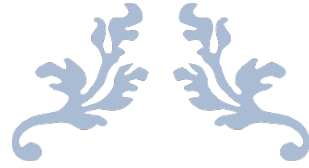


A Solitary Life

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# A SOLITARY LIFE

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## **A Solitary Life**

Patrick loved children. At CYO camp he dreamed of becoming a junior counselor and when he was old enough, he did. His youth was taken away from him then, in an empty boathouse, beside a calm lake, on a stormy August afternoon.

When Patrick was eighteen he joined the priesthood, just as he'd been ordered by the Parish Father to do. Before his first year finished his mother died, and Patrick dropped all pretense of assuming his vow. He moved from his mother's home in the Bronx to Manhattan's Lower East Side, where he took a job as a librarian and lived on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of a pre-war brownstone. Over the next decade Patrick witnessed young singles in his building fall in love, get married, have children and move away. But such attainment of intimate relationships and family life eluded him.

At the age of thirty-two for no reason he cared to understand, Patrick decided to attend church again. He considered the Lutherans but found their ministers too austere; their fussiness over their families took away from their dedication to minding the flock. He tried the Episcopalians, but they offered no confession before communion. So, Patrick returned to Roman Catholicism, not because it was the church of his youth, but because all the priests in it, like him, stayed single, the way an honest man if he considered himself holy enough to lead God's sheep, should be willing to do.

Patrick returned to mass in his old neighborhood. But such familiarity disturbed him. He tried large cathedrals in Manhattan like St. Patrick's on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and St. John the Divine on the Upper West Side. In their cavernous sanctuaries he knew he'd appear invisible and this suited him fine. Until the multitudes who attended overwhelmed him.

## A Solitary Life

That's when he decided to limit himself to random neighborhood parishes where he would encounter no known faces, and could expect lesser crowds. As long as there was pre-mass confession.

Patrick loved the confession. For there within the confines of its protective interior walls – whether within the muffled velvet lining of an ornately decorated box or a simple wood frame like a poor man's coffin -- he could allow all the demons within his true self spill out thoughts and urges he was constantly fighting. This need to divulge was tempered only by a greater fear inside; hearing of priests who'd been turned over to civil authorities for their sexual misconduct, he couldn't bear the thought that the transgressions of his own imagination might surreptitiously make their debut to the light of day. As he was convinced they did for all members of congregations; those who, placing their blind faith in the integrity of God's human intercessors, confessed in their parish churches. It mortified him to think what sort of impression people's sinful acts, interior desires made upon the holy ordained: 'There goes that father with incestuous thoughts of his step-daughter;' one confessional priest might murmur, or 'that prim and proper mother, addicted to valium;' or 'this teenager, with gun-violent fantasies.' How did he know at some unguarded moment a priest who heard his confession might not publicly blurt out secrets about him? After too many doubles on the rocks perhaps; careless words dribbled out in front of a Rectory cook, a housemaid, a church laywoman. For this reason, Patrick believed he must never visit the same church twice, instead move around lest any priest come to know him better than he knew himself. He made sure to avoid personal contact with priests outside the confessional at all times.



So it was a wonder when one day in early autumn while taking the late afternoon ferry from Pier A to the Statue of Liberty, Patrick ran into a field trip of Catholic school girls. All were dressed in white zip-up sweaters and Douglas plaid skirts, with bobby socks in saddle shoes. Nymphets of Nabokov he thought – a whole harem of them. They were chaperoned by nuns in black cassocks and one copper-haired priest. The young girls clung to the nuns; the older favored the priest.

As the boat approached the island, Patrick wandered to the top deck of the ferry. He bumped his knees against the mesh iron sides painted white, leaned his bare arms over the cold rail. There before him she stood, the towering statue, in all her mammoth bulkiness covered in that patina tunic, a dominant figure standing between him and the gray sweatful sky. Behind him Patrick heard girls giggling.

Joining him at the rail were the priest and two of his students. One of them must've had a fantastic crush on the father for she swooned, leaned against him at every opportunity. The other was a furious camera snapper who, annoyed that the priest was ignoring her, sought revenge by taking pictures of him convulsively. The priest never addressed the camera girl, spoke only to the fawning one as if he returned her infatuation. The girls started bickering, and the priest leaned Patrick's way.

