

The Vulgar Soul

By John Biguenet

It began as a chafing, a patch of dry skin, in the palm of his left hand. He ignored it at first, though at odd moments he found himself absentmindedly rubbing the chapped flesh.

It persisted. After a week or so, he appealed to the pharmacist in the old-fashioned drugstore and soda fountain near his house. The druggist, a young man whose diploma on the wall behind him was as fresh and white as the medical frock he donned before counseling customers about their minor complaints, asked the man to extend the hand with the rash.

"It's not a rash, exactly," he said, opening his palm over the counter. "It's just sort of scaly."

"Well, Mr. Hogue—"

"Tom," the man interrupted.

"Well, Tom, I think we've got what you need." The pharmacist led him down an aisle of ointments. Reaching for a purple box, the druggist explained that a simple moisturizing lotion would probably suffice. "But," the young man added gravely, "if itching develops, we may have to consider a hydrocortisone cream."

Sitting in his car in front of the drugstore, Hogue unscrewed the top of the bottle and coaxed a dab of the lotion onto his hand. Massaging the raw flesh with the moisturizer, he saw deeper cracks in the skin than he had noticed before. He poured more lotion into his cupped palm.

That night, peeling off his socks as he dressed for bed, he thought his right foot seemed blistered. *Damn new shoes*, he told himself, though a sly doubt vaguely tormented him as he rubbed moisturizing lotion into his hand. He restrained himself from looking more closely at the blister.

Work preoccupied Hogue for the next few days. The lotion seemed to soothe his chafed hand. The blister, which had engorged itself, burst, and filled again, required some attention, though. He bandaged his foot to prevent infection and waited for his body to heal its own wounds. He smiled at his overblown worries and let them drift away down the broad boulevards of a busy life.

It was with the startled panic of one who suddenly remembers a forgotten obligation that he felt the dampness on the bottom of his sock when he had unlaced his shoe a few evenings later. Slipping the sock off his foot, he was shocked to see the bandage soaked with blood. He hopped into the bathroom and sat on the edge of the tub with his ankle resting on the other leg. Holding his breath, he gingerly peeled back the tape of the dressing. As the bandage came loose, he glanced at the sore and quickly looked away. Taking another breath, he bathed it in peroxide. He was surprised that he could find beneath the cotton ball with which he wiped the blood no open wound, only a deeply chapped bruise the size of a quarter.

By the time Hogue fell asleep hours later, he had convinced himself that there was really nothing all that strange in what had happened. Rushing from meeting to meeting that day, he had done more walking than usual, which must have opened the blister. Tomorrow was Saturday. He would try to keep off his feet over the weekend and give the sore a chance to heal.

Despite two days on the couch with a pillow beneath his foot, by Monday he was hobbled by a tenderness on the bottom of both feet. The blistering had spread to the other foot.

He was embarrassed by the expressions of concern offered by his colleagues as he limped to his office. Though he wore bandages, his gait was

deformed by the ache of the two raw bruises on his feet. He tried to stay at his desk all day.

Driving home, he passed the drugstore but thought better of conferring with the young pharmacist when he imagined how ridiculous he would look, tottering on one leg as he laid a bare foot upon the counter. And what if it started to bleed? He often ran into his neighbors at the little store.

Hogue decided to wait. Except for the soreness, he was perfectly healthy. He felt sure nothing was wrong, or so he told himself.

The tenderness eased over the next few days, although there were a few incidents of bleeding. He began to use the moisturizing lotion on his feet. Religiously, he continued to apply the lotion to his hand, but while the dry skin did not worsen, neither did it improve. In fact, it was while rubbing his palms together with a dollop of lotion that he first felt the roughness on his right hand.

He was surprised to find himself almost resigned to his discovery, as if he had been waiting, unknowingly, for this last extremity to exhibit the chafing of the other three.

But there was nothing foreseen in the revelation he received as he undressed one night. Naked before a mirror, he saw a pink circle glowering at him just below his ribs. He watched in the mirror as his fingers inched over his body toward the chapped skin. His hand recoiled as it brushed the intensely painful spot. Suddenly blood began to ooze from it. Hogue lifted his hands to

his face; each expressed, drop by drop, thin streams of blood. He did not have to look down to know that his feet were bleeding, too.

It seemed a contradiction to him even as he felt it, but a horror somehow calm and deliberate took hold of him. He held out his hands and watched himself in the mirror quietly bleeding. The terror that rose in him had matured so slowly over the last few weeks, had teased him so often with its acrid taste, that he felt no panic. But he did feel absolutely lost.

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The next morning, Hogue convinced the nurse who answered the phone to schedule an immediate appointment with his doctor. He would have to hurry right over, she told him, to meet with the doctor before the regular appointments began at ten o'clock.

He bandaged himself as well as he was able and made himself drink a glass of orange juice.

The doctor was in a jolly mood when he entered the examining room. Hogue tried to think how to begin.

"Something's happening to my body," he said haltingly.

"Tell me about it," Dr. Loewy nodded, dragging a stool closer to the examining table on which Hogue sat.

The doctor didn't interrupt until near the end of the story. "And all five irritations began to bleed simultaneously last night?" he asked with a tone of surprise that worried Hogue.

"Simultaneously," he assured the doctor, "and for no reason."

"Show me," Dr. Loewy instructed.

