

Excerpt, *The Hounds of Heaven* by David Foley

*This begins a few pages into the novel. John, the narrator, has recently moved to Los Angeles with his boyfriend Fred.*

I liked L.A. It had the advantage of not being New York, but I got to know its other charms as well. Having grown up in Northern California, I reflexively considered L.A. an alien and inhospitable place, though not unpleasantly so. The weather was nice, and the spindly desert palms curving above the boulevards, the retro burger joints and grimy movie palaces kept the city's glamor comfortably adulterated with seediness. I liked driving, too. I'd gotten out of the habit while I lived in New York, but now I would spend hours driving around the city with no aim in mind and none acquired along the way, enjoying even the traffic snarls as part of the local tone.

As this might suggest, I had a lot of time on my hands. I worked from four to midnight, Monday through Thursday, and this left me with my days largely free, and that may be why what happened happened.

It happened in a cafe I liked, a short drive from where I lived. It was one of the nicer L.A. chains. It had big plate glass windows, but they were tinted, and even on the most brassily sunny days a soothing umber light filled the place. It was large enough that you could almost always find a place to sit, and there were scattered newspapers and magazines if you wanted distraction from what you were reading. What I was reading those days was Proust. This requires dedication, but I needed a project to give shape to my days, and this seemed like a good one largely because it was a long one.

On this particular morning I'd settled into one of the overstuffed but oddly uncomfortable armchairs. A watery cappuccino and *Within a Budding Grove* were at my side, but I'd been seduced by the *New York Times* crossword puzzle. The name of Captain Nemo's ship—third letter "u", last letter "s"—was eluding me, and I chewed on my pencil as my gaze drifted around the room.

It settled on a man at a nearby table. He looked about forty, with an austere, though not unhandsome, face. There's an American sort of face that, no matter where you see it, conjures up images of conestogas and mesas and cattle stampedes, though it wouldn't look out of place on a serial killer either. That's the kind of face he had. Taut tanned skin annealed to narrow jaw and cheekbones, and dark eyes that probably let him lay claim to Native American ancestry. His hair was somewhere between brown and gold, and thinning just enough to be sexy. I wondered idly what that rangy body looked like beneath his shirt.

The shirt was another question. It was unusual. Tiny checks of blue, orange, and white, it rode a razor's edge between Sears-catalogue masculinity and dandyism. It was the kind of shirt that made you think, *Is he or isn't he?*

And then I noticed the Bible.

It was one of those small Bibles, pages thin as bathtub film, which zip up into

their own binding. It looked small enough to be just the New Testament, and I wondered if this made him more or less likely to be a religious nut. I'd learned only recently that born-again Christians don't view the Old Testament with unmixed regard. I'd always supposed that they secretly preferred it because that's where the wrath of God really lets down its hair. At Christmas, my nephew had explained it differently.

"The Jews?" Joey had said, still young enough, despite his recent tour of duty, to end every phrase with an interrogative twist. "They had this book? It was called the Old Testament? And it was full of lies? And Jesus? He bled on the lies. And he made them true!"

This didn't entirely make sense to me, but it wasn't the first time I'd found the born-again view of reality arrestingly absurdist. I glanced at Fred at whom the speech was largely aimed. Joey had spoken politely, ducking his head and smiling, but I could see he was really aiming at something that would, in the eyes of his co-religionists, have been an enviable double coup: the rescue of a sinner from the twin snares of Judaism and homosexuality. Fred seemed to be taking it well, and indeed when I later tried to work him up into a state of indignation, he laughed it off. He thought because it was absurd it was harmless, and that, in my experience, is a mistake.

On the other hand, I felt sorry for my nephew. He'd returned from Iraq with three fingers missing from his left hand, and though he was trying to position this as part of God's plan for him, you could see he was troubled, and a Jew/homo conversion would definitely have repurposed him.

Of course I had no way of knowing if this guy—the guy in the café—was a born-again Christian. He could, for all I knew, have been taking a class in Myth and Meaning, and this was his homework. But not, I reasoned, with a zip-up Bible. A zip-up Bible was serious. A zip-up Bible was consulted frequently enough to need its own suitcase.

I hadn't been paying attention to what I was doing, and the guy caught me staring at him or his Bible. His eyes locked on mine for a second, and I quickly feigned absorption in my crossword.

But I could feel his eyes fixed on me. I was afraid that in another minute he was going to say something sarcastic, like "Got a problem?" or "Can I help you?" and everyone would turn and stare. Nervously, I glanced up.

Certain looks are unmistakable. They overleap interpretation and go right to your gut and, if you get one from a man who, moments before, you were thinking was kind of sexy, your stomach will flip, your scalp will burn, and your blood will sluice through your veins at a faster clip.

I engaged in what, even in the moment, struck me as a kind of ocular slapstick. I looked down, looked to the side, slanted my eyes back at him, held his gaze a second, looked down at my crossword, tapped my pen against it, then looked back up as if surrendering my gaze to the trap of his.

He looked both a question and a warning at me—the warning perhaps for

discretion and the question so blunt, so laden that it seemed to roll over the obvious answer (which, I tried to remind myself, was No) like a tank.

My gaze dropped to his Bible. He zipped it up, slipped it into his leather satchel, and stood. I kept my eyes down, saw only peripherally the leather satchel hitch up to his shoulder, traced with lowered gaze his weaving path through the tables to the door. When I looked up again, he was outside, staring at me through the plate glass window, still the question, and the warning this time something more aggressive, as if he wanted me to know he didn't like his time wasted.

I slipped Proust into my knapsack and bumped through the tables to the door, telling myself that I was just curious, that I could always take one last look and then, pretending that I only happened to be leaving the café at the same time, be on my way. Or maybe I'd stop and say something. Find out who he was. Ask him about the Bible. Then make an apology and go.

Outside, the light hit me like a hammer. It was one of those blank L.A. mornings with one of those blank L.A. skies that make all other skies look Dutch by comparison. I blinked, hesitated, started to move uncertainly away, cast what I hoped would be one last glance over my shoulder, found my gaze snagged again by his. He jerked his chin to the left and started walking.

I followed.