

3,382 words

## Compas Digs In

The pitcher, six-feet-seven, the most imposing player on the field, was enraged by the previous batter's home run.

In the batter's box Compas dug in, head down. He focused not on his spikes pawing the loamy dirt but on steeling himself for the task. *Hang tough. Don't flinch. He'll come inside to stake his territory, brush me back. Keep front shoulder low and hard, not flying out, especially on the curveball. See the ball all the way in.*

The pitcher was aggressive, full of purpose, and his purpose on this pitch was to establish one thing: fear. "Another year or two," his pitching coach had said, "yer gonna be facing major league hitters, an' if you don't take yer part of the plate, you won't be facing 'em for long. Either you pound it inside, or they'll pound you."

Compas, feet planted and weight balanced, raised his head. He zeroed in on the pitcher's hand.

The pitcher placed all his weight on his right foot and pushed off with authority. Saw only Loveless' mitt hovering high over the inside corner. His release point was perfect. He knew. *This sucker is not going to dig in on me.* The pitch roared in, intent all over it.

Compas reminded himself again to see it all the way in. He picked up the spin of the seams, and he knew. Fastball. Rising high and tight. Knew it would tail into him. He tilted his

head, but the ball tailed in more than he'd figured. It hit him just below his helmet's ear flap. Broke his jaw.

In the hospital room the next day, his teammate, Samuel, didn't notice Compas' nurse, a former Miss West Virginia, enter the room to check the I.V. "Al, I thought we were going to lose you last night, man. So now I'm rethinkin' some things."

"Like what?" Through his grogginess and wired jaw, Compas managed to grunt only muffled words.

Samuel asked the nurse to bring a pad and pen. Once she did, he continued: "Like what the hell I'm doing."

Compas wrote, "Playing baseball?"

"Naw. I *know* that's what I wanna do. Wanted to be a ballplayer since I was nine." Miss West Virginia left after updating the chart. "I mean, what the hell I'm doing with all these women."

"What you're doing with them?" he wrote. "Are you really Samuel, the one with babes in every Carolina League ballpark?"

"Let's just say you got me seeing these babes leave me, um, empty."

Samuel advanced to Double-A the next year, then Triple-A for the last week of the season when the major league club made some September call-ups of its best minor leaguers. But the following spring he was back at Double-A San Antonio and never got any closer to the majors. Then it was off for good to his dad's hardware store in Wisconsin.

As for Compas, after the beaning he tried a comeback in Salem three months later but couldn't keep his shoulder in. Especially on anything high and tight. Even the soft stuff.

She wore a miniskirt, sleek and clingy like those girls back in college. She was probably twenty-five, and she had the legs for it. Sniffing into a tissue in the church office, she kept those legs tightly crossed.

Father Compas sucked in a deep breath, steeled himself. Her olive skin was toned and creamy: shoulders, upper arms, complexion. She reached for the last tissue from her purse on the floor, the scooped neckline revealing one breast more supple than an oiled-up fielder’s glove. When she sat up, it was her silky legs that distracted him. *How do they shave so close, so smooth? Eyes. See the eyes, not the curves. Hang tough.*

He closed his eyes, and, as if to hold himself together, pressed two fingers to the bridge of his nose. He squeezed too hard, aggravating his jaw, which had never healed properly, even after seven years. The fracture lent his ruddy face a handsome, though asymmetrical, squareness. That fracture, plus his dark wavy hair and beacon of a smile, endeared him to his parishioners. Then there were the stories and jokes that spiced his homilies, his after-Mass exchanges, his other face-to-face interactions. His anecdotes were peppered with characters lilting in British, French, or Russian accents, colorful contrasts to the drawls of central Texas. At a parishioner’s dinner party—as much as Father Compas delighted in holding forth, his audiences delighted in it more—he lit into one of his favorites, about an Irish mother of eight scoffing at a priest who urged her to consider the trials of the Blessed Mother, then he delivered the mom’s punchline in a delicious brogue: “Hah! Mary and her *one*?” Young and old, commoners and eminences, many who encountered Father Aloysius Joseph Compas basked in a wash of mirth, compassion, or relief. But underneath was a soul who understood pain, struggle, foibles.

