

Gorden Schweers: *Atonement*

For Bob Akerstrom

Grey light in an early morning overcast. Traffic to the airport is minimal. Buckled in to her seat, Bea glances down from the overpass to the intersection of several layers of traffic. Their city has become a behemoth of concrete. Twenty hours from now she'll be basking in the Mediterranean weather of Tel Aviv. But of the vehicles racing below her, she notes they travel in different directions. This makes sense. Next to Durance's side of the expressway a white van slash-painted in the logo of a courier service accelerates past at great speed. On the horizon, the control tower for the airport dominates the skyline like the tower in a modern state prison. There are tears of joy in Bea's eyes now and the reference of a smile. Behind the tower, a jet carrying 8 crew and 204 passengers lifts off the runway. Like a surface-to-air missile launched at an opaque ceiling, it vanishes in to the clouds on its way to its next destination in Dallas, Texas - or Kuala Lumpur.

"Can't you just hurry up?" Bea asks in a voice that is more command than question.

"Not if I don't want to get a ticket for speeding," Durance Beusch says in response. He's learned not to let his wife's opinion dissuade him in anything. Attitude is everything. Beusch is the type of alpha male they cast in movies like *American Sniper*.

The enamel on the hood of their Nissan has peeled open, exposing the undercoat under the paint. A ticket for speeding would more than likely include a motor vehicle inspection which their rusted import would never pass. Just like with his own life, Beusch takes pride in keeping the car on the road and more or less functional even if various items such as the turn signals and one of the windshield wipers no longer function. Further, due to Bea's concern over missing connection with her travel group, they've left an hour early. He'll punch in to work at the mill soon after dropping his wife off at the airport. Her actual check-in time is at the top of the hour, and the charter flight to Israel an hour after that point. Why the mad rush? He's been disgruntled ever since the alarm went off at 5 am. To his complaints, Bea had shouted from inside the bathroom

where she stood at the mirror meticulously putting on her eye shadow, “People who can’t be on time can’t love.” Beusch wasn’t about to let her away with that or any other comment. He shouts back through the door that was probably locked on the inside, “The end of one thing marks the beginning of another.”

The courier van has almost disappeared from sight ahead of them. Her husband is acting this way, Bea tells herself, out of resentment. But she wouldn’t have to think about him for the next fourteen days. She’ll be around supportive people for a change. Mr. Beusch isn’t her sole lord and master by a long shot: *Co-Dependent No More*.

“I asked you to come along,” she reminds him, “and what did you say? A flat out - *No*. You said, ‘Not interested in climbing the hill up to Golgotha now or in the future’. So now you have a chip on your shoulder when I take the initiative to go by myself.”

“I’ll miss you,” Beusch confesses as if trained to avoid jabs from other fighters. Days earlier he had entered her study and sat in the chair at her desk facing her, appealing in silence for a moment of her time. She wasn’t forthcoming. He has already wasted twenty-two years of her life. She had a miscarriage because of him; she hasn’t forgotten. Bea continued to shuffle through her travel documents, ignoring the intrusion. Belittled, Durance has no choice but to get up and leave like a chastened little boy. *Why does our relationship have to come to this?* They tied the knot when very young. Bea was four months pregnant with Ginny when they were married by a Justice of the Peace. Their honeymoon never happened. Instead Beusch had to leave with 120 others in one of the five company buses parked adjacent the industrial compound. He won’t see Bea again until she is five months pregnant; and then at nine months she’ll give birth to their daughter without his support. Durance will be worlds away, working in camp as part of a survey crew mapping out the *Tar Sands* boundaries across the tundra in the north of the province. Twenty-one years has since evaporated. Perhaps in two weeks Bea will come home from Israel with a more positive attitude. *A change is as good as a rest*.

An array of signs appears overhead as they near the terminal. Beusch picks out the lane that allows for **DEPARTURES** and parks at the glass entrance of the airport. In the

lane ahead of them, a dozen or more passengers stand waiting as their luggage is unloaded from the vault of a tour bus. Beusch says aloud, “Now that’s a damn good idea” when he sees the arrivals roll their luggage away on wheels attached to the corners of their travel cases.

“This is fine,” his wife tells him. “You don’t have to come in with me.”

“I’ll help you with your luggage,” he offers.

“No,” she says in response. “You can’t park here. I can handle it myself.”

Signs on the sidewalk and walls back up her perspective. Cars left unattended will be towed away at the owner’s expense. At the very least he wants to get the luggage out of the trunk and give Bea one last farewell hug. She’s flustered by the attempt to show her any consideration and warmth, as if she’s a casual acquaintance not his wife. A moment later her floral outfit merges with throngs of people entering the airport. Beusch stands on the pavement next to his Nissan like an unpaid taxi driver. Nothing about this trip to the Holy Land feels quite right. Perhaps though this is the way people facing long flights around the world unconsciously react to the stress of a biological change in their metabolism. Bea along with her group of Christian do-gooders face a grueling twenty hour flight. Is she annoyed with him, as she says, because he refused to tag along, a decision he now regrets? That therapist friend of Bea’s recommended separate vacations to resolve their differences. Beusch took a dislike to her right from the start. As soon as he stepped in to the counseling office she said to him, “There’s no smoking allowed in here.” Therapist or no therapist (with fancy documents plastering the wall behind her to back up her own prejudices) he stood up to her, saying, “Fat people take up too much of my space.”

Bea took the therapist’s advice to heart. Less than a week later she came home with the announcement she would be going to Israel with 12 others from her church. That was yet another sore point in their relationship. Once Ginny and Jarrad left home, Bea insisted on going off by herself to Sunday service in the downtown Episcopalian cathedral. This new devotion to *Jesus* was counter balanced by the indifference she began

to show Durance. *Silence (they say) is golden;* but hers implied contempt as she got herself ready in the last weeks leading up to the boarding ramp attached to the entrance of a Boeing 737. The door of the catacomb of the charter jet would be unsealed a world away and the evangelists would be in Israel, no doubt singing *Alleluia* and tossing down palm branches on the tarmac.

