

James Kwapisz

Bodies Like Scaffolding

Gunther sat at his kitchen table with his elbows perched on the edges as he stared into his coffee. There were bits of grounds stuck to the sides of his cup which he poked at and slid up and out one by one so that he would not drink them. He moved swiftly, for his morning beverage would not stay warm long. When the exposed porcelain was without a spot he dared a sip, but gently, should he stir the inevitable grounds from their bedding at the bottom of the cup. The sound of the screen door slamming shut startled him, disturbing him from his careful venture.

“What’s up, pop?” said Axel, studying his father hunched over the table spitting repeatedly and perusing his cheeks and gums with his tongue.

“Dang apparatus can’t keep the beans out,” Gunther replied. He spat.

“Probably ain’t usin it right. You press it down slow, like I shown you how?”

“Sure ain’t like Lou’s. Never had to worry about no dregs at Lou’s.”

“That’s ‘cause that wasn’t no coffee, that was water. This here’ll make you a decent cup.” Axel held the French press aloft and swirled whatever was left and examined the contents. “You done pressed it down too fast.”

“I pushed it just fine.” Gunther cleared his throat. “I ‘preciate it, Ax, I do, but it’s just junk. Don’t work as it should. Thing is, I prefer to *drink* my coffee.”

“You’ll figure it out, pop.”

“Sure hope so.” He grunted. “Sure hoped Lou’s wouldn’t of been run down by them condominium tycoons plowin over the whole damn town either, but that’s the world we live in. One thing keep replacin the other, don’t matter if it’s broke or not. Whatever makes they pockets fattest. Speakin of which, time to tend to the coops, I suppose.”

“Still gettin threat letters in the mail?”

“Yep.” He sighed as he stabled himself with the table and rose from his seat. “No man can’t raise any kind of farm in this country without the damn gov’ment breathin down his neck.” He fished the last ground from his molar, spat into his cup and tossed it towards the sink.

It shattered. Axel blurted, “What’s goin on, pop?”

Standing in the doorway, without facing his son, he said, “Do I really got to get into it? Can’t ya tell? That’s the trouble with yer generation. Need everything spelled out for ya.”

“Well, ain’t you gonna sweep the shards up from the floor?”

“Why don’t you get back to your hocus pocus or whatever it is you call your practice and let me alone now.”

He slammed the door behind him and hobbled out to the dilapidated chicken coops strewn along his meager acreage, leaving Axel to his ruminations. Axel stared at the shards splayed across the linoleum floor for a while until he could no longer resist the urge to clean the mess. Such was his nature, be the dilemma miniscule or other. The fragments of the cup took on a life of their own and Axel would see to it that their unity be restored.

His father did not see the sentimentality Axel had attached to the cup. To his father, a thing was a thing, and it ended there. He, however, saw worlds through and beyond the object at hand. This cup was not just a cup. He had bought it for his father along with the French press in an attempt to console him after Lou’s, the diner he frequented every day before and occasionally after work, had closed down. Out this cup, Axel had thought, my father will finally experience some quality. But what Axel did not understand was that his father did not incorporate the diner into his daily ritual for the coffee but for the rapport he had had with Lou.

Lou was a gruff old man five or ten years Gunther’s senior. Although their friendship was rooted in their brooding over their lost world, it was friendship all the same. Many bonds are made through common hatred—it happens all the time. Had you been at Lou’s in its prime eavesdropping on the grumpy owner and the equally grumpy regular’s banter you would hardly have thought to call them friends. Neither man possessed the courage nor saw the necessity to declare it verbally, but deep within them, past their tough, life-hardened exteriors they knew what warmth lived between them.

“Damn kid’s lost his wits,” Gunther would say of his son.

“Ain’t your fault, Gunth,” Lou would reply. “A man cain’t keep his boy in line this day and age. Every boy’s gotta choose between the word of his father and that of the world he live in. Boys today ain’t got the sense nor the specs to see through the whirlwind of shit they diseased world’s a-spewin’.”

With devout diligence, Axel pieced and glued his father's cup back together. Having not looked up from his work since he began, his heart nearly burst through his ribs when he saw the time. Frenzied, he ran about the house in search of all he'd need for work and once he had everything messily upgathered in his arms he rushed out the door, leaving the cup atop the stove.

The relief he felt upon entering his studio did not last—while there were no regular members at his door angry with him for his tardiness, there were no regular members. The few who had attended his sessions were from out of state, Northerners and Californians usually. Not one who appeared at one session appeared at another. Most were only passing through on business or on vacation touring the distilleries. His studio was not supported by the locals, and its proximity to the condominiums did not help his case. Both stood in the place of long beloved establishments that were run by the families whose ancestry laid the very foundations of the town. And although the bitter remnants of these families and other indignant locals did not understand yoga and holistic healing, because the studio could be seen within the same plane of sight as the condominiums their ignorance was easily projected as dislike or even hatred.

