

The Great Poor Box Heist

Casey Watson, pastor of St. Martin's Church, figures this nightmare to be some kind of earthly hell visited on him. One moment he's sleeping peacefully in his warm bed and now he's standing out here shivering in the late-night frosty air, eyeing two grim-faced city police, mounting his church steps, with drawn guns and leveled flashlights. A moment before, they'd had him unlock the church front doors before warning him to stand back at a safe distance. To a man like Casey, who's been preaching peace and tolerance this past thirty years, this is a totally shocking sight. Call them back now! Tell them you never

envisioned this. Come back, right now, please! Before someone gets hurt, or worse! Only they can't hear you now that they've already disappeared into the darkened church.

Too late, laments Casey, too late for me and, even worse, way too late for whatever poor bastard they may find in there on the wrong end of those guns. More than likely some luckless transient fresh off the latest freight train passing through town: one more nameless face in the line of chewed-up humanity Casey sees begging for a handout outside his door most any day. How awful if this one's ill-conceived try at a little self-sufficiency, is about to become his ticket to the County morgue, a place Casey dreads only a little less than hell.

It's been a few months now since the last morgue call came in well after midnight, when Casey had gone staggering over there half-stupid with sleep, and was able only to gag out a few quick prayers over the sickening, bloated body bag of ooze, that was once a human being. "That's where a head-full of jug wine and a speeding freight will get you," observes the lone attendant right after Casey's final blessing over the hapless remains. "Say Padre, any chance you can show up again around eleven tomorrow with a few more good words at the burial?" With a brief nod of agreement Casey is quickly out the door.

The mercury is pushing well past ninety next day as Casey sets out still battling the remnants of last night's nausea. As he parks his car, he hears a loud whistle that signals the six stalwarts selected as pall-bearers from among a bevy of jail trustees, to take their place alongside the unfortunate now mercifully enclosed in gray canvas stretched taut over rough pine. At which point, Casey poses a question.

"Man or woman, do we know?"

"Most likely a man, but don't rightly know," says the attendant, "you ready now, Padre?"

Casey decides to go with "thy servant" and nods he's ready as the box is hoisted shoulder high from the two saw-horses and the procession starts 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 off to the right, an old water truck is gamely attempting to dampen down the swirling clouds of dust being raised by a fractious little Bobcat locked in combat with a hefty, half-buried boulder. Might as well be using a water pistol, thinks Casey, swatting at the dust clouds drifting over him. Despite the noise and clatter, he still can't avoid hearing the special words of condolence being sent heavenward by the pall bearers.

"Could be that water-truck might want to get on over here and give this fella the good dousin' he likely needs for where he's headed."

"Shut up and keep moving", shouts the attendant, as Casey attempts re-establish a little solemnity. "In baptism Thy servant was clothed in Christ, may Thy servant now also share in His glory."

"Hey! Watch where you're stepping up front before these damn gopher holes end of having us dump'..."

"I said, shut the hell up and walk straight, like I just showed you," shouts the attendant. As the remains are being roped into the grave, Casey once again invokes the Almighty's intervention. "Eternal rest grant unto thy servant O Lord and let perpetual light..."

It's a lonely resting place they have out here in this patch of red sun-scorched earth carved out from among the waist high weeds and manzanita bushes. There's got to be upward of fifty graves here, most with only a plain wooden cross marked, "Unknown." Casey offers a quick prayer for all the lonely souls resting here and for their families who'd likely envisioned a better life for them one time. Still, rich or poor, good or bad, death is the great leveler for everyone. "*Sceptre and Crown must tumble down and in the dust...*" With a final nod to the attendant

that he's finished, Casey starts back up the hill and away from this pitiful place.

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Out of the night from opposite directions are more flashing red lights as two police cars come screeching to a halt and four more uniformed officers jump out and go rushing toward the church steps.

"Keep standing back there, Padre, until we give you the all clear," shouts one of them, Danny Doyle, surely Casey's peskiest altar boy from long ago, as he remembers. He's a burly sergeant now with the same moon face that once made him almost believable. From inside the church Casey hears the sound of muffled voices followed by the terrifying sound of dragging. For sure now the morgue will be calling him again later this night, since he's the dumbass that got this fiasco all revved up to begin with.

A chilling silence follows before the door slowly opens and Danny sticks his globular head out. "Everything's under control now, Padre, so come on in if you'd like."

