

Going Way Out

"My uncle is asking for last rites. He's dying."

"Is he a member of our parish?"

"I don't know. But he used to come to this church when he was younger."

"Does he live in Laguna Vista?"

"No. But he's right next door in Mission Park."

"Sorry, but I can't help you."

"But Father. He's dying. Are you sure that..."

"Will you excuse me please? I'm tired and I have to get back to the sacristy..."

This was my interruption as I was coming back from confessions. I was thinking about how much it bothers me that wine gives me headaches now.

And that's just the beginning of my ironies. Being a party animal god meant that I made a lot of enemies when I was young. That was not a problem when I had health and power. But that was a long time ago.

My decline was difficult to take. Those gods who are known for wisdom tended to do better. But I was never known for being very bright by any measure. Senescence meant that I could no longer do things closely identified with me. Jumping and dancing got me sore knees and sprained ankles. My attempts at tumbling with the dryads brought humiliating reports of my inability to perform.

There was no graceful way out. In a fit of disillusionment I dumped quick lime into my eyes, mostly blinding me. With my cursed divine powers, I could see well enough to serve, but not well enough to enjoy anything.

I can no longer stay at my preferred home, Greece. In fact, the whole Mediterranean is not a safe place for me anymore. After scouring the globe in a state of semi-darkness I finally settled down in Southern California. It has a climate like home, medicine crafted for old guys like me, and a diocese where the clergy is as dense and neglectful as Zeus is to his wife.

Why would I care about the Catholic clergy? I have so few thrills in this life, but I still draw energy from religion. Another of my ironies. In spite of the many parties thrown in my name, even now, I cannot live without sincere belief, ritual and religion. I do, by the way, approve of the central place that wine takes in their worship.

I have resided for decades in a Catholic presbytery at St. Vincent of Saragossa parish, as the venerable, Fr. Dick. (yea, Priapus has been giving me shit about that). When I first came here, six months passed before the pastor had any idea I was here. He finally noticed me, and yes, he

was suspicious. By that time, however, I had celebrated so many Masses, wedded so many couples, and heard so many confessions, that there was no going back.

Being a priest has its advantages. The shit we routinely get away with. On Thursdays, I walk into Andre's, a lovely little restaurant up the street from my parish. I order some langoustine, take my time and talk to beautiful people. By the end of the evening, someone, I don't know who, has paid my bill, and covered the tip. At church, I regularly walk into parties in the parish hall and people make a place of honor for me. I do not even know anyone there, cannot remember anyone's name, and do not care. It makes no difference. The priesthood is the way to be a grumpy old man.

There's some pretty sick shit that goes on with priests too, with an astounding helping of impunity, but that is not what this story is about.

It is about a woman named Margaret Mariam, a parish musician.

I have always been fond of music. Especially now, with wine being stricken for me. I love music when it is simple, pure and fun. I love the kind of tunes that invite everyone to join in. Electronics has done something terrible to music's sincerity. Now a single braying jackass with a microphone can dominate an audience of thousands. The volume alone hypnotizes throngs. The audience does not have to do a thing. Even country music has sold itself into this sound system slickness.

Churches too, have vast assemblies who do nothing but sit and listen (and not even very well—they're busy dinking with their phones). They do not deign to raise their own voices and sing, oh no. When I was at the height of my powers, everyone had to sing, and everyone had to make a fool of themselves. The non-singing slackers got prodded into doing their part by everyone else. Now everyone is too fucking proud. "I can't sing," these lazy morons whine. Bullshit! Everyone once sang at all kinds of gatherings in the centuries past.

Margaret leads music at a Mass that is one of my last hopes. She has long flowing gray hair, a strong singing voice and the steady gait of a strong hiker. She loves colorful linen dresses and necklaces made with large rocks.

