The Minister's Narcissus

By Julia Santucci

Pastor Rustan Case sat picking absently at the fringed margin of his desk blotter, picking and then rolling the fuzz between his fingers, around and around until it fell. Behind him the sun was just coming to skim the tops of the truncated hills and its whiteness poured brilliantly into the bowl of the valley. Piercing the streak of light was the spire of the Church of the Evangel. Rustan Case was not watching the light creep to the base of the white steeple. In fact, he was quite unaware of the day, mounting in pantomime outside the window. Under the sluggish cloak of his thoughts, he was conscious only of his wife moving her violets from the northwest side of the house to an east window, a process accompanied by the snapping irregularity of raising shades. But it did not disturb his concentration as he thought somewhere outside himself, I must get a new blotter soon.

The window behind him was obscured by a network of sticky petunia leaves, but the brightening sun came through them and rested on the back of his neck like some sort of ridiculous ruff. Even though the warmth startled him he did not move. Why he had brought his windowbox into the study last fall, he didn't know, and now the leaves sucking at the heat through the double thickness of glass had grown too bulky to move again. And, although the spring was well toward its beginning, the petunias were still inside, excreting their peculiar acid smell, which he had grown to enjoy, sitting there picking at his frayed blotter.

An orange cat came in and jumped to his lap, pushing itself between him and the blotter, so he scratched its head until it purred and writhed with pleasure. He lifted the cat until he held two handfuls of her fur close to his mouth, and he blew into her coat feeling the hot breath against his own lips. Approaching steps made
him look up from under the gray wave of hair which was mingling with the orange fur.

"You have company," His wife Bessie pushed open the door. Her real name was Stella, but her father had always called her Bessie. "Stella don't fit her. She's not tall enough," he used to say. So it got to be Bessie from her middle name, Elizabeth.

"It's Adna," Bessie said.

"Yes," he said. He caught the tense rhythm in her voice, caught the impact of the quivering white ringlets and the pale cheekbones, and for this he was ashamed, not of her, but of his own firm pride. "It's all right, Bessie. It's always all right." So she left him then in the room with the petunias, with Adna.

He was dressed in an easy plaid shirt, this brother of Bessie's. He looked to be the insurance man that he was. The wool of his shirt made Rustan Case's flannel droop a little more, and the worn places in it, resewn in darker thread, were more prominent. The minister rose slightly, motioning a chair to the man who had been a part of his childhood as a brother. Now it was different. Not different between the boys that they had become. And all the time Rustan was impatient and always wiggling his hand, released it quickly as if it had been aflame.

"Hello, Rus." Adna reached over and grasped the outstretched hand, released it quickly as if it had been aflame.

"It's been long." The pastor, suddenly old as he opposed this younger man of the same age, pulled his own chair toward him.

"Yes," Adna was quick. "Yes, Rus. I came to see you on business." He watched the head of his sister's husband sink a bit until the chin touched the flannel shirt, and waited for it to come up again. It was slow.

"Business?"

"Oh, not serious," Adna slapped his hand to his knee and laughed once, heartily, and not again. Round and round the book-lined room went the sound until it fell. The minister had reached over to his blotter again.

"In fact," said Adna confidentially as to a partner, "in fact, it should prove an advantageous business for you." It was then that his eyes began to jump, to dart erratically, as a trapped bird will fly frantically to escape. Adna seemed a cage which held some creature inside himself, some creature startled at being there, and yet receiving his very identity from the prison which held him. Rustan Case did not seem to note this.

"Is it about Bessie?"

"No, of course not."

"Oh. You were always worried about me and Bessie, that's why I thought . . .," he said.

"She's your wife. She chose her way." It was abrupt.

"Yes."

"It's about your work," Adna said. "I heard of a new family. Actually he, the man, was up at the office checking on some insurance stuff, and he was talking about churches, so I thought maybe you . . . ."

"No." He was trapped now, too. "No," he said. "You know that. Why did you come?" He sat in the silence as if he were carved out of a stone that no water would ever wear away.

"I can't." It was loud.

