

Finkle, Frigup

By the time Finkle arrives at the museum, the troop of Little Geneses are berserking through the Garden of Eden, climbing the Tree of Knowledge, dodgeball-ing with the apples. Each forbidden fruit is wooden. A pigtailed girl takes a knotty McIntosh to the mouth. She bleeds down her chin, holding up a piece of tooth like it's a question. The cute substitute teacher, with a minimum-waged eye-roll, escorts the Little Genesis to First Aid between the one-tenth portside replica of Noah's Ark and the interactive Bible Kiosk.

This is how it's Finkle's fault:

Finkle operates the Flood Geology exhibit. By way of pneumatic hoses and pile-driving mechanisms—representing “collapsing, orbiting vapor canopy theory” (a.k.a. über amounts of rainfall) and “rapid-shifting tectonic plates concept” (a.k.a. über tsunamis)—a large diorama floods and trembles. A mini ark floats as toy dinosaurs mass-extinct under displacing sand. After the flood dissipates, kids dig up the dinosaurs as souvenirs.

“But since the frigging diorama did not flood,” Pastor Sneiderling says, “the frigging children—being frigging children—became impatient, antsy, and flash-mobbish. How does one ‘bright side’ a bloodied Little Genesis to a parent or guardian?”

Sneiderling summoned Finkle via an Alpha/Omega/Audio/Visual/Public Announcement. Whenever the A/O/A/V/PA booms, it disseminates a pillar of smoke using sophisticated foggers, vents, and a lightning strobe, which did not flicker for omnipotent/omniscient effect because the museum's outdated electrical is daisy-chained and über-fritzing.

The lights flicker. Sparks fizzle down from the rafters like electric lake-effect snow.

But the wiring is just the tip of the iceberg. Pastor Sneiderling's Strategic Vision Box is crammed with concerns. One is that Sneiderling isn't even a real pastor. He inherited the Creation Institute last year from a rich devout aunt. The café chips are stale. Somebody stole the T8 thoracic vertebra from the Primate Column. The Bible Kiosk is missing books from the New Testament. Flood Geology hasn't had new sand in years. Whenever Finkle resets the diorama, he finds soggy Band-Aids.

“Tell the parent or guardian the Little Genesis was pulling an Eve?” Finkle suggests.

“It was a rhetorical question,” Sneiderling says. “You’re here re: tardiness.”

“Retardiness?”

“Regarding tardiness,” Sneiderling sighs, massaging his eyelids. “Of all days! Turns out the annual codes inspection is this afternoon, which Aunt Dee failed to note on her calendar.” He tears up a Strategic Vision Box concern. “I had fresh sand installed overnight. Go prep the diorama and look pious. You’re lucky Codes wasn’t scheduled for the a.m. What if the Lord had been tardy with the miracle of serpentine Aaron’s rod? What would Moses have done if he’d tossed down that rod and it remained a plain old rod?”

“I got stuck behind a school bus in a construction detour, I swear to God,” Finkle says.

“Don’t,” Sneiderling says. “Swearing to You-Know-Who is not dogma protocol.”

“Dogmaticol,” Finkle suggests.

“Dogmaticol?”

“It’s streamlined,” Finkle says. “You know, synergistic?”

“Get the frig out of my office,” Sneiderling says. “Also, go polish Arnold.”

Arnold is the mastodon skeleton donated by a paleontologist who turned to Apologetics after the quake that opened a two-hundred-foot fissure and devoured one of his interns. *This Mammut’s pristine intactness, the placard reads, is proof of a sudden burial, confirmative of a catastrophic global flood only a few thousand years ago.*

Finkle polishes a femur, a tusk, a rib. What was so bad about *dogmaticol*? It would save time to say, and Ma says time is money. Time to move out of the basement, she says. Time to get a job with benefits. Time to take some online college courses. “But if time is money then I’m rolling in it,” he jokes, and Ma swats him with the cake spatula. Though he knew what she meant, having his paycheck docked for this morning’s retardiness. Finkle had to drive Ma to the prosthodontist because she wanted a tooth gap like Brigitte Bardot’s. Ma was always changing her dentures. Last time Finkle tried to sneak a girl into the basement Ma was at the kitchen table in her bra, gumming a cigarette, trying on ten different pairs of teeth.

