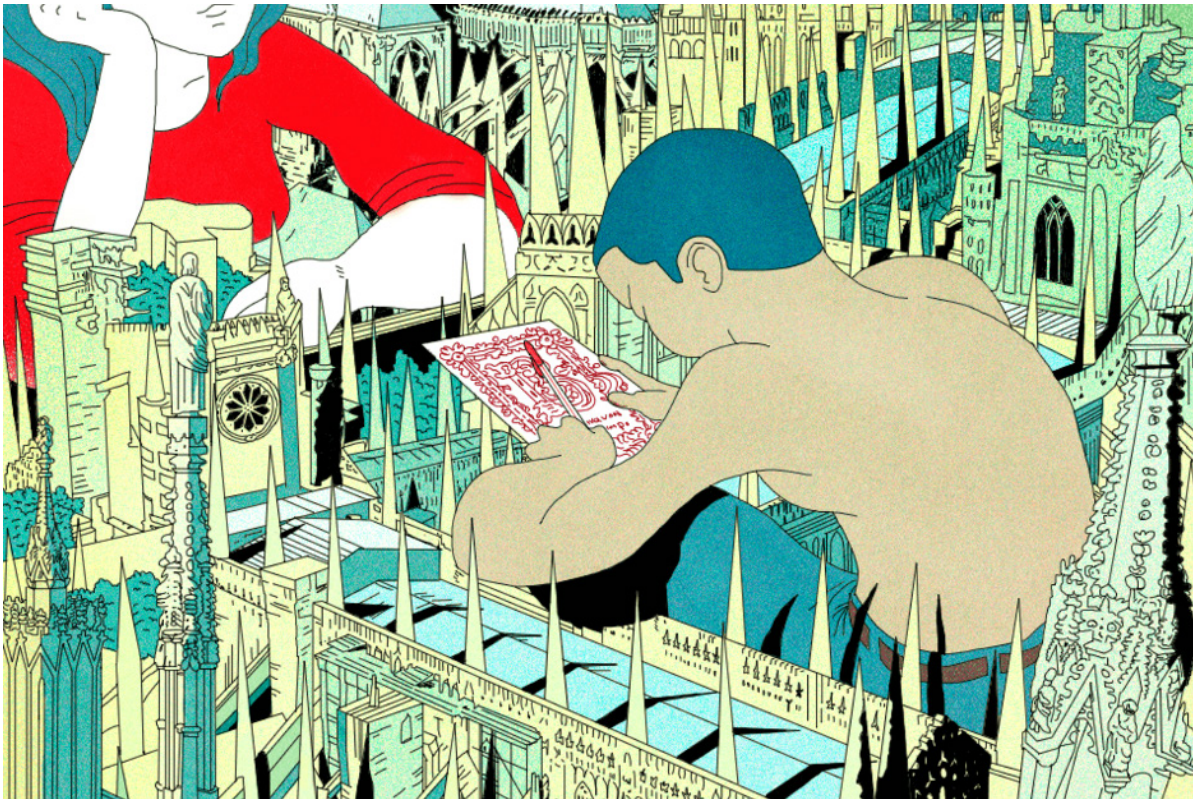


# Eight Saints and a Demon

BY NABEN RUTHNUM

"I always felt weird about telling you. Don't get mad, okay?"



Thaïs  
8 October 2009

Colin kept pronouncing it as though he were talking about people from Thailand. He wasn't following the patient, enunciated lead Ms. Rawley gave him in her intro: the way she stretched the *i* before sucking in air at the end of the *s*, making the *trema* talk. She interrupted Colin after the first paragraph or so of his presentation to explain the *¨*, applying it to the whiteboard with two darts of her marker, then writing *diaeresis* / *umlaut* / *trema*.

"And since I would never even try to say 'diaeresis' repeatedly in this

classroom, and umlaut is a bit of an ugly word, we'll call it a trema. Go on, Colin."

Colin always worked shabby jokes into his assignments and would inevitably focus on the Thai prostitute angle for his Penguin Dictionary of the Saints presentation on a reformed fourth-century "notorious harlot" from Egypt, who'd achieved beatification by burning all her clothes and jewellery, then latched onto a team of nuns to clean her soul for death.

Instead of listening, Julian practiced getting the *ï* to work for him the way it did for Karen Rawley. He sat at his desk making the small fishlike moue that the word demanded, while the room of fifteen-year-old boys waiting for their turn laughed intermittently at Colin, and Ms. Rawley stared at her desk. The assignment had been inspired by the discovery of a sealed box of the paperback dictionaries lying in the supply room, untouched since 1965. The books were beautiful, the liquid black of the borders and the sharp colours in the cover painting of Saint Jerome vivid and new, as though they had been mailed from the past.

