

G. Keizer, Help

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man

also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us."

There's more, but you've heard enough, haven't you? You don't like the story one bit. Neither do I. Tell me, though, what don't you like about it? Isn't it that Abraham sounds like such a prig? Isn't it that you are outraged by that chasm—and who put that there, God? and where the hell is he, anyway?—that cannot be bridged and that doesn't allow so small a mercy as a drop of water on a burning tongue? It's not like the man is asking for a pardon. A mere drop of water. Jesus better not have told such a story, you say. Only a monster would make up something like that.

It takes a moment for your eyes to focus and for your mind to grasp that this intolerable chasm represents the contrived separation between the rich man and Lazarus in their lives on earth. *Even the dogs licked his sores.* But the rich man would do nothing beyond the crumbs falling inadvertently off his table—as through some great galactic void—down to Lazarus's open hands. God doesn't pass sentence on anyone in this parable. God is noticeably absent. For all we know, God may not even exist. Before we realize what we are doing, we pass sentence upon ourselves.

Dickens says much the same thing in *A Christmas Carol*. I would not be surprised to learn that he had the parable of Lazarus in mind. We remember the three ghosts and Bob Cratchit and all the rest, but who recalls that haunting vision of hell that Marley shows old Scrooge before the spectral visitors arrive?

The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went. Every one of them wore chains like Marley's Ghost; some few . . . were linked together; none were free. Many had been personally known to Scrooge in their lives. He had been quite familiar with one old ghost, in a white waistcoat, with a monstrous iron safe attached to its ankle, who cried piteously at being unable to assist a wretched woman with an infant, whom it saw below, upon a door-step. The misery with them all was, clearly, that they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power forever.

I feel that you and I are at a place now where two friends might be who have driven all night and find themselves parked and wide awake at the side of the road. Perhaps they have narrowly escaped an accident a ways back and are still high on the adrenaline. Or perhaps they have just dumped a pain-in-the-neck hitchhiker and feel roused just to be rid of him at last.

They could be near the ocean, which is so dark that it exists only as a primordial sigh. Or they could be on a bluff overlooking the last town they drove out of, seeing it now as an alien vista, a Martian city on a plain. And their choice of metaphor leads them to those subjects that friends are prone to discuss on a night like this—especially when they are young, and for this moment, at least, let us be young—such things as whether there is life on other planets and if true love really exists and if you are meant to be with one special person or if there are

hundreds you might love for a lifetime and if there is anything after this life and where people go when they die.

And then you ask me if I believe in it, or maybe I just say that I do without your asking.

Yes, I believe there is such a thing as hell.

The look on your face makes me want to take it back, but I don't think you will believe me if I do. "That's horrible," you say.

It's all horrible, I say. It's so horrible that you might wish for a hell even if there wasn't one. I read an article the other day about the world trade in prostitutes. Young girls kidnapped from their villages or on their way to what they have been told are jobs in other villages. Gang-raped on videotape. Their captors threaten to send copies to their parents if they don't cooperate. They live under constant threat of violence, in constant risk of disease. They live in "permanent gynecological pain."

So let us say there is no hell. But what if there is a life beyond this one? What kind would you like? The sex slaves meet up with their masters on the shores of eternity. "So, like, what was that back there all about?" They reach the conclusion that it was a learning experience. Side by side they swim toward the Big Light. Pimps 'n' ho's. The girls get to wear designer bikinis. A consolation for all they've been through.

Maybe in a past life these girls were Danish sex tourists, in which case, they're just working off bad karma now. Maybe Lazarus was once a robber baron. Maybe we should go back for the cedar boughs. At least we could try to retrieve some of the money. Cut our losses.

Or maybe there's just nothing. Definitely no afterlife, maybe no God. Just luck. "The absurd," so called, a philosopher's flimsy attempt at euphemism. Absurd? I don't think so. *Waiting for Godot* is absurd. Sitting through a whole performance without nodding out once is absurd. But a world in which some of us get to be sex slaves and some of us get to live on Sesame Street is not absurd. It is horrible.

Hell is merely the least horrible in a set of horrible possibilities. I'm saying things to you that I have never said to my daughter, and she'll be twenty next month. I'm saying things I never said in that many years of preaching from a church pulpit. I'm saying things that, frankly, I'm not even sure I believe, and yet I hear myself saying them.

Do you know what I imagine the torments of hell to be? Not the wrath of a sadistic God, that's for sure. Not even the anguished reaching out to the needy on earth that Dickens talks about. The torments of hell are nothing but an eternal sting of remorse for the missed pleasure that would have been ours had we made a more just world.

