



## Fads of the Fated Faithful

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With dilated eyes Sheila recalled the LSD joke about huge pupils told her by the ophthalmologist. It was the reason she was riding the Greyhound bus; driving after dilation was cautioned against and she liked to abide by doctor advice. She carried with her an overnight bag (stowed on the seat beside her), an unused satellite phone, and a disposable platter stacked pyramid-style with rhubarb newtons, protected in saran wrap.

After a moment she thought up a “shortbus” analogy, with her on the school bus alongside special ed students, the healthier kids getting rides from friends or driving themselves. Dare she look again at the faces of her co-passengers? It was then that she realized the two college coeds who’d been in the seats in front of her had departed the bus in Sticksville, leaving behind a purse and a flip-phone.

Sheila Dorsey waited a moment before slinking an arm into the seat directly in front of her to grab for the discarded purse. She struggles a moment; her fist was too big for the space between the coeds’ seats; as she twisted her wrist her whole body contorted, the heirloom necklace of gold and ruby tapping at her breast. Success did net her the prize she was after: a fold of tinfoil tucked into the coin pouch of a cheap, otherwise empty, wallet. The purse would go directly now to the bus driver. (She was saving the coed possible trouble with the police, right? by keeping the likely blotter for herself? She could take the risk of running mule.) Before she took three steps Sheila snatched up the flip-phone from the seat in front of her then slipped it inside the purse and zipped it shut.

“Driver?” Sheila had to grab the handrail behind the driver to keep on her feet as the driver plowed over potholes galore. “Sir, this purse was left on the seat in front of me by those two college coeds who got off the bus in Sticksville? I’d like to leave the purse with you for safekeeping.”

Sheila made it back to her seat and tried again to balance the platter of newtons on her overnight bag. The meeting of TransForm would be held at a unitarian church near the Greyhound bus station in Capitol City, and she would then ride with her son

to his apartment and spend the night in his den on a hide-away. She would depart late next morning for home. Short and sweet, was he idea for the visit.

At the station Sheila felt stood up and rearranged her brain to believe her son had forgotten or been delayed, despite the fact that they'd agreed she'd take a taxi from the station to the meeting. Yet the station had no available taxis. She wished she'd kept that coed's flip-phone to call 4-1-1 and find a taxi. What if she got stranded at the bus station all night? Was it even open past midnight? Nope. Where would she stay if she never made it to meet her son? Then: a taxi pulled up, a chance chariot. She realized she could've walked from the station, once the driver pulled up to the church. Yet she had that bulky overnight bag and the newton platter! Better to arrive in style, thought Sheila as she entered the meeting hall.

First, Sheila checked her coat and overnight bag. At the refreshment table, she removed saran wrap from her treats then found a napkin and placed a newton as an ad in her lifted left palm, smiling as she walked through the small islands of opened collapsible chairs. Someone quickly offered to set her up with a seat, and she waited patiently while munching on that newton, smiling even as she chewed. She felt liberal and liberated, by associating with all of these marginal, ostentatious, strange and conflicted people. One member set up a chair right in front of Sheila, blocking her view of the lectern. On the yellow jacket slung over the back of the chair were the letters: est f iends fo ev r.

As the space filled, Sheila grew wary and weary as she acclimated to transculture. More than once she stifled an instinct to tell the New Men and New Women to mingle, form bonds—it was like dining with blind dates who have broccoli or spinach in their teeth; should something be said, or will they take it the wrong way? They uniformly sat anyway in stubborn homogenized clumps sharing space accented with defiance and the chemical whiff of synthetic hormones. This meeting of TransForm had divvied itself into a battlefield; the “men” (gender reassigned or in-progress) sat in the first few rows or dead-center, while the “women” (in-progress) grouped themselves mostly in the rear-sides or in the middle chairs.

The falabella was docile enough to evade her notice for a full ten minutes while she dabbled with her satellite phone. (Who should she call? To call Aaron would make her a nagging dependent.) It stood motionless except for blinking eyes at the end of the newly formed aisle in a row behind her field of vision. A circus, this place, was what Sheila thought next. She refused to survey or stare and thus noticed only a fraction of what was occurring at the suddenly stuffed meeting... But what she saw was enough. She wondered if Aaron could see any of this. By the time the mic was tested she'd done a 180-degree spin in her thinking about tranzies. Yes, she did admit to some anger at her son for choosing such an off-the-wall lifestyle, one of such deceit. Yet it was a complete outrage, this shucking of the old for a competition of the new. As passersby in her row mentioned Joseph Campbell's *Care of the Soul*, Sheila wondered if anyone at all in this meeting possessed a soul to care for... if probably too much primping and tucking and padding and exaggerating or diminishing body parts via plastic surgery were antithetical to the soul. Then would be the entire group as godless as hordes of spayed and neutered pets hell-bent on nihilism.

