

The Priest

I grew up in a Catholic orphanage. I entered at a young age, one where I don't have many memories but the ones I do have won't leave my head. I think I was about four, maybe five. My personality wasn't one that really stuck out so I hid in the background. Friend after friend came and went, adopted into these wealthy families; the ones that now come to me for guidance. Years went by. I think the nuns started forgetting I was there. One night they set the table one place short and I sat on the ground and just stared at everyone's legs as they swung back and forth, kicking each other, playing innocent games of footsie and tag you're it. Someone's shin started bleeding and when they took him away to get cleaned up I just jumped right up, took his spot and it was as if no one had ever left...until he came back and beat me up for eating his food. After that I always had a place at the table, right next to a sister so I wouldn't cause any more trouble.

Only when I got into the later years of childhood did they notice I wasn't being looked at. I think it's because I was so normal. Everyone else was either ethnic, or disabled, or witty, or troubled, or were freakishly tall and recruited for sports teams. Me, I was an average sized white boy who hadn't lost all of his baby fat yet. I was one of two children who had been there for ten years. The other one was a Russian child who was going through the process, but his citizenship papers weren't going through. I forgot his name. Actually, I never knew it. I never knew anyone's name, not even the sisters. I guess that helps for where I'm at now. If I tried now to remember everyone's names I would be swimming in a sea of faceless John's and James' and Jose's. We have a fairly large Latino population.

Then it came to be my eighteenth birthday. Such a momentous day for everyone. Too bad for me it was the day I was cast out on the street with a brown paper bag lunch and fifty dollars in cash. With no immediate family to my knowledge nor friends acquired over the years I turned to the institution that failed me, the only one I knew; the Catholic church.

Back at the foot of the Cathedral we traveled to every Sunday for mass I ate my pb&j sandwich and gulped down the cup of milk in a carton and started up the stairs. I entered the doors I knew so well. The rough grain of the oak wood, the fading stain, the slight depression where most hands push the door open. I walked inside wearing my Sunday best, cause that's all I had for clothing, the sound of my half depleted brown dress shoes smacking their cork heels against the fine marble. I took my mental route immediately to the confessional booths in the back.

I never really liked confession, but I enjoyed sitting in the booth. The dark, musty closet that doubled as a sin absolver. If only all closets could do that. Walk in with your dirty laundry and walk out wearing a clean pair of pants and a white starched, collared shirt.

I walked up to the booth, opened the door, and sat down. There was no priest present. It was too early for them. So, I waited. Three hours before any of the priests that walked by saw that someone had entered the booth.

Finally one entered the other side, took about ten seconds to sit down, and slid the face divider open.

There, sadly stoic, the face of a man completely devoted to God and completely empty from himself.

I didn't speak those opening "forgive me father for I have sinned" lines because I had just confessed the day before, so there was a long silence as we both enjoyed the quiet presence of another human being. Finally, he opened his mouth, the build-up of saliva causing a soft popping sound to come from his mouth before he spoke to me—

-Do you have anything to confess?

-No. I do not father.

-Then why have you come to me?

-Well, I didn't really come to you per say. I came here to this cathedral, this booth, but I couldn't care less who was on the other side of the partition.-I could see out of the corner of my eye that he enjoyed that small jest.

-Have you come to seek counsel?

-I guess you could say that.

-We can talk in my chambers. That is usually where I counsel people.

-No. I prefer the confessional. I like the enclosed space.

-Fine, fine. What are you having trouble with?

-Well, I have been put on the street and have no place to stay.

-There is a homeless shelter down the street that takes twenty-five souls a night. If you go now you might make the list.

-No, that is temporary. I am looking for something more permanent.

-Have you any money?

-Fifty dollars.

-Have you a job?

-No.

-Have you any friends or family in the area?

-I couldn't tell you an area where that would exist.

-Well then, you might to settle for something more temporary. It doesn't sound like you have many options.

-I was thinking I could do what you do, maybe stay here.

-Become a priest? My friend, this position takes many years of hard work to get to. There is much schooling and preparation necessary before you can get to where I am right now. You don't just walk in, put on a robe and start working.

-No, I don't want to be a normal priest. I want to do what you're doing right now. I want to take confession."

-That's it? Just confession?

-Yes.

-I'm sorry. I can't help you.-He left. I didn't.

A few hours later I opened the door and switched stalls. I received my first confession ten minutes later and after the fifth one was confronted by the priest. He was furious, but because he was a true man of God he didn't lay a hand on me and left after I told him I wouldn't leave.

The next day when I was still there he came by with some food on a tray and served me as we talked and he agreed to let me hear confessions on the condition that I would never leave the church. That was the only way he knew that I would maintain my secrecy. I told him that there was no problem and that I probably wouldn't leave the booth. He was fine with that as long as I got out to shower every day and eat at least two meals.

