you forward, as if accustomed to this ritual.

Go in? you ask him. Really?

Just for a look-see. You might not think so, but it's an honor, their approving you for an impromptu tour.

Why me?

Most young enlistees have living parents. You're a proxy.

A soldier yanks the scarlet banner from a coffin and brings it to you as if to throw it over your shoulders. Its stars and stripes are mutedly visible as different shades of red. You lift a hand, palm outward. No thank you.

Our dead would wish us to robe you in it, the soldier says.

You count sixteen coffins—one of them minus its patriotic drapery. Who *are* your dead today? you wonder aloud.

Sixteen trainees in a reconstructed Osprey Vertical Takeoff/Landing Aircraft, he says. It crashed a half mile from camp, the third bird this year. He again offers the scarlet flag.

No, I can't. I'm partial to the old version, even at its foulest.

The soldier courteously withdraws, to re-drape the naked coffin.

Father H—— takes your arm and leads you straightway into the oven.

The Cold Room had ice effigies. The Furnace Room—or this part of its crematory extension—has a cindery floor and dunes of ash. When its doors close behind you, you stand in the grey hemisphere like snow-globe figures, lit by thin skylights. Black scales etch continents and islands on the walls, and the sooty dunes, when you move, suck at you like whirlpools. The furnace scares you. It seems both an execution chamber and a tomb, full of drifting human fallout.

I thought the ash and bone fragments were collected to give to the families, and that everything else went up the smokestack.

Some ovens work more efficiently than others, the father replies.

You walk deeper into this peculiar space and kneel before an ashen dune. You run your hands into it and let its motes sift through your fingers like desiccated rain. You rub your wrists and arms with it. You pour its greyness over your head in a sort of baptism, a dry baptism befitting your age and orphanhood. You scrub it into your clothes and run your tongue around your mouth to taste its grit.

Father H—— breaks a dozen ampoules of red-wine vinegar over the ashes before you and stirs the bitter into the bleak. He shapes a pie from this mixture and urges you to follow suit. You obey. After a while, you've made a dozen or so together, but still must make a dozen more for the unfed soldiers in the tunnel. Kneeling, you work side by side to accomplish that task.

* * * *

Weeks go by before you visit the Melancholarium.

Father H—— has told you that it's a memory room that only two people at a time may enter: an orphaned couple, or the only surviving orphan and a person of his or her choice. No one may enter alone, or in a party of three or more. None of these rules makes much sense, but little about Vinegar Peace ever does, even if it sometimes seems to have a coherent underlying principle of organization that you can't fathom owing to an innate personal failing.

Meanwhile, you've grown used to the noisy Sleep Bay, learned when to visit the crowded jakes, perfected the art of getting servitors to do your bidding, and made enough *friends* to feel—well, if not *connected*, at least not entirely estranged from the protocols of what passes for normal life here. You no longer bolt up when bombs go off at Fort Pugnucose (where many of the recruits for the War on Worldwide Wickedness train), or when air-raid sirens wail in the galleries, or when some of the older orphans sidle up to your cot at night and plead, *Take me home, take me home*. Even the twilight influx of dispossessed oldsters, addle-wits with confusion writ large in their pupils, has ceased to faze you. After all, they'll adjust ... maybe.

Then a dormitron sporting Henry Kissinger glasses and nose gives you a pass to visit the Melancholarium.

The name itself sabotages the place. Just hearing it, who'd want to go there? You, indeed, would rather return to your life-help cottage in Sour Thicket. Vinegar Peace isn't a concentration camp, but neither is it a Sun City spa. It's a training facility for people with little time to make use of that training in the Real World, which in your opinion no longer exists.

Choose somebody to go with you, the dormitron says.

You pick Ms. B——, the strap-thin woman who asked you to tell her a breakfast story, and one morning in your second month of residency, the two of you ride a lift to the fifth level and walk together to a tall cylindrical kiosk where a familiar-looking young person, probably female, seats you next to each other at a console and fits you both with pullover goggles.

