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Charles Edward Brooks

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The Second Law

by Charles Edward Brooks

*Won't there be a fatigue
Of things,
Of all things,
Like that of the legs or an arm?
--Fernando Pessoa*

"He's thirty years old: born the very same day as Earl Junior. Has a master's degree from up North. He'll teach physics and chemistry. That's all I know about him, Mattie Belle."

"But who are his *people*. Fran? There's Gibbs and there's Gibbs, if you see what I mean."

"He didn't just go to school up North. He's *from* the North."

"Oh!" Mattie Belle Street let the question drop. In her ethnography, northerners formed a single homogeneous mass. It was futile to apply Southern notions of family to them at all.

A black woman stepped onto the screen porch with a silver tea tray.

"Thank you, Maida Vale," said Frances Willingdon. "It's cooled off pretty good now. You can go on home."

"Yes'm."

Even after the cooling off, the late afternoon remained torrid. But mid-August heat notwithstanding, the two ladies were taking hot tea. The hostess maintained certain rules, and whoever partook of her hospitality had to observe them. After filling the china cups, she spooned stiff whipped cream into both of them.

Mattie Belle dabbed daintily at her forehead with a lace handkerchief "What do Earl Junior and Sarah Frances think of you taking a roomer?"

"They've been after me to do it ever since their father died. They don't like the idea of me bein' here by myself at night."

"Couldn't Maida Vale sleep in? I mean, there's plenty of room in the basement."

"No, her family wouldn't like it."

"Oh!" Mattie Belle relinquished her line of thought. Blacks, too, formed a homogenous mass to which the concept of family did not apply. From time to time, an individual stepped out of the mass just long enough to weed her rose garden or clean her hardwood floors.

"Good afternoon, ladies," boomed a male voice from the sidewalk.

The two women answered in unison: "Good afternoon, Rector." Both between fifty and sixty years of age, in juxtaposition they created a mildly comic impression, for the hostess was as willowy as her guest was tubby. For long minutes they sipped their tea without talking.

A sudden chuckle from Mattie Belle revived the conversation. "Well, Yankee or not, it's been ever so long since anybody new came to Witness Hill. Maybe he'll shake things up a little bit."

Frances set down her teacup and frowned. "Mattie Belle Street: I never heard of such a thing! Being shaken up is one thing we *don't* need around here."

*

Mattie Belle Street cleared her throat. "The August meeting of the St. Perpetua Society, Frances Willingdon Chapter, will come to order." Twenty-four ageing belles closed their mouths on the instant. "Madam Secretary, will you read the minutes of the July meeting?"

The summer heat had reached its zenith. As the secretary's voice droned through the grand living room of the Willingdon mansion, the other women worked palm leaf fans and lace handkerchiefs busily to keep from falling asleep. In the kitchen, Maida Vale and another maid labored on



the spread that would follow the business session.

Frances had established the St. Perpetua Society twenty years earlier, after she and Earl Senior moved to Witness Hill and struck it rich with their Cadillac-Oldsmobile agency. The Frances Willingdon Chapter was the body's only chapter, the membership having adopted the name over the founder's gentle protests.

Just as mystics have characterized God by what He is *not*, Frances Willingdon, too, was defined by a negation: She was *not* a member of the St. Cecilia Society of Charleston, South Carolina.

Nor could she ever have been, even if she had belonged to one of The Families and had an education, for the members of said society are males. But she remained in ignorance of that fact to her dying day.

And no invitation to join was extended to her husband, a young filling station owner with neither family nor education. It was the lack of acceptance by the august St. Cecilians, among other things, that had prompted the move to Witness Hill—as far from Charleston as the couple could go without leaving the state altogether. Afterwards, Frances told all and sundry that she had been asked and had refused the honor. This Great Lie had dominated her life ever since.

The Episcopal rector in the new community had supplied her with the name of St. Perpetua, like St. Cecilia an early martyr to the cause of Christ. That Perpetua was pictured with a wild cow instead of an organ pleased the society's founder; the attribute bespoke rebellion and independence. According to its by-laws, the new society—whose membership was exclusively female—delved not only into music, but also into history, literature, the graphic arts, and even science. Religion and politics were officially banned from its agenda, allegiance to high church Episcopalianism and the Republican platform being taken as self-evident.