In his empty studio he laid out his mat and began his morning routine, though now that it was mid-afternoon his rhythm was offset. Oscillating between cow pose and cat, Axel opened his eyes to find “Mr. Kentucky” Kerchief scowling at him through the windowfront. Kerchief was a large, barrel-chested man whose half bald head sat sunk between his shoulders as if his neck had become reclusive in his broad frame for the whole of the bitter winter that was his life. Grimacing at Axel, he knocked on the glass with the knuckle of his forefinger. Axel exhaled and rose from his mat to answer Kerchief's beckoning.

“Why, hello there, Mr. Kentucky,” Axel said, holding the door open. “Come on in.”

“I'm fine just where I stand.”

“Oh. Well—what can I do for ya?”

Kerchief appeared confident and full of premeditated sentiments but when he ventured to speak he struggled to articulate himself as he had planned. “Your daddy know what you’re doing here?”

“Well, I tried explainin it to him, but I’m not so sure he understood. He’s got a vague idea up in that hard old noggin of his, but he don’t—”

“He know you prance around and put yourself in shapes no man should assume? You queer, boy?”

Axel knew before he answered the door the nature of Kerchief’s inquiry. He had grown accustomed to such philistinism in the three months his business had been in operation.

“Was just stretchin, is all. It’s good for ya.”

“Don’t tell *me* what’s good for me. *God’s* good for ya. I don’t know what it is exactly you got goin on here but it sure as hell ain’t Christian.”

With perfunctory expressionlessness, Axel retorted, “No, I’m quite certain Jesus wouldn’t mind none.”

“Ya back-sassin me, boy?”

“No, sir. In fact, I think he’d be quite pleased with all the healin takes place in this very room.”

Kerchief’s brow rose as if God had bowed the arc of the covenant clear across the reddened firmament that was his face, as if this perceived blasphemy was the tempest that would be calmed by his faith alone.

“Never see you on Sundays—not e’er since you put this place up, that is.”

“I been busy.”

“Too busy for the Lord?”

“I get my prayin done just fine. I don’t need your snarky ass there watchin me, judgin me if I’m doin it wrong or right.”

“You—”

“Oh, get on now.”

Axel turned from the doorway, letting the door swing closed behind him.

Muffled through the glass, Kerchief shouted, “See how long your damned voodoo shop stands once folks hear tell down at the distillery!”

Axel sat on his mat like a lotus and attempted to empty his mind but he could not rid Kerchief's red snarling face from the blacks of his eyelids. Though he was angry with the man, he was angrier with himself. *If you become angry, you have already lost the battle*, was his mantra. No good would come of his outburst, he knew. Now he was flustered and now Kerchief would deter potential customers from supporting his already failing business. Mr. Kentucky's Bourbon was the most renowned distillery of all those that lined the brim of Jefferson County; tourists would often consult him about the lay of the land and he would have answers for them. Because the majority of those who passed through the town solely in search of whiskey were of a secular nature, they found Mr. Kentucky's overt pious demeanor a novelty typical to 'a place like this.' The few who had met Axel were surprised by how 'down-to-earth' he was, and some even were disappointed.

Later that day one woman, who Axel found to be, despite his agnostic beliefs, particularly divine, inquired about the nature of his difference from the rest of the townsfolk after a session she described as transcendental.

"I never thought I would feel so at ease in the midst of the Bible Belt," she told him. "Whenever I step foot in a church, which is rare—so rare that I can't seem to remember the last time I found myself in one—but I feel like I have a vague remembrance of feeling like my soul was sweating. I couldn't do it. How do you stay sane here?"

Axel chuckled with relief. "Well, I do feel myself an outcast, what with all the old world thinkin pervadin this town. It's real hard to reach most of em. Can't talk sense to some old coot thinks the world came about six thousand years ago. I try and tell em . . . dinosaurs—"

"Yeah, like there are volumes of scientific data. I don't trust anyone who takes that shit literally."

Their laughter filled the empty studio. Lillian was her name. Axel repeatedly pronounced each syllable slowly in his mind as he looked into her vibrant green-eyed face. She looked at him, and then lied lazily back on her mat. Staring into the void of the ceiling, she asked, "When did you first stop believing in God?"

