

pale breast riding free. In his dreams he sees the delicate tuft of blond pubic hair he witnessed poking out of a pair of low-slung jeans in study hall. This is what Sander thinks about as he walks behind his mother, feeling the hot sun wherever it touches the black fabric of his suit. That and the bad haircut he got yesterday.

The haircut! He feels tears start again at the thought of it. Some friend of his mother's, in her kitchen. When she brought out the mirror: death. As if every single thing in his life were there to disqualify him.

A nice enough street, anyway. Lots of students from the college. It's a Tuesday afternoon, so nobody much answers the door. Those who do are mostly wearing flannel pajama bottoms and flip-flops. Some of the men don't even have on shirts. His mother rings the bell, and a college girl comes to the screen door, and if she came outside Sander could tell if she was wearing a bra under her thin little shirt. But she says no, thanks, not interested, thanks, and closes the inner door on them, though it was open before.

Another soul misses out on eternal life in an earthly Paradise.

Why can't he be like his mother? Why can't he just be good?

Immense transparency of light, the sky a luminous blue. He takes a deep breath and lets God's grace fill him. All this great gift, this flowering world. It is not Sander's place to question why a God so generous can also be so exacting. Why do they have to work so hard to come to Him? Sin is everywhere, the path to goodness narrow and sometimes hard to find. But this is nothing next to His generosity.

"Another block or Taco Bell?" his mother asks.

"I don't know," Sander says. "I don't care."

"Are you hungry or are you not?" He is hungry. He is always hungry. But he doesn't want to go there in his new suit and with his haircut, and he doesn't want to go with his mother. He says, "I'll pass, I guess."

"Well, I'm starving," his mother says.

They load the valise into the back of the blue Aerostar and drive to Broadway, where Sander watches as his mother consumes a Gordita Supreme and an order of tortilla chips. She eats slowly and carefully, and she reads from a small black Bible as she does. Next to them, a tableful of senior girls laugh and scream like girls at a swimming pool: Elin Peterson, Morgan McKay, Nora Austin. Anna

KEVIN CANTY

God's Work

FROM *The New Yorker*

SANDER LOVES HIS MOTHER. He walks a few steps after her, wearing a new black suit that has room for him to grow into, carrying a big black valise of pamphlets. When his mother goes to the front door, rings the bell, waits for an answer, Sander stands behind her, looking over her shoulder, with an expression on his face that he means to be pleasant.

It's the second day of his summer vacation, but it still feels like spring. Lilacs bloom in every yard; irises wag their pink and purple tongues at him.

His mother is plain. She wears a gray sweater, despite the sun, and a black skirt that reaches nearly to her ankles. No lipstick, short, practical hair. Her name is Anna. She makes up for her plainness with a big galvanic smile. People are on her side right away, though they rarely open the screen door and almost never take a pamphlet. Nobody new ever comes to Fellowship. Anna doesn't take this as permission to stop trying. She thinks the men and women and children in these sleeping houses will lose the chance to live life as God intended unless they take the message she brings them in the pamphlet. Sander thinks she is lovely and brave and admirable. Every day, she tries to save strangers. Selfless. Sander loves his mother.

Today! is the name of the pamphlet.

Sander has just finished his sophomore year. At the first breath of spring, the girls all started to dress like prostitutes. With his own eyes he has seen a pretty junior bicycling in a tank top with one

doesn't seem to notice, but Sander is worried for her. Something dangerous in that scream life.

After lunch he is twice as hungry and feels like an idiot. They go back to the same neighborhood and begin to canvass. Two houses into it, a screen door is open, and a man in an undershirt, his hair pulled back in a graying ponytail, answers.

"I'm here to invite you to a special event," Sander's mother says.

"All right," the man says.

"I have some good news about God's love," she says, holding a pamphlet out toward the door.

"Come on in," the man with the ponytail says. This is not quite a surprise—every day or two they are invited in somewhere. Usually it's a drunk person or someone lonely and old. This man just looks angry.

