

Two Confessions

Cathy's convinced the grey drizzle was lying in wait just for her, waiting to deposit weeks of dirt on her hands and face. *I'll never find peace, I don't care what Father Joe says. What's there to confess: the wrongs were done to me, again and again! Sweet Mary – sweet Mary, full of grace. I'm so full of dirt a sea of soap couldn't wash me clean.*

She wipes her eyes before realizing that she has now made things worse. *I'll look like some drunken zombie by the time I get to the bus stop. My eyes must be all red.* She doesn't see the puddle and the dirty water splashes above both her ankles. "Christ! And Jesus again! So, Father, is this not enough penance? The Devil's laughing – and don't spin me any story about Job. He was a man!"

She finally reaches the bus stop and laughs. The drizzle has turned to rain which is being driven into the bus shelter by strong gusts of wind. She goes around to the outside corner and leans into the Plexiglas. She's chilled and her nose starts to run. *Christ, I'm shaking like a drunk.*

In St. Agnes, Father Joseph has just finished taking confession. He returns to his room. He carefully folds the violet stole and hangs the alb on one side of the closet. He feels the need to sit undisturbed in the chapel and changes into his civvies. *Best be disguised and see if I can sneak up on God. In my collar or vestments He can see me coming a mile away. Got to be a "He." God were a woman, She wouldn't let this happen again and again. Worthless effort, this changing. People always seem to know I'm a priest. Civvies it is anyhow.*

Back in the chapel, Father Joseph moves in two seats from the center aisle in the third row. There is a large carving of Christ on the Cross suspended from the vault above. Its feet are above the altar and the body extends out over the pews. Long ago he calculated that if the statue

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broke free of its moorings their heads would meet. He still smiles at the thought. *Two heads better than one is it? We'll have to see, won't we. Been coming back here all too often. Must be my flock is getting older, wants to confess before it's too late. This morning at the hospital one came in just under the wire and then Cathy comes in this afternoon on her way home from work. So is this my cross to bear, not being like some of my fellow priests who have the "blessed amnesia" after hearing confession?*

He laughs at himself. *Miserable weather too.*

Cathy shields her eyes, stares, and wipes her nose as she brings her hand down to her chest, choking back a cough. *Just my luck if the buses have gone on strike. Father Joe saying the rain washes away our sins. "I'm having none of this. He's sitting warm inside, probably a hot bowl of soup in front of him." Jesus, I must be going crazy talking to myself.*

A long chauffeured car goes by splashing waves up towards the bus shelter. Cathy scoots back, laughs, and continues her conversation. "Ha, my feet were already wet! Doubt there's even a couple spots under my coat still dry. Be my victory if I keep them that way until I get home. A sign from Heaven, right, Father Joe?"

She sees the headlights of the bus in the distance. *Best shake this off before I get on. Start crying and the driver is liable to call the police. All I need is explaining to a bunch of men about getting abused as a child. There! I've said it.*

Father Joseph sits quietly in his pew. The confession he heard at the hospital followed eight hours later by that of Cathy have upset him sorely. It's not as if human depravity and cruelty are unknown to him, alas; he's all too familiar with that, and it's not as if the poor soul that passed on this morning had any connection to Cathy, but it feels as if there was some hidden thread connecting them.

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Maybe if Cathy had heard confessions for forty years she would...I don't know, what? Mother Mary could have given her strength and the Holy Spirit could have granted her wisdom. And if she had heard that confession this morning, would that have helped any, given her peace? I rather doubt it. I pray, Jesus help her!

He breathes deeply, leans forward, and places his elbows on his knees on black pants old and shiny from years of kneeling. He stares at his shoes, amazed that he can still see some reflection of his haggard face this late in the day. *Must be why they can always tell I'm a priest even without the collar. I don't have a good feeling about this. Not now with this miserable weather. Bone chilling and her coat was so thin. And there I was spouting dogma about how we must accept God's will. Maybe all we have ever had is our prayers.*

Father Joseph opens the kneeler. His body shakes as he lowers himself, places his hands on his thighs and his head on the back of the pew in front of him. "Lord, I have no words. Please accept the petition of a broken heart." He passes the portraits of the recent popes hanging in the hall on his way back to his room. *I was ordained shortly after Pope Pius XI was elected. I prayed that Pope Pius XII would do more for the Jews during WWII. And now with Pope John XXIII I fear the direction the Church is taking.*

By the time Cathy gets off the bus the rain has turned to snow. She walks slowly; the sidewalks are slippery. Her lips are blue but she talks to herself, willing the words up to heaven with her breath. "My shoes are probably ruined. Not sure what I can wear to work tomorrow."

The heat is inadequate in the old building where she has a small studio apartment. She moves two chairs towards a radiator that occasionally whistles to let her know the heat is on. It is barely warm. She removes her coat and the thin sweater underneath, tents them on the back of a chair, and moves them closer to the radiator. She steps back, frowns, *these will never dry by*

tomorrow, and drapes the hem of her coat over the back of the radiator. “There – best effort deserves some reward.”

She goes into the small bathroom, turns on the shower, and returns for her pajamas. As she passes her bureau she points a finger at her reflection. “Cathy, you *will not* be going out later. I’m sorry, no *Fancy Dress Ball* for you tonight.”