Adna knew: He knew the church closed in the summer, so the people could get the hay in and say it had to be done on Sunday. He knew the winter congregation of ladies in soft violet shawls with hearing aids, and the janitor leaving before the sermon and saying he had to check the dinner meat for the Mrs. He knew Bessie, his youngest sister, watching it happen and sitting there in the fifth pew all the same, sitting there and hushing some wiggling child parentless in his Sunday pastime. He did not know the faith of the man before him. Rustan Case had told Adna once, but Adna did not know.

"You can't drag man to any god. You can't even coax him. You just have to wait, Adna, you just have to wait on something bigger that can saturate him with the need to be forgiven." This had been years ago, the summer after Adna's last year at Harvard and Rustan's first year in some little Southern seminary.

question, nor would he comprehend the answer of his friend.

"Where'd you ever get God, Rus?" Ad would never answer that question, nor would he comprehend the answer of his friend.

"I got Him in the church. I got Him that day when I was a kid, and hiding from Ma, and they locked the door without realizing I hadn't gone on ahead."

"Scared?"

"At first, but then I fell asleep on the carpet, and it was all
right, and I slept until they found me.”

“Yes,” said Ad. “I remember how mad your Ma was.”

“I don’t know why. I kept telling her it was all on a plan, and I hadn’t worried much.” But everyone else worried, worried about this force that made Rus so stubborn, and pretty soon even Ad didn’t come to church much, and he took his pretty little wife to the big church in town.

Years later now, they sat in the early morning while daylight brightened on the small wooden building across the street. The cat had settled down in a freckle of sun beside the pastor.

“I can’t,” repeated Rustan Case.

“But you need them. You need these young people. You need young ones in that old decay. You need something more than doddering ladies, who don’t even hold your voice so it won’t echo.” Adna’s own voice had risen, so that both men were conscious of a woman stopped somewhere in the house, stopped somewhere and waiting.

“They live on a farm,” urged Adna. “They live up on the big hill, and they want to come, but they’re afraid to come without your inviting them. He told me that in the office the other day.” Ad remembered the voice, wasteless and efficient.

“Yeah, I’d like to hitch up with some church, and Sunday School, too, for the kid, you know. But, well, Em and me, we gotta have a good pastor. One that kin really preach, so we know we’ve been to church afterwards. Not an old guy.”

“No,” said Ad. “Of course not. This minister’s not old—why he’s my age. Wouldn’t call me old, would you, young fellow?” He laughed and the man blushed.

“You’ll like him,” said Ad. “He really wants to come. And you’re no stranger to him because I introduced you. In fact, he said we were really lucky to have a pastor who has grown up in the village and knew its people. That’s exactly how he put it. So come now.”

Ad’s voice was rapid, pleading. He did not know why he wanted this so much. Only for Bessie, so she could chat simply with the other ladies. Not for Rus, he thought almost bitterly. Rus has his communion on his knees, with his cat all the time purring. Rus has that building to soak up all the poison, to muffle all the bumps, to absorb all the mistakes like his blotter. He used to joke with Bessie:

“It’s a good thing you got married in that church, or your husband would have missed the wedding for sure.” But you couldn’t joke when you were age sixty and the only weddings left were those between you and your failure which streamed behind you like a flag being dragged along as an afterthought to an eternal parade.

“They want to come?” said Rus, his eyes searching, his hands silent and stiff in his lap.

“But of course. I told them how nice your little church was. It’s so far to town, you know on a Sunday morning, and they’re young.”

Satisfied now, the pastor stood up, and walked to stare between the petunias at the rolling countryside.

“Maybe. Yes, maybe I’ll go this afternoon.” He turned. “So they can come tomorrow, you know.” Rustan Case was extracting his doubts almost physically, objectively, as a physician with sterile forces, and he smiled at the cleanliness of the operation.

Grinning, Adna took the role of insurance salesman, having just completed a difficult interview. He expanded and began to stride approvingly back and forth, back and forth across the wooden floor, until Bessie heard them and came in. Standing in the door, her dish towel a muff around her hands, she watched until Adna noticed her.

