

Porn

Fortunato Salazar

I was reading in the New Testament about fornication, and having a good old time. It was Friday morning, Thank God It's Friday and all that. I had the NT open on my phone. Two saints were on their way to Antioch; meanwhile I'd just surpassed my previous all-time high for flipping parking meters. I could do that at the time—walk past a parking meter and transform the blinking light from green to red. The feat required major mental effort. Two meters in a row and I was worn out, mentally. But I'd done as many as ten in a row before. Ten and crashed. Ten and I was out of gas. But now ten looked small. I'd demolished ten. Now I had a whole new number, a very large number, under my belt, so to speak. I sipped my coffee and wasn't in the least fatigued. I was curious about the saints. My family had been atheists. We read the NT, as atheists tend to do, only in translation. We didn't drink coffee, or alcohol, or milk, or even caffeinated tea. So much had changed since my childhood and its dietary prohibitions. I was curious about the dietary prohibitions in the original language. I'd challenged myself to read one whole book each weekday. I'd done that the day before. Now I was in the next book, midway through and it was only nine-thirty in the morning. The letter had been written, the decree about fornication, and the saints were underway: Saint Paul, Saint Barnabas. Meanwhile I'd just crushed a number that had seemed safe. Ten had been inviolate, so I'd thought until that morning. To place myself back on the other side of ten, remembering what it was like as recently as the morning before, that was now a difficult task—more mental effort, of a different kind. I'd been naïve about ten, I'd lacked ambition and I'd been naïve. Meter after meter had fallen, adding up to ten, a number that satisfied my ambition, such as it was at the time. But now, in retrospect, ten looked like an infant garment. By noon, at this rate, I would close the last page on the book. I slowed myself down. The afternoon loomed with its frantic taxidermy errands. I shifted from the book to the commentary—the commentary in English—open in another tab. As an atheist, raised on the translated version, the commentary offered a whole new kind of fun. The commentary had *a lot* to say about fornication. If only I could get my hands on *Die Gemeindeverfassung des Unchristentums*, by Loening. I was naïve about the moral atmosphere of the Syria of the first century, the heathen view of impurity, heathen religious guilds, “nameless breaches” of the Christian law of purity. My parents had been lifelong atheists and, truth be told, not especially receptive to alternative views. I went inside and filled my glass from the tap. Uncleanliness, there you had it: tap water. Knocking off meters dehydrated me, however. It left me with a spent, parched-deep-down feeling. Even now, energized from the coffee and the run of meters, viscerally I felt spent and parched: out in the sun even though I was in the shaded corridor. Thirsty. Regarding “fornication,” there were many places I could go, for example Holtzmann, Ritschl, Zöckler, Wendt, Ramsay, Meyer, Ewald, Godet, Weiss and others cited in the commentary. And that was just fornication. The other prohibitions in the verse—I'd be scrolling down through the commentary for hours. The saints had their work cut out for them. I started to wonder about range. If I put enough effort into thinking about flipping, could I flip the meter that stood directly in my line of sight, clear across the plaza? That struck me as a real stretch, unproductive whimsy, but then again last night I would have said that obliterating ten was a stretch. The alchemy of flipping meters, transforming emerald into ruby. I wanted to celebrate. I would get my hair styled and pay for it with quarters. My stylist would tell me all

about her complicated prohibitions as regards fornication, resuming a conversation we'd had before. But I was getting ahead of myself; I still needed to finish the book. Now I discovered in the commentary that the word "fornication" itself was in dispute, that possibly the correct word actually was "swine." I had *my* work cut out for me. Also, a doubt occurred to me: what if I'd miscounted? If "fornication" might actually be "swine," wasn't it possible that, in my elation at destroying ten, I'd given myself too much or too little credit? Overlooked one bar of flashing ruby? Notched a meter I hadn't flipped? Tallied sloppily in all the excitement of leaving the three-letter number behind me in the dust? Centuries had passed and still "fornication" was in doubt, next to which a meter-counting error seemed a plausible human lapse. True, but the new tally dwarfed ten by so much that only a fussy worrier would dwell on one more or less. No one had ever called me a fussy worrier. Right, but suppose in fact I had miscounted, ten being inviolate for so long that smashing it had disoriented me; obviously "disoriented" in a good way, buzzing with woozy elation, but still, in a state that made me susceptible to a counting error. One more or less, could that realistically be compared to doubt, after centuries, whether the word was "fornication" or "swine"? Never mind the word; if the word was in doubt, then the prohibition must be in doubt. Not comparable to one more or less. "Swine," if it was the word, if you were the food truck parked at the meter that was directly in my line of sight, would hit you where you lived. The meter fed me its soothing pulses of emerald. Time to move along to the next verse. In the next verse the saints had already arrived in Antioch.