Before he could bring himself to speak he arighted himself against the wall and looked over her lying there, searching her eyes but her gaze remained intent on the ceiling. He began by explaining that he did not necessarily believe in nothing at all but that the

word *God* was subject to semantics and that that ambiguity should be respected rather than to impose the concrete on something so abstract. While she was vaguely in agreement, she cut him off to remind him of her original question: “*When, though?*”

He slouched against the wall and relaxed himself. He matched her calm tone and spoke as if mesmerized by the foreign fluidity of his words and the comfort with which he related to her the memory.

When he was eleven years old, his mother, rest her soul, thought it would be good for him to serve the Lord as an altar boy at the St. Pius Church of the Immaculate Conception. Even then, he found the whole ceremony of it to be quite peculiar. The people—the same people he would see arousing debauchery when his father would, for lack of funds for a sitter, bring him along to the bars—were now reserved and respectful because they were in the house of God. In neat lines the procession shuffled through the aisles and all would assume the same pews each had sit in on Sundays prior as if rehearsed, as if the whole delicate ritual would be disturbed if one were to venture to sit in a new seat. In his hands he held a large candle upright, and he remembered the strain he had felt in his forearms more vividly than the purpose of their being gathered there together. Former friends of his, too, held candles aloft and one at the forefront held a gilded cross that wavered with his steps. All proceeded down the middlemost aisle, their footfalls evenly placed and paced as if they themselves were masters no longer of their own movements but subject to and strung along by some invisible force unknown to them. They took their places on the stage on either side of the pastor, pale and statuesque, with his long arms raised over the altar in welcome. He looked briefly over his shoulder and sneered at one of the boys who had not been in the position so ordained in their choreography. Axel straightened his spine and set his shoulders back so that those leering eyes would not fall on him. The priest stood woodenly, so stiff you could scarcely tell if he were a thing that harbored life, as he looked on at the crowd. All were seated.

“Please rise.”

All were now standing. The priest issued a few sentiments concerning some matters local and global, gave thanks to regular benefactors of the church, and then began his sermon. And while the priest illustrated how Jesus had suffered for the sins of man, Axel endured a struggle of his own as the hot wax of the candle he held dripped

sporadically onto his head. Only those who possessed a short attention span for the sermon and a keen eye for extraneous details noticed him wince at each drop. For fear of compromising the integrity of whatever message the priest was trying to get across to his audience, Axel remained still. The smell of his hair and scalp burning reached the noses of the boys standing nearest to him and they snickered when they saw its origin but were quickly hushed by the decrepit woman sitting behind the organ.

He wondered if it was for God or simply for the people around him that he suffered his silent martyrdom. Over the course of the sermon he grew accustomed to the pain and when it subsided enough for him to divert his focus he listened to the priest's words and in them he could find little relevance to his own life. It seemed to him as if the cause of this congregation was to celebrate the pain of a man who lived two thousand years ago, yet if he expressed his own in the selfsame setting he would be reprimanded. Here he stood alive in his youth yet all eyes, hearts, and minds were fixed on the corpse of a man who had died so long ago, a man whose existence was tangible only in the tangles of text written so very long ago. He thought about how the symbol trumped presence; he thought of his agony and that of the metallic cadaver hovering above him and while he knew and could feel one to be real the other filled him with doubt.

Now chains of people lined the aisles all in wait to receive the Eucharist. One by one they consumed His blood and nibbled away at His body. Then they blessed themselves and took their seats and regarded the remainder of the savage symbolic feast.

"It started off fine," Axel explained to Lillian. "But then that candle started dripping and within a minute's time I was expelled from a nice get-together and sent to some underworld cult ritual, so it seemed."

Lillian could not help herself from bursting out in laughter.

Axel smiled. "No hair's grown in the spot since. Look." He leaned over to show her.

"Perfect size for one of those little hats—what are those called?" She looked him over. "You know, put a robe on and you'd pass for a fine friar."

They laughed and when they were done laughing they both sighed at the same time and then they laughed some more.

Axel looked at her. "So, what saved you from believin'?"

She stopped laughing. “Uh, I guess it was when my mother and father dropped dead within a week of each other.”

“I—I’m sorry. That’s— Wha-what happened to them?”

“Must’ve been an act of *Gawd!*” She smirked nervously, and then her face went blank. “No, I don’t know. We didn’t have too many relatives, and the few we had were not the kindest people—not awful but not kind enough to pay for two autopsies. And my brothers and I sure as hell couldn’t afford that shit. We were so young, we didn’t have any money. And the little our parents had went to funeral costs.”

“My ma died early on too. Cancer. Just me and my pop now. I sure wish I had brothers—ya close with em?”

