

## **The Great Poor Box Robbery**

3124 Words

Casey Martin is praying hard as he hangs up the phone. Ten minutes earlier he'd been mid-way through his usual sound night's sleep at the rectory of St. James the Less before the clanging of that infernal burglar alarm outside his bedroom had him leaping out of bed like a panicked gazelle and groping wildly after his phone. "Slow down there, Father Casey," pleads the city police dispatcher "way down, until I get some kind of handle on all this. How about taking a deep breath and starting over—this time real slow?" Half-way through she's got it. "Okay,

## POOR BOX HEIST

Father, listen! Meet us outside the church in five minutes and don't get any ideas about going into that church alone thinking you've got God on your side. Wait for us now you hear."

Seconds after hanging up Casey finds the light switch and grabs for a few scattered clothes before rushing down the hallway and out through the kitchen door right as the red lights come racing up Montgomery Street and screech to a halt outside his church. *It's freezing cold out here tonight!* But nothing like the chunk of polar ice forming in Casey's stomach over the lousy way he figures he's handled this whole mess. Two cops leap out of the car.

"First off, Father," the older one yells, "where exactly is the poor box?"

"Inside the front door to the left, officer."

"Okay. Why don't you to unlock the church door for us and then stand well back?" A moment later, as Casey steps aside both cops run past him into the darkened church with drawn guns and leveled flashlights. For Casey, who's been preaching love, peace and tolerance these past thirty years this whole mess is quickly getting out of hand. *Go in after them! Now! Casey,* screams the voice of conscience in his head, *before it's too late. What if someone is killed here tonight? In your church? You want to live with that?* Except, like the cops have told him, there's nothing he can do now but stand back and hope. And pray!

And may God may watch over whatever poor sap who might well end up staring into the wrong end of those guns. Like one of those down-on-their-luck transients fresh off the latest freight rolling through town and in desperate need of a bottle for the night. Most times it's the candle money they're after, rarely the poor box. Either way the need doesn't vary. You don't go bedding down in the frosty weeds without the comfort of a bottle. And, while you're bedding down in those weeds, you're likely trusting on seeing another tomorrow; not so likely if your bed

## POOR BOX HEIST

is one those cold shiny slabs over in the county morgue. That's what Casey fears most this night. That some poor drifter may well up in the morgue over the few lousy dollars in that poor box. Probably no more than fifty dollars tops since it's emptied most every day. That same morgue over by the county jail he dreads going to only a little less than hell itself.

It's been several months since he got a morgue call late one night that had him arriving over there half-stupid with sleep and able only to gag out a few distracted prayers over the bloated body-bag oozing strawberry-colored goo across the cold stainless steel. "That's where a head-full of jug wine and a speeding freight will get you," observes the lone morgue attendant wryly just as Casey is making the sign of Christ's cross over the pitiful remains.

"Okay, Padre, thanks for coming over at this hour. You willing to show up again around eleven tomorrow with a few more good words at the burial?" With a brief nod of assent, Casey quickly makes for the exit and the fresh air he hopes will quell the bile rising in his throat. A cold north wind is blowing dust clouds around as Casey arrived at the morgue the following morning still battling the leftover remnants from the previous night's ordeal. The six jail trustees acting as pall-bearers stand on either side of the rough pine box loaded onto two stout saw horses. Before starting, Casey has a question.

"Do we know the decedent's name or sex?"

"Both known only to God I'm afraid, Padre."

Casey opts for, "Thy Servant" as the pine box is awkwardly shouldered and the procession begins its stumbling way down the rutted path to the paupers' lot. In the lead Casey solemnly intones, "Thy servant died in Christ, may Thy servant now also share in His resurrection." A little ways across the parking lot a battered old water truck is gamely trying to tamp down the

swirling dust clouds that threatens to engulf the funeral procession. Given the gloomy circumstances Casey is inspired to pray even harder for the deceased's immediate ascent into heaven as the reward for a life well-lived. A noble sentiment that's being hardly affirmed by one of the pallbearers who begins yelling for the water truck driver to "git yourself on over here fer the good dousin' this fella's likely needin' fer where he's headed."

"Shut up and keep walking," shouts the morgue attendant in a vain effort to restore some modicum of solemnity to the proceedings. No easy task given how a second pallbearer is soon voicing his own concerns.

"Hey you fellers up front watch out fer them gopher holes so we don't end up dumpin'..."

"I said, shut the hell up and walk straight like I just showed you," yells the red-faced attendant.

As the pine box is being lowered into the grave, Casey invokes the Almighty one last time.

"Eternal rest grant unto Thy servant O Lord and let perpetual light..."

*The same light, Casey thinks that rarely shines in this desolate place—this wind-blown acre of red earth carved out from the forest of sagebrush and manzanita bushes that cover these lonely hillsides. There must be upward of a hundred unmarked graves here, each one a testament to a life likely to have drifted far from the long-ago dreams held out by so many loved ones. And yet, for prince and pauper alike death is not death the great leveler? "Sceptre and crown must tumble down and in the dust be equal made..."* And, like Casey would often remind his congregation, "remember, how we fare above the clouds is the only thing that really matters in the end." With a final nod that he's got nothing more to offer, Casey starts back up the hill in hopes hope he's not called back here for a very long time.

