

## Flannery O'Connor's Bus Ride

We are far from the world of hope, faith and charity in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” the title story of the posthumous Flannery O'Connor collection that was published in 1965. The tale is set in a small Southern town in the late 1950s, unidentified but large enough to support a YMCA and a bus system. In fact, the story takes place mostly on a bus or at bus stops. A middle-aged woman and her son are on their way to a weight-control program the mother has enrolled in at the YMCA. Because she fears riding alone on newly integrated buses that might have Negro riders, she has asked her unwilling son, Julian, to accompany her. The two are at the center of the tale, surviving on a small amount of money; neither seems to have much of a future. Their neighborhood, prosperous forty years ago, is undergoing an extended period of decay, and in fact the dreariness of an impoverished small town pervades the composition. They have come down in the world, this pair, the father having long ago disappeared through death or desertion, the reader is not told which, and the mother lives off the remembered glory of more prosperous times. Her mind has been trapped in an earlier generation of a race- and class-conscious South, with its claims to antebellum money and grace; she is so representative of her type that O'Connor declines to assign her a name. She bids her son to embrace her fantasies, and tells him that his great-grandfather was once governor of the state and owned a plantation with two hundred slaves. This is a source of satisfaction. The mother adds that she “can be gracious to anyone,” which is how she patronizes those she considers her social inferiors. In her own mind, however, she remains a *grande dame*, certain of her worth.

“Saturated in depression,” her son Julian is unimpressed by her claims. (He has others.) We see the story mostly through his eyes. He has recently acquired his undergraduate degree,

and though he labored hard to make the best of a mediocre college, his writerly ambitions appear to be pointless. His namesake St. Julian killed his parents and atoned for the accident by ministering to a leper. But the Julian that O'Connor contrives detests his mother and feels the need to atone for nothing until the end of the story. He is too "progressive" to miss the absurdity and moral repugnance of her claims, but knows that he will never go beyond her materially, that in fact they'll share the apartment they live in until she dies. Julian expects to be confined to the same lower-middle-class life he has always known, tedious and uneventful, bound by routine and limited in scope, all of which stimulates his bitterness. O'Connor cannot resist the irony of making him a typewriter salesman. There is no reference to his missing father, but when O'Connor describes the "fantasy world" that the mother inhabits, she adds that "the law of it was to sacrifice herself for him [Julian] after she had first created the necessity to do so by making a mess of things."

But Julian seeks relief in fantasies of his own. They chiefly consist of revenging himself on his mother for having to depend on her. Her imagines her seriously ill and dependent on a solicitous Negro doctor that he arranges to treat her. (Maybe the imaginary doctor is a colored St. Julian.) That fantasy gives way to another, when he decides to bring home "a beautiful suspiciously Negroid woman," the "ultimate horror." Leaving his mother behind, he toys with the idea of heroically participating in a sit-in with like-minded whites and Negroes. Or thinks of the mansion the family once lived in, decades ago, "a high-ceilinged room" with "large pieces of antique furniture." (Like much else around him, it has fallen into decay, and is—horror!—occupied by Negroes.) These fantasies constitute "the inner compartment of his mind in which he spent most of his time"—a "kind of mental bubble in which he established himself. . ."

Julian tries to bring these fantasies alive on his bus rides. He hopes to rise above the prevailing race-consciousness on these outings by befriending Negroes that other white people avoid. On this particular evening, escorting his mother to the Y, a white woman vacates a seat after a black man, well dressed and bearing a brief case, steps into the bus and takes the one next to her. Julian gets up from his own, taking the seat vacated by the woman. The man is reading a newspaper, but Julian hopes to declare his solidarity and perhaps draw him into a discussion of art or politics, “of any subject that would be above the comprehension of those around them.” But the other man is absorbed entirely by his paper. He seems as unaware of Julian’s aspirations as he is of the woman who has moved to another seat. There will be no discussion of the cold war, the Supreme Court, desegregated schools, or anything else in the news that might provoke comment. So Julian considers another tack. He decides to ask for a match, even though smoking is prohibited on the bus, and, indeed, he can no longer afford to buy cigarettes. That gambit also fails.

We have not exhausted the possibilities of racial interaction, however. Could “Everything that Rises Must Converge” be written today? In the American press, and in much of academic life generally, black people and other minorities are often represented as victims. The white male is the victimizer. Women and blacks and Asians and Muslims have grievances the middle class needs to be alerted to. But in the Russell Banks piece that I looked at, two black strangers attack an unsuspecting white man in a poor neighborhood in Boston. Like the unnamed mother in this piece, the college professor in the Banks story (who is attacked) also lives in a fantasy world, one that precludes understanding the danger of entering abandoned streets on Christmas Eve. And I wondered in my essay how easily a writer could publish such a story

today. In the age of political correctness, readers are not encouraged to think independently. There is a definite party line, which readers and writers are expected to strictly abide by.

The violence in the Flannery O'Connor story produces a much harsher result than the indignity and injury inflicted on the college instructor in Banks's *X-Mas*. A large black woman enters the bus at a stop on the route with a little black boy, presumably her son. She is bristling with anger, her life apparently poisoned by chronic rage, and sits next to Julian, emitting "a muted growling like that of an angry cat." She is wearing "a hideous hat," which Julian notices with delight is identical to the one worn by his mother. Soon the boy and Julian's mother are playing peek-a-boo with their fingers widening and closing like the slats of a blind. All the while the boy's mother "is rumbling like a volcano about to become active." Two women, two mothers, two sons, identical hats. It establishes an identity of sorts between the two women, but one that for the black passenger generates only rage. The mother lives in the fantasies of the gracious manners of a South where people know their place. The black woman is strictly contemporary. She is furious with whites and sharply resents the game-playing between her son and Julian's mother. But Julian's mother relishes the exchange and decides it needs a final touch to complete it. She wants to award the friendly, fun-loving youngster with a bright new penny. Julian warns her against it. Befriending Negro passengers is fine, but this one is not a candidate. The mother goes ahead anyway, and outside the bus—for all four have gotten off at the same stop—she tenders a penny to the small boy. The black woman responds by striking the older woman in the head with her purse and knocking her to the ground.

Julian's mother is of course stunned by the violence, and more than simply stunned. She intends to end the evening and go home. But this is just an inchoate reaction, and after she raises herself from the street, she staggers and falls. In her derangement, she asks Julian to call on the

long-dead grandfather for help. But she is dying, the attack on the street has induced a stroke, and Julian tries to rouse her as he takes in her “fiercely distorted” face. He cries for help, but the streets are empty. His anger towards her has vanished. She is no longer a compound of pettiness and prejudice, the object of such intense distaste, but his mother, for whom succor, from him or anyone else, is now pointless. He runs for the help that is too late to matter, and “a tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing for the moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow.” Julian claims the title of his namesake after all.

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