At the airport, his parking time is up. A security guard approaches, insisting he move his vehicle. Other vehicles are behind his, waiting to unload. Some honk impatiently. *Okay, okay, (he says) you don't have to be a bitch about it.* Pulling away from the curb, Beusch tries to lighten up and hums a favorite tune, *I'm on the road again.* Yet as he clears the east wing of the complex, another jet gains thrust from its takeoff. In a blink, his mood switches to one of anxiety. Clutching the steering wheel, he leans behind the windshield to watch another metal bird gain altitude. It might just as well be taking away his elan at the same time. Overhead traffic signs indicate routes out of the airport but he finds he cannot let his wife turn her back on him with such indifference. Like a fool in a blindfold – and in a series of disastrous blunders he will repeat for the next fourteen days - he takes a detour that leads to the open air parking lot. An arm of steel lifts once he inserts his debit card between the lips of a metal wicket: *ka-ching >\$30 for an hour's worth of airport parking time.*

Rays of sunlight knife through the overcast as Beusch saunters back to the airport. Flowers planted along the sides of the terminal are breaking out of their bulbs by the miracle of organic germination after the long dormancy of winter. Beusch notices neither the people he passes on his way to the terminal nor the attempts by the gardeners to mitigate the austerity of a modern facade. He tells himself he wants to do the right thing, to give his wife the support she deserves; and by placing a soft kiss on her lips, remind her he is the most important thing in her life. The airport is bustling with beautiful young women. Stewardesses in uniform wheel their luggage carts briskly past Beusch. He visually paws one of them as she passes in an opposite direction but she completely discounts him on her way to a change of planes at Heathrow; thence to Paris, and then in the air again on her way to a three day layover in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Lineups are all over the airport. People stand in single file like petitioners at counters for specific airlines and destinations. Others undergo screening by airport security, searching for explosives or weapons. Still others stand outside the doors of restaurants, waiting for an empty table. Beusch can't help but wonder how much of the world's population is living in airports at any given moment, hopping from city to city on different continents.

At the juncture of the east and west wings, a screen updates flights on a regular basis. Gate numbers are given, along with arrival and departure times. Beusch's eyes flip down the list, looking for his wife's specific flight and gate. The screen reads like an atlas of the world. London. New York. Tokyo. Honolulu. Auckland. Tel Aviv. The scroll is updated on a regular basis. Bea's flight is posted as leaving in 45 minutes from Gate 18. Another map shows the layout of the airport along the axis of a hexagram. If he has read the map correctly, Gate 18 must be to his left. Beusch begins to count off the numbers above the rooms on the west side of the terminal. Carts run by batteries thread through throngs of people rushing in the same direction. *Where is everyone going – and why?* But he finds Gate 18 on the opposite side of the hallway. It isn't what he expected. Gate 18 has a kiosk to one side of a glass wall. On the other side of the wall, passengers with tickets in their hands wait for their flight to be announced. Two hundred pilgrims from various denominations mill about inside the enclosure. Beusch is completely out of synch and stands straining to catch his wife's eye for one final adieu. His heart is on his sleeve. The last thing he is capable of admitting is that he doesn't want to face the apprehension of the next two weeks alone, though he hasn't the slightest insight into his impending *trial by fire*. For now, there are too many bodies in the way. People are talking to each other, their words protected by a barrier of glass. Then Beusch locates Pastor Rainer in the multitude, at the coffee desk stirring his morning espresso and talking to another minister. His eyes follow Rainer through the crowd as he walks back to his flock seated in the far corner of the enclosure. At least a dozen of the faithful Episcopalians (including wife Bea) signed up for this *once-in-a-lifetime opportunity* to walk in the

footsteps of their superstar, Jesus Christ. They'd better be ready to go through a dozen Israeli check points first, Beusch quips as he stands on his toes, straining over a sea of heads.

The outline of Bee's face appears for a few seconds in the crowd. She looks younger, even radiant, among friends. Inside the enclosure, the mood of the faithful is animated towards festivity as if the *Second Coming* is close at hand. Lot's wife may have looked back towards Gomorrah; but Bea doesn't notice the man who purports to love her like no other standing on his toes outside a glass wall, pleading for her attention. Beusch has become categorically invisible.

The throng inside the room is galvanized by the announcement they can now board their magic carpet for Israel. People line up and begin handing their tickets to an employee who checks off each passenger on the list she carries on a clipboard. Beusch stands back and watches like a man denied Paradise, separated aside from the chosen ones. When the last passenger disappears past the gate, Beusch sulks at the windows facing the main runway. Painted across its tail boom, the charter aircraft sports the figure of Jesus tending a lamb. Bea is aboard, her face perhaps at one of the portholes. Beusch waves like a manikin on a string and at nobody. The plane is turning at the farthest end of the runway, waiting for clearance. It's too late for Beusch to leave, sparing himself this one last vilification. Granted permission for takeoff, Flight Fox Trot 3592 accelerates at great speed until its bulk lifts off on its way to Gethsemane. In a few seconds it disappears, floating at 838 km/h along an intercontinental jet stream.

Beusch's aspirations topple to the floor. It would be appropriate to pray for his wife's safe arrival but he can't imagine where to direct his words. In any case, the opportunity to travel is what exhilarates Bea as never before. She's told him repeatedly, "We women are taking over the world." Any danger is secondary to the thrill of the experience. In any case, along with the rest of her congregation, Bea would have found her husband's inclination to pray amusing, as if an atheist could appoint himself her intermediary with Jehovah. Pastor Rainer had lectured his flock from the pulpit more than once about those who are foolish enough to associate with the ways of the devil

through alcohol and drugs. “By all means pray,” Bea would have said to Beusch after just such a sermon from Rainer, “but for yourself first”

Incredible as it seems, by the time Beusch gets back to his car, a notice on his windshield states that his vehicle is over parked. His debit number has been automatically docked for an additional days parking: *ka-ching* >\$100. Beusch stares in disbelief at the audacity of the airport authorities. Just who the hell do these guys think they are? Another jet becomes airborne with the roar of a tidal wave, lifting hundreds more in plush seats to a new destination on the other side of the world. Beusch is late for work. In fact he’s so late he decides not to drive to work at all but rather to call in on sick leave, using the lame excuse his mother has died. This delay has changed his priorities. Rather than drive straight to the mill from the airport, he lingered with his tail between his legs, watching all of those bastards leave on a wonderful trip to a warmer climate. The money he would have made working in the mill for the rest of the day will vanish anyways as a fine to the parking lot bandits. So why even try when the game is rigged against suckers like himself? He should have gone with Bea just to piss her off. The few times he had attended any of the church functions, in his opinion they acted more like a singles group than a collection of pious believers.

