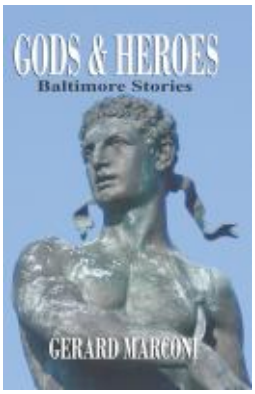

This novel of linked stories follows two unforgettable characters from childhood through adolescence into adulthood with a provocative look at love, sex, and religion. Set in a blue collar neighborhood of Baltimore during the 1960's and 70's, it unfolds cinematically with short chapters told from several points of view. Both tender and humorous, blasphemous and profound, it shows how two young people attempt to wrench meaning from adversity and find happiness together despite their differences.

Gods and Heroes

Baltimore Stories

GODS & HEROES

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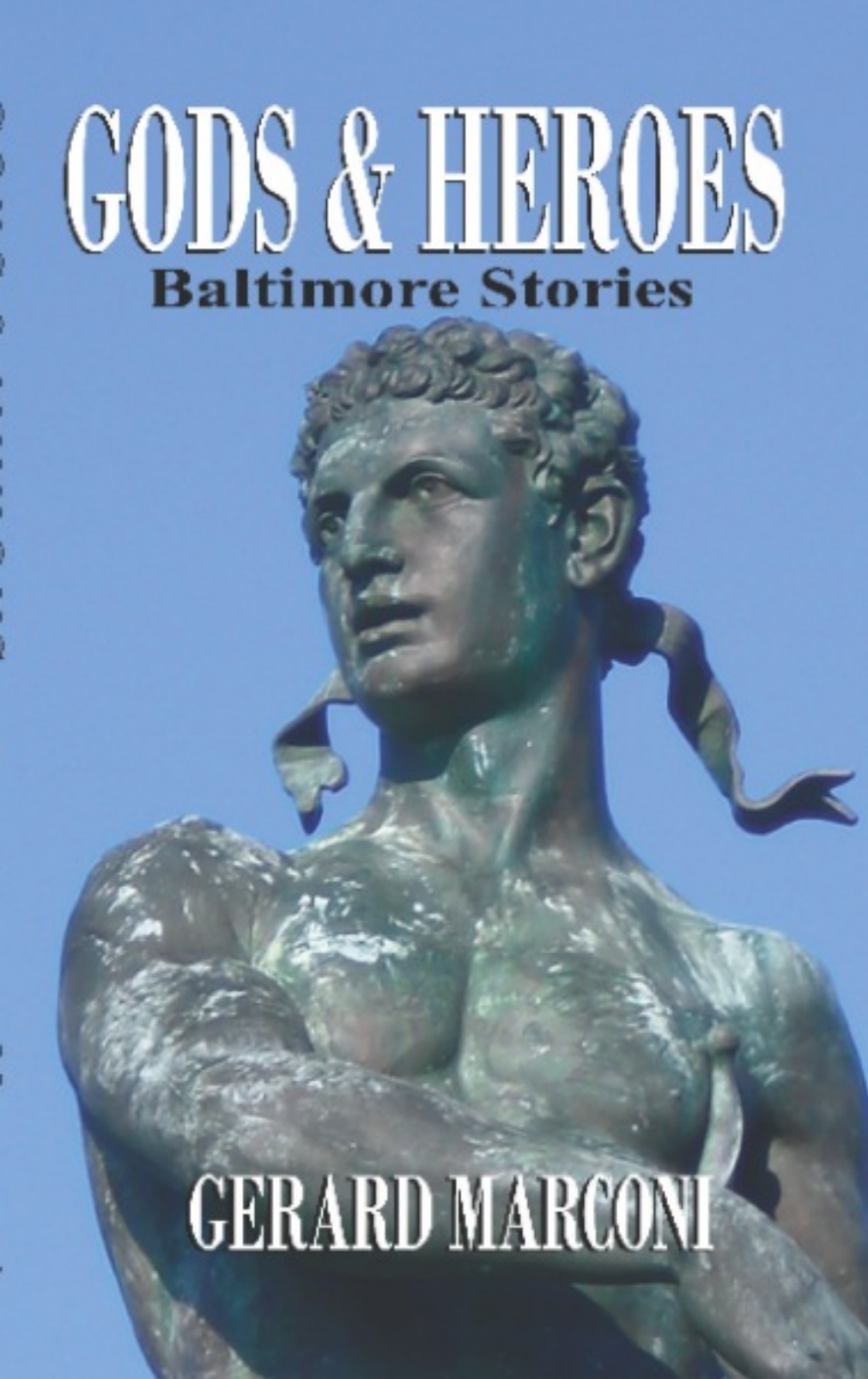

GERARD MARCONI

Gods and Heroes

Baltimore Stories

By Gerard Marconi

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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Cover: *Orpheus with the Awkward Foot* at Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Site. The poet, musician, and singer of Greek mythology is depicted playing a lyre. The marble base bears a medallion honoring Francis Scott Key, who wrote the "Star Spangled Banner" following the bombardment of Fort McHenry during the War of 1812. Cover design by Greg Walsh. Photo by the author.

