

TONY VIGORITO

**Nine Kinds
OF
Naked**

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A C E G I K J H F D B

19 IN 1936, during the depths of the Great Depression, forty young women arrived at the Cooper Pants Factory near Gainesville, Florida, sat down at their sewing machines, and set about stitching hems and seams, another dreary day in the land of opportunity. Shortly after they began their busywork, and as if this debasement of their imagination were not tragic enough, a tornado came along and bumped into the factory. Thirty-nine of the forty women ran panicked and screaming to the stairwell; a Mrs. Boyd Shaw remained at her station. She had inadvertently sewn her own dress into the seam she was stitching, and was unable to beat the hasty retreat. As she struggled to free herself, the tornado ripped the roof from the building, ultimately causing it to collapse, but not before it tore Mrs. Boyd Shaw clean out of her clothes and tossed her a block away, stark naked and bruised, but otherwise fine. All thirty-nine of her coworkers died in the ensuing inferno that consumed the factory.

There are hundreds of substantiated oddities such as this surrounding tornadoes. A tornado once opened a barn door, pulled a wagon out, turned it around, wheeled it back inside, and closed the door. A phonograph recording of the song “Stormy Weather” was once found wedged into a utility pole after a tornado had swept through the area. A butter churn once dropped out of the sky and landed on a cow’s head, half an hour after a tornado had hit twenty miles away. Chickens are routinely stripped of their feathers, and the feathers are sometimes found speared into planks of wood. In 1974, a farmer reclaimed a mirror, a carton of eggs, and a box of Christmas ornaments—all undamaged—from the otherwise

total wreckage of his house. A tornado in 1996 even had the audacity to hit a drive-in movie theatre in Canada while it was screening the movie *Twister*.

Then there are those who claim that tornadoes can blow a jug inside out, or a cellar upside down, or a rooster into a bottle, or even that a tornado can change the day of the week and knock the wind out of a politician. Although these assertions are ludicrous, the essential point should not be lost. Tornadoes introduce chaos, and chaos makes anything—short of changing the day of the week—possible. To describe the situation in terms of probability theory: Tornadoes provide a high probability that several of millions of low probability events will occur. Of course, which of these millions of low probability events actually occurs is pure chance.

Probably.

20 DIABLO WAS STILL inside Billy Pronto's truck when he regained consciousness. The truck was about seventy feet from the road, and neither his severed middle finger nor Billy Pronto were anywhere to be seen. Frustration descended, and like a paper clip in idle hands, Diablo was bound to get bent out of shape. His finger, or the lack thereof, hurt like hell. His hand and head were bleeding, and he wanted to get himself to a hospital, preferably with a finger for some surgeon to heroically reattach.

To make matters worse, Diablo's simulacra of satori had split, evaporating like a two-minute sprinkle in the desert. This was no longer the perpetually flaring present, the big day of everyday; this was the worst day of his life. Jeezus christ,

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Diablo thought, did I *swallow* my goddamn finger? Maybe the heroic surgeon can retrieve it? Decisions. Final scan for finger and Billy Pronto. Nothing. Keys? Still in ignition. Does it start? Yes it does. Go? Go.

Diablo floored it, tore up the fallow field, crashed over a ditch, and bounced back onto the road. He had accelerated to sixty miles an hour before his zeal began to sag. Though the sky above him was as azure as he had ever witnessed, the sky above Normal—still four miles away across the Illinois flatland—was a sickeningly greenish black, clouds tumbling and boiling, thrashing and roiling like the underbelly of a rabid dragon in a pit of petroleum. Then he saw it, a wound-up towel snap from the bottom of the enormous cloud mass and slap the ground, the finger of God tickling Mother Earth. She bucked and threw a swarm of debris back at the roguish overtures of the sky, where it circled like vultures along the dancing windpipe, squirming like the trunk of an elephant about to sneeze.

Dumfounded once again, Diablo continued racing toward Normal for another few seconds. He might have continued farther if a curtain of hailstones the size of golf balls hadn't suddenly fallen all around him. He braked hard but only succeeded in marbling across the hail-covered road, spinning a dozen times, each rotation marked by a barrage of hailstones pelting him through the open driver's-side window. At some point he let out a cry, shielding his face from the punctuated bombardment of ice and his eyes from the relentless madness of the world. He managed to roll up the window once he realized he had stopped, and there he sat, shivering from shock,

realizing he could no longer cross the fingers on his left hand, as thousands of berserking devils stampeded over the outside of the truck, hooves whampering, clamoring, riding jackhammers for pogo sticks. After a few minutes, the swarm had mostly passed, with only an occasional straggler pinging like the last few kernels of corn to pop.

