

Joseph Millar

Wide World of Sports

You lie on the couch after work
watching the police on CNN
handcuff the pedophile football coach,
cold as a god in his white hair,
cold as a corpse in the rain.

You listen to the thunderstorm outside
like the sound of paradise breaking apart
peering out through the blinds
like Hawthorne scanning the churchyard

remembering the welfare mother
smoking outside on her fire escape,
her son asleep in his basement room

under the dark horns of the moon
silent and split with scars
hovering close to the earth and its crimes,
its relentless, sorrowful appetites,

the gray shrike stabbing a field mouse
and hanging the small body up
in the thorns, and the brown moth
crashing into the porch light
drunk on its ruinous love.

Christi Clancy

Joy

When Campbell Brown cried over the little girl trapped in her school in Haiti, Gail cried. And when Anderson Cooper stood just beyond a pile of bodies in the streets, the bright sun glinting off his silver hair, and said this was one of the worst disasters he'd ever seen, Gail nodded in agreement: surely Anderson Cooper knew from disasters.

She never realized she was attracted to Indian men until a visibly touched Sanjay Gupta kissed his fingers and pressed them onto a fifteen-day old infant's forehead. He explained that the baby's mother had been crushed and her father was too distraught to leave the house, so the uncle brought the baby with the head wound to see the famous doctor, any doctor. "She'll need antibiotics," Sanjay said.

Gail said out loud, "Oh, hell. She'll need a lot more than that."

A few days after the quake, Gail sent a check for \$50 to Unicef and another check for \$50 to Doctors Without Borders. She attached post-it notes to both checks that said, "Keep up the good work!!" She drew a smile under the two exclamation points.

Wasn't there more she could do? She ate microwaved macaroni and cheese from Trader Joe's and tried to picture herself in Haiti under the hot sun, cleaning up all those bricks and chunks of concrete, but she had a bad back and the heat gave her a horrible rash on her thighs. She thought about adopting a child from Haiti, but the child couldn't come into focus. Not a baby. Babies were too much work, and they weren't solid enough, they were like bags of fluid. She wondered if most of the kids in Haiti had AIDS. She was self-employed and had a \$5,000 insurance deductible. How could she afford all the medical care that would require? Could she, Gail, bookkeeper for Kane County Knitting Guild, handle a child who had lost a foot or an arm? Do you ever get used to looking at the puckered-up skin on the stump where the limb had been?

On CNN they said the doctors were cutting off body parts with hack saws, just like they did during the Civil War, when soldiers had to bite bullets to deal with the pain. She'd heard of amputees who still felt their lost limbs long after they'd been gone. Phantom limbs. They moved fingers that weren't there, wiggled lost toes, flexed and pointed missing feet, and felt pain where pain shouldn't be.

No, adoption wouldn't work. Children need fathers, and Gail's

husband left her over a decade ago. He lived on a hobby farm with his new wife, Shelly Blount, the billing clerk from his office who had a lava lamp on her desk. Imagine that, a grown woman with a lava lamp. She also had puffy balls with googly eyes stuck to her computer monitor. Gail remembered that one had a note like a fortune cookie attached to its felt feet. It said: "Hang Ten." What would one of these poor babies with a hacked-off limb think of that? Hang Ten, Kid.

Besides, she was too old to adopt a kid. How in the hell did she get to be fifty-two? Sometimes she looked in the mirror and thought someone was playing a trick on her, but there she was, grey hair, long earlobes, breasts like empty windsocks. She'd been tired lately, more tired than usual. Too tired for anything beyond idiot knitting. No fishbone cables for her. How would she have the energy to learn how to brush and style black hair and buy special oils and beaded hair ties?

Maybe not adoption, she decided, but something. She felt like an entire country needed her.

Gail watched CNN while she got ready for bed. She'd seen people get loaded onto garbage trucks to be taken out of Port Au Prince, mothers clutching their crying babies, standing where the garbage was supposed to go. People were poor in Haiti even before the quake, but were they used to riding in garbage trucks? When she was in her twenties, Gail sat in the open cab of her uncle's old Toyota pickup. She remembered she got some dirt in her eye that scratched her cornea, but at least she hadn't been surrounded by garbage.

She gave up on sleep and went downstairs for a snack. When she turned on the light in her kitchen the room lit up but the darkness lingered in the form of a little girl with a dirty bandage flapping over her forehead. She looked just like the girl Gail had seen on television, wandering the streets alone, looking for her mother. She was eating one of Gail's apples, a Fuji that cost Gail \$2.99 a pound. Gail couldn't believe she'd spent that much on apples in January but they kept her regular.

The girl's skin was shiny, her eyes were big and bright, and bits of plaster and debris were stuck in her braided hair. She sure as hell looked real. "What are you doing in my kitchen?" Gail asked.

The girl looked as confused as Gail. She took a big bite and shrugged.