Hogue removed his shirt as well as his shoes and socks. He let the doctor loosen the five bandages.

Switching on a flexible lamp, the old man examined each area carefully. "I suppose you've tried some kind of lotion? Yes, you told me you did, didn't you?"

Finally pushing aside the neck of the lamp with his arm, the doctor looked up at Hogue. "It looks like some kind of eczema. But just to be safe, perhaps we should get a dermatologist's opinion."

"And the bleeding would be consistent with eczema?"

"It would be unusual," the doctor admitted. "That's why I think we should call in a specialist."

"It couldn't be something more serious, could it?" Hogue asked.

The doctor sighed. "It can always be something more serious. Maybe we'll do a little blood work on you, see what the numbers say." He buzzed for his nurse. "Let Maggie draw a few samples, and then give me a call Friday afternoon around four. I'll let you know what we turn up."

As he opened the door to leave, he added, "By the way, don't bandage them unless they start bleeding again. Maggie will give you the name and number of a dermatologist I work with. I'll give him a call this morning and get him to see you this week, OK?"

Neither the dermatologist nor the lab results shed light on his condition. Everything was "within normal ranges," Dr. Loewy assured him when they spoke on Friday, but he asked Hogue to set up another visit for the next week. "I want to do a little research over the weekend," the doctor said enigmatically.

When he arrived for his appointment on Tuesday, the nurse ushered him into Dr. Loewy's private office rather than an examining room. "The doctor will be right with you," she said.

The desk was crowded with sprawling stacks of files and paraphernalia from drug companies—pads of paper, a pen set, a calendar, a ruler—all of which had been emblazoned with the corporate logos of pharmaceutical manufacturers. A snapshot of a young woman with a child was slipped into a plastic frame imprinted with the name of a well-known decongestant. On the wall was a Norman Rockwell print of a doctor examining a freckled boy.

"I'm glad you're here," the doctor said as he swung open the door, startling his patient. "I've been looking into your case."

It worried Hogue to hear his eczema described as a "case."

"I've found some articles on a condition very similar to yours, something called psychogenic purpura." He held out a copy of *Archives of Internal Medicine*.

Hogue took the magazine but did not open it. "Psychogenic what?"

"Purpura. They're spontaneous lesions—without any apparent physical cause."

"Just like mine."

"Except that your case history doesn't quite fit." Dr. Loewy paused.

"There is some other literature, though, that comes a little closer. A blood man I know lent me this." He handed Hogue another publication, *Seminars in Haematology*. "It's got a review of historical cases of your condition."

"So, what is my condition?"

"Have you ever heard of Therese Neumann?" the old man asked as he searched through the files on his desk.

"No, I don't think so."

"On Good Friday in 1926, Miss Neumann, a woman about your age from the village of . . ." Dr. Loewy was distracted as he searched his cluttered desk for a particular piece of paper. "Yes," he said to himself, finding the sheet beneath some folders, "Konnersreuth in Bavaria." The doctor continued to glance at the page, looking for something. "This woman suddenly began to bleed spontaneously from her side. At the same time, her left hand began to bleed from a spot that had been red for days. By nightfall, both hands and feet as well

as the wound in her side were bleeding." He put down the paper and looked up. "You're luckier than she was, though. She also had drops of blood weeping from her eyes."

"From the eyes?" Hogue repeated, unsettled.

"Yes, but these eruptions occurred in the midst of an ecstatic vision."

"What kind of vision?"

"Of Christ's passion, of course." The doctor looked at him as if he were missing the point. "My boy, she was a stigmatic—like you."

Hogue wanted to pretend the thought hadn't occurred to him. "Why, that's ridiculous," he objected. "We're not living in the Middle Ages."

Dr. Loewy was searching for another piece of paper. "Yes, here it is. I don't suppose you've heard of Padre Pio? Or the Stigmatic of Hamburg—an interesting case: the man was a Protestant. Very unusual."

Hogue was shocked. "You're a doctor, for Christ's sake. How can you take such superstitions seriously?"

"Superstitions?" Dr. Loewy put down the paper he was holding.

"Stigmata are as real as those bloody bandages on your hands."

Hogue looked down and saw the blood soaking through the gauze.

"I thought I told you not to use bandages," the doctor scolded.

"The wounds started bleeding again during the night." Hogue saw the red proof spreading across his palms.

The doctor leaned back in his chair. "Look, I'm a Jew. You think I believe that Jesus is pricking your body to make you bleed? But that doesn't mean you're not a stigmatic. The one in Hamburg, the Protestant, held only the vaguest religious beliefs. But he even carried the wounds of the crown of thorns as well as a bleeding cross on his forehead. He begged his doctors to find a cure."

Hogue allowed himself a smile. "What did the Catholics make of him?"

"He was quite a problem for them. You know, in all the literature, they take real pride in claiming the stigmatics as their own. One of their theologians quickly classified him among the—oh, what was the term?" The doctor shuffled through his papers. "Here it is: the *âmes vulgaires*. The vulgar souls. It was decided that he was 'spiritually mediocre' and suffered from 'psychological blemishes.' What a discreet expression, 'psychological blemishes'! They wrote him off as a hysteric."

"I wonder what they would have said if he had been Jewish?"

The doctor laughed. "Now there's a thorny theological question."

