

HEROES

Augustine Himmel

Snow on the rooftop
So still—
And all is passing

George Zorn

When I was a boy, I had two heroes: my brother and Larry Richemier. They were terrific basketball players for Edson High. Like most boys in the late 1960s I admired the superstars of the day, the athletes and rock'n'rollers and big-screen tough guys, but Jerome and Larry were tangible and so I admired them more. There was a time I believed they could do anything, a time I would have fought the world for them—and yet, when Larry Richemier died the winter of 1991, I hadn't talked to my brother in three and a half years.

I was sitting in my real estate office in Saginaw when my wife Bridget phoned me with the news. Outside the window big flakes of snow waltzed

across a gray afternoon sky that covered mid-Michigan like a casket pall. The few agents who worked for me had other part-time jobs, so I'd been sitting there alone, watching it snow while hoping for a floor call, and thinking about a closing I had scheduled for the following morning. I disliked morning closings because sometimes the bank didn't wire the money on time, which meant closing in escrow, which meant making an extra trip to the title company in order to get paid. However, I had both ends of this deal, a coveted double-dip, and since the buyers and sellers wanted a morning closing, I was happy to oblige them.

Bridget sometimes called me at the office if something important had happened, even though I'd be back home in Edson at the end of the day. Larry had been living in Battle Creek and went into a hospital there for a knee operation—routine surgery, nothing to worry about—but shortly thereafter developed an infection and died of sepsis. He was forty-two.

After putting the phone down I prayed for Larry's soul and the comfort of his family, and then walked to the refrigerator in the back of the office. There was usually nothing in it but some Diet Pepsi and some fruit, maybe a low-calorie sandwich Bridget had packed in an effort to help me lose weight—the previous few years my waistline had expanded like payments on an adjustable-

rate mortgage—yet that day I knew there'd be vodka in the freezer section. It was left over from our office Christmas party and I'd stored it there when cleaning up. As a rule I don't drink during office hours, but I really needed a snort right then, so I filled my dirty coffee cup a third of the way with vodka, and because there was nothing else to use for a mix, I topped it off with Diet Pepsi. It tasted as horrible as I felt.

Back at my desk, I looked out at the falling snow and thought about the last time I saw Larry. It was only a month before, near Christmas, at the annual candle walk in Edson. The sidewalks along Main Street were glowing from the dozens of candles cradled in paper sacks on the ground, the elementary school choir was singing carols—the breath of children lingering in the air like a cheerful, yuletide fog—and several yards ahead of Bridget and me and our kids, a few inches taller than the rest of the crowd, stood the dark-haired, unmistakable, friendly yet slightly melancholy, Larry Richemier. He must have been in town for the holidays. I was happy to see him, but there were a lot of people between us and I didn't have a chance to say hello.

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Larry was the youngest son of Sam Richemier, an ex-Marine who owned the local hardware store. There were plenty of Richemiers in Edson, but none

of them possessed the legendary athletic prowess of Sam's boys. All together there were four or five brothers—I can't remember exactly because some of them were a lot older than me—and while they each played two or more sports in high school, they were especially skilled at basketball. Most of them played hoops in college, and all the brothers, with the exception of Larry, earned at least a bachelor's degree and became successful businessmen.

In the village of Edson, Michigan, where winters stretched out like the arrow-straight roads surrounding town and faces were as familiar as the shops along Main Street, high school basketball acquired an almost mystical quality. It wouldn't be accurate to call it a religion, to compare bleachers to church pews, coaches to pastors, or away games to pilgrimages, but if there was a home game on a Tuesday or Friday night and you happened to miss it, if you didn't see your brother or cousin or nephew or grandson, your friends or simply your classmates, compete on the hardwood floor, and as a result you couldn't talk about the game with everyone else the following day, you might not feel guilt, exactly, and if you were Catholic you wouldn't have to go to confession, but as sure as James Naismith invented the sport so his phys ed classes could expel some energy during frigid months, regret would jab you like an elbow beneath the backboard.