“Planning to climb inside her today?” the priest asked, nodding at the statue. Patrick looked at the waves splashing haphazard against the side of the boat. “I am, and you?”

## A Solitary Life

“All the way,” the priest said. His crop of intense red hair blew in the wind. “Overwhelming this close, isn’t she? It’s always a fine pleasure for me once inside her dark heavy robes, to rise up and take a good look at her snatch.” He lurched his thin eyebrows up.

Patrick wasn’t sure how to respond. He stepped back and said, “An experience larger than life I suppose.”

Sensing she was losing the priest to this stranger, the pretty girl grabbed his hand between hers and pulled him away. The priest glanced up at the Statue of Liberty, nodded at the girl tugging him along, then grinned at Patrick with the wink of an eye.

Patrick wondered how to take this priest’s dirty talk and cavalier attitude. Did the nuns know he was this way? Was he showing off, demonstrating he could speak the bachelor’s known vernacular? Or did he have in mind evil ends? What should Patrick think about it? A voice whispering in the wind answered him: *‘Follow this priest and protect the girl at all costs’*, it commanded. Patrick grinned so widely his eyes squinted. His only caution to himself was that, before he struck judgment, he must first divine without a shadow of doubt the motivation of this priest’s innuendos. Wiping errant raindrops off his baseball jacket sleeve, Patrick descended to the lower deck and from there walked the plank onto Liberty Island with the other passengers.



The next Saturday afternoon, Patrick was at five o’clock mass in New Rochelle. Inside the confessional, this is what Patrick divulged to an elderly Monsignor visiting that day.

## A Solitary Life

“Forgive me, Monsignor, for I have sinned,” he gave the sign of the cross in front of his chest and sat down. “Earlier this week I felt alone and needed to get away, so I visited the Statue of Liberty. While crossing over on the ferry, I encountered a priest surrounded by young female students. Leaning over the rail on the top deck, he started a conversation with me which was not on the most savory topic, for we spoke of the undergarments, or the lack thereof, on the Statue of Liberty herself.”

Patrick expected a chuckle from behind the wicker separator. There was none forthcoming. “Go on,” the bony-skinned Monsignor said.

“Fawning all over this priest was one of those girls,” he said. “She became so jealous of the attention I was receiving from the priest that she glared at me. When her friends pulled on her sweater, she squabbled with them and that gave the priest an opportunity to make lewd remarks so startling, I felt it was my God-given duty to follow him the rest of the trip. I had to be sure, you see, that this young lady’s amorous disposition had no chance of being taken advantage of by him.”

Memories percolated up from the depths of Patrick’s subconscious.

*Splash of water, shrieks from a beach, motorboat hums. A Father invites a boy for a canoe trip around the lake. Clouds darken; a lifeguard whistle blows.*

In the confessional the air felt heavy and warmer than when Patrick entered. He unzipped his jacket. “Once inside the Statue of Liberty,” he said, “I watched this priest and the girl from a distance, remaining unnoticed, something I am exceptionally good at doing. But I wasn’t the only one trying to go unnoticed, Monsignor.”

*The Father and the boy walk away from the beach unseen, through the woods toward a boathouse. Rain begins to sprinkle.*

## A Solitary Life

“The priest disappeared with the girl through the crowd,” Patrick said, “away from the chaperoning nuns and other girls. They thought they had not been seen. But I saw them, Monsignor.” Patrick thumbed his chest. “They didn’t get far from me.”

*“Remove your shirt,” the Father commands the boy. He obeys.*

Patrick removed his jacket. Untapped feelings fluttered within.

*From under his shirt the boy reveals two swollen breasts, the reason he never liked to swim in front of the other boys.*

In the confessional Patrick wrapped his arms around his chest. “When the girl saw the spiral staircase leading up to the statue’s crown, she ran ahead motioning to the priest to climb with her. As they did, I followed.”

*The Father tweaks the boy’s nipples; mosquitos bite his flesh. The boy runs.*

“While we climbed, I heard the priest and girl chattering above me, but suddenly they became quiet.”

*The boy flies up the wooden stairs into the boathouse, kicks open the screen door.*

“I was sure it was me they heard, so I froze still.”