"You want some coffee?" he asks. "I've got hot coffee. I've got plenty."

"No, thank you," Sander's mom says.

"Is that against your religion?" the man says. "You don't look like Mormons."

"We are not of that faith."

"Well, do you want some coffee?"

"I'd love some," Sander's mother says, and settles with a small ladylike sigh onto the sofa and takes the valise. Sander doesn't know about this. Maybe the man is not drunk, but there is certainly something wrong with him.

"So am I going to Hell?" the man asks, setting a steaming mug of coffee in front of Anna.

"By my lights, you are not," she says. "No hellfire and no eternal damnation."

"What, then?"

"Nothing."

"Just nothing?"

"A blank eternity."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"Consider the alternative," Sander's mom says. "An eternity of bliss in the company of God Himself."

"You want to get high?" the man asks Sander's mom.

"Why, no, thank you."

That eagle stare he gives her, ignorant and proud. Why do the heathen rage? This happens, not too often, every couple of weeks and then not at all for a month or two, the sinful man who is proud of his sin. Sander is a sinful boy—he knows this about himself. But he has the grace to be ashamed of it.

"Oblivion," the man says, lighting a little brass pipe, smoking, pointing it toward Anna, who shakes her head no. Then toward Sander.

"I'd ask you not to do that," Anna says.

"Why not? If it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter."

"Your soul is at stake."

"If it's just nothing," the man says, and takes another hit off the brass pipe. Sander has seen it done, in the smokers' pit behind his school, though it's odd to see a grown man puffing on a tiny pipe.

"If it's just oblivion," he says, exhaling the words through thin smoke, "then I don't care. I like oblivion. I seek after it."

"Think of what hangs in the balance."

"Or not," he says. "Clara!"

"What?" a petulant voice answers from the kitchen.

A needle of fear. Sander knows that voice, that name.

"Come on out here."

"Why?"

"Come on out here is all."

It is exactly the person he was afraid it was, Clara Martinson, she of the ripped T-shirt, raccoon eyes, pierced anything, the next grade up from his, this girl who looks and dresses the way every teen girl would if there was nobody to tell her she couldn't. Which there isn't. Please, dear God, make me disappear, Sander thinks. Send me to the solar surface and vaporize me.

"What do you want?" she says. Then she notices Sander in his black suit and haircut. Okay: there is something in each of us, in every sinner (and Sander knows that we are all sinners), that wants to climb toward the light, and for a moment, in Clara's eyes, Sander sees the longing for grace.

Then, just as quickly, the window shuts. She says, "Oh, for fuck's sake, Dad."

"Come have a hit with your old man," he says. "Just a little toke."

"I'm sorry," Clara says to Anna. "He gets like this. You should go."

"This is a value, too," Clara's dad says. "This is a family."

Anna presses a pamphlet into Clara's hand, into her father's as well, as she rises to her feet. "Please come to the meeting," she says. "We have good news for you."

One more glance from steely Clara is all it takes to set Sander off into a fury of blushing. She trails them to the door while her father sits fuming on the couch. As Anna leaves, Sander turns to Clara.

"I'm sorry," he says. "She's just . . ."

"Don't apologize for her," Clara says.

"Then me," he says.

"No." Clara shoves him out, blinking, into the bright miracle of the day. The door closes firmly behind them. Sander sits on the curb, his big black valise between his feet, and wishes he could cry. He can't—he doesn't know why. Doesn't remember the last time.

When he looks up, his mother is beaming. She says, "That was really something, wasn't it? You never know what's going to happen."

"But the two of them . . ."

"We plant our seeds on stony soil," she says. "It is not up to us which grow and which do not. Are you hungry yet?"

"No," Sander says, although he is starving.

Clara turns up at Fellowship on Wednesday.

She seeks out Sander and says, "There's no Hell. There's really no Hell?"

"No."

"Then I'll sick around and listen."