A siren wails behind Beusch and he pulls over. An angry red light is flashing in his rear view mirror. His morning just got more complicated but its too late to turn back. Beusch tells himself: *Just sit tight. Your seat belt isn’t buckled up. Quick, buckle up before the cop comes to your window. Too late! He’s seen me move.*

A large man with an Irish inflection and a tablet in his hand stands looking over the rust on the Nissan. Officer Barrfoin taps the expired sticker on his windshield.

“I’d wager this Cadillac of yours is due for a thorough once over,” he says, making note of the offense on his tablet.

“Just by a few days,” Beusch responds nonchalantly. He knows how to handle police officers. He can talk his way out of just about anything.

“Let’s see the driver’s license,” Barrfoin says, not intending to put up with any nonsense.

Like his vehicle inspection, the license has expired weeks earlier on his 39th birthday. Its just a small indiscretion. Beusch holds the wheel of his misfortune tightly with both hands and chews gum, smiling up at Barrfoin with a dumb expression. Another comment is entered on the tablet: Driving with an expired license: *ka-ching* >\$85. And another one after that one. Not wearing a seat belt: *ka-ching*>\$100.

Beusch has had enough. He protests he had on his belt but Barrfoin informs him the dash cam on his cruiser will show him making the last minute attempt to buckle himself in properly. The ticket stands. “Now for the real reason for stopping a reprobate like yourself,” Barrfoin says. “Racing through a red light.” Next *ka-ching*>\$155.

Beusch protests the traffic light in question was still yellow by the time his tires passed the far side of the intersection. Barrfoin tells him he had better stop misrepresenting the truth. The *Sentinel* at the intersection jotted down his rear license number and relayed it to the *Interceptor* in Barrfoin’s squad car. Technological checkmate on all three counts.

“My mother just passed away,” Beusch whines.

“She’ll have gone to heaven after having to put up with a scalawag like you for so long,” Barrfoin says, tapping out the tickets on his tablet with one finger. Then he instructs his convicted felon, “You’ll be notified when to appear in court – and when to have your rust bucket down at the inspection depot. There’s this here crack in the windshield for a start.”

“This is blackmail,” Beusch mumbles even as he initials each of the tickets.

“What’s that you just said?” Barrfoin asks.

“I’m not having a good day,” Beusch says.

“And who’s fault would that be?” Barrfoin peers down his nose at him.

“My wife’s,” Beusch replies.

Four tickets in one morning! How will he explain the loss of so much money to Bea when she returns? That woman keeps scrupulous watch over his paychecks, pays down their mortgage each month and combines their incomes for tax purposes at the end of each year. She knows all the tricks. Somehow he’ll have to admit to her he’s been

forced to fork over \$470 in fines on the very morning he had driven her to the airport. She'll blame him as she always does. His first mistake was not attending those insufferable bible readings she went to on Thursday nights. His next mistake was going through a red light less than three miles outside the airport on his way back home to kick back for the rest of the day.

By the time Beusch pulls in to his driveway, he is anxious and angry. This whole day needs to go on rewind. For starters, at the very least he should have given Bea a corsage to wear on her trip to Israel. Next, if he would have driven directly to the mill as he was suppose to have done, he'd never have gone through that red light and got caught for not wearing a seat belt. Back in his driveway, Beusch sits staring at the one bedroom box they call home and which will be cleared of its mortgage in four more years. Forty-eight more payments (*4 years x 12 months*) and they will be financially free for the first time in their lives. His conversations at the dinner table have turned towards the purchase of a cherry red '82 Corvette once that magic day arrives. But as usual Bea argues that they need a station wagon as if the kids are still with them. Who is she fooling? Neither of those ingrates even bothered with his birthday day. Ginny's gift to him consisted of her coming home in tears, pleading for money for rehab after her partner got her hooked on oxycontin. Son Jarrad isn't any better. He's spending three years in jail for stealing cars to ship overseas in containers. What kind of a son does those things? Both those kids are a disgrace to the Beusch name.

The kitchen is a mess. Under the sink, the drain drips in to a pan he put under the leak rather than mess around with the plumbing. Before doing anything else, he'll have to call his supervisor at the mill and book off on sick leave. He keeps running over and over the same excuse: *mother has died*. But next to the phone in the hallway, a letter with his name written in Bea's hand is taped to the handle. Beusch restrains himself from tearing open the letter. He expects a card will be inside the envelope, apologizing for her decision to take the expensive trip to Israel: *You're never very far away, because I keep you in my heart*. Further, she'll promise to pray for him at the holiest of places on the face of the earth. Signed: *My everlasting love, Bea*. Beusch frowns and lays the card aside

without bothering to challenge his expectation. Instead he runs through his excuse once again while calling the number to the office at the mill. 'Big Shot' Buchanan spends the first part of his shift in the cramped office on the third story of the complex, completing charts and time sheets. The phone rings beside Buchanan and he picks it up.

"Bow River Manufacturing," he repeats in to the receiver like a robot. "Quality piping at a low price."

"Hey there big guy, its me. I just got the news my mother has died. I can't make it in to work today. Sorry, but you'll have to get by without me for a couple of days.

"You're booking off sick again, right?" Buchanan snorts. "How long for this time, Beusch?"

"Well, to be honest that depends on how long it will take to get to the funeral and back again, settle the estate. You know, the usual bullshit."

"But you did manage to drive you wife to the airport this morning!"

"How did you know that?" asks Beusch.

