
Last Call for Credence

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I

I AWOKE TO A SUDDEN BURST of fiery red light from beyond the horizon. At first I thought it might have been an explosion, but upon arriving at the window I found that it was the sun that was responsible for the lurid brilliance. The riots and the protests from the night before had left a thick radiance of smoke atop the town. It was pink now from the haze of the freak sun that gazed upon the morning with a solemn sovereignty. As I recall, it was the dawn of a Saturday morning in the city of Credence.

Having had no place to go, I shut the blinds to stifle the obnoxious variation of sunlight. I lay back in bed and stared at my pregnant wife, Carrie, who was angelically silent and still. The faintest hint of pink light lit her face in such away that the light was not obtrusive anymore.

Carrie woke me just as I was reentering my dreams from the evening before. I could feel her cold tremble and knew immediately that something was not right.

“Wake up, Willie,” she said to me. “Please wake up.”

“I’m afraid I can’t,” I told her, “it’s my day off and I don’t plan on getting out of bed for anybody. As a matter of fact, you can steam me because I’m going to be a vegetable — all fuckin’ day.”

“Quit fucking around. There’s some crazy shit going on outside.”

Her fear began to frustrate me. I took her hand and dignified her apprehension with a question.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Listen,” she said.

I stared at the ceiling silently and waited for something out of the ordinary to catch my attention. First there was nothing, only silence.

“You’re just having a pregnant delirium or something. Go back to sleep.”

“Listen.”

I focused my attention once again on the silence. After a moment, I began to hear the static of something far off in the distance — outside the house. It began to grow louder. It was deep and consistent.

“Thunder,” I told her. “They were calling for scattered storms today.”

“That isn’t thunder,” she said. We were silent once again. The low rumble continued to grow until it became quite clear what we were hearing.

“They sound horrified,” I whispered. “What’s going on?”

She walked slowly around the edges of our room. She kept one ear close to the wall, monitoring the alien clamor that had seized our attention. Finally her eyes shifted from the wall to me. They were wide as though she had just seen a ghost.

“Where is it coming from?” I asked.

“Everywhere,” she said.

II

There was a knock on the door a few hours later. I opened it to an unearthly blast of dry heat. It was as though the neighborhood had been placed in a giant oven. There in the cataclysmic weather stood an old friend of mine, Ray. We had grown up together since the sandbox. Back in the day, we ran the old neighborhood. Until that Saturday, he and I still lived right around the corner from each other.

I welcomed him inside and we sat down in the living room. Carrie greeted him and went into the kitchen to make a pitcher of her Bad Ass Long Island Iced Tea. She returned and sat a pitcher, two glasses, and a tall Irish cream liqueur and milk, for her and the baby, down on the table. We sat there silently and drank, each of us engulfed in our own complications of reverences and anticipations.

“Did you catch the Pistons game the other night?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

“Yeah, it’s turning into the ’04 season all over again,” Ray said. “I don’t care what the mascot calls you: you don’t pull out your cattle prod and shock his ass in the middle of the second half of the game. It seems like you can’t say shit anymore without starting a damn war. And now I hear they’re suspending the player who did it.”

“I had a c-note riding on them,” I said.

“You said you weren’t going to fucking gamble anymore, Willie,” Carrie said to me. “What the hell goes through your head anymore?”

“Don’t give me that shit. Look around, baby — it doesn’t fuckin’ matter.” “Excuse me, prick,” she mumbled as she stood up. She took the empty pitcher into the kitchen to make a second round of booze.

“Bitch,” I called after her.

“So what do you make of all this, man?” Ray asked me as he threw back the remains of his drink and signaled towards the window.

“I’m not sure what to think,” I said. That was a lie. I was thinking about how I needed a line.

“How about Carrie?” he asked.

My attention deficiency took full affect and I trailed off into my own simple and narcissistic direction of thought. It came to me like a blur.

“Do you remember that time,” I began, “I stole two hundred dollars from my Dad, and I spent it all on cocaine? I was pretty bad into it for a little while back then — you saw me, man. It’s pretty unfortunate that I had to pick such an expensive habit. I should have just taken up tennis or something, like a normal person — you know — like a *good* person.”

“Did you ever get the chance to pay him back?” Ray asked.

“No. Maybe. I don’t know. Fuck them.”

“It seems like I remember you getting along with them?” Ray asked.

“I wish I remembered that, but I don’t.”

I felt Carrie place her hand on my shoulder.

“Looks like I’m just in time with round two,” she said as she placed the pitcher on the coffee table.

