

## At That Time, or The History of a Joke · *Grace Paley*

AT THAT TIME most people were willing to donate organs. Abuses were expected. In fact there was a young woman whose uterus was hysterically ripped from her by a passing gynecologist. He was distracted he said, by the suffering of a childless couple in Fresh Meadows. The young woman said, "It wasn't the pain or the embarrassment, but I think any court would certainly award me the earliest uterine transplant that Dr. Heiliger can obtain."

We are not a heartless people and this was done at the lowest judicial level, no need to appeal to state or federal power.

According to *The Times*, one of the young woman's ovaries rejected the new uterus. The other was perfectly satisfied and did not.

"I feel fine," she said, but almost immediately began to swell, for in the soft red warm interior of her womb, there was already a darling rolled-up foetus. It was unfurled in due time and lo! it was as black as the night which rests our day-worn eyes.

Then: "Sing!" said Dr. Heiliger, the scientist, "for see how the myth of man advances on the back of technological achievement and behold without conceiving a virgin has borne a son." This astonishing and holy news was carried to the eye of field, forest and industrial park, wherever the media had thrust its wireless thumb. The people celebrated and were relatively joyful and the birth was reenacted on giant screens in theaters and small screens at home.

Only on the underside of several cities, certain Jews who had observed and suffered the consequence of other virgin births cried out (weeping) (as usual) "It is not He! It is not He!"

No one knew how to deal with them; they were stubborn and maintained a humorless determination. The authorities took away their shortwave and antennae, their stereo screen TV and their Temple video tapes. (People were not incarcerated at that time for such social intransigence. Therefore, neither were they rehabilitated.)

Soon this foolish remnant had nothing left. They had to visit one another or wander from town to town in order to say the most ordinary thing to a friend or relative. They had only their shawls and phylacteries, which were used by women too, for women (by that time) had made their great natural advances and were ministers, seers, rabbis, yogi, priests, etc. in well-known as well as esoteric religions.

In their gossipy communications, they whispered the hidden or omitted fact (which some folks had already noticed): The Child WAS A Girl, and since word of mouth is sound made in the echo of God (in the beginning there was the Word and it was without form but wide), ear to mouth and mouth to ear it soon became the People's knowledge, outwitting the computerized devices to which most sensible people had not said a private word for decades anyway.

Then: "O.K.!" said Dr. Heiliger. "It's perfectly true, but I didn't want to make waves in any water as viscous as the seas of mythology. Yes, it is a girl. A virgin born of a virgin."

Throughout the world, people smiled. By that time, sexism and racism had no public life, though they were still sometimes practiced by adults at home. They were as gladdened by one birth as another. And plans were made to symbolically sew the generations of the daughters one to another by using the holy infant's umbilicus. This was luckily flesh *and* symbol. Therefore beside the cross to which people were accustomed there hung the circle of the navel and the wiggly line of the umbilical cord.

But those particular discontented Jews said again, "Wonderful! So? Another tendency heard from! So it's a girl! Praise to the most Highness! but the fact is, we need another Virgin Birth like our blessed dead want cupping by ancient holistic practitioners."

And so they continued as female and male, descending and undescending, workers in the muddy basement of history, to which, this very day, the poor return when requiring a cheap but stunning garment for a wedding, birth or funeral.