Satisfaction

August in Baltimore was brutal. Humidity hung like a heavy blanket over the city, stifling all breath and slowing the pace of life. By day the black-topped roofs of tightly packed row houses absorbed the heat, making their occupants miserable. Children flocked to heavily chlorinated swimming pools while their elders found relief in the hum of artificially cooled air behind tightly drawn curtains. A lucky few fled to the bay, where they languished in boats until dark, swimming, fishing, or crabbing. After sunset the smell of steamed crabs mingled with the exhaust fumes of buses and motorcycles. At night neighbors sought the scant evening breeze on front stoops or roof top decks, where they listened to the sounds of baseball on the radio mixed with the shouts of children playing in the streets.

The year was 1965 and the Orioles had not yet won a pennant. Jim Palmer joined the young pitching staff but the team still finished third, lacking a power hitter. When they signed Frank Robinson at the end of the year he was unable to buy the house his wife wanted in a white neighborhood. Fans of the Buddy Deane show lamented the absence of their favorite television deejay who was taken off the air because a local TV station refused to show black and white teenagers dancing together. Two American space crews rendezvoused in orbit as part of a program to land men on the moon by the end of the decade. The Beatles were surpassed in record sales by the Rolling Stones with “Satisfaction.” The sexual revolution was in full swing but abortion was still a dirty word, an illicit procedure performed by doctors in back rooms without anesthesia. In Southeast Asia, a thousand tons of bombs were dropped on Vietnam by U.S. fighter planes in advance of combat troops landing there. In New York crowds flocked to

the World's Fair, where Michelangelo's *Pieta* was loaned by the Vatican and followed by Pope Paul VI himself in the first papal visit to this country.

On a sweltering August afternoon two lone figures sat in a row boat east of Baltimore where Middle River flows into Chesapeake Bay. The teenage girl was tall and slender with long brown hair and wore a white T- shirt over her red bikini. The boy was somewhat older, his hair the same color but short and curly. He wore cut-off jeans and a gray tank top. Usually he moved with a certain athletic grace and agility, a trait shared by both, but his actions in the boat were slow and heavy, the result of drinking too many beers in the hot sun.

Ellen Marinelli threw her crab line overboard and waited patiently. Frankie said that was the key. *Patience.* She sighed and looked past her brother at the horizon. Slivers of sunlight glistened on the water's rippling surface. The tide flowed out beneath the boat as wind-blown waves moved in the opposite direction. A cluster of sea gulls circled lazily overhead in search of food. She loved the water, the sound of waves gently lapping the boat, the salty tang in the air, the gritty feel of sand between her toes. Their family often went to beaches on the bay like Sandy Point or Tolchester. They didn't go to the ocean because of their father's memories of war in the South Pacific. He never talked about it, but their mother told them he had seen beaches littered with bodies torn apart by shrapnel or gunfire. She said he had nightmares about it for years afterward.

Ellen's only trip to the ocean had been a disaster, the cause of her present predicament. Frankie had told her it was different. "It's very sexy," he said with a wink. "There's wider beaches, bigger waves, and a pounding surf." He was right. Ellen was thrilled by her first sight of the ocean and by making love with Dennis among the dunes.

Staring into the dark murky water beneath their father's boat, she saw a crab swimming sideways, its legs all moving at once. It changed direction suddenly and swam upward, rising toward the bait she dangled just below the surface. She held her breath and waited. *Patience. Patience. Patience.* When it tugged at the line she quickly dipped the net and held it up for Frankie to see.

"Way to go, Sis," he said, pulling the Orioles cap down to shade his eyes from the setting sun.

Eager to drop her catch into the basket, she stood up too quickly. The boat shifted beneath her feet, the horizon tilted, and the dark water beckoned. The whole world teetered on edge. She grabbed Frankie's outstretched hand just in time to steady herself and sat down hard on the wooden seat. In the bushel basket next to her crabs clicked and crawled over one another, their wet shells gleaming. Some had lost their front claws, snapped off by others, and she wondered if they felt pain from the missing limbs.

Then, just for a second, something fluttered in her body. *Is it the baby or just my imagination?* A wave of nausea and panic swept over her. With a catch in her throat she said, "Oh God, Frankie, what are we going to do?"

"Don't worry, Sis. You'll make it. We both will." He took another swig of beer and nodded. "You can bet on it."

You can bet on it. That's what their father's friend Lucky used to say. Sam Marinelli had survived World War II unharmed, but Lucky came back with an artificial leg. When he came to dinner at their house he amused them by poking a hat pin into the holes of the fake leg beneath his pants. They thought it was magic until their older sister figured it out and told them the secret. It was just like Marie to spoil things. Ellen knew Frankie was trying to be optimistic, but their future was filled with bleak uncertainty. She was pregnant at eighteen and

his college basketball career had just come to a crashing halt with the arrival of a letter from the Selective Service. The thought of her brother going off to war in Vietnam brought back the sadness and despair she had fought so hard to overcome. Now, with the baby growing inside her, she would have to stop taking the Valium their family doctor had prescribed.

Frankie interrupted her reverie. "Time to cut bait," he said, reaching for the lines. He threw the rotten chicken necks back into the water and started the motor. Their father would be pleased with the crabs. Sam liked to steam them in a big metal pot, stunning each one with an ice pick before dropping it into the boiling water. Their mother refused to eat crabs because she said they were bottom feeders. Ellen wasn't looking forward to another night of arguing with her. Margaret thought she should give the baby up for adoption but Sam said it was up to Ellen.