Finkle imagines trying to sneak the cute substitute teacher into the basement. Ha! Ma would be hounding him nonstop about how his *dogmaticol* idea went over. “It shows that you’re a go-getter/questions-asker for once,” she’d say, resting a cig into the gap in her dentures, where a bottom tooth was pulled—the set made especially for smoking. She

keeps Pa in a French press beside her, ashing cig after cig, like she's trying to reconstruct him.

Instead, maybe while Sally Dobbs is setting up *Adaptation, Not Evolution* in IMAX for the Little Geneses, Finkle will give the substitute a tour of Botanical Eden, pick a vibrant flower and put it in her hair, woo the dickens out of her, then drop trou behind the Hyperbaricbiosphere Chamber, which simulates pre-Flood conditions via atmospheric pressure, enhanced oxygen, and magnetic coils—or so Len Peebles says, who is educated on the HBB Chamber's dogmaticol. Len claims to have kept a fruit fly alive for a week inside it.

Except didn't Finkle already drop trou with Sally? Didn't she call his thing *newt-like*?

"Does it change color, too?" Sally giggled. Finkle did, in the ears and cheeks and throat.

"You're thinking of a chameleon," he muttered, zipping up.

A draft swirls. The lights flicker. The A/O/A/V/PA squawks reverb and trickles a half-assed spiral of smoke. Scratch dropping trou. IMAX might zap power from Botanical Eden's hydroponics again, and Finkle will need to make fast with the watering can. Three pounds of not-so-cheap Saffron Crocus have already been lost to wilt. He sort of sympathizes with the lost-to-wilting but can't put his finger on why. The movie ticket stub in his jeans pocket is from last year. Also, Len is likely back there, pressing his junk against the HBB Chamber, which he does on slow days, most days, due to the vibrations and magnetic feeling.

Maybe he can find some online cartooning courses? Word bubbles were his specialty. Though hands tripped him up. He always drew the thumbs on the wrong side. Didn't his high school guidance counselor once say he showed potential?

"Don't shave that pretty head of hair!" Ma had said when he tried to enlist out of school with John Remington. But he failed the mile run test. So it was five years of scooping ice cream at Carvel until it closed, his knuckles still rough with old frostbite. He's balding at twenty-five, and his buddy J.R. is under an American-flagged plot in Oolitic Cemetery, where caskets used to slide out the eroding hillside until the retaining wall was built. Finkle often goes up there to salute his pal, flexing his hands with reminiscent numbness.

After polishing Arnold, Finkle returns to Flood Geology. Inside the diorama: dunes of white, glittering granules—sharp to touch, which must violate some dogmaticol. Still, Finkle rakes it into mimetic landscapes, placing model trees and toy dinosaurs into what he believes resemble prehistoric hunts and migrations and matings. Raking, he

unearths a tube of white rock as big as his forearm—a branchy, knobby paper-towel roll.

Looking through it: light and color kaleidoscope off its glassy inner walls.

Another troop of Little Geneses arrive. Finkle floods the diorama. The Little Geneses don't become impatient, antsy, or flash-mobbish. Sometimes he floods the exhibit for nobody, sometimes for freckle-nosed Charlotte from the Tabernacle Café & Gift Shop, or Lydia Lake from the Homological Vertebrae exhibit, or Len who eyes the trembling event as if he'd like to press his junk against it. The lights flicker. More sparks fizzle down.

"Is that dangerous?" a Little Genesis asks, swatting a spark from her hair. Finkle recites dogmaticol: "Nope. It's just simulated fire and brimstone."

The A/O/A/V/PA booms: "*This is the way, walk in it, Burt Finkle and Charlotte Knot.*"

Charlotte is already in Sneiderling's office when Finkle arrives, holding a bag of stale chips. She throws it out. It makes a biscuity *thud* in the bottom of the trash. Sneiderling is still shredding concerns in the Strategic Vision Box.