*Inside the boathouse life jackets hang upside down on nails, fishing poles lay with baited hooks. Smell of mold, rotting worms.*

Patrick felt cold and rubbed his arms. “We reached the top of the statue, Monsignor, where all the tourists stared out the windows of the crown, snapping photos.”

*The Father climbs stair planks, which creak under his weight. Water drips from his broad-brimmed hat. Rain pelts the boathouse roof like darts.*

Patrick gripped the seat edge in the confessional with both hands.

## A Solitary Life

*The boy passes into the back room where oars and paddles lean in a corner; canoes lay overturned on crates. Cold wind rushes through the window giving the boy a chill. He ducks beneath a canoe.*

“Go on,” said the Monsignor.

“There we were in that small space,” said Patrick, “the tourists, girl and priest, a park ranger and me. It was so crowded I got pushed to one end of the crown.”

*A screen door squeaks open, closes with a bang. Black shoes enter and thump on the floorboards.*

“It began to rain outside the statue. Through the windows we watched the Verrazano Bridge become so engulfed by fog it disappeared completely. Thunder rumbled in the harbor as we saw the storm fast approaching.”

*Black shoes enter the back room and scuffle over grit of sand. Window shutters close.*

Patrick’s chest tightened and he took a deep breath. “The ranger announced the closure of the crown,” he said. “All of the tourists left as they were ordered to except a Japanese couple, who pretended not to understand. They pleaded to stay until a flash of lightning lit up the crown.”

*Black Shoes step over to the canoe, so close the boy could reach out and touch them.*

“Scared, they ran down the exit stairs on their end of the crown, while I crouched down and hid on the stairs at my end. That left the ranger alone with the girl and the priest. Outside the wind-blown rain splattered against the windows.”



## A Solitary Life

*The black shoes disappear from sight. The outside screen door squeaks open and slams shut. The boy is free.*

Patrick inhaled and exhaled. “The priest asked if he and the girl could stay up a few minutes longer in the crown. The ranger reluctantly nodded yes and left.”

*The boy comes out from beneath the canoe. The Father stands waiting for him.*

In the confessional Patrick shuddered. “I was shocked Monsignor by what I witnessed next. The priest brushed the girl’s hair back. She cocked her head up, her cheeks cupped by his hands, her eyes closed as if expecting a kiss. Then he unbuckled his pants. ‘You know what to do,’ he said. The girl unzipped his fly and reached in.”

*On your knees the Father orders the boy. He obeys.*

Patrick kneeled on the confessional floor. “The girl placed her lips on him. As I watched, I kept thinking this isn’t right. It’s not proper that a priest behave this way toward a child.”

*The Father unbuckles his pants and tilts the boy’s chin up. He runs his fingers through the boy’s hair like a claw.*

“They were so caught up in the thing Monsignor they didn’t notice me peeping at them.”

*The Father pulls the boy’s mouth into his open zipper. Outside rain pours down deafeningly.*

“That’s when I thought that I should blow my cover, and stop what was going on immediately.”

The Monsignor leaned forward to the wicker divider. “And did you, son?” he asked.

## A Solitary Life

“No, I did not, Father,” Patrick said. “Instead, I just crouched there and watched.”

“That was your first sin,” the Monsignor said.

Patrick closed his eyes. “I felt as powerless to stop what was happening as she did. There was this child, both eyes closed, in an anticipatory state, not knowing what to do except feel afraid, confused, aroused a little perhaps, praying this be over and done with. The child waited for it to happen, with no fault of her own. You’ve got to believe me Monsignor it wasn’t his choice. If you were there, if only you were there!”

*Lightning lights up a tree, thunder pounds the boathouse like a sledgehammer, a cacophony of noises fills inside and outside the boy’s head -- fog horns and whistles, drums and batons, canons and fireworks, cymbals and gongs, birds cawing, people screaming, stars bursting in frenzy, the boy crumples down, without voice, without human feeling.*



Patrick stood up and braced himself against the confessional walls. He rushed out the rest of his words so rapidly he was barely intelligible. “Then I fell out of my hiding place, and the priest and girl were so startled by me the girl grabbed the priest, who tried to break her grip until he spotted me, then pushed her away, but she wouldn’t let go, so he backed up to get away, and she let go and he lost his balance and fell backwards, his arms waving in the air as he fell down the stairwell towards me. I moved out of the way, but he kept falling, so I moved further down, until I didn’t have to, because he stopped rolling, just finally stopped rolling, landed like a pretzel at my feet. The girl screamed

## A Solitary Life

and ran down, then saw me and ran back up, then I ran up to calm her, having to step over the body of the priest.”