We sat there in reminiscence for a couple of hours. I always felt good after having a conversation with Ray. He had a pastoral quality that you don’t often find in human beings anymore.

After cutting up for so long, we had all grown tired. Ray and I were a little drunk and Carrie was having some of her morning sickness. I figured neither one of us wanted to sit around and listen to her puke all day so I decided it would be best if we left the house for a while. Ray said that we should go outside watch all the action taking place out in the streets, so we left the house and I walked him home.

The skies were the color of open flesh, the sun still as fiery and untamed as a rabid phoenix. The impending thunderstorms had moved in, and there were great entanglements of electric lightning that spread across the sky like a giant shrimp net. Excited people ran hysterically in the streets. Some cried. Some laughed madly. There were maniacs whaling around violently, scared and angry. I saw two of them shot down where they stood.

“Look at all the burning houses,” I said to Ray as we passed a row of them. The flames were tall, as though they might have originated from the sky rather than the ground. The fire was spreading along all of the white picket fences, creating a barrier inferno that moved from house to house.

“Yeah, I see,” said Ray. “It is going to be a long day. What do you plan to do after this?”

I thought about it for a moment. I hadn’t considered all of the many things that I wanted to do before the day was over.

“I don’t know,” I told him. “I might visit some friends. I wouldn’t mind having one more Philly cheese steak from Giglucci’s. I don’t know.”

“Are you scared?” he asked me.

“I don’t know,” I told him. “Are you?”

“Fear suppresses us. I gave it up a long time ago.”

“Funny,” I said. “That’s exactly how I felt about the coke.”

We arrived in front of his house. It seemed as though it were the only one in the area that wasn’t engulfed in flames. I suppose it was fortunate that Ray had never built a fence like all the others.

“Well I guess this is it then, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Don’t be so sure. After all, you don’t know. Remember?”

“So true,” I said. I gave him a hug goodbye. Ray was the coolest motherfucker that I had ever known. You would think that with age it would be easier saying goodbye to friends, but I don’t think that it ever does.

“Take care of yourself, man,” I said.

“You do the same,” he told me as he turned to enter his house.

With that, I turned around and walked back into the street. My thoughts were broken by one last call from him.

“Hey, Willie,” Ray hollered from the porch.

I turned around.

“Try to go home to your wife!” he told me.

III

It has been said that man views nature, women, and God all in the same regard. I can understand this in relation to the truism that we indulge almost pleasurably in disobeying these representations of morality. We do, despite sincere perceptions of right and wrong, have tendencies to be litterers, adulterers, and blasphemers. We can't help it, however. The unruly nature of deviance is so much fun.

Upon leaving Ray's house, I had originally planned to just walk home. I couldn't stop thinking about things: the baby, Carrie, Althea, Ray and his logical concepts. What did everything mean and, more importantly, what would it all mean tomorrow?

As I was pondering all these things, I walked right passed the street that led to my house. I continued walking downhill, out of the neighborhood and towards the city. Going downhill on Run Street gave quite a view of downtown Credence. I had thought the neighborhood was sabotaged; however, when I saw the city, I could not believe my eyes. There were entire buildings on fire. Great trails of smoke ascended toward the heavens. The crazies were crazier in the city too. Thugs and addicts were robbing people at gunpoint. Some were even killing for sport. The Credence Police Department was far too outnumbered to do anything productive. What would it have mattered anyway?

I found myself at the bottom of the hill facing a house that I had been to far too many times. It was an old house; you could see the water damage from any angle. Thick willow trees surrounded it; their long leaves blew severely tranquil in the wry winds. There was no picket fence around this house either. Anyone was welcome; often times they never wanted to leave.

I walked up the pathway to the front porch and knocked on the rusty screen door. A beautiful, scantily dressed woman answered it. Her skin was the color of caramel, her hair black like midnight. Then there were her big, radiant blue-green eyes. They were gypsy eyes.

“Hello, Althea,” I said to her.

“Hello, Will,” she said to me.

She welcomed me inside. The house was old and filled with relics from another time. She had inherited it from her grandmother years ago, never changing any of the furniture. It was like stepping into a time capsule from the nineteen-eighties. I sat down on the dusty brown ragged couch and Althea poured me a neat bourbon from a glass vase she had sitting by the front door.

“How have you been?” she asked, standing over me, next to the couch. Her eyes stared passed me, toward and out of the window.

“Not any better than anyone else,” I told her, sipping my bourbon. “Yourself?”

She smiled. “You know,” she began, “when the world flounders around in its finale, everybody forgets their whore.”