She does not use a mic, making her an anachronism. After 45 years she still plays that old Kent nylon string guitar. Although she is in rude health, the years have not been so kind to her ministry. She was first moved from the flagship 10:30 AM Mass, to the 8:45. That was about 30 years ago. She has long since been relegated to the sparsely attended 6:30.

Her Mass is just as dated. She is joined by three or four others who offer an unreliable show of support. They were all heavy into the 60's, and suffer from deafness, acid-induced flashforwards, and language with words like "groovy" and "bogart" and "far out."

Yes, that language makes me sick too. But I have lived a long time, and every age has people who think that they're a bunch of freaking poets. Even now, we have idiots who love to say things like "hella" and "NBD" and "hangry" (oh please!).

None of this is a problem at the 6:30, because the assembly is almost as bad. They show up with their hair, sandals, and beads. Some wear robes, or clothes they have made themselves. They come on foot, skateboard, or bicycle. They fill the parking lot with bugs, gremlins and small stubby vans. They come from all over Southern California, complaining about wealthy suburbs that are chucking out the homeless.

When they sing, they love putting their arms around each other. Lots of hugs during the sign of peace (and at other times during the sacred liturgy). At this Mass they really do need the incense to cover up the BO. It is not just a medieval thing here. At the pastor's insistence, they have laid off the Peter Paul and Mary, John Denver, and Joan Baez. But they still sing "Kumbaya" and "Michael Row the Boat Ashore." They still love simple choruses, which can get started at any time. I hear these things, and my heart melts. There is nothing like an unbuttoned religious service that can make me feel young again. I am, by the way, the only priest to get assigned to this Mass.

Time's ravages make themselves felt as I celebrate the sacred liturgy. My blindness obliges me to lean close to the lectionary to read anything. My voice barely carries past the first five rows (fortunately, no one really notices that at the 6:30 either).

Last Sunday Margaret walked into the sacristy before Mass, barely stifling her giggles. Her voice was clear and mischievous. "I thought about you the other day,"

She helped me as I raised my robe over my head to put it on. "Oh yeah?"

"Yes. Remember that we were talking about alternate universes last week, and how you are convinced that that is where so many bottles of wine disappear. I think our parish is at a spot where this kind of thing happens frequently."

"A kind of vortex, perhaps?"

"Yes. So many of our drivers seem to get confused when they are looking for the driveway. They must be getting switched around from one universe to the next as they try to find their way in. I always see these long lines of cars backing so quickly."

So—the alternate universe is the cause of lost bottles of wine and confused drivers. Margaret is one of the very few people who can appreciate such things.

Because I am a god, I know when threats are coming Margaret's way. About 15 years ago, a music director took it upon himself to supplant Margaret and her friends at the 6:30. He wanted a youth-style Mass for that slot. Parishes cannot seem to get enough of that tripe. Even ancient adult choirs with organs are singing this youth shit!

This director did not even bother asking Margaret to add some youth music to the mix, because he knew she would never go for it. So he took the typical, time-honored Catholic parish strategy. He used his daily face time with the pastor to stab her in the back.

He talked the pastor into a trial Mass for the youth group that he had conjured up—a bunch of junior high kids in the school marching band whom he could not place anywhere else. He told Margaret on the Friday before that her services would not be needed.

I knew all this was going to happen. But being the god of parties, I can still steer certain events in certain ways to elicit certain consequences. I arranged for that junior high marching band to put on a performance at the local amusement park the previous evening, and I made sure that those kids stayed there until closing time. None of them were able to show for Mass that following morning.

As for that damn jerk wad of a music director, I had a special reward. He was going to a simple gathering with a few friends. I turned a single glass of wine into a binge of mai tais and daquiris, and a night on the town through hot whore heaven. Incredibly, he was still able to make it the following morning, but that may have been even worse for him. He had a wicked case of laryngitis, a massive headache and a miserable disposition that led him into cursing at a little old lady.

He did not last much longer here. Margaret and her group had their old job back, and the community got the message—do not dink with Margaret. No one has considered bothering her, until now.