She melts off toward the back of the hall before the meeting starts. It's a basement—knoty-pine paneling and framed pictures of the ex-presidents of the Elks on the walls. Sander is out of the suit, but the haircut remains. And he dresses as if his mother dressed him, which she does: chinos, plaid shirt. What had Clara been wearing? He can't remember—only her face, which was mostly clean of makeup and had a look of inquiry. He wants to turn around and look at her. But he must keep his mind on God's path. Then they stand and sing, all of them at once, "What God Has Yoked Together."

They are in the same room and singing together. They are one soul, one breath, at least in this tiny moment. That's what Sander feels.

After Fellowship, the hens and chicks of the congregation spirit

Clara away, and he doesn't see her again. He will never see her again. The skirts alone, down to the ankle, will drive her away, and the plain faces, the blouses buttoned to the neck. Clara will never have the vision to see through the shell, the earthly costume, to the joy that waits for her. Words, words, words, Sander thinks. She is a girl who might talk to him. These women will spoil it for him, these women he has lived among all his life. Just now, he hates them for it.

But she comes to Fellowship again on Saturday, and afterward, before the hens and chicks take her away, she asks Sander if they can go for a walk on Sunday. No, he tells her, but Monday might be all right.

"And what are your intentions?" his mother asks.

"I don't have any," Sander says.

Anna laughs out loud. They're in the kitchen, Sunday afternoon, summer rain beating against the windows. Sander still in his Sunday suit, though he's taken his tie off.

"That's impossible," his mother says. "Everybody has intentions, good or bad or all mixed up. What we want. It's what sets people in motion. But you," she says, and leans closer. "I don't want you to lose your way. She's a very pretty girl."

Not really, Sander thinks. Compared with the chicks, maybe.

But there are some real knockouts at school. Clara's got the edge, maybe, the interest—she's got a snake tattoo that curls out from under her shirt, a little ways up her neck, emerald and garnet—but there are definitely prettier girls.

"She doesn't know what she's doing," his mother says. "You've seen how she dresses. She has no compass."

"We're just going for a walk," Sander says.

"Do you wish me to come along?"

Oh, no, Sander thinks. A hot ball of disappointment rises in his throat. He forces himself to speak: "I'd rather you didn't."

"Then think of what you are asking."

"I'll pray on it," Sander says, and his mother radiates approval, and at that exact moment he splits into two people, the one he has always been and some itchy, wayward newborn.

The old Sander will do as his mother asks, will pray and puzzle, working toward the light and out of the morass of sin. The old Sander thrills at his mother's smile, at her approval. Old Sander, full of grace.

The newborn Sander schemes. That night, in his bed, as he is supposed to be searching his conscience, he thinks instead of the snake tattoo. He thinks about what exactly he might say to his mother to keep her from chaperoning, without thinking whether this might be lies or truth. His dreams are full of open windows, speeding cars. The ex-presidents of the Elks laugh down at him.

At four o'clock Monday, after Sander and his mother have returned from a short, hot day, Clara shows up on her bicycle. The sun is shining and the sky is an empty, mindless blue. She parks her bike alongside the house. Sander is surprised: Clara's wearing a skirt down to her ankles, a turtleneck that hides her snake, even a beret on her head. Plain-faced. He barely recognizes her.

True, she's wearing combat boots, but Sander's mother approves. She says, "Very becoming."

Clara knocks politely. His mother invites her into the parlor and offers her tea, which Clara accepts. Sander hangs around the edge of the room like a curtain, a piece of furniture, while they talk about nothing: the weather, the summer, the beautiful yellow irises that Anna planted by the ditch in front of the house, now in full stalky bloom.

Clara has tits under her clothes, little ones, as far as he can tell, or maybe medium. And she has a pussy, too, a hairy one, or maybe a smooth, pretty one—he'll never know. Last year, when he was fifteen, he let this thought torment him until he was undressing every counter girl and lady cop who passed by. Lately, he's better, most of the time. Until he can't help it.

