

Forty Days

by Christopher Funk

“Forty-one days and no rain – not a drop people, can you believe it?” The KISW D.j. made clear that Lake Union and Washington were already fifteen feet below average. The annoyance of the goofy incredulousness in his voice drowning out the end of The Who’s anthem, Love Reign O’er Me, almost begged a mocking response from anybody who had to endure his carnival barker shtick. He continued, “Now peeps I know we’ve got some heavy cloud cover, but the great grey blanket has hasn’t let a drop fall for three days and in just a few hours we are going to be in our forty first day without rain. That’s a record not broken SINCE 1886! And you’re bone dry with us, right here on K-I-S-W, Seattle’s honest rock radio...” In his best mock-Dj voice, Jerome belted out “...yeah, folks that’s right Seattle’s lamest schlock radio,” he switched to NPR, “...is The B-B-C World Report and now the top news. Because of record rainfall in the midlands the Thames truly is the tumid river and the estimated damage cost from flooding is...” Jerome turned the radio off.

“HMMM, I guess the Brits are stealin’ our weather and it’s costing them a pretty ‘pence’. How’s that for deductive reasoning Sherlock?” He mocked his own ‘reasoning’ and drove on in silence under the grey quilt of clouds in the gathering twilight.

Jerome puzzled again over the earthworm he had seen wriggling on the August dry sidewalk. The worm’s movements vacillated between slow undulations and violent convulsions. “That was so bizarre,” he mused to himself. When Jerome saw the worm, he almost passed it by, but took a step back thinking that wouldn’t be in keeping with the spirit of his mission. In a tentative fit of compassion, he squatted down to move the witless creature on to the grass where it had a better chance of living to see the next rainfall. He did this despite the fact that he distrusted the clouds would let fall a single drop, let alone open the floodgates needed to restore ‘our withering city’ and save this little worm. Jerome laughed aloud at the thought of the worm ‘seeing’. There must have been some kind of electric poison in Jerome’s touch, though, judging by the worm’s reaction. At the instant of contact with his fingertip, the worm sprang and convulsed like an exploding clockwork expending all of its kinetic energy at once. He thought to himself “What was that all about? I was just trying to help and it just freaked.”

Jerome was pulled from the reverie of his worm riddle by the river of red taillights indicating that the West Seattle Freeway was grinding down to a snail's pace. "Ahhh man! What the f..." he didn't finish. He noticed his silent radio and the harsh sound of his own voice had shattered the silence like a brick crashing through some sacred window. He sat there in the smothering silence with the shards of his previous thoughts that remained though they were swept to the periphery of his mind while he dealt with the traffic and a cranky transmission. "Sorry God." He whispered it aloud and meant it but wondered if God bothered to listen.

Ever since he had seen that old movie, *Fiddler on the Roof*, Jerome had taken up similar sort of repartee with God. Speaking aloud like that Tevya character. He figured this was as good as a time as any to engage in this sort of dialogue again. He wondered if Tevya ever longed for an exchange that felt a bit less one-sided. Considering the nature of his mission Jerome thought a little heart-to-heart with the Almighty was more than a little apropos.

"So what's it all about Alfie? Huh, Chief? What was the deal with that worm? Is that how we look to you? Are we the same? Do you try to help us and we just fight against it like crazy? The way that worm flipped out didn't inspire a deeper desire to help. Maybe if I didn't appear such an alien bit of freakishness to the worm he wouldn't have gone epileptic on me. I think that's a pretty good hint for you Chief. Not too tall an order for the Almighty is it? Maybe you could think about helping us worm types with a hand that seems a little less freakish or alien then we might not fight against it like we are undergoing some kind of exorcism."

In light of his convictions that were new and tenuously grounded, Jerome lapsed back into a pensive silence reflecting on His fledgling fealty as a Person of Faith. He preferred that title to Christian. "'Christian' - just has too much baggage," he thought. It helped him avoid the hassles that calling himself a Christian would cause with the old crowd. He knew if he looked too hard, he would see through the thin veneer to the cowardice of this justification. "God, I'm a Christian. How did that happen?" He'd recently thought that very thing, truly incredulous as if he'd just been witness to someone blowing a cube shaped bubble.

