

The Way I See It

“D^eath should be like losin your grip,” I says. “No different than losin your grip and swingin into one of your windows—only it ain’t a window and you sail right through to the other side.”

There was five of us lined up in a row at O’Malley’s, Healy with his usual pint, McKinney with his fancy scotch and soda, Sweeney suckin down a gin.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph, will you listen to him?” Sweeney says, “from one day to the next gone loopers on us.”

“Go to hell,” I says. Loopers was not a word we used lightly. Mostly we saved it for the women—my woman in her day, God rest her soul, Healy’s woman, whichever woman was goin through the change.

“It’s the pint talkin,” McKinney says.

“Nah,” Healy pipes in. “Too much time in Cambridge. That’s what I think. It’s in the air.”

McKinney spins around to face me. His gut’s gettin bigger by the week and we’re all thinkin if he don’t watch it, he’s headin for a coronary. “So Sutherland,” he drawls. “Whatcha got for us this week?”

I look up at the TV where the Sox look beaten before they start.

2 VENUS IN THE AFTERNOON

“Sorry boys, nothin today.”

“C’mon. Don’t hold out on us. What’s he been up to this week? Any handcuffs? Any fuckin faggots?”

“Dirty minds, all of you,” I says. “Filth.”

“Well,” Healey says, “where the hell do we get it?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say I have much choice, but man, you guys just roll around in it.”



It’s too bad you can’t confess another man’s sins or I would do it, get on my knees in front of Father O’Conner and spill the litany of sins my eyes been forced to see. His hair would go white on me right then and there. I don’t tell him because he might tell me to change jobs, tell me this is how the Lord is puttin temptation in my path, but what does he know really? And anyway, there’s nothin like seein another man’s ugliest secrets to make you understand in your bones what it means—sins of the flesh.

You know, when the girls were little, they used to have this doll house. Not one of those fancy ones that cost a hundred bucks and comes with furniture nicer than what you’ve got in your house, but one that my brother Tim nailed together for them one Christmas. Maggie had sewed curtains for the tiny windows, made furniture for the rooms out of wooden match boxes. And Katie—the one we always had to pull down from her dreamin like a helium balloon—Katie says one day that the rooms weren’t really rooms but worlds. A whole bunch of different worlds smack up against each other, only no one knew it. And the dolls in the bedroom had no idea about the dolls in the kitchen, and that when she looked at all of them workin away in their little cubes of space, she felt like God lookin in on his creation.

Well I sure don't feel like God but when I'm rappellin down from window to window, it's like I'm seein snapshots—movin snapshots of these little worlds—each one deaf, dumb and blind to the other.

Mostly it's the usual stuff but man—when you're just tryin to make an honest livin cleanin the next man's windows—there's a hell of a lot of grime you get to see. Grime that no ammonia is goin to clean up. The underbelly of the workin world—that's what we're given just when we're mindin our own business.

It's high on the tenth floor—the smut room. That's what I call it because what I've seen in there would make any decent man's skin crawl. The truth is this guy makes me sick. You can see that he thinks he's God's gift to humanity, the way he struts around like a cock in a hen yard. Women are his weeknight thing, but it was when they had us do the once over on the Saturday before inspection that I learned that his weekend taste was for boys. The kind you see in those underwear ads, all puffed up and lookin like they just stole their daddy's car.

When I'd come home on those nights, the woman would somehow know he'd been at it. Just as I'd be comin in, she'd always reach across the couch and pick up her rosary, like I was the devil himself walkin through the door.

I made the mistake of confessin one night and one day too many to the boys, told them what I'd seen, the whole kit and caboodle.

“And the desk,” I was sayin, “Always the desk! What is it with these guys? Would he lose it if it were a bed? What in hell's name is wrong with a bed in the privacy of his house for Christ's sake?”

“What if you ratted?” Healy says then. “What if his company knew how he was usin their office? Their furniture for fuck's sake?”

4 VENUS IN THE AFTERNOON

“You should come down to the Wharf,” McKinney says, “Switch to our job. Whole building’s empty.”

Sweeney never says much, but now he says, “You know word is you could have supervisor if you want it. Nobody’s got your seniority and don’t fool yourself, they ain’t gonna keep you up there much longer.”



Okay, so I’m stubborn. Is that such a bad thing? I know I’m pushin things but I don’t want no desk job. Might as well pack me up and ship me off to an old age home where you lose your muscles, and then you lose your mind and then they turn you from side to side till you croak. As it stands now, the muscles ain’t so bad. A few Advil with breakfast and I can mostly ignore the shoulders and back when they start their screechin.

The boss leaves me alone. Tells me soon the union’s gonna put their foot down but since Maggie died, they don’t want to ruffle my feathers. But that might all change after today. Because wouldn’t you know it, just before lunch, a rag gets caught in the belay device and I go and get stuck. The belay jams just as the rest of the guys are leavin for lunch and I’m yellin like a lunatic, tryin to get them to hear me before they’re too far. But they keep on walkin, not hearin a thing. The guys told me years ago to leave the higher jobs for the young kids we were breakin in, but I was stubborn.

The thing is with no obvious way down and me swingin like a hammock, I was scared. It’s funny how even when you think there’s nothin more anchorin you to this life, there it is, like a rumblin in your belly and you wantin more. Even with the woman gone and my nights a long stretch of beer and TV, there I was, wantin more.

And where do you think I was?—right by his office only I look right in and he's gone. The office is empty, just a few things on the desk I don't recognize, and then she comes in, this young girl and I think, no, it can't be and no, it isn't but Jesus, does she look like Bangs and for a moment I feel like it's Bangs who went and died on me and not just the woman. But of course Bangs never died. Just marched out of our lives like a freakin majorette.

