

# CLAIRE PHILLIPS

## TUBULAR

On the corner of Pasadena Avenue and Figueroa, five people stood in line in the hot sun, waiting to be next to inhale the Egg and see the Saint. It was not long before the truck ran out of Egg and a fight broke out.

“I told you there was no point in standing in line,” Ben told his wife. “Nothing ever works out. We shouldn’t have come.”

Angela wasn’t surprised things hadn’t worked out the way Ben wanted. She was busy with her baby and secretly hoped they would be able to go home without adding Saints and psychobabble to an already long list of complaints.

Ben worked for Caltrans in Malibu and soon, it was rumored, he’d be losing his job. The State parks had all about closed and now, spectacularly, there was talk of closing Zuma Beach in the winter. This Saturday Ben had hoped for a vision or a sign to help him make the next right move. It was nearly impossible to talk to his co-workers about how he was seeing things. By attending protests down at City Hall, the union workers felt they were taking control. What they failed to miss were the signs everywhere of a mass societal collapse. E. coli. Terrorism. Extreme weather. Land-faring mutant worms. Once the transportation system fell apart due to high oil prices and the trucks were no longer able to deliver their goods to the cities, a return to hunting and gathering was inevitable, leaving only the practiced gun owner to survive.

In his chosen field of work, scrubbing public toilets and grooming county shrubbery, overseeing

the comings and goings of those appointed by the court to community service, few appreciated philosophical discussion. In his need for the universal he felt alone. Not even his wife Angela liked talking about the future. It wasn’t that she was stupid or small-minded. She just didn’t want to despair.

“Come back next Saturday,” an emaciated worker called out from the banged up catering truck. “A new batch is being hatched as we speak.”

Ben turned bitterly behind him to the cracked sidewalk where a silver-haired amputee suited up in a gray duct tape bag cinched at the waist sucked down the last delicacies of the *Spittle and Pittled Eggs of New York* catering truck. “Lucky dog,” Ben spit on the dry cracked ground. “Time to hightail it outta here.” Ben tossed a flubby arm about his wife and baby as a crush of embittered patrons moved forward for the truck.

“I’ve been waiting here for over an hour,” a buxom broad shouted up to the Ouroboros worker. “I’m not leaving till I see a Saint.” The Ouroboros worker banged closed the catering truck’s window and started up its engine. “Where you goin’, fool?”

An Armenian homie tossed an empty beer bottle toward the truck and it shattered loudly against the side as the swaying truck pulled out into Lincoln Heights traffic. “Go back to church!” the driver sniped back.

“I don’t want Jesus, I wanna bona fide Tubular Saint,” the buxom woman hollered. “I wanna see Bear, like my sister.”

“C’mon,” Ben maneuvered Angela and six-

month-old baby Hilda toward the car, past the day's winners sprawled out in the dirt under a broken frondless palm, stoned and inhaling the dregs of the notoriously potent Spittle and Pittled Eggs.

The family boarded the four-wheel drive Ford Hybrid SUV purchased before the End Times had announced themselves via the tubularfamily.com sighting of the black-hatted New Jesus drifting up and down the 5 freeway. In a bombed-out yellow Toyota Tercel, the Manco Incan hailed passersby with endless stigmata blood works—turned out Jesus was an illegal immigrant. Too ironic for words.

"This freakin' sucks," Ben lamented, stabbing the steering wheel with a meaty elbow. "Now what am I gonna do?"

"You're so pessimistic," Angela sighed, carefully buckling Hilda into her seat. "You're always taking the gloomy view."

"I can't go back to being a nurse aid. All that freakin' illness and misery—I'm not cleaning another bedpan, Angie. Maybe I'll start cooking meth like that teacher with cancer on TV."

Angela shot him a look of annoyance. "You're way too lazy to deal. You'd just end up an addict. Too bad you didn't take my sister up on becoming a real estate agent when you had the chance."

"You serious?" Ben lifted a brow. "If I'd gone that route we'd be living with your mother right now." He huffed. "With Caltrans at least I got a retirement account I can cash out if things get really bad. Thank god I'm not stupid and grasping like everyone else dying to make a quick buck. You're lucky, Angie—"

She cut him off. "—I can always start selling Melaleuca again," Angela offered dully, observing out the window the hodgepodge of colorful Latino stores racing by.

"No thank you," Ben dry-heaved. Angela's Melaleuca habit, selling tree oil-based products like toothpaste and pain relievers to relatives and friends, cost him a whopping thousand dollars a year to keep afloat. It was a pyramid scheme and she was a lousy saleswoman. "It's too freakin' bad about the Eggs," Ben hunched over the steering

wheel. "Imagine if I'd seen a Saint and we won the lottery like that lady in Carson with stage three liver cancer. It's too damn bad. The lottery's up to four hundred mil this week."

"Nobody can prove Saints are real," Angela countered, jutting her lower lip.