Hogue relaxed a bit. "All right, let's say I'm a stigmatic. What do we do?"

"Well," Dr. Loewy said, growing serious again, "the symptoms are physical. You know, come to think of it, that's the medical term for the characteristic signs of a disease—the 'stigmata.' Anyway, your stigmata are physical, but the cause is clearly emotional. All the lab work came back negative."

The dermatologist didn't really know what to make of it, but his report says the sites don't appear self-inflicted. That leaves us only one explanation. You're suffering from a psychosomatic disorder."

"You mean it's stress?"

The doctor seemed uncomfortable with Hogue's interpretation. "Sure, almost everything that goes wrong with the body has to do with stress one way or another. But this is more complicated than that."

"Because I don't feel particularly stressed when it happens. Last night I was asleep."

"It's not as straightforward as simple cause and effect. The body can be awfully mysterious when it wants to. We're complex machines."

Dr. Loewy gave Hogue the name of two psychiatrists. "Talk to them both. See which one you trust."

A question still troubled him. "Is this going to get worse?"

"Well, the classic stigmatics exhibited two or three other symptoms, but you really don't need to worry about them. We've caught this thing in its early stages."

Hogue persisted. "What are the other symptoms?"

The doctor seemed annoyed. He picked up his notes again. "Insomnia, cessation of digestion, and clairvoyance."

"What is 'cessation of digestion'?"

"You stop eating."

"And then you die?"

"No, not according to the literature. There was a celebrated case in the nineteenth century, a woman from Brooklyn named Mollie Fancher. According to fairly reliable witnesses, from the beginning of April until the end of October in 1866, she ate almost nothing—a piece of banana, two teaspoons of wine—basically nothing at all."

"So what happened to her?"

"She got skinny and became a clairvoyant. And she wasn't even a stigmatic." The doctor gave Hogue a sly look. "Of course, she suffered from multiple personalities, so if one of them were to sneak a snack, Mollie might honestly imagine that she had consumed nothing. Like I said, it's a complicated business, this mysticism."

Instead of going back to work after his visit to the doctor as he had planned, Hogue drove to the park across town. It had been built at the turn of the century by a designer who must have loved small, intricate patterns. Narrow walks scrolled around elaborate plantings of delicate flowers and eddied about the feet of carved stone benches in grottoes shaded by weeping willows. In the center of the little park, a modest fountain spilled its water into a vast, shallow pool.

As he circled the fountain trying to come to grips with what the doctor had confirmed for him, Hogue strained to penetrate the shimmering water down to the mosaic arabesques that lined the floor of the pool. He was startled when a mottled, foot-long fish suddenly shattered the mirrorlike surface of the pond as it burst into the sunlight, devouring a mayfly that had lit upon the water. The pool, momentarily animated, quickly regained its tranquillity; the ripples of the extraordinary event were diluted by the stillness of the water before they could reach the arched concrete lip that curled back over the edge of the pool. "Not a trace," he almost said aloud, but a small boy staring up at him (and watched in turn by a woman frowning nearby) stifled his exclamation.

Hogue turned and followed one of the carefully tended paths that spiraled away from the fountain. Finding a wrought iron bench encircling an oak, he sat and tried not to think. He simply watched people—the young couples furtively embracing in the shadows, the old men arguing over chessboards, the women tending children, the swaggering guards puffing up their chests—and felt for them all the most profound sympathy. He was surprised by what he felt, and he knew the ripples of his compassion, if he could call it that, would fade in the spring air long before they could interrupt the kiss of the boy and the girl closest to him, in a little stand of trees about which the path looped back on itself and turned once again toward the fountain.

He realized what he was doing and grew annoyed at his sentimentality. "I'm playing at being a saint, aren't I?" he asked a sparrow that hopped nervously from the bench to the ground and back again.

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Hogue put off calling the psychiatrists; he was uncomfortable with the idea. It was not long, however, before he had to admit he needed help.

Though it was true that his appetite had diminished over the weeks of swelling worry about his condition, the insomnia was a more pressing problem. It had asserted itself with greater stubbornness after his visit to Dr. Loewy, but when he looked back he remembered bouts of sleeplessness in even the first few nights of his stigmatizing.

He took the first appointment he could get; one of the two psychiatrists, Dr. Burke, had an opening in three days. Fortunately, her free slot was in the late afternoon. He did not want to miss any more time at the office.

Hogue's work had been suffering. Taunted by inescapable worry, he pushed himself from sleepless nights to drowsy mornings to exhausted afternoons that yielded to yet more wakeful evenings. His supervisor's sympathy was souring into anger, but Hogue, of course, could not bring himself

to explain. So by the time he shook hands with Dr. Burke in her simple office, he was desperate for a solution.

The psychiatrist wondered if he would like coffee. As he shook his head, he realized that he had stopped drinking coffee. Worried about work, he hadn't really thought about all the ways in which his life was changing. By the end of the first session, he and Dr. Burke had constructed a list of the alterations, especially the inconsequential ones, that had crept into his habits. That was really all the two of them had done, except that she had asked to see his hands. He removed the gloves he had begun to wear in public. She took his hands in hers and turned them over. "You have beautiful hands," she said, almost clinically.

"Except for my wounds," he corrected her.

"Wounds? Is that what you call them?" she asked with surprise, and she wrote something in her notebook.

