

Blessed Dedication

Danielle Winterton

Lawrence made the long drive to attend Matthew's christening, even though he and Dan continued to have more disdain than affection for each other, and Lawrence could barely maintain the slightest civility of casual conversation with his sister-in-law. But Matthew was his only nephew, and Dan had called to invite him. Lawrence had considered the matter, and took some time before making a final decision. Rachel would have preferred that Lawrence keep a polite distance. Lawrence would have preferred that his brother's marriage not have taken place. Lawrence thought Rachel was wretched. But he made an effort to temper his internal tone. Rachel was not in an enviable position. Her suffering was etched all over her face, her body exuded tension and barely-suppressed despair. As for Dan, it had been quite some time since they'd seen each other. Dan had a tendency to talk over whomever was in the room, but age had exaggerated this trait to near intolerable proportions. Still, Lawrence missed him, and felt drawn to Matthew for reasons he couldn't quite discern. Matthew was utterly innocent

as a newcomer to a family tension he wouldn't yet understand. He needed allies, he would need role models who displayed a degree of sanity and decorum. So Lawrence decided to tolerate Rachel, and Dan, for a few hours on a late March day that started out cool and smoky damp with light rain and persistent mist.

Dan and Rachel lived in a cul-de-sac in a New York suburb. At their raised ranch, the paint peeled, the bushes were scraggly and unkempt, and the grass was high. Rachel answered the door when Lawrence arrived. She slid a smile in his direction, her head cocked slightly to the right, her eyes fixed on his, her tall lanky body crooked at the neck. Lawrence, she said, glancing over her shoulder at the shag carpeted stairs as though someone had just walked by, but the space was empty, no one was there. I'm surprised you came. Lawrence tried to keep a light detachment to his voice, but his low vocal notes sounded more serious than he intended. Dan invited me, he said, and Matthew – he's my nephew. Yes, well, Rachel said. Welcome. She held the door open. Is this all you brought? she said, reaching for the pastry box and bottle of Sancerre that Lawrence held. No gift?

There was a wrapped playpen from Rachel's baby registry in the backseat of Lawrence's car. The gift was too big to be carried to the door. And this little question from Rachel set him to inwardly seething. It was just this sort of petty mechanizing and summing up that he despised in her, and made him feel tense around her. She calculated at every turn, constantly under-estimated others' generosity, under-appreciated what she was given, and angled for more. Lawrence closed his eyes as he stepped into the foyer. He heard Rachel move up the stairs, and he stood still for a moment, praying only that the event would be pulled off without incident, that Matthew could be christened in a peaceful setting in which the boiling family tensions were perceptible but not auditory, ratcheted well below the polite surface of the social setting. Matthew would have much to contend with in the years to come in relation to Dan and Rachel's parenting, and he would need as much of a divine influence as could be mustered for him.

The christening would be a private home affair with a Unitarian minister to witness and guide the ceremony. Dan and Rachel set up

Matthew's little baby bath pool in their living room, next to a pail of blessed water. Rachel had painted both the bucket and the pool white with silver stars; a nice touch, Lawrence thought. There was no denying Rachel's ability to make disarmingly sweet gestures at important moments. Dan and Rachel asked the guests to gather round the little pool. Lawrence and Dan's parents were too old to travel, but Rachel's family was there en masse—obese father, vacant-looking mother, skanky sister Sue, doofy but harmless brother-in-law Bryan, and their two kids, as well as a few elderly aunts. Lawrence noticed there weren't any of Dan and Rachel's friends present, only family. Did they invite any? Did they have any? Lawrence didn't know. Sue and Bryan were the godparents. Sue wore spike heels and a flimsy, slinky off-the-shoulder red dress. She held Matthew wrapped up in a white gauze, while Bryan stood behind her, wrapped his fat hairy bear arms around her minuscule waist, and rested his bearded chin on her bare shoulder.