"An hour," Anna says. "Then right back here, all right?"

"Yes, ma'am," Sander says, and Clara looks at him to see if he's being sarcastic, which he is not. It's a whole new world for her, Sander can tell.

The park: The newborn Sander, soft, defenseless, feels every green leaf, every flower, every shaft of evening sunlight penetrate into him. A bright chattery mountain stream runs the length of the park, and on either side are tangled thickets of birds and flowers. Here, though, is the picnic area: bright grass, wooden tables, barelegged couples lying next to each other on quilts, touching.

"The world is ending," Clara says.

"It is," Sander says. It's nothing he wants to talk about.

"When?"

"Soon," he says. "I don't know. People said it was going to happen a couple of years ago, but then it didn't."

"But you still believe it."

"I believe in Jehovah," Sander says. "People make mistakes. They interpret His word, they add and subtract. People are people. Jehovah doesn't change."

"The end of the world—that's a terrible thing to believe," Clara says, and sits down on a bench. Sander sits on the same bench, not quite as far from her as he can get. He feels so full of desire and fear—it might spill out. Yet he speaks what he believes.

"It's God's love at work," he says. "He's given us a chance to redeem ourselves. To mean something."

"But only through Him."

"Only through Him," Sander says. She's right there on the bench. Perhaps he could kiss her. People have certainly kissed her before.

"Have you ever touched a baby's head?" she asks. "I don't know."

"Sure you have," she says. "That soft spot, up on top of their head, the place they're so vulnerable. Or the way they smell—not the powders and the ointment but just the smell of a baby."

"Sure," he says, and he's almost certain he has. "Fontanel," she says, remembering. "Or what about this, the flowers and all, the green grass and the rain. There's so much that's pretty about the world."

"It'll go on."

"Without us."

"Without most of us," he says. "Then it won't really exist," she says. "Without somebody to touch it, see it. Without somebody to breathe that smell of baby."

Sander is amazed. It's something he's known all along, this passing sadness, the beautiful dream of the world, only to have it all end. Clara has put her finger on it.

"It doesn't make sense," she says.

"It doesn't have to make sense," he says. "You don't have to understand it. That's for faith to do."

Her eyes swim up to him from someplace deep under the surface.

"You do believe," she says.

"I do," he says, and in that moment he does.

water, laughing, drinking beer. This wide world of pleasure, and Sander with his blinders on. When he can manage it.

"I tried this before, when I was twelve or something," Clara says. "I was Catholic for a year. I was confirmed and everything. Catherine," she says. "That was my confirmation name."

"I don't know how that works."

"It's like being baptized again, kind of. My mom had me baptized when I was a baby, but then when I was trying to be a Catholic . . . I don't know. It just seemed like the thing to do."

"You change your name?"

"You get, like, an extra name, from a saint. They're supposed to help you after that. They have their specialties."

"What does St. Catherine do?"

"I don't know, exactly—I just thought it sounded cool. Clara Catherine. Also, she has a torture thing named after her."

"Which one?"

"The Catherine wheel," she says. "They tie you to it and then they break your bones."

"Nice!" Sander says, which makes her laugh, a coarse, cawing laughter that sounds at home in the woods. Animal cry, he thinks.

"The Catholic boys were worse than the regular boys," she says. "All they want is blow jobs, blow jobs, blow jobs."

Sander feels it rising but he can't make it stop, and even the trying to stop it makes it worse, and then he's blushing, a hot and awful mess, and Clara sees it—how could she miss it?—and the pause in her face makes it worse, the hot blood pulsing through his face.

"I'm sorry," she says.

She walks off ahead of him, to give him a chance to recover. So she is considerate. He follows, every footstep throbbing in his face. Slowly, slowly, it subsides. It's hot anyway in the afternoon sun, and his face is engorged. Just thinking the word, *engorged*, and he blushes more. Engorged, engorged.