Following a long paper on the carpetbagger era in the Pee Dee region, the president closed the meeting. Maida Vale and her cohort glided into the room with trays of refreshments. "Ooh!" and "Ahh!" sounded dutifully from all sides as the la-

dies laid into the delicacies.

The rector's wife, secretary of the society, took a bite of Maida Vale's renowned lime chiffon pie. "Fran, I hear you're gon' take in a roomer."

Frances bristled ever so slightly. "Well, yes, I am. Mr. Gibbs, the new chemistry and physics teacher at the high school. Let me tell you: There're members of the You-Know-What Society in Charleston that take payin' guests. If *they* can do it, I reckon *I* can."

"He sounds like a real refined young man, even if he is from the North," Mattie Belle hastened to add. "I can't wait to meet him."

"A little fresh blood does a town good from time to time," Frances went on. "After all, didn't Earl and I move to Witness Hill from outside?"

And *that* argument said everything.

*

Maida Vale set down a silver coffee service before her mistress and waddled out of the dining room.

"Science is even in our by-laws, Mr. Gibbs, but we've never had anybody qualified to give a talk on it. I'm sure our members will be real interested."

The smooth young man at the other end of the table parted his lips slightly, as close as he ever came to smiling. At the high school they complained that he never laughed at all. "And what would you like me to talk about specifically, Mrs. Willingdon?"

"Oh, somethin' modern, don't you know." Frances lit a cigarette and poured thick black coffee into demi-tasse cups. "Somethin' our ladies won't have heard of before."

"Suppose I make a few remarks on cosmology: current theories about the origin of the universe and its ultimate fate? That's a subject one doesn't read about every day."

The woman smiled vaguely. "Oh, that sounds fine, Mr. Gibbs. I might even ask Earl Junior and Sarah Frances to join us for the meetin'. My children. They'd enjoy it."

The young man's unblinking gaze seemed to intimidate his landlady. As they talked she focused her eyes on a point over his head.



"I might explore a few implications, say, of the Second Law of Thermodynamics," Mr. Gibbs continued.

"The . . . ah . . . second law of . . .?"

"Thermodynamics. It states that a decrease of entropy in an isolated system is impossible."

"Oh!" Frances rang a crystal bell. "Maida Vale, bring us some fresh coffee, please."

"And things like proton decay. That's an intriguing concept, to scientists and laymen alike."

"Pro-tone decay? I declare, I don't believe I've run into that before. And then, that other: in-tro—"

"Entropy. It's a measure of the extent to which a system's thermal energy is unavailable for conversion into mechanical work—a measure of the disorder in a system."

Maida Vale set a pot of coffee on the table.

Frances lifted a bedir-monded finger and giggled. "Well, I had right much science at the College of Charleston, but I don't believe we ever got into that." A sudden reddening of the fine complexion was not unrelated to the fact that she had never set foot in that institution of higher learning—or any other.

And then the Great Lie, which she could not resist articulating, in one variation or another, again and again: "That's one reason why I didn't want to join the St. Cecilia Society. They don't put enough weight on science."

Mr. Gibbs did not respond to her statement. Instead, he began to sketch out his address to the October gathering of the St. Perpetua Society. Almost everything he said sailed far over his landlady's head.

When he finished, Frances lit another cigarette. "The last time the bishop was here, he preached a real comfortin' sermon on . . . that very thing."

"On cosmology?"

"No, not exactly. What he said was that there's no real conflict between science and religion."

Mr. Gibbs set his cup in its saucer with a clank. "Oh, but there is, Mrs. Willingdon. *There is.*"

In the kitchen, Maida Vale squeezed an ear against the swinging door to the dining room. As she listened, she pressed one hand tightly over her mouth, as though forcing back a scream.

The Willingdon mansion occupied a spacious lot next to St. Thomas's Protestant Episcopal Church. The church had formed part of life at Witness Hill long before the Willingdons had, and its name antedated their advent to the community by many years. The newcomers' attempts to have its name changed came to nothing.

For of all the saints recognized by Canterbury, St. Thomas was the one least congenial to Frances Willingdon, and she had persuaded her late husband to share her antipathy. Thomas was a *doubter*, and God's church had the duty to dispel doubt. The saint was a painful reminder of something that had no right to be.

In the dark Victorian living room of the rectory, on the other side of the church, Frances leaned back in a lady's chair and puffed on a cigarette. Through the bay window she gazed at a dainty Chinese maple tree whose leaves were already going scarlet.

