

Labors

Yes, that was the bitch of it. The first sign that something was rotten came about one rainy night when Father Rourke called upon me to assist him in his private chambers before evening prayer. I was in the garden at the time, getting rained upon. This garden, like the flower garden, was set behind the church house, and it was this selfsame garden that the vegetables for the stew were grown. The two crones managed this, along with many other details around the property. Father Rourke called out from under his umbrella for me to come inside. I said I was fine. He insisted. I said again that I was quite content to stay where I was. Then he demanded I come inside out of the rain, in order to help him. I huffed and sighed, showing as much as I could, my disdain for all things resembling labor. He either didn't notice, or pretended not to. I was never sure which it was with him. Following him to the sacristy, he paused at the door to look about, perhaps seeing if the crones were around. Then feeling we were quite to ourselves he ushered me in and closed the door behind us. It often crossed my mind that he distrusted the old bags, and that they might be holding some scandal over him, and therefore he kept them on for their silence. Or perhaps he really just needed them to perform their maintenance and cooking duties, as he was extremely busy with his studies. Yes, that could very well be. But I sensed something under the surface. Alone in the private chambers together now, Father Rourke confided in a rasping tone that I was needed for a very sensitive matter, and that I was the only person he could trust with it. I nodded profusely, as I often do. He asked me why I was nodding, so I stopped. He handed me a towel, which I naturally wrapped around my head, like a hood. He went on. I began nodding again. He told me to stop. So I stopped again. He sat down on a red cushioned chair, much like a throne, and began hissing up his skirts to his thighs. Oh, I must add here that ever since the eve of an aborted feast (caused by me, which then caused the flock to flee) and the transfiguring rage that resulted thereafter, Father Rourke was every day looking a bit more aged and under the weather, so that by this point he looked like a man well into his nineties. Still though, he had the spry freedom of movement implicit to his actual age. Therefore, as one might guess, he was capable of giving one quite a surprise or, maybe more appropriately, quite a fright should they see him bounding after them on any given day with the speed of track and fielder. A sight I'd seen many a time when I'd gone missing from the grounds and he was forced to hunt me down, in order to tell me that it was lunchtime, or bible study, or any other number of thing. For it seemed he was always telling me one thing or another that I then in turn forgot. Sometimes I would see him coming in the distance, in a field or somewhere, and not wishing to chat with him, I would hobble off for dear life. I hadn't a chance in the world. My, was he ever fast! Within seconds, I'd smell the incense of his cassock mixed with the putridity of his breath, and turning my head, there he was! Right beside me, and not even the slightest bit winded! Always a clever one, Father Rourke. These surprises as I call them, didn't amount to squat, compared to the one I got upon hearing his request this rainy night...in what I believe was June? Yes, June it was, at about midnight, maybe earlier. There in the sacristy, while seated on his throne, Father Rourke lifted his skirts to his thighs, thus exposing to me his pale wrinkled legs, and releasing a foul odor in the process. Come, he