He was now half way across the West Seattle Bridge. God had anticipated

Jerome's request for a hand more familiar. For Jerome, God is the Being that is, the source of all being, a kind of philosopher's Koan¹, and undoubtedly exists and as such, to Jerome's mind, could not be more strange or 'freakish or alien'. Thinking about thinking *about thinking*, Jerome recollected the moment when he pressed his thought further in and arrived at that silence – a silence pregnant with thought, unarticulated but full of purpose or significance or meaning or all three and Jerome knew that someone resided in that silence and was asking to pour the fullness of Being into him. That Jerome had thus far been unable to explain how he knew this and his inability to articulate the exact nature of this knowledge was a source of doubt and temptation to dismiss the experience as a bit of sketchy psychology. Yet, because of the experience Jerome had embraced Christianity. Now, as a Christian, Jerome still held to that descriptive premise about God; but in that experience, for an instant, he experienced a thickening of time illumined by a shaft of light that directed his focus on the humanity of Christ.

That God would take on an image less strange in order to offer a helping hand is an astounding idea in and of itself and a source of pathetic comedy if one thinks Aristotle's 'Magnanimous Man' is an ideal. Yet, Jerome, for a very small instant, vaguely understood the light years and possibly infinite number of dimensions of being that were transcended to cause the arrival of God's helping hand. A more unexpected arrival could not have been guessed. God's helping hand was fully human and came to a bitter end transfixed to a tree. That wasn't the end of the story of course but... in the presence the silence deepened. Jerome *knew* he was being offered something more than an extension of biological life, much more than he himself could have offered that little worm. He looked up and somehow the hill into west Seattle was alive with a thousand shades of green catching the last of the fading twilight. Jerome thought life is good and good is a very freakish and alien thing.

Jerome wanted harmony with "life" and that is why was headed to his father's house. He'd chosen disharmony in more ways than he'd like to admit but one of more glaring examples that demanded atonement was his hostile rejection and general disrespect coupled with outrageous demands he had made of his father. Jerome had resolved to go and make it right. "Man, I hate the sound of that-- 'make it right', what does that mean?!" Jerome felt the heat in his face thought to himself, "I'm not going to get all worked up about this again." So Dad didn't possess the perfect parental skills; your criminal behavior didn't exactly make it

any easier. Jerome remembered being in high school and how, after being at a party he was so drunk that he let his friend drive his dad's car and wrecked it, because, of course, Jerome's friend was drunk, too. His Dad was furious, Jerome responded in kind, ferociously refusing to acknowledge any responsibility. Some hard and bitter words were spewed from the blustering red face of his father. Jerome didn't break, at least not then, in front of his dad. A few days later, he found a card in his room. Jerome remembered it very clearly. It was a Non Sequitur comic. On it, there were two street prophets, caricatures of Moses, about to cross paths. Each prophet had his own sign, one read "**REJOICE!**- Today is the first day of the rest of your life." The other read "**REPENT!**- Today could be your last." Printed inside the card it said "the philosophers' showdown" but his dad had written "Jerome. I love you. -Not I'd love you if only... or I love you but... Just I love you. Your dad." At the time Jerome saw it he thought "Whatever! He's been readin' that psychobabble crap again. Well it ain't gonna work!" Jerome's girlfriend Deirdre, read the card and her eyes misted with tears; Jerome tried not to sneer when he heard her say she thought it was "beautiful..." Jerome recalled thinking at the time, "blah, blah, blah... what a sap! She doesn't know my dad!" while at the same time wondering what his Dad was trying to prove. Jerome's eyes were now stinging at the thought of his own pusillanimity at being unable to accept something good with out suspicion and the vicious schadenfreude he would often feel when he could make his Dad blow his cool or expose his failure to live up to his precious 'standards'. "Stay detached," He told himself "or you'll end up blubbering like Teresa at the ending of Babette's Feast."

He had taken his little sister Teresa to an independent film house down town to see Babette's Feast a few weeks ago Jerome liked it. The film was astounding in it's ability to convey the poignancy and joy of self sacrifice to give gifts, even to those unable to fully understand the nature of the gift. He understood why Teresa wanted him to see it.