When I was in eighth grade Larry and my brother started for the varsity, Larry as a senior and Jerome as a junior, and my parents took me and my sister to every game. We'd usually sit by my best friend Nate Maxwell and his family, who, like us, attended the Lutheran church a few miles outside of town; the adults enjoyed each other's company and would often get together at one of our houses to play euchre or 500, the men versus the women, and they'd laugh and carry on as if *they* were in junior high. Sitting on the wooden bleachers a few rows behind our team, Nate and I shared SweeTarts and Milk Duds or other candy we'd purchased at the concession stand, we talked about what happened that day at school and cupped our hands over our mouths to whisper suggestively about the cheerleaders, but mostly we watched the contest on the court, we studied the art of jump shots and give-and-gos and backdoor layups, of zone defenses and full-court presses and how to take an offensive foul without cracking our skulls—in short, everything about that beautiful and demanding sport that meant so much to us. This was serious business, after all. Not only was the pride of the Edson High Hornets at stake, but Nate and I planned to compete on that court the following year, albeit as freshmen, and so we took in all we could.

For me, though, everything started with Larry and Jerome. They're the tip-off around which my basketball memories circle. And while Jerome and I were bonded by blood, Larry and I shared a more unusual affinity: we were left-handed. In grade school we both had to learn how to write without smearing pencil lead across the page; we had to sit in right-handed desks and use right-handed scissors; and if over time electric can openers replaced those right-handed manual ones, buttoning our shirts remained a bit awkward, as did our attempts to put forth a firm, confident handshake.

Unlike my brother, Larry didn't look like an athlete. At 6'4" his height might have been ideal, but he carried a paunch that made him slow and ill-suited for jumping, and which took a toll on his knees. Nonetheless, he was graceful and he had a good shot, and although he became winded after only a few trips up and down the court, he rarely came out of the game, and when the fourth quarter drew to a close and found him more haggard than ever, his jersey at least partially untucked and his dark hair matted with sweat, his shots kept falling and Edson almost always won.

Larry's favorite weapon was a hook shot from in front of the foul line. He would use it from other spots, from the sides of or nearer to the basket, but a

foot in front of the foul line was *his* place. It was a shot that, I'm sure, he fashioned after Lew Alcindor, the awesome center of the UCLA Bruins. The difference was that Larry could only perform the shot with his left hand, while the right-handed Alcindor could use either—and, of course, Larry didn't get too far off the ground. Still, that shot was something to see. Larry's height and long arms made it unstoppable. He'd pivot, take one step and spring lightly off his right foot, his left arm curling back and his stomach stretching his jersey to the limit, and when he let go, the ball spinning from his hand and beginning its rainbow arc, you just knew it would be all net! My friends and I used to imitate that shot during our own practices, but we were never very good at it.

After that season I didn't see much of Larry until a few years later when we both coached grade school basketball. By then I was a senior at Edson High, and although I hadn't made the varsity team, my love for the game remained undiminished. I hoped to coach a high school team once I graduated from college and secured a job teaching phys ed, and therefore was happy when the need suddenly arose for someone to explain the basics to a group of fourth graders. Larry coached the fifth graders, I suppose, because he wasn't doing much else. His bad knees had kept him out of Vietnam, and prevented him from standing all day on the cement floor of one of Michigan's auto factories,

which were still occasionally hiring, so he worked a bit at his father's hardware, but only part-time since Mr. Richemier liked to put in most of the hours himself.

I was five years younger than Larry, and not nearly as talented a player, yet he treated me as his peer. Our teams shared the small elementary gymnasium, so there were plenty of chances for us to talk: about the Vietnam War that was finally coming to a close, and the boys from town who still hadn't returned from it; the not-so-recent breakup of the Beatles, which really grieved Larry, and which he blamed on Yoko Ono; how Paul McCartney, a lefty like us, had formed a new band called Wings; Coach John Wooden's UCLA Bruins, who would probably win their sixth NCAA Championship in a row; our favorite NBA players such as Gail Goodrich, a former Bruin and another southpaw; how cool Sean Connery was in *Diamonds are Forever*; the best-looking girls at the high school, most of whom were sisters of girls Larry had known; my brother and his basketball team at Northern Michigan University; and, at my insistence, Larry's playing days at Edson.

I loved those talks with Larry. They were important because he was Larry Richemier, and also because my brother was so far away: After two years of

playing hoops for Delta College in Saginaw, Jerome received an athletic scholarship from Northern Michigan University, which was in the Upper Peninsula, a place as distant from Edson as the Beatles were from Bing Crosby. I missed my brother terribly, and getting to know Larry made the separation more bearable.

Larry and I didn't just stand around and talk, however. We coached as well as we could, and tried to shape those kids into what resembled basketball teams. Sometimes we'd have a scrimmage. And while many of our players did little more than run around like decapitated chickens, both of us, I'm sure, imagined ourselves the next John Wooden, rolled-up program in hand, leading our team to yet another NCAA Championship.