As they headed back to shore the pale moon was barely visible in the sky above Sparrows Point. Ellen often gazed at it from her bedroom window at night before falling asleep. It was hard to believe the United States was going to land a man there someday. *Will that change how we look at the heavens?* She wished it would change some things here on earth, like the crime and fear creeping into their neighborhood. Like race riots in the South and the war that was spreading in Vietnam. She swung her legs around to face Frankie, who was steering the boat with one hand. When she reached out to touch his arm their eyes met. "Thanks for bringing me out here," she said. "It really helped." He nodded with a tight smile and held her gaze briefly. It only lasted a moment but it meant more to her than anything in the world. *What will I do without him?*

At the dock Frankie asked her to drive home so he could doze off in the front seat. As they headed down Eastern Avenue she turned on the radio and recognized Lyndon Johnson's drawl. The President was explaining his decision to increase the

number of troops in Vietnam. He said that draft calls had already been doubled to 35,000 a month. Ellen glanced at Frankie, who opened his eyes and stared at the radio.

"I do not find it easy to send our finest young men, the flower of our youth, into battle. I have spoken to you today about military units, about divisions and battalions, but I know them all, every one. I have seen them in a thousand streets, a hundred towns, in every state of the union, working and laughing, filled with hope and life. I know, too, how their mothers weep and how their families sorrow, but that is the price of freedom."

Frankie sat up and slammed the dashboard with his fist. "Fuck you!"

Ellen quickly punched the button for another station. When she heard the Rolling Stones she looked at Frankie and smiled. His beat-up Chevy Nova bounced along the old streetcar tracks as they laughed and sang the words to "Satisfaction." They stopped briefly for a red light and a policeman glared at them from the sidewalk. Ellen stared back at him until he looked away. Then the light changed to green and she drove on.

When the song was over she knew what she would do about having the baby.

Cotton Candy

My name is Ellen Marinelli. I'm twelve years old and I was born on April Fool's Day. Lucky me. My father, Sam, sometimes says that life is a crap shoot, but I don't think he really believes that. He heard it from his friend, Lucky, when they enlisted in the Navy together. I like to call my father Sam and he doesn't seem to mind because he's the dearest, sweetest man in the whole world. I think the only strange thing he ever did was marry Margaret Dorcas O'Neil. He often told us how he proposed to her in the ballroom of the Southern Hotel while they danced to a song by Cole Porter called "In the Still of the Night."

Dorcas is the name of a woman in the Bible who was raised from the dead. It was very popular at the end of the nineteenth century, but my mother got stuck with it even though she was born in the 1920's. Maybe that's what made her so mean, having people make fun of her strange middle name. Dorcas has red hair, a dimpled chin, and a firm voice that's raised in praise of God at Mass every Sunday. She also has a huge Irish temper that's usually directed at me. I learned in the sixth grade that dorcus is the name of a stag beetle, one of the meanest creatures on earth. It has a large black body with two huge pincers that it uses to devour its young. Even though it's spelled differently I've started calling my mother Dorcas behind her back.

Dorcas is obsessed with neatness and order. She has a saying for almost every situation, like "Waste not, want not" and "God helps those who help themselves." My sister, Marie, says she sounds just like the nuns at school. One of her favorite sayings is "Half a loaf is better than none" which she remembers from the Great Depression. She grew up during the Depression, so her family ate a lot of bread and potatoes. "We had fried bread for breakfast, bread and mustard sandwiches for

lunch, and potato soup for dinner," she says. "That's all we had, so we didn't complain." Maybe that's why she's such a terrible cook, especially compared to my Italian father. Sam prepares food lovingly but Dorcas cooks with a vengeance. Once, when she made Irish potato soup, it turned out gray. Marie and I joked about the color at dinner, so Dorcas narrowed her eyes, threw down her napkin, and went into the kitchen. She came back with red food dye, which she promptly dumped into the soup tureen. "You want color? There's color for you." We watched in horror as she swirled the dye through the thick gray soup until it turned blood red. Then she stormed out of the room. Now, whenever we see her cooking something new, Marie winks at me and says "Double, double, toil and trouble."

I'm the youngest of three children. My sister, Marie, was born in 1941. We decided that she must have been conceived before my father enlisted. Then came my brother, Frankie, who was born in 1944 and was probably conceived while Sam was home on leave from the Navy. We liked to figure out when we were conceived because we couldn't imagine our mother actually enjoying sex. I was born in 1946, which meant I was conceived right after the war ended. I like to think I was a month premature because I couldn't wait to get away from Dorcas.

I didn't always think of my mother as a dorcus. When I was little we enjoyed doing things together, like shopping downtown or watching parades on the Fourth of July. There are parades all the time in East Baltimore. Some are religious, like the feast of Saint Casimir in Canton and Saint Anthony in Little Italy. Some are patriotic, like Memorial Day and the Fourth of July. The biggest parade I ever saw was in Highlandtown on Armed Forces Day. The newspaper said there were 30,000 people and over 6,000 marchers. My father marched in the parade that day with the Veterans of Foreign Wars, so our

whole family went to watch. We sat on the curb in front of Patterson Park and ate cotton candy from a street vendor. I love the blue swirl of cotton candy and the way it sticks to my hands and face. It's sweet and light, like eating a cloud. My hair was braided into pigtails and I was barefoot because I liked feeling the warm bricks under my feet. In those days the streets of our neighborhood were paved with red bricks and the gutters were lined with yellow ones. When I got older the city paved over the bricks with black asphalt that burned my feet.