#

From out of the night come further flashing lights as two more cop cars arrive to a screeching halt.. Out jump four more uniformed officers who go rushing past Casey on their way up the church steps. “Keep standing back there, Father where you’re safe until we give you the all clear,” shouts Danny Doyle, once the peskiest of all Casey’s long ago acolytes. He’s made sergeant now despite the same moon face and hang-dog look that suggest the kind of complete pushover he really never was. “No way, Father,” the young acolyte Danny would solemnly swear by way of affirming his total disassociation with the missing chancel-clock pendulum later found hidden away in his school locker. Or the soaked candle wicks that stubbornly refused to light for Casey from being earlier soaked in Danny’s spit like one of buddies later finally admitted.

From inside the church Casey hears muffled voices followed by the chilling sound of something being dragged across the floor. Cripes!. An ominous silence follows before the door slowly opens and Danny sticks his globular head out. “You can come on in, Father, now that this fellow won’t be giving you any more trouble.” “Thank you Danny,” Casey answers with a forced calmness that belies the sudden terror roiling his gut over what, “*this fellow won’t be giving you any more trouble,*” may soon reveal.

#

And the damnable part of this disastrous night was that it had come at the end of an otherwise corker of a day—Casey’s weekly day off! Up promptly at six-thirty, he’d conducted his usual, daily, thirty-minute mass. Shortly afterwards he’d returned to the rectory for a quick change into golf clothes before making his weekly dash over to “Eddie’s Eatery.”

“Morning, Eddie.”

## POOR BOX HEIST

“Morning, Father Casey. The usual?”

“Absolutely! You hiding the sports page from me again, Eddie?”

“No, Father, you sure you’re not sitting on it?”

Ten minutes later Casey happily tossed the paper aside so he could fully concentrate on the sizzling miracle Eddie had placed before him with a ceremonial flourish. Bacon and sausage with two over-easy eggs topping a glorious mound of golden potato farls. “Fabulous, Eddie, fabulous!” offers a drooling Casey about the first-class culinary miracle this superman produces week after week. For which Casey then pauses to give thanks and remind himself, that, other than the greatly ballyhooed sexual act he’s sworn off for life, he’s likely never experience anything more life-invigorating than tearing into this wondrous creation he’s been fantasizing over for days. Made all the more satisfying by the sweet payback it is to his doctor, who’s finally offered Casey one grudging concession—“well perhaps I could allow one sensible departure from my prescribed diet, but only on your day off mind you.” Well, so much for that detestable diet of tree bark and panther urine that quack expects him to consume on all the other mornings due to, “your elevated hypertension and considerable weight gain that can only lead to a very undesirable end.”

Thirty minutes later a fully replete Casey was back home and proudly presiding over three welcoming mugs of steaming hot tea for his priest golfing buddies just in from the valley for their ten o’clock tee off time. *Golf’s weekly lesson on the vicissitudes of life wherein the arrogant are quickly brought low and the meek exalted all within two swings of a golf club. Thank you Lord, for the brilliant four hours I’m about to spend out in your wonderland locked in*

*mortal combat with these, my buddies, until the final putt is sunk and our bets are fully resolved over a few well-deserved drinks on the clubhouse patio.*

Afterwards, as the laws of hospitality dictate, it's everyone back to the host's place for hot showers while the Idaho spuds baked in the oven and the turnips simmer sweetly on the stovetop. While out on the darkening deck the barbeque patiently awaits that transformative moment when its magical powers will once again be called upon to convert those four thick rib-eyes resting on the kitchen counter into the crown jewels of our Sultan's feast. Casey's choice of wine for the evening? A full-bodied Sonoma County Zin he's certain will perfectly balance, but never overwhelm the flavor of those four succulent marvels.

#

Inside the church vestibule it's pitch dark save for the several piercing flashlight beams being trained down on some pitiful-looking creature cowering on his knees with hands cuffed behind his head. Casey swallows hard on the huge sob of relief arising in his throat: *No one is dead!* Maybe not even hurt. *Thanks be to the Lord God.*

"Hey Father," says Danny, taking Casey by the arm, "how about you and me going up front and turning on all the lights so we can check things out thoroughly. After that, I'll lock everything up, and you can head on back for some more beauty sleep after all you've been through tonight. And one more thing, I'd like to hold on to this church key until we wrap things up here for good. Tomorrow morning you can pick it up at the jail when you come over to give us your statement. Nothing more to keep you here tonight."

"Right you are Danny," says Casey, grateful for the chance to be alone for a while. Any other time he might have taken a parting shot at old moon face, "now that you've finally made it back

to church don't be such a stranger you hear now—Sergeant!” But the real stranger here this night will be the sleep Casey knows will not come to help him forget about the blood-stained hands that might well have been his tonight—hands long ago consecrated to heal not to maim. Or the spilled blood that might have desecrated this sacred place set apart for the safety and sanctuary of all.