That was as close as I ever got to Larry, and the last I would see of him on a regular basis. Months later he left Edson for Battle Creek, hoping to make his way in the world like his father and brothers. From what I heard he tried his hand at all kinds of work: first a low-level management job at Kellogg's which an uncle had obtained for him, but which, unknown to both of them, turned out to be temporary; after that, Larry took a course to become a loan officer; he spent several months as a truck driver; at one point he borrowed money from his dad to open a deli; when the deli failed, there were stints in sales—

restaurant supplies, Kirby vacuums, even encyclopedias... so many jobs over the years, and most recently an attempt to build his own landscaping company. Yet for Larry, success remained elusive.

I'd sometimes bump into him when he was back home for a holiday, perhaps in his father's hardware store or at the candle walk, more often in the tavern. Each time Larry looked increasingly fatigued, as if life was wearing him down like a full-court press. He always mustered a smile when approached, but it was unconvincing, and his sadness made me want to put a basketball in his hands, to say, "Don't worry, Larry... just loft one of those beautiful hook shots for us and everything will be all right."

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I poured another vodka and Diet Pepsi and then put the bottle back in the freezer. It was still snowing, and the drive from my office to Edson took forty minutes in good weather, closer to an hour in snow or heavy rain—not the type of trip to make on a belly full of booze, no matter how it's mixed.

I felt like drinking, though. I felt like drinking until I fell down and passed out on the floor of my real estate office. Death was nothing new to me: In the years since I coached with Larry both of my grandfathers had died, also an

aunt, a cousin, and various people from Edson to whom I wasn't related, including, every few years, one or more teenagers who recklessly drove their cars into eternity, or who wound up there because they'd been along for the ride. Yet Larry's death was different. It jarred something inside me those others hadn't. My way of understanding life now made as much sense as buying a house without getting it inspected.

I'd always thought Larry would make it. There always seemed to be enough time. Though I never understood why he hadn't gone to college, I remained convinced someday Larry would succeed in business as wonderfully as he had on the basketball court. Maybe he'd even find his way in real estate, like I did after I earned my degree and discovered phys ed jobs in Michigan were as rare as an actual wolverine. Eventually, I knew, Larry Richemier would come back to Edson for a holiday, not as some once-great, over-the-hill, ne'er-do-well, but as an accomplished businessman who'd finally made the transition from high school to real life. Even his melancholy trips back home all those previous years seemed part of this plan: they would make his victory that much sweeter.

Suddenly, that wasn't going to happen. A surgical infection had taken away his future, robbed him of everything he might have become. And al-

though he wasn't my hero anymore, it hurt to think the best time of his life was when he was eighteen years old.

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The same season Larry starred, Jerome and I played basketball together whenever we had the chance. In those days we were as close as brothers can be. A forward who could handle the ball as deftly as a guard, Jerome, more than anyone, taught me how to shoot. He'd say, "Get your elbow up!" or, if my shots were wavering to the left, "Your right hand is just for balance... balance!" Then he'd make me shoot with only my left hand, my right hand tucked behind my back.

In the winter, after our own practices and a quick meal—and after convincing Mom we didn't have any homework to do—we'd grab a basketball and head outside. Dad had made a backboard out of plywood, painted it pale yellow to match our house and attached it to the roof of the garage. He'd also fastened two floodlights on the corner of the house, one for the backboard and one for the driveway.

It was important to dress properly, to stay warm and yet maintain a range of motion that allowed us to shoot a basketball. That's why winter jackets were no good: they were warm, but much too restrictive. The best bet was a couple

of T-shirts followed by two or three sweatshirts, each succeeding item bigger and looser than the one before. That done, we were ready to play. Of course, if the wind blew from the north, down from Canada and across Saginaw Bay, it was simply too cold, and on those nights we'd stay inside and do our homework.

Often we had to shovel the driveway before we played. I never minded because the sound of metal scraping on concrete excited me, confirmed that in a few minutes I'd be shooting hoops with my brother. He was the best player I knew besides Larry Richemier, and I always believed, if it wasn't for Larry, he'd be the star of the team. The following year he was.

Our favorite games were 21, Around the World, and Horse. We rarely played one-on-one because the difference in our ages made such a contest lopsided. Plus, although we had shoveled, a fine, slippery film of snow remained on the driveway, and quick movements could be hazardous.