“He will?” she said.

“Yes,” said her brother. “He will.”

“Hey,” said Rustan Case. “Since you’re here, Ad, could you maybe help me carry these flowers outside?” He looked up. “Guess I’ll have to cut them down, and let them start all over again.”

And only Bessie knew now, knew more than Rustan, that even a child has no choice but to leave the womb after nine months. In this understanding lay her penetration into the man to whom she had bound herself.

“Sure. Be glad to,” said Ad.

So off they went, like two boys who went fishing, the stream clear and white beneath them and the falls thundering, dragging them to oblivion.

“I knew you’d do it,” said Ad. “They told me they were hill folks, and I knew the hills were your territory.”

After Ad left, Pastor Case remembered that there was a communion service the next day, and that he had to arrange the candles.

“I’ll be back,” he called to his wife. Moving down the driveway his galoshes flapped, and on his back the shirt made little gathers where the suspenders crossed. Having just combed his hair the little tooth divisions still ran through his thick gray waves.

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He turned toward the church. His rubber soles made no noise on the pavement, and the hardness beneath his feet was white with the winter's deposit of road salt. He moved quickly, easily, as a man who has walked long distances and who has thought only of destinations. The swing of his arms was as careless as an athlete's, but he did not have the build of one who had tested his skill.

"Ah, yes," he breathed. And with that single rush of air he purged himself of all the dust that swirled incessantly on country roads.

The church stood asserting its whiteness between the spring-brown grass of the hill behind it and the violet evergreens that capped the rise. Through the open bell-tower showed a patch of yellowed sky. Rustan Case told time by the degree to which the sun had crept down the steeple from the swinging arrow of the weather vane to the slate-tiled roof. Right now it was a good half-way down the widening spear.

The minister felt consoled near his church, the way other men feel about their fishing tackle. He did not try to explain the feeling, only that it was there, a pliant membrane protecting him from all that sought to bare his innocence, a medium to vitality and substance. One by one the dangling cords of his hurts had come to be contained in this building, contained and woven into a pattern for his life.

Each time he walked up the cracked cement stairs and pulled open the heavy door a reverent elation crept into him. Both with a slowed and lightened step he would move before the gleaming brass altar service. The whole action was so weightless it seemed to occur in water. Sometimes he would trim the dripping wax off the candles, and often he would just run his smooth hands across the velvet table cover. "In hoc signo . . ."

A battered green and orange clown doll, unremembered in a child's haste, lay on the edge of the aisle, and brought the pastor to smile as he noticed it. Part of the gray stuffing was foaming from one leg, and as the toy lay grinning blankly, Rustan Case leaned over to see the fading features. Still grinning, its face distorted by the weight of its own body, the clown was lifted and its head fell back at the neck while the old minister, his hands quick and sure, pushed the insides back up into the torso.

"There you are," he said. He propped the toy against one of the brass candlesticks.

Filled with only the exultation of the silence and the splintered
sun which entered between the window frames, he moved out of the sanctuary to the closet where the candles were kept.

Bessie, he remembered, used to be upset about the candles.

"Rustan," she would say. "Don’t you think candles are a rather large expense to add to the accounts of such a small church as ours? Really, dear, it’s all quite unnecessary. You should listen to Adna."

Adna heard about it one night when he and his wife were visiting for supper.

"Of course, Rustan, they’re very nice. But the fire hazard is terrific—what if one of the little kiddies . . .?" He cleared his throat. "What if one of the little kiddies should bump into them?"

But Rustan Case spent several hours with his tool chest, reinforcing the sturdiness of the candle-holders, and the item continued to appear on the bills sent from the church-supply order house to the treasurer. The deacons fumed regularly about it, but they felt a strange impotency to resist the sincerity of the pudgy, graying man who moved among them, but was not one of them. Silently they accepted the expense, and finally stated a generous allotment for the extravagance in the meager budget.

Rustan Case now moved in short, coordinated steps between the boxes of candles which lay spread out on the white pews, white against white. Under his breath he hummed pieces of the hymn he would use to close the morning service. He hummed busily, because spring was coming, and he had plans which occupied his entire being, physical and mental; plans which engulfed him as surely as the hills engulfed his little village.