“Althea,” I told her, “you’d be surprised. I’ve tried to forget you; it isn’t easy.”

“Thanks,” she said dryly, her eyes still melting the glass panes of the window.

“You’re not a bad woman,” I told her. “It’s almost ironic — you are the best woman, the only woman. You are an angel.”

“How is that ironic? Because I’m a whore?” she asked, unattached.

“Well, yeah,” I said honestly.

“I guess that is ironic, isn’t it?” she said, laughing a little. I hadn’t heard anybody laugh all day long. Of course she would have been the first. I smiled back at her.

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“Tell me, Will,” she said much later, wrapped up in her ivory sheets like a fleshy taco. “What do you regret the most?”

“I wouldn’t know where to start,” I told her. “Maybe not being a better husband. Maybe just being a husband. Maybe the baby... maybe you.”

She stared at the ground and nodded her head, the left side of her mouth curved upward a little into a pseudo smile.

“How about you?” I asked. “What do you regret?”

She began to pace around the room, those gypsy eyes deep in thought. “Well,” she began, “I guess I wish I would have stuck with cheerleading.”

I laughed now.

“I couldn’t see you with the pom-poms and what not,” I told her, “but I guess, in your own way, what you do is kind of like cheerleading.”

We both laughed. She sat down on the couch and laid her feet on my lap.

“You’re so funny, Will,” she said. “Why couldn’t I have just found a man like you to take care of me? I could have had the little ranch house in the ‘burbs, a little mini-van, hell, maybe even a little baby.”

“Someone has to do what you do,” I told her. “All the men in town would go crazy if you weren’t around to take care of us.”

She massaged my groin with the backside of her hand. “Why me?” she asked with the most vulnerable sincerity that I had ever heard in her tempting little voice.

“I don’t know. Perhaps you are a martyr.”

She smiled and smacked my cheek playfully a few times.

“I like that,” she said. “A martyr...”

We sat there in silence for a few minutes. I suppose she still thought about her newly realized title of a martyr. I pondered the choices I felt I had to make in these desperate hours.

Was I a fool? I decided I might be, but I’d rather die a fool than a prisoner. I had no desire to be a martyr.

“Althea,” I began, “maybe I could stay here with you today...”

She stood up from the couch and walked towards the door. She lifted the bourbon and drank it straight from the vase.

“I think you should leave,” she said. “You are a husband — a father. You don’t belong here. This place is for the wicked. Get out of here and save yourself.”

“Althea,” I yelled as I stood up in a furious confusion. “How could you say that?”

“I’m not martyr,” she said relentlessly. “I’m a whore.”

I finished my drink and walked from the bedroom toward the front door. She held it open for me. I stopped in front of her to try to change her mind. She looked out of the door in the direction that she wanted me to go. I turned to kiss her and she turned away as I walked out of the house. I stopped and turned around to pay her and say one last farewell.

“Althea,” I said as she threw my own money at me and shut the screen door in my face. I was left standing alone on her front porch.

“You’re my favorite whore,” I whispered.

IV

Ever since I was a child, I remember going to Giglucci’s Italian for practically every meal. When I was growing up in the city Theodore Giglucci lived next door to me. He would always bring food to my family. My father, being a mechanic, would always work on Mr. Giglucci’s Cadillac for him. It was sort of a trade.

Mr. Giglucci was a very kind man. He had his temper, of course, but overall he was a fair and brilliant man. He could have done a lot more in his life than open a restaurant, but that was all he wanted and that was all he ever did. His wife died when I was a child and he never remarried. The neighborhood kids were all like his children and I’m not sure if he ever loved again. Perhaps he visited Althea or one of the other community women in town, but I doubt it.

I was already near the metropolitan area after leaving Althea’s, so I decided that I would stop in at Giglucci’s for lunch. I figured it might be a long shot, but it would be like Mr. Giglucci to show up for work even on a day like this one.

I entered the restaurant around four o’clock. Things had started to simmer down outside in the streets; I assume it was this way because people had begun to realize that looting was such a waste of time in the denouement of things.

As I had suspected, Mr. Giglucci was at the restaurant when I came in. He sat there at one of the booths by the window in the dark. I had never seen him smoke before, but the only things I saw near him were a pack of cigarettes, an ashtray, and a bottle of Jack Daniels.

“If it isn’t little William Fisher,” he said to me, still facing the window.

“How are you, Mr. Giglucci?” I asked.

“I’ve been better; I’ve been worse,” he told me.

“I hear that,” I said.