For a moment, Lawrence reflected. Dan would have been four when Lawrence was christened. Did he remember it? He had never mentioned it. Dan was a math geek and Lawrence a lit nerd. Driven to introverted activity, as children they shared the intimacy of study in common spaces like the den, the tree house, the backyard, the lake house where they vacationed. As teenagers, they often double-dated. Dan was prone to sad-eyed clingy girls who resented the amount of time he spent studying, and became obsessed with him during and after the breakup process. He'd had one serious girlfriend before Rachel, a robust brunette fixed on being a veterinarian. During the three years they dated, she stalked him with multiple phone calls at inappropriate times, and harassed him with jealous inquiries about who he socialized with while she was in her clinics. In the end, she broke up with him one semester before college graduation. A few months later, there was Rachel, who he met during after-hours at a local bar.

The first year, they all spent summer weekends camped out together on the lake, drinking PBR and boxed wine, listening to dub reggae and early Dylan. Then, Rachel liked to sing along drunkenly, but later she decided Dylan was a masculinist and refused to listen to him. Why don't you have any records of female vocalists,

she'd ask, then turn her back to the sink to scrub the counter. Dan and Lawrence's relationship started to sour about a year after Rachel arrived. Rachel lost weight, lost jobs, engaged in mediocre painting projects that she habitually abandoned before completion, routinely cheated on Dan, and even her hair thinned—Dan said he found clumps of it in the shower. She was constantly being evaluated by health care professionals, a slow monotonous parade of acupuncturists, massages, herbalists, psychics, nutritionists. No one could find any definable ailment, and none of the suggested treatments seemed to lighten her dark moods. Dan was faithful to her, and aloof to Lawrence when he hinted that maybe Dan could have a happier life with someone more career-focused and self-satisfied. Maybe Dan just didn't care; he worked hard at his actuary job. He earned a respectable salary, but Rachel didn't make much as a freelance photographer. They piled credit card debt on top of student loan debt, buried themselves in the related costs of a mortgage with an old fixer-upper. A few years later they were barely treading water financially – Dan busting his ass to stay afloat and maintain their bills. Dan always looked exhausted and Rachel tense, her eyes and mouth strained. At their wedding, a small modest picnic affair under a pavilion on the lake, the circles under Rachel's eyes were frightening. As he stood next to Dan and watched him put a ring on Rachel's finger, Lawrence silently vowed to keep his distance from the couple, and for the last few years he'd been successful, but now Matthew's birth, his presence, had forced Lawrence to rethink his position.

Rachel was wearing white, presumably to match Matthew, a wrinkled cotton ankle-length dress, typically shapeless and formless, a scoop neck, and short sleeves with puffed shoulders. Her hair was pulled back in a long braid, and she walked circles around the group during most of the ceremony, sometimes sprinkling the participants with handfuls of silver dust or rose petals. As a result, a stray rose petal stuck to Bryan's bushy dreadlocks for the duration of the ceremony, and silver dust settled on everyone's shoulders and around their feet. Meanwhile, Dan, in his only threadbare navy blue suit, stood on the other side of the celebrant, legs straight and slightly spread, looking stiff, clutching one wrist. He never

took his eyes off Matthew's face as the celebrant read from the Bible, the story of Jesus approaching John the Baptist. This is my Son, with who I am well pleased. The heavens parted, and a dove descended. Lawrence half-expected Rachel to pull a dove out of a bag and release it, but instead she leaned over to empty the water from the bucket into the pool, and then took her place next to Dan, and grasped his hand. The celebrant took Matthew and knelt by the pool. The celebrant removed Matthew's swath, he was naked underneath, and said something about living water, memories, ordinary, extraordinary. Then the celebrant cradled Matthew's head in his hand and dunked the infant's body below the surface of the water with a loud splash. Matthew screamed, then cried, and swung wildly with both fists. The celebrant moved to hand Matthew to Rachel, who took a step back, and Dan reached for the pink squirming, spraying, drooling infant, instantly drenching the front of his suit, while the guests applauded, and Rachel disappeared into the kitchen.

