

3,775 words

### **Confession**

At St. Luke's Grade School, the nuns tell you that your every sin leaves a dark stain on your soul. Your soul is white when you're born, they say, whiter than snow or clouds, blindingly white, and each sin is as black as new tar, or the pupil of an eye. Commit a minor, or venial, sin—lie to your parents, utter a curse word, disobey Sister Mary Jude Thaddeus—and a small inky blemish will appear on your soul. Commit a major, or mortal, sin—not just murder or theft but also premarital sex or even abusing yourself for sexual gratification—and not only will a black shadow engulf your soul but you may go to hell and suffer in flames for all eternity.

These lessons begin on day one, first grade, when you are six years old, and for several years your soul is dotted with the occasional tiny black smudge—a fib here, a bit of parental insubordination there, though you did once pilfer a pretzel stick, which you convinced yourself even an angry God would consider more of a venial than mortal sin. But, by the time you are twelve or thirteen, and you feel your blood heat up at the mere glimpse of skin between the buttons of your virtuous classmate Jenny Lasick's white blouse, the prospect of actually going to hell becomes all too real. Late at night, while lying in bed, when you think of Jenny's pale, smooth flesh, your body begins to stir and ache and beg you for some kind of relief that you don't even know how to deliver yet. You've had boners before, but you've never felt this urgent

need to do something with it. You hear Sister Mary Jude Thaddeus's voice conjuring Satan in the fire, and you roll over and try to banish all impure thoughts from your mind.

The next day—and you don't know for a long time whether this is a brilliant move or a fateful error—you go to your brother Richie and ask, “Does your . . . *thing* ever . . . you know . . .?”

Smiling, your brother feigns ignorance, asks you to explain, until he's pulled it all out of you: Jenny Lasick's exposed skin, your rock-hard penis, the kaleidoscope of filthy ideas in your head.

“Lemme show you something,” Richie says. He opens his closet door, where a mound of shoes and dirty clothes covers the floor. He rummages beneath them to find an old tool box, and you worry for a moment that he's going to swat you with a hammer or lock you in the closet until you have to break your way out with a screwdriver. Instead, he opens the box and pulls out a magazine with a naked woman on the cover. She's standing sideways so you can see half a breast and her rear end. Something alive and wild squirms inside your heart, and you feel like you might have to poop. He pulls out another magazine, and then another, with names like *Cavalier* and *Swank* and *Oui*.

“Where'd you get those?” you ask through dry lips.

“Never mind,” he says, and he opens one magazine to a large, double-paged picture of a totally naked girl lying on her back atop a bearskin rug. Her skin is smooth and flawless, her chocolate brown hair long and silky-looking. You try not to stare at her small pink nipples and the way her breasts form a pleasing kind of upside-down bowl, but when you look away your eyes find an even more exciting spot, the tuft of light brown hair at the apex of her endless legs. You've fleetingly seen your mother naked, out of the corner of your eye, maybe as she undressed

for bed, but you have never seen a naked young woman reclining like this for you to enjoy at your leisure. Your penis stiffens and pushes against your jockey shorts.

“You like?” Richie says, and you can’t bear the thought of how red-faced you must be. He laughs. “Here, take this,” and he hands you the magazine, but you are unable to grip it, the glossy paper is slippery. He laughs again and wraps your fingers around it. “Just don’t let Mom find it,” he says as he replaces the tool box beneath his dirty clothes. And now you understand your brother’s strategy for being such a slob.

But, because you are a neat and orderly person, you hide the magazine beneath your mattress for now and wait for your mother to leave the house on errands, and though you know Richie is around, supposedly doing homework but probably goofing off or maybe even in his closet with the tool box, you remove the magazine and, lying on the bed, with your heart ricocheting around your ribcage, you go through it page by page, each photo staining your soul one small spot at a time. You try to resist the urge to touch yourself, which would be a huge relief but would also douse your soul in the deepest, darkest black imaginable. By the time you get to that fold-out photo of the woman lying on the bearskin rug, however, you no longer hear Sister Mary Jude Thaddeus or Father Sharp or any of the others in black; you no longer care that you might go to hell. You unbuckle your pants and remove this . . . *creature* from your shorts. It’s like a separate being, hard and long and thick, and when you touch it, a liquid shock shoots up your spine to the top of your head. It’s one long roller coaster drop as you rub and stroke and the sensations build and boil inside you. The girl in the picture smiles, and you imagine those red lips on yours, you imagine her skin against yours, her long legs, her flat yet soft belly, the tuft of hair below . . .