I came in from the doorway and looked around the restaurant. I had not been here in many years, yet it did not seem to have changed at all. The walls were dark green with artifact pictures from the old neighborhood hanging up all around the room. The booths were red vinyl, and the tablecloths were red and white checkered. He sat in front of the only light source in the room: a tall picture window. I took a seat across from him.

“I was hoping you might stop by,” he said to me. “I haven’t had anybody to cook for all day long.”

“You know me,” I said. “I can’t go too many days without one of those Philly cheese steaks.”

“Seems like I haven’t seen you in here in ages,” he said. “I thought maybe you had run off or gotten arrested again.”

“No,” I began, “those days are all over with. I’m married now.”

“No kidding!” he said excitedly. “To who?”

“Her name is Carrie. She’s from Georgia and she’s pregnant.”

“Oh goodness,” Mr. Giglucci said. “You’re quite the man now, aren’t you?”

“I guess I am,” I replied.

“You’ve got it all!” he exclaimed.

“I guess I do,” I said.

We told a few jokes, and made a little more small talk. We walked into the kitchen where he turned on the grill. He went into the freezer to retrieve some steak, cheese, peppers, onions, and bread. Within a moment he was done. I had one of those sandwiches I hadn’t eaten in so long. We went back into the front of the house to sit down and eat. The room was still dark.

“This is damn good,” I told him with my mouth full.

“You want another one?” he asked.

“Nah,” I told him. “I’d better be getting home eventually.”

“So tell me,” he began, “are you happy with this new life of yours?”

I sat there and thought about it for a moment. “I guess so,” I said, finally. “I mean, I love Carrie, and everything, but it all just seems so simple, so plain.”

“Fuck you, William,” Mr. Giglucci said to me, after staring for a moment in disdain. I was thrown by his sudden outpouring of contempt.

“What’s your problem?” I asked him defensively.

“I would have killed for what you have. I spent my whole life trying to raise a family, and it all turned to shit. Ever since Maurine died I haven’t had anybody. You know how long that’s been? Thirty fucking years.”

“I’m sorry...” I began.

“Bullshit!” he exclaimed. “If you were really sorry you’d be home with your little wife, waiting on your little baby. But here you are, and how do you think your wife is?”

“She’s asleep,” I told him.

“Women are not fools,” he told me. “They know. She must know.”

“Listen,” I started, “I’m sorry your wife is dead, but...”

“Don’t start,” he said. “You know how my wife died? It was about ten years after we were married that I felt that I had grown bored with it all — much like you. I went and toured the Far East and met a Thai woman named Lily. Lily was one hell of a woman. She sent me home to my wife sadder, more miserable, and even diseased. My wife died from that disease. It was my philandering that killed her.”

I didn’t know what to say. My hero was conceivably an animal after all.

“I never loved again after her. I never even knew how much I loved her until she was gone. I never sought pleasure from another again. It’s been thirty years, and there was never a day when I didn’t miss her.”

“Oh, no,” I managed to say.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Yes, and it is what you are doing right now. It’s so easy to be damned, William. You must find the will to persevere. You must find God.”

I finished my sandwich.

“I think it’s time you left,” Mr. Giglucci said. “Go home. You’ll do the right thing. We have it in ourselves to execute both vice *and* virtue, not just one or the other. We wouldn’t be human if we were only devout, or only evil. We’re all a little bit of both. Life is somehow trying to regulate all that. We must conquer our urges and bear our crosses silently.”

“You’re right,” I said as I stood up to leave. “You’re a good man, Mr. Giglucci. I only wish that I could be half of the man that you are.”

“I’m no saint,” he said to me, “Nor am I a bastard. I’m just a man, son — just like you. And as Credence falls, William, honestly... I’m so scared I could shit myself.”

V

I stood in front of my home for a long while before entering. I felt naked, somber, and sober. I missed my wife now, and it was as though I was watching myself watching the house. I could see that I was wrong, so wrong. I wondered if Carrie was still inside, yet I could not bring myself to go in and see.

I sat on the porch and watched the sun go down. Brilliant pinks and oranges turned into deadly violets and auburns. Fires had turned into smoke, and the smoke had turned into a hazy obstacle anywhere you turned. There wasn’t any action in the streets anymore. The neighborhood looked like a ghost town; the dead tree limbs shook like rattled skeletons in the smoke.

I put my key into the lock and opened the front door. The house seemed so quiet, so normal — as though it was safe from the impending undoing outside. The windows were open, letting in the smell of smoke that blew through the delicate curtains like wind through a sail.

I put my keys down on the table and unbuttoned my shirt. The night had fallen yet the temperature continued to rise. I walked into the kitchen and made a glass of ice water. Suddenly I heard a cry come from the bedroom.