The skies had cleared and the mist was beginning to burn off a bit. The guests herded into the kitchen to grab Budweiser cans and glasses of wine, then trickled out onto the back patio, where Rachel set up a buffet of cold cuts, potato and macaroni salads, crudités, and lasagna pans propped up over little Bunsen burners. Lawrence didn't want to stay long, but he did want to have a moment with Matthew, and get a word in with Dan. He filled a wine glass with cold sauvignon blanc, emptying a bottle of some mass-produced Australian brand that Rachel put out in a bucket of ice. He thought longingly of his own Sancerre, but Rachel was standing close to the fridge, washing dishes, and he didn't want to risk an interaction. He stood in the doorway for a moment and observed her. She scrubbed at a ceramic blue bowl, slightly harder than necessary, and bit down on her bottom lip. He remembered when she had the firm agile body of a 20-year-old. He remembered, as he often did, one night camping at the lake when he woke in his tent to feel a body on him, warm, supple, sweet-smelling. The fire had long since gone out and a new moon that would begin to wax the next day meant a void-black sky. It had drizzled earlier, and a thick cloud cover obscured any twinkle or glow the stars might have offered them.

He knew it was Rachel even though he couldn't see her, because she was the only female camping out that night. But precisely *because* he couldn't see her, it created the illusion that she was not Rachel, specifically, but anyone, anyone at all. It did not seem very important whether or not he touched this female, though he remembered – a far-away recollection – that his brother was under the impression that he loved her. But what did that mean, after all? Wasn't the universe ultimately confusing and unknowable to humans? For all the chaos that existed in the cosmos, did it really matter if these two particular clumps of molecules, hers and his, bumped against each other for a few minutes? How arbitrary were things like identities and names, names like "Lawrence" and "Rachel"? The utter and complete darkness added to the illusion that both he and Rachel were invisible and meaningless, reduced to shadows with sensory perception, two-dimensional beings able to enjoy for the moment a pure kind of desire with no repercussion in physical reality. Lawrence felt a stab of pleasure deep in his groin; he pulled his hips back to let the sensation slide upwards and inwards, and he thrust against her to feel that particular pleasure once again. The female on top of him sighed. He grabbed a handful of breast, a mouthful of neck. She tensed, and pushed. She pulled her head back, put her mouth on his and made a circular motion with her tongue, then a sucking motion with her lips and mouth. That gesture bolted him back to reality, as it was suddenly distinct to an identifiable individual: Rachel, with her long, deep, iron fingers of need, reaching into his mouth for gratification, attempting to mine his body for something she lacked and was always, relentlessly, searching for. Lawrence shuddered, shook off his disorientation and pieced together this moment: aroused and confused by the erotic shock of waking in the night to find himself caressed in unexpected ways. He grabbed the hair at the back of her neck. He didn't pull, but held her firm to get her attention. She froze, and held her breath as he whispered: You won't understand this, he said. I don't want you. You are ugly to me. Tomorrow you'll tell yourself a story about how I won't let myself be with you because how complicated it is with my brother. It isn't true. Can you hear me saying this? I don't want you. Get off me. Go sleep with Dan. And never touch me again.

Do you want more wine? she said, looking over her shoulder at Dan. Is that why you're standing there like that? She'd evolved from hot biker waif-chic to free-flowing middle-aged airhead in the last several years. The post-partum hippie bore not a trace of her younger self that Lawrence could see. His jaw tightened. Of course, she would speak to him. He'd been staring at her. That was his own fault. Yes, Rachel. Thank you. It's in the fridge. Help yourself. She returned to the dishes. Lawrence saw Dan sit down at the table with Matthew, who was stuffed into a cotton yellow onesie, rewrapped in a yellow fleece blanket, sucking on a pacifier, and falling asleep in Dan's arms. Rachel turned off the faucet, grabbed a Bud can from the cooler on the floor, and went out the back door without looking at either of them. Lawrence scanned the fridge, grabbed a half bottle of Yellow Tail that was already open, and another full bottle, and sat down next to Dan at the table. He upended the bottle into Dan's empty glass first, then filled his own.

Thanks for coming, Dan said, gripping the stem of his wineglass, the wine glinting a garish yellow that was almost neon-tinted lime green in the slant-rays of sun that now fell from the open window by the kitchen table. You want him?

Can I? I don't want to wake him.

You won't; he's been fed and changed. He's exhausted.