I couldn't wait for the parade to begin. "Yay, daddy!" I yelled when I saw Sam in his dark blue veteran's hat. He was giving out bright red poppies in memory of those killed in the war. Then I saw a cream colored convertible in the parade and a man with a white suit riding in the back. He had a little black mustache and waved at the crowd. My mother said he was the mayor and told me to wave at him. "Hello, Mister Mayor," I said. He smiled and waved back. His name was Tommy D'Alesandro, Jr. and he was so popular that the city elected him mayor three times.

What got the most attention that day was the appearance of a Nike guided missile in the parade. Everyone stopped clapping and stared as it rolled by on a flatbed truck. I was ten years old and the strange looking rocket meant nothing to me until I heard people say missiles like that were installed in suburbs all around the city. "Why did they have to show us a Nike missile?" my father said at dinner that night. "It spoiled the whole mood of the parade."

There's a butcher shop across the street from Patterson Park where I sometimes go to pick up things for my mother. It's run by an old man named Mr. Kessling, who has yellow fingernails, a bushy gray mustache, and little tufts of hair coming out his ears. He speaks with a German accent and scowls at me because he knows that I usually come in just to

pick up cold cuts. "Liverwurst," I say to him, and he nods, knowing that my mother gets a pound at a time, sliced thin. Then he shuffles off to the meat case, humming softly to himself. I don't mind his nicotine-stained fingers, the gray whiskers on his chin, or his funny accent. I like the way he talks and the spicy smell of the butcher shop. One day while I was waiting for the liverwurst I noticed a skinny dark-haired kid standing with his mother in front of the deli case. I knew he lived somewhere in the neighborhood, but he wasn't in my grade at school.

He was staring at me when his mother said, "Come on, Tommy, it's time for lunch." When he turned to follow her out he tripped over his own feet.

Old Mr. Kessling laughed and jerked his thumb toward the door. "That boy is such a *klutz*," he said, smiling at me. I smiled back, even though I had no idea what a klutz was. I must have seen this shy awkward boy with his mother before, but I can't remember when. I learned later that his name was Tommy Burns. He had curly black hair and he stood with one foot on top of the other. He wore short pants above his scuffed shoes. But what I remember most about Tommy that day is the expression on his face. He looked at me with something like curiosity and longing, as though he wanted to come home with me, to make me his older sister or his best friend. As though he wanted to trust me and love me, even then. It's probably just my imagination, but that's my earliest memory of him.

In memory everyone is young. My parents, Sam and Margaret, my brother, Frankie, and my sister, Marie. Everyone except my grandmother, Nanna, whom I love dearly. She's a tiny woman with thick blue veins in her hands. Her skin always smells of olive oil and lava soap, and she's very proud of how she came to America from Italy with her husband and three kids. "We crossed the ocean in steerage at the bottom of a steel

ship," she says. "And I was afraid it would sink." My father is the youngest of her four children and the only one born in this country.

One of my earliest memories is of Frankie and me dancing together. We were eating dessert at the dining room table while our parents danced in the living room to music on the radio. I can still see them gliding across the living room floor, my father pausing to twirl my mother, laughing as he dips her low, her red hair barely touching the oval rug. Frankie and I giggled between bites of chocolate cake as we watched them.

"Dance with your little sister, Frankie," he called to my brother. "Go on, dance with her."

Frankie jumped off his chair with a big grin and ran around the table. He held out his hand to me and I slid off my chair into his arms. We clutched each other stiffly, trying to imitate our parents. When the music was over, they both clapped for us. Then Frankie lifted me off the ground with a big bear hug. I screamed "FRANKEEEE!" as he dropped me onto the floor and tickled me.

One of our favorite games was for Frankie to sit on my bed and pretend it was a car with a steering wheel on the headboard. He was always the driver on our imaginary trips, and Marie and I were his passengers. One time he pretended to be a bus driver and called out, "All aboard. Last bus leaving for Washington, D.C." He made the explosive sound of air brakes as Marie grabbed my hand.

"Wait, mister. Please wait for me and my little girl." She dragged me over to the bed and the two of us climbed up behind Frankie. "Big girls don't suck on their thumbs," she scolded. "If you're good, maybe we'll get to see the President. First we'll go to the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington monument. Then we'll go to the White House." She glared at me. "Maybe you should have dressed up more."

After a few minutes driving and calling out stops along the way, Frankie suddenly turned the wheel and made a horrible screeching sound. He fell backwards on the bed and rolled onto the floor. "We were just in an awful accident," he said. "The driver's dead and the bus is on fire." I got really scared when he said the bus was on fire.

"NO!" Marie screamed. "Good drivers don't have accidents. I want to go to Washington and meet the President." Then she said, "It's okay. We don't have to do what he says."

"Yes, you do. I'm the driver and I say the bus is on fire."

Marie jumped off the bed and stormed out of the room. She didn't talk to us for the rest of the day. Sometimes our imaginary trips ended happily, but not always.

In bed that night I buried my face in the covers and pretended the bedspread was a map. I traced roads between the tufted swirls of cotton with my fingers and imagined I was on the bus going to Washington just like we had done that morning. This time I got to see all the monuments and meet the President, but I can't remember his name.

We belong to Saint Elizabeth's parish. It's only three blocks from our house, so we walk to school every day. Everyone has to wear uniforms: dark blue jumpers and light gray blouses for the girls, gray shirts and dark blue pants with matching blue ties for the boys. Our teachers are all nuns with long black habits, starched white fronts, and big funny hats. They make us pray before every class and watch us play tag in the school yard during recess. They even come into the lavatories to make sure we behave. A nun went into the boys' room once to break up a fight and Nicky Vittello peed on her habit.

