

God Shopping

Robert Hollingworth August 2011 (VIC)

At birth they named him Augustus because they had high expectations – the first son of a lawyer and a senior librarian – and for a while he was called that: *Augustus Wainwright the First*. But after the diagnosis it became Augie. Poor Augie, what future does he have? Was it their own genes that had caused this abomination; how could life deal such a cruel blow? And when his father packed up and left for Canada, Augie became Gus. That's when he was admitted. There was no treatment for the mentally impaired, no cure and nothing could be done. Now it was up to *Fernshore* to keep him safe and warm. Visits were intended but in the end they only complicated things and when his mother went home he cried for days. It was hard on her as well – his mother's own mental condition went through horrible bouts of disappointment, guilt and self-hatred – so the visits too were phased out for the good of both.

The years slipped by, punctuated daily by a dozen main rules. Gus counted them: No hurting, No spitting, No defecating in the hall, No pulling hair – your own or other people's. Gus knew all the rules – something that was beyond many of the others – and where they were written down he even learned to recognise them. Of course there was no education, but Gus became his own best teacher and learned by watching and listening. In his mind he held many words: *stop, lock, blood, bad, go back, silent, stay still*. He knew that people were *Male* or *Female*, the first words he learned to read – they were written on the toilet doors – and he knew the difference between the two. When he was ten an older female came down the corridor naked. She had large projections on her upper torso and there was no willy, just a clump of reddish hair. His mother was female and his father was male – that much he surmised – but exactly where they were or what they looked like was anyone's guess. In his mind they resembled the matron and the head of security: strict, sensible and divorced from the rest of the *Fernshore* populace.

When he was fourteen, they moved him out of the mixed ward. A clump of hair had sprouted on his own body and he became dirty. Don't be dirty, Gus; Gus is being dirty again, and sure enough his willy was standing up like a rubber truncheon, a regular occurrence which became the most exciting event in the day. At night when the blackness enveloped all but the wails and cries of others, that stout little fellow in his own bed became his first friend, and he'd have played with him for hours if they'd let him. But on those occasions they used the plastic tape and those restraints soon taught him not to be dirty. But even then he was never returned to the mixed ward of male and female. *Male and female, mail and email, hail and handrail*. Beautiful words, some of which he understood and some he came to read.

Things might have gone on like that forever except that with the approaching new millennia the swell of society turned. It changed its mind about people in asylums, it stopped using words like



demented, retarded and handicapped, replacing them with terms like *mental disability* and *cerebral palsy*, and it determined that people like Gus should live in normal houses. Of course they still needed carers and in this case the church provided Pauly. It was he who ran the house that Gus lived in. Pauly said, "You can say your own prayers." Pauly said, "You can help set the table; you can take your own shower; you can hold the cup yourself." Pauly told him he was a *Wainwright*. *A wainwright is a maker of fine wagons*. He even found Gus a secondhand book on the subject – which prompted another book about boats and trains. *Boats and trains, coats and rains, goats and brains*, more beautiful words. Gus learned to recognise many others and was encouraged to attempt them out loud. But the word he spoke best was *why*. When Pauly said, "It's getting dark," Gus would purse his lips and push out that wonky little word: *why?* When Pauly said, "People drive too fast," Gus took on a look of concentration and said, *why?* "Too many questions, Gus; let's talk about it another time." *Time, V-line, half past nine*.

As expected, Gus began to refer most of his questions to the world around him – and there was one such world where the boy thrived. *Safeway* became his gleaming, brightly lit classroom crammed to the ceiling with colours, shapes, sounds, smells and thousands of new words. Gus knew each aisle by the smell alone and the products by their hardness and relative temperature: fish, oranges, *Peters Icecream, Chris' Dips*. He pointed in every direction and Pauly put a name to it. He absorbed it all, recognising each word, each brand, each price, each product and what it was used for. In his mind he learned to read many phrases: *locked down low prices, quick sale, two for one, temporary price cut, new season's, new product, new line*. He liked to touch and smell everything: flour was warm and smelled of the earth even through the packet; lamb chops were cold and smelled of old memories.