My personal favorite was 21 because that's where I had the best chance of beating Jerome. Like anyone with a moderate amount of talent I could usually get in a groove from the foul line, which, on our driveway, was the break between the first and second sections of cement. Since the backboard rose from

the edge of the garage and the first section of cement extended very nearly to fifteen feet, the standard distance for a foul line, it worked out great.

I'd throw my gloves down beside me, get positioned with my left foot slightly forward from my right and just behind the break in the cement, and then after a couple dribbles I'd raise my left elbow and release the ball, watching it spin through the air and smartly snap the net. Occasionally I'd blow on my hands to keep them warm. For the first few shots, I could keep my position: if I was in a groove, in the right spot, I wouldn't move my feet. I knew, however, if I made three or four in a row, Jerome would throw the ball to the side so I'd have to leave my spot—a strategy that became easier as the night wore on and the basketball lost its bounce. I did the same to him and, really, it was often the only thing that kept us from reaching 21 without a break. Even so, sometimes we did, Jerome more frequently than me.

In a way I liked playing basketball outdoors, at night, better than in a gymnasium. On clear nights stars illuminated the sky over Edson, and from the foul line I could see the Big Dipper high above our homemade backboard; the Little Dipper was harder to make out, but if I stopped and looked closely I could find it. Those constellations always reminded me of us brothers. Plus, I liked the cold. It felt good to breathe and it made my face tingle, and every

time I saw my breath, or Jerome's—his face ruddy beneath the floodlights—the absolute pure joy of living filled me as it only can in childhood.

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I locked up the office and walked out to my car. The snow had nearly stopped, but memories of Jerome fell all around me.

My brother and I don't talk anymore because one summer three and a half years ago he called me a liar and punched me in the mouth. For six weeks I had to have my jaw wired shut and drink blended food through a straw. Try selling houses like that!

It happened at a family reunion. We had gathered at my parents' house in Edson because the reunion was their idea, and they have the most room in case of rain. Jerome and his wife Buffy and their kids had driven down from Alpena. The trouble started when Buffy tried to seduce me. There's no other way to say it.

She and my brother had recently gotten back together after several months of separation, the causes of which were murky, since neither of them cared to comment. Rumors of promiscuity had swirled around Buffy before she and Jerome started dating as seniors at Edson High, subsided when they

became a couple, only to reemerge more strongly when he was away at Northern Michigan University. I'd always tried to ignore the rumors, but they had bothered me, nonetheless, and I was relieved when Jerome and Buffy finally married, believing that vindicated her.

With the rest of the family gathered in the back yard, some playing euchre or horseshoes, others just visiting—we'd had a pick-up basketball game a bit earlier—I went into the kitchen to get more beer. I'd just pulled four bottles from the refrigerator, and stood there awkwardly with two beers in each hand when Buffy came through the door.

I lifted my right arm toward her and said, "Hold these, will ya?"

She walked up close to me, ignoring the beers, grabbed my crotch and said, "I'd rather hold this."

I don't know why she did it. My being thinner back then is certainly no excuse. And while Buffy's always been flaky, she had seemed, aside from the rumors, a harmless type of flake, another Midwestern flower child who wished she'd been at Woodstock. Her original name was Doris, but at eighteen she had it legally changed to Buffy after hearing the music of folk singer and activist, Buffy Sainte-Marie.

Maybe Mom was right: When Jerome first started dating Buffy, he ignored Mom's subtle hints that Buffy wasn't good enough for him, so once, in a fit of exasperation, she referred to his girlfriend as trailer trash—not because Buffy grew up fatherless in a trailer park halfway between Edson and Saginaw, but because her family didn't go to church and she wore bell-bottom blue jeans that looked like they'd been painted on her. Of course, when I was a college freshman and started dating Bridget, a junior at Edson High who came from a devout Catholic family right here in town, Mom skipped the subtlety and said I was endangering my soul. Thank goodness our sister restored our family honor by marrying a Lutheran from Frankenmuth who makes his own bratwurst and plays tuba in a polka band.

If Buffy had been drinking during the reunion, I might have been able to blame the alcohol and shrug off her behavior. However, I hadn't seen her with anything stronger than iced tea, and so I spent the rest of the day fretting about whether to tell Jerome. At one point I almost confided my dilemma to Bridget, but decided not to get her involved.

The reunion ended later that evening. Jerome and Buffy and their kids were supposed to spend the weekend with my parents, and then drive back to

Alpena on Monday. Their plans abruptly changed when I told Jerome what happened.