Buchanan doesn't bother to answer. He was sitting behind Beusch in the lunch room when he complained to his shop steward that Bea was taking off with her crowd of loonies to Israel. Beusch volunteers to the other man he'll have to drive his wife out to the airport this coming Thursday morning even if he doesn't like it one bit. Buchanan doesn't miss a trick. Beusch has nothing to say in his own defense. He's been caught in yet another lie.

"This is the third time you've booked off sick this month, Beusch. The 5th / the 11th and now, today / the 19th. How many times this month is your mother going to die?"

Neither say much for a short minute. Beusch can hear the monotone of the mill in the background of the call. Or perhaps Buchanan has become such a loyal company man his heavy breathing mimics the sound of the mill. Then his overseer says:

"I'm not going to bother giving you a warning, Beusch. I'm not going to say, 'This is your last warning, buster'. Not at all. I'm going to tell you straight out – Beusch, you're fired. Got it?"

"You can't do that," Beusch says calmly. "I'm in a union. You can't just fire me on the

spot without justifiable cause.”

“Your stuff will be in a box in the time keeper’s shed.

“My locker is pad locked.”

“Not any more, it isn’t.”

The phone goes dead with a click. Beusch can’t believe what this week is dishing out to him. First thing last Monday, Rooney phones after not hearing from any of them for years and says, “Hate to be the one to tell you but Mum has passed away.” So? Their mother wasn’t anything to scream about. She raised her boys with an iron fist after their father took his own life. Rooney wants to know if Durance will be flying out for the funeral. The rest of the brothers will wait until he arrives. “Don’t bother,” Beusch tells him. Then he hangs up and doesn’t feel a seconds worth of remorse.

Now today, he gets saddled with a dozen traffic fines after Bee leaves for Tel Aviv with a chip on her shoulder. Since when is his wife (or any of them for that matter) a devote Christian? She says the trip will change her life forever. Maybe her life will change but his is getting harder by the passing minute. Because of the changes her nonsense forced him to make on her behalf to his schedule, he’s got no job to make their mortgage payments and *thousands of dollars* in traffic tickets. His dream of that hot little Corvette has just gone up in smoke. But after a shot of whiskey he gets things more under control. First, he’ll contact the head office of his union. Buchanan can’t do this to him. His mother has died recently and he’ll have her death certificate to prove it. He’ll litigate all the way to the Supreme Court if he has to and they’ll be forced to give him back his old job.

Before he can locate the phone number for his union office on 2nd Avenue, the card left behind by Bea slips to the floor at his feet. He imitates her voice, saying ‘*Thank you, Darling – for letting me fulfill my dream. Love you always, Bea xxoo.*’ Its hardly worth opening the envelope. On the other hand, even something as saccharine as a card from his woman might cheer himself up. He opens the envelope with a kitchen knife but gasps when reading:

Durance – I want to tell you this now so you'll have time to come to terms with our divorce. For months I've been unable to overcome the revulsion I've felt when Ginny told me what you did to her as a child. Its best we go our separate ways at this point. You've worn me out. I don't intend to take it anymore. I wish you the best. Goodbye. Bea Anne Beusch (nee Lessing) cc. D. V. Isle, LL.B.

Divorce! *ka-ching*>\$235,000. Beusch reads his death sentence in disbelief several times as if its written in a code he can't break. Her trip to Jerusalem is intended to kill two birds with one stone. Durance Beusch is one of those birds; the other is his prospects for a better life and car. Panic sets in. The loss of his job is trivial compared to this news. Why hadn't he seen it coming? With the mortgage so close to getting paid off, he'd be a different man once out of the vice grip of those payments. He reads the note again. What is Bee talking about with Ginny, the oycotin queen? Or, worse, the part: *You've worn me out.*? The message is legal fodder in their upcoming divorce as in cc. *D. V. Isle LL.B.* Not only has Bea been going to church to pray for world peace, she's been going to a some fancy office to tell a lawyer a pack of lies about their life together.

Beusch explodes in to a rage, smashing things in the house, calling his wife, his kids, his brothers, names. Fortunately he has friends he can reach out to in a crisis and phones his drinking buddy, Jack Voltaire. Jack's wife calls him to the phone. Beusch is out of breath, pleading for rescue:

"You won't believe it, Jack, but that bitch of mine has given me the slip. I came home and found a letter saying she's divorcing me! Can you believe it?"

"Of course," says Jack in a bored tone. "She's been having an affair with Pastor Rainer for over a year now."

"Wh..Whaa...What?" Beusch stammers.

"Everybody knows but you," Voltaire continues. He's waited a long time to even the score with Beusch. "They've been seen together all over town. Rainer has been picking her up for their *bible readings* on Thursday nights, right?"

"But he's a pastor; he's married," interrupts Beusch. "He has two kids and

another one on the way.”

“Love is blind,” Voltaire states flatly. “Go get yourself a good lawyer, dude.” Jack Voltaire hangs up.

Beusch is speechless. Pastor Rainer? *Diddling my wife?* A married man with a *holier than thou* attitude? Yet it makes sense now. Beusch roars like a wounded lion, standing alone in a house he no longer owns. Wait (he tells himself) its not possible for one man to have all of these problems at the same time. His mother (bless her soul) has died. His son rots in prison. Ginny is accusing him through her mother of something he doesn’t even remember. He, Durante Beusch, has been betrayed by all of those to whom he’s given his love and undying loyalty. His kids, his employer, friend Jack Voltaire and now his wife.

Forty eight hours later, Beusch awakes on the couch. The house has been through a hurricane. Squares of fresh paint mark where the family pictures once hung from the walls. His clothes are filthy. On his way to the bathroom, he stands at the door way to his bedroom, staring in disbelief at the shape of a woman in his bed. A stranger with a worn face raises her head from the pillow and says sheepishly with no teeth, “Hello honey baby.”

Beusch stands naked under the shower head, trying to regain his sanity. Somewhere in the fog of the past two days, he’s been lost in an underground tunnel surrounded by hundreds of mardi gras strangers. The signs belong to a foreign language. Ahead of him a man shuffles with a hunched back. When Beusch tries to push past him, the derelict turns and sums up the disappointments of his life, saying, “We all have a cross to carry.”