She's waiting a ways down the path, by the creek, in the shade of a big cottonwood, sitting on a log and taking her boots off.

"I'm hot," she says. "It's the turtleneck. I'm going to take a dip, just for a second. Come in the water with me?"

"No, thanks," he says immediately, then immediately regrets it. The stream here falls over a tumble of rocks into a deep, nearly still pool, shoulder-deep at least. The bank is smooth round pebbles.

"Okay," she says, and gets up off the bench and starts down the path into the woods, in a fury of thought. Sander follows. It's what he does, in his chinos and black shoes: he's a follower. Small birds scatter and chirp as they pass. Sunlight glints on the water of the creek. The world, he thinks, this generous world. He is looking at a bird by the water to see if it is a dipper when she stops short and he runs into her, *bang*, almost knocks her down.

"Sorry," he says. "Sorry, sorry. I wasn't looking."

"It's all right," Clara says.

But Sander doesn't hear. The after-print of her body on his is too strong, just the accidental touch—he doesn't get touched enough. Not nearly enough.

"Faith," she says. "Where do you get it? Where can I buy some?"

Sander doesn't know. Just now he's nowhere near his God, dazzled by the sunlight, the girl. He says, "It's work sometimes."

"Just sometimes?"

"All the time," he says. "And half the time it doesn't come, and you're just nowhere. Sorry."

"No, that's okay," Clara says. She takes his hand and says, "Thank you. Thank you for being honest."

"Oh," Sander says, and blushes.

"I'm not supposed to do that, am I?" she says, dropping his hand. And Sander almost catches the moment, almost manages to hold on. "It's all right," he says. "No harm done."

Clara's there at Fellowship again on Wednesday night and on Sunday, dressed modestly in her own way—long skirt and combat boots, a navy woolen beanie on her head instead of the lace frill favored by the hens. Sander barely sees her. The chicks are so delighted to have a new face among them that they surround her. At one point, a long wistful look as Clara searches out Sander's eyes and smiles at him: What's to be done? They have me.

On Monday, they go walking again, with his mother's blessing. Clara wants to talk about Hell and why they don't believe in it. This is where she comes in: A God who doesn't hate His people. Come to me or not. Sander explains, but his mind is on the body. Her body, his. It's a warm afternoon, almost hot, and girls in swimsuits and cutoff jeans are lounging in the shallows of the creek, sitting on fallen logs and letting their feet dangle in the rushing

Sander says nothing, but stretches out his hand and lays it on the damp fabric of her skirt, just at her knee. Clara looks at his hand and then at his face, with a deep sadness, almost exhaustion. She takes his hand from her knee and gives it back to him.

"That's not what I want from this," she says. "From you."

"Okay," Sander says.

"We should get going," she says, and laces up her big black boots.

And Sander follows—down the path through the woods, across the bridge and home again, where his mother waits in the kitchen—but only a ghostly part of Sander. The real person is still back in the woods, still wondering where God was, why God did not stop him from making a fool of himself. All through dinner, all through the night, he wonders. Where is the holy part of him? He can't find it, only sin. He seems to be made of sin, to contain nothing but dirty desires, tits and asses.

All week, his mother looks at him as if she knows something, as if she suspects him, and maybe she's right to. Clara's white thigh torments him, the ease as her body enters the stream, the dazzle of sunlight on water and pale skin.

She isn't there at Fellowship. He looks from face to face and doesn't see her. Then back to his mother, who has seen him searching, who knows, who is disappointed in him. This much good remains in Sander: he's sad for the sake of Clara's immortal soul that he drove her away. His greed and sin have pushed her back into the darkness. He sees again what a trap and a contrivance the world is, a tangle of sin and pain. And Sander's God is nowhere near. He searches and searches within himself.