And it's a much more serious problem, from a much more serious source.

It is the new pastor, Fr. John. He has woken from his neglectful stupor to perceive that he has an unsightly mid-twentieth century history lesson within his own parish.

This pastor is wealthy. He inherited some eight million dollars when his folks died, and he has spent his money on his boat. He loves talking about it during homilies. "Father Yacht" the parishioners call him.

So now he has a problem. He knows that he cannot just throw Margaret and her group out. That would cause a scene that would make him look bad across the parish and the diocese—and he has already received a lot of bad buzz for his typical clerical top-down methods. He has to be sneaky about it.

When he changed the locks across the parish, He made sure that Margaret did not get the new key to the musician's storage room. Now she has to bring her own maracas and tambourines every Sunday. He has removed her name from the bulletin's list of parish ministers. She is not advised of parish activity day, so she misses that annual opportunity to put up a stall and encourage people to join her group. He excludes her from liturgy meetings and notifications, resulting in musical miscues for the 6:30. These are relentless attempts to make her look incompetent. Fortunately, at the 6:30, no one ever notices any these things.

Unfortunately, he has more roadblocks planned. He is having the new music director bring in a children's choir once a month for the 6:30 (Is it not bad enough for a kid to go to church at all, even without singing at the early morning Mass?). He has put a new person in charge of scheduling the meeting rooms with a list of rules and constraints, effectively excluding a free-

spirit like Margaret from rehearsing on the parish campus. And he is planning to institute a fingerprinting and sexual misconduct training program for all musicians at the parish, which would not only be a heavy blow for Margaret's group, but would be devastating to the Mexican musical community, whom the pastor also does not like.

So my task is clear. I am going to have to find a way to take him out altogether, before he takes Margaret out.

Easier said than done. The old party trick with the junior high kids and the music director won't work with this guy. First, he never parties. In fact, he minimizes contact with the outside world, especially the faithful. Second, even if he did party, no one would notice or care. Music directors are one thing, but the notion of a priest getting into trouble because of booze is laughable. Yes, there is the ongoing wave of pedophilia scandals and cover-ups, but I don't want children getting hurt by this.

I thought about my friends. I was always the cute god (take a look at how artists portray me). Although my own powers were useless here, maybe someone else could help me. I decided to pay Aphrodite a visit. It turned out that she lived in a day spa by the shores of Penasco Point. I had to walk there, since my eyes will not let me drive. It took me about an hour and my legs got sore, but the breeze was invigorating. When I found her, a short Asian woman was leaning over her left foot, doing her toenails.

We had a refreshing afternoon. She was very grateful for the presents I brought for her, remembering how booze makes her job so much easier. And the babes that she assigned to me for a massage were very accommodating indeed. The thought of ensnaring a Catholic pastor intrigued her, considering it a worthy challenge. "But who would he fall in love with?" We had any number of considerations, from the teaching staff at the school, to the administrative assistants in the office.

There was also the question of how this liaison would manifest itself, and I how I could use it to remove this threat against Margaret. The relationship could turn scandalous and be revealed in a photo—cameras are everywhere nowadays. Or, perhaps Fr. John could say that he was leaving the priesthood for the woman he loves, and then he would be conveniently gone. At the end of the afternoon, she bade me farewell, and told me that she would think about what she could do.

So I achieved nothing in my visit. The children's group sang that Sunday, and managed to win the affection of those hippies.

A money-related scam would be almost as good. So I visited Hermes next. I found him in LA. I took a train there, which was not much fun since I had to constantly ask the other passengers where I was. I got lost twice.

I've always had to be careful around Hermes. I did some favors for him back in the 80's. A ton of wineries started up back then; millions of vines got planted across California. He talked me into this. But then it all crashed with the grape glut. On the plus side, I know he felt that he owed me a favor.

