

One Who Lives Chastely in the Presence of Temptation

By Gregory Baer

The priests had come from money, at least one of them had. We went up to build the deck. We stayed up there, past the gate with the guard and the clipboard.

There was swamp all around.

“Wetlands,” my mother said. She stood with her back to the kitchen, her left shoulder against the door jam. “They’re called wetlands, honey, not swamps.”

“What’s a swamp then?” I said.

“A swamp is different. It’s wetter or something, I don’t know. Up here we call them wetlands. Maybe they only call them swamps down south,” she said.

“Down south?” I said. “Down south like Florida and Georgia?”

She turned away and put the dishcloth down on the counter all spread out, to dry it. The dishes, recently washed, sat sweating in the plastic rack. Gray light came glinting in off the snow from the window above the sink; it stung. I touched my finger to a bead of water and it broke into two streams around my finger.

I was wrong to keep them, but I didn’t know. I wanted to look at them, to make them mine and keep them close.

They couldn’t survive, not like that. In the Tupperware, they slowly died of thirst. I poked at one until it moved a little bit. No sense taking them back, I had thought, they’ve already forgotten how to survive in the wild; they need me now.

I put my boots on by the sliding glass door. I walked past the posts that I had helped my father set in the ground. Each had a little metal shoe for the concrete, to make it stable. There were six of them altogether in a rectangle that ended at the cabin.

“Robert?” my father said, turning away from the miter box. His eyes were bright and hard. There was nowhere to go. “You can’t sneak around me, you know that. Where do you think you’re going?”

“Into the wetlands,” I said. I tried to smile at him but his face would not change. I reached into my pocket to get the sunglasses attachment for my glasses.

“To do what?” he said.

“Whatever I want, I guess,” I said.

“That’s not an answer, Robert. Look at me when I’m talking to you.”

“I have my sunglasses on,” I said.

“I know you, Robert; I know when you’re not looking at me. Now, answer my question,” he said.

“I was going to look for salamanders,” I said.

“More of them damn things? Robert, don’t you think you’ve found enough?”

“No,” I said.

“Take those silly glasses off and come hold this board for me,” he said. He turned around again to face the miter box.

I thought they’d be worried sick. I thought I’d at least hear my name echoing through the wetlands. Hours past and no one came looking. I had made sure not to go too far. When hours had passed and no one had come, I decided to pick a direction and start walking. It was dark out there. We had driven far away from anything I knew and there were no other houses in sight. The only light came from a weak moon and my flashlight. If anything, flashlights scared me. The halogen beam made the darkness around me more acute; I thought of the X-Files; I thought of Scully training her light into dark corners where monsters from outer space or underground were waiting. I replayed rational thoughts in my head over and over like Dr. Brauner had shown me. There is nothing out here. There are no monsters. I am not edible.

I turned over rocks to keep my mind from creeping stillness. They breathe through their skin, I thought. They were like old men in need of care; they seemed so feeble, hiding under the wet stone. I tried to make them happy. I put the rocks back down on top of them. Even at night, the moss was bright and green. Everywhere it clung to the rock and the corpses of saplings bloated in the water. The swamps refused to freeze and they halted my progress no matter which way I went.

The deer scattered from the salt lick, leaving corn spilled yellow in the snow. The motion sensor had clicked on at my arrival. The light burned my eyes after so long in the dark. My father stood behind the glass, thinking of what to do with me.

I found the salamanders splayed across the table. All dead. Father Manning had come to check on the progress, they said. He wanted to talk to me in the living room.

“Hello, father,” I said.

“Hello, Robert,” he said. “I heard about your little adventure.”

I looked down to my boots and focused on wiggling my toes.

“You gave your parents quite a scare, didn’t you, Robert?” he said. His dark eyes were somber as he sipped his red wine on the couch.

“I don’t know, father,” I said, “They didn’t come looking for me.”

“Robert, don’t lie to me. You know your mother was worried sick. She was so sick she had to lie down with a fever. You’ve really hurt her, Robert,” he said.

He took another sip of his wine before continuing.

“Why did you run off into the woods today?” he said.

“To find salamanders,” I said.

“Salamanders? Oh, yes, they’re all over these woods. Do you know what the ancients believed about salamanders?”

“No, father,” I said.

“They believed that the lizards could withstand fire and even extinguish it,” he said.