A weirdo in clown pants handed Sheila an event card advertising a deejay at an open dance being thrown by a club called TransSpecies put her thoughts to: Aaron's brother getting mangled by a turtle. It was sad and humorous. Where was Aaron? She wanted to tell him about his brother. The pre-meeting din died down to a lull.

Emcee: "Good night, happy Sabbath, welcome to this the 50th meeting of TransForm. Tonight I want to open with a question: Do you believe in fate, or do you believe life is what we make of it? I am being rhetorical—no, no, keep your answers to yourselves. Ponder the question throughout the meeting. Is everybody feeling good? Good!"

"Conflate!" shouted one enthusiast.

"Conflate," agreed another.

"I'm pleased to announce our upcoming lecture series, right here in this church every Tuesday night—freak night!—starting in January... Number one: name changes (feminizing male names, bizarre names, gender-neutral names, surnames); number two: age of consent (hormones, plastic surgery and adult sex for the transsexual minor); number three: the fistula (what it is, what you can do about it); number four: gaslighting (is someone covertly trying to make you insane because you're trans-identified?); number five: Shakespeare: gender discrimination and pedophilia (as a teaser I'm going to read you this passage from The Folger Shakespeare Library: 'In Shakespeare's England the roles of women were played by boys. Some of these boys grew up to take male roles in their maturity. There were no women in the acting companies, only in the audience. It had not always been so in the history of the English stage. There are records of women on English stages in the 13th and 14th centuries, 200 years before Shakespeare's plays were performed.');

number six: body art (a plastic identity, tattoos and piercings); number seven: technology (should I run from or embrace the dating pool online? should I freeze my eggs or sperm pre-op?); number eight: the bathroom issue (enough said); number nine: gender and athletics (gender-exclusive community sports teams, gyms); number ten: Disney and its taboos (is 'The Little Mermaid' about transexualism? is 'Pinocchio' about pederasty? is 'Fantasia' about tripping on LSD?)... oh, I could go on, but I can see some of you nodding off already out there. Please come and bring a monetary donation so we can continue to educate our community and the community at large."

Sheila thought also of the necrophilia angle in *Sleeping Beauty*, then the animal sex implicit in *Beauty and the Beast*. The *Little Mermaid* could logically be about actual trans-species of human-fish, considering the theory of evolution. Yet the transexual metaphor remained plausible enough, she supposed. All of Disney was a shallow waste of time, she'd thought since her own childhood, as she remembered those films and picture books. That Aaron grew up wanting to play princess every day was scar tissue, healed as well as it could be over the decades. For awhile, she'd wanted to blow up the world. Next Sheila wondered if TransForm had ever received a bomb threat.

The emcee continued, "In the local news: two of our members were arrested for panhandling for gender-reassignment money. They were 'flying a sign,' as the hobos say, which means they wrote their wishes on cardboard and held them up to passing

motorists out at the truckstop near Sticksville. They were fined and let go on their own recognizances.”

Where was Aaron? Sheila wondered if he'd been arrested. She'd never bail out a daughter from jail, but her sons she would, knock on wood. They were such troubled boys, half-men, the younger turning his blank-half into a fax of a female.

Where would she sleep tonight? Some random hotel without a reservation, like a vagrant who found a hundred dollars in his palm or on the ground? Maybe the Belling campus would have a three-star hotel posing as a four-star hotel; spending the night in that kind of space might feel luxurious.

Someone with platinum spiked hair and a vague resemblance to Aaron Dorsey's height and weight drew a chair up to the aisle nearest Sheila, opposite the therapy pony. The person had white gauze and tape over nose-bridge. That's Aaron, the mother told herself calmly; that's my son. It appeared Aaron had finally gotten that rhinoplasty despite vowing to the contrary. That made 17 surgeries Sheila knew about. She could still see her baby in some of his mannerisms yet the face was completely resculpted, as were other areas of the body. He wore the permanent mask of a woman. Sheila for the first time considered calling him by his legal name, Erin. She noticed a few tranzies digging for then putting on nose-job tape in sympathy of her son's latest operation.

“Finally, we need to give our congratulations to a prize-winning writer among us,” said the emcee. A few attendees clapped. “Izzy? Would you come up and read to us a passage from your memoir? It's destined to become a new classic. The author, everyone, is known simply as Izzy, like Cher or Sonny or Chaz. Ze's here on a working vacation, definitely maybe. There ze is! Let's give zem some applause.”

Izzy stepped up to the mic. “Hello. I would read to you but I didn't bring a copy of the memoir-slash-creative-nonfiction-essay-poetry.”