Then she arrives, and Sander fills with an unreasonable happiness. All is not lost, not yet. She takes her place in the women's section and kneels and prays, modest in her long skirt, a gray scarf over her head. She's naked under her clothes, though. Sander knows this. Maybe God will find a way for them. Maybe they will marry. Maybe there is a godly way. Sander is filled with lust and virtue at the same time, seeing her in bridal white, the tattoo snaking up her neck. Sander in a good suit, with a good haircut . . .

A commotion at the back of the room. Everybody looks: it's Clara's father, in undershirt and ponytail and intelligent-looking glasses.

"Come on, girl," he says to Clara. "We're done here."

She stands, all modesty in her long sleeves and skirt, and takes the hem of her skirt in her hand and walks out into the still water, raising the skirt as she goes so it won't get soaked. It still gets wet in places, water darkening the gray cloth. Between the water and the hem of her skirt, Sander glimpses the cool white outline of her thigh, the palpable flesh. Just an inch or two. If she wades out any deeper . . . but she stops, and looks back at him. Is she laughing at him? Or just smiling?

"Come in," she says. "It feels great."

Yes, he thinks, oh, yes. But what's he going to do? Take his pants off? Also, this is sin, and he knows it. This is the lure of the flesh. This is the moment they have been warning him about, all of them.

"Come on," she says.

"I can't," he says. "I shouldn't."

"All right, then," Clara says, and turns her back to him, turns her face up to the sun. For a moment, Sander thinks she will dive in all the way. He feels it himself: the plunge, the beautiful clear cool water. Instead he sits on the log and feels sorry for himself and tries not to look at Clara, who is not looking at him, who doesn't care if anybody sees her or not. He looks everywhere—the sky, the stream, the trees—but always back to her. The shape, even under her clothes, the curve of her hips. Sander is hopeless. Sander is lost.

Clara wades out of the water toward him, dropping the hem of her skirt as she goes until the only bare part of her is her pretty feet, which is the last thing Sander finds to stare at. She sits next to him on the rough log. Sander wishes he could find a way to make it smoother for her.

"I get it," she says. "You're not supposed to enjoy yourself or something. But I don't understand why."

"God wants other things for me," he says.

"You can't have both?"

"I don't know," he says, while inside his mind he searches frantically for God to guide him. Even the name of God sounds like a fraud to him, a lie he's telling himself.

"I'm really asking," Clara says. "I want the things you want. I want to feel like a whole person, you know? Just at peace with things. But then I'm, like, there's nothing wrong with pleasure. I'm in the water and it's clean water, you know? I don't see what's wrong with it."

"I don't want to."

"That doesn't matter. It's time to go."

He takes the scarf from her hair, not quite roughly, grips her arm and pulls her to her feet. Sander needs to rescue her, Sander needs to help.

Instead it's his mother who walks over to them.

"Let the girl stay," Sander's mother says. "For the sake of her soul."

The father laughs the same loud cawing laugh as his daughter. The same. Everything is being taken from Sander.

"Y'all sound crazy as a shithouse mouse," the father says. "Two years, when she turns eighteen, she can believe whatever bullshit she wants to. But for now I have to take care of her. Steer her in the right direction. Come on, honey."

He keeps his grip on her arm, up by the shoulder, and pushes her toward the door. Clara looks back in a kind of panic, seeks out Sander's face, implores him. But he sits rooted to his chair, suddenly heavy. This is the last he will ever see of her. He knows it and still cannot move. Then she's gone, and an electric hush falls over the room. Nobody says anything.

A week later, they drive by Clara's house on the way to a different neighborhood and see the windows empty and open. Nobody lives there now. Sander feels it as just one more thing. One more nothing. None of this matters. Everything that matters to him is gone. His mother pulls to a stop a few blocks farther on, and Sander takes the big valise of pamphlets, walks behind her. The sun shines down on his black suit. Still eight weeks of summer left.

JAI CHAKRABARTI

SHORT STORIES® 2017

Selected from
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by MEG WOLITZER
with HEIDI PITLOR

With an Introduction by Meg Wolitzer



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