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Driving to Amherst

It's 4:14 AM the morning before Christmas, 1999. His family sleeps scattered throughout his mother's house in Ohio, having driven down from Minnesota the day before. His mom, who suffers from heart failure and diabetes, has nevertheless prepared a big Christmas reunion for later this morning.

He can't sleep. Worse, he has lost his reading glasses somewhere in the bedroom, and rather than wake his wife up to find them, he is typing blind on his mom's computer, using way-expanded text size.

A part of him was willing to get in the car and drive one town over to Amherst, where he grew up, to buy a new pair. Surely there is an all-night grocery there that sells readers. He knows they built a big store on the outskirts of town, an all-nite drug mart. They'd be open. He could take the dog, if he'd be willing to clamber down from a warm couch to venture into the cold with him.

In truth, he always wants to drive to Amherst. He loves his mother, but in all his years of visiting, he has never satisfied his urge to

revisit the town itself. He lived there for only eight years, from age 7 to age 15. But those were the real years of his life, the years he learned how to act and how to talk, how to want a thing, and how to live without it.

He went to Catholic grade school and learned all about that. When he was 7 the nuns used to wash his face in front of the class, to shame me for indifferent hygiene. It was a world of casual cruelty, of the sisters yanking the kids around by the ears, of drunken fathers piling into bridge abutments after the bars closed, of schoolyard bullies passing on the violence they experienced at home to kids who wondered why they were chosen as targets.

The bullies had great fun with his sister, who was sick and different -- her heart provided her with so little oxygen that her skin had a bluish cast -- calling her names and taunting her for being less than whole. He hopes it did them some good.

He fell in love with the Christ on the cross in the gym the parish used as a church until it could afford to build an actual church. He remembers the painted skin and eyes. How desolate and unreal he seemed, nailed to the back wall of a gymnasium, how forsaken to be crucified in Ohio, how naked to be Jesus and alone in a huge drafty cinderblock room. At night he believed Christ was in the apple trees outside the window, perched in his robe in the crook of a branch, sweating blood for our sins and blessing the fallen green fruit. He prayed that when he died Christ would recognize him and overlook his transgressions and welcome him into his heavenly coterie.

Instead his sister died at age 15. She went to the dentist, slipped into a coma, and died, And the whole town turned out for her funeral. It was so public. Too public. How can you grieve with everyone looking at you?

Not a day goes by that he don't think of her and miss her, and not a month that he doesn't contemplate the horror of being a young girl who

knows she will die without ever having a boyfriend. Their parents got divorced. He can still remember their father coming round to say goodbye. Father climbed the little terrace the house sat on and shook his 12-year-old hand under a raggedy Chinese elm. I just wanted to stop by and say so long. I'll be gone for a bit, he said.

Behind him was a field of muskrats and chuggers, strange animals who made hollow plunking sounds on hot summer nights. He supposed they were just frogs, but in his mind they transmogrified into something dark, cold-blooded and unsympathetic.

The whole town of Amherst watched his sister die and his father walk away. The boy used religion to get away, running off for a year to a prep seminary in Philadelphia. It wasn't quite Jesuit, but almost. The teachers were passionate and smart. The boys were passionate and good. He read T.S. Eliot, G.K. Chesterton, and Charles Williams. Everyone rose at 5:30 every morning and walked in silence across a noisy wooden bridge to the chapel, to kneel on hard bare boards and honor the dawn before any bird. This Christ was golden and glorious, and in the dark and smoke he began to heal.

But he couldn't stay. His big brother was headed to college, and they couldn't leave their little brother alone with their mother, who remained distraught and difficult. That was no way for a boy of seven to live.

When he came back to Amherst he was like a Jew returning from Babylon, literate and aware, and too big for his old parish. They put him in a Catholic instruction program for high schoolers, to keep as many of the kids close to the faith during their season of fire, puberty, as possible. They met in the old 5th grade classroom, and somebody's dad read them the lesson furnished by the archdiocese, about the first letter to Timothy. "So what are the five attributes of grace," the man asked, and they stared up at him like submerged stones. "Anyone?"

He wanted to shout out Eliot's "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" or "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," which he had memorized, and which spoke his murky take on religion, a ball of flame that was welling up in him that could scorch this mediocre masquerade. Instead, he got up around 8:30 PM and drifted out of the classroom and, almost as an afterthought, left his faith behind as well.

The years that followed were bad. He was arrested twice for shoplifting, right there in his little town. He remembered his terror sitting in the chief of police's office, dialing the home phone to deliver the news. And the retribution that followed. His mother, who was utterly without emotional resources, could not bear it. "What do you want me to do, send you to a psychiatrist?" she asked through stinging tears.

She could no imagine no greater disgrace. Looking back, obviously, the answer was sure, do it, send him. It seems so clear a case of someone crying for help, stealing aftershave from the Amherst drug store, trying to clamber somehow out of the trough he had slipped into. He no longer knew how to live. He was saying: I don't know how to go on. Will someone please speak up and save me?

It was no better in Amherst for the little brother. Being boys, they couldn't comfort one another. They didn't know how to, it wasn't programmed in them, and there was no one to tell them what to do. They could only stumble through the days, improvising as they went, hoping this day was not too painful. Their little town in the woods was like a dream, in which the people around them lived normal lives and went about their work, and were happy enough that they could afford the everyday cruelties they visited on one another, like expressions of plenty -- the insults, the denigration, the slaps to the face. So the boys were expected to put on a brave face and do likewise. They were lousy at it. He took solace from the truth that, at the very least, they were not cruel to one another.

What would it take to restore them to their lives?

The restoration of what had been taken away. People must come back to life. Parents must love and take care of their children. God must reinfiltrate the world. Time must pass and healing must happen. Weary hearts must learn to accept.

It's early Christmas morning, and snow has begun to fall out on the lake. He stands alone at the front window, watching the heavy flakes tumble into Lake Erie, and disappear.