Relieved, Diablo picked up one of the smaller hailstones littering the inside of the truck and tossed it in his mouth. It gave way to a satisfying and refreshing crunch. He smirked, rolled his window back down, stuck his left arm out, and defiantly extended what remained of his middle finger to the sky.

2 1 NO SOONER HAD Diablo proffered his profanity to the heavens than a new peril presented itself. Squinting down the highway, he saw a surge of cars emerging from the dusty mist and charging his way, taking up both sides of the road and then some.

The tornado had attacked the highway through Normal, peeling slabs of pavement and tossing them here and there like so much citrus rind. This had triggered a universal reaction of internally combusted flight as hundreds of drivers shrieked their automobiles in the opposite direction and toward Diablo. Several cars were tapped out as the tornado chased the retreating pack down the highway, adding still greater imperative to the evacuation. Later, it was estimated that the tornado had been moving across the ground at speeds approaching seventy miles an hour.

Of course, Diablo was unaware of those affairs. The funnel cloud was no longer visible amid the dust and debris it was

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producing, and he could only see the ripsnorting onslaught of automobiles bearing down on him. Alarmed, he turned the ignition, fully expecting it to cough and sputter, but it defied the cliché and roared to life. Diablo gunned the engine, turned the truck with a gratifying fishtail, and just as he shifted into third looked in his rearview mirror and saw the leaders of the pack less than a hundred feet behind and an enormous tornado suddenly in full view a mile or so back. Within seconds the first wave of cars tore past him, honking and squealing, and before Diablo knew what was happening he was in the middle of a high-speed traffic jam. He shifted into fourth at sixty-five, and finally made it to fifth by eighty miles an hour. He was still being passed on all sides. On the median to the right an SUV was bouncing across the grass, taking the beating it had been waiting for since its manufacture. Farther behind an ambulance was wailing its siren and flashing its lights, trying to bully its way forward, but no one was having any of that shit. The emergency, after all, was perfectly apparent to everyone.

Diablo pushed harder on the gas pedal, hoping to open the throttle another micrometer, anything to accelerate, anything to get the holy fuck away from that windy monstrosity. When he next glanced at his speedometer the needle was bouncing back and forth across the gauge, maxed out and indicating that he and everyone around him were barreling down the highway at well over a hundred miles per hour. Soon afterward the tornado veered off the road and dissipated over some trees. Traffic gradually slowed, some people pulled over and got out of their cars, and within ten minutes the road was mostly empty again. Diablo kept on driving. It was all he had

going for him, the way he figured it. The accidents of the day had conspired to trade the middle finger of his left hand for a pickup truck with three-quarters of a tank of gas and half a bag of corn chips. It was a start, and it seemed like it would lead him somewhere.

No sooner had he reasoned this out than the truck was rocked by an unseen collision. Diablo yelled “Jee-zus christ!” in the ensuing melee of braking, screeching, and the rear window shattering, and this was as it should be. After all, an eight-foot crucifix had just dropped out of the sky and into his flatbed, managing to shatter his rear window in the process. Once he had the truck pulled over, Diablo jumped out to investigate, still thinking he’d hit a deer or vice versa. He was, for the third time that day, dumfounded, finding instead a bronzed, life-sized, crucified Christ gazing placidly up at him from the flatbed as if it were a loyal pet.

Growing accustomed to the profoundly improbable, Diablo set about arranging the crucifix securely. Most pickups are designed to hold the standard cut of plywood, a 4 × 8 sheet, in their bed, and so the crucifix, four feet wide and eight feet tall, was a perfectly snug fit. After regarding the curiosity, Diablo got back in the cab, pausing to inspect both of his hands. He would not have been surprised if his missing finger had mysteriously shifted to his right hand, or even, given recent events, if it had miraculously regenerated itself. The situation seemed stable, though, and the bleeding had even stopped. He sighed, and after accelerating back up to fifth gear, Diablo tucked his left hand under his thigh to soothe its throbbing, shook his

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head at the bizarre events of the day, and drove away from Normal, confident that God was with him.