I said *the pleasure*. Your surprise at that statement is like a brief, metallic foretaste of hell. It's what that nun heard in the Salvation Army kettle. We like to tell ourselves that we may have to forfeit some future paradise because we find the joys of the here and now too good to resist. We are unable to enter that gray cloistered gloom of delayed gratification that is the monastic life and the socialist state. Such a bunch of old sensualists we are. Such reprobates, such irrepressible rascals. There is bound to be hell to pay.

It's all a crock. A crock with two nickels and a dime. That we had too little fun, not that we had too much—that will be our damnation. No hangovers in the hereafter. If we are punished, it will not be for our indulgence but for our rigid self-denial, our disciplined refusal to have a better time with one another. We would have had a better time had we been more willing to share. You probably expected me to say, "had we been more willing to help." At the end of the day—at the end of the world—the difference is one of synonyms.

But that is not all I believe. You got me going on this, and now I can't stop. I want to slide off the hood first. I need to say this part standing up. If they could hear me down in that Martian city, I'd tell them too.

I also believe that we can abolish hell. I am not talking about building a heaven on earth, which has been tried and seems only to lead to more hell. I am talking about abolishing hell, in all the ways it exists, because as long as it exists in even one of these ways, it *might as well exist* in all the others—as an apt metaphor, a psychological state, a metaphysical reality. All the way down the line. I am talking about another way of saying "on earth as it is in heaven." In hell as it is on earth.

It is precisely because I believe in hell that I believe it can be abolished. A justice so dreadful calls for some justification, and the only possible justification is that we could have gotten rid of it if we wanted to. We could have stood before our Judge and said, "We got rid of ours. What are you going to do with yours?"

Imagine waking up early on a Monday, and in those first gray moments when your drowsy mind asks itself, "So what goddamn thing is on my agenda today?" you remember that the agenda has recently been revised. The business of the day, of everybody's beautiful, purposeful day, is to abolish hell. To destroy *the goddamn thing* once and for all.

And what might that involve? It would involve what political scientist Judith Shklar called "putting cruelty first," that is, first among the things that have to go. If help, as Philip Hallie defined it, is like covering someone with a blanket and allowing her body to create its own heat, then cruelty is the act of turning a body against itself. Its nerves and reflexes, against itself. Its inability to hold back from shivering, shitting, or screaming. Cruelty is the antihelp.

Consumerism is a soft form of cruelty. It too takes advantage of the body's naive devices. Its atavistic desire to store sugar and salt. Its hard-wired need for neural stimulation. Its long-evolved predisposition for rhythm, acquisition, display. Its snuffling, burrowing drive to meet its perceived needs, even when they are not, in fact, its real needs.

I said we could abolish hell. I didn't say we would.

Even if we did, there would still be volcanoes. There would be earthquakes and diseases we could not cure. Dogs, mosquitoes, and snakes would still bite. We would still die. But no one would die in needless torment or alone. No one would be without help.

We would still have to work, probably harder than ever before. There could be no abolition of hell without the reformation of work, without the reclamation of work from mere toil. For the poor that would mean some other fate than being the expendable "help" of a service economy. Simone Weil began to grasp this when she went to work in the factories. The liberation of the worker must be found in the shaping of the work itself. The pleasure of the worker might be found there too.

When I asked Brian Cole what he did to keep the sadness of his ministry from getting the better of him, he told me of an antique store in Asheville where he sometimes goes on his lunch hour.

People make beautiful things. They make beautiful rugs, beautiful pieces of furniture. I need to remember that not everything is

broken, not everything is destroyed, not everything is lost—that some folks made things that worked and lasted and held together.

I wonder if he has ever sensed a connection between the broken lives of the "folks at the shelter" and the fact that these beautiful objects in which he takes such comfort and delight are *antiques*. That is to say, that human beings are unmade whenever they are divorced from making. And it has been a long and rancorous divorce.

When my former student makes his arbors and trellises, he is transformed. He thinks of himself no longer as a loser but as a maker. An artisan. He is still poor. If anything, his poverty seems like more of a crime when he is able to achieve these rare moments of transcendence. They excuse nothing. But, like Cole's antique shop, they help me to remember that not everything is in pieces. Something still works even in those who may not always qualify as "the working poor."

In another month I will return and find his porch lined with rustic archways, set side by side along the railing, ready to sell. He will drag each one forward and turn it so I can admire the designs. They are built to stand as doorways to a garden. Perhaps one of them will be wide enough for both of us to walk through.

Only the sound of crickets now. The car engine is too cold to accompany them with its ticking or singe the long grass underneath. A red flare, or perhaps a meteor, flashes like a brief exclamation point in the sky. *I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven*. Or did you just flick your cigarette over the embankment?

"It's getting pretty late," you say.

It is in fact very late. I never meant for us to stay out this long. All I meant to say was, maybe it is not too late. Maybe even at our age—for it seems as though we have grown old in a matter of hours—we are not past help.

Come on. I'll take you home.