Afterwards they had gone down to Pike Place Market to get some seafood gumbo and apricot sherbet – Teresa's favorite ever since she was four and had turned Beauregard her stuffed rabbit's face orange trying to share the joy of her new favorite frozen delight.

Jerome's mind returned to their conversation because he felt it was so pivotal in his decision to go and make peace with his father. His mind wandered further into memory.

They were coming out of the theater. "Hey Roman, let's go to The Happy Clam," Teresa said with a bit of forced enthusiasm. Her eyes were bloodshot and puffy. Jerome could see moisture glistening on her eyelashes. He felt sheepish about looking in her eyes because he knew she'd been crying in the movie, but he thought her eyes pretty and unusual in that they appeared to undergo dramatic shifts in color from baby blanket blue to dark like the water at Alkai Beach. They were dark now.

"I don't know; that's all the way down town and..."

Teresa interrupted. "Oh C'mon Roman! It's Tuesday and we're havin' California summer so quit actin' like Wednesday's child in a Montana winter. You know you love The Happy Clam – 'Ask anyone around – Best seafood gumbo in Puget Sound!' " She mocked the famous slogan by trying to make her little voice into a booming bass. Teresa's enthusiasm was fully spontaneous at this point.

"OK OK, Lady Bigbucks-- but I'm not buying Beauregard any sherbet and I don't want to see your orange tongue," Jerome teased. He thought it funny that his sister – 'Miss Adjunct Physics Professor' at Seattle U. seemed no less "little girlish" than the she did at four when she excitedly tried to share her sherbet with Beauregard.

The docks were all but deserted, mostly because it was Tuesday after the Fourth of July, but also the lack of rain made the fishy smell of the Sound a lot stronger. When Teresa and Jerome went into the Happy Clam, which was as deserted as the boardwalk, they were greeted by the bartender with a shaved head who wore a t-shirt with a print of a can of Spam on it, out of the sleeves sprang two well muscled arms entirely tattooed with some kind of very intricate Celtic weave. His face had multiple piercings and his ears had so many that it looked as though they were framed in metal. He told them to sit anywhere. Teresa jibbed under her breath, "Looks kinda like you used to when you had dad's fishing lures through your lip and nose, Mr. Punk-rock." Jerome laughed but quickly retorted, "they weren't fishing lures and not everyone thinks granola girl chic is the epitome of cool, fashion crack." They went and sat in a booth under a large tin bas-relief of a cartoonish clam and crab. In a backdrop of bright and whirling colors, both of these sea creatures wore John Lennon spectacles replete with oil-slick swirls for lenses. The paint was cracked and had flaked off near the bottom

of sign so that all that was left of the Happy Clam slogan read: "anyone around".

Jerome laughed. "Look Tes, '...anyone around...?' Just us Donnigans! - Oh yeah and these hippy crustaceans on the wall."

Teresa cast a baffled stare in his direction. Jerome pointed at the sign. She furrowed her brow then offered him a kind of knowing charity smile.

Jerome pouted, "How come my comedic timing is only perfect when it's unintentional or at my expense?"

" 'Cause, Mr. Roman, you were born a lone stooge. Now if you could just find you own Curly and Moe then you'd be off the chain," Quipped Teresa.

"Who says I'm Larry and... oh whatever, Juss ordah me a Guinness an a gambo an den shutcha pie hole cuz ahm goin to da crappuh, toots," Jerome replied in his best 1930's Chicago gangster accent.

"Ok, but get rid of that crappy Cagney before you get back brother dear," Teresa replied with saccharine sweetness. The bartender was walking up with water and menus saying "You already know what you want?"

"Yeah, she'll tell you. I gotta go..." Jerome nodded toward the bathroom.

"Alright, man." The bartender turned to Teresa, "you know what you want too?" Teresa nodded her head.

Jerome was walking off while the bartender stuffed the menus under his arm and took her order. Teresa's voice faded in Jerome's ears as he walked away.