Patrick sat back down on the confessional bench. He inhaled and exhaled a breath deeply, twice. “The girl got hold of herself and crept down those jam-packed steps so very still, as balanced as a cat and just as aloof. She brushed right by me, descended to where he lay, and asked, ‘Is he dead?’ Patrick wiped his eyes. “I didn’t want to move him Monsignor in case he was still alive. It looked like his neck was twisted, the way when they tell you not to move a victim whose neck might be broken, since you could kill them. But when I went down to examine more closely – the priest that is – all of a sudden the girl, all of a sudden remarked to me, ‘Look, it’s still hard.’ She touched him and I saw it, and she looked at me, curious.”

Patrick felt numb. He wondered if the Monsignor was going to interrupt. Silence filled the gulf.

“We felt a vibration in the steps from the running up of feet on the other set of stairs,” he said, “I drew the girl’s hand away from the body. Minutes later there stood above us the ranger with a walkie-talkie blaring. The ranger called for the medical technicians to rise up on the tiny crown elevator they have for emergencies—and ordered them to hurry, to deal with this, quick.”

Patrick was thirsty but had nothing to wet his burning lips. “Then I told the ranger since I knew how he fell, I should be the one to stay with the priest while she escorted the child downstairs. I was asked where I had come from. Then, as if on cue, the girl screamed hysterically and the ranger, not a little nervous because the priest and girl

## A Solitary Life

had been allowed to stay without supervision, didn't know what to do, until the girl began heaving sighs, so they left." Patrick rocked forward.

"I didn't do a thing Monsignor until the paramedics arrived. I explained to them how the priest had fallen, and where I thought his neck might be broken. They asked if I were a doctor and if not then I shouldn't act like one. They carefully placed him in the elevator and descended out of sight."

Patrick dropped his arms. Emotions spent.

"You must have felt highly traumatized," the Monsignor said.

"I was," Patrick said. "Below I had to give my account of the accident like the girl. We both lied as to what happened, omitting the nefarious kinds of touching and so on, but our stories coincided, so the police decided it had just been an unfortunate incident." Patrick slipped on his jacket. "Later, I heard one explain to curious tourists on the last elevator down, 'You see, folks, that's why nobody's allowed up in the crown without supervision at all times'." Patrick took a handkerchief from his coat pocket and blew his nose. "I'm sure from now on whenever a visitor asks to stay in the crown longer, they always tell the stubborn at heart: 'Sorry, but the last time we made an exception a priest fell down and died.'"

The Monsignor squirmed in his discomfort, then finally gave Patrick his penance. With a prayer book under his arm he rose to leave.

"Wait," Patrick said.

Sighing, the Monsignor sat back down. "Yes, son, what is it?"

Patrick lifted the red velvet kneeling stool, scratched its threads with his nails. He would've prostrated himself had there been room.

## A Solitary Life

Monsignor slapped the book on his thigh. “Judas Priest, son, speak up.”

“I lied,” Patrick said. “Before the Paramedics arrived, I placed my fingers on his throat to feel for a pulse when the priest opened his eyes and stared at me. It was in that gaze he spoke, asking me to end his life. For that very purpose I had been sent into the statue to follow him and the girl Monsignor, but I couldn’t do it.” Patrick looked up at the confessional ceiling, “who was I to judge him?” Patrick stood up to leave. “It didn’t matter what I did. He died before the medics arrived. I guess God had his own way with him, he didn’t need my help after all.” Patrick zipped up his jacket to the neck.

The Monsignor didn’t immediately respond, but then unleashed an angry voice, “St-st-stop following our priests around. Don’t go bothering them anymore!” He slammed the confessional slide closed on Patrick with a crisp, hard chop.