The miniskirted temptation made Father Compas recall his buddy Samuel, his playboy

teammate back in A-ball, in Bakersfield then Salem. Samuel, who said he loved to hold his head tight between a firm pair of baseball-sized breasts. Compas would wag his head at him, even when the latter would say, "C'mon Al, I can set you up with one of her friends. Hers are bigger than softballs." The night Al was knocked unconscious at home plate, Samuel had kept Al's tongue from lolling back and strangling him, stayed with him at the hospital until morning and all day after the surgery. Even missed the next night's game. By then Al's self-discipline regarding sex, as well as his near-death ordeal, had inspired Samuel's second thoughts about womanizing.

The woman sniffled across from him, and Father Compas returned to his familiar reminders. *Dig in. Keep front shoulder in. Hang tough.*

"It's over, Father. Nothing between us anymore. He's seeing some cheerleader at State, and I know she's not the first." She tore at her tissue. The priest handed her a fresh one then another. "I'm so disgusted with him. Divorce isn't enough." She looked up from her tissues, sucked in a deep breath. "Haven't had sex in five months. And . . ."

She blinked once at him then her green eyes stayed wide. "It's not so much the sex that I miss. It's uhmm . . ."

A long pause. Then he said, "Intimacy?"

"That's it. Yes. Comfort and trust." She slowly switched crossing those legs, just as tight as before. "An understanding touch. You know, Father, you're a great listener. I guess you hear that a lot."

"Sometimes. Possibly the single most important idea in the gospels is Christ's commandment, *Love one another as I have loved you*. We're called to be Christ for one another."

“So I wonder, Father, do you ever miss not having a human relationship? A woman’s touch?” Her green eyes blinked again.

“O God save us!” Father Compas shook his head, opened his door and took a long drink from the water fountain down the hall.

#

Back when Samuel had come down to Austin for Compas’ ordination, they had discussed the difficulties of his calling, especially the loneliness.

“One thing that keeps me going, Samuel, is my mom and sister. When he was drunk my dad would go after Mom.”

The soon-to-be Father Compas blew out an audible breath and found the ceiling of his seminary dorm room. “I was five or six, and I could hear her laughing sometimes, but he’d be groaning. Remember that big righthander from Visalia who’d grunt so loud on every pitch, the outfielders could hear? That guy reminded me of my dad. I was confused about whether this laughing and groaning was a good thing because other times, instead of laughing, there were her screams—a lot louder than his grunting and groaning. Sometimes he’d realize we were in the house, and he’d try to shut her up while he worked on her. When my sister started high school, he’d go after her. The first time was on my twelfth birthday. No laughter then. Then in college she got gang-raped.”

Samuel stared at the floor then offered, “That have anything to do with becoming a priest?”

“Partly. There’s plenty of suffering around, and sometimes, believe it or not, I think baseball has a lot to do with hearing the call. Somehow I’m pretty good at facing pain and difficulties, a lot like digging in at the plate, knowing a four-seamer’s coming high and tight at

ninety-five. Somehow I’m able to hang in. I’ve had a lot less suffering than most. Maybe I can help others with theirs.”

#

By his fourth year at St. Augustine’s, Father Compas’d just about had enough of the rich and pampered, renowned in his parish, especially with so many flaunting their womanly augmentations. He thought of going to Bishop McDermott to request a transfer but decided to discuss it first with his own confessor, Father Cappadonna, whose congregants lived at the less affluent end of the county.

“Ed, I don’t know how I keep going,” he said. “At a wedding last week the bride sauntered up so slowly, this hour-glass dress just about painted on. Even when she first entered in the back, all anyone could see were swiveling hips and her breasts cantilevered and barely covered.”

Neither priest wore a frat-boy grin; instead, Father Cappadonna winced at the anguish in his counterpart’s eyes. He kept quiet but allowed Compas to continue.

“I almost came to you last month after the Holy Thursday foot-washing. There was a big blonde who was first in my line. She’s sitting on a chair in front of the altar, her foot in the basin, then she’s bending over while I towel her off. She’s hanging out of a low-cut sundress, taking her sweet time getting her shoe back on.” Father Cappadonna took a deep breath, but Compas kept on. “It’s like she knows exactly how distracting she is. And I can feel the whole congregation peering at me, waiting to see if I start gawking at her. I made sure I stared straight down at the water. I tell you, Ed, I’m making the Holy Spirit work overtime.”