He felt better afterward and slept for a few hours that night. The next morning, he called Dr. Burke's office and moved up his appointment to the following day.

The psychiatrist was surprised to see him. "I thought we weren't going to meet again until next week."

Hogue nodded. "But I really felt as if we made some progress last time. And I can't go on like this. I've got to do something about my . . ." He almost said "wounds," but he stopped himself.

Dr. Burke asked Hogue to tell her about the last year. Except for the stigmata, there wasn't much to tell.

"I live a quiet life," he explained with some embarrassment when she asked whether he had dated anyone recently.

"What about religion?"

"Well, I'm Catholic—at least I was raised Catholic—but of course I don't practice."

"Why not?"

To believe in God, he patiently explained to the psychiatrist, one has to be willing to close his eyes to a great deal. "Isn't that what they mean by faith—refusing to accept the obvious, refusing to accept what's always been right there in front of us?"

"But that's exactly what believers say," she countered. "God has always been right there in front of us. We just won't open our eyes."

"Maybe it's not so easy to see what's right in front of our eyes."

The psychiatrist laughed. "That's certainly true, Mr. Hogue. I'd be out of business if that weren't true."

"Not that I blame them," he assured her. "In fact, I sometimes wish I did believe. But I'm not going to lie to myself and pretend. It's childish."

He had believed as a child—quite intensely, as a matter of fact, he admitted. But he had outgrown religion. In college, he explained, he had realized that the wildest myths of primitive peoples weren't any more fantastic than the virgin birth or the resurrection of the dead. "The scales," as he put it, "fell from my eyes."

"But to suddenly lose everything you believe in," Dr. Burke interrupted, "surely that must have affected you very deeply."

He smiled and shrugged. "Not really. It all just stopped mattering."

So he found it impossible to accept his stigmata as proof of the existence of God. "What is a miracle, anyway," he protested, "except something science hasn't gotten around to explaining?" He was willing to waver in his atheism; perhaps he even hoped to be unburdened of his lack of belief. But when he looked into himself, he insisted to the woman, he could discern not the slightest trace of faith, not even a doubt.

"I didn't say that your 'stigmata,' as you call them, prove that God exists," she said, and then hesitated. "I just wonder if, in your case, the stigmata might not be simply an extreme form of self-deception."

Hogue was taken aback. "Self-deception? What am I deceiving myself about?"

"I don't know. That's what we have to find out. But your body is mutilating itself. It's demanding something of you, isn't it?"

Hogue understood. "Yes, of course it is."

"Do you know what it wants?" Dr. Burke asked almost in a whisper.

Hogue shook his head.

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As his sessions with the psychiatrist progressed, the stigmata bled less frequently. Hogue was getting more sleep, and though he continued to lose weight, he managed to eat something every day. He felt cautiously hopeful.

He had been visiting Dr. Burke for about a month when a letter arrived from the archdiocese's chancery. A Monsignor McRae informed him that a report from an anonymous member of the laity had suggested that Hogue might carry the marks of Christ's passion on his body. "It is the duty of Holy Mother the Church," the letter noted, "to examine all individuals claiming the stigmata of our Lord and Savior."

Hogue's first impulse was to deny any knowledge of the stigmata to which the monsignor referred. But he realized that was useless. Whoever had written to the archbishop—one of his coworkers, a neighbor, someone at the gas station—would continue to see the gloves on his hands, the sudden red spot

staining his white shirt as he jerked his jacket closed over it. Eventually, a skeptical parish priest would be enlisted to serve as a witness. Once confirmed, the news would fill bingo halls and churches across the city. Already a ladies' guild or an altar society were no doubt spreading the gossip about the local stigmatic.

So Hogue called the monsignor and asked to meet with him. The monsignor was happy to honor Hogue's plea for discretion; the church had no wish to fan the emotional flames of "miracle hunters," as the cleric derided them. The two men met at a rectory that had been vacated for the evening by the parish's old pastor. "We sent him to the movies," the monsignor explained.

After some chatting about his background (and expressions of relief that Hogue had been baptized a Catholic), the priest asked, "May I see the manifestations?"

Hogue removed his gloves, unbuttoned his shirt, and removed his shoes and socks. The monsignor gingerly touched the reddened spots. "That's it?"

"They bleed," Hogue told him, "at least sometimes."

"Anything else?" the priest asked, obviously unimpressed.

"No, not really." Hogue decided to stay away from the insomnia and "cessation of digestion." He tried to look guilty. "I have to tell you, Monsignor, I'm not a practicing Catholic." Then, to be safe, he added, "Also, you probably ought to know that I'm seeing a psychiatrist."

The monsignor was relieved. "Good," he said.

"So I hope we can keep this quiet," Hogue continued. "I find it all very embarrassing."

"Of course," the priest agreed. "The church is not interested in promoting spectacles. The faithful are easily led astray."

As he pulled away from the rectory that night, Hogue was very pleased with himself. He had portrayed himself as "spiritually mediocre"; he had confessed to "psychological blemishes." He felt sure he had fended off the humiliation of a publicizing of his condition. He even stopped at a bar and had a beer, though he found it impossible to drink more than a few sips.

His elation was punctured when he arrived home. Tacked to his door was a petition signed by five of his neighbors. Above their names, they had simply written, "Pray for us."