It was late, nearing midnight. Bridget and Buffy were in the house, helping Mom clean up, and Dad had gone to bed. The kids were in the basement watching television. Jerome and I were sitting next to each other on folding chairs in the back yard, talking about old times; although we hadn't been able to play hoops together as much once he started dating Buffy, we always remained close. I didn't actually make up my mind to tell him until I heard the words coming out of my mouth.

I still don't know if it was the right thing to do. It's one of those decisions you hate to have to make, because you know it will change things. I felt I had no choice, though. Buffy had been undaunted by my refusal. She kept giving me come-hither looks throughout the reunion, and I couldn't help wondering if she went around grabbing crotches in Alpena. I loved my brother too much to watch him be made a fool.

At first Jerome thought I was kidding, but once I convinced him I was serious, things happened quickly. He called me a fucking liar and in the same instant twirled around in his chair and punched me in the jaw. I didn't have

time to react. Suddenly I lay sprawled on the grass, as stunned as some sellers when they learn the market value of their house.

Jerome and his family left for Alpena that night, and I haven't seen or talked to him since.

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By the time I reached Edson it had stopped snowing. I thought about having a drink at the tavern, in part to wash away the aftertaste of vodka and Diet Pepsi, but decided against it because I knew I might stay there all night. Instead, I went straight home and put my car in the garage and pushed the button to close the overhead door. After walking out the side door into the evening darkness, I looked across the yard to the kitchen window at the back of the house, and saw Bridget standing over the sink, her auburn hair surrounded by warm, yellow light.

Inside, she gave me a quick kiss and asked me how the roads were.

"Not bad," I said, unbuttoning my overcoat.

"I'm still in shock about Larry."

"Me, too."

"Isn't it awful?"

"Sure is."

“To die from a routine surgery like that...”

“It really makes you think,” I said, hanging my coat on a hook by the door.

“I hope he was in a state of grace.”

“Yeah. So do I.”

“Your folks are going over there tomorrow. Your mom’s making a casserole or something.”

I wiped my shoes on the doormat, then walked to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of beer. “He was forty-two.”

“That’s the same age as Elvis.”

I didn’t say anything.

“When he died...” she said. “Elvis was forty-two.”

I understood the connection. It just seemed an odd one to make, even for a fan like Bridget. And she must have mistaken my silence for annoyance, because she offered to blend us a pitcher of strawberry daiquiris, so I put the beer back in the fridge.

While she made the drinks I changed my clothes, and then peeked in the nursery to check on John Paul, who, like me, is a notoriously sound sleeper. He’s eleven months old, our youngest child, the one we never expected. After our firstborn, Mark, we had two girls, Elizabeth and Clare, each child roughly

two years apart, and each christened after a saint with a regular-sounding name, so as to not offend my mother. I remember Bridget and I looking through a book of saints before Mark was born, and I joked that if we had a boy, he should be named Isidore, to honor the patron of farmers, since Edson is surrounded by so much flat, fertile land.

John Paul is seven years younger than Clare, and by the time we were choosing a name for him my mother had long since gotten over my marrying and becoming a Catholic. In fact, she now loves Bridget, and realizes how blessed I am to have her for a wife. We named our youngest after Pope John Paul II because Bridget suffered a very difficult pregnancy, but through it all, including several weeks of bed rest, she received consolation from how, since the start of his pontificate, he had frequently, with his strong, Polish accent, echoed the words of Jesus: "Be not afraid."

I returned to the kitchen wearing a flannel shirt, jeans, and slippers, my usual attire for winter nights at home. Bridget had poured our daiquiris into water glasses and placed them on the table. Sitting there in the kitchen with my wife, I felt a little better.

"Where are the girls?" I asked.

“Sleeping over at the Gunthers. Remember? There’s no school tomorrow because the teachers have an in-service.”

“That’s right.”

“And Mark’s at basketball practice.”

“I *knew* that.”

“He’s getting a ride home with Kyle Maxwell. Although he said he might eat dinner at Kyle’s if his mom was making pizza.”

I nodded.

“Didn’t Jerome used to play basketball with Larry?”

“Yeah... They had quite a team one year. Made it to the state finals.”

I took a swallow of daiquiri and thought about Larry being gone, and about Coach Briggs, who had mentored all of us and accumulated over 300 wins, but who was fired last spring because of small-town politics.

“Maybe this would be a good time to call Jerome.”

“You know how I feel about that.”