"Wow! That was fast." Jerome returned to the table, finding his Gumbo and Guinness with the clover carved into the head of the pint had already arrived. He caught one whiff of the gumbo and realized how hungry he was. "Where's yours?"

"I got the grilled chicken salad. Aren't you happy he knows how to pour a pint? And quick, too." Jerome dug in barely noticing that after her salad arrived Teresa was picking at it disinterestedly. When He took his first long pull on his pint he

did notice. "Hey why'd you insist on comin' here if you're not even hungry?" Jerome asked though he didn't think he really wanted to know.

Teresa began. "Did he spice up your gumbo? I know you like that so I told him to."

"Yeah he did!" Jerome's eyebrows lowered. "What's up with you?"

With a tone of prevarication Teresa began, "Well you know Mom is going out of town in a couple of weeks and she asked me to check in on Dad. You know help him 'remember' to only smoke in the den and eat something besides frozen pizza. Well, I thought that..." Teresa halted.

"That what?" Jerome queried but didn't think he cared to hear more. The tones in Teresa's voice all but killed Jerome's appetite, but he finished his pint and asked for another. "I mean," she continued, "Mom knows you been going to Mass with me, and you know how happy she is about that." Jerome's eyes narrowed. "She didn't say anything to me about it. You think maybe she's gloating about the efficacy of her prayers?" He laughed. Teresa's face soured.

"I'm just kidding!" he said defensively. "So what are you getting at? Mom's happy that I might be a repentant sinner?" Teresa's eyes flared "Knock it off Romen! You know I don't think that's funny. You and your trendy paganism were really irritating-- either be a real pagan or don't... Whatever... You know I love you but I'm not going to cry about your goofy stuff 'cause... 'cause your 'smarter-than-God' attitude is really stupid and I'm having apricot sherbet and you need to go see dad. Don't think I haven't noticed some of the new books in your apartment or wasn't listening to some of your conversations with Father Chu and don't tell me you just like to hear his Vietnamese accent either."

Teresa was articulating her words with a kind of severe clarity, which, Jerome knew, meant she felt what she was saying was very important. He shifted uncomfortably.

"Ok, ok, chillage in the village, sisterling. I was just playin', but Teresa," Jerome's voice grew assertive, "my 'trendy paganism', as you dismissively call it, is somewhat responsible for my being able to embrace Christ – in and through The Church. The Pure Land Buddhism that I studied with Dr. Tsu Lim..." Jerome

trailed off.

"I'm sorry Jerome. I know. I know, 'love truth wherever you find it.' Anyway," Teresa began again, "You need to go see Dad." She touched the silver ring she'd given him recently. It had thorns outside but inside there were roses and Luke 15:11-32 inscribed. "You need to let this stuff go to work."

"I just saw him on the Fourth-- and when did God make you the voice of my conscience?" Jerome blurted out in a tone harsher than he'd intended.

Teresa flinched but kept on, "Yeah, but you two said less than two words to each other and I don't want another Christmas like last year. I swear between yours and Dad's stony silences, Hark the herald angels sing, ends up feeling like a funeral dirge."

Jerome felt a bit sullen. Part of him knew she was right but he resisted being pushed.

"Look, Romey just do it. Dad misses having someone who appreciates those silly comics and will engage him in political badinage or bickering and stuff... He misses you too, Romey."

"Too? – who said that I..." He didn't finish. "I'm less than twenty miles away which feels plenty close. And by the way we weren't always 'bickering', we just engaged 'interesting' conversation."

Jerome observed Teresa, smiling at him with naivety of a three year old-- or was it the purity of a saint? He wasn't sure which; wasn't sure if there was much of a difference between the two, and was certain there was none if intensity of joy were the measure of such things. He tried to scowl but couldn't help smiling back and said. "You ready?" Still smiling she said, "Yes, brother dear."

Jerome pulled up to the house still shaking his head at the thought of his sister's triumphant smiling. He imagined her as a tiny Joan of Arc crawling up his shoulder and jamming the conqueror's standard in his ear." He laughed to himself. "So, Chief, some people get an angel on their shoulder and I get a little sister in militant mediaeval garb." He was smiling back again. He opened the car door and the smell of fresh cut grass was at once sweet, thick and invigorating.