Slumped in a chair, the sheet of paper dangling from one hand, Hogue felt desolate. He understood that he could not escape. In a few days, hundreds, perhaps thousands, would know of his wounds. He lowered his head in despair and saw a trickle of blood running down the petition.

The next morning, he peeked out through his drapes to see if the long, sleepless night had finally yielded to dawn. Waiting patiently in the street, ten or fifteen people jostled one another in reverent awe, apparently to catch a glimpse

as he walked from the house. "So this is how it begins," he said aloud in the still-dark room.

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That evening he was visited by a representative of the Society of the Paraclete, a group with which he was unfamiliar.

"We are guided by the Holy Spirit to announce the gospel," said the middle-aged man. "Despite the authorities, we believe that we continue to live in the age of miracles. Do you believe in miracles, Mr. Hogue?"

Hogue confessed that he did not.

"Then how do you explain your stigmata?"

He knew there was no point in denying their existence. "I'm seeing a psychiatrist. We're working on exactly what's happening to my body. It's got something to do with stress."

"Perhaps you're right. We certainly wouldn't presume to tell you you're wrong. But have you considered the alternative?"

"I've rejected the alternative."

The middle-aged man leaned forward. "Mr. Hogue, you are involved in something extraordinary. You can certainly choose not to participate in the

miracle yourself. But do you have the right to deny others an encounter with the miraculous?"

"It's not a miracle."

"Why not let others be the judge of that?"

The calm, indefatigable representative wore down Hogue's resolve. In the end, an agreement was reached for a single meeting with the group.

Albert Rapallo, the man with whom Hogue had spoken, picked him up the following Sunday night. "I'm sorry for the secrecy," Rapallo apologized, "but the church authorities are rather hostile to our work. We like to joke we're a little bit like the early Christians, hiding from our persecutors. Except our catacombs are just the basements of our houses."

The group of mostly older Catholics greeted Hogue warmly. He declined the coffee that was offered and followed his host into the den. The men, women, and a few children joined hands and offered a prayer that Hogue didn't recognize. Then there were readings from scripture. Finally, the man who had led the service so far asked everyone to sit. "Our good friend Bert is going to introduce our guest," he announced.

Rapallo offered a few words of introduction and then surprised Hogue when he turned the floor over to the bewildered young man.

Hogue didn't know what to say. So he simply peeled off his gloves and held up his hands. He hadn't realized it, but they were bleeding.

"Please," said a woman sitting near him, "may we see the others." She asked so gently and so humbly, Hogue felt he could not refuse. Removing his shoes and socks and lifting his shirt to untape the bandage he always wore now as a precaution whenever he went out, he leaned back in the chair to expose the wounds. The group dropped to their knees and began the rosary.

As they mumbled through the Our Fathers and Hail Marys of their beads, Hogue at first felt utterly ridiculous propped up for their edification in the paneled playroom. But the intensity of their faces, the joy and awe of this moment for them, confirming their most profound desires, swayed his feelings. By the time the final prayers were recited, he felt a great sympathy for these desperate believers. He remembered the afternoon in the park but understood immediately the difference. Then he had been deluded by a kind of ambition; now, though moved by the group's innocent passion, he felt no pretense of sanctity. He did feel, however, as if he had finally resolved something within himself.

Over the next few weeks, he agreed to visit other groups. Invariably meeting in secret, small bands of the laity prayed as he revealed his wounds. They rarely bled, but that did not seem to make a difference. More and more often, the faithful would whisper special intentions for which they asked his intercession. Though he, of course, promised nothing, he did not refuse the woman who prayed for the remission of her husband's cancer, the man who

begged for the safe return of his runaway daughter, the couple who wanted a child.

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About two months later, Dr. Burke was awakened by a phone call just after midnight. It was Hogue.

"Did I wake you? I'm sorry. I lose track of the time at night."

She was still half asleep. "Mr. Hogue, no, I'm glad you called. I've been leaving messages for you on your machine. I'd given up on you."

"I'm sorry. It's been so hectic."

"How have you been? Are you still troubled by the . . . emissions?"

She heard him laugh. "Do you mean are my wounds still bleeding? Yes, every so often."

"So, how are you?"

"Well, I'm afraid my secret was found out. The archbishop ruled that I was not a true stigmatic, but the people, at least the older ones, were not convinced. They insist my wounds are a miracle."

The psychiatrist sounded worried. "Is that what you've come to believe?"

Hogue laughed again. "Oh, no. Not at all. I'm afraid my views on religion have not changed in the least."

"How is your physical condition?"

He took a deep breath. "Stable. I try to eat something every day. Not much, but something."

"And sleep?"

"I don't know, I'm so drowsy most of the time. Perhaps I do fall asleep for a few minutes here, half an hour there. That's the worst part really, the insomnia, but at least there's no pain. I've been reading a great deal about stigmata; often there's excruciating pain."

"What about work?"

"I had to give up my job. It got to be impossible, particularly once the premonitions began. They are so distracting." He knew she was writing down the word "premonitions."

"Then how are you managing?"

"I've become a kind of religious celebrity. I display my wounds at someone's house, sometimes an elderly priest will invite me to a secret meeting in the parish hall. That's really all there is to it. And after all, how does it hurt to encourage their belief—even if I don't share it—and to comfort them? They are so tender and innocent in their devotion, like children. You should see them."