2 2 THIRTY MINUTES EARLIER, the oblivious Dave Wildhack was impatiently ignoring Father J. J. Speed's homily. Sermons frustrated Dave since they required everyone to sit down, thereby suspending his continuing survey of the rear ends of the women in his parish. Furthermore, a squad of headaches was also kicking in the doors of his skull like overzealous gangbusters. He winced as he massaged his neck, and the gangbusters opened fire with a crack of thunder outside, blinding his closed eyelids with flares of spectacularly bright light. Dave looked up to stretch his neck, opened his eyes, and noted with a moment's curiosity that the hanging lights were all vaguely rotating.

If the oblivious Dave Wildhack ever paid any attention at all to his life, he might have noticed that he was apt to develop such headaches just prior to thunderstorms. If only he had realized this, he might have perceived the peculiarity of the atmosphere, and guessed by the severity of his headache that an uncommonly strong storm was developing outside. But Dave perceived his headaches in precisely the same way as he understood every other difficulty in his life, that is, as random misfortune and arbitrary adversity. Consequently, the barometric pressure was free to plummet to its exceptional depth that morning, unheeded by anyone at Palm Sunday Mass.

If there had been a dog in attendance, surely it would have been whining frantically, running in circles, barking, bristling,

and generally raising the alarm. But there was no dog, only people, and people reside much more comfortably in their imagination than they do in the actual physical world. Indeed, these days, the physical world itself is usually nothing more than a material manifestation of the human imagination, built to suit the human scale and to provide the illusion of control over existential chaos.

Although Bridget Snapdragon did not share this intolerance for chaos, she certainly held no prejudice against residing in the imagination. Not at all. Bridget Snapdragon merely found the socially sanctioned imagination to be a shallow, unexciting alternative to the depths of unpremeditated reverie. Today, her imagination wandered into wonder at something she had recently read about quantum mechanics. It was the notion of *nonlocality*, the preposterous principle that seems to imply that space does not exist, or that there is some hyperspatial dimension whereby two particles need not share the same region of space to be interconnected. Experiments demonstrating this—whereby measurements taken of particles that were once united show that the observation of a particle at one location can have an instantaneous effect on the state of a distant particle—seemed to disrupt every assumption of a material universe confronting human consciousness from without. *Acausal nonlocal quantum mechanical interrelatedness* is what they called it. Acausal nonlocal quantum mechanical interrelatedness. She liked that phrase; it had a certain rhythm to it.

Regarding acausal nonlocal quantum mechanical interrelatedness, the explanation that most fascinated her was the idea that the two particles are not separate at all, but are sim-

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ply two different versions of a single particle, like two camera angles of the same event. Furthermore, given that every particle in the universe was united before the Big Bang, the conclusion seemed to be that every particle in the universe is simply a different version of the same single particle. An atom, consequently, is nothing more than a dimensional protrusion, a localized expression of the same underlying event, and Bridget Snapdragon was beginning to muse that perhaps this sub-quantum event could be called God when Father J. J. Speed interrupted her daydream.

“Woman!” Father J. J. Speed thundered the conclusion of his sermon, unctuous oratory dripping off his tongue like quicksilver as he competed with the storm outside. “Woman is the fairest of all creatures.” Father J. J. Speed was chasing his rant, hot on the trail of the Holy Spirit, and no burrs of hesitation would tangle his climax. “The tender curves of Mother Eve are irresistible, as beautiful as the Earth itself, yet as seductive as the forbidden fruit. Mothers and daughters, lead us not into temptation. Your modesty means the salvation of your fathers and your sons. Lead them not into the thicket of lust. Lead them not into the jungles of lechery. For as Jesus the Lord has spoken, ‘Whosoever looketh upon a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.’ Sisters, save your brothers from this mortal sin . . .”

Bridget furrowed her brow, disliking and dismissing Father J. J. Speed’s logic. What the heck was he talking about, standing up there stumping for prudery? And at the dawn of spring, no less! She imagined herself shouting back at the pulpit: Adam and Eve were naked, you doofus! Modesty only

emerged after the fall! Nature has no privates. The naked truth is this: *Modesty* is the devil's handiwork. She grinned in smug satisfaction with herself.

"...And as we go forth into our lives this week," Father J. J. Speed concluded, pleased that even the storm outside had become suddenly still for his finale, "let us remember that the salvation of others," he bowed his head, "lies in our own modesty." After an extended dramatic moment he gestured with his open palms for the congregation to rise. "Let us pray."