said, in his whispery voice. I declined. He then pointed to a table. Go, he said. Go? I said. Go, he said, Fetch that basin. I saw the basin he meant. It was a small wooden pan, filled with what looked like milk. I got it. Come, he said. No, I said. Come, he said. No, I said. Come now, he said. Yes, I said, and I approached him. My feet, he said. No, I said. Put my feet in, he said. Grumbling, I put the washbasin under his feet and lifted them each into the milky liquid. He closed his eyes and sighed, then lolled his white head back into the cushion of the throne, and sighed some more. The ewers, he said, not bothering to look, but pointing towards the mirrored table from which I'd retrieved the basin. I did not move. Get them, he said. Ewers? I said. Yes, he said. I understood him to mean the assortment of little bottles on the table, so I collected them under my arm. Bring them, he said. No, I said. Bring them, he said. No, I said. Come, he said. Yes, I said, and approached him with the bottles. Now, he said, pour some of the ointment – *kaff, kaff* – pour some of the ointment on your fingers, and then work it into my feet. Are you sure? I asked. Yes, he said, it's the only way. Sensing the desperation of the man, I capitulated, and opened one of the bottles. I poured a small dab on my fingers. One at a time, he said. I lifted a dripping foot from the milky bath. Though I'd heard him complain to me in private of his condition before, I'd still always been vague as to what his feet might actually look like under the shoes. Bunions, he said they were. It meant that his big toe stretched out and buckled under the meaty hook of his index toe. Thus giving his foot the appearance of a hairless rabbit's paw, but more mangled-like. On top of his every toe there were hardened corns, flaked over with a yellow crust. Infected perhaps. On the bottoms of his toes there were calluses, and several blisters ripened with pus. Rub, he said. And seeing no alternative, I smeared the foot all over with the ointment. Good, he said. From there I began to rub Father Rourke's toes between my fingers, making sure to get the ointment on every corn and every callus I could find. Good, he said, now the others. There were three more bottles under my arm, and if I understood him correctly, each would have to be applied before I could move on to the second foot. As I worked these ointments in, Father Rourke leaned back in his chair with his eyes closed, breathing heavily and sighing, even farting now and again. And in spite of this distraction, I worked on, trying hard not to breathe in the fetid air around me. This it turns out is impossible. By the time I was finished with both feet, I was dead tired, and wanted nothing more than to return to my broom closet, where I could sit down with my knees up to my chin till I lost consciousness. These medicinal foot rubs were not nightly, mind you, but happened sporadically, and only when it was deemed necessary. This might've been better, except for the fact that a sense of dread now accompanied my every waking hour of the day. Would tonight be another rub? How many days till the next rub? And so on. Many a night, after one of these impromptu sessions, I'd sit in my closet and, clutching my stick, cry till merciful sleep. Other nights I was too tired. Oh, the exertion, that damnable exertion. Made dust of me! Sleeping did nothing to help my sorrows as it turned out. Dreams came. No rest from the tortures, though. For I dreamt of my life as it was. I dreamt of the church house, of Father Rourke, and of his feet steeped in milk, his wheedling voice urging on my handiwork. More. More. More, he would say, and faster, faster. And the crones, they too would beg indecencies of me, which I naturally submitted myself to, despite my revulsion. It was such that I didn't dare look them in the eye during my waking hours. Therefore I was always looking at them. I did not like to. I had to. It even occurred to me at one point that they were responsible for these dreams, the old

witches. And if not to blame, then certainly they were aware of them, the way they held their old, lascivious mouths open all the time. Their phlegm-slicked tongues, licking around at the cracks in their lips. Yum, yum, their mouth gestures seemed to say. This ultimately resulted in me wishing to vacate my precious little space to go in search of another. I did not leave though. For I had other duties that needed tending to, not just the foot rubs. And I didn't want to be registered as a loafer for all time. As that would surely have a negative impact on my hope of lodging somewhere else down the road. Reputations move faster than their owners it seems. And I for one couldn't afford being turned away should I seek asylum elsewhere. I carried on in my labors then. Pushing my rock up the mountain so to speak. Watching it fall again. Pushing it up again. Watching it fall again. Days in. Days out. So in this way things were stable. That is to say wretched and dull. Always with the state of things! A summary of my other duties then, might here be in order. Oh, but now I recall, yes, at least one thing that he said: Thou unholy sniveling worm, you, you ball of bung wax! Yes, something to that or similar effect, when he was so angry with me, the night of the supper. He said to me. He yelled to me. Yes, that was it, though maybe not. I listen so rarely. Which then leads me to believe I could not have been sniveling, as clearly I was thinking, or maybe just breathing idly by, or smelling the stews and vomit, maybe? But definitely not sniveling! These things matter. But I couldn't care less. So then, about my clothes at the time, that might be a needed detail as it was also a part of my duties. Looking back I was a regular gossoon about that place, I swear it. It came to me then the responsibility of washing my clothes, along with those of the others. That is the crones' and Father Rourke's. On Sundays, after our quiet ceremony at which we were the only attendees, I went around to the different rooms and gathered up all the dresses, cassocks, and soiled undergarments in a wicker hamper. Incredible what a priest can do to his drawers in a week! Then all the while I was washing these items in a basin in the basement of the church house, the good Father and his two henchwomen would bask in the sun, unclothed out in the garden, sipping root tea, and fondling themselves. Oh, but then I forgot to mention this, didn't I? Upon my first day as a lodger there at the church they supplied me with a fresh wardrobe as well as a name, for they needed to call me something, and having forgotten mine, I relied on them to take the liberties. So they called me Rufus. Not a bad name, I thought. Besides what's all the fuss about a name anyway? Rufus. Yes, it will do, I thought. This was very generous of them. I grasped that. Then they went on to tell me that they were not used to having lodgers, and so gave me what clothes they had available. This as it turned out was a gray cassock, like Father Rourke's, though it was clearly used, and well-tarnished by what I guessed were the many passionate duties of a good priest. Whatever those might be. So it was that if anyone were to venture onto our property, which was a rare occurrence, for no one ever came, it would be likely for them to fancy me a priest at first glances. A passionate one at that! I admit here that I took a small pleasure in this guise, as Father Rufus. Though unfortunately for me, no one ever mistook me for a priest, as no one ever came. A pity, I thought. For I would have enjoyed that position, which by the third week, given all the cramming of religion Father Rourke felt compelled to inflict upon me, wouldn't have been difficult for me to pull off with some little success. I knew the rhetoric by then and was very fascinated by the myths of babies out of thin air, the angels and demons, the giants slain by stones, and the whole kip. All good yarns, I thought, But really nothing to raise a stink about. In the basement, while I washed these