A little boy with a runny nose and a slit on his cheek tugged at the hem of Gail's pink chenille bathrobe. She'd begun noticing lately that her bathrobe was starting to smell like her mother.

The boy's skin was lighter than the girl's, the color of a latte. "Maman?" the boy asked. Maman. That sounded so proper.

"I'm not your mama. Now, where on earth did you come from?"

"Maman?" the boy said again.

Gail nodded her head. "I'm sorry, little boy. You need to go home now." The boy stared at her and nodded. Gail thought he understood.

"Maman?"

The doorbell rang. Thank God, Gail thought. She hoped to meet some parents and get an explanation for how these children got into her house. "Wait here," Gail said to the little boy. He was clutching her robe so tightly in his little fist that he'd pull it off of her if she walked away. "I have to answer." The boy didn't understand. He just gripped the hem more tightly. Gail picked him up. He couldn't have weighed much more than her cat, and he smelled like stale urine. When had he last had a shower? He wore ripped shorts that exposed his calloused knees, so big for his skinny legs that they looked like shoelaces with knots in them.

The doorbell rang again, a long, angry buzzing sound, then a few staccato buzz, buzz, buzzes. "I'm coming!" Gail shouted, frustrated. Her voice scared the boy. He buried his face in her robe and began to cry. The girl did nothing to help. She just reached for another apple and bit into it with her white, white teeth.

That couldn't be the father. At first she thought there was an albino at her door until she flipped on her porch light and noticed the man's eyes were blue, so blue they must have been the color of the Caribbean, not that she'd ever seen it. She'd seen Lake Michigan, and although it changed color depending on the sky and the weather, it was never quite this blue. If those eyes weren't so brilliant under her porch light, she might not have opened her door at that hour of the morning. Was she glad she did, because, standing right in front of her was Anderson Cooper. For a moment she almost forgot about the girl eating the apple at her kitchen table and the boy in her arms.

"Anderson!" she said, realizing when she said it out loud that his first name was a last name, too. Why hadn't she thought of that before? But she didn't have much time for thoughts because he had a body slung over his shoulder.

"Take him," Anderson said.

Gail looked at the boy in her own arms. "I can't."

He let out a deep breath and brushed past her, the first national news correspondent she'd ever had in her house. If she'd known, she would have straightened up, lit some candles. He set the boy onto her brand new couch. No, not the new couch. She just bought it from the

floor sample sale at Drexel.

“He’s bleeding!” Gail said, panicked. She knew she should have gone with leather, but isn’t a white couch life’s reward for never having children or guests? The boy had his hand over the side of his head where the blood was coming out but it did nothing to stop it. It was a waterfall of red. “Can’t you set him somewhere else, Anderson?” Anderson, it was a thrill to say it out loud. She was on a first-name basis with him, Gloria Vanderbilt’s son, talking to him like they’d been married for years. The closest she’d thought she ever would have gotten to him was by wearing his mother’s jeans.

“I have to go,” he said.

“But he needs help,” Gail said.

“That’s why I brought him here.” When he brushed past her she got a little thrill. So what if he was gay? His tight black t-shirt was covered in so much dust it was almost the same color as his silver hair. She noticed as he disappeared into the dark that his ass under his jeans was flat.

She recognized the boy. This was the looter she’d seen on CNN—was it last night or the night before? She couldn’t remember, it all ran together, one sad story after another. Someone stood on the rooftop of a building and threw a chunk of concrete at his skull. It wasn’t until Anderson let his camera linger on him that she realized he wasn’t a grown man but a kid, just some kid with nobody there to comfort him as he dealt with probably the worst injury of his life. She cried when she’d seen it happen on television, but Gail didn’t think about comforting him at that moment: she thought about getting him off her couch and calling an ambulance, but she hesitated. How would she explain this to the paramedics? Would they arrest her?

She ran into the bathroom for a towel. She’d have to do something about the boy in her arms. He didn’t seem so heavy at first but now she felt like she was carrying a pile of rocks. She grabbed the hand towel she’d set out at Christmastime and forgot to take down: it was embroidered with the word “Joy.”

“Here,” she said to the boy on her couch. He didn’t take it. He was moaning and rocking back and forth and she didn’t know what to do. The boy in her arms cried even harder when he heard the other boy. When Gail got close enough she saw ripples on the injured boy’s scalp and wondered if what she was seeing was his actual brain. She’d never seen a brain before.

“Please, take this,” she said, offering him the towel again because she didn’t want to have to touch his head herself. She wanted him to cover it from her sight and stop the bleeding and crawl back into the disaster on the TV set.

She’d have to get him some help.

She turned around and saw an elderly woman’s dead body on her floor near her piano bench, her abdomen bloated. A rat was chewing on the woman’s diapers. Gail tried to scream, but no sound came out, just some bile from the back of her throat.