It's not necessarily that the girl looked like Bangs, though they each have those freckles that make em look like a kid, but there was somethin else—an expression—a determined little look. Bangs' was harsher—had that hard, don't-get-in-my-way look like I seen in those girl sprinters in the Olympics. In your face, if you know what I mean. I can still see it—Bangs balanced on the top of the stairs ready to take them on a skateboard, Bangs cuttin her hair like a boy's and talkin her way onto the scruffy soccer team the boys had gotten together down the street. Bangs in eighth grade, snippin the front of her hair off so that the old lady and I would stop callin her that.

"Mary Beth," she said as she turned to face us, her bangs gone, the rest of her hair hittin her cheeks like Francis of Assisi.

"Mary Beth," as if we didn't know her name.

In the same tone that a few weeks later, I heard her talkin to her mirror, not knowin I was passin in the hall. "I'm getting out of here," she said to herself and she did. One day at breakfast she laid out brochures to some fancy girls' school she'd already applied to. Marched right out of Southie to this boarding school in Connecticut where she'd got herself a full scholarship, and then to Princeton which she said was pretty fancy as far as colleges went.

"It's in New Jersey," I'd said. "If I know anything, it's that there ain't nothin fancy in New Jersey."



She's ashamed of me and that's the truth, and other than when the woman was dyin, I ain't seen hide or hair of her in over a year.

So there I am, stuck outside the girl's window, blowin this way and that like a plastic bag caught in a tree and she comes right up to the window. I raise my hands as if to say "What can I do?" and the girl smiles the kindest smile and puts a sticky note up to the window that says "just hang in there" and we both laugh and I tell you she was like sunshine after the flood only it was bittersweet kind of, because she was gettin this pain goin in me that I'd thought I was done with.

The next few times I cleaned she would wave to me, but she'd got busy. I could tell from the way they looked at her—the guys comin into her office—like she had their respect an all, and I thought, good for you, girl. That's just great and I thought she deserved it—though I knew nothin about her except that she got me missin Bangs all of a sudden, and Maggie, God rest her soul.



When I drag myself to church, there's one hymn that gets to me. The rest I could sleep through: Father O'Conner's sermons about the lamb and the pasture, about the water and the wine and the blood, and a million and one meanings of the trinity—that stuff's never done nothin for me. And I don't think it needs to be all that complicated. It's us idiots that go and complicate it, lookin to show that we know better than anyone else what things mean. They mean what they mean. Ain't that obvious? I mean there's God, his son and the Holy Ghost. What's the problem with that? Anybody got a problem with that?

But there's this one hymn, it goes "Gather Me, Gather Me Home" that gets me all choked up as if Maggie had planted

those words in my day to make me remember, because, if I'm honest with myself, in our early days that's how she made me feel, and even later after all the spats and bad times, somehow Maggie made things right and without her it's like I'm a boat that's tippin and everything's slidin this way and that.

Sometimes I think she's watchin me. I feel it or else I'm losin some screws, which is what the boys would say. I can't even take out the magazines anymore without feelin guilty, and when Suzanne down at O'Malley's leans over the bar and her breasts are bare down to the very end—and she's got this killer rack—I look away. Can you believe it? When I was younger and the woman was around, I was no such kind of shy. I mean other than that early kettle of fish I got goin over that waitress in Gloucester when the kids were still little, it was only thoughts; never again did anything—too loyal when you get right down to it, and after that one, too scared. And I knew that Maggie had taken me back once but wasn't goin to be a fool for it twice. And the truth is I loved her. If I didn't know it before things blew up with that silly waitress, I knew it right when they did, Maggie packin herself and all the kids and I was like a man watchin his fortune sinkin. So after that, I was good. And in the end, it was only Maggie I wanted to wake up to anyway. Only Maggie I wanted to sit down and eat with, share a laugh with, grow old.

But we didn't get to grow old, did we?

That's mine to do and she left no instructions for that and the kids are crazy busy and I'm gonna go nuts if I don't figure out how to live without her.



Six more months, they're tellin me, and it's a desk job for me, or if I want it, early retirement. In the morning, I hang for a

few minutes before I start, just watchin the birds landin on the rooftops and terraces as if they were the tallest trees in some forest, the world sparklin clean at this height and free from all the sweat and work and also from its prancin, tryin to be this or that. Up here it all just is.

When I rappel down to her window, no, I'm not imaginin it, the girl's pregnant. Looks like she must have been pregnant all along and I never noticed it, cause her belly's popped like an umbrella opening and she's breakin my heart because it's like seein Bangs pregnant, gone all soft and pretty. Thirty-seven now and Bangs and her husband doin their research into god knows what, doin their travelin and thinkin that they can just order a kid when they want, like from one of them freakin catalogues. But go try and tell Bangs anything. Maggie tried before she died and just barely had the time, the diagnosis made so late and all and Bangs not knowin for the first few weeks we knew.

We was wonderin why she never turned up and it was only later that Katie, of all people, says, "you sure she knows?" and Maggie has me callin the rest of them—Joey, Kevin, Chrissie and the twins. "You're kiddin," I says, my blood rushin to my head and poundin there like a fuckin drum. "No one's called Bangs? What the fuck is wrong with this family?"

When Bangs finally arrived, you could almost see her skin crawl around all the crosses and rosaries Maggie had around the bed.

"Hi, Ma," she said, and it was so strange. There was no Southie left in her at all. Just Maggie's face in this short, cute haircut like that actress that went and had that orgasm in the middle of a restaurant—but it's like she came from somewhere else entirely.