"Since it pretty much says in the book that Thaïs probably didn't exist and that she is basically a Catholic bedtime story, the project, overall, was getting me to research a lie told to scare people into not having fun."

"What a penetrating argument, Colin, thank you." Karen looked up from her desk, watching Julian try his *ï*. He looked thoughtful and breathless, a drowned saint in living glass of blue and pink.

Pazuzu  
31 October 2013

During Karen Rawley's hearing, Colin became Julian's best friend. This was in their senior year, when both boys switched out of Hemdale Catholic in favour of the enormous, identity-blanching public school between their two suburbs. Colin kept best friend status through their freshman year of college and two months of the next. In that last month, they watched *The Exorcist* on Halloween, trying to, as Colin put it, "get the fear back."

It worked. Just not in the fear-of-God way that Colin intended. They sat on separate couches in Julian's living room, which was weakly heated by baseboard units and chilled by powerful movements of air through and around the papery, century-old panes in the large window behind them. Colin and Julian were each caped in wool blankets and eventually drew their feet off the floor, pressing legs close to bodies.

The bit in the movie about Father Karras abandoning his mother was

what got to Colin, who hissed a little bit at the scene of the depleted, betrayed old woman in her bed at a chaotic mental hospital. Colin's transfer from Hemdale had been followed a few months later by a local news profile of him and his boyfriend, a fairly stupid boy named Luke Strachan who was mainly appealing because he had his own place and made decent money selling stolen phones online. They'd done the interview in Luke's bachelor apartment, the door open so the camera setup could get a decent angle on Colin and Luke sitting on the futon couch that unfolded into the bed they shared. Colin's mother was not the kind of Irish Catholic to embrace this aspect of her son, especially when she first encountered it through her husband screaming at her from the living room to come to the TV.

"All her fault, definitely, but it still felt like mine too," he said to Julian, when they paused the movie to get a wax-coated whiskey bottle open.

Nothing in the movie got to Julian quite as much as the death of Max von Sydow, which happened offscreen and was an accidental triumph of the devil, who'd been helped by the old priest's weak heart and broken assistant.

Colin kept talking after they'd gotten the whiskey open, talked through the whole rest of the movie, but Julian had maintained his ability to ignore him even after they became friends. He concentrated on little Regan, a couple of traced scars on her face as she hugged the priest in the last scene, until she got into the car and was driven away from the house where she'd been invaded by the demon Pazuzu. With the film over, his ears began to accept Colin's frequencies again, noting only that he was still talking guilt, before the names surfaced.

"And Latham didn't even see you with Ms. Rawley. I just told him about you being in her car after lunch. He pretended he saw, like he was the scandalized star, and added all that stuff on top of the kissing. Stuck to it the whole time, once his parents told the cops about the texts they saw. And he only pretended because he was a glory hog, not because he didn't want to rat on me, for sure."

The Exorcist credits were interrupted by Netflix pointing out similar films to stream next. Julian usually liked to watch credits through to the end, but he hadn't made a move for the controller, or any move at all.

"I always felt weird about telling you. Don't get mad, okay?"

Julian didn't grab for the controller, stepping onto and over the coffee table instead with his hands in loose fists. He tripped and smashed his face into Colin's teeth, setting his forehead and his friend's mouth bleeding before the first punch.

Vulnus

Julian Proctor

10 October 2009

English 10

Ms. Rawley

St Vulnus

Vulnus began his life in ninth-century Baghdad. He was born from the union of a travelling merchant from Spain and a courtesan, who knew that she was to be decapitated for granting favour to someone other than the caliph. Vulnus's mother composed a song for her son, understanding that she would be executed when his skin and eyes were seen at his birth (the caliph at the time being decidedly dark, and the traveller from England rivalling the palest of his countrymen, his skin constantly blistered by the lacerating heat and rays of the desert sun).

Indeed, her head was ordered struck off before Vulnus's feet had left her womb, the court vizier having seen the boy's blue eyes, and a scimitar-bearing guard attending the birth. (Another version of the Vulnus story holds that the vizier, whose own eyes were blue, was the father). Many accounts say that the boy Vulnus was delivered of a dead woman, as Jesus was delivered of a virgin.