The rustle of everyone standing was defeated by a resounding rumble of thunder bowling across the ceiling, followed by a rattling veil of hail sweeping across the roof. The oblivious Dave Wildhack paid no attention, silently rejoicing instead as a couple hundred female haunches burst once again into his view. Bridget Snapdragon imagined herself continuing to assert that the salvation of others lies in our *immodesty*, and demonstrating her point by streaking nine months pregnant through the church. As for Father J. J. Speed, he kept his head bowed, working a grin out of his face. It was a good sermon, and these left him with an oratorical high that temporarily relieved the burden of his own hypocrisy. Plus, it was cool that the storm's thunder seemed to echo of the irrefutable truth of his words. Straightening his face and looking up at last, he began to lead the congregation in their monotonous recitation of the Nicene Creed. "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."

A split second after the completion of the first affirmation and before they could draw in a breath to continue, every open door in the church simultaneously slammed shut. This was a

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consequence of the exceptionally low barometric pressure that had been developing in the atmosphere around the church, and it gave everyone a considerable start. It relieved nobody when what sounded like every toilet in the building simultaneously flushing gave way to a tremendous gurgle throughout the building's plumbing system. As everyone looked around at each other bewildered, the reverberating echoes of this commotion gave way to an abrupt stillness in the atmosphere. The only sounds were the creaking of the hanging lights, now circling more emphatically, immediately followed by a swell of murmurs and whispers, and also, thanks to the microphone mounted on Father J. J. Speed's cassock, an amplified "what in the hell?" He was as unsettled as everyone, and after a few more moments, he addressed the congregation deliberately, if irresolutely. "I think, folks, perhaps, um, we should, ah, proceed downstairs?"

Scarcely had he spoken these words than a noise like every bee on the planet swarming filled the collective aural cavity. People began to jostle one another nervously in the pews, and the noise quickly rumbled into what sounded like the roar of a gigantic waterfall bursting its dam at last, bellowing like a billion revolutionaries storming the Pentagon. Everyone froze, looking up, mouths uniformly agape. Everyone, that is, except for Bridget Snapdragon. She was lowering herself unobserved onto the pew, clutching her enormous belly. She called out to Dave, who didn't hear her, but did happen to look her way by chance a few moments later. He leapt immediately to her side, and seconds later, the roof of the church was ripped from its flying buttresses.

2 3 AS FAR AS the cosmos is concerned, planet Earth is very literally in the middle of nowhere. As a result, there is nothing necessarily up about north. In other words, given the absence of any permanently stable point of reference in the infinite void of space, it is impossible to assert with any certainty that north is upside down, right side up, sideways, diagonal, or any other particular direction in the three-dimensional 360-degree infinity of space. It is only a convenience of a culture bred from colonialism that allows us to generally assume that north is up and south is down.

Be that as it may, if we can close our minds for a moment and assume there is something inherently right side up about north, it then becomes possible to pretend there is also a top and a bottom to our entire solar system, an assumption that itself permits the existence of the consistently meaningful rotational directions of clockwise and counterclockwise. Armed with this expansive delusion, it at last becomes possible to point out that, with the notable exception of Venus, every planet in our solar system rotates counterclockwise on its axis.

Now, this celestial pattern is no trivial fact. As a direct result of the so-called counterclockwise rotation of the Earth, ninety-nine percent of the tornadoes on the so-called top of the Earth rotate counterclockwise when viewed from above. However, the F4 tornado that struck Normal, Illinois, that fateful April Fool's Day was of the one percent that rotate clockwise. What this means is anyone's guess, but for years afterward Georgeann Judge would tell Dave Wildhack—by then no longer oblivious—that it was a *Venusian* tornado.

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24 IT WAS NO apparition when the congregation witnessed Jesus Christ turn several holy cartwheels down the center aisle of the church before ascending into the windstorm above. As one does not ordinarily expect gymnastics from crucified prophets, the lack of a revelatory aura made it not the least bit less astounding. However miraculous that spectacle might have been, there was scarcely a moment to appreciate it before all hands were shielding first their eyes and then their heads entirely. A cone, extending a half mile up and occasionally revealing the midday sun at its far end, enveloped the entire terrified church far too much like the tunnel rumored to greet us at death. Brilliant flashes of lightning zigzagged between howling walls of bilious debris, and somewhere a civil defense siren began to whimper.