#

On the Friday flight to Cleveland for an ordination, Father Compas reminisced about his

own. Had it been five years? He considered the three vows.

*Poverty, so called, isn't much of a sacrifice, although our "brother-priests" driving Cadillacs or running parish campaigns for renovating rectories (with elevators?) pay it no heed. As bad as televangelists. Obedience? Some bishops discourage homilies that rail against income disparity or ill treatment of the poor, lest generous donors be offended, but at least McDermott is reasonable. Throws no onerous burdens on us.* Father Compas tried to tuck away the third promise, but the next day during the actual rite at the cathedral, the archbishop urged the six candidates to remain “blameless in a life of chastity and sanctity . . . rid yourselves of all vice and concupiscence.”

*O boy. There it is. Concupiscence. Or as the Code of Canon Law says: “obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence.” Good ol' Can. 277.*

Compas observed the six of them. Each lay face down, each a baserunner sliding headfirst before the archbishop, arms and hands outstretched forward, flat on the sanctuary's stone floor, stark emphasis to all present, including himself, of the humility demanded of them. He was reminded again: *We all have our sufferings, including my big one, that “perfect and perpetual” obligation. But our sufferings are dwarfed by those of the Christ.*

After the reception and celebratory dinner in the great hall for the newly ordained, Compas walked past the twin gothic spires and through the cold streets, even though it was early May, to his downtown hotel. As he entered the lobby, the woman at the desk, the night manager, called warmly to him.

“Father, you said you have an early morning flight, so you can sign out now and complete your checkout early.” She seemed maybe forty, her auburn hair pinned up, a smart suit not quite hiding the tight white blouse flaring at her bosom. Her cool blue eyes and parted

lips could have graced a magazine cover. "Drop off your key here on the way out."

He squinted at the bill. "What about charges for the second night?"

She smiled. "That's comped, Father."

"Cleric's discount?"

"No, Father."

"You're Catholic?"

"No, Father." She leaned forward. Those eyes. He heard one of her heels click on the ceramic tile. *Hang tough. Don't flinch.*

He didn't want to look away, but he did. *Is she tempting me, or am I only wishing her to?* Her fragrance flirted with his conscience. Up the stairs to his room it lingered as he trudged up, alone. In his dreams it substantiated into her curvaceous form.

#

Father Compas told only his pastor, Monsignor Moriarty, and the parish secretary of his vacation plans: see his sister in Chicago, his buddy Samuel in Wisconsin, a family friend in St. Louis, and games in four ballparks. More than one at Wrigley, he hoped. He didn't tell the monsignor or secretary of others he'd visit.

The widow in Kansas, age eighty-six, served him tea and a big salad. "I made snickerdoodles for dessert," she said. "You're the first visitor since Henry died. Three and a half years next week."

"What about your daughters?"

"Moved to California and the Philippines. They send pictures and cards on my birthday and Christmas."

Father Compas' sister was a divorcee with three teenagers. He repaired a broken table



leg, rehung her jammed front door, and set up counseling for her and his youngest nephew. "Al, I know: I should've seen it in that bastard husband. Just like our bastard father."

In a Milwaukee suburb, Samuel and his fiancée, a petite math teacher, took him to dinner one night and a game the next, but he had a longer stay in Minneapolis with an old friend of his mom's whose husband and teen daughter were killed the previous winter. She said, "An eighteen-wheeler skidded all the way across I-94 in an ice storm."

The St. Louis friend was also reeling. She was Father Compas' first inspiration for his trip.

"When you called, I didn't want to tell you." She looked twenty years older, not two, since he'd last seen her. "Herbert left me for 'a younger model.' Twenty-seven years thrown away, just like that. You remember the chasuble he gave you?"

"Sure. The white one. I said my first Mass in it."

"I guess it'd be too much to ask you to throw away that too."

Four broken, cast-off women, Father Compas realized.

#

A screen door of the confessional slid open. "Bless me, Father," the woman said.

"I will, but tell me, are many others waiting?"

"No one else is in the church. But I have a lot to confess. I know I've sinned, in thought and deed." Her breathy, articulate voice seemed assertive but measured.