“But he and Buffy are getting divorced. He probably wants to talk to you.”

“Maybe you’re forgetting, *he’s* the one who punched me.”

“Oh, Jason,” she said. “Why are you guys so stubborn?”

“Stubborn?” I replied. “Don’t talk to me about stubborn. So now he’s figured out his wife is a slut? If he had believed me that night at the reunion, he could have saved himself a lot of misery.”

“But Jerome isn’t the only one who’s suffering.”

“Well,” I said, “that’s the way it goes.”

“Can’t you see? This is the perfect time...”

“Look! I’m not going to call my brother long distance and talk about the death of Larry Richemier. So let’s drop it.”

“Okay,” she said. “It’s all right.”

Her brown, compassionate eyes studied me, and I had to look down at the table. With God’s grace and Bridget’s encouragement, I’d eventually forgiven Jerome, but I still felt it was his responsibility to call me. At the same time, I worried what might happen if that call ever came: I didn’t want him to break my heart again.

After drinking another strawberry daiquiri with dinner, I emptied the blender into my glass, filling it halfway. Bridget said she didn’t need any help with the dishes, so I went to the living room and sat down on the couch, in front of the coffee table which, since Christmas, held a jigsaw puzzle of Graceland; Bridget bought me the puzzle as a joke, wanting to piece together

Elvis' grandiose home herself. Across the room from me three electric candles illuminated our picture window, the floor beneath the window displayed a lighted Nativity scene, and farther down the wall, in the corner, our Christmas tree glowed brighter than a sequined jumpsuit. Still, there wasn't enough light for what I wanted to do, so I turned on the lamp to my left. Until then I'd barely looked at the puzzle, but I needed something to distract my thoughts.

A short while later, as I secured a piece to one of the columns fronting Graceland, Bridget walked in and, true to her routine for that time of night, closed the thin, inner curtain of the window. Then she sat down by me on the couch.

"John Paul still sleeping?" I asked.

"Yeah. He was awake for a long time this afternoon."

We worked together on the puzzle a few minutes, I finished the rest of my daiquiri, and then, I thought of a much better distraction. As Bridget leaned over the coffee table, I pulled back the collar of her shirt and kissed her neck.

"Jaaa-son..." she warned.

"Hmm?"

"What are you doing?"

With my best Elvis impersonation, I replied, “Jus’ takin’ care of business, Darlin’.”

She laughed, still working on the puzzle, and then said, “Mark could come home any minute.”

“He’s eating dinner at Kyle’s.”

“He *might* be.”

“Don’t be cruel,” I whispered into her neck.

“Later...” she promised.

But I wouldn’t give up. After kissing her some more, I bit her softly and said, “You taste better than a fried peanut butter and banana sandwich.”

Bridget laughed again, and then, while slowly lifting her chin for me, whispered her final, requisite protest: “We really should wait.”

§

My wife is named after St. Bridget of Sweden. When we were dating I learned my future mother-in-law always thought it implausible that, after rising from the dead, Jesus would appear first to Mary Magdalene rather than to His mother. Even as a girl, Bridget’s mom theorized the reason the Virgin wasn’t at the tomb on Easter Sunday, and the reason Jesus wasn’t initially standing there in the garden, was because they were together. However, it was

a private moment between the two of them, a moment Jesus didn't want recorded in scripture—and the Virgin, perfect in humility and obedience, was content to keep the secret. Imagine how my mother-in-law felt when, years later and married, she read about the visions of St. Bridget of Sweden, which confirmed that after His resurrection Jesus did console His mother first. With pious joy my mother-in-law decided, if God blessed her with another baby girl, she would name her Bridget.

As a Lutheran, I found this disconcerting. The crucifixes, statues, and holy water fonts adorning Bridget's house were bad enough—I'd tolerated them because she was beautiful and sweet—but her family talked about visions as if they were the most natural thing in the world. I'd gone to school with plenty of Catholics, had played basketball with some, and none of them ever talked like that. I began wondering if Bridget would have visions. With my sparse, jumbled knowledge of theology, I imagined us married and me coming home from work to find her sitting on the floor in the lotus position, humming to herself like an actress in a made-for-television movie... and my mother's voice ringing in my ears: "I told you so."