The hot water has taken the edge off of her chill but when she sees her naked body in the mirror she becomes dizzy. Tears start and are choked back. *Not tonight will you go through your litany: Mary, Mother of God, would that these withered breasts had at sometime suckled an infant.* The tears now flow freely as she puts on the old flannel pajamas from Goodwill and wraps herself in the tattered bathrobe inherited years ago from her mother.

She sits on her daybed, puts on a heavy pair of socks, and wonders what she should prepare for her supper. *Chicken soup, that would be nice. But for chicken soup I would need a chicken.*

Father Joseph struggles up from the kneeler and folds it into the pew. “Lord, a broken heart contains so few words, probably not many more in a contrite one either. Mercy on your humble flock.”

He goes to the front and kisses the altar. He turns slowly taking in the small chapel. “Lord, you have so much and she has so little. May your mercy be upon her.”

Cathy crosses to the cupboard, looks inside, hoping for a miracle. There’s a large jar of generic peanut butter and a smaller one of strawberry jelly. The day-old bread is now even older. She remembers that a third of a can of mackerel, a couple of carrots and a heart of lettuce are in the small refrigerator. She smiles and opens the door. A shriveled wedge of lemon stares back at

her. She picks it up and kisses it. “Ah, Romeo, wither art thou, my Romeo. Your kisses are like the balm of Gilead, fragrant with the smells of the Promised Land.”

She brings the mackerel, lettuce and lemon to the table, returns for a carrot, and decides she won't wait until Sunday to bake one of the few potatoes hiding at the back of the vegetable bin. She picks it up, holds it up to the dim ceiling light and declaims, “Alas, poor Mr. Potato Head, you jest. Who will carry me now? Think ye to hide behind two withered carrots? Hardly. Best I carry you beneath my withered breasts.” She laughs, searches for a match, and lights the oven. *With a dab of oleo, a dessert fit for a Prince or his Princess.* She turns the oven on high to take the chill out of her room.

Cathy puts a single slice of bread in the oven along with the potato. She leaves the door open to check on the progress of her toast. When it is ready she sits down to eat, slowly munching on the carrot between bites of her open sandwich. She has decided to save the lemon for her hot water in the morning. She's feeling dizzy and slightly nauseous and is determined to stay up for her dessert. The oleo is soft and for once her room feels warm.

Father Joseph retires to his room. It is modest: a plain crucifix and a picture of the Holy Father on a grey wall. He carefully puts his clothes away, dons a heavy bathrobe and goes down the hall to the bathroom. When he returns he sets his alarm for 4. He is to offer the early mass the next morning. He kneels by the side of his bed and says his evening prayers. He offers thanks that Cathy was at least not abused by a priest.

Paul, a neighbor across the hall from her, comes home late. He's had one too many drinks and stumbles, falling into her door with a loud bang. He comes down on one knee, “Jesus, Joseph and Mary. Now I've gone and waked that poor lady.” In his befuddled mind he's

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determined to apologize and bangs on the door. “Cathy, it’s me, Paul. Sorry I woke you. Come on and have a drop. It will help you fall back asleep.”

He’s not too steady and puts both hands on the doorjamb. He yells, “Cathy, come on out and have a tippie.” He thinks this is funny and starts to laugh, the volume increasing as he imagines Cathy in a nightgown.

The racket wakes an upstairs neighbor. He starts down the stairs to tell Paul to stop and smells gas.

“Jesus, Paul. What are you trying to do, raise the dead? Hey, don’t you smell gas?”

Paul stops muttering and holds up his nose like a beagle, turns around, and attempts to smell the seat of his pants, muttering, “Hope I wasn’t so drunk that I shat myself.”

“Give it up, Paul. That’s a gas smell coming from Cathy’s studio. I’m going to get the super. You open the front door and keep it open. Whatever you do, don’t light a match to smoke. Jesus, what a night!”

Five minutes later the super has come around to Cathy’s apartment with a passkey. “Wow, you’re right, Larry, gas. Paul, you keep that door open!”

They rush in and find Cathy slumped on the table, a half-eaten potato pushed to one side. The super rushes to turn off the gas surmising that the pilot light has failed. “Help me drag her outside. There’s still a chance. Then run up and call an ambulance. She doesn’t have a phone.”

The medics estimate that she had been dead two hours by the time they got there.

Her employer called her emergency number when she didn’t show for work three days running. They were surprised when they were told they had reached the rectory at St. Agnes. When they asked if there was anyone there by the name of Joseph, they were told to wait, someone would be sent to find Father Joseph.

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Father Joseph told them he was sure Cathy was sick and would go by to see if he could help after the morning Mass. He went around to the address she had written in the church registry. There was a note on her door directing all inquiries to the super in the basement garden apartment in the back.

He knocked and the super took in his collar and said, "Please come in, Father. I'll make us a cup of tea." He hung Father Joseph's heavy coat on a hook behind the door. "You've come about Cathy, I guess. A pity. Such a gentle soul."

Vapor rises from the cups on the kitchen table.

"You may remember: three nights ago we had that early snow. Looks like she made herself a baked potato and the pilot went out. She may have left the oven on for more heat. These old buildings are tough to keep warm. Medic told me if it was carbon monoxide like they thought, she didn't feel any pain. Just like going to sleep."

Father Joseph nods and puts his untouched cup back on the table.

"They'd have more information at the local precinct. It's over on Water Street, four blocks down."

"Thank you. I think I'll go there now."

He goes out and gets into the parish car. He's numb. Tears fall down his cheeks as he sobs, "This is not what I meant when I asked the Good Lord to have mercy on her. Not at all!"