clothes in my basin, my mind would wander to strange places. I thought often of my old cell. I missed the taste of the food. The smells. I wondered if it had been put back in order. I wondered about Rueb. How was he doing now? Hopefully he, like myself, had run into a bit of luck. One of my other duties was emptying the outhouse. I usually wore gloves for this. I would also wrap a towel around my face, but it helped very little to keep the stench of shit from blurring my eyes. It's not to be believed, the odors the devout can make. But then perhaps that's why they call themselves men and women of the cloth. This duty was to be carried out twice a month, which is probably more frequently than outhouses belonging to the average, more moderate shitters. For my housemates were extraordinary shitters. Truly of the first rank! One by quick analysis might suspect the stew. But I ate the stew as well, and more often than not suffered from constipation. How they shat so often and so abundantly? Well, it will just have to remain a mystery to me. Many things are like that. What then to do with the shit? I asked Father Rourke. This inquiry struck him rather jejune, for he laughed in my face. Why, Rufus, my poor creature, said Father Rourke, Do you think our flower garden fertilizes itself? What silly notions you have? Now run along and deposit it amply about the rows of flowers And remember not too much here, nor too little there, he instructed me, sweeping his hands about like he was loftily flinging turds hither and thither. Do we understand each other, he asked, or shall I go over it again? I remembered the first time I'd prompted him to reiterate, and how badly it had hurt. No, I said, Thank you. Thank you, he said, stretching out the word *you* in a vexing manner. It's time now for my meditations, he said most grievously. Then he turned about, chuckling, and ambled off to the sacristy. By meditations I knew exactly what he meant, the old satyr, for I had once walked in on him in the process. A wonderful and wretched pastime, I must admit. It should be added too, that by this point I had gotten quite good at it myself. In fact, I'd become such an expert that I no longer had to physically thresh the wheat of the field, and instead, I could remain in the comfort of my own broom closet, merely thinking of the golden meadows, sometimes for greater lengths than at other times, but ever focused, and soon enough, the same glorious, stupefying results. Yes, one never has to travel far. It's all very convenient. So there I stood, alone, the Father having gone away to make of mess himself. Ah, but if I didn't make a botch of it this first time. On a complimentary note, I could never be accused of detachment in my duties. Always thoroughly engaged, that's me. Some might even say I get lost in my work. That surely must count as a favorable attribute in my possession. The bull's horns! Yes. Well, it took a stone to break the spell. I hadn't time nor consciousness to note the thrower, only that it was thrown, and that it weighed a pretty amount. Blood-heavy, I would say. There I was. Minding my moils. Innocent-like. Reaching into my pail of shit, deploying it all sparsely. For I'd had a good notion of method occur to me when I saw the great length of the garden. Instead of wasting my hours like a fool, going up to each and every leaf and stem and sprinkling the manure there, then moving on all slowly. Why not, thought I, Why not pick a good position, and then, yes this is good, and then I can just toss the shit every which way? Maybe save myself some time. It will get around where it needs to, I said to myself, and so after planting my trusty stick in the ground to lean upon, I commenced in a zealous fashion my fertilizing duties. I admit it did seem a little amiss to me at one point, the way the handfuls of shit would smash the plants, covering them over completely with a dull plopping sound. Hmm, I said. Call it a feast. Plop! Plop! Plop! Plop, went my little