“Yeah, yep, with one especially. The others live in New York so we don’t see them too often. Greg and I flew out here to check out that good ole Kentucky bourbon. But he’s done from last night—he was hammered. Don’t think he’ll make it out for round two.” She got up from the floor. “Would you want to join me? You could show me the hidden gems of this little town.”

Axel’s face lit up. “Sure! Sure, yeah, let’s do it. Let’s get to it.” He rose from his mat. “There is *one* place we’ll need to steer clear of though.”

When Gunther, after a long day in the coops, walked into his house the first thing he noticed was the cup. He was surprised to see it intact but even more so that the stove had been left on all day.

“Kid’s got a big heart, just wish his brain was as big.”

The stove was set to Low and in fact it was he who had left it as such. Countless years of drinking had addled his memory significantly and as of late he had fallen into the habit of passing blame on his son for his own follies. It was easier than taxing his mind with the task of recollecting what he may or may not have done. He cursed the electric stove and rued the day he let Axel coerce him to get rid of the old gas one.

“Can’t even tell if the damn thing’s on or not. Well, s’long as it’s hot might as well make another batch.”

He shucked his bloodied apron over his head, slung it carelessly over a chair, and then he washed the blood from his hands before he filled a kettle with water. He moved

the cup to the counter then set the stove to High and placed the kettle on the reddening coil.

Exhaling as he sat, he reflected how this was his favorite part of the day. He put up his feet on the other chair at the table, set his head back, rested his eyes. He inhaled deeply through his nose and he exhaled a long wind through his mouth.

All at once the kettle whistled insistently and the screen door gusted open.

“Pop!” Axel exclaimed. “Ay, pop, what’s doin’? Makin coffee? Say, there’s someone I want ya to meet.” He spoke rapidly and his words were slurred as they could not keep up with his excitement. “Name’s Lillian.”

Gunther squinted up at his son and raised his brow quizzically.

Lillian stumbled up the steps and through the doorway. “Heh—hello there. It’s a pleasure to meet you . . . sir.”

Gunther turned to look at her. He nodded but he did not say anything to her.

“Here, here, Lillian. Take a seat.” Without seeing his father’s feet propped up he pulled the chair out. Gunther jerked forward and grunted.

“Oh, sorry, pop—hey, you know the kettle’s goin off, don’t ya?”

Gunther sighed and started up from his seat but Axel stopped him.

“Naw, sit, sit. I’ll whip it up right, show you how it’s done.”

“I can do it just fine, you little shit,” Gunther muttered.

Lillian averted her eyes to the cardinal clock on the wall.

“Was jus tryna help, is all.”

Gunther got up and looked into his son’s wheeling bloodshot eyes. “Ya wanna help how ‘bout ya put in a real day’s work tendin to them chickens out in them coops. Could make work light for yer old man, ‘stead I’m out there hackin away and collectin a million eggs and breakin my spine while yer sprawlin and rollin around on cushions all comfy all damn day. They’s the Y downtown—what need’s there for yer little ‘business’? Hell, can’t even call it that. Can’t call a place a business if there ain’t no busy-ness, and frankly I ain’t seen a soul in there.”

The kettle whistled incessantly. Axel opened his mouth as if to retort, then he looked at Lillian and turned his back to his father and resumed the process of preparing

the coffee. He took the kettle off the coil and reached in a cabinet for the bag of beans. Under his shaky wrist some water spilled from the kettle and hissed on the coil.

“Not one soul. Not even—”

The blaring drone of the beans grinding drowned out his father’s voice. He kept his hand pressed firm on the grinder until the grounds were so fine they would dissolve without stirring.

“That’s right, boy. Keep ignorin your old man. So sensitive, never could withstand the hard lessons of life. Now look at you. Useless.”

“He’s not useless,” said Lillian.

“You mind your own now, miss.”

“He’s not useless, you old crank. You know, you could use a little sensitivity. Maybe then you’d see that your son is beautiful—he’s great. He’s—”

“How would *you* know? What’d ya just meet him today?”

“Uh . . . yeah, but—”

“But nothin. Can’t tell shit from a day’s time.”

“That’s untrue. I can see that he’s a good person. He helps people.”

“Helps people. Helps people how?”

“Today I walked into his studio with an aching back—I could barely reach down to tie my shoes—and when I walked out I felt like a fucking gymnast.”

“But how’d he do it? I need proof.”

“It’s called reiki, sir.”

“It’s called what? I don’t trust it. Sounds like hocus pocus to me. Back in my day they’d just throw ya in a splint and you’d be fine.”

“Times have changed. We have evolved,” Lillian said flatly.