"Thank you, Danny," answers Casey in a voice that greatly belies the terror roiling his gut over what terrible sight, "*Everything's under control,*" may reveal.

God, what a rotten end this disaster has been to an otherwise corker of a day, where Casey had been up early for the nice, smooth thirty-minute mass he likes to deliver on his day off. Then, back to the rectory for a quick change into golf clothes before a much-anticipated dash over to "Eddie's."

"Morning, Eddie."

"Morning, Padre. The usual?"

"Absolutely! You hiding the paper on me again, Eddie?" Ten minutes later Casey tosses aside the Sports Section so he can fully appreciate the sizzling marvel Eddie has laid before him like a triumphant ceremonial offering. Bacon and sausage with two easy-over eggs topping a glorious mound of golden potato farls. "Fabulous, Eddie, fabulous!" And now, by God, is there any more fulfilling life experience—other than maybe the sexual act strictly forbidden to this man of God—than taking a few deft knife strokes to this miracle plate of Eddie's and turning it into into a glorious sea of liquid gold? And all without the knowledge or fussing over by his doctor, and his constant carping over crap like, *Casey's elevated hypertension levels and recent considerable weight gain.*

Yes, by God, this Eddie, this nonpareil of a man, he'd miss most were he ever transferred from here. More than Sheila, his church financial manager, she, whom he things of as the ultimate harbinger of seasonal changes, with her unforgettable selection of form-fitting golden brown and pastel sweaters; or Julie, sweet Julie, his faith-formation coordinator, who with her pale, pensive gaze, could transport a man of God straight to the gates of paradise or, maybe, down to the deepest pit in hell! This day though, there will be no talk of hell, to profane this man's well-earned day off.

Thirty minutes later a fully replete Casey is back home presiding over welcoming mugs of steaming tea for his golfing buddies here from the valley for their ten o'clock tee time. So then, let us give thanks on high for this heaven-sent day that will bring the glorious combination of exhilaration and misery that is the lot of the amateur golfer. Until, it's time to settle accounts in company with the setting sun and a few well-earned drinks on the clubhouse patio. Then, as the laws of hospitality demand, it's back to Casey's place for showers while the dinner spuds bake and the turnips simmer on the stove. And, out on the darkened deck the barbeque patiently waits for that transformative moment when its magical powers will be called upon to convert those four thick rib-eyes resting on the kitchen counter into the crown jewels of their Sultan's feast. And in

that same feast is there any more perfect partner to medium rare palatability than the full-bodied Zinfandel Casey has chosen for this evening? By the end of the first glass, there's a feeling of warmth and relaxation permeating the group. By the end of the second glass, Casey is well on his way into the inner-self, where, in deep reflection, he's aware of his utter privilege in playing golf with his best buddies out on that magnificent parkland golf course. A real foretaste of paradise is what it's been! Contrast that with the abject humiliation he'd earlier felt over the loss of his third golf ball to that accursed water hazard on the tenth hole. His friends—sure they'd extended him a sympathetic, "Hard Luck." But, were those sniggers they were carefully concealing? Sniggers that then unleashed his inner fury at God, and this damn golf course in particular: this utter cow pasture, on which he would now like to rain down every biblical plague he could remember—frogs, flies, gnats, lice and locusts. And, don't forget, boils, yes by God! A ton of boils! Sadly, he'd been the perfect consummate ass out there. But, no longer because of the redemption stirring in his soul by the end of the third glass. Thank you, glorious Zinfandel "Hey, Tommy," he hears himself calling out to his forever friend, "as long as you're up, pull the head off another one of those fabulous Zins before we all die of thirst."

Inside the church door, it's pitch dark save for the ring of flashlights being trained on some pitiful-looking little fellow down on both knees with hands cuffed behind his head. Casey pushes down hard on the immense sob of relief rising in his throat: No one is dead! No one is even hurt, and, because of that, everything else is dross. "Thanks be to the Lord God..."

"Hey Father," yells Danny, taking him 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, you can go on back to bed after all you've been through here tonight. And, one more thing, why don't you slip me the front door key that I'll hold on to until we wrap things up here for good. Then, tomorrow morning you can pick it up at the goal when you come over to give us your statement. Nothing more to keep you here tonight, Padre."

"Right you are, Danny," says Casey grateful for the chance to return to the rectory and his warm bed. Another time he might have taken a parting shot at Danny, "and now that you've finally made it back to church, don't be such a stranger, you hear." But the real stranger here tonight will be the sleep Casey now sorely needs, so he can forget the blood-stained hands that might have been his tonight—hands that were long ago set apart

for healing in a sacred place set apart for the safety and sanctuary of all.