"You don't think it's dishonest?"

"How? I don't make any claims for myself. I let them judge with their own eyes. They believe what they want to believe."

There was a pause, then Dr. Burke asked, "And what do you receive in return?"

"They make donations," he admitted. "Not much, but enough for rent. Since I stopped working and sold the car—I didn't think it was safe to keep driving—I really don't spend very much anymore. And of course, they pay my travel expenses."

"Travel expenses?"

"I've been visiting groups in other cities." He chuckled. "They joke that it's a reverse pilgrimage."

"And do they come to your house, these people?"

"Yes, but not as many as you would expect. They're pretty good about respecting my privacy. Of course, I'm getting more and more mail, people asking for favors."

The psychiatrist sounded exasperated. "Mr. Hogue, you have to stop this. It's going to get out of hand."

"Doctor, do you remember when you told me that my body was mutilating itself, that it was demanding something of me?"

"Yes," she said softly.

"Well, I've simply yielded to my body's demands. I don't understand what my body wants, but I do know what will satisfy it. And that's what I'm doing."

"But what about the people you are deceiving?"

"My stigmata are real," he insisted, losing patience. "And I simply don't believe that the cause makes any difference." He took a deep breath. "Listen, if my wounds soothe a dying old man or comfort his widow, if a few drops of my blood help a mother and father over the loss of their baby, should I deny them that consolation?"

There was silence. Finally, Hogue said, "I had a special reason for calling you tonight, Dr. Burke. I suddenly started thinking about you. You're taking a trip somewhere this weekend, aren't you?"

The psychiatrist was surprised. "Yes, to a conference in New York. How did you know?"

"That's not important," he said wearily. "But you mustn't go."

"Why?" She glanced down at her notepad and saw where she had scribbled "premonitions." "Is it the plane?"

"No, not that. All I know is that you just shouldn't go."

"You don't actually believe that you've become clairvoyant, do you?" She was angry.

"I don't believe anything. I just know that sometimes I'm right about these things, and I wanted to warn you."

The psychiatrist's anger was thickening into fear. "You can't expect me to cancel my trip because you've had a vision. It's out of the question."

"You're probably right," Hogue said, trying to calm her. "I just felt I shouldn't decide for you. I thought I owed it to you to call. Please, forget I said anything. I'm sorry." He hung up.

*

When Dr. Burke knocked at Hogue's door a month or so later, she was greeted by an old woman who demanded to know whether she had an appointment.

"Please," the psychiatrist insisted, "just tell Mr. Hogue that I am here."

A few moments later, Hogue himself ushered the doctor into his study. "You must forgive Margaret," he whispered in a weak voice. "She can be very abrupt, I know. But she's just trying to protect me. They come at all hours now."

The psychiatrist was shocked at Hogue's condition. He had lost a great deal of weight since the last time she had seen him. He was having trouble walking, and his face had grown so pale and sunken that his dark eyes seemed huge. He crumpled into an armchair and flicked off the lamp next to him. "The light, you know," he explained, touching one of his eyes.

"I'm glad to see you," he went on. "I wanted to call to apologize for—"

She stopped him. "You were right."

He winced as if he had been struck. "What happened?"

"I'm pregnant."

Hogue smiled. "That's wonderful. I was afraid—"

"It's not wonderful. It was stupid what happened. What I did."

"On your trip?"

She nodded, then took a deep breath. "I got the test results from the lab this morning." She slid her chair closer to Hogue's. "I've got to decide what to do about this right away."

"Why? You have time."

"I'm married. This isn't my husband's child. He's going to find out." She started to cry. "I love him."

There was a knock, and the door opened. "I brought some tea for your guest, Thomas."

Wiping her tears, the psychiatrist thanked the old woman.

Margaret scowled at her. "He needs his rest."

"I'm almost done," the doctor promised.

Hogue gestured feebly for his housekeeper to leave.

Dr. Burke waited for the door to close. "What am I going to do? Have this child and pretend it's Ted's? Live a lie for the rest of my life? Or should I have an abortion? Or tell Ted the truth?"

"But you don't expect me to tell you what to do?"

The woman took another breath. "I want you to tell me what you saw the night you called."

"I didn't see anything. It was a feeling." He tried to adjust himself in his chair. "I was thinking of you traveling—I don't know why. And I knew you shouldn't go. That's all."

She started crying again.

"I'm sorry." He took her hands in his. "Dr. Burke. . . Evelyn," he said, "don't let me confuse you. You know that what's happening to me is no miracle. It's like you said: my body is simply demanding something of me. And now your body is demanding something of you. That's all there is to it."

She looked into his exhausted eyes and smiled. "They take you for a saint. Maybe they'll take me for a virgin mother."

He laughed weakly.

As she rose to leave, he whispered, "They're wrong, you know. They've always been wrong. It's not the soul; it's the body."

She wanted to ask him what he meant, but the old woman was already at her arm, pulling her toward the door.

*

It was some months later, in the heart of the winter, that Margaret first remarked on his appetite. "Thomas, you finished your whole meal. Thank God you're finally eating."

Hogue looked down at his plate. He was shocked to find that he had eaten everything.

That night, he awoke with a start, frightened and disoriented. He put his face close to the red numerals of the clock beside his bed: 4:12, it read. He tried to clear his mind. Had he really been asleep for five hours?