"That's all right. No need for a laundry list. How about a few that weigh heaviest?"

She cleared her throat. "All right, Father. Here's the most *pressing* one." Some ruffling of clothes followed. It reminded him of the crinkly tissue rustling when removing a new baseball from its box. One high heel clacked onto the linoleum floor, then another. "Actually,

I’ve been thinking of you. You have those piercing gray eyes, and . . . well, I’m sorry, but I’d like to do something and then confess after that. I remember an interview of a singer who said her ultimate fantasy was to seduce a priest.”

“O God save us.”

“Father Compas. Father What a Waste.”

“That’s an old line--be gone, woman!”

He flashed his door open, plucked the sponge from the font of holy water, and flung a splash on the confessional’s outer door, the woman still inside. He fled to his rectory.

He locked his door and blew out a prolonged exhalation. A touch of familiarity lurked in that articulate voice, and then he knew: Jacqueline something. A shapely brunette, impeccably dressed. A constant solitary presence at ten o’clock Mass, third pew, left side. Synthetics what they were, he figured she could be anywhere between thirty-five and fifty. Most Sundays she’d approach when congregants would greet him afterwards in the narthex. Not much interaction other than hello with a quick handshake. No indicators of strong affection. He figured he’d never see her at Mass again.

For years he’d felt the burden of the widening sex scandal searing through the Church. In addition to sorrow for the victims living and reliving their traumas, he cringed at the pain it caused those priests who were innocent, the suffocating suspicion. And his one heavy question. Could he himself remain “blameless” and chaste in his outward actions? Inner chastity was another matter.

#

A screen door of the confessional slid open. “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.”  
Father Compas recognized the voice, knew too well the man’s struggle.

"I can't help myself, Father. I can't keep from looking, from going after them. I love my wife, but she's, she's not enough. It's hard with her and so easy with some of these others."

"Tell me about your prayers."

"Oh, Father. I pray. I saw this one yesterday, in the grocery store. I saw her and I knew. I whispered three Hail Marys as I tried to walk away. I turned on another aisle and saw her again. Walked on. Said an Our Father and then one more. Then I caught a side view of her. Ohh. All the angels left me. That view: those breasts, her ass, lips, even her eyelashes. She was irresistible, delectable, edible, all kinds of *-ible*, and all I wanted to do was nibble on all that curviness inside those jeans, her tight t-shirt. And I did. I did, Father. It was easy to talk to her and easy to forget everything about my wife."

Compas wanted to sigh but didn't. He let a few seconds pass. "You've been married how long?"

"Eighteen years."

"And you're still with your wife?"

"Yes. Even though there's been others, all these *-ibles*. I admit that, Father."

"Others?"

"This is the third one I've actually been with. But I've surely been tempted by many more."

"But you're still with her?"

"Yes. I still love her anyway. And I don't know how. I don't understand how we're still together, that we still basically love each other."

"Ah. St. Paul, that great expert on sin, said he didn't understand his own actions. And he wasn't at all at peace with sexuality. So maybe your *Anyway* is exactly right."

“What do you mean?”

“You obviously know lust is powerful, sometimes overwhelming. This one looks, smells, walks just so, a cure for all this angst and grief and struggle. And compared to the one we’re already with, the one who’s so ordinary, the other is so much more. We wonder how can we resist, how can we possibly remain faithful.”

“That’s exactly it, Father.”

Compas found himself, again, digging in at the plate. *How to face the temptation when it roars in? What to say to this man in his agony?*

“I don’t have some great insight that will make any of this easier, for you or me. I wrestle with all this too, so I’m no better than you. Maybe the only thing I know—really know—is that God knows we suffer. Christ, the suffering Christ, knows. The prophet Isaiah said the Messiah would be a man of suffering, that *It was our suffering he endured*, that he would *be crushed for our sins*.”

The confessor allowed a silence. “The great God who created the universe, who created us, including our libido, sent his Son to come as a human, to suffer everything we suffer. He knows suffering, knows mine and yours, and though I too try to avoid looking at women and fantasizing about them—and often fail—He still loves us. Accepts us.”

“Anyway, right, Father?”

“Anyway.”

Father Compas absolved the man, listened to him exit the confessional. He stared a moment at the ceiling, took in a deep breath, let it go, and slid open the other screen door.