We spent most of second grade getting ready for First Holy Communion. My mother was always quoting *The Baltimore Catechism* to me, just like the nuns. When I first tried to

imagine what my soul looked like I saw something soft and round and pink, surrounded by white clouds. It was warm and it glowed with God's love at the center of me. But then one of the older nuns said it was covered with a crown of thorns, like the head of Jesus at the crucifixion, and I pictured something soft and red and bloody, like the picture of the Sacred Heart. It was disgusting and it made me wonder. *Why would my soul be covered with a crown of thorns?*

On the day of our First Holy Communion we had a procession around the block at church. The girls wore starched white dresses with veils and the boys wore white suits and ties. We were a parade of white, which the nuns said was a symbol of our purity and goodness. They marched along beside us to keep us in line and led us in singing the hymns to Jesus and Mary. It was a hot muggy Sunday in May, so we were glad to finally get inside the church. The Mass lasted forever and I got all sweaty and nervous waiting to receive Communion. When the priest put the Host on my tongue, I thought of the bloody Sacred Heart and almost threw up. I made it back to my seat okay, but we had to keep kneeling for the rest of the Mass and I started to feel woozy during the final hymn. My mother was waiting outside with a camera and snapped my picture as soon as we came out into the bright sunshine. Dorcas was horrified when I ran to the curb and puked. She said, "You're not supposed to throw up the body of Jesus!" Then she turned to my father. "Should we get the priest to clean it up? There might be pieces of the Host in it." Sam ignored her and asked if I was all right. He folded the veil back and slowly wiped my face with his clean white handkerchief. Then he took my hand and led me up the street to our house. When we looked back at my mother she was still standing at the curb trying to decide what to do about the Host.

I was eight years old the first time Dorcas took me Christmas shopping downtown. The sidewalks were crowded and I held on tightly to her hand as we went from one department store to another. I saw a man with no legs sitting on the sidewalk next to a woman in a black shawl who looked like my grandmother. They were both begging for money. We stopped to watch a man playing an accordion while a little monkey danced around him in a circle and held out a hat for coins. My mother stared at the man, who moved with a limp as he played.

"My God," she said. "That's your father's friend, Lucky. They were in the war together." I remembered him then, the one who stuck pins in his leg, and I wanted to say hello but she grabbed me by the hand and led me into Hutzler's. We rode upstairs in a wood paneled elevator operated by an old black man who smiled when he saw me staring at his white gloves. We got off on the fourth floor, where my mother bought Christmas presents for Uncle Ted and his children. They always come to our house for Christmas.

This year Uncle Ted handed me a big red envelope and said, "Merry Christmas to my favorite niece." There was a green disc on the inside of the card. "It's a record," he said, pointing to the circular grooves. The hymn was *O Come All Ye Faithful* and I sang along with the words on the card as we watched the little disc going around. I was puzzled by the second verse. *Lo, He shuns not the Virgin's womb. Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing.* The words reminded me of what the nuns at school said about the Virgin Birth, but I still didn't understand what they meant.

"What's the Virgin Birth?" I asked Marie when the three of us were alone.

"A physical impossibility," she said, without looking up from her book.

"I thought it was some kind of miracle, like Jesus walking on the water."

Marie rolled her eyes. "Why don't you go play with Frankie?"

I sat on the floor where Frankie was playing with his train set and watched as he squeezed little drops of liquid into the smokestack of the steam engine. Then he ran the train around the Christmas tree at top speed until tiny puffs of white smoke came out. After a while Marie came over to join us. When he wasn't watching, she put a string of boxcars in the path of his passenger train and I held my breath as they collided.

"You can't do that," Frankie said. "These are my trains."

Marie laughed and went upstairs, but after she left Frankie added fire engines and an ambulance to the wreck she had made. Then the two of us lay together on the floor, staring up at the Christmas tree. The colored lights and shiny tinsel made it look magical. When I reached out to feel the strands of tinsel, they felt soft and weightless between my fingers.

"They're supposed to be icicles," Frankie said, "but I think they look fake."

"Do you believe in the Virgin Birth?" I asked.

He looked at me like I had two heads. "Why are you asking me that?"

"Because I don't think Marie does."

"Marie doesn't believe in much of anything."

"But do you?" I said. "Do you believe in the Virgin Birth?" I would have believed anything Frankie told me.

"Sure," he said, watching the train go around in a circle under the tree. "Why not?"

The End of Steam

Tommy Burns felt the movement of the train in his body, the grinding of the wheels in his bones, the droning of the diesel in his head. Stretched out on the hard vinyl seat, his ten-year old frame was too long for the cramped space and he couldn't sleep. His grandmother dozed on the opposite seat. Ever since his parents' divorce he'd gone to spend part of the summer with her while his mother stayed in Baltimore to work. He stared through the thick double window and tried to pick out lights in the darkened landscape. When a train passed going in the opposite direction, he was startled by the muffled roar of the locomotive. The blur of cars rushing past was only inches away from his window. Then, as suddenly as it appeared, the other train was gone.

"Tommy, are you awake?" His grandmother must have heard the passing train. He closed his eyes, pretending not to hear her. "Richard and the other boys will be glad to see you." He felt a knot in his stomach and knew he wouldn't be able to sleep.