projectiles all about the garden. I was getting quite good at scattering it fairly. Even started to enjoy it a little. They later claimed to have shouted out to me at first. To stop, I guess. I did not hear them though. And so I just kept flinging my shit at all the plants, perhaps in what might look like an aggressive manner to some. But how can I judge? I was just doing my job. Plop! Plop! Plop, went the music of my labors. One learns the hard way, it does not take long before another becomes tired of shouting, and so resorts to the casting of stones. Or so it would seem to me. Four, maybe five shouts? Couldn't have been much more, for I was still on my first pail. Ah, but it's incredible how quickly a stone can put you to sleep, given the right weight, and the right speed, isn't it? When I recovered I saw my housemates standing over me, looking down with their wretched eyes. Their features were mostly blackened. The sky behind them was blue, as it tends to be. Father Rourke was speaking at me. He sounded cross. I was then told that in the future I'd need only manure the flower garden, and not the vegetable garden as well. I was also told that I would have to proceed more carefully next time, as one of the crones had got some shit in her eye. I don't know why I say this, but I think it was the fat one. Needless to say though, this came as quite a shock to me. I mean I hadn't seen anybody anywhere, and I had certainly looked around before I started my work. Yes, I looked. After all it was the looking that made me come up with my method in the first place. That wretched vastness! How troublesome, and for so long. Well apparently, as the case turned out to be, the two crones had finished with their kitchen duties early, and so stripped off their dresses for a little frolic in the vegetable garden. Well, it must've been quite a ball! Because I couldn't even tell them from the garden, they were so dirty! Plop! Plop! Just an innocent round of *Beef Curtains*, don't mind us. Plop! What say you to a game of *Hidey Hole*? Plop! Plop! Golly, a real monkeyshine! Plop! Plop! Oh, the rascals! Plop! Covered from tit to toe, round and round, went these decrepit sluts in the dirt. Supposedly, or so they claimed, one of them shouted out when the fat or the thin, or whomsoever she was, got it in the eye. But alas I was in my element, and so kept right on like a machine till one of them – probably not the wounded one, though maybe, found a stone and hurled it in my direction. Krakk! Right to the skull! Of all the shit blind luck! A spell of impenetrable blackness and down I went, the pail spilling out onto my chest and my neck, while the stars circled like a mobile before my eyes. A moment later my walking stick became unstuck and decided to join me where I lay. Thus thwacking me on the bridge of my nose, before rolling off to rest above my head. The persons above me, two dirty crones and a geriatric priest, seemed to have grown bored and so left me there, making, I assume, for the church. I did not join them. No, I preferred to lay inert a while longer. And tonguing my lip, I tasted the blood pooling from my nose with just a tincture of what must've been shit. For it tasted like the smell of shit. I was not allowed into the church that night after I refused the proffered bath. The sky darkened with clouds. I pretended not to mind being locked out and sat in the garden, nibbling on unsoiled radishes and carrots. At darkness it began to rain. I pulled my legs up under the tresses of my cassock and clutched my stick like a baby doll, while the rain violently pelted my stinking corpse, slowly, and coldly, washing away the filth in which I'd been steeped, during my hard day's labor. I shivered, biting at the sleeve of my robe. And suddenly something profound occurred to me that caused me to feel joy, and feeling joy, I smiled. Yes, I smiled. I smiled, and smiling I felt a terrific peace come over me. It was the peace

of knowing that I'd not have to rub a single callused toe for the rest of the evening. So I smiled and I slept, at peace in the garden.