Bridget shielded neither her eyes nor her head, although Dave, his confusion having given way to his instinct of paternal responsibility, was doing his best to protect both himself and her. Bridget was inhaling, drawing in an infinitely deep breath like a child looking up from an asphalt faceplant. Her eyes were wide and her pupils dilated, gazing up, absorbing and reflecting the entire circumstance, and still she inhaled. Her rib cage expanded to its full capacity, her heart gorged itself on ionized oxygen, her incipient daughter caught a buzz off the superoxygenated blood pumping through the umbilical hookah, and still she inhaled. Her water broke, and still she inhaled. When the atmosphere finally found its way out of Bridget's lungs, her wail pierced the roar of the tornado like a referee's whistle in a soccer riot. It was such a blast of tribulation, in

fact, that half the already panicked congregation instinctively turned to see what in the name of God was happening *now*.

What they saw was not Bridget Snapdragon in the throes of childbirth, for she was lying down obscured by the pews. Instead, half the congregation was greeted with the sudden sight of Georgeann Judge's husky and entirely naked body. Georgeann noticed this herself at about the same instant as everyone else, but her reaction was one of incredulity rather than mortification. She needn't have worried, for within seconds an identical fate was greeting everyone around her, seams splitting as easily as perforated tissue paper, wedgies ripping underwear clean off, buttons busting out, bracelets, watches, necklaces, everything except for the occasional sock was stripped like feathers from a chicken.

Father J. J. Speed's cassock was the last article of clothing to join the congregation's Sunday best in airborne frolic. Having seen everyone else's clothing yanked so rudely off, he had time to lay a firm grasp on the inside of his smocky sleeves a moment after his chasuble soared off his shoulders and a moment before an unseen hand rent his cassock in two like an indignant Pharisee. He immediately found himself twirling one half of his furiously flapping vestments in each hand as they struggled to join the dancing apparel above. At about the same time as his boxers split off, Father J. J. Speed realized the futility and the foolishness of his tug of war with the heavens. Looking like a superhuman and sacrilegious Chippendale reject, he ceased his grapple and released the billowing fabric with a splendid flourish, sending it sailing into the melee

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above. The two halves of his cassock left all remnants of chastity with the nude dude below as they joined the spinning rave of raiment, gradually twisting and tangling into an orgy of torn panties and rumpled trousers before vaulting high into the wild blue yonder.

2 5 NATURE KNOWS NEITHER mercy nor malice. From organism to ecosystem, every level of order has its own reasoning, all of which exists indifferent to the dreams and nightmares of other levels. As we are indifferent to any suffering inflicted upon unwelcome microorganisms as our own bodies struggle toward homeostasis, so is the good Earth indifferent to the catastrophes and disasters inflicted upon its inhabitants as it sneezes and coughs. Simply stated, a tornado is an absolutely neutral fact.

This truth was not apparent to the whimpering and sobbing parishioners now huddled naked in each other's arms, hiding beneath the pews from a wrath they could never have imagined. That everyone had taken shelter under the bolted-down benches was fortunate, for this particular tornado was so malevolent in its indifference that it had managed to locate Father J. J. Speed's sixty-six thousand remaining toothpicks and send them raining down on the parish like a volley of darts. The wind-whipped velocity permitted the toothpicks to puncture the surface of the pews, embedding themselves so comprehensively that every wooden surface in the church had become a virtual bed of nails.

Father J. J. Speed had taken solitary shelter under the altar,

entirely naked but more concerned with shielding his chest from public view than his privates. The thing was, Father J. J. Speed had a barely noticeable attribute that he was nevertheless very self-conscious about. Directly between his nipples, a dessert bowl sized depression dipped concave. Not having revealed himself naked to many people over the course of his life, he had grown to imagine that this feature was an elephantine deformity, and made every effort to ensure that no one would discover his terrible secret.

So there he squatted, shivering and habitually wishing he had a toothpick on which to gnaw when thousands of them came spraying out of the sky like an Egyptian plague, pelting and piercing every surface of the church. Despite the apparent fulfillment of his wish, he did not reach for one, and it would be over two decades before he would ever reach for one again. In his mind, the era of the toothpick ended at that moment, and a new dawn had arisen. His lifetime supply of toothpicks was gone, and he was still alive. It was a rebirth of sorts. He could move on at last, and he reached for his open Bible to lay a praise-the-Lord and promising hand upon it. He saw that it was open to Ezekiel, chapter one, and his astonished eyes happened to fall upon verse four:

And I looked, and behold, a whirlwind came out of the north . . .

26 ACTUALLY, THE ONLY person in the church not undergoing her own profoundly personal rebirth experience was the daughter of Bridget Snapdragon, who was merely undergoing her first birth. Whether Bridget was assisted by the exceptionally low point of barometric pressure or the greatly amplified