They arrived in the middle of the night at Grafton, a railroad town in the mountains of West Virginia, and were met at the station by Uncle Charles. A tall bony man with a flattop haircut, Charles worked for the railroad like almost everyone in town. When he shook Tommy's hand it felt like a vice-grip closing on his fingers. He heard other stops announced in the station, like Clarksburg, Parkersburg, Cincinnati, and Chicago, but they were places Tommy never got to see.

He was startled awake the next morning by the sound of riveting from the repair shops behind his grandmother's house. The wrecked bodies of twisted rail cars were pushed in one end of the long metal buildings, and newly painted rebuilt cars were pulled out the other end. After breakfast he sat on the back

porch with his sketch pad, drawing the steam engines as they filled up with water from a wooden tower. His grandmother hung laundry out to dry in the backyard and yelled up at him. "Why don't you go see if Richard's home?"

He hadn't seen any of the other boys yet. The summer before he had gone with them every Saturday morning to the old movie theater that showed serials of Flash Gordon and Dick Tracy. They played together in the back lots that overlooked the train yards, climbing trees or digging tunnels in the black dirt. They told scary stories or invented games with ray guns. All except Richard, who was a bully and liked to show off in front of the others. Instead of going to Richard's house Tommy went down to the musty basement to see what he could find. In a corner behind the coal furnace he saw an old bicycle that must have belonged to Uncle Charles. Tommy wanted to fix it up, but first he would have to ask his uncle's permission.

"How old are you, boy?" Uncle Charles asked at dinner that night.

"Ten. Almost eleven."

"Do you play baseball?"

"No, sir."

"Do you fish?"

"No, sir."

"What do you like to do?"

"I like to draw things, especially trains." Uncle Charles frowned at this, so Tommy tried to think of something else. "I saw your old bike down in the basement," he said. "I'd like to fix it up and ride it, if that's okay with you." Uncle Charles didn't answer. They ate in silence until dinner was over, then he gave Tommy permission to fix the bike and announced they were going fishing together on Saturday.

Tommy cleaned and oiled the bike during the week. He bought new inner tubes with allowance money he had brought

from home and rode the bike down to the station so he could draw the sleek new diesels that pulled the passenger trains. On Saturday they got up early and drove into the hills. They climbed down to the bank of a rocky stream bed where Uncle Charles showed him how to use a worm for bait, puncturing it with a long hook that he slid into the guts. The first time Tommy tried it he almost puked, but he did it anyhow to please his uncle. Charles cast his own fly line with bait that looked like one of the dragonflies swirling above the stream. The tiny insects he made for fly fishing were beautiful but each one had a hook sharp enough to pierce the gullet of a fish.

Tommy dangled his feet above the water as they sat on a flat rock next to the stream to eat lunch. "What's it like to work on the railroad?"

Uncle Charles thought for a second before answering. "Dangerous," he said. "I've seen men get their legs crushed between cars while the train was coupling or get thrown from the top of a car when they weren't careful."

"What exactly do you do?"

"I'm a brakeman."

"What's that?"

"I hook up the air brakes when the cars are coupled together and turn the wheel to set the stationary brakes when they're left on a siding."

Tommy caught two small fish that day but Uncle Charles made him throw them back after carefully removing the hooks. As they drove home he imagined his uncle climbing onto the running board of a switch engine or signaling to the engineer from the top of a boxcar.

"Richard's been asking for you," his grandmother said at lunch the next day. "I saw him at the A&P. He's old enough now to bag groceries. Why don't you go see if he's home?" Tommy didn't want to but knew that she would badger him

until he did. When he saw several boys he recognized in Richard's backyard, he decided to go over. As soon as he got there he regretted it. They were smoking cigarettes and eyed him with suspicion.

"It's Tommy from the city," Richard said. "Still playing cops and robbers, Tommy?" The other two laughed. Wayne and Jimmy pretty much went along with whatever Richard said or did.

"What are you guys doing?" Tommy asked.

"Being bad," Richard said. "But now we're going to play cowboys and Indians." He stubbed out his cigarette and smiled at the others. "First we're going to hunt for snakes and then we're going to build a tee-pee." They showed Tommy the hunting knives they had bought at a hardware store to cut down small trees in the overgrown field behind Richard's house. They gave him a pocketknife so he could strip off the branches and he inhaled the bitter smell of sumac when he did. The long spindly trunks weren't strong enough to support a covering, so they used one of the trees in the yard as the center pole. Richard climbed the tree and they reached the tops of the sumac poles up to him. He tied them to the trunk with twine while the others staked the bases to the ground. Then they covered the frame of their tee-pee with an old blanket and stripped off their shirts to paint their bodies like Indians.

When Richard took his shirt off, Tommy saw the fine strands of hair under his arms. "What's wrong?" Richard said. "Are you afraid to take your shirt off?" Tommy was embarrassed by his scrawny chest and skinny arms, but they stared at him until he peeled off his sweaty T-shirt. Richard put his arm around Tommy and led him inside the tee-pee. "Now we're ready to play cowboys and Indians," he said. "You're the paleface cowboy and we just captured you, so we're going to tie you up and torture you." Tommy's heart jumped and he tried to

squirm away, but Richard held him firmly and told the others to bring some twine. They tied him to the tree trunk and pretended to make Indian war woops but they were mostly laughing at the trick they had played on him. The rough bark of the locust tree tore into his bare skin and its tiny thorns left bloody scratches on his arms when he tried to wriggle free.