Hermes was in a large, heavily carpeted office in a tall building, top floor. He had become pudgy, graying, balding. But in his mischievous voice I could still sense that lust for a deal. We talked about all of the money-related schemes that Fr. John could get involved in—misuse of parochial funds, gambling, sports betting, investing without approval. At the end I got a similar response as I did from Aphrodite. Hermes told me that he would think about it. I thanked him with a level of sincerity that matched his promise. By the time I got back home I was exhausted.

Time was growing short. Fr. John had assigned a director over Margaret and her group. They were now required to play youth songs. Margaret was doing the best she could with her Kent Guitar, but I could tell that no one was really buying into this, least of all her. It was only congregational inertia and deafness that got me a little more time.

Remembering the pastor's boat, my last shot was Poseidon. Unfortunately, I did not know how to find him. In desperation, I just walked into the sea. My priestly robes undulated with the push and pull of the waves as I got deeper and deeper. The water was cold. When I got in over my head, I called out "Uncle!". Bubbles issued from my mouth and floated away. I was sinking. The water's surface was getting farther away, and I was beginning to think that I would drown. Then a powerful tide swept my feet off the floor and whipped me through an inscrutably long expanse of ocean. I don't know how, but breathing was not a problem. Within minutes, I found myself in Poseidon's very court at the bottom of the sea.

His palace was huge and old to the point of decay. It left no doubt, however, of Poseidon's lingering power. He asked how I was, and nodded his head while I talked. He was like a grandpa who listens to a four-year-old complaining about running out of peppermints. All this fuss over church music. He suggested about a dozen possible actions to address the problem, some of which would have killed thousands of people. I liked the idea of sending Fr. John adrift in his boat to an remote island in the South Seas. Unfortunately, this meeting ended like all the others, as he told me he would consider his options. There are some disadvantages to being an easy-to-dismiss cute god.

When I got back, Margaret was walking out of the parish office, and I knew that it was too late. Fr. John and the music director had just told her that the 6:30 Mass was being eliminated altogether. She was in a daze, but I was much worse. The last thing I remember was her holding me as I collapsed in the parking lot.

When I came to, I felt a tingly balm on my eyes. Fingers, light as sparrows wings, caressed my forehead. I opened my eyes and saw the cracked ceiling of a VW bus and Margaret's face looking down at me. This was not the first time I had woken on my back in such a setting. But something was different. I wondered what it was. Then I figured it out.

I was seeing perfectly.

Margaret was more than just Margaret. Those grape-green eyes. The button nose. The delicate laugh lines. I knew this face.

"My husband," she said as she stroked my cheek. The corners of her lips were contorted downward as she gazed into my freshly healed eyes. "My dear, dear husband."

I was glad to be lying down. If I had been standing I would have passed out.

"Ariadne?"

"Yes, Dionysus"

"I thought you were dead."

"You can't believe everything you hear."

"What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question."

"You've been watching over me this whole time?"

"Yes. And I've been waiting for the right moment. It finally came. Aphrodite, Hermes, and Poseidon all told me what you did. You don't know what that meant to me." Her eyes glistened and that steady voice of hers wavered like a vine in the breeze.

I was still flat on my back. "I don't believe this."

"Believe it. And it's time for me to get you home."

"And where's that?"

"I think you'll like it. I have a property in Napa Valley. It's right next to a monastery."

"Napa Valley? You mean it's a..."

"Yes."

"And I could..."

"Yes."

I've done plenty of dumb things in my life, but I know a good decision when I see one.

"That sounds like a good idea."

"Let's go," she said. "Right now. I've been waiting too long already." She climbed into the driver's seat, started the bus and drove towards the exit. I clambered into the seat beside her, taking in the marvelous sights of this seaside church for the first and last time.

"You think anyone will miss us?" she asked.

"Nope. The pastor despises me, and everyone else is on another planet."

"Good—and you know what? I don't think I'll miss them either."

The bus revved and squeaked as it tumbled onto the street with a couple of delirious old gods, rejoicing at the beginnings of a second chance.