Eventually, I had to confide my concerns to Bridget. One night as we played Ping-Pong in my basement while listening to an Elvis album she'd

brought over, I tossed her the ball and, as casually as possible, asked her if she could see God. She laughed and told me, no, visions were a rare phenomenon, and then just before administering one of her special spinning serves, which I always pretended were difficult to return, she said even if you asked for a vision you probably wouldn't receive one. That greatly reassured me—almost as much as when, after our engagement, she acknowledged my frustration over still not being allowed to touch her breasts, and told me the Catholic Church thinks sex is *so important* that, technically, a marriage isn't valid until it's consummated.

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What the Church doesn't say is how difficult it can be for married couples to find a little privacy once they have children. Bridget and I had barely kissed our way down the hallway and into the bedroom, and had just started undressing, when we heard the back door close, our moment slipping away like a silk scarf dropped from a concert stage.

A short while later, as she fixed Mark's dinner, I grabbed a beer from the refrigerator. I might not have been as frustrated as when Bridget and I were engaged, but I wasn't happy.

“Why didn’t you eat dinner at Kyle’s?” I asked Mark, who had plopped down at the table.

“His mom was making a *broccoli* pizza.”

“A what?”

“A *broccoli* pizza! Have you ever heard of such a thing?”

I shook my head and walked back to the living room. Increasingly, there seemed to be no escape from that repugnant weed, and now it had ruined more than just a recipe.

Sitting in my recliner, I drank the beer and flipped through the television stations, and despite the alcohol coursing through my veins, or perhaps because of it, I realized I was watching a medley of stupidity, the greatest hits of a culture declining like an overweight rock star. And I couldn’t stop thinking about Larry and Jerome, about things that had happened in the years since my own high school practices.

It was 1991: UCLA had been through several coaches since John Wooden retired, but none of them could repeat his success; it had been over thirteen years since Elvis died—Bridget had thirty Gregorian Masses said for him—and a decade since John Lennon was gunned down in front of his New York City

apartment building; Sean Connery was alive and well, but too old to play James Bond; students studied Vietnam in history books.

I had to do something. I couldn't just sit there.

So I went into the bedroom to get my tennis shoes. When I bent and looked in the back of the closet I almost fell, and had to brace myself against the wall, and then, standing and coming out, I spilled several shirts and pants from their hangers. I looked under the bed, which didn't help my dizziness, but my shoes weren't there either.

"Bridget!" I hollered. "Where are my tennis shoes?"

When she arrived at the bedroom door, she said, "Your tennis shoes? What do you want those for?"

"Where are they?"

"I threw them out," she said. "They were old and they stunk. You promised to buy yourself a new pair, remember?"

"Yeah... Oh, yeah. Thanks."

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

Before long, though, I was bellowing, "Bridget! Where are my other sweatshirts?"

She returned to the bedroom, where I held a dark orange sweatshirt in my hands; while she was gone, I'd removed my flannel shirt and put on a second T-shirt.

"What do you want now?"

"My sweatshirts... where are they?"

"You're holding it."

"This?" I said, holding the sweatshirt in front of me as if in supplication.

"I only have one sweatshirt?"

"Yes."

"How come I only have one sweatshirt?"

"I don't know... Maybe because you sell real estate and don't need extra sweatshirts."

"Realtors don't need extra sweatshirts? That's ridiculous! Everybody needs extra sweatshirts. The more the merrier!"

"Honey," she said, "why don't you lie down? It's been a long day."

"I'm fine," I said. "I just can't figure out why I don't have any clothes."

"You're not acting fine."

“Well, I am... I’d be finer if I had some tennis shoes and a few good sweat-shirts, but I’m fine just the same. Actually, I’d be *finer* if I had some tennis shoes, and *finest* if I had more than one sweatshirt. *Fine, finer, finest.*”

“You’re drunk,” she said.

“Sticks and stones,” I replied.

When she left I put the sweatshirt on over my T-shirts, struggling to pull it across my stomach. Then I reached behind the door for my winter robe; it was a white terrycloth robe, with a red border and belt, and I hardly ever wore it. Standing in front of our dresser mirror with the belt tied beneath my paunch, I understood why: Like St. Bridget of Sweden, I had a vision, only it wasn’t of Jesus or the Virgin Mary, but rather, of the Fat Elvis, who never lost his interest in karate. I imagined myself with raven-black hair and long bushy sideburns, working out in a dojo, practicing my kicks and chops on opponents from the Memphis Mafia, my lapdog entourage that, to a man, would pretend to be caught off guard by my drug-addled moves and drop like butter into a frying pan. This pseudo-Elvis vision was nearly as disturbing as the thought of putting broccoli on pizza—would the King of Rock’n’Roll have countenanced *that?*—so I took my keys from the dresser, and then went into my son’s room

and grabbed his basketball. When I walked out to the kitchen, he started laughing.