Hogue lay there in the dark, troubled and hungry. He had sensed changes in himself, he had to admit, small things, but changes nonetheless. The blood, when it finally came, was a mere trickle lately, each drop squeezed with enormous effort, it seemed, from the wound. He hadn't paid much attention to it—the bleeding was always irregular. But now that he thought of it, when was the last time he had bled at all?

Over the next few months, he began to gain back lost weight. More and more often, he slept through the night. And the bleeding diminished even further until, by summer, he could find no trace of his stigmata.

At first he had tried to conceal the changes. But as obvious to those around him as had been the onset of his condition, so also was its remission. He increasingly sensed that those who, just weeks before, had crowded round to beg his intercession now regarded him as a charlatan, the agent of a counterfeit

miracle. By the end of the summer, Hogue had lost his following. Even Margaret, though sympathetic, parted company with him that September, moving to Seattle to care for an ailing sister.

Like any invalid unexpectedly cured of his malady, he felt—with no little resentment—his sudden abandonment by those who had ministered to his every need. Yet he told himself he was glad to be rid of them all.

Hogue tried to pick up where he had left off. He found a job—nothing like the kind of position he had held before the stigmata, but at least in his field—and he took a cramped but cheap apartment in a different neighborhood. Neither at work nor at home, though, could he recover the sense that things were normal.

He imagined himself, especially in dealings with his new colleagues and neighbors, to be living under an assumed identity. He, of course, dared offer no hint of the extraordinary events of his recent life. When pressed, he alluded to a rare illness that he had contracted but survived. And even if he had wanted to reveal the truth, what proof did he have? No matter how insistently the thumb of one hand worried the palm of the other, no seam of skin, no scar corroborated the existence of a healed wound.

When, having finally conceded to himself that he needed help in this readjustment, he called Dr. Burke's office for an appointment, he was told that she was still on maternity leave. He declined a session with her replacement.

Instead, he called her at home. She knew the little park where Hogue suggested they meet.

The woman had taken a bench near the fountain—in the sun for the baby, it occurred to him as he approached. “It’s good to see you, Dr. Burke.”

She looked up from the child, squinting into the late afternoon light. “Mr. Hogue, how are you? You look wonderful.”

“Well, I’m eating again. And sleeping.”

“Please, sit down. How have you been?”

He sighed. “It’s been strange. Like I told you on the phone, the bleeding stopped.”

“And the wounds?”

Hogue smiled. “Is that what you call them?”

Dr. Burke laughed.

“Gone,” he said, “not a trace left.”

“I noticed you weren’t wearing gloves.”

“Gloves?” He shook his head. “I’d almost forgotten about them.”

Ever so slightly, she rocked the baby in its carriage. “So, Mr. Hogue, how are you really?”

“OK, I guess.”

“You sound disappointed. Isn’t this what you wanted—to be rid of your stigmata?”

Hogue sighed. "At first, when they began to disappear, I thought I was going to get my own life back. But that's not what happened, not exactly." He looked away. "You know, it's like the world you used to live in is gone, obliterated. Now all you've got is this new world, somebody else's world."

"Mr. Hogue, this is the only world there is."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. It's just that, the whole time people were whispering 'miracle, miracle,' I never once pretended at something I didn't feel, didn't believe. And now that it's all over—I know it's crazy—now I feel like I'm living some kind of lie."

The woman shifted the carriage out of a shadow that had crawled across the path. "You know, I've often thought about what you told me the last time I saw you."

"About the baby?"

"No, at the end, just before I left. It's not the soul, you said, it's the body."

He nodded. "What else could it be? I mean, unless you believe in God and all the rest of it, what else have they been talking about? Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha—if there is no soul, then they're talking about the body."

"I didn't really understand what you meant until Teddy was born."

"That's the baby's name?"

"Yes, after my husband."

"So you didn't tell him?"

“Why? Ted would have been hurt. The baby would have grown up without a father. Where is the good in that?”

“And you don’t think it’s dishonest?”

She gave an exhausted laugh. “Of course it’s dishonest. And don’t worry, the guilt never dulls. But I realized that to save myself from that guilt I would have to sacrifice the two people I loved most of all, my husband and my child. Why should I be the happy one?”

The woman dangled her hand above the baby, wiggling her fingers and cooing the child’s name.

“You know,” she said, turning to Hogue but leaving her hand lolling over the edge of the carriage, “maybe neither one of us is living a lie. Maybe we’ve just stopped deceiving ourselves, and this is what it feels like.”

The baby was growing restless. The woman lifted him and rocked him in her arms. “He’s hungry,” she explained. Discreetly adjusting a little blue blanket over her shoulder, she unbuttoned her blouse and offered the child her breast.

He could hear the infant’s ravenous sucking beneath the cloth. “But what were we deceiving ourselves about?”

She turned her face to his, even as she continued to suckle the baby.

“Why, everything, Mr. Hogue, absolutely everything.”

The woman shifted her position, and the child, jostled, lost the nipple. Squalling, insistent, he furiously jerked a tiny fist free of the blanket, then grasping a fold in his fierce grip, tugged the blue cloth to the ground. His mother lifted her shoulder, easing her exposed breast toward the child's face. Finding the teat, but still whimpering, he nuzzled the milk from her body.