And yet, his first instinct earlier tonight had been to call in the cavalry, like in those long ago Western movie days where he'd reveled in the swift justice employed by the gun. A childish ignorance, he'd foolishly thought he'd left far behind.

It's the second time Westerns have been made to cross his mind, like when his spiritual director had recently broached the same subject in confession.

"Bless me, Father," Casey had begun, "since it grieves me to confess how close I came to falling prey to the Missionary's Downfall."

"Say no more, Casey, since I'm well aware of that horrid rum concoction with the tiny umbrella sticking up that's brought down many a good priest before you."

"No, no, Father, this is a whole other kind of downfall, I'm afraid, that keeps wrestling me to the ground like I'm a helpless child."

"Out with it then, man, nothing to be ashamed of."

"I'm afraid it's Diana the Huntress, Father."

"It's what?"

"More like a, "she" than a "what", Father. She's a Roman Goddess who's been haunting my nights."

"And, how in the hell? Sorry, how the dickens could some Roman Goddess come to haunt your dreams, Casey?"

"I'm afraid she's been with me since I first met up with her statue in the DuPont Art Gallery."

"You go there?"

"Yes, but only on days too wet to play golf."

"Is she, is this goddess scantily clad, by any chance?"

"Worse than that I'm afraid, Father, because it's those milky white breasts of hers that have me transfixed like I'm..."

"All right! All right! Let's move on here from ruminating on bare mammary glands that are among the oldest priestly traps in the world. But, by God's good grace, not impossible to escape either."

"Good, good. So, could you give me some guidance on what I need to do?"

"Of course I can, Casey, and follow me closely here, because every word I'm about to say is like an arrow right to the heart of your problem. First, no more moping around art galleries that are nothing more than the devil's playground for the unwary.

Filth passed off as art! Don't fall for it, Casey. Turn instead to the great literature I want you to keep close to your bed from now on, like Thackeray and Hardy that will be your bulwark in case this Diana shows up again."

"Anything else, Father?"

"And, I'm told long walks are also very therapeutic."

"Anything else, Father?"

"Finally, Casey, think Westerns."

"Westerns, Father! But, I haven't watched one of those for years. Why now Father?"

"Because, Casey, Westerns are the best antidote to the mystique of bare mammary glands, since Westerns neither promote nor exalt the kind of sex and nudity that are among the most toxic perils for the celibate priest. And sure, Westerns include some drinking, from which few of us are exempt, and also swift justice administered by strong moral men for righteous causes that makes it fully justifiable. Men, like Matt Dillon and Wyatt Earp! Towers of strength despite the evils bubbling around them. Think of them, Casey, next time Diana the Huntress comes calling and ask yourself, what would these men do if this Diana showed up bare breasted on the streets of, say, Dodge City? I'll tell you what. First off, Matt would have Kitty wrap her in a nice

warm blanket so she quickly understands that, huntress or not, she needs to be properly attired at all times, like any god-fearing woman should be."

"OK, I get what you just said, Father, but where do I find Westerns these days?"

"Where there's a will, there's a way, Casey."

And, who knows how successful Casey might have been, had not the devil upped his game right then by having his friend Tommy take him to see, "Pretty Woman," where he figured that bathtub scene with Julia Roberts, made Diana the Huntress look like Little Bo Peep. So, that when he returned for more spiritual advice the next month he even tried justifying his Diana fantasies as relatively harmless, "I mean, she's only a statue, after all."

"Not so," insisted his spiritual director. "Fantasizing is fantasizing, whether it's about statues, paintings, or people, the same way drinking liquor is still drinking liquor, even if it's done with a fork.

"Fork, Father?"

"Friend of mine, Casey, who insists he never touches a drop while he's busy forking large helpings of brandy-soaked sponge cake down his gullet as dessert. You see my point, Casey, there are many paths to sin, and unless you're willing to confine your

fantasies to the sacred art displayed in our churches and rectories, you must follow my earlier advice on the benefits of great literature, long walks and Westerns."

Then again, thought Casey, a man may not be particularly proud of his fantasies, but unlike Westerns, they leave no bodies strewn in the dust of Dodge City either."