Except for a dog barking in the distance, the street felt unusually still. Jerome looked to the house the only light on was in the den. He could see a flickering so he knew the TV was on. One of the rabbit ears was pushing the Venetian blind breaking the uniformity of the light pouring between the slats.

“Well heeeeeerzz Johnny, and here goes nothing. C’mon, it’s just Dad,” Jerome mumbled to himself, trying to steady his resolve as he slouched his way to the door. He rang the bell. He didn’t know why he felt nervous-- after all, he was expected. He’d phoned earlier saying he was coming over, but that was at ten in the morning. The porch light came on and the inward suction of the door opening pulled the screen in with a jarring cacophony of metal on metal. The instant before Jerome pulled the screen door he saw his warbled reflection in the glass super imposed over his father’s face far on the other side.

“I thought you were coming over this morning.” Jerome’s father stepped back offering an unspoken invitation to come in. Jerome accepted. Jerome’s father looked steady at him and then turned toward the den saying, “I was just watching The McLaughlin Group and having a snack. C’mon back. You wanna a pop? How’s your new place? Don’t tell your mom I was smoking out of the den.”

“She already knows.” Jerome thought, but he said, “I won’t.” When they came into the den Jerome noticed his dad was wearing a plaid flannel robe barley tied and some thread bear pajama pants. James Donnegan was in his late fifties, and though he was once a barrel-chested athlete, now he had a considerable paunch. His hair was thick grizzled and dull brown, pushed back in a kind of disheveled pompadour. He wore a goatee, equally disheveled and grizzled, though more white than brown. His Irish face was round and ruddy and set with eyes like Teresa’s, but when his eyes were bright, they were full of mirth and mischief. When they went dark, they burned with a hot Irish temper, which, coupled with his considerable intellect, made him capable of hard and cutting words. Some of those words had been directed at Jerome in this very room. In the amber light of the table lamp, his father’s eyes merely looked faded and he seemed somehow smaller to Jerome. Jerome looked around and as usual, he saw that his dad had three or four periodicals on the coffee table next to an open sci-fi paperback and a Who’s Who in Jazz book. There were pizza crusts on plate and Jerome was looking at them when they sat down. John noticed his son looking and laughingly said, “I’ll have salad later. After I finished the lawn this afternoon,

I've just been the lounge lizard since I showered – haven't bothered to get dressed yet."

"Yeah I thought it was kind of early to be going to bed. I hope you don't mind me droppin' over." Jerome looked in his father's face. "'Cause I wanted to talk to about something I thought was pretty important."

John Donnegan shrugged then his brow furrowed and said, "Are you in trouble?"

Jerome clenched his jaw, angry that his father just assumed trouble, but then he relaxed, reminding himself that trouble had been a big staple their relational diet these past few years, and he did ask rather than declare. "No, no trouble I just..." He hesitated.

Then his father did something very odd-- he turned off the TV and sat up looking intently at his son as if he knew the extent of Jerome's struggle to say what he wanted.

This disturbed Jerome. His dad rarely gave what felt like undivided attention and when he did, Jerome wished it didn't feel so probing.

Jerome continued, "I know that this has been a long time coming and I'm sorry I've waited so long to do this or at least try. I wish I knew exactly where to begin. I know I've acted like an ass to you and done a lot of crap that I need own up to. You probably know most, if not all, of it. Like the time I got your car wrecked or when destroyed your glasses when we were arguing or put salt in your coffee... all the name calling and lying about stupid stuff... I am sorry. I know that doesn't make everything all better. But more than being sorry I am asking for your forgiveness. There's probably stuff I don't remember but I know I caused you, Mom, and all the family a lot of grief and cost you more than a pretty penny to boot. If you think I can make it up, I'll try but I know most of what's done is done and... well... I am sorry. I really..." Jerome's voice faded.

He felt as though he'd covered it pretty well. Not as well as he'd rehearsed but what was lacking in detail he made up for with the emotion that fueled the delivery. His emotions hadn't surged as strong during his moral inventory, or as Teresa preferred to call it examination of conscience.