The song composed by his courtesan mother, plucked from an oud every morning by the slave woman who'd offered to nurse him (the boy's survival being another indication that the vizier, and not a wandering merchant, had been the father), was an eleven-note strain full of the east with a recurring lyrical thrill that was not to be heard in Western music until the baroque period. The surviving notated scrap of "Vulnus's Dawn," taken down by a Renaissance musician from Sicily who had heard it at a Persian wedding, is considered by musicologists to be a key bridging element between classical music forms in several different cultures. Earlier renderings of the song, if ever they were notated, were lost in Hulagu Khan's devastating assaults on Baghdad.

Vulnus was raised to be a musician, castrated at an early age to preserve the sweetness of his voice and to further reinforce the caliph's claim on the courtesans that the young man spent his days with. He fled the castle and Islamic rites on his twenty-second birthday, but not before releasing a dozen captured Christians who had been working as slaves in the kitchens—he clothed them in garments that would be invisible in the city, and provided them with funds for their escape, refusing to flee alongside them, as he knew the caliph's men would concentrate on

capturing and killing him.

After two days, when none of the escaped slaves had been recovered and were judged to be a safe distance from the city, Vulnus reappeared at the castle gates and surrendered himself to the caliph's men, declaring his hope that his deed had cleansed both him and his mother, while acknowledging the betrayal of his duty toward the caliph, who had fed and clothed him since birth.

Vulnus was beheaded in the same chamber where he was birthed, and his head rolled upward along the slanting stone floor to come to rest where his mother's had. On his face was an expression of total peace, which, when his executioner saw it, caused him to retire his role and take up work in the kitchens, where he became the court's greatest baker. But that is another tale.

Julian, I can't decide if this is a little bit racist (not intentionally, of course), and that 'Arabian Nights' turn at the end is wrong, tonally (despite making me desperate to hear the story of the Executioner-Baker), but your Vulnus entry is excellent, and you've done a great job of emulating Attwater's prose from the real Dictionary of Saints. A definite A / A+. Overall, I would be proud to have written this myself.

-KR

Eugenia  
25 December 2014

Eugenia was Karen Rawley's favourite female saint story, both for the audacity of the holy bullshit and the Shakespearean hook of the cross-dressing woman-as-monk. The beheading ending was a downer, but Karen had corrected it in her latest piece—four pages of crowded handwriting on yellow paper that she folded together at the upper-left corner and slid into a folder with the rest—before knocking on the inside of her own door and waiting for it to be opened from the outside.

Threats that she'd made up and bruises that she didn't have to invent had gotten her what she'd wanted: 23 hours a day in solitary confinement, the kind that was usually earned by committing a few in-prison murders or by entering far more notoriously than Karen had. Whenever she asked a few hours in advance, the guards shuffled her up to the chaplain's office. Today they took her up immediately. The Father had special Christmas hours just after the morning mass, which Karen never attended.

"Nothing better to do today, Father?"

"I never have anything better to do than discharge the duties of my office, Karen," said Father Mackle. He was bald, cauliflower-eared from boxing young and cauliflower-nosed from daily drinking after hanging up the gloves. The guard who'd made the walk with Karen, a silent obese woman with a large facial mole, left when Mackle waved her off. What would have been an exposed brick wall behind him was painted a pale, fishy yellow, to match the rest of the surfaces on this floor of the prison. The desk wasn't institutional, though; a hunk of cherrywood that looked like a real piece of the outside.

"Did you bring that from home? I always mean to ask."

"The blotter? The desk. It was a gift from my first congregation. I've been hauling it with me ever since. What can I do for you, Karen?"

"I want to run my penitence past you, Father," she said, presenting the file she had brought up from her cell, pushing it across the red wood toward the priest.

"What's this?"

"I've been writing a series of dialogues between me and saints of my choosing, and enacting them in my cell. I perform them out loud, I mean. I wanted to tell you so you can let the guards and the Warden's tentacles know that I'm not going insane. I'm talking through my sins."

"Yes. Well, that isn't harmful, necessarily. But I have to tell you that it is weird, Karen. Not a replacement for confession." Mackle paused, likely realizing that any alternative he could present would involve him doing much more work than he wanted to do, and devoting more time to Karen Rawley than she had fair claim to, in a facility of this size.

"Can you read one out with me? Whichever you choose. Just so you can see that it's harmless, even if it is weird. The guards. Soller, you know her? With the long arms and the bad front teeth?"

Mackle smiled at the description, able to place the woman instantly, though he'd never known her name. "Yes, I think so."

"She keeps on rapping on my cell door and asking what I'm up to when I do the readings. Clearly thinks I'm going insane. Just pick one out and you'll see. It's narcissistic, at worst, but I want you to see that it's a genuine expression of a kind of faith, Father."