Matthew felt hot to the point that it seemed he should be sweaty, but his little face was dry and he looked peaceful with his slit-closed eyes and downy wet combed-over fluff tuft of dark hair. Something squirmed in Lawrence's stomach, some dark squirt of longing or squeal for closeness, for intimacy. Even though he was sleeping, Matthew seemed to trust Lawrence. His warm body melted into Lawrence's stomach. Would Matthew trust anyone into whose arms he was placed? Lawrence thought hard about what he would say to him if he could. Little bud. That was the first thing that came to mind. I'll see you whenever I can. I might not always be able to. Things – people – might get in the way. It won't all make sense to you. You won't understand it. I'm sending you the love. Little bud. Can you feel it? Matthew parted his lips and a slight burble escaped his belly. Lawrence readjusted his pacifier and held him a little tighter.

Dan was sitting hunched forward, both elbows on the table, his forefinger tracing the rim of the glass. His gray eyes looked sad behind his glasses as he spoke. It was important that Matthew got wet, really wet, he said. Not to relive the trauma of his birth. I guess that would be the opposite. Birth is from water into air. Baptism is from air into water. But I've seen baptisms where they just spurt a few drops from a squeeze tube onto the baby's forehead. No one cares. There's no change. Not that God equals water, or even trauma. Still, there should be a shock. There's something wrong, isn't there, about seeing a baby thrust in such a vulnerable position? I flinched. I couldn't wrap him up in a blanket quick enough. I thought Rachel would take him. I looked for her, and she wasn't there.

Did you know Rachel had a homebirth? You were in Paris then, on a writing assignment, when Matthew was born. I was nervous about it, I protested. I wanted to take her to the hospital. She was determined to do it. She said the hospital was too quick to sedate the woman and prematurely pull out ob/gyn technology. The beds are too thin, she said, for me to really get in bed with her and experience the birth as a family unit. What could I do? I wasn't sure, but she pulled it off. The neighbors were warned there might be some noise. As it happened, I didn't get to help her birth him, because she announced early in the day that she went into labor that she didn't want to be touched. She spent a lot of the day walking around with her iPod on, getting into different positions, trying out different rooms. The rest of us waited. She wouldn't let me near her. I could be in the room, I could watch her, but I couldn't touch her. In the end she got into a birthing pool and spurt him out right there, right in the middle of the living room in our ramshackle Yonkers house. Not without some moaning, but not the animal screams I expected. Amazing, right? We brought in all this plastic, but didn't even need it. The pool sopped up the placenta and blood, and Matthew was lifted out. The midwife got his lungs going. I guess Matthew went from water to water to air, really. Dan smiled at his own joke.

Rachel didn't want Matthew to be christened at all. She didn't like the idea of his sin getting washed away, or of him having to petition to enter into the kingdom of God through the power of a cloaked, robed figure. We had a naming ceremony, she said, so it

wasn't as though his entry into the world was completely without ritual. She didn't want him to think he had to be washed clean to be worthy of God, she didn't want his flesh considered to be sullied. He was perfect as he was, she said, from the moment of conception, birth, and beyond. Taking his first breath was just confirmation of his continued perfection. Not sullied, I tried to tell her. At risk. We all have choices. We all face dangers. The water's just a symbol.

Dan took a breath. Then a sip. Then a longer sip. He stared into his glass. Everyone else had left the kitchen and they were alone. I finally convinced her by consenting to a Unitarian ceremony. I was annoyed though, he said. I would have preferred he be baptized Catholic, the way we were. Even though we don't practice, just for the sake of tradition. There was a tightening in my stomach as I watched her set the table for dinner. She was slicing the cucumbers all wrong, in thick, ragged slices too big to put in her mouth. I thought about how, when we're in the car, she fills it up with cigarette smoke and fiddles incessantly with the radio, trying to find a classic rock station. Can you stop with that? Just find something and leave it on. I've tried to teach her to cook with farmer's market vegetables, to pay more attention to what she feeds herself and her son. It's important. Industrial food addictions will be worse for Matthew later on. Obesity is an epidemic, and so on, and so on. She doesn't want to be slave to the kitchen, as she thought her own mother was, spending hours in the kitchen to feed her family. Everyone has to eat, Rachel. It's not an issue of gender. But in her teens, at an art house show in the East Village, she'd seen a French film from the early 60s in which a closeup of a pretty woman in an apron holds up several kitchen tools, naming each one. Spatula. Bowl. Whisk. Spoon. They were the tools of her oppression, Rachel said. In naming them, she both enlarges and reduces them. The film seemed to drive Rachel's too-small concept of the framework of femininity. But she hit something like rage when we talked too much about it. So your answer is to fill your mouth with contaminated garbage to show you're a modern woman, I asked? You couldn't possibly understand, she said. Why don't you just do all the cooking so it's exactly how you like it. Even if I tried it your way, it still wouldn't be good enough for you. Then