Richard went in the house and came out with some of his mother's lipstick. They painted their faces in shades of red and used shoe polish to add black stripes to their bodies. Then they lit up cigarettes and sat behind the tee-pee smoking. When Tommy begged them to untie him, they laughed. After a while Richard came into the tent with the lipstick, but instead of painting Tommy's face he smeared it on his mouth and drew circles around his nipples. "There," he said. "Now you look like a girl. Like the sissy that you are." He thrust his face so close that Tommy could smell the tobacco on his breath. He grabbed Tommy's crotch and said in a low voice "If you're not a sissy, show me your weenie." Tommy's face burned as he fought back tears. "If I untie you, will you show me your weenie? Or are you afraid to do that, too?" He thrust a handful of dirt at Tommy's face. "Okay. You can eat dirt instead."

Somewhere in the distance Tommy's grandmother was calling him for dinner.

"Eat the dirt," Richard said. "Go on. Eat it and I'll untie you."

"What are you boys doing?" Tommy's grandmother yelled at Wayne and Jimmy from the back porch. "Tell Tommy it's time for dinner." The screen door slammed as she went inside. Tommy wanted her to come back out and save him but he was ashamed for her to see him like this. He sobbed when Richard held the dirt up to his mouth again.

"Come on, Richard, that's enough," Jimmy said.

"I'll say when it's enough." Then he snarled at Tommy. "Eat it."

Tommy tasted the dry, gritty coal dirt. He pretended to swallow, but had to spit it out before he gagged. Richard laughed and went outside. "You can let the sissy go now," he said. The other two came in and cut the twine. Tommy grabbed his T-shirt and ran back to his grandmother's yard. He rubbed the lipstick off with a mixture of tears and sweat, then went in through the basement to wash up.

At dinner Uncle Charles said, "Why is your face so red?"

"From running and being hot."

"Is that lipstick on your mouth?"

"What did those boys do to you?" his grandmother asked. "Why are your arms cut like that?"

"Nothing. We were just playing cowboys and Indians."

Uncle Charles stared at him. "Boy, didn't your daddy ever teach you how to fight back when other boys pick on you?"

"Leave him alone," his grandmother said. "He's a good boy."

"He's going to be a sissy if he keeps this up."

Tommy bit his tongue to keep from crying. Then he jumped up from the table and ran down to the basement. He got out the bicycle and pedaled as hard as he could up the gravel alley. His grandmother called after him from the back porch but he kept on going. At the edge of town he stopped to gaze at the mountains in the distance, at the gray ridges outlined against the hazy blue sky. The silence was broken only by the occasional cry of a bird or the distant whistle of a train. He smelled the sumac trees by the side of the road and remembered the gritty taste of coal dirt in his mouth. When he thought of going back, the fear and tightness in his stomach returned. He decided instead to follow the dirt road that led to the railroad tracks along the river.

He rode for a while next to the embankment and remembered how Uncle Charles had warned him never to walk on the tracks. He listened for the sound of a train but heard none, so he left his bike by the side of the road and climbed up the ballast-covered bank. Two shiny rails stretched around a bend before disappearing into the darkness of a tunnel. As he followed the tracks Tommy thought about his uncle walking on top of boxcars and wondered if he was ever afraid. Pools of stagnant water lay outside the tunnel and a swirling wind echoed inside. It was a strange and hollow sound, like his own voice when he was afraid. He was afraid now, but that didn't stop him. The darkness and silence drew him in.

His footsteps echoed inside the tunnel as he stumbled on the slippery cross ties. The blackened walls were pockmarked by stones thrown up by passing trains. Near the center he peered at the daylight far ahead and saw the two rails come together in the headlight of a train. Then he heard the whistle and saw the locomotive belching black smoke as it steamed toward the tunnel. He turned to go back but the entrance was too far. The train entered the tunnel and hurtled toward him. His legs grew heavy, his heart pounded, and his knees grew weak. The ground trembled and the piercing headlight bore down on him. A sudden blast from the whistle startled him and he leaped from the tracks, feeling his way blindly along the wall until he found a niche. He cowered there, closing his eyes tightly, covering his ears against the deafening sound. A shower of steam and coal dust singed his arms as the huge black engine roared past.

After the train was gone Tommy slumped to the ground, sobbing. He had wet his pants and was afraid of being found there, just as he had been afraid of seeing Richard again. He wiped away his tears and struggled to get up, anxious to escape before another train came. Then he heard the sound of footsteps

in the darkness and felt himself being lifted by a pair of powerful hands.

"Boy, what did I tell you? Don't ever walk on the tracks. And never, ever go into a tunnel!" His uncle's gruff words echoed in the darkness as he helped Tommy toward the entrance. The big man kept checking over his shoulder and down the tracks ahead to make sure another train wasn't coming. Once outside they walked in silence to the car, where Uncle Charles lifted Tommy's bike into the trunk.

"How did you find me?" Tommy said weakly.

"Your grandmother saw you ride out the alley toward the west end of town. I drove this way until I found your bike by the side of the tracks."

Tommy was too embarrassed to look at his uncle. He stared out the window as they drove along the dirt road that curved away from the tunnel. Then he said, "Please don't tell anyone about this." Uncle Charles didn't answer. He drove up the steep winding road until they came to a clearing. He parked the car near the edge of a cliff and sat on the hood with his legs resting on the chrome bumper. When Tommy did the same he saw that they were on an overlook directly above the tunnel. In the distance he could see the roundhouse and the freight yards, the long silver tracks divided neatly into parallel rows, and the old brick station where he had arrived on the train with his grandmother.