So, now I'm here, protected once again by the Holy Father and his chum the Pope. Oh, wait. Here comes a visitor.

A man, bleeding from the chest enters the other side of the confessional. I can hear his heavy breathing as he sprawls himself over the chair, sheltering the view from the outside world.

-Hhhhhhuughhh. Hugh, hugh. Hhhhuughhh.

He is having trouble with his jacket. It must hurt to take it off.

-Are you alright my friend?-I ask.

-Shut the fuck up and listen Father I haven't much time. I've sinned, boy I've sinned. Hssseeeee. Ahhh.

But there's one that has really been bugging me all these years. I'm a bank robber. I rob banks. Like Robin Hood, except all those poor people I give money to are me and my alcoholic girlfriend. But, one day I couldn't bring myself to start the job. I had a bad feeling, and in my line of work you don't do a job unless you're absolutely sure that it's gonna go perfectly. You just don't do it. So I'm on my way home and I'm in a

really bad mood cause that's a lot of money lost and people I have to pay off, so I'm speeding through this neighborhood.-He pauses at the most exciting part. I always love the confessions that take these big dramatic pauses. It really gets to me. Oh, wait, he's about to continue, taking a deep breath and - and I never say them. Out of nowhere as they always say. I just ran over them without blinking an eye. Now, hitting two people is not a good thing for a car, but I had absolutely no time or desire to stop and check on them. The equipment in my van could incriminate the President. All I truly remember is the face of the poor bastard as he rolled over my windshield. It was like a kid making faces at you through a restaurant window. Cheek pressed against the glass, lips slightly pursed, one eye the size of China while the other shuts itself tight like the legs of a Catholic schoolgirl. The wrinkles in his forehead were so accentuated, I felt as if I were looking at a birds eye view of the Grand Canyon. Then the glass started to crack, expanding from the epicenter, right around the eyebrow. I was checking the damage later and I even found one of his hairs stuck in the glass, poor bastard. It looked like it took the whole root with it. And right behind his ear were these big, beautifully white teeth. I mean pearl-ers. She must have brushed and flossed those three time a day and never had piece of candy on Halloween, I mean, flawless fuckers. Then they were digging their way into the back of his head. It almost killed me then and there to see them snap like that, as if they were made of styrofoam. Snap. Just like that.-I can see him making gestures, but they're muddled by his words.-They must've stayed on the top of the van for a few seconds, because I didn't see them fall in my rear view for at least ten seconds.

Now that was an awkward silence. I thought he was going to continue, but I guess not. I wonder what he has to say?-Is that it? What part do you want to be forgiven for? How much penance do you want to deal with at one time?

-Penance? Death is my penance. I'm dying Father. I don't even want to be forgiven. It's not like I did anything to stop it from happening, or tried to help out. I don't even know what to feel about it.

-Death is no penance. It's an escape. It's how you avoid your responsibilities. I can help you.

-Can you? Is it forgivable Father? I just don't want to live with it. Help me out with this before I day so I can rest in peace.

-Everything is forgivable.

- Good. Good. Lay it on me as I just get a little more comfortable.

Where did I put it? Ah...here it is. These robes always bunch up around the waist. Ugh. No reception. Let me just...move it...around a bit. There. 9-1-1. Such an easy number to remember.

-Father? Your word?

-Hold on a sec.-it's ringing.

-9-1-1 emergency response. What is your emergency?

-I need an ambulance at the cathedral as soon as possible. Please come to the second confessional in the back.

There will be blood.-Hang up. No need to tell them any more.

-What!?! No, you son-of-a-bitch! What the fuck do you think you're doing? AAAAAAGH!! Fuckin' shit.

Jesus Christ, you fucking cunt!

-Please don't take the Lord's name in vain. I can see him squirming, trying to lose as much blood as he can before they get here. Too bad for him I can already hear the ambulance. Anonymous calls always attract more attention.

Lots of yelling no crying but there's plenty of time for that after a while all the yelling gets very exhausting I feel like I'm sitting in a sauna of sound there they come they always look so professional when they run with that equipment I wonder what all they have oop there it is I never really saw his wound till now so big he was right to think he was gonna die but thanks to modern medicine he'll be able to keep that wound and not have to perish into that damp dark place of the afterlife already on the stretcher wow that was quick they sure don't waste time when they see a pale semicorpse like that do they nope off they go oooo I hate standing up my knees always end up hurting so bad but I've got to catch them before they leave in their shiny white van there we go - Forgive me Father, for I have sinned. You could have started there, but you'll be seeing me enough now that you'll have some practice before you come back.

That face. Oh, I'll remember that face forever. It almost looks like my father's.