When you come, it takes you by surprise. The buildup, you knew, had to lead somewhere—it couldn't just stop—but you didn't expect this mess, this gluey white goop to come gushing out all over your hand and the bedspread and a long splash on the magazine itself. You jump from the bed, yank up your pants. You hide the magazine and run for Kleenex to wipe off your hands and the sheets. The air smells weirdly of Comet cleanser. When your heart finally stops pounding you lie back down and ponder your fate. You are definitely destined for hell. And there is only one way out.

You have been going to confession since second grade, back when your list of sins was limited to a lie or two, maybe a little mouthing off to your parents, coveting a friend's new bicycle. You are expected to confess every two weeks, and it's always been a challenge to come up with enough material to take up Father Sharp's time in the confessional. The priest wasn't even impressed by that pretzel you stole from Donna Tracy's lunch bag; he just chuckled and gave you a few extra Hail Marys to recite, and your soul was back to its virgin state. On some occasions you've made up a sin or two—an extra curse word, say, or a slice of pepperoni pizza on a Lent Friday—but then you had to deal with the fact that you *lied to a priest*, and two weeks later you would lead with that lie, and again you could make out behind the ornate grill Father Sharp's amusement. But what would the priest think of *this* outrageous sin? What penance could he possibly assign that would wipe your soul clean of *this*? A million Our Fathers? And how on earth will you even explain to this man of the cloth what you did? Will you mention the magazine? Will you squeal on your brother, whom Father Sharp knows all too well from his years as St. Luke's straight-A student? Will you mention how it made you feel when you took hold of yourself, the delicious sense of vertigo when you came? How you didn't care if you went to hell forever if you could feel like *that* for even a minute? You imagine Father Sharp turning

red, the way he did when your fellow altar boy Phil Caserta accidentally knocked over a heavy candle from the altar with the long, brass lighter. You imagine him shouting at you to leave the confessional, to leave the church building, to leave the Catholic Church altogether and never come back. “There’s no hope for you!” you imagine him saying. “Your soul is as black as death and cannot be saved!” And then he’ll call your parents and tell them everything—the photos, the tool box, the mess you made on the sheets—and you’ll be kicked out of the house to live on the streets, hungry and penniless, until you die of starvation and/or frostbite and go straight to hell.

But you have to do it. You have to confess. Otherwise, if you get hit by a car tomorrow, you’ll have *zero* chance of getting into heaven.

Every day at lunchtime, the pious students of St. Luke’s can avail themselves of the opportunity to confess their sins. So, the next day, unable to work up an appetite for your baloney sandwich, you tell Sister Mary Jude Thaddeus that you’re headed next door to the church. She smiles and nods, ignorant of your awful sin. Also headed next door is Jenny Lasick, who, aside from being the most religious girl in your class, is also the most beautiful, which, you’ll learn later, is often the case. She goes to confession at least once a week, she informs you as you walk together across the parking lot. The church building is gray and made of stone and impossibly old. Jenny chats about an upcoming social studies exam as she trots up the steps ahead of you, but you can’t hear what she’s saying anymore. Who cares about westward expansion when her plaid skirt clings to her rounded bottom like that?

Inside, the church is quiet. A few regulars dot the pews, saying their penance prayers. The confessional door is open a crack, and Jenny asks if you want to go first. You say no—you need more time to organize your thoughts—and she shrugs and skips over to the box. You sit in a nearby pew and stare up at the life-size Jesus hanging from His cross. This image has haunted

you for as long as you can remember. You once dreamed of sitting right here as Jesus yanked first one then the other hand from the wood of the cross and then popped the nail from His bloody feet to climb down from the altar. You woke from that nightmare just as the Son of God was quickly making His way toward you across the tile floor.