she slammed some cupboard doors and threw a few articles of wet laundry around the kitchen. I stood back, watched her, and tried to determine my desire for her. Which is not easy because desire hides in shadows for long periods of time. You think it's gone and then it reappears. You remember what I used to tell you about her when we first met, how crazy she made me. She's always had a long, lithe figure I could get lost in the looking at, the perfect slope to her hips, thighs, calves. Dark areolae, symmetrical pussy, tight enough, you know. She didn't lose any of that during pregnancy. Her skin turned the most miraculous shades of strawberries and cream. She liked being pregnant because she was the de facto center of attention, anywhere she went. I tried not to hassle her too much about what she ate, but we did fight over it. All I could think about was the tiny fragility of the fetus ... she tried to humor me, but I think she still ate junk food behind my back. At least she quit smoking. For the first time, she started liking it doggy-style, I think she felt it protected the baby, but she also said she was getting in touch with her she-wolf side. What can you say to that? Is this too much, Lawrence? We haven't talked this way in a long time, have we. No, he can't hear us. Good point, though, maybe ... Rachel, come get Matthew, will you? Thank you, love muffin. No, I'm just talking to my brother. Yes, we're having a nice time. I'll come outside soon. Well, send them in to say good-bye before they go, if I don't get out there first. There's more potato salad and a plate of cut fruit in the fridge, if you want to put that out.

I'd love some, yes, thank you Lawrence. You know, we haven't had good wine since you first got back from France and brought us some as a gift. We can't really afford even little luxuries anymore. I missed you while you were gone, you know. I know you've kept your distance from Rachel. But she's my wife now. Did she ever hit on you? Is that why you stayed away? It's OK, you can tell me. Well, I'm surprised then. I would have thought for sure at some point, that she would have. You know how she gets guys? She makes them feel that she's doing them a supreme service by letting them touch her body, while at the same time making them feel that they're the only ones who can please her. I don't even try to stop her anymore. What can I do? You know why it doesn't really bother me? She doesn't come

anyway. All that show of mating dance and ritual, and for what? It's not about sexual pleasure. There's something else going on. All those guys getting a turn with her, and her not even coming. It's too sad to be funny, I guess, or maybe too funny to be sad. She likes to perform, to be watched. I don't mind, because I like to watch. Who doesn't? I got her this big freestanding vibrator with a little clit stub at the top for our first anniversary. She would squat over it, let the shaft penetrate her, rub herself against the nub. She can come like that, we realized pretty quickly, as she shuddered and moaned, then collapsed on the bed. It was like the revelation, like we figured it out together. I could watch, but not touch. She was tender taking the vibrator out, she flinched, and had to do it really slow. I was happy for her. Even though she never has come while I'm in her, it kind of made up for it. Almost. But if you wondered, and I know you did, why I didn't leave her, with all the flirting and cheating? I just can't take it seriously. No one else who knows her does either. The problem comes from introducing her to new people. I'm so tired of the routine. They're shocked at first, then they ask me, you don't mind, bro? Really? They don't believe me. Then the questions ... about everything from jealousy to logistics ... where do you go while she's, you know, doing it with someone in your bedroom? Where do you think I go? Into the den, the kitchen or the backyard ... it gets old, Lawrence, explaining it to people over and over again. We've lost friends over it, for sure. But who will watch out for her if I don't? She does have her good points, you know. She's been loyal in other ways. I know what you're thinking, Lawrence. Not even an affair, or a few affairs, could break up this marriage. I just know what she went through, and can't shake off my compassion in favor of self-interest. I don't agonize over it, it's not like it hurts me to think of it, but it's there, a fact. I read that Trungpa Rinpoche likes to say, there is no cure for hot and cold. No cure for the facts of life. That's what I tell myself. You don't even want to know, Lawrence, it's beyond awful. Her father, her neighbor, her uncle, maybe her brother ... it's like the trauma froze her in time, she never evolved beyond the role of willing helpless depository for any male in the room. She's still a sixteen-year-old slut in her psycho-sexuality. I don't know that will ever be any different. But I comfort myself knowing she wants