One day at *Safeway* Gus saw, *Mother's Day* and a picture of a smiling woman. He pointed and asked Pauly, *why, why?* Pauly's shoulders slumped. "You want to know about your mother?" Gus waved his arms and gestured again. "Your mother has gone to Heaven, Gus. She died a long time ago." In his mind's eye Gus saw his mother's outline shining brightly, then fading. He did not see her succumbing to her own mental anguish. He did not see her drink a bottle of *Johnny Walker* and deliberately slip from the third storey window of her Essendon flat. Instead, he saw his mother's light slowly fade and disappear into the rosy, light-filled picture of his prayer book. Slap that book shut and mother was at last with God. Amen; The End. *Why, why?* "Who can say, Gus. God moves in mysterious ways." With these words at last Gus had something in common with his mother. This was the exact phrase Pauly used when Gus asked about his own condition. One night at bedtime when he was trying to get into his pyjamas, Gus gestured towards his awkward frame tangled in the loose fabric. *Why, why?* he said. "I don't know, Gus. God moves in mysterious ways." *Mysterious ways, serious days, mystery maze*.

At twenty-three, Gus decided it was time he saw God for himself – hadn't he always learned from his surroundings? If God moved in mysterious ways then he'd like to observe it in action. And perhaps he could learn why it was that the Lord decided to take his mother and organise his own bodily condition just so. It was time to go shopping for God. These days he could catch the tram by himself; he could negotiate the step to board, insert his ticket and find his own seat. He could



recognise the stop where he wanted to get off and seek assistance to alight. Many times on the way to Safeway in the back of Pauly's car he'd studied the church on the corner of Kent Street. And on this day he found himself on the footpath staring up at the chunky bluestone façade, the cladded spike, like a space shuttle, aiming emphatically into the blue.

He hesitated at the bottom of the stone steps. *Step stones, step toes, tip toes.* He assessed their right-angles carefully. He leaned his body to the right and raised his left arm to balance. He lifted his left foot and placed it on the first step. Then he leaned to the left, lifted his right foot and parked it beside the other. *Left, lift, loft, laughed – ha ha.* He repeated the action again but this time his right heel caught the edge and he was obliged to put it back where it was. *Try again, Gus. Even if it seems hard you must keep trying.* And before he knew it he had reached the top of the six stone steps. *Sicks tonne ships, sticks stones chips.* And there ahead of him stood the arched church doors, wooden and pointed like a boat on end. He walked towards them with his thumb planted firmly in his jeans pocket – his right arm was bent at the wrist but this way he was sure no-one noticed.

He entered the vestibule and then passed through tall doors into the largest empty interior he'd ever seen – no shelves, no products, no music, no sound. You could fly a kite in there, clouds could form and rainbows. There were so many long seats – but no checkouts, no customers, no-one at all. *Don't expect things to always be the same, Gus.* He walked half way down the aisle and the boards creaked under the carpet: *quiet now Gus; that'll be quite enough! Quite quiet, quit!* He moved sideways into one of the long pews. He put his hand on the polished wood in front, warm on one side, cool on the other. He leaned forward and put his lips on the woodwork: a little salty, yet sweet, like the door at *Fernshore*. Locked. *For your own good, Gus.* Voices in the crack at night, a prick of light through the keyhole. *Get back to bed!*

So many smells touched his nose: *Mr Sheen, Windex, Freedom* and old wood like the chair Pauly found one day on the hard rubbish. But no food, no coffee, no cooking! Gus's bum squeaked on the polished seat. He made it happen again. His eyes roamed widely. And then he saw a woman enter – was she here to see God as well? She pulled a vacuum cleaner down the aisle, a sausage dog on wheels, a hose-lead. It squeaked at him; Gus squirmed on the seat and squeaked back. He watched the woman go all the way to the front and become so small that he could hold her between his fingers. She moved across the front, closer to Jesus – Gus recognised him immediately – soaring like a bird above her. She bent over under the half-naked figure and the Lord inclined his head to watch. He would supervise her cleaning. *Cleanliness is next to Godliness. Do not soil the bed linen; Stand still in the shower. Cold as raindrops.* The woman dropped a broom handle on the wooden boards and it went *bang!* The church went *bang!* The walls, the windows, the hymn books, the rows of seats all went *bang!* Jesus stayed still and listened. *Be still Gus; don't fidget.*

Then another sound behind him: a man was in the aisle dressed entirely in black. *A man of God.* Clearly, if anyone knew where the Lord could be seen, this was the one. As he drew near, Gus made himself small and twisted his head upwards. The man stopped in the aisle, his face silhouetted against the bright window glass, his ears illuminated pink. He ran his eyes over Gus's



angular frame, assessing him, the way people do. Gus could smell other people's cigarettes; he sensed *Rexona, Nugget, Gillette*. The man's eyes softened. *Good boy; you must pray; God be with you, son.*