“What are you doing?” said Bridget.

I didn’t answer her because I was looking at Mark, who had doubled over the table, trying to contain himself.

“Eat your dinner,” I said.

“Jason?” asked Bridget.

“I’m going to play some basketball.”

“Are you crazy?”

“No, I’m not crazy. I might be ill-festooned for the noble sport created by the Honorable James Naismith, phys ed teacher *extraordinaire*, but I can say, without a doubt, that I’m not crazy.”

Then I flipped on the floodlights and walked outside.

Like my father, I had put a backboard on the garage roof—although I bought a metal one rather than build one out of wood—and looking over the roof, I saw the sky had cleared. When I unlocked the side garage door to get the snow shovel, I realized I’d forgotten my gloves, but having no desire to go back in the house, I started working on the driveway without them. Before long the sound of metal scraping against concrete made my blood rush, and

the cold air on my hands and face revived me. With little effort I removed the powdery snow from the front of the garage to a couple feet past the first break in the concrete—the foul line.

After putting the shovel back in the garage, I blew on my hands to warm them. Then I picked up the basketball and started with a few close shots. The net was old and frayed because Mark and his friends don't think much of shooting hoops outside on a winter's night, but the net, like the weather, couldn't curb my enthusiasm.

I went on to some slow-motion layups. My slippers had lousy traction, and I still had a buzz, so I needed to be careful. From the left side the layups were easy, but from the right, just like when I was a kid, they proved more difficult: I kept wanting to push off my right foot.

Then I moved to the foul line. My hands were cold and the ball was slick, and I remembered that gripping it lightly was the key. I positioned my feet, bounced the ball a couple times, and with great anticipation raised my left elbow and shot. But as I released the ball my robe bunched up around my shoulder, so the arc wasn't high enough, and the ball banged brusquely off the front of the rim—a "brick," as we used to call it.

After getting the rebound and setting the ball on the driveway, I untied the belt on my robe so the front fell open, the ends of the belt hanging at my sides. Then I loosened my robe around each shoulder. The next shot arced beautifully and fell straight through the net.

As I prepared to drain what I hoped would be the second of several consecutive free throws, Mark came out wearing his winter coat and gloves. I was surprised to see him, but pleased, even though I suspected Bridget had sent him.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

“Great!”

“Can I play?”

“Sure,” I said, and tossed him the ball.

He stuffed his gloves in his coat pockets and we shot around for a while, blowing on our hands as we waited for rebounds. It felt good to be playing basketball outdoors on a winter’s night with my son, to see our breath rising in the glow from the floodlights—and yet, as time went by, sadness nearly overwhelmed me.

Mark’s shots were stiff because of his coat.

“You should wear sweatshirts,” I said.

“Yeah,” he nodded. The color of his face was changing, becoming more ruddy each minute.

Then he asked if I wanted to play a game.

“Sure,” I answered. “How about some 21?”

“Sounds good.” He threw me the ball and said, “You can start.”

Walking cautiously in my slippers, I headed for the foul line, but just before reaching it I stopped and looked back at Mark. “Let me take one more shot first.”

“Go for it,” he replied.

So I stood at the right side of the driveway, about a foot in front of the foul line, with our house behind me. Inside, I imagined, Bridget was waking John Paul. And although I was trying hard to “Be not afraid,” I thought I might cry.

“Dad?” Mark said. “Aren’t you going to shoot?”

“Yeah,” I answered, summoning my parental composure. “Wait till you see this...”

I took a slow, deep breath, of life-giving air. It felt like I was inhaling history—mine, Jerome’s, Larry Richemier’s, the history of Edson, Michigan, and of this wonderful, sorrow-filled world.

I dribbled and took two steps towards the center of the driveway, sprang lightly off my right foot with the ball in my left hand curling upward, my robe billowing at my sides, and then, as I let the ball go and it began to arc, the backboard outlined by another star-filled Edson sky, I knew I would call Jerome.

AUGUSTINE HIMMEL's stories have appeared in the *Beloit Fiction Journal*, the *Long Story*, the *South Carolina Review*, the *Arizona Mandala*, *bananafish*, the *Bridge*, *Progenitor*, the *Rockford Review*, and the *Northern Reader*. His essays have been published in *America Magazine*, the *National Catholic Register*, and *OnePeterFive*.