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'I can really get behind this new product. It's something to believe in.' Dad rubs the sensitive area above his mutt's tail. The dog's enjoying it so much, I feel he's taking my place as son. Maybe the dog's a bitch, but I don't think so.

My father tells me he's 'really pumped about this new product.' When he starts to tell me again that this is a product he can really get behind, I ask him if the dog's gay.

It's the Sunday after Thanksgiving and only nine people came to this morning's Eucharist. On the drive out to Clay Creek, I reassure my father that it's probably because everyone's sleepy from turkey leftovers. He bellows so loud I open my window to get it out of my car. Wind whips in and pierces equally with a Nordic chill, uncharacteristic in Southern Mississippi. It punishes him, as intended. Up my neck rises guilt. It warms my head.

I search for another joke ('You're postponing the inevitable', chides my internalised sister, eyebrows raised without rumpling her brow. Thanks to a fresh injection of Botox, she's wide-eyed and innocent as a fish). 'Don't sweat it, Dad. Your parishioners are still on the crapper, giving thanks for their first solid evacuations in days.' That one makes less sense, but it does the trick. He rubs knuckles into the corners of his eyes, and I'd bet his dog's life Dad's excreting real tears from those leaky ducts. My father's dog leaps on my lap to shove his bird-thin face out my window.

'Your dog just farted.'

This 'tickles' my father so pink he bangs the dashboard until I yell over the radio's *Don't know much about the French I took*: 'Jesus Tits! If you don't fucking quit it, our last crap's gonna happen in my Honda, after we wreck into one of these pines. Fuck.'

Slow down, Big Guy, he maybe says. I'm too pissed to hear him.

My sister has given me orders to conduct a Worse Case Scenario Talk. After hearing from Dad *a couple three* too many times that he can really get behind this new product, that the protein powder he's stockpiling in the bathroom is better than what those fuckers load into their BMWs at Whole Foods ('Whole Paycheck!' he yells and laughs at least once per visit), because it's fortified with bull semen. 'Says who?' she balked. And then according to both of them she interrupted his testimony about the good character of someone named Michael Jackson—not *The*—who recruited him to 'rep' this product. "...Out of a crowd of people," while window-shopping in The French Quarter with his sweetheart, Irene. 'Michael spotted me and said he could tell instinctively that I'd make a good salesman.'

She asked if Dad confessed his catalogue of failures as a salesman to this pyramid scheme recruiter. Did he mention his job as priest, as a bona-fide servant to G-O-D?

He called her a ball-buster.

'Well you would know,' she concluded, 'given all the bull's nuts you've personally busted with your silky smooth

fingers.

So they're on hiatus, and I'm left to make sure my father doesn't drive himself headfirst into Ruin. He's being boycotted by his parish and invited to leave. His plan, he announced, once he's pushed out of the rectory, is to move in with the parents of his fiancé. She's my sister's age.

'The church is giving me the pinch,' he says. He runs the tip of his index finger along his moustache, whose white hairs spike like a plastic scrubbing brush.

'Yup. They're putting the squeeze on me. The honeymoon's over for Dear Old Dad.'

As soon as the car door's open, the mutt runs off and disappears over a hill. I pray to Bejesus that he's accidentally committed suicide over one of the park's sudden cliffs.

'If the dog gets lost, we're going to be here way past sunset, Dad. Will you please put it on a leash?'

'Lay off, Buddy. It is a good dog, and its name is Happy. Feel free to call *him* by his name if his behavior does not meet your high standards.'

In the flinty winter sun his face shines like a pet rock, polished in some kid's worried fingers. He's gained weight, and this new fat has erased some of his wrinkles. When did my father become so young, full of bull's semen and adolescent fury? It ages me. He ages me. Happy ages me. I shake my head and look at the ground, at fallen leaves and broken sticks and dead stones. They lie there, inert as a landscape.

He stops at the top of a steep hill. 'What a view!' We can see over the hills and valleys that make up this crappy state park, nestled in Mississippi's nether-regions between the leggy Piney Woods and the bloated Coast. What we see is an endless spiked sea of gray, wires without home or purpose. The trees will pretend to be dead for the winter. Playing possum, like children. Faking out Death. Do hibernating animals ever choose not to wake up?

'Such great heights!' he exclaims.

We are high. The path's loose gravel gives me reason to pause as well. Words hum in my ear like a noisy mosquito. They're my sister's. 'Precipitous decline', she buzzes.

'If I move in with them, I could easily have a year without paying rent. How sweet it is! Talk about breathing room!'

I laugh because I know he wants something from me, but I'm distracted by how his moustache hairs must feel to his finger, what kind of reassurance they offer: change, growth, a trimmable order.

I want to indulge my father to the point of confidence. 'Happy, you little piece of shit, where the hell are you?' He laughs and heads down; I follow, close on his trail.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Emily Lundin.*