“But they’re amphibians,” I said. He paused at this.

“Robert, can you tell me what the fourth commandment is?” he said.

“Honor thy father and mother,” I said.

“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, Exodus chapter twenty, verse twelve,” he said.

“That’s what I meant,” I said.

I wasn’t afraid of him. But I knew he would tell my parents everything that was said. I knew that my father had called him in the first place, to come and talk to me. He was older than either of them and I could see it in his eyebrows and in the gray of his goatee.

“Of course you did, Robert. You know your commandments, as well you should. In order to avoid sin, we must look it in the face; we must know its name.”

“Yes, father,” I said.

“Do you know that you have sinned, Robert?”

“Yes, father,” I said.

“Good. Now, I must hear your confession, so that God may grant you his forgiveness.”

“Yes, father,” I said.

Father Manning was gone when I woke up the next day. God had forgiven me, but my parents had not. I sat down at the table in front of my bowl of corn slivers. They were already soggy. All I could see of my father were his two hands perched on the edges of the paper. My mother didn't say, “Good morning.” She barely looked at me.

“You scared us. What you were thinking? I mean, my, God,” she said.

My father pulled the paper down. He had cocked his head so that he was looking at me out of the corner of his eye. He turned the page.

“Just what are we supposed to do with you now?” she said. She stood with her weight on one leg and her hip thrust to the side.

“You didn't come looking for me,” I said.

My father stirred.

“What did you say?”

“I said—”

“Robert, your father looked for you. He was out there for hours, looking for you.”

“Robert.”

The ex-priest had come from far away. They sat sweating in that plastic. All the way up here, he came. He came for me. My father looked.

I put my boots on inside the door. They were still dirty but it didn't matter. I looked at my mother in the kitchen, her back was to me and her hands were moving hastily across the counter in front of her. I heard my father call me through the glass.

I stood at the saw while he made measurements. I waited by the saw for him to come back from measuring to make the cuts. He cut where I had marked it.

“Is this right?” he said.

“I think so,” I said. He didn't check it. He just cut it and put it up against the house with the others. Eventually, he looked up from his sawing.

“You know why I didn't come looking for you?” he said.

“No, I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking about it,” I said.

“Come on, you little chickenshit, you ran away. What are you, a woman? Hiding behind a rock, crying,” he said.

“That’s not true. You weren’t there,” I said.

“I didn’t have to be, God was there,” he said.

“So what,” I said.

“You better get your ass out of here,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I said.

Archimedes wasn’t expecting me, living under that rock the way he did—he couldn’t see anything. I thrust him into the stiff daylight and he hated me for it. They secrete a white goop when they’re scared. It’s harmless. Anyway, Archimedes gave up on that after awhile.

“Now, weren’t you tired of that?” I said.

“Living under a rock far from the world?” I said.

“I don’t understand you,” I said.

He sat in the Tupperware looking straight ahead. Can they look up? I couldn’t tell where he was looking. But I was sure that it wasn’t at me. What’s there to look at straight ahead? No reasoning with Archimedes.

“Every time I see you, you’re like this,” I said.

“Who are you talking to?” my mother said. She stood with her arms crossed in the doorway.

“Nobody,” I said.

“I heard you talking in here,” she said.

“I was singing to myself. Everyone does it.” I said.

“Hmm,” she said, “Father Manning is coming over again.”

“Why?” I said, “I haven’t done anything.”

“It’s nothing like that. He needs to speak with your father. I’m going into town today.” she said.

“Goodbye, then,” I said.

Archimedes couldn’t settle on a wife. Half the time, he wouldn’t even tell me if I had found a female or a male. He left me to my ignorance. I will say that he didn’t revel in it. I appreciated that.

“You have to give someone a chance,” I said. “Fine we’ll take a break.”

“Swamp? Oh yeah, that’s what I said. She said wetlands. Looks like a swamp to me,” I said.

I heard my mother’s voice carrying over the boulder.

“Robert! Robert! Robert!” she yelled.

“Yes, ma,” I said.

“Oh my God, Robert, it’s the house. It’s burning, burning. I came back from town and it was burning. Where’s your father, where’s the father? Where are you going, Robert, Where are you going?” she said.

I can see the fence, Archimedes. Can you see it? It’s not even electrified, for Christ’s sake.