"So?" Ben sniped. "That's the way it's always been. Spiritual things aren't provable, that's why they're spiritual. Besides they've proven the existence of giant tube worms. They'll prove the Saints next and the Tubular people. You'll see."

"I don't believe in the Tubular. That's a myth," Angela pouted. She didn't like all this talk of interspecies breeding and the breakdown of culture. Of the unfamiliar. She wanted everything to remain the same. To remain the way it was when she was in school, when her hair was long, down to her waist, and she was good at passing Scantron tests.

"If I were Tubular, I wouldn't need a job," Ben said, tailgating the white 1998 Acura up ahead. "I'd just eat plastic bags out of the garbage and get high on Egg," he guffawed. "Dammit," he yelled, eying the consumption stats of his vehicle, "something's wrong with our vehicle. We got 43.7 miles to the gallon last Saturday. Now it reads 37.3. This car is a rip."

Angela rolled her eyes. She wished her sister hadn't moved out to live with their mother in Santa Ana. Now the only person she had to talk to was Ben and all he cared about was endless nights of gun practice, picking fights with the gangsta neighbors and mooning over bogus alien invasion stories. She could now add gas prices to the list.

From out of nowhere, a fulsome pair of chalk-white ten-foot-long tube worms, sporting bright-red hydrogen sulfide sucking plumes, booked across the intersection, shedding piles of sand and broken shells in their wake. "Shit," Ben cried, slamming on the brakes. "Ange, look at that pair. They're huge!"

"Be careful," Angela said in a quiet undertone. "Hilda's sleeping."

A loud squall came from the back seat.

"Are you teething again, m'hija?" Angela gave Hilda an index finger to suck on. She was

a good mother when it came to the basics, Ben observed admiringly. He felt lucky. Angela was easy on the eyes *and* she was trustworthy. Not a hellraiser like his mother who suffered from a bad case of keeping up with the Joneses. “Quick, you’re gonna miss them,” he pointed to the parking lot of an empty CVS store.

“Where?” Angela brushed long glossy hair from her eyes.

“Right there. In that garbage container dusting the empty milk gallon bottles,” he laughed.

“That doesn’t make sense. What are they doing in our neighborhood? We don’t live anywhere near an oil refinery.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in the cold seeps.” Ben marveled at Angela’s mocha complexion in the ecstatic L.A. sunshine.

“Stop making things up,” she demanded. She had married him for his jokey side, though lately she’d begun to find Ben’s practical jokes tedious. Like the time he scattered his clothes around the living room, then left for the Arco and texted her to say he’d been abducted by aliens.

“The cold seeps are giving me the creeps,” Ben flexed a toneless bicep, showing off a less than exact Thousand Faces tattoo. “I’ll defend you from them,” he leaned in for a kiss.

“I like it when you rescue me,” Angela raised a dark serpentine brow. “Let’s play that tonight, okay?”

“I’m going to see Prince tonight at the Forum. R’membuh?”

She shifted in her seat, tugging at the ends of glossy hair. “Come home early,” she said, a bright gleam in her eye, beams of sunlight reflecting off her silver hoop earrings.

“If I don’t go Tubular,” he warned.

“You’re such a bullshitter.” Angela lifted bemused in her seat. “You don’t have the courage to go Tubular. You hate change worse than me. Tubes don’t even have sex. You’d have to lick your own balls.”

He grimaced, checking on the status of his gas tank through his side view, relieved it hadn’t been tampered with by the legendary mutant tube worms that were an outgrowth of the 2010 BP oil

spill. “Those bastards can steal all the petroleum they want from the corporate sonsabitches but they ain’t takin’ jack from me.”

Ben hunkered down, steering past a clutch of twelve-year-old wannabe gangbangers on Valley Vista, and immediately tensed. He had nothing against the orphans unless they were stealing his shit.

“If they steal another one of my pumpkins, I swear, *Angela*,” he pronounced her name the Spanish way. “I’m gonna pop them with my nine. No joke.”

Angela sighed. He was always threatening to shoot someone or something. The seagulls for shitting on the pavement outside the public bathrooms at work. The postman for delivering bills. His mother for taking him out of her will. The squeaky back door.

Pulling off loud multi-lane Valley Vista Boulevard, gliding silently into his short drive, he glared through the rear view mirror.

“I’ll pick ’em off one by one,” he muttered.

“I wanna fence,” Angela blurted as they passed a showy row of carved pumpkins, Ben’s pride and glory.

“A fence won’t help. It’ll only give the impression of us being rich,” Ben said, gyrating within his loose, hip-clearing jeans. “Rich. Is. A bitch.”

Teetering in nude patent leather five-inch heels, Angela crossed the unvarnished living room floor into the kitchen where she placed Hilda in her high chair before settling into her weekend ritual of rearranging everything in the cabinets alphabetically. While Angela organized in the kitchen, Ben plowed through four light beers and a large bag of goji potato chips, flicking through crap TV, killing time before his big night out.