You can hear whispery voices from the confessional, and you wonder what Jenny could possibly be confessing. She is so sweet, so obedient of the nuns, gets straight A's, is kind to her little brother in fifth grade. You feel awful comparing her meager sins—maybe she uttered “God” instead of “gosh” when she stubbed her toe or something—to your own mortal crime, and with this thought comes the image of the naked woman on the bearskin rug. It's burned into your consciousness, you've seen her a thousand times since yesterday without even once opening the magazine again. You know every inch of her. She has so imprinted herself that, though you have no way of knowing this now, every serious girlfriend you'll ever have will resemble her, including your two wives. You slam your eyes shut, as if that will help erase her, but she only becomes more vivid on the inside of your lids. You look up at Jesus again but see only his pain, and so you glance toward the confessional and imagine the halo floating over Jenny Lasick's head. Then—and you can't stop this from happening any more than you can stop rain or the wind—you imagine Jenny with no clothes on, lying on a bearskin rug, and you feel your chest contract, and your colon rumbles, and the blood rushes straight to your groin. Jenny has green eyes and a pouty lower lip, and her dark hair touches her shoulders, and her blouse bulges in the right places, and sometimes in class she stretches out her legs diagonally and they go on for a mile.

She emerges from the confessional with a pious smile on her face and kneels close by. She doesn't look at you, she just bows her head to pray in penance. The door remains open, and now

you have to choose: either confess your sins and cleanse your filthy soul or run out of here as fast as you can.

You rise and, awkwardly holding your hands in front of you to hide the bulge in your pants, make your way to the box.

Inside is darkness, with just a vague yellowy light leaking through the grill from the other side. You kneel on the pad and can immediately smell Father Sharp's nicotine-stained fingers, the same fingers over which you have poured water a hundred times in your role as altar boy. Through the metal grill you can barely make out his his jowls, his thin lips and beady eyes.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." You make the sign of the cross and speak in a voice slightly deeper than normal, hoping he won't recognize you. "It has been two weeks since my last confession."

You see the outline of his hand as he waves the imprecise shape of a cross in the air between you. The box is as silent as the inside of a coffin as you ponder what to say and how to say it.

"Go on," Father Sharp says.

You decide to start small and work up to the big stuff. "I lied to my mother," you say, which is not exactly true, but maybe hiding a dirty magazine counts as a kind of lie.

"Yes?" the priest says.

"And I disobeyed my father," you say. Again, not strictly true, but your father would definitely not approve of your behavior, so in a sense you *have* gone against his wishes.

"And . . .?"

You wonder if Father Sharp somehow knows what you're leading up to. Perhaps, after all these years of listening to people confess their sins, he has developed a sixth sense based on the

confessor's voice and manner. You decide you'd better tell him everything or he'll know you've kept the truth from him—and from God. Still, you hesitate.

“Yes?” he says. “What else?”

It's so hot in here. You feel sweat break out all over your body, which makes you think of the girl in the photo—her smooth, moist skin lit by warm lights—and again your penis stirs. You try to shake the image from your head, but you can't dam this feeling coursing through your body. You've got a boner in the confessional! You brace yourself for the lightning bolt headed your way from heaven above.

“Are you done?” Father Sharp asks, a tone of doubt in his voice.

You clear your throat. “No, Father. I also . . . uh . . .” You decide to start with the most general of statements. “I've had impure thoughts, Father.” You leave it at that and pray that he will be satisfied and too uncomfortable with the subject to ask for details.

You hear him realign himself in his seat. “Go on.”

Go on? What does he want? You mumble a bit and, sensing the priest's impatience, say something about looking at pictures that brought on these impure thoughts.

Again, a shift in his posture. “What sort of pictures?” he asks.

This is torture! You try to explain the situation but leave out your brother. You say you found a magazine, saw the photos, and they led to impure thoughts.

He asks you to describe the photos.

“Father?” you say, certain that you misheard him.

“Describe the photos,” he says again. “So I have an idea of the seriousness of this sin.”

You can't believe this. You think about getting out of here, just bolting and hoping Father Sharp has not recognized you, but then he says, "*Carl*, please describe the photos," and you know you must obey.