There are no clean towels in the bathroom. One is stained with blood and has been tossed in to a corner near the toilet. Deep lines encircle the blood shot eyes staring back at Beusch from the mirror. Stubble outlines the edge of his face. The only garment left clean in the bathroom is the robe Bea left hanging from the hook on the back of the door. In the hallway the street walker laughs when she sees him in a woman’s bathrobe. “Don’t you look a sight!”she says, adding with a cigarette between her lips, “Got to get

back to work.” She collects her things in the bedroom and is gone.

Beusch is completely numb. Trees in the neighborhood outside the kitchen window are beginning to flower for the summer. Beusch stands staring out at a world that is wholly indifferent to his existence. The bathrobe smells of his wife’s perfume. He doesn’t give a damn about anything anymore. In front of him, a housefly buzzes back and forth. Beusch reaches and grabs the fly in his hand, then releases it unharmed. The fly makes abrupt turns in the air around the room then leaves the house by an open back door. Which gives Beusch a brilliant idea. In the game of marital one upmanship he knows exactly what he must do: *Every man has his own cross to carry.*

Down in the basement, he locates a pair of pressure treated 4 x 4s. The first timber spans again the horizontal width of his arms and the second is the right length for the vertical timber. Forming a huge cross when bolted together at right angles, Durance Beusch is ready to become a modern Quixote, an exhibitionist chasing down the sins of the world in his own way. A small wheel gets attached on the end of the timber which will drag behind him on his chosen stretch of the highway. Still in his wife’s bathrobe, he’s outside roping down the timbers to the roof racks of his car. For all he cares, they can go to hell with their traffic tickets. Then he runs back to his house to get dressed for his odyssey through the wastelands of the new Jerusalem. Clothes are ripped from their hangers and tossed on the unmade bed. He pulls a clean pair of Stanfields over his jockey shorts and pushes his head through a warm sweater. For pants, he chooses a dark pair of army tweeds he hasn’t worn in years. Its going to be cold out on the highway. His feet need the best wool socks he can find. Drawers get dumped on the floor. Footwear consists of hiking boots laced up tightly to the top of his instep. Except for one more thing, he’s ready to roll. Again in the closet, lines of clothes are pushed aside until Beusch finds an old gray parka. With his pencil line beard and moussed hair, he can pass for a peasant from any century in the past. He reflects - *God help me if this backfires.*

Out in the sunshine, Beusch focuses. He knows where his 400 mile pilgrimage must start and where it must end. It starts at the site of his first survey job in ‘66: Fort McMurray. The vast deposits of tar sands in the Athabaskan plain had since fallen under

the auspice of corporate control. A dozen refineries with miles of piping and security fences exploit the swamps left by the Pleistocene age. Men with huge machines work like frenzied ants to scrape the surface of the earth down to its bedrock. For a hundred miles across the Athabaskan tundra, the sand is squeezed clean of its contamination by the hands of corporate investment. What better place to make a statement than where money flows like honey in to the hands of those whose gold fever ruined the first year of his marriage?

Beusch has little time left before Bea returns and his marriage collapses for the rest of eternity. He drives like a madman towards the north east corner of his province and thence starts his walking pilgrimage. For the next ten days, he intends to carry nothing but the cross and his debit card. His needs will be simple: food and the occasional lodgings. Right off the bat, however, strange things start happening to Durance Beusch, pilgrim par excellence. After hoisting the cross on his back and starting to trek southwards along the main highway, he hasn't gone a hundred yards when something akin to *a tongue of fire* falls from heaven. The soft impact gives him the stamina to keep walking through the torture of the next 10 days. Even so, of all the blunders he has made since Bea left at the airport, this stunt with a cross is his most serious. It is too late to back out. In a few days he will attempt to take his own life.

In a cavalier mood, Beusch adjusts the crutch of the wood against one shoulder. Just for good measure, he takes one last nip from the flask he keeps stashed in the car. He is determined to walk back to his home city hundreds of miles to the south with this cross on his back in full view of every passing motorist. Though, with his first steps, the consequences of his ruse sobers him up. Perhaps the police will arrest him and lock him up in a mental asylum. This homemade cross feels suddenly heavier than it should for two pieces of plain wood. For once in his life he's doing something original but the act of stepping away from the crowd threatens him as never before. Bea will return in nine more days, tanned and ready to forsake their marriage. He has no other alternative. Sink like a stone or like another Ishmael swim to the surface with this cross rather than a coffin as his life preserver. Beusch rushes forward, reminding himself for one last time - *Every*

man has a cross to bear.

Beusch the life long exhibitionist gets an immediate and conspicuous reaction. Eighteen wheelers and motorists traveling in the opposite direction slow down when they see the apparition of a man in broad daylight carrying a full size cross, trekking south on the opposite shoulder of the highway. A few truckers blast their air horns. Others in family sedans pull off to the side and point and stare in disbelief. Beusch loves the attention but wants to remain as nonchalant as possible. His new mantra for the days ahead becomes – *One foot ahead of the next. One foot ahead of the next.*

To his right for the next several kilometers, a petrochemical plant for the production of synthetic crude oil spreads across the tundra like a keloid. Just by coincidence, Beusch rolls his cross past the entrance to a billion dollar refinery at the same moment Clayton J. Stoyne, one of the petrochemical engineers running the refinery, stops his BMW and stares down Beusch as he passes with his ridiculous cross. ‘Just who does this nutcracker think he is?’ Stoyne asks himself, taking offense that somehow a *Jesus Impersonator* would chose the vicinity of his refinery to undertake some type of a Hajj with a cross on his back. ‘Doesn’t this jerk know the petrochemical industry runs the world and all of its levels of government?’ Stoyne refuses to move his car, forcing Beusch to walk his cross around the back of the impeccable black sedan. Beusch grins to himself when his back is turned. It looks as if at least one big wheel has gotten the message. They wouldn’t even give him time off to be with Bea when Ginny was born.