You walk side by side into the Melancholarium. Now, though, Ms. B—— is no longer Ms. B—— but your late husband Mick, whose hand you hold as you approach the gurney on which Elise lies in a pair of jeans and a blue chambray shirt open at the collar. Her clothing is so blatantly neither a gown nor a full dress uniform that the simplicity of her look—her sweet girlishness—briefly stops your breath, as hers is stopped. You reach to touch her. Mick seizes your wrist, not to prevent you but instead to guide your fingers to Elise's arm, which you both clutch for as long as you have now endured in this grand human depository. Or so it oddly seems.

Elise's red-tinged hair, which the military cut short, now hangs behind her off the gurney. It sparkles like a sequined veil. The expression on her face suggests neither terror nor pain, but serenity; and if you addressed her, saying, *Elise, it's time to get up, come out to the porch to see the sun shining on the spider webs in the grass*, you believe with the same soft ferocity that you once believed in God that she will obey—that she'll open her eyes, sit up, and embrace you briefly before striding out of the Melancholarium into the stolen remainder of her life.

You kiss Elise's brow. Leaning across her, you give her the hug that she'd give you if only the same green power seethed there. Her body has a knobby hardness that would estrange you from her if you didn't love her so much. All your pity re-collects and flows from your bent frame into her unyielding one. She has the frail perdurability of Cold Room effigies—but none of their alienness—and so she has finally become yours, although neither you nor anybody else can own her now. When her smoke rises through the crematory flue, it won't dissipate until your smoke also rises and clasps her last white particles to yours. Then both clouds will drift away together.

You step back. Mick gives you room. You want to freeze this tableau and visit it like a window decorator, keeping its centerpiece—Elise—intact but endlessly rearranging the furniture and flowers. You kiss her brow again, hold her hands, and finger the runnels in her jeans.

You undo the buttons next to her heart to confirm a report that three high-caliber rounds inflicted her *non-sustainable* injuries. You find and examine them with a clinical tenderness. You must know *everything*, even the worst, and you rejoice in the tameness of her fatal mutilation.

Joyce, Mick says, the first time anyone has spoken your given name in so long that it jars like a stranger's. *Are you okay?*

You embrace, leaning into each other. Of course, it isn't really Mick holding you upright in the vivid deceit of the Melancholarium, but so what, so what?

You pull back from his image and murmur, *Mick, her hands...*

What about them?

They're so cold, colder than I thought possible.

Yes, Mick says, smiling, *but if you rub them, they warm up.*

* * * *

On your journey back to the Sleep Bay, you tell Ms. B——, Mick would never have said that. That was you.

Ms. B—— says, Well, I've never seen such a pretty kid.

You should have seen Brice.

Stop it. I was just being polite. *You* should've seen *mine*: absolute lovelies fed into the chipper by tin-men with no guts or gadgets.

You don't reply because you notice a short tunnel to a door with a red neon sign flashing over it: **EXIT** and then the same word inside a circle with a slash through it. You think about detouring down this tunnel and even try to pull Ms. B—— along with you. She resists.

Stop it, she says. You can check out whenever you feel like it. Just don't try to leave. Don't you know that by now?

I've heard there's an escape, you say. A way to get out alive.

That's not it, Ms. B—— says, nodding at the flashing **EXIT/DON'T EXIT** sign.

Don't you even want to hear?

Enlist? Is that it? Sign up to wage war on the wicked? Well, that's a crock too.

I'm sure it is.

Okay, then—what is it, your secret way to get out?

Adoption, you tell her. The padre says that if a soldier with six tours adopts you, you're no longer a wrong-way orphan and you can leave.

Ms. B—— regards you as if you've proposed sticking nasturtiums down the barrel of an enemy soldier's rifle. Oh, I've heard that too, it's a fat load of bunkum.

You don't reply, but you also don't go down the tunnel to try the door with the contradictory flashing messages. You return with your *friend* to the Sleep Bay without raising the subject again.

But it makes sense, doesn't it? A decent orphanage adopts out its charges. If you believe, just *believe*, somewhere there's a compassionate Brice or Elise, a person who's survived six tours and wants nothing more than to rescue some poor wrong-way orphan from terminal warehousing. Such people do exist. They exist to lead you from Vinegar Peace to a place of unmerited Milk and Honey.

That night, huddled on your cot amid the hubbub in the Sleep Bay, you envision a woman very like Elise sitting with you on a porch in late autumn or early winter. You sit shivering under scarlet lap robes, while this person whispers a soothing tale and tirelessly rubs your age-freckled hands.