"Like the new beach?" he asks Finkle with a wink. "Knot: fresh chips are also en route."

"The heck is that stuff?" Finkle asks.

Sneiderling pauses, mid-shred. "Sand."

"No, it's not. It's shiny and poky. Kids can't be walking barefoot on that."

"So we make them keep their frigging shoes on," Sneiderling says. "It's silica sand. Pulverized limestone and quartz. The quarries donated a mound. A buddy of mine made a case of chips fall off the back of the truck. I even got ministerized on the Internet. Look, don't make me a Cain here. Don't reject my offerings. What's that passage—something about if you reject God's gift—not that I'm God, just doing His work, of course—and you get all righteous through what is lawful, then Christ died in vain? I'm not one-hundred-percent sure about the exact quote since Galatians is one of the books missing from the Kiosk."

"So we're up to Code?" Charlotte asks.

Sneiderling shreds another concern. "Yes and no. Turns out the Adam and Eve mannequins have been defiled. A Little Geneses troop drew genitals on them being crudely manipulated. Except the little twerps drew the frigging hands backwards! What is our country coming to when a kid can't even defile with diligence?"

Finkle would laugh except for the heart-wanting-to-birth-from-his-belly-button feeling.

“You want us to bathe the mannequins?” Charlotte asks.

“No,” Sneiderling says. “It’s permanent marker. Pull non-expensive leaves and flowers from Botanical Eden, fashion some conservative biblical attire, and pose under the Tree of Knowledge. It must be you two. Len’s too willing to de-pants, Sally’s an intern, and Lydia’s a prude. Albeit an attractive prude. If I wasn’t now a celibate minister, ha!”

“I want overtime,” Charlotte says.

“You’ll both get time and a half,” Sneiderling says.

Finkle sulks back to Flood Geology. The white rock sits on his stool. Maybe it’s an elongated asteroid? Or a fossil? Why take lacking diligence so personally? It’s just constructive criticism, which he’ll be getting tons of in cartooning workshops. He’ll just trace his own hands until he gets it right. He’ll also need Ma to get high-speed Internet again, and he’ll promise to keep the door open this time when he’s on the computer. His thumb-error drawings will probably be worth big bucks once he’s a famous cartoonist. Some fan with a thumb defect, her opposable digits Picassoed, will tell him those early works speak to her. Like Finkle totally understands the weighty weight of her plight. They’ll hump in the basement and make mini-Picassos, and Finkle will teach them to thumb wrestle. The cute deformed girl will gather them all up, this one big fist. He’ll buy Ma a pair of dentures for every day of the year, including Leap.

He floods the diorama for the hell of it, letting it crash and applaud.

The lights flicker, the A/O/A/V/PA whistles. More sparks fall and fizzle.

Somewhere in the rafters above: “*Ouch!*”

“Len?” Finkle says, looking around. “What’re you doing up there?”

“Wrapping the sparking daisy chains where they spark so they won’t. Over here.”

Between the dark rafters and braided tangle of wires, Finkle spots Len, teetering on thin scaffolding, sucking a finger, then shaking it out in front of him. It smells like burnt hair. Len gives Finkle a thumbs-up. The tip looks blackened.

“Len,” Finkle asks. “Did you really get a fruit fly to live a week in the HBB Chamber?”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Finkle says. “I’ve just been thinking a lot about time today, I guess.”

“No,” Len says. “It was the regular kind. Good thing it wasn’t a fruit fly. Imagine that? Living seven lifetimes longer than you should?”

“Noah lived for nine hundred and fifty years,” Finkle says.

“God, that Kiosk is going to fry your brain.”

“I was bored. And you’re not supposed to take You-Know-Who’s name in vain.”

More sparks, more electrical tape. “We’re twenty-five, Fink,” Len says. “We’re supposed to take everything in vain.” More sparks, more tape. “By the way, you should see what I found in the HBB Chamber today. It looks like a fly, but it’s not.”