"You choose one," Mackle said, pushing the file back at her. "I'll get it photocopied so we can do it properly."

Ursula  
21 October 2009

Julian knew Ms. Rawley parked her car in a small strip mall parking lot a block from the school. Her dad owned Ham and Tony's, the sandwich shop in the mall, and Karen had told the class a few stories about working there when she was a student at Hemdale. No kids from school went, choosing the McDonald's around the corner instead. Mr. Rawley had regularly kicked out teenagers who lingered too long at his stools and tables during the lunch rush, and this had been enough to kill the place for Hemdale kids and make it a teen-free oasis for downtown office lunchers.

Julian waited in front of Karen Rawley's car, the cold of the pavement pushing through his cotton uniform pants and boxers. By the time he realized that he really wanted to get up he'd seen Ms. Rawley approaching, and didn't want to look fidgety.

"Hi, Julian," Ms. Rawley said. "Following me?"

"No. I just saw once that you park here instead of the teacher's lot."

"Yes. When I finish work I don't want to talk to anyone, really, and the other teachers tend to chat in the parking lot. I get all chatted out." Ms. Rawley kept her car keys in her pocket, not her purse, and already had them in hand. She put them back in her pocket and leaned against the door of her aging Honda. Julian stood.

"I was wondering if I could get my Dictionary of Saints thing back. Even if didn't count."

"You have it in your computer."

"I want to know what you said about it," said Julian, staring at Ms. Rawley's stuffed shoulder bag, which bristled with white papers and pulled her body slightly to the right when she walked. With its weight braced against her car, she was straight again, except for her small, usual slouch. He knew his entry was in that bag.

"Whoever told the school admin about the project, not that they were wrong to do so, I'm not running a secret classroom, ended anything to do with our new Dictionary. I tried to explain that it was an exercise in style. Inventing new entries for saints who didn't exist is not the same thing as inventing new saints. If anything, it wasn't a creative exercise but an exercise in restraint."

"I know," said Julian, not really knowing. "I figured you got the idea from Colin's stupid comment about how Thaïs didn't exist."

"Ten points for pronunciation. And yes, something like that, although I'd never call Colin's point stupid. If anything, I was stupid for suggesting the assignment at this school."

"Did you read mine?"

"Yes."

"Did you like it?" Julian asked. Ms. Rawley shrugged out of the shoulder strap and rested the bag on the hood of her car while she got her keys out again, opening the driver's side and doing the double-click turn that unlocked all four doors. She tossed her bag in the backseat, which was teeming with volleyballs.

"We can talk about this a little farther away from the school, Julian, if you have time right now. Some restaurant near your house?"

On the drive Julian asked Ms. Rawley about her favourite entry in the real dictionary, clarifying that he meant which entry, not which saint. She told him about her second favourite, instead. It was Ursula, who hadn't wanted to get married and had corralled either eleven or eleven-thousand maiden virgins to ditch Britain with her. All of them went on pilgrimage to Rome and were massacred for their faith by Huns on the way back home.

"None of it could have happened, none of it's proved, but still. Eleven-thousand-and-one virgins on a road trip, and all those blades at the end of it."

Anastasia  
25 December 2014

Anastasia: You've called for me.

Karen: Yes. You're supposed to be an exorcist.

Anastasia: A rumour from long after my martyrdom. I've had very few conversations with the adversary.

Karen: You died in Serbia. I'm half-Serbian, maybe that's why I chose you.

Anastasia: You've summoned me to confess.

Karen: No, for an explanation and a few questions.

Anastasia: I'll do my best with the time we have.



Karen: Martyrs want out. You have to acknowledge that, on some level, they all just want out, even if they have to go through torture first.

Anastasia: Christ?

Karen: Between what was going on down here and being King of Heaven forever? I never understood the sacrifice. I've read the reasoning but I've never felt it, myself. What was there to lose? Physical pain, ostracism. Surrounded by lesser beings he was compelled to love.

Anastasia: A basic theological question that has been thoroughly answered.

Karen: I'm trying to understand the damage I caused. I confessed to everything I did and much more I didn't do, to spare Julian from the courtroom, from my "infamy." I described filth that had nothing to do with us. I picked up on every suggestion the judging machine made and I agreed, enhanced, amplified. I buried myself here.

Anastasia: But you did do wrong.

Karen: Yes, but how much?

Anastasia: Several kinds of sin. Worse, you corrupted acts of virtue. You degraded generosity and charity. You weren't helping and guiding Julian. You were trying to fuck yourself in all meanings of the word.