"You should have brought your sketch book," Uncle Charles said. Tommy glanced at him, surprised. Just then a coal train pulled by two steam engines came roaring out of the tunnel below. Heavy black smoke billowed up towards them. After the locomotives passed, Charles said "You're looking at the end of steam."

"What do you mean?"

"Someday there won't be any steam engines left. They're already using diesels for most of the passenger runs."

Tommy thought for a minute. "What about you?"

"They'll always need a brakeman."

As he watched the train recede into the distance Tommy was glad to know that his uncle would still have a job.

The following week Uncle Charles drove him over the mountain to visit his cousin, Patrick, in the next town. Patrick was three years older. Charles said that during the summer he swam on the local swim team and worked in his parents' dry cleaning shop. They went in through the storefront, past the steam presses and chemical smells, and up the narrow winding stairs to the living area on the second floor. Patrick's mother said Tommy would be sleeping in the back bedroom with his cousin. He came in while Tommy was unpacking. When he saw the sketchbook he said, "What's that?"

Tommy blushed. "I like to draw. Especially trains."

Patrick leafed through the drawings. "These are really good," he said. "That's a Mikado 2-8-2 and this one's a Baldwin 6-8-4." Tommy was pleased that he liked them.

The tiny bedroom faced the railroad and a train passed nearly every hour during the night, waking Tommy with a start each time. The huge locomotives blew their whistle as they roared past the window, reminding him of being in the tunnel. After a while he tried to anticipate the noise so he wouldn't be so frightened. He listened for the rumble of a train approaching in the distance, but as it came closer the sound quickly grew into a terrible roar that rattled the windows and shook the building. Then a headlight swept across the room and the engine's whistle erupted with a scream. Tommy bolted upright in bed and stared at Patrick, who was standing naked next to him. "Don't be scared," he said, and climbed into bed with

Tommy. Patrick held Tommy's hand in the dark until he was no longer afraid. Then they fell asleep together.

After breakfast the next morning Patrick's mother said he could have the day off to take Tommy swimming at the town pool. Patrick put on his swimmer's briefs and watched as Tommy pulled boxer trunks over his jockey shorts. Then he showed Tommy how to roll up his dry clothes in a towel before heading to the pool.

Patrick went right to the deep end and dove in. "Come on," he yelled.

Tommy hesitated. "I have trouble breathing and swimming at the same time."

"Don't be afraid. I'll show you how."

Tommy jumped in and Patrick swam next to him, showing him how to turn his head to the side and breathe while he swam. He was feeling better about being in the deep end until Patrick yelled "Race you across the pool!" Tommy was afraid to follow, so he climbed out and lay on his towel to dry off in the sun.

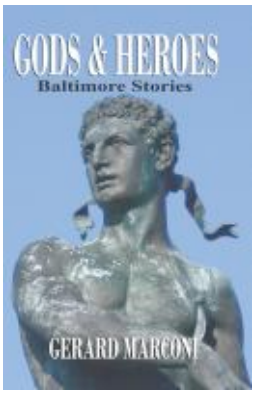
When it was time to leave they went into the bathhouse to change. Tommy was shy about getting naked in front of the older boys. Patrick must have sensed this because he said, "It's okay." Then he led Tommy to a corner in the back where the air was hot and stifling. They stood on the damp concrete floor and Tommy turned away to pull his wet shorts off. He was startled suddenly by someone touching him. He felt his cousin's naked body against his, the damp flesh that was like his own but not his own. "It's okay," Patrick said again, but Tommy's heart pounded and his face burned. Patrick groaned softly next to him as Tommy inhaled the mingled smell of chlorine, sweat, and semen for the first time. When it was over he felt dizzy and staggered against the wall.

That night the trains roared past their bedroom window again but this time Tommy cried himself to sleep, silently repeating what Patrick had said in the bath house. *It's okay. It's okay.* He was glad when Uncle Charles came to get him the next morning. His uncle asked about the visit as they drove back over the mountain. Tommy swallowed hard and said, "He liked my sketches and he taught me how to swim." Then he stared out the window in silence, relieved that Charles didn't ask more.

The day before he left for home Tommy made one last sketch of the railroad yards. It showed tiny puffs of smoke coming from the steam engines and a big cloud over the roundhouse. The repair shops were in the background, covered with black coal dust. Uncle Charles liked the drawing. "That's the way it really is," he said. "Loud and dirty." At dinner that night he suggested it was time for Tommy to ride the train home by himself. His grandmother had tears in her eyes but she agreed.

The next morning Charles drove him to the station on his way to work. He said very little in the car but crushed Tommy's hand with his vice-grip when they said goodbye. On the way down the mountain the train went through a long tunnel that seemed to go on forever. The roar of the locomotive beat against the window as Tommy stared at the blackness outside. He fought back tears of shame and confusion when he thought about what his cousin did in the bathhouse. Despite what happened he still wanted to believe that Patrick was his friend. When the train emerged from the tunnel he was blinded briefly by the sunlight. Then he got out his sketchbook and looked at the last drawing he had done, the one Uncle Charles liked so much. He decided to call it *The End of Steam* and wrote the date on the bottom: 1958.

That was the last summer he went there.



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