A tap on Finkle’s shoulder. It’s Charlotte.

“You’re going to have to hustle over to the hardware store for some plastic ficus,” she says. “Codes is ahead of schedule and thirty out, and I can’t tell which plants in Botanical Eden are non-expensive, or ones that will leave a rash on my harp.”

“Your *harp*?”

Charlotte looks up to the rafters. “You know? My mimsy, my bubble-gum, my foof?”

“Your *foof*?”

“We’re supposed to have cute names for it or never speak of it.”

“What’s wrong with the V-word?” Finkle says.

“*That*,” she says. “Nobody wants to say it. Makes people uncomfortable.”

“Say, Char?” Len says. “How often do you practice the ole freckled harp?”

Charlotte’s cheeks sunburn; her nose freckles darken. “You’re both gross.”

“What did I do?” Finkle says.

“You’re gross by association,” she says. “Vile by gender. Men are all daisy-chained.”

The day is bright and hot. Horseflies eddy, fat as farmer thumbs, and when they land and bite they leave knots under the skin. Finkle squints, his upper lip sweating, listening to the flies beat against car windows, smelling something sweet from the bakery up the block. Maybe he’ll bring home a pastry to soften the bad *dogmaticol* news to Ma. She’ll have to pop in her special dessert dentures, which she doesn’t do often because of the insulin shots. Finkle pulls the tubular white rock from his back pocket and traces proper hands in the air.

Up the street, a ponytailed beatnik paints a mural of a pile of dead alpacas on a vacant building. A woman in a bathrobe sits beside him,

slapping bongos. The alpaca sickness made the news, which Finkle and Ma always watch during dinner.

“Is that fulgurite?” the beatnik asks.

“This?” Finkle says, handing him the rock.

The beatnik cradles it in his palms. “Petrified, lightning-struck sand! The shucked exoskeleton of energy! This is a fine specimen. You can blow prayers through it. Or it can be a clairaudient ear trumpet. Or, directed at the chakras, it will rouse the inner-kundalini, awaken the hibernating sex. The Muse and I have used them in various foreplays.”

“Not since forgoing baths,” the robed woman says, “in protest of chlorinated water.”

“What’s a clairaudient ear trumpet?” Finkle says.

The beatnik puts the petrified lightning to his ear and closes his eyes. “Through it,” he says, “you hear unheard frequencies.” He places a finger to his lips and listens. “Like all those dead alpacas gurgling? And everyone in Oolitic Cemetery...”

“You hear someone named John Remington?” Finkle asks. “Or he might go by J.R.”

The beatnik opens his eyes and gasps. His breath is humid and palpable compost. Finkle thinks he could scoop it out of the air, Carvel-style. Then the beatnik leans closer to Finkle. “Did you know everything we’re saying and doing is being *transcribed*?” he whispers, and nods toward a horsefly that lands on the mural’s fresh paint, its hair-thin legs ink green. “They got microphones that look like insects. They’re the all-knowing, all-seeing space invaders. I can hear their transmissions through the holistic fulgurite.”

“Forgive him,” The Muse says. “He tests cosmetics for a living. He’s side-effecting.”

“My Pa did that, too,” Finkle says, squinting up into the sun.

On the way back from the hardware store with the plastic ficus, Finkle again hears the horseflies beating against car windows, but this time he listens for unheard frequencies. He remembers what Len said about what he found in the HBB Chamber, and now he’s curious. Whatever it is will live too long. Enoch was 365. Lamech, an unlucky 777. Methuselah lived to be 969. The HBB Chamber is sort of like playing God, and Finkle wonders if maybe that’s all God really is—just a bunch of strangers playing it. Intervening. The older we get the more our lives take on the theme of loss. Sure, Ma’s experienced more, but Finkle also lost Pa, and his buddy J.R. Maybe he doesn’t want to move out of the basement because he doesn’t want to lose Ma, too? Maybe he doesn’t want to grow up and keep losing.