God be with me? Where? Certainly nowhere apparent. Gus twisted awkwardly and ran his eyes around the darkened interior, silent, neutral, uninformative. He noted the coloured glass and the dim glow of blues, reds, whites and yellows. Where was the vibrancy? Where was the prismatic exuberance of the shelves of *Dynamo, Drive, Surf and Spree*? And where was God? *God is all around*. Gus waved his hand, at first a gesture for recognition but then an attempt to catch the air, to fluff a little of God's presence in his general direction, to draw him in like a warm current from the aircon or the spicy scent of roast chicken in bags of silver foil. But God could not be detected – and Gus could usually detect anything. He waited. *God is always present: omnipresent*. Gus looked around again, turned his eyes upwards and suddenly found himself lying on his back, stretched out along the polished pew. High above he observed the embellishments, the arches, brackets and buttresses, cornice and carvings; an old-wood surplus of ornamentation see-sawing across the dark and lofty expanse. What was it all for; what was the point of this ebullient display of human craftsmanship which was so far out of the reach of all?

God must live there, Gus surmised and through the woodwork lancing across the timbered sky he tried to see the Great Creator, the one who brought the world into existence and determined the fate of all; the one who held the explanations for the presence of Nurse Rhodes who beat him for his tears, for Father Rubin who squeezed his genitals, for Mr Barnes who bloodied his nose and broke his arm accidentally, for Johnny-o who stole his food and flushed his mother's hanky down the toilet. It was the only thing Gus owned of her. And now Pauly had told him that she too was flushed from the world, *gone to heaven*.

And then a movement! High, almost beyond the reach of sight a living presence was looking down on him. Gus scratched his brow and tried to steady his gaze. He heard a flap and coo and the familiarity of it sent him back to *Fernshore*. He spent a great deal of his childhood looking from a single window and just above the frame there was a ledge on which these lovely feathered forms rested. Sometimes he would become *bird* and take off across the rooftops exploring the vast world of the whole of Heidelberg. What was out there beyond the bars; what strange realms had he never seen? He recalled the day they removed the ironwork and climbed out there to install barbed wire. *They are pests*, he heard them say, *rats of the sky. Sky, fly high, the Lord is nigh*.

Could God be such a bird? Gus stared intently at the small grey shape high in the shadows. Lighter than air on angel wings it moved across to another beam and stared down. Gus put his hands to his face and made a tiny hole through which to view the Creator. Dutifully, the Lord expanded to fill the void. Gus put his hands down and God shrunk once more to an incidental clump of grey on the massive buttress. *We must pray for our sins. Play for spins, sprays and pins*. As Gus lay on his back staring, another large form loomed and blocked his view. Gus was obliged to refocus and there



stood the man in black towering over him – he felt obliged to draw his legs in to make himself smaller. “Ah, there you are.” The man studied him and then turned to look in the direction of Gus’ gaze. “Ah, the pigeon. I’ll give you ten bucks if you can work out how to catch the damn thing.”
Damn thing, damn nuisance, damned to hell.

Gus looked from the man to the bird and saw them both studying him, looking down, blinking their eyes, cooing in their own particular way, occupying a station in life that was lost to habit and custom, memory and convention and the expectations of the rest of their species. Of course Gus didn’t really see all this – but he saw *something*, something that had no air, no air of authenticity, no enduring relevance. Poor Gus wasn’t taught what to think; what to believe. And without society’s claim on his intelligence, his eye penetrated to the very essence of what it means to be an ordinary organism, complex and simple: a bee, a bird, a boy.

A moment later a hand came towards him as the man in black leaned in to help raise him to the vertical. Gus hooked his other arm around the backrest and suddenly he was upright again, sitting on the squeaky seat. But something had changed for him now. In the moments that followed, Gus decided that the only one not present was God; that He’d long since left the premises for parts unknown, never to return. If only He’d chosen *Safeway* as his abode, a place of purpose and enterprise: bright, exalted, revered. If God belonged anywhere it was there, pushing a trolley through the labyrinth of plenitude, selecting items infinitely renewed, rejoicing in the abundance and the goodness of the fresh food people. Perhaps the man in black could take a job there, replenishing the shelves. Gus eyed him curiously as he stepped back to encourage him from the pew. “Time you were getting home, son. But I hope you’ll come by again.” *Why*, Gus tried to say but the man seemed not to notice. *Come by again. Come buy and gain, a real bargain, a red hot special, reduced for quick sale – you won’t be disappointed.*

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