Except for a dismissive wave of the hand at the words “make it up...” Jerome’s father remained a still point and with an unguarded yet stony stare he observed his son for a few minutes without comment. Jerome felt like three or four eternities passed while he looked into his father’s face completely dumfounded by his inability to read the expression he saw. He looked at the bookshelf, noticed Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy next to Robert Heinlein’s Stranger in a Strange Land, and was thankful for the distraction of such an odd juxtaposition of literature. He heard his father shift in his chair.

John Donnegan was judiciously weighing the words his son had just spoken. He focused on Jerome’s facial expression; nervousness was bleeding into dejection like he thought he’d wasted his breath and was looking for an escape. John Donnegan spoke from the silence. “Jer... Achcemm...” He cleared his throat. “I forgave you before you were here.” He looked at his son and loved him.

Jerome had been studying his father’s face but it had been inscrutable, and he thought about saying something so his dad wouldn’t feel obligated to respond; anything was better than the deafening silence. As Jerome struggled for the words that would release them from this silent stalemate, his dad centered his gaze on Jerome and said those startling seven words that would echo in his head long after he ever heard them.

Jerome got up mumbling his gratitude. John nodded and mentioned that Tim his partner at the firm said the ‘steelhead were jumping in the boat over at Alkai’, “How’d you like to go, say, Labor Day Weekend?” They were standing on the porch and though the smell of cut grass was still in the air there was a gentle but steady breeze, cool and thick with smell of rain. “I wonder if we’ll get rain.” John continued releasing Jerome from answering his invitation. Jerome smiled easy saying, “Yeah, where’s Chief Seattle and a good rain dance when you need him? God knows how we need the rain.” Silence again, they were both looking down the way like they expected to see something besides the lighted street on a quiet suburban night. Jerome tuned to look at his dad and said, “Yeah I’d like to go... it’s been awhile.” His dad smiled. “It’s been a while.” He repeated.

Jerome was nearly home and still pondering the words, his father had given him. Jerome mused aloud “‘...before you were here.’ What did he mean? Did he guess why I wanted to visit? Did he mean in some bizarre metaphysical sense like he

'forgave' me before I was born or before I reached this level of spiritual maturity...?" Jerome laughed at the thought of calling himself 'mature'. A contented quiet washed over Jerome as he thought of his father sitting there in a tattered plaid robe with a belly that refused to remain covered. The same robe his mother wanted to give to The St. Vincent Society but John Donnegan refused saying in an exaggerated Irish brogue "For better or worse woman these are the colors of the Donnegan Clan and they'll not be forsaken!" At this Teresa and Jerome squealed in amusement. He was a bit thinner and less grizzled then.

Jerome let those words spoken in the den, like absolution, run through his mind again. He thought his dad an odd mystery and for an instant, he thought him like a Buddha, if Buddha if had been an Irish chain smoker with a disheveled pompadour and a goatee. "He's certainly got the belly." Jerome chortled to himself. Then he thought to himself "no, it was more like Jesus. The Incarnation - the physical helping hand of God still manifests, sometimes through the nicotine stained fingers if an Irishman."

A big – SPLAT - On the windshield. "What the..." Jerome thought it was a huge bug at first but then there was another and another and another – it was rain! Rain was coming down like the tropical torrents in Texas. Just like the rain Jerome had seen when the family had gone to Sea World in San Antonio to see Shamu the killer whale do his tricks. Jerome was eleven and wondered how people could live where it rained so hard. "Seattle never gets rain like this." He thought reaching for the windshield wipers.

He remembered saying "God knows we need It." to his dad on the porch less than an hour before. He thought of the announcer who was so excited that we would get forty-one days with out rain. "I guess someone higher up figured forty days would be enough to go without..." Jerome trailed off. The gospel story of Jesus fasting for forty days came to his mind. "...and after forty days he was comforted by angels..." He spoke the closing words of the tale softly. He looked forward to when he would be fishing with his father. Aloud, he spoke, "it's been awhile." He continued simply saying, "Thanks God."

"It's been awhile."

Jerome felt these words come again, from somewhere beyond himself to be consumed by the sacred interior.

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