Sometimes Ma regrets aloud that she should've taken him to church. "At least for the Prodigal Son part," she says. "Maybe I didn't do such a good job." Well, he'll blow prayers through the petrified lightning tonight when he hears Ma shuffling past his room, asking what the heck he's still doing up. Praying, he'll say, which will show her she did a fine job raising him. It's not her fault he's been such a fuckup. Though, Finkle will say *frigup* because another regret Ma has is not washing his mouth out with soap whenever he cursed.

God or no God, why not start now? He puts his lips to the fulgurite:
Please take care of Ma. Oh, and say hi to Pa and J.R. for me.

He puts his ear to the glittering rock tube: it sounds like the ocean.

By the time Finkle arrives at the museum, the Codes Inspector is early, making checks on his clipboard with a red pen hanging around his neck and not the dangling green one, followed by a panicked Sneiderling, trying to justify every clipboarded red check, followed by disgruntled parents/guardians demanding an explanation for the broken tooth of their sweet Little Genesis who is now unbloodied and quite happy, twirling in a yellow dress in the damp diorama, kicking over toy dinosaurs. The pulling-an-Eve line doesn't float. The dad shoves Sneiderling. He falls backward into the animatronic Methuselah. Its arm breaks off and smoke erupts from the torso socket. The Codes Inspector makes another red check. Methuselah short circuits. The lights flicker, the A/O/A/V/PA squeals high-pitched reverb, and suddenly Len's falling from the rafters, covering his ears, tangled in electrical tape wrapped around wires that break apart at their daisy chains and hang, sparking and flopping, like voltaged pigtales, like those on the Little Genesis twirling in the diorama, which is where the mega-wattage wires are moving toward.

It's in slow motion to Finkle:

Len hits the floor. His elbow points in the wrong direction. The Codes Inspector's uncapped red pen blooms pseudo-DNA on his shirt. Sneiderling kneels. The parents/guardians reach out for their daughter—a hopeless and completely hope-saturated gesture—still twirling, pigtales fanning like a pretty propeller. Her grin is pierced with a black gap. The broken tooth is probably tucked under her pillow. That little acute triangle of tooth will become the parents/guardians' infinity. The Little Genesis leaves spirographs of footprints in the glittery wet sand. The jolting wires juke closer, hip-shaking like epileptic Presleys. Maybe it's just her time, which is pretty terrible, whenever it's a kid's time. Ma holds Finkle's hand at dinner when the news reports it was a kid's time. You live as long as Ma, and loss should be humdrum. But Ma will

squeeze his hand again tonight when the news reports about the Little Genesis. Maybe because she imagines each kid could be Finkle, and she's praying for more time. *No sneaking boys into the basement for you*, is what Finkle is thinking as he hurdles into the damp diorama, tucks the girl underneath an arm, and jumps out of the sparkly sandbox.

The wires make contact. A loud pop and flash, a crackle and hiss. The power goes out. Smoke curls in the dim red glow of exit signs. The mom is instantly there, lifting her child. The dad is helping Finkle stand, kissing his face. Finkle yawns, trying to release the pressure in his ears and the low whistling, like air over empty bottles. The Codes Inspector, Charlotte, Lydia, and Sally tend to Len, who's sobbing at his bent-backward arm. Sneiderling is calling an ambulance. The parents/guardians sandwich the crying little girl, one big limby shuddering hug. The low whistles, almost syllabled whispers: one older man, one boy his age. It sounds like: *Good, gooooood*. Finkle yawns harder. He moves through the dim red dark, a warm draft on his face, as if a hand is palming it, pulling him forward. The airy thumb on his cheek in its right place. His eyes wet from, what he'll explain to Ma later, all the smoke and nothing more, after he tells her what he saw, and she talks about miracles. There's no such thing, he'll tell her, but he'll be lying. Finkle bumps into the diorama. The whispering *good* moves through his chest and glows neon where he feels vacancy, like cheap motels. It funnels to him from the large culvert-sized white tubular rocks that now nest in place of the sand, light and color kaleidoscoping off their large glassy inner walls, where the dry draft passes through.