Sitting alone at his kitchen table waiting for the tea kettle to boil, Casey begins remonstrating with himself again on why his first instinct earlier this evening had been to call in the cavalry once that buzzer started going off? Like in his long-ago Western movie days when he and his buddies would revel in the swift justice employed by all those strong men with guns. A childish ignorance he'd foolishly thought he'd long ago left behind until--

After confessing several weeks back that he'd been haunted by troubling thoughts and lustful desires brought on by visions of Diana the Huntress and the movie “Pretty Woman,” his spiritual director had some very direct advice. “Develop a healthy interest in Westerns, Casey, where there's never a hint of sex or nudity. Only a bit of harmless shooting. By the way, who's Diana the Huntress?”

“Some image I saw in an Art Gallery a while back.”

“And she was scantily clad I'll wager.”

“Exactly, and the way those milky white breasts of hers had me transfixed like...”

“Hush Casey, we're priests for God's sake. Now listen to me, no more moping around art galleries that are nothing more than the devil's playground for the unwary. Filth fobbed off as art! Don't fall for it, Casey. And, from now on, I want you to take plenty of long walks and read only great literature like Hardy and Thackeray. And remember what I said about Westerns.



## POOR BOX HEIST

Strong moral men like Matt Dillon and Wyatt Earp! Towers of strength they were despite the evils bubbling around them. So that if this Diana ever showed up bare-breasted in the Long Branch Saloon, no question, Matt Dillon would have had Kitty immediately wrap her in a nice warm blanket and convince her about the importance of women being properly attired at all times.”

Advice that Casey decided not to take, *for while I may not be proud of my Diana the Huntress fantasies, they leave no bodies strewn in the dust of Dodge City either.*”

#

Five cups of tea later it's after four in the morning and Casey is still wide awake. Earlier when that damn buzzer went off he suspected someone was fooling with the poor box over in the church thanks to the alarm system installed by the Knights of Columbus, who used the money to cover evening meals for the homeless. At one time, with the takings so paltry, the Knights could only afford the most mundane fare until Casey had an idea. What if people were asked to do a little more than the paltry penance customarily imposed for sin in confession. Like, maybe dropping a fifty, or even a hundred in the poor box as penance for that canoodling you carried on over there in Monterey! (While the wife was stuck home with the kids!) *Cheap at the price!*

#

It's going on for four-thirty and still no sleep despite Casey's switching from tea to a few snorts of brandy. He'd even called in Diana the Huntress who'd utterly failed him not unlike the young maidens who'd failed to warm the dying King David. Well to hell with it, unlike David *he* wasn't dying. Far from it, so why not test the revival powers of a hot shower and a read of the

morning paper to revive him. And, afterwards, maybe another trip back to Eddie's Eatery that was more than justified after this night-from-the-pit-of-hell he'd just been through!

#

Mid-morning the city police called to say Casey could come over to give his statement. Afterwards Danny Doyle informed him that "the little mud-lark over in the jail would like to apologize for his misdeeds." Even in jail the little guy looked a lot better than a few hours before. He'd been fed, washed, assigned a public defender and, like he told Casey, "at least I'm in out of the cold."

His story was both interesting and hardly unfamiliar. Catholic school education including ten years as an acolyte at Holy Angels in Chicago. Married too young to his pregnant sweetheart who'd soured on him early for a whole bunch of reasons. Three kids in five years and never too diligent about helping out at home. Add in a serious roving eye and a fondness for Manhattans that left him slobbery drunk most evenings and wanting her in a way she'd declare to be disgusting. "Yes we tried marriage counseling," he'd responded to Casey's inquiry, "that I likely torpedoed with my first response to the counselor's plea that we both speak honestly to each other. 'So, for openers', I told her, 'I'm pretty damn sure the priests down at Holy Angels are having more sex than I am.'"

"I see," said Casey, figuring that anything more would be useless as calling back water long since gone over the dam.

#

The mud-lark's trial was set for four weeks later with Casey subpoenaed as a witness. Eleven o'clock in the morning of his day off! His golf game ruined! What a total cockup! Damn that

## POOR BOX HEIST

poor box! And, double-damn that moronic buzzer! At ten-fifteen that morning they called to say the mud-lark was pleading guilty, so, no trial. Damn and blazes! Couldn't they have called earlier? His entire day off wrecked! Or maybe not. His buddies were teeing it up at Peach Tree no more than twenty miles away and if he drove over there like mad he might even intercept them at the tenth hole. And besides, they'd mentioned something about going on later that evening to a "must see" movie called, "Sleepless in Seattle." More fantasy!

Not ideal. More like pathetic for some middle-aged duffer like him reduced to fantasizing about bloody rubbish like Diana the Huntress for far too long. What a hell of a long way that was from how people were really intended to find happiness. Might he someday? Someday maybe! But not today! This day was created for golf. The greatest game known to man. Even for half a round, because, like his mother would often say long ago, "Even half a loaf can keep you going for a hell of a long time."