Karen: That sounds unsaintly.

Anastasia: I'm one of the made-up ones.

Cyprian and Justina  
26 September 2011

She liked it when Julian walked around naked after they fucked, only letting him put clothes on when it was time for him to put in his writing hour.

"You still do this on our days off, I hope."

"Yes."

"An hour a day? On loose-leaf, not typed? Because this doesn't look like an hour of work." Karen flipped through the four pages he'd brought in, culled from the printer in his dad's study and containing about half the story of a saint named Akhen, in unacceptable handwriting.

"Sometimes an hour sometimes longer. Is that okay?" Julian didn't like

hearing the sulk in his voice, but didn't know how to shed it.

Karen made him use her old university laptop, a clunker that no longer connected to the internet, closing him in the tiny breakfast nook in the kitchen and watching him through the windowed door as he wrote.

Each semester that they'd been doing this, she'd invented a new after-school club, bringing it to life on Hemdale stationery and inventing a series of email addresses that all routed to her, to buy this time from Julian's parents. This semester it was an illuminating class, and each time they had a session, Julian carried home one of the curlicued and ornamented letters that she herself had made as a teenager, replete with peering monks and lazy serpents. She scissored her initials out of the corner of each piece and he wrote his in. They were up to J: a boiling pot rounding out the lower curve of the letter with a pair of martyrs being turned into faithful soup inside it, twining their arms together around the rising trunk. Karen was refreshing the gold-leaf, always the first to flake off, when Julian broke the silent rule and called through the glass door.

"What if, just saying, what if we let someone else see what we're working on? Like, a magazine, or even you could just show another one of the teachers?"

"You can show anyone you want to, but you can also keep the work private, and I think you should. Until you're really great. That's what no one told me, Jules. It's fine to wait."

"Don't call me that. It's girl-sounding."

"I don't think there's any risk of me thinking you're a girl, okay?"

"I just don't like it."

"Okay, let's agree that's not important, and move on."

"What is important, though? I've written like two hundred of these saint entries and most of them are terrible, and you still haven't written one. You should be doing half if this is going to be any good."

"What I should be doing is encouraging and editing you. And that's what I am doing. You're going to be great, and I'm just going to be here, but that's okay. I'm okay with it."

Hallvard  
15 May 2018

She's been out of jail for three years and the no-contact order has

been repealed for two, but this is the first time he's gotten her to agree to meet him. Julian's in front of Ham and Tony's, which is still open but with a different owner, Mr. Rawley now living in Florida. The pavement's warm, and the blacktop under his sneakers is absolutely hot, having baked in hours of sun. Karen has the same Honda, she said on the phone, and he's waiting for that.

He can't remember how they'd gotten there in her car that first time, but he remembers Karen showing him how to shape his lips for a kiss, the right kind of non-familial kiss, and watching him while he did it, looking at his mouth and then his eyes, waiting for him to lean in and start it. Julian had told the cops about that moment after an hour of questioning, when they threw in Chris Latham's testimony about the kiss and fondling that he'd supposedly witnessed. Julian finally told them that Latham must have been lying, that they'd barely ever kissed in public after the first time. Then he told them the rest, a nice female officer who was only a little older than Ms. Rawley encouraging all the details forward, promising that Ms. Rawley wouldn't have to know that it was him who gave them, unless there was a trial.

"If she's as decent as you think she is, in the way you think she is, there won't be a trial," the cop said. And Karen did confess everything that night. Julian forgets the cop's name, the way he's been forgetting more about the past both distant and recent since he stopped going to school and writing and doing much of anything other than sitting on his parents' couch and telling them that he's almost made a decision.

Karen had hidden the pages of the New Dictionary of Saints they'd made, printing them off and smashing the laptop before the cops made their first visit. Her last text had been to tell him so, that the pages were safe. The phone call the school had gotten was enough for her to make that move. The pages were hidden somewhere now, a relic, lost like those books had been in the Hemdale supply room, before Ms. Rawley resurrected them by passing a box cutter through the tape that held their imprisoning flaps down. If he could get the pages back and talk to Karen, just talk, he could figure out what to do next. Maybe tell the cops that he'd lied to them, that Karen Rawley had gone to jail to protect him, somehow, that she was the real innocent. That she'd been helping him.

The car, Julian thinks it's the right one, turns into the parking lot and starts angling towards him. Maybe the pages are in the trunk. Julian starts to stand but waits, because she might want him to stay sitting at first.