Perhaps they would come, these people that Adna had told him about. Certainly. They were already there. He pictured them now, sitting on the right side of the church towards the front, and he knew the sermons he would preach for them. They would be different sermons, sermons that young couples liked. And maybe, for the child . . . but no. He was thinking of telling a children’s story after the scripture. It was too much though. Only perhaps. . .

They might even be the nucleus he needed for a young couples club. He felt guilty that he had nothing for young people.

Leaning back to survey the finished effect of his labors, he rested his thumbs through his suspenders and, noting the evenness of the smooth wax lengths, he gave the elastic a satisfied snap. With still a tinge of excitement, he gathered up the empty boxes, brushing into

his hand the tiny particles of chipped paraffin that remained on the seat, and prepared to go.

Before leaving the building he climbed to the height of the pulpit and opened the oversized Bible. Not to a particular place. He just opened it to the middle, which was Psalms.

"When I consider the heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and stars which thou hast created . . . what is man?" Rustan Case laughed, loud and free in his mirth, as he gave the grinning clown a last look and went to the door. The light from the windows fell across the pews at about the same place as it did right before the sermon.

"I must go. Bessie will be starting to fix lunch, and I must change into my white shirt. I have a visit to make right after noon."

He spoke aloud to the silent room. Outside on the road a car squawked and, heeding the noise foreign to his mood, the pastor gave a final glance to the work of the morning and closed the door behind him, holding the latch so that it would not further disrupt the peaceful wake that followed him toward the house, the wake that diminished with each step until it disappeared in the cry of the yellow cat, who rubbed about his legs in welcome.

He stopped near the parsonage door at the bed of narcissus blossoms and, bending a little stiffly from the waist, he gathered about a dozen of the pale symmetrical blooms.

"I will take them," he said. "They probably will like them." He pictured the flowers soaking in a tall glass, amidst the confusion of their half-unpacked possessions, there at the top of the hill. They looked a bit like stars, except for the centers.

He ate his lunch quickly. The clean shirt made starched ripples down his front, and the speckled bow tie moved up and down with each swallow of soup. He kept blotting his lips with a white napkin, which his wife washed every night, because he had only one.

"I never saw a soul get a napkin dirty so fast," she said to Adna once.

As he ate, he did not look up at all. Only he said, "It was kind of Adna to come this morning."

"Yes," she said.

Pushing his plate away from the edge of the table he arose, pressing his shirt front to his body so that it would not drag through any stray particles of food.
"I will go now."

"Now?"

"First I have to wrap the flowers in wax paper. Do you think it is a good gift?"

"Yes. But they should be asters. Anything but narcissus."

"Narcissus grow the easiest."

"I know," she said.

Together they worked over the rustling paper. They were not efficient like this, and her coverall apron got in the way, but it was finally finished.

On tiptoe she pecked at the loose folds of his cheek.

"It will be good," he smiled.

Later, as the sun was dropping in a heavy faint behind the western hills, Rustan Case turned again into the gravel of the parsonage driveway. He sat there in the car in the shadow of the house for several minutes, his hands resting lightly on the plastic rim of the steering wheel. There was an empty space in the patch of narcissus blooms that edged the driveway which gave the tiny garden a less cultivated look. Somewhere a bird gave his staccato call, and from behind the house came the faint answer. Evening clouds gathered and rested on the highest hills, while the air began to be filled with the moistness of dropping dew.

Closing his eyes, Rustan Case tried to think of his communion service the next day, but he was instead concentrating on the sun's last rays, visible as they reflected the dust, absorbing the moisture from the rich soil of the valley. The sweat on his hands made them slip from the wheel, and he let them fall to his lap.

"Rustan, is that you?" He felt rather than saw Bessie calling him from the house, and he climbed from the car, pulling the empty wax paper from the flowers along with him, so that it hissed when the wind blew it along the gravel. Not waiting for her to ask, he said:

"I do not think they will come."