“What prize did you win?”

“I have a copy in my purse, yes I do! Hold on, it's in my other bag.”

“What's your book about? Does it have a plot?”

“Hold on, it must be in my car.”

“How did you get published?”

“Do you have an agent?”

“I could run outside and get it.”

“Blizzard start yet?”

“A blizzard! How much snow is coming?”

“Could be one-inch to three-four-five, six feet, in these parts!”

“You can read from this copy, Izzy.”

An entertainer, Izzy put on small large plastic glasses and said: “This portion is from the middle of the book, when my repressed memories start to surface. I wrote it in third person as a story I once showed to my shrink, who asked me only one question: ‘How do you feel about caterpillars this week?’ You’ll get the punchline after I finish reading to you. But it is actually about alcoholism and child molestation, two very trendy topics, which is how I won my first literary award. But I hope that the themes are evident! Here goes:”

### A Julep Remedy

Vernon probed, “What lost room?”

Glancing about the noisy café, the young woman took a perfunctory sip of lemon-flavored water. She deliberated over whether to explain that the lost room occasionally washed over her and through her, made her frigid, caused her to imagine herself trapped on a surreal red-washed stage wearing a ridiculous vaudeville fright wig.

“Dawn,” her date continued, “you’re talking gibberish.”

And she knew she was. Yet somewhere between the *déjà vu* that occurred whenever she uttered the words “the lost room,” and the snippet of nightmare trying to force itself into her current thoughts, she knew one existed. The hidden room, painted dark red, wickedly shape-shifting—and she’d screamed bloody murder in it. Past lives might be influencing her, she always conceded. Yet a cavernous internal electricity splayed the hairs on the back of her neck and she wrapped her thoughts around the lost room, pushing for a recollection.

“The lost room is somewhere in the back of my head,” she robotically said, then regretted it. Like the irony-laced Dandy Warhols’ song, “Solid,” she worried that she wasn’t, that she had a door in the back of her skull too, and something supernatural had shoved the lost room inside her—mere mention of the place embellished the lost room with additional power.

“Are you seeing somebody?” Vern asked, ironic and quizzical as always. “A shrink, I mean.”

Dawn searched her date’s face, looking for genuine concern below those facetiously etched laugh lines taking hold between his nose and cheeks; he’d have unattractive jowls someday, she realized with dark-side melancholy. Their future seemed iffy at best. “No,” she told him.

When their server asked, the young woman ordered a julep extra sweet then stuck a smile on her face and waited. Despite the background chitchat, which persisted in echoing selected phrases of her thoughts—somebody was scolding a stranger for wearing too much red, one person apparently adored the Dandy Warhols’ oldest video, and at the next table their server stressed the significance of any couple’s sixth date—she managed to remain calm enough to refrain from making bizarre facial expressions or worse, verbal outbursts.

Within moments Vernon, who was suddenly mock-deconstructing the war using vague historical footnotes, sat eclipsed beneath the mindless prattle of strangers: “His lost room,” “the lost room,” “your room, the one that’s lost,” “her room, it’s gone missing” tracked round the café, reminded her of the circular amusement park ride she once climbed into with her fifth grade teacher as chaperone-with-stink-breath, a ride where a shifty serpentine hood arbitrarily enclosed then displayed its passengers—yes! She stopped her thoughts.

“Vern,” she interrupted, wide-eyed. “I’ve found the room.”

With a bemused lip-curl, the man looked left, then right. “It’s here?”

“In a meta-sense, yes,” Dawn replied. She ignored a murky internal tugging. “It’s a memory. But I’m scared to look.”

“Can’t do it for you,” he said, eyeing her again as if she were some sort of specimen.

Even before the server stumbled to stain her pristine culottes with julep, Dawn’s mind balked at the sugar-coated version. Bleached towels and cheap apologies fell in slow-motion as the woman recalled the many white ribbons her mother liked to braid into her hair, to keep her looking young despite that her body was developing faster than any other girl in her class that year. She nearly floated away before finding her wits consisted of breathy vapors, on the underside of the icky red hood.

Clapping, whistles, cheers, a few attempts at starting a standing ovation followed. Sheila worried she was unhip, as she failed to understand the passage or what it meant to members of TransForm.

“Conflate!”

“Conflate!”

“Conflate!”

A word of the day, Sheila guessed. What did it mean, join together? Something like that. These poor outcasts, making their slow headway into the mainstream.

The din ceased when the emcee opened an informal discussion forum.

“My big bro, private detective Ian Silly, wants me to see a different therapist before I go any further on my transjourney. Does anyone know of a good one? Maybe you could pass me a card after the meeting? Thanks.”