something different from them than she does from me. She wants to be seen, Lawrence, which is something I try to give her, but she needs more than one set of eyes. No one really sees you when they're fucking you. I understand it, though, from a woman's perspective, at least I think I do. Get naked, lie down, take the gaze, you'd think you were being looked at, at least. But don't we all view each other through all the lenses of all the ones who came before, all the porn we've jerked off to, all the fantasies we've had and continue to have throughout the duration of any sexual act? She hates men, you know that, Lawrence. Her coldness to you, she's like that with everyone. I think it's because she's so dependent on their gaze for existence. So there must be some resentment that goes along with that. Of course, she has problems with women, too, if she perceives them as being in competition with her in any way, even if it's just a fantasy. But she said once that she doesn't know how to raise Matthew, how to teach him to be a man, what a healthy male sexuality would look like. As though I have nothing to do with it. As though I haven't been here the whole time, nurturing her rather unconventional tastes with my presence and companionship. I couldn't tell if she thought that *I* had an unhealthy male sexuality, or just that all males do, for being male ... I wasn't up for a fight, so I didn't ask any questions. She's been pretty good today, though. I thought it best if we just keep this a family affair, not bring any friends or co-workers into it. At least everyone here knows what they're getting into. Thanks for coming, though, seriously. It means a lot.

Your christening? What was I, about five? I remember pictures. Aunt Georgie dressing you, Uncle Ben holding you. We were at the old house, in Highland then, with the plaid wool couches that the Irish setters tore apart, and the bright blue shag carpeting in the playroom. You probably don't remember that, we moved before your first birthday. Mom and Dad were still together then. No, I don't Rachel is nothing like Mom. Mom cheated, yes, but Mom and Dad had some fundamental incompatibility as people. Rachel and I see the world the same way. But now that you mention it, I do remember your dedication service. You were born in the spring and christened in the summer. We had a backyard barbecue, and Mom made a cake for you. I never felt jealous of you, you know.

Mom said she kept waiting for there to be rivalry between us, but I wanted to protect you. I remember your christening gown in a box, the shoes so tiny, the size of shallots. Mom filled a little bag of gold medallions and gave them to me, and I gave one to each guest before the ceremony. The medallion had the likeness of Saint Christopher, Patron Saint of Travel Safety, because Mom said she could tell you were going places, that you were from birth more inquisitive and exploratory than any baby she'd ever seen. I stood at the front of the church with Mom and Dad and Aunt and Uncle, your godparents. You pulled at your bonnet with your fists, chewed on the ribbons during the ceremony, and kicked at the priest when he fully wet your head. He scooped handful after handful over you, and afterward you looked like you'd been hit by a firehose, with little seed pearls of holy water hanging on each eyelash and clinging to each downy strand of hair.

Lawrence swallowed the last sip in his glass. I have to hit the road, he said. Work tomorrow. He pushed his chair away from the table and stood up. I have a playpen in the car for you. Dan was still staring into his wineglass. Lawrence looked out the window. At one end of the yard, Rachel's family members were gathered around the picnic table, listless and blank-eyed. Her mother was asleep in her lawnchair. The kids were in the sandbox, scooping sand into a pail with their hands. Across the lawn, underneath a gnarled scarlet quince in full bloom, Rachel sat in a camp chair, gazing into the sky and breastfeeding Matthew. The front of her dress was pulled down and tucked under her armpits, her long hair draped across the back of the chair, both breasts bared to the sun, melon-swollen, milky, purple-veined, one mauve nipple hidden by a ragged kitchen towel, the other by the infant boy's eager, suckling mouth.