A man with a wheelbarrow barged in the front door—had she not shut it after Anderson left? He was over six feet tall and had a head full of dreadlocks. His muscles bulged through his torn t-shirt. He emptied another body on her rug, the body of an old man. It landed with such a hard thunk that the crystals on her antique candleholders clinked together. The body had gone hard. She could tell from the way the arms were stuck out in front like they were still begging for help, and his eyes were partially open.

The wheels on the man’s wheelbarrow were squeaky. “You can’t bring bodies in here,” Gail said. “This . . . this is my *home*.”

“Well then, just where do you think I should put them?” he asked. He had a French accent that made him sound smart.

“How about on the lawn?” Gail regretted the words as soon as she said them. What would her neighbors think? No question this would lower their property values. Look what happened when the child molester the next block over moved back in with his parents.

“Would you put your own mother’s body out there in the snow?”

Gail’s mother died suddenly three years ago of a pulmonary embolism. The doctor called it a little asteroid of blood that landed in the wrong place. An asteroid of blood: who talks like that? Gail buried her in her rabbit fur coat, a bible tucked into the casket that cost over five thousand dollars. At her funeral, her uncle tapped on the casket, listened to hear if it was solid, and nodded with approval. There was a sign Gail loved her mother. She didn’t cheap out in the end.

“I’m calling the police, you know.”

The man laughed his low, grumbling laugh. “The police, yeah? Okay, you go ahead and call your police.”

He took the front door off its hinges and threw it on top of the Box Elm in her yard. One by one, her room began piling up with bodies. Gail could do nothing to stop it.

The smell in her living room was suffocating. She’d read somewhere that police put coffee grinds in their nostrils before they go to a murder scene to block the smell, but Gail stopped drinking coffee a few years ago when the doctor found all those cysts in her breasts. She put the Joy towel the wounded boy wouldn’t take over her mouth and nose. “Ice,” she said to the little boy in her arms. “He needs ice.” Would the ice freeze his brain? What did she know about treating

injuries like that? The last thing she wanted to do was make him worse. She found her kitchen filled with dark children eating her oatmeal and her bread. There were pretzels all over her floor. One child had her hand in a jar of dill pickles that Gail must have bought years and years ago. Could pickles go bad eventually?

“Maman?” the little boy said. He ran his hand through her hair. He was sweet, she could tell. His voice punctured something that was already broken inside her.

“I told you, Sweetie, I’m not your mama,” Gail said again. “And I’m going to have to put you down.” She sat him on the floor and propped him against the kitchen cabinet. Where was her phone? She hated cordless phones.

“Not Maman,” the boy said.

“That’s right, not Maman.”

Thunk. Another body hit the floor in her living room. When all this was over she’d have to replace the carpeting. Her neighbor had died from sepsis a few years ago. When the Korean family bought the house, they said they had the floors sanded but still couldn’t get rid of the dark spot from where his body had been for two days. Gail had bought some linen napkins at his estate sale and no matter how often she washed them in bleach she swore they smelled like infection.

“Not Maman, not Maman.” The boy’s lip began to quiver and tears slipped out of his eyes. She wanted to pick him up again but if she’d ever needed her arms free, she needed them now. The Korean family had brought her a plate of vegetable rolls wrapped in seaweed. She tried one and threw the rest out. She wished she still had them to feed all these kids. She bet they’d eat anything. She saw they’d even gotten into a bag of figs.

Food. She’d never want to eat again after smelling these smells. Her robe was wet from the boy. She thought about changing but she couldn’t get past yet another boy who appeared from out of nowhere in the hallway. He sat quietly with his father’s head in his lap, staring at her framed cross-stitch on the wall that her mother made for her when she first got married. It said: “Bless this house.” She’d seen this boy on TV. His whole family had died except his father, Anderson explained, or so he’d thought. He’d sat with him for hours after his father had died, thinking, or maybe just wishing that he was alive. And now there he was at the foot of her stairs. Gail took a good look at the father’s face and his crushed gut. He was dead, there was no mistake about it. She stepped over them and slipped, landing on the man’s legs. They were hard and cold, and she had to grip them in order to boost herself up. He still had a black flip-flop attached to one foot, and his toenails were yellow and needed to be cut. There was a clipper in the top drawer of her medicine chest. If she clipped them they’d still keep

growing. She’d read that somewhere.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the boy, and she was. But he wasn’t paying any attention to her.

What was she supposed to do now? She thought maybe Anderson would return and tell her what would happen next, but he didn’t. A cold wind blew through her open front door. In her kitchen she heard the children tearing packets of soup mix and opening boxes of cereal. She’d run out of food in no time.

She heard people banging on her windows and the sound of footsteps on her roof, the whine of the wheelbarrow, the cold pounding of another body. The boy’s moaning had stopped and a river of blood trickled down her hallway.

A stain: it would leave a stain.

