Americanization

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“AMERICANIZATION a mer i kan i za’ shun The process of gradual assimilation of alien peoples, reshaping their customs and ideals to meet the American requirements of good citizenship, and developing in their consciousness a just appreciation of the land of their adoption.”


Saint Ambrose Cathedral is one of those downtown churches. Downtown people go to downtown churches. Look out for those downtown Catholics, those drunken Knights of Columbus. Bad as the Shriners. He knew.

He said it was built to honor the pope. He said the pope was an evil man, who thought he was the only one God listened to. And his damned misbegotten flock sat over there across the street, praying to the cold stone idols and kissing unnatural things, the air heavy all around with smoke and fire. They can’t buy their way out of it, Dorcas, never.

Then your father took you by your hand and led you away from that place, down High Street to the Municipal Garage, to the car.

You explained, fought for, even apologized for that tumbledown faux pas your family lived with. Your parents, you know, should never have been together.

Your mother said not to worry about “those dirty, dirty sons-o’-birches.” She whispered in your ear; Father allowed no swearing. She pointed out that the phrase “common law marriage” contained the words law and marriage, and that she and Papa were every bit as married as Mr. and Mrs. Finnegan across the way. Everyone knew about him and that Lupe Cuevas, that-b-girl. Didn’t she and Papa raise you up a good, sensible child? And didn’t Papa take you to church every week, even twice on Sundays?

Don’t blame Papa now, she’d say. He had wanted to marry her, she’d say. Even now, after all these years, he’d probably take her down to Brother Owen’s and marry up like two grubby necked teenagers.
But I, she'd say, (and she'd wink at you, as if to entice some long ago beau to fill her dance card) I am a free spirit.

Yet you prayed for the salvation of their souls, these two people not quite one flesh. Every time an evangelist came in to do a healing you prayed for the healing of your clandestine family. You could tell by the furrow between your father's eyes, as he sat there next to you in the pew, that he also was praying. Praying the very same thing.

When you were in college you went to a wedding. I guess you could say you knew the bride. But you didn't really know the groom, some Chem E major from Polk City. She clung to him in the receiving line, thumbs hooked through his belt loops like two horny high school drop-outs at the stock car races. You were in a strange land.

The hesitant irreverence of the service startled you at first. But everyone tried to be a little unacceptable then. You felt fussy, overdressed, maybe the hat was too much... The bride wore daisies in her hair, and they were barefooted, the whole lot of them, groomsmen, bridesmaids, right down to the runny nosed flowergirl, their feet brutal and black from the tile of the fellowship hall floor.

You sat outside on the parking lot with one of the groomsmen. He wore a top hat and overalls. Called himself Pan, "the god of the woods, the fields, the fuck-hungry shepherd." There were rainbows in his beard. You two discussed the craziness of it all, invoking this maybe-god. You drank a bottle of champagne without glasses. You kissed each other, full of yourselves and champagne, dizzy, tongue wrestling. You had your Tarot cards with you, proud of them, as if this one quirk made you worthy of membership in the Pepsi generation. His future was pregnant with organic elements, until you turned over The Lovers and found them reversed. A card upside down is an ominous thing, and you were terrified as the rice sifted silently down around you.

Badmouthing the Roman Catholics. He called them commandment breakers, pagans, sister bangers. Your father said they even made that streetwalker Mary Magdaline a saint. Leave it up to the Papists, he told you, to seat a whore with the bridal party. Your mother smiled a slow motion smile and poured sweet cream and bourbon in her cup. They say you just get yourself a piece of one of them saints and rub it on what ails you, like limiment, she said. Oh what miracles that poor girl must be responsible for! He laughed and pulled her into his lap. She wrapped her legs around him pushed the heels of those ridiculous blue spikes through the back slats of his chair. As you turned to leave he put both hands up her skirt, and her laughter danced behind you all the way down the darkened hallway.

The noon whistle screamed. They began. She opened the window and sent his sock drawer crashing into the hollyhocks. You watched them fight in shimmered admiration. They were good.
They were in the pantry, circling and glaring as if bipedalism was new to them. Your mother wore a sleeveless cotton housedress, her arms bare and round in soft, papery folds, mother's arms. She blew smoke in his face, letting the snood fall from her hair, letting him see who he was dealing with — a free spirit.

What happened? You saw it in his eyes. The trembling hand. He reached for her, took her by the wrist. Softly, slowly he drew it to his lips, pressed his lips to her wrist, his mouth greedy on the arteries and veins, the seamless underside. You got a headache over one eye. He kissed her in the slashing place. The slashing place. You didn't know who won.

After sitting through every feature at the drive-in, you went to the truckstop on 60 for one dollar hash browns with cheese. In the grainy dark there was only you and him and old, hollow-eyed truckers half-wired on white cross and coffee. You talked.

He closed his eyes lazily and bit your neck until you quit talking. You thought it was terribly risky, insane to be conquered that way. Above your booth hung a huge print of a male pheasant in flight.

He put his gum in the awkward little ashtray that folded into the back of the front seat, where popular boys kept Kennedy half dollars and furtive, jealously hoarded Trojans in those birthday present wrappers. He always kissed you as if to consume you, but so gently at first you were captured. Fitting together, warp and woof, your lips hydroplaning in some slick dance. By the time you realized what was happening it was far too late to stop, and you were consumed. A starfish on the beach.

He said he couldn't wait. You didn't want to wait. (Here then) He sank into you, a millstone to the sea. Your breath unraveled in his ear. Still you wondered why making love, why not doing love or being love, which to you seemed more precise.

In the end it didn't matter.

But nothing ends, or maybe they just keep ending and ending and ending. He faded in and out like a Mexican radio station on a clear night. Gradually the outs prevailed and he faded away entirely, leaving an impression flat and sturdy as a WPA mural. And the sad, dull roar of the semis shifted down and down until they were halfway to morning.

LuAnne Civitate's name first appeared on John walls when you and she were still in grammar school. Her reputation often preceded her; she was on the wall at West High two years before she got there. There was nothing very special about her. She didn't know the latest dance steps. She couldn't flirt or tell a good story. She didn't even have the kind of breasts that were in fashion then. In fact, LuAnne didn't have a thing going for her. She was just incredibly, pitifully willing, everyone's favorite dirty joke. She charged a quarter for a blow job, but
going all the way cost a dollar. Once someone told her only a tramp would take money for making nasty with the high school boys.

So LuAnne stopped charging.

"The transformation of an immigrant is shown in the two pictures. The first is from a photograph of a woman and her baby on their arrival in America, the second was taken a few years later. The homemade dress, the scarf for the head, and the coarse shoes have been replaced by modish clothing. The youthful appearance of the woman suggests that she might be the daughter of the immigrant. The contrast emphasizes the miracle that is possible in the Americanization of the alien."

The World Book Encyclopedia, 1935