“O sweet God, Ax. You bring another one of your heathen friends in my home again and I swear—”

“You’ll do what? Hit him? He’s a grown man now, you can’t—”

Axel grabbed her shoulder. “There’s no use. He ain’t ever gonna listen.”

“Get this yankee whore out my house!” His eyes twisted with rage and concern; fatherly, Gunther prodded his son’s chest with his forefinger.

“I’m from California,” Lillian said. “Sir.”

“Don’t make no damn difference. I know your kind. Come here all haughty and drink up all our whiskey and laugh at us simple country folk. Then you slink back to whatever city you crawled out of and cackle away with your godless friends at our expense. Ax, you think this witch has actually taken a likin to you? You must be blinder than a mole rat. She only thinks yer special ‘cause yer a smidge like her, but just a smidge, make no mistake. No matter how hard you try to stray, the marrow in yer bones and the blood in yer veins’ll always be of good ole Kentucky stock, don’t never forget that.”

“I know what I am,” Axel said, “and I know what I ain’t.”

Lillian smiled up at him and he caressed her shoulder. He leaned to her ear and told her, “Listen, I think you better get on till this blows over. I’ll call you once I get him settled.” He walked her to the door.

Gunther sat back in his chair and, with his arms folded over his paunch, grinned at her as she walked out of his house.

Axel closed the door behind him. “I’m sorry ‘bout all this. He’s just—”

“You don’t have to explain anything,” she said. “I’m just sorry you have to deal with this every day.”

“So, I’ll see you later?”

She gave him an ambiguous smile. He gave her money for a cab but she refused and said she would walk. He began to give her directions to her motel but she said, “I’ll just wander. I’ll find my way.”

He kissed her on the cheek and she smiled. She walked down the driveway and around the bend and then she was gone.

The smirk he had expected his father to be wearing was right there planted on his face when Axel walked inside.

“Lillian, eh? Lillith’s more like it.”

Axel shook his head.

“Bet she asked you to move to California with her, didn’t she?”

He grinned. “Naw, I wish. She did say I should visit though. Would be nice to see an ocean.”

“Ocean? What need you of an ocean when you got rivers? Way I see it, oceans the void of death, rivers the veins of life.”

“You’re a real poet, pop.”

Axel poured the grounds from the grinder into the French press then added water and stirred. He put the top on the press so that the coffee would not lose heat.

“Well. We gonn drink it or not?”

“Patience. Gotta let it set.”

“Lou woulda had a cup ready ten minutes ago.”

“Well Lou’s is gone and you gotta accept that. You’re the one always tellin me to appreciate what I got. And what you got here is better than what you had, so quit your complainin.”

“I suppose you’re right, son. I do suppose you’re right.”

Axel turned to the sink to wash the wet grounds from his hand. He smiled to himself. “Smell that, pop? Gonna be the best damn cup of mud you ever did drink.”

His father chuckled and coughed into his hand. There was a newspaper on the table. He picked it up and flipped through the pages, squinting his eyes as he scanned the words.

When Axel deemed the coffee ready he poured half of what was in the press in his father’s cup. He held it under his nose and closed his eyes as he whiffed at the heavenly aroma, but when he went to sample a sip the cup fell away in fragments leaving only the handle and base in his hands. He swore as he fetched paper towels and a broom and dustpan, his father laughing all the while.

“What’d you use hot glue? Stuff melts when ya heat it, ya know.”

Axel glared up at his father.

“I gotta teach you everything? Superglue, now that’ll do it.”

“I’ll get to it later.”

“Aw, I was just joshin, son. Throw that thing out. It’s junk.”

He took another cup from the drying rack, filled it with the remaining coffee and handed it to his father.

“Enjoy.”

His father sipped and sat blinking.

“It’s alright.” He smirked at his son. “Could use a little somethin. Say, hand me that bottle of Woodford above your head there—yeah, right there. Grab yourself a glass. C’mon now. Drink with your old man.”

They sat and drank and talked until Gunther dozed off, resting his head on the kitchen table. Axel got him a pillow and gently lifted his head before slipping it under. In his stupor, a wave of determination seized him and for a long hour he sat hunched in his labor over the pieces of porcelain wielding a vial of superglue.

There was no sun and he realized he had forgotten to call Lillian. When he called there was no answer. He finished what was left in his glass, unwittingly set his father’s cup on the still red coil, and set out into the night for her motel.

He awoke in the fog of morning on a park bench. He had wandered through the night, alone. When he returned home there was no house. All that stood on his father’s meager acreage were the chicken coops and beyond them but smoldering ash. There were no birds in the sky. Axel looked at his hands and could hardly see for the litter and clamor of those in need of tending, of those without master.