"Oh." She moved her toe in a circular motion against an uneven board on the porch.

"You must be tired," she said. "I will fix a special supper for you, and we will eat in the dining room like when we have company, and use the silver candlesticks." The candlesticks had been a wedding present. To Bessie they represented a link with another world—with Adna's world and the world of her parents, all of which she had relinquished to serve this man whom she hardly knew.

Rustan Case coughed. He tried to recall the visit with the new people, but it existed indistinctly even now. They had been kind to him, he remembered, had met him at the door with smiles of thanks for the narcissus, and apologies for the unsettled house. Inside, seated among the confusion of torn cardboard boxes and excelsior they had talked about the emerging springtime and the flowers. But Rustan Case realized it as soon as he saw the house, sitting there squatting in an overgrowth of dandelions, and with the blinds pulled against the heat of the outside. He realized that it was a mistake.

As the young wife flitted about with her apron strings untied to find a vase for the flowers, her light hair curling away from the still-soft complexion, the men sat among the boxes in the front room. They talked about fishing, but Rustan Case had always fished from the stream, and the man had a boat which he drove behind his car to a lake farther north.

The noise had waked the child from her nap, and she leaned sleepily against her father's shoulder during the entire visit, munching from a box of animal crackers, and clutching a faded toy which she called Barnum.

"Grampa?" she asked at first.

"No," her mother blushed. "That's Mr. . . . " she fumbled for the name.

"Case," he said, almost under his breath.

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry." She giggled. "That's Reverend Mr. Case, honey. Can you say 'hello'?"

"No," said the child petulantly. "Don't wanna."

"Don't force her," said Rustan Case. No thank you, he did not want any more coffee. He was not thirsty.

"Excuse me," he said. "I really must be going." All the time thinking: this is wrong, Bessie will be disappointed, I must try to say as I should 'Please come to my little church. We are mostly old. We need you.'

"I am getting old," and added as a second, "or I would offer to help you get settled. Perhaps some of the younger ones of the community . . ."

"Well," said the man. "So glad you could come. The fellow at the insurance office told us about you, but he said . . ."

The wife's words rushed out.

"We don't go to church much. You see, my husband usually goes
to the lake that day.” Her mouth smiled independently of the rest of her face.

Rustan Case looked off to the horizon where violet cloud shadows moved as if to caress the thick pine groves. The wind blew his full trousers around him like waves. He left then, crushing his way through weeds which sprang up again after he had passed.

Standing here penitently before his wife, he was glad that her thoughts had already passed his and were involved in supper. Brave, he thought, but there is no choice.

This story by Julia Santucci has been awarded the semi-annual EXILE-Denison Bookstore creative writing prize.

Solitude
BY CHRISTINE CONDIT

Know, strong roots, know that not only earth is deep and vast, but hearts also.

Know, flowers, massed apart from the nourisher which lent you birth, earth, know that no matter how high you flourish in the sun’s lone, intoxicating eye, you die. Freedom from the clinging earth is never quite given to you.

Know, self, know that never quite starts freedom from the clinging loves and hearts; though you reach with mighty grasp indeed toward the sun which is your solitude.

Island Lady’s Bill-Green Sky
BY ROBERT WEHLING

Riding dauntless dolphin
Coast to coast to oil wells,
Stopping to sup of gasoline and glycerine.

Supercharged, again we’ll fly
Like jetstreams through the bill-green sky
Over cloverleafs and swimming pools
Motor plants and grand hotels.

The racing steed then surges home
To a stainless steel stable,
While I, exhilarated from my lofty ride,
Sit down to sumptuous dinner,
Sapphire wine, and sensuous you.

Looking for Enchantment
BY DENNIS TRUDELL

She waits wide-eyed and waits
Dew-lipped in sunbathed glade;
Always these trees had winked
And eyes had peeked from shade,
While elves all came to dance,
While the fairy pipers played.

She waits dew-eyed and knows
That years have blown away;
And if she had not crushed
The wildflowers yesterday,

Would elves then come to dance,
Would the fairy pipers play?