“I’d like to remind everyone about the TranSpecies dance next month. We hope to see many of you there.”

“This has nothing to do with anything on-topic, but: Is dust really composed of 90% human skin? Um, is it dandruff and eczema fluff?”

“Scaly feet!”

“Dry elbows!”

“Let’s keep it on topic,” said the emcee.

“I’m gathering funds to host Kate Bornstein as guest speaker. The visit could be as early as sometime this spring. Please see me after the meeting if interested in contributing.”

“Who is Kate Bornstein?”

“Famous Ivy League icon of the transgender agenda for acceptance and intellectual discourse, author of *The Opposite Sex is Neither*.”

“Nope, \_\_\_\_\_ wrote that. I should know, I own a copy. Kate Bornstein wrote *Men, Women and the Rest of Us*.”

“Same difference.”

“Kate is also a former Scientologist, an actor, and an activist/theorist who likes Zen Buddhism. As a post-op Kate recognizes that gender is never reassigned and that the polynary of gender identity classifies nearly everyone as transgender to some degree.”

“You are totally misinterpreting Auntie Kate’s work!”

“We are special, unique beings! Unlike the rest of them.”

The emcee formally dismissed the meeting. Much scraping of chairs as people stood or rearranged themselves into cliques. Several tranzies in wheelchairs vied to beat the rush and be first out the door, It was then that Erin approached his mother.

“What bling, Mother! Sheila, dear, what have you got on? You took the plane, you must have. I’m glad you heeded my advice about that bus.”

“Aaron, I thought you were picking me up at the station.”

“Is that what we agreed? I thought I was meeting you here, which I did.”

“Water under the bridge. You look... different.”

Erin grabbed for the bandage, lightly brushed the gauze. “I know, I know, I did my nose. I had to keep everything consistent.”

“Aaron, Aaron, you might be an addict, you know, of cosmetic surgery.”

Erin next suggested her mother open a safe deposit box to store the necklace, as soon as tomorrow: “You shouldn’t bring bling on a bus, Sheila.”

“I’m listening.”

“Better make that a large one, Mother—the largest box they’ve got! I have many valuables to store.” “We can each have a key.”

“And I would pay the box fees, I gather? All right, Aaron. We can go together in the morning.”

The therapy Farabella clomped past, about as loud as Erin in those low-heeled boots, thought Sheila.

“Watch out, watch out!” shrieked the owner of the therapy pony. “Gotta go, gotta go!”

People moved aside, looking convinced the pony and the owner might both be ready to let loose with a steaming, stinking shit.

“Aaron, your brother—”

“I care nothing about my rapist brother. I care so little about him that I’m never going to press charges for what he did to me, binding me and gagging me and sodomizing me...”

“Are you through?”

“I have no interest in him.”

“Your brother, he... he and his third wife—did you know he got married again?—um, they tried something... kinky, with a snapping turtle. And he lost a testicle. To the bite of a turtle.”

“Mother, what?”

“He had a bedroom boo-boo with a reptile because his wife made him try ‘turtling’... you’ve heard of the practice? It’s all the rage in some circles.”

“Mother, what are you saying?”

“Turtling is when a snapping turtle is placed on the floor and a female lies down naked with her legs spread and a baby carrot in her, um, vagina. It’s popular with sororities these days, I hear.”

“Where do you hear of this stuff?”

“The dark web.”

“Oh, you,” sighed Erin, looking quite unlike what the mirror shows. “Really, Mom, this really did happen? My rapist brother finally got what’s been coming to him? How fabulous. That pervert deserves to lose both his stones. You do know he called me ‘nice girl’ the whole time he was raping me.”

“Aaron, bestiality is no worse than transsexuality, in my opinion. I do think your brother would appreciate an empathetic phone call, even a sympathetic one because you have testicle-loss in common, right, Kiddo? Be sympathetic just like your rhinoplasty friends are with you, Aaron. Erin. Do you have compassion? Your friends seem to.”

“I have no compassion for my brother. Nor for bimbos who bait snapping turtles with their gashes! What do you take me for? Now, about that safe deposit box...”

Sheila gave up, for today anyway, on correcting her son’s personality flaws. She would concentrate instead on renaming him Erin, because as much as she sought Aaron the offspring before her showed only Erin. As stranger shows a mask to a stranger. Then it dawned on her to call him Air-on, maybe Air-in, because she needed to breathe deeply, to avoid losing emotive control.

Then Sheila recalled the good probability of scoring some acid from that coed’s purse. She wondered if Airin might move it for her, since she no longer wanted to take a trip. What would she do with it, if it were in fact nice blotter? She realized after a moment that her ruby and gold necklace did have a secret locket only she knew about. The fold of foil could then be deposited in a safe box.