Soon afterward, two police officers arrive in their squad car. They stop ahead of Beusch some distance and stand assessing him as he walks towards them. Both have their hands on their holsters. This could be real trouble. *One foot ahead of the next.* He stops and says, as a way of introduction, “Nice day to do my penance.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” asks the one officer, the youngest son of a Presbyterian minister. Sweat forms traces on Beusch’s forehead. He could be on his way to the nearest insane asylum.

Durance replies: “My wife has taken a trip to Israel to walk in the footsteps of ah...ah...our Savior. I’m walking in those same steps here at home. Every one of us has a

cross to bear in some way or other.” He smiles, hoping the police officers won’t call his bluff. It works. They don’t know what to say. If they arrest him, his cross would have to come along as evidence, strapped to the top of their squad car. They’d look like they’re part of a Hollywood movie, starring Charlton Heston as Moses. In other words, the laughing stock of the entire precinct. On the other hand, there isn’t any law or bylaw on the books they know of that says it’s criminal to carry a cross along the highway embankment. ‘Just hurry up past the refinery before the media get wind of what you are doing and why.’

One officer offers him a hankie to wipe the sweat from his face but Beusch declines. They back off and return to their squad car. Beusch waves with his left hand as they pass him and the one in the passenger seat waves back with a limp wrist.

He’s over his first hurdle. When he’s sure they can’t see him in their rear view mirror, he guffaws like a bedlamite. “Go in peace, peace officers,” Durance quips. More than once after a weekend bender, he’s woken up in their drunk tank, forced by the jailers to sober up under a cold shower. His small triumph lasts only until the wind shifts and his lungs fill with the smell of the byproducts of tar production. His shoulder aches as never before. Ahead of him, nine more days and hundreds of kilometers need to be traversed.

In the afternoon the media show up like a troupe from a traveling circus. The lead reporter thinks this biblical *tour de force* will make good banter for the news anchors on the late news. He tries to get Beusch to pose with his homemade cross, giving thumbs up to the camera. Baring that, the reporter wants to interview Beusch with his arm around him, in effect making a clown of him in front of a million Albertans. But the misfit on the road curses the reporter to his face, calling him names from the New Testament such as *a filthy money changer* and *hypocrite*. The news team click off their cameras until they can find a news worthy thread, a palatable hook for the news anchor. “Okay, okay,” the reporter says, trying to defuse the situation. Perhaps this stunt with the cross is on the level after all. They’re just trying to make a living like everyone else, understand? “Better than working in that place,” the reporter says in self defense, indicating the

refinery that sits behind a fence of razor wire. Beusch agrees to allow them to film his pilgrimage but only if its done respectfully and from a distance. The reporter arranges for two of his film staff to pose as passing motorists who will stop and out of the goodness of their hearts give Beusch sandwiches. As a special touch, Beusch agrees to give the two actors a blessing, the sign of the cross, for their generosity. The episode that is filmed looks very authentic. The film crew pile in to their van and race away. The reporter shouts back, "You can keep the sandwiches."

That same evening, on the late news, the entire province is shown footage of a *Nazarene* carrying a huge cross along the highway. Refineries billow out plumes in the background. Motorists stop and (moved with compassion) donate food to Beusch. He is heard telling the two actors, "It is better to give than receive." The short documentary is presented in the studio with the utmost candor by one of three news anchors. Rather than being sedated in some nearby asylum, the pilgrimage transforms Beusch in to a media celebrity. There is such a wave of viewer response to this one story *Channel 9 News* thinks it best to keep tabs on Beusch's progress, dubbing him *the highway man*. Every other night, the anchors muse over his latest achievement. "*The highway man* has passed his third day of atonement." says the one news anchor to his associate in an off-the-cuff script. "Incredible," says the second. "An example to us all," confirms the third news anchor. Their commentary is presented in a heartfelt manner. Its the most natural thing in the world to carry a full size cross from the Athabasca tar sands to the city sprawl adjacent the Bow River.

Out on the highway Durance Beusch begins to suffer torments of mind with each passing mile. The carrying of the wood is easy enough but apparently the act itself connotes religious overtones leading to a morass of personal recriminations. The traffic is incessant in both directions. Beusch tells himself *One step at a time; one foot in front of the other, one step...one foot...*

Day Three. After resting in a nearby motel for the night, Beusch is back on the road, hefting the cross on his back with the help of the motel staff. The weight knocks out his breath but just slightly. He chides himself for ever starting such a pointless quest.

“You going to be okay, old boy?” one staffer asks him. Beusch resents the suggestion he is turning in to an old man at age 39. *One foot ahead of the next.* In an hour, as the birds near the highway begin to search for nourishment for their young in nests, Beusch halts as if standing in front of a wall of clear thick glass. For no obvious reason he is being forced to remember one incident out of thousands in his childhood. The time he spent alone with *Miguel* comes back to him like a jolt of lightning: *The two boys (Ages 10 / Grade 5) are alone in Beusch’s home. Mechano parts are strewn over the floor and on the lower part of the bunk beds. It is a Saturday afternoon. Miguel makes a point of visiting friends rather than stay near his own shanty of a house where his father is an alcoholic, his mother committed several times to a sanitarium, and his brother a sadist towards his younger and weaker sibling. Durance and Miguel are wrestling with each other on the top bunk of the bed. Miguel is undernourished and soon finds he cannot defend himself against the strength of the other boy. Durance feels a sense of entitlement and decides to smother his friend with a pillow. Miguel pleads for Durance to stop; he can’t breath, he is being smothered to death. Feeling the intoxication of absolute power over a weaker person, Durance refuses to stop. Miguel is being forced to die slowly at the hands of a friend. Finally he bursts in to sobs under the weight of the pillow, wailing with the sorrow of a broken heart. Durance stops then, afraid his mother will come home and hear Miguel weeping in the bedroom. His mother will most certainly punish Durance severely. He tries his utmost to get Miguel to stop crying but a dam of sorrow has broken open in his soul. He tells Durance of the torments he faces with his father and his brother, both of them beating upon his broken mother. He tells Durance of the many times his brother has tried to smother or choke him, and of his futile attempts to defend himself from the older boy. Miguel sits in one corner of the bed, sobbing at the level of betrayal life has dealt him as a boy and for no reason. He tells Durance how he has turned to friends such as himself for companionship but they too have turned against him. Durance is afraid his mother will return from work at any moment. He pleads with the boy to leave.*

Beusch stands like a lost migrant on the side of the highway and admits for the

first time in his life, 'What a bastard I've been; What an absolute bastard!' He has no choice but to keep moving. The cross on his back increases in weight unless he keeps walking. But by now he concedes he's capable of any level of inhumanity to his fellow man. All they would have to do is put a uniform on him and with some specialized training, he'd napalm women and children.