Embarrassed, Hogue looked down and saw the hands in his lap, hands that had expressed, he understood with a certainty approaching despair, merely blood.

*

So Thomas Hogue carried his secret through the streets of the city, among the aisles of the corner grocery, intent upon his role as an ordinary man. And thus he continued to live, the quiet tenant in the next apartment, the business associate whose name one could never quite remember, until he was recognized at a cafeteria a few years later by a former member of the Society of the Paraclete.

"You don't know who I am, do you?"

He looked up from his small table, crowded with a plate of prime rib, a little bowl of mashed potatoes, another of peas, a saucer with a corn bread muffin, a glass of iced tea, and the day's newspaper folded to the editorials. A

woman stood before him, balancing a red tray heaped with food. She was about his age, maybe a few years older.

"I'm sorry?"

"It is you, isn't it? The bleeder?"

"I really don't know what you're—"

"I saw you at a meeting," she interrupted, "a prayer service. Bert Rapallo brought you." She wedged her tray onto the table and sat down. "Four or five years ago." Her eyes narrowed. "No, four years ago."

Hogue sighed. "Yeah, I remember."

The woman took his admission as an invitation to unload her tray. She spread her little bowls and saucers of food among his, even as he tried to shepherd his dinner toward his side of the table.

"You were something." She shook her head. "I mean really something."

Her hair was cropped—like fur, he thought. And there was something coarse about her that annoyed him.

He tried to make conversation. "Does the group still meet?"

She looked up from her slice of ham. "I don't know. They were friends of Frank, really." She started to lift the fork to her mouth, then paused. "My ex," she explained.

"Oh, you're divorced. I'm sorry."

“Divorced?” she chuckled. “No, that’s not allowed. Frank got an annulment.”

Hogue nodded.

They ate silently for a few minutes. She would take a bite from one dish, then push it aside, trying another. Suddenly, she smiled at him slyly. “So, how did you do it? That’s what I want to know.”

“Do it?” he repeated, pretending not to grasp the question. He realized he didn’t even know her name.

“The blood. What was the trick?”

Hogue was struck by the way she ate, moving from plate to plate, nibbling, like a bee in a field of flowers. Now she was on to a small bowl of sweet potatoes smothered in marshmallows.

“The trick?” He thought for a moment. “Getting it to stop, that was the trick.”

She laughed, taking his answer for a joke.

He slowly sipped his iced tea, regarding her down the long snout of brown glass. She was a worn but handsome woman. “By the way,” he said, lowering the drink, “my name is Thomas.”

“I’m Karen.” She smiled. “You know, you almost saved my marriage.”

“Your marriage?”

“Frank, my ex,” she explained again, “he eventually dumped me for Christine Aronson—do you remember her, the blonde with the big chest? Probably not. You were just there the one night. Anyway, Frank told me I wasn’t committed enough to spiritual perfection and he needed a ‘helpmate’ who was. Can you believe that crap? That’s what he actually said, ‘helpmate.’ So he dumped me and helped himself to Christine. After the annulment was in the works, of course.”

Hogue was growing uncomfortable with the woman. “That’s too bad.”

“And then,” she went on, “right after I hear he’s going to marry her once everything is legal, I get diagnosed.” She shoved the potatoes aside with her fork. “Ovarian cancer. Advanced.” The woman slid a small cup of chocolate pudding in front of her. “It knocked me for a loop.”

Hogue didn’t know what to say. “I can imagine,” he managed.

“Frank was right—about me, I mean. That’s why I let him get away with it when we finally went to the canon lawyer. I had never really bought all that religious mumbo jumbo, but Frank liked it, so what the hell, I thought. After a while, though, Frank could tell what I was thinking, and it made him feel small, silly, I guess. We started fighting about it all the time.”

He was confused. “But what did I have to do with your marriage?”

“Well, when you came along and I saw it with my own eyes—the wounds looked like they were really bleeding, I saw them—for months and months, till

the next summer when Bert told us the truth about you deceiving us, I was a true believer. That whole year, I was Frank's helpmate. And everything was different between us—better."

"I wasn't trying to deceive anybody."

"It wasn't your fault. I mean, how could it last? What do they call it, a fool's paradise? That's where I was living. But it was paradise, at least for a while."

Hogue tried to defend himself. "There was no trick to it. I really was bleeding."

The woman shrugged. "Nobody blames you. We were lying to ourselves. All of us. And to be honest, for Frank and most of them, it didn't make any difference anyway. But for me, once I knew the truth, that I'd been hoodwinked—no offense, Tom—there was no going back. By winter, we'd already signed the annulment papers, Frank and me."

"And that's when you found out about the cancer?"

"A few months later. They pulled out my plumbing, zapped all the cancer in sight."

"So you're OK?"

"I was. But now it's back—in the lymph nodes. I just finished a second round of chemo last month." She poked one of the sliced peaches with her fork.

"But it didn't do any good."

He suddenly realized she had been forcing herself to eat.

“You know, when the doctor gave me the bad news a couple of weeks ago, I thought about you. What if there was something else? That’s what I kept thinking. What if you weren’t a fake? What if your hands really did bleed?” She laughed and tried the sweet potatoes again. “Crazy, huh?”

Hogue looked at the woman. She was still smiling.

Wiping his lips, he inconspicuously slipped his steak knife under the table in a fold of his napkin.