The rector squirmed in his gentleman's chair. "But Fran, we have to interpret these things. Translate them into terms that speak to the modern mind—"

"Rector, the creed's as clear as can be. It's plain English. You don't have to interpret anything. *He will come again to judge the living and the dead*"

"But—"

"Rector, Earl and I put our money on that. We counted on it. Nobody else in this town has ever done as much for St. Thomas's as we have."

"Of course we're grateful for—"

"And then, what about chapter 19 of the Book of Revelation, where it says that Jesus is gon' come on a white horse with eyes like a flame of fire and a mouth like a sharp sword to smite the nations?"

"That's—"

"I'm askin' you flat out, Rector: *Where* is Jesus gon' ride that white horse?"

"*Where?*"

"Is it gon' be somewhere in that mess of dead stars and ashes? The universe is expandin', Rector. And runnin' down at the same time. We know that from the Second Law of Thermodynamics."

"From *what?*"

"Not to mention proton decay. Matter's last



gasp. There'll just be a few sputterin's of energy left. The temperature's gon' flutter around absolute zero."

"Fran, you—

"The dyin' universe, cadavers of stars and things, are just gon' crowd out heaven. There's no room for any white horse, Rector. No room for Jesus. And no room for the New Jerusalem."

Frances jabbed her cigarette in the ashtray and stared at the maple tree, magnificent in the September sunlight. The clergyman sat stockstill in his gentleman's chair. On the other side of the door to the dining room, the rector's wife shook her head in bewilderment.

*

Mattie Belle Street banged her president's gavel: "The October meeting of the St. Perpetua Society, Frances Willingdon Chapter, is hereby closed. Mr. Gibbs, I hope you'll join us for refreshments."

The smooth young man with the expressionless face nodded curtly. The rector's wife, hostess for the occasion, rushed into the kitchen. The remaining members and the three guests—the rector and Frances Willingdon's son and daughter—sat in stunned silence. None of them had ever been confronted with the thoughts just presented by the chemistry and physics teacher from up North. None of them had wholly understood them, either, but all had sensed a hideous fatality clotting over their heads as the guest speaker unrolled his vision of the end of time.

The appearance of the rector's maid, accompanied by Maida Vale, broke the spell. Everyone in the room, except for Frances Willingdon, started to talk at once. About anything and everything except the sidereal horrors unfolded before them only moments earlier. That the universe, being unbounded, would go on expanding. That all the stars would die. It was like learning the fact of mortality all over again, but this time on a truly meta-physical scale.

Aided by Maida Vale's lime chiffon pie, spirits in the dark room gradually rose to something like their normal level. And after a few of the rector's harmless jokes, at which everyone but Mr.

Gibbs and Frances Willingdon laughed uproariously, cheer prevailed in the gathering.

During the address, Frances had repeated the word *entropy* after the speaker from time to time. Otherwise, she had said nothing the whole afternoon. Now, waving away the plate which Maida Vale held out to her, she spoke in a hollow voice: "It's the Last Days."

The rector leapt into the breach of silence that succeeded her ominous words. "Fran, I heard a little story that I know you'll like—"

"Seven seals will be opened, seven trumpets blown, seven bowls poured out."

"A little girl was at church for the first time, and—"

"He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead I believe in the resurrection of the body, and his kingdom will have no end."

Earl Junior and Sarah Frances rose and approached their mother's chair. Mattie Belle Street exchanged a look of alarm with the rector and grabbed her old friend's sleeve. "Fran! Snap out of it!"

"Oh, I'd always hoped to see you in the flesh. In the resurrected body. I knew that old law couldn't get to *you*."

"Fran!" Mattie Belle squealed. "Don't you know me?"

The other woman turned her head sideways and looked at the tubby president out of the corners of her eyes. "I reckon it's St. Cecilia."

The membership, the rector, and the two maids followed in a procession as the son and daughter led their mother outside and down the flagstone walk to Earl Junior's shiny Fleetwood sedan. "I'll meet you in the emergency room," whispered the rector to Sarah Frances and trotted up the driveway toward his own car. The rest of the assembly stood motionless on the lawn, drenched in the golden sunshine of late October, as the Cadillac and the rector's Oldsmobile drove off.

Alone in the Victorian living room, Mr. Gibbs rocked back and forth in soundless laughter.