Day Six. Beusch is exhausted, morally and physically. He has lost ten pounds. His back and feet hurt. He has never held a single commitment in his entire life, nor kept one promise to his son or daughter. Then, another bolt of remorse. He has been drinking with friends and comes home in the evening intending to rape his wife. The scene of his travesty passes through his mind and before his eyes as if being forced to watch a horror film from a concentration camp. Bea is crying and begs him not to hurt her. From the other room, Ginny is crying in her crib. After staying in bed for two days, Bea loses their second child to a miscarriage. Beusch is entirely at fault. She was going to tell him she was pregnant on his birthday. In the fridge there's a cake for the occasion and a small gift with a card that says *To the Most Wonderful Husband in the World.*

Out on the highway, cold and dejected, Beusch can't stop the weight of the cross from tormenting him with images from his past. Everything is going to catch up with him in his upcoming divorce. The wheels of a huge semi pass so close he stumbles in the wind tunnel. It is a wonder Bea lasted with him as long as she did. *You wore me out.* 'Okay,' Beusch concedes. 'You're right, absolutely right. I accept responsibility.'

Day Seven. Durance starts the day on a more positive note. He is only 94 miles away from his destination. The worst is over. Remembering his sins is a painful catharsis but it's done for the most part. He is making good time. The cross feels lighter than in the last 6 days. He looks up only to glance the familiar outline of a face as a man looks back at him from the back seat of a car. "Oh God, no," he pleads, "not again, not more. Please, Lord, let this bitter cup pass." Too late. *The face belongs to the late Dennis Jedwokski. Fourteen months earlier, Jedwokski is on the floor of the mill like all the rest of them,*

ants toiling inside the labyrinth of an industrial mechanism. They work like an organized army, anonymous numbers not men with different personalities. Then word passes, a rumor at lunch break, Jedwokski is due for a promotion. Managers like Buchanan from up there on the third floor want to elevate the little bastard above the rest of the men. Beusch doesn't like that one bit. What's so special about Jedwokski compared to himself? Beusch has bust his ass for the company and got nothing in return. Then he spots Buchanan shaking Jedwokski's hands behind the glass of his office, the perch where Buchanan watches them like a hawk day and night, the son-of-a-bitch never sleeps. Beusch knows he had better act quickly if he wants to put a wrench in to the spokes of this new development. Jedwokski's not yet acting cocky like the rest of management.

Out on the road, early traffic races past Durance Beusch but he is elsewhere, staring at the black pit of his past, distraught by the implications of what he is forced to remember.

Soon enough the opportunity arises. Beusch waits until Buchanan is looking over the production spool and says, "Too bad about that Jedwokski guy." Buchanan raises his eyes from the chart with its red line stylus and asks like the gullible clown Beusch has him figured out to be, "What do you mean?" Beusch says, "Don't you know he's up on a charge for molesting his daughter?" Buchanan lives a Catholic life with five kids and a wife who goes to confession every time the priest tells her to from the pulpit. The mention of any type of a sexual dysfunction does the trick with these papists. "Where did you hear that?" Buchanan asks. What a chump, Beusch thinks. "His wife told my wife and her other friends after church last week." Buchanan drops the issue but Beusch is an 'honest Iago' and knows enough about the frailty of the human mind to have guessed right. Later that same shift, he laughs under his breath when Jedwokski is called back upstairs. There is a heated exchange in the office between Jedwokski and Buchanan behind the sound proof glass of his office. Beusch can only guess that the promotion to L-7 Supervisory has been canceled. Buchanan is astute enough to say nothing of his motives for the change but it infuriates Jedwokski such that, out of pride, he quits on the spot. Beusch smiles to himself. That was easier than he ever imagined. A few weeks later, the

situation becomes critical when the police are called to the Jedwoksi residence for a domestic disturbance. An intoxicated Dennis Jedwokski is inside the house, threatening his wife and two children. A standoff with the police takes several hours until Jedwokski releases his children. He appears on the balcony of their apartment with a gun at his wife's head, threatening to kill her if the police don't back off. Instead a police sharp shooter picks him off with one bullet to the temple. Kate Jedwokski is unharmed but covered in her husband's blood. News of the tragedy circulates among the mill workers but Beusch has dismissed his part in the situation. Then Buchanan calls him up to the office. The sound of the mill is shut out when Beusch closes the door behind them. "Do you remember Dennis Jedwokski?" his supervisor asks. "Not really, Sir," he says, standing in front of Buchanan with his hands behind his back as if a private standing at attention. Buchanan looks at him with a sour expression. "Of course you do," Buchanan says. "He got killed by the police." Beusch doesn't like the suggestion he is lying. He belongs to a union and doesn't have to take any dirt from management. "Too bad," replies Beusch, "nice guy." Another hard stare from Buchanan which Beusch ignores entirely. What's the problem? "I'd like to go back to work," Beusch says. Buchanan won't budge. In silence, he is searching for a motive that is too diabolic to put in to words. Then Buchanan says, "I've got Jedwokski's obituary here. Perhaps you'd like to read it?" "Not really," says Beusch. Buchanan reads it for the both of them. Kate Jedwokski has dismissed her husband's insanity – or doesn't want her children to be reminded of the mental breakdown their father suffered in the last few hours of his life. "Dennis was a gentle and loving father to his two surviving boys, Tomas 7 and Jerry 9. He will be remembered for all the times we shared and laughed together. Kathleen Sara Jedwokski." Buchanan sits staring at Beusch after reading the obituary. All Beusch can do is think that Kate Jedwokski is now a young and attractive widow. Beusch says, "Can I go now?" Buchanan glances down at the newspaper on his desk with pictures of the deceased above commentaries of their lives by their loved ones. "Did you notice something in that column I just read?" Buchanan finally asks. This is getting bloody annoying. Beusch doesn't have to tolerate this type of unwarranted harassment. He

wants to get back to work and move on with the rest of the week. He'll be able to cash his next pay check in three more days. "Jerry and Tomas: Jedwokski's two boys," Buchanan says with a bitter expression. "Sure, you read that. What's your point?" Beusch puts on the act that he is a man with no memory. They have a standoff of stares. Buchanan is dealing with that which is indefensible. Beusch turns to leave but Buchanan stops him, saying the obvious, "Jedwokski didn't have a daughter," So? So what? Beusch decides to leave since their conversation is going nowhere.