“Willie,” I heard the little voice say, “Will...”

I entered the bedroom to find Carrie sitting alone, sweaty, and stark naked on the floor next to the bed. Her pregnant body glistened in the heat, and her eyes produced tears that collaborated with the beads of sweat that fell from her brow.

“Willie,” she repeated in that condemning frailty, “Willie, where have you been all day?”

“I’ve been out, baby,” I told her, placating her woes, “but I’m here now.”

“Willie it’s been awful,” she said, “it’s been hot, so fucking hot.”

“Drink this,” I said as I handed her the glass of ice water.

She drank half of the glass and threw the rest on her head and her body. She closed her eyes and reposed in the newfound comfort of the cold.

“Thanks,” she said, her eyes still closed.

“Are you okay?” I asked as I took a seat over her on the neatly made bed.

“I’m not doing so well,” she said. “I haven’t been able to move that much all day. And the heat, Will, baby, the heat is so fucking unbearable.”

“The heat is bad,” I said. “I’ll get you a cold rag.”

I walked into the bathroom and removed a rag from one of the little painted baskets Carrie had made in her spare time. I turned on the faucet and dampened the rag to a cool, comfortable temperature.

“Here you go,” I said to her as I handed her the rag.

“Thanks,” she said again.

“So other than the heat you’re all right?” I asked.

“It’s not just the heat, Willie,” she told me. “There’s something wrong, something inside me. I’m afraid it’s the baby.”

“Oh God,” I said, scared for her, the baby, and myself. I was even more frightened at the fact that there was nothing I could do. The phone lines were dead, and there was no service on my cell phone. I could run for help but it was nearly guaranteed that I could not find it, and I didn’t want to leave her alone.

“Willie,” she said from below, “please lie down next to me.”

I lowered myself from the bed and sat down against the wall. I wrapped my arm around her torso and embraced her naked, sweaty body. It was a cold sweat.

“You feel so cold,” I told her, rubbing her head as she began to cry on my shoulder.

“I’m burning up,” she said to me. “I can’t take it anymore.”

“It’s okay, baby,” I told her as I caressed her head with the backside of my hand.

We sat there on the floor and embraced each other for what seemed like hours. The sun had gone down now, and with the electricity being dead, the only light was that of the red moon that shined over the layer of destruction. I wanted to go search for a lantern, but I could not bring myself to leave Carrie.

She was not doing well at all, and I could feel it. I didn't want to alarm her with worry, though. So I just sat there in silence and held her.

"Will," Carrie cried suddenly from the darkness.

"What is it, baby?" I whispered into her ear.

"Willie, it's coming," she whimpered. I could feel her feet beginning to kick.

"The baby is coming?" I asked in sheer fucking shock. "The baby is coming!"

I stood up suddenly and Carrie's head fell from my arm and hit the wall.

"Willie! It's coming!" she cried in helplessness.

I got her another cold rag from the bathroom.

"Just tell me what you need," I said to her. I turned to stroke her head but she grabbed my arm so tightly that I felt compelled to scream myself.

"Will! I can feel it!" she wailed. "Good God Almighty!"

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Turns out it wasn't the baby. It was something far more miraculous than that — something I can hardly describe to you in words. Photographs would not have done it justice. This was no miracle that could be defined, much less confined into something so meager as a sentence or a painting. I could have seen it with my eyes closed.

Carrie sat there in agony on the floor. She began to convulse heavily in the darkness, so much that the floor began to rumble. Before long I realized that it was not Carrie who rumbled the floor, for while pregnant and a bit heavier than she had been previously, she herself could not have created such a thundering rumble.

And then could you believe that the darkness ceased? And what heavenly light there was, from every angle. There was not one certain source of this light; it did not come from one particular direction as we could only fathom. It was like watching a television with shitty reception. Everything in the room had become far too luminous and intense for simple sight.

Within a moment the light ceded and the darkness returned as though the entire experience had never happened. My ears were buzzing as they do after a rock concert or from under a departing airplane. For a moment I felt complete madness, my thoughts having been too overwhelmed for mere sense. And then it occurred to me: Credence had fallen.

And there was Carrie, on the floor in the darkness. She looked so peaceful and serene lying there. She did not move at all. It seemed that her panic had vanished completely. In the absence of light I caught the vague impression of a smile on her face. It was almost nothing at all, but I saw it. Everything was still now as though time had stopped. In the darkness, on that barren last Saturday night, I sat there next to the mortal remains of my wife.

...And I waited.