You do your best. You mention the rug first, and the priest clears his throat in irritation, and so you move on to the girl, and when you say the word "naked" it sounds like the most wicked word in the world, worse than "murder." Of course, in describing the naked woman—Father Sharp asks the color of her hair, and whether she is looking directly at the camera, and, weirdly, whether she wears anything on her feet—you must necessarily envision her yourself, and again you feel the blood rush south through your veins, and your pants grow tight in the crotch. You want to shift your penis into a more comfortable position, but touching yourself in a confessional will certainly result in spontaneous combustion, so you settle for a slight shift on the kneeler, hoping for relief. You manage to avoid mentioning her nipples, and definitely do not bring up the tuft of hair between her legs.

"How old?" Father Sharp asks.

Again, you're not sure you've heard him correctly. "How old?" you repeat.

"The girl," he says. "How old is the girl?"

He sounds slightly out of breath. You worry that he is going to have a heart attack. The previous pastor, Father Caplan, dropped dead in the rectory, but he was about a million years old. Father Sharp is old, but not *heart attack* old. Still, this story might shock him enough to cause what your grandmother used to call "palpitations."

"Are you okay, Father?"

"How *old*?" he asks again, sounding angry this time.

"Uh, I don't really know. Maybe twenty-two or something like that?"

You're certain now that he's having some kind of reaction—his breath is labored, and his shadowy figure seems to sway behind the grate. Or maybe he's just furious and having a hard time keeping calm. You shut your eyes and wait for him to explode at you the way he did at Phil Caserta after knocking that candle onto the floor just before a funeral. You imagine his crimson face, the flared nostrils, the grimace thinning his lips.

But all you hear is a little sigh, almost a whimper, and all the tension in the box seems to dissipate. Still, you wait for his pronouncement, worried that you'll never be able to recite so many Hail Marys.

"Well, my boy," he says, sounding slightly out of breath, "these things are natural for your age. You must promise me, however, that you will cease all such behavior. Burn that foul magazine and never touch yourself again. Do you promise, Carl?"

You would recoil at the mention of your name, but instead you're overcome with relief that the priest is being so calm and understanding.

"Yes, Father," you reply.

"But," he continues, "you must also promise that, if you are weak and give in to temptation again, you will come straight to me to confess your sins. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Straight to me, yes?"

"Yes, Father."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

He sighs, satisfied with your vow, and says, "Now, the Act of Contrition."

“O my God,” you say, and you continue with the words by heart, barely able to hear yourself, you are so thankful. “I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid near occasion of sin. Amen.”

“Amen,” Father Sharp says. “Now, you will recite ten Hail Marys and ten Our Fathers. Bless you, son.” He waves his hand through the air, and you can’t quite believe that you are free to go.

You open the door and are half-blinded by the daylight pouring through the church’s stained glass windows. Jenny Lasick is still on her knees in the pew. You kneel a few feet away and make the sign of the cross.

“Jeez, that took forever,” Jenny says.

She’s grinning in a way you’ve never seen before, like she knows something secret. Was she eavesdropping?

She slides close and sits back in the pew. “What’d you do, commit a murder or something?”

You glance over at her while silently praying. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee*

...

“So, how many Hail Marys for *you*?” she asks.

*Blessed art thou among women . . .*

Jenny’s skirt is hiked up, revealing more leg than is technically legal at St. Luke’s. It’s like she’s giving off heat. You’re floating in a kind of limbo where all the energy is located in your penis. It’s as hard as marble now, and you clasp your hands together so tight that they hurt.

*And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*

Jenny shrugs and says, “Whatever.” She stands and turns to go but then turns back. “I’m his favorite, just so you know.”

“What?” you say. She glares down at you. “*Whose?*” Was she talking about God? But she doesn’t answer, just walks away, her shoes clacking on the marble floor tiles.

That night, in bed, you keep seeing Jenny, her legs, and you hear the new tone in her voice, an elastic sort of tone stretching from the innocent Jenny you’ve always known toward a new, more adult Jenny, and in your mind she morphs into the magazine woman, naked and taunting. You feel the now familiar rush, your heart thumps, the tightening in your groin. The clock reads 11:32. Your parents are asleep, you can hear your father snoring down the hall. Next door, Richie is probably reading one of his fantasy novels or listening to music on his headphones.

You hear Father Sharp’s voice: *You must burn the magazine.* But for now it remains beneath your mattress. *You must cease touching yourself.* But you are touching yourself at this very moment. *You must come to me to confess your sins.* We’ll see.