A year later, Beusch is alone with his remorse on a highway with a huge cross hoisted on his back. The transcript of his existence is being read back to him with merciless persistence. The phone call earlier in the week to Buchanan makes perfect sense. It had nothing to do with Beusch booking off on sick leave. It goes back to the terrible harm he has done to Dennis Jedwokski and his family.

Beusch can't take any more torture. He has reached a point of saturation. Just a few feet to his left and his body will explode upon contact with a passing long hauler loaded with tons of industrial metals. Before any truck passes, Beusch is impacted instead by the *Grace* he has disdained since puberty when by his own hand his father renounced the commitment he had to his four sons. The disavowal has confined Durance to a bitterness from which there has been no escape for the last 30 years. Lacking comprehension, Beusch is left gasping for breath as the miracle of an organic germination breaks to the surface. The pain is as intense as a massive heart attack. Even as he chokes for air a voice whispers him reassurance –*Its okay, Durance. You can grow. Let yourself grow and I'll be with you every step of your life from this point onwards.* The cross bears down even harder on his back. *A tendril finds a tiny fissure and breaks open to the light that shines in the darkness.* Beusch is a broken man but he knows he must finish his pilgrimage at any cost. The crisis has passed. The road stretches out as a long straight line. He lifts one foot forward and the other follows; and then another and another. Be will return from the Holy Land in a few days. Along the outermost edge of the horizon winds pile up castles of white cumulus.

Tenth Day. Beusch wraps up his pilgrimage on the hill outside the conurbation of the city where he lives and works. The news outlets have been tipped off that *the highway man* will be making his grand finale as the sun rises over the city. With his cross in position behind him, Durance quotes from Isaiah 43. He cries out in front of the cameras:

*Oh Israel! When you go through deep waters, your Son will be with you!
When you walk through the fires of oppression, you will not burn up. Your
Savior, the Holy One of Israel, will be with you!*

Beusch stands overlooking the city as one crying out in the wilderness:

*Oh my people! Bring your sons and daughters back to Israel from the distant
corners of the earth. For your sake alone I will send an army against Babylon.
I will create rivers in the dry wastelands.*

Falling to his knees, he wails:

*Dear family of Jacob, you refuse to ask for my help. You have grown tired of me.
Oh Israel! Wake! Arise and take up the cross as I have for your sake.*

The news people have gotten some excellent footage. Beusch's hirsute face will appear in every home in the province on the evening news. The *National* (Gregore Carrigan) plans a special report on his pilgrimage in a segment at the end of the week. *Face the Nation* comes on with a complimentary follow-up a few days later. Beusch has gone viral.

Later that day, Durance trudges home to his modest bungalow. Out on the sidewalk, he's incredulous. His home has been completely refurbished in his absence. His neighbors formed a committee during his televised journey to refurbish his home. It is their gift to him for his personal sacrifice. One group repainted the interior after cleaning his dishes and laying away his laundry. Outside, another group of volunteers repainted the exterior after power washing off the green scum from his siding. On his lawn, a sign says WELCOME HOME and has been signed by all of those who donated their time to the endeavor. Beusch looks around but the street is quiet, empty. He hardly knows any of his neighbors and yet they've come together to help him in such a generous

way. *I'll be with you every moment from this point onwards.* Inside the house, the table is set in the living room. Wine glasses sit alongside silver ware. A note is against a vase of flowers in the center of the table. His daughter writes:

Dad – I'm so proud of what you have done. Everyone in Rehab is inspired and talking about you. What you've done is a fine example to all of us. I'm so proud to have You and Mum for my parents. PS. There's a bottle of wine in the fridge to have with dinner. Love you always – Ginny.

Beusch still has the note in his hand when his wife bursts in the door. She has arrived at the airport and with her group from Israel passes through Customs. The lineup stretches across the main foyer. Arrivals to Canada are questioned by Custom Agents for contraband from other countries. As soon as the agent sees Bea's name on her passport, she gushes, "You must be related to our *highway man*. What an extraordinary person! My husband has gone back to church because of him." Bea hasn't a clue what the agent is talking about. Meanwhile other agents at their wickets stop for a moment and smile at the wife of their hometown celebrity. Bea clears Customs. Something is up and she had better find out what that yo-yo of a husband of hers has done now. Waiting for her luggage to show up, she phones her daughter on her cell phone. "Just what the hell is going on?" she demands. Ginny tells her the whole story. This is *the biggest reward* she has ever had in all the 21 years of being their daughter, she relates. Bea taps off the cell phone and slips in to a funk.

An hour later she bursts in to their home and throws herself at Beusch's feet, pleading for his forgiveness. Beusch lifts her off the floor, cradling her in his arms. With his lips near her ear, he whispers, "Sin no more, woman. Sin no more."

Postscript: The news coverage had what could only be described as long term *unintended consequences*. One man with a cross was a news worthy distraction but more than one (and in all parts of the country) a nuisance. From St. John's to Nunavut and Victoria BC, men across the country had *taken up the cross* and literally. The trend had to be addressed and quickly. In an emergency session Parliament voted to make *cross country*

pilgrimages illegal. Busloads of Japanese tourists on their way to Lake Louise couldn't be disturbed by the sight of Canadians packing full sized crosses across the industrial wastelands of Babylon.

END