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It's past three in the morning, and Casey still can't sleep. Earlier on, when he'd first gone to bed, he'd been rapturously dreaming he'd finally rid himself of his pesky golf slice at the exact moment he's jerked awake by someone jackhammering in the hallway. Jackhammering! And then he knows! It's that damn buzzer in the broom closet that must be turned off before opening the poor box over in the church. Shit! Can someone be tampering with the poor box at this hour? Maybe, there's a short in the wire. Go back to sleep. No, best be sure. Maybe go over there and check things out for himself. A minute later he's dialing the phone.

"They should be there in ten minutes or so," the city police dispatcher tells him before hanging up. Over by the kitchen window he waits with cassock half-buttoned over pajamas, and wonders how much money is in that box anyway? He's got no idea other than enough to feed over a hundred homeless people every

week-end. At one time, those same people had to get by on fairly mundane fare, until Casey's inspiration that made for a nice menu upgrade. The kind of inspiration that comes to a man while sipping a nicely finished Barolo late one evening in company with a well-heeled friend. Proportionality! That's what he must put in place, after hearing that this stuff goes for, "north of two hundred and fifty a bottle and worth every penny."

So, think about that in terms of sin and sinners. Where's the proportionality between the whopper kind of sins and the paltry penance he's been imposing for forgiving those same whoppers? Five Our Fathers as penance for a weekend of canoodling in Monterey, (while the wife is home with the kids!) There's nothing close to proportionality about that. "So, for your penance, say five Our Fathers and, why not drop a hundred or two in the poor box on your way out?"

"Cheap at the price!" Casey figures is the Lord's assessment of his latest grand scheme.

Only now, some bastard is trying to undo his well-worked out strategy on behalf of those poor hungry homeless people.

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It's going on for four-thirty and still no sleep despite those two good snorts of brandy and calling on Diana the Huntress, who

has utterly failed him, much like those maidens failed the dying King David. Well, to hell with it, unlike David, *he* wasn't dying. Far from it, so let's see what kind of revival powers a hot shower and a read of the paper might bring? Not to mention an after-mass visit back to Eddie's, who'd be surprised to see him back two days in a row, until Eddie is made aware of this night-from-the-pit-of-hell his old friend has been through.

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Around mid-morning the city police called to say Casey could come over most any time to give his statement. Afterwards, Danny Doyle informs him the little mud-lark over in the jail would like to talk to him and apologize for his misdeeds. Even in his jail cell, the little guy looks a lot better than a few hours before. He's been fed, washed, assigned a public defender, and, like he tells Casey, "at least I'm in out of this heat."

His story, Casey found both interesting and hardly unfamiliar. Catholic school education, including ten years as an altar boy at Holy Angels church in Chicago. Married way too young to his pregnant sweetheart, who'd soured on him early on for a whole bunch of reasons. Three kids in five years, never too diligent about helping out at home, along with a serious roving eye and a fondness for Manhattans that left him slobbering drunk most evenings by nine and wanting her in a way she declared to be

disgusting. "Yes, we tried marriage counseling," he'd answered Casey's inquiry, "that I likely torpedoed right off with my way too candid response to the counselor's plea that we both speak honestly to each other. 'So, how come', I began, 'I'm so pretty damn sure the priests down at Holy Angels church are having more sex than I am?'"

"I understand," said Casey, realizing that anything else would constitute little more a useless swipe at water long since gone over the dam.

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The mud-lark's trial was set for four weeks later, with Casey subpoenaed as a witness. Eleven o'clock in the morning. His golf game ruined! What a total cockup! Damn that poor box! And, double damn everything and everybody associated with that moronic buzzer! At ten fifteen they called him that morning to say the-mud lark had pled guilty, so, no trial. Damn and blazes! Couldn't they have called earlier? His entire day ruined! Or, maybe not. His buddies were playing golf at Peach Tree not more than twenty miles away and, if he drove there like mad, he might even catch them at the tenth hole. Besides, they'd mentioned something about a "must see" movie called "Sleepless in Seattle." Another fantasy to keep him going for a little while. Not ideal, of course, for any middle aged man in this kind of

pathetic life-place, where he's reduced to finding comfort in fantasizing about bloody statues and made-up Hollywood romances. What a hell of a long way that is from how God intended ordinary people to find life comfort in the love of a permanent, caring partner? Someday, he must take a crack at dealing with that. But not today! Today, it's long past time to throw his clubs in the car and be on his way for half a round, because, like his mother was wont to say, "Half a loaf is better than no bread."