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Sanctuary

by Danny Scalise

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen." The crowd is almost in unison. The Saturday evening mass isn't well attended at St. John's Parish. At close to 1/3 capacity, the parishioners are on their knees reciting the Hail Mary prayer over and over while an older woman wearing a black lace doily stands up front leading the meditation.

Tommy is near the back. Easier to not be seen and easier to get out quick in the case of emergency. This isn't just his habit at church, it's his habit everywhere. Sit in the back, know the exits, and prepare to get out quickly. He is aware this thought is a little paranoid, but it serves him well. No one attacks him now.

On his knees, he holds the rosary beads in his hands and squeezes on each bead a little harder than necessary as he repeats the prayer. The feeling in the tip of his index finger and thumb are gone from his grip of the sacramental. Finally, the last Hail Mary is complete, they finish the prayer and all in concert everyone sits back in the pew. The gentle knocks of people folding the kneelers up fills the silence.

Tommy still has the smell of smoke and the restaurant on him. He works the early shift Saturdays so he can go to this mass. Being the manager gives him that opportunity, but he leaves work just in time to drive to the church. He smokes a final cigarette in the car finishing in the parking lot. Wearing the uniform, black button up shirt and black slacks with a black belt and black walking shoes, he doesn't stand out. His appearance is unremarkable, but the odor is felt by all those who sit around him, another reason to attend this mass.

At once, a bell is rung in the back of the hall. Everyone stands save for a few guests who quickly realized their mistake and jump to attention. The organ, just slightly out of tune plays as a procession begins walking down the aisle. First an altar boy dressed in a white robe carrying a crucifix held high in the air, then a Deacon carrying a red book emblazoned with a gold cross. Finally, the Priest completes the procession like an emperor parading through his subjects. He isn't the Pope, but you don't know that from the pomp in his gait.

As soon as the Priest's appearance is in the room, Tommy feels the anxiety. His palms instantly sweat. His blood pressure rises. He hears ringing. He can feel a hand on his shoulder even as no one is behind him. Every weekend, Tommy goes through the same thing. A panic attack at the mere sight of the leader of his parish. He never says a word about it.

#

"Tommy, please put that over there." Father Declan Kearney looks at 12 year old Tommy as he is instructing his altar boy how to arrange things for the mass coming up this weekend. Tommy has served his parish in this role for a few years. His mother is very proud of her son's role as a young person in the church. She only misses her weekly mass if she is exceptionally ill. Feeling the pressure from his mother, Tommy volunteers for this assignment.

Father Kearney walks behind the boy and puts his right hand on Tommy's left shoulder. Tommy can feel the odd gaze of a much older man while touching him. The smell of the Priest's deodorant is failing as he wears the polyester garb of his trade. The odor is emanating throughout the sacristy. It even gets past the smell of incense still lingering. His hand stays on the shoulder for too much time, Tommy begins to feel afraid and his flight or fight response is not working. "That's a good boy. Go on and go now. Your mother is probably waiting on you." Father Kearney's tenor voice is followed by two quick pats on the lower part of Tommy's back. He wants to run, but walks quickly without looking back.

#

"Order up." The cook in the back of the house can yell in this building. The restaurant was designed for it. The front of the house sits in front of a large divide, a wall that will keep all of the sounds of a kitchen in place. Patrons can go about their meal without the language of the restaurant industry.

"You caught up yet?" Tommy queries his cook.

"Yeah bossman, we're caught up."

"I'm going outside for a smoke."

"OK."

It's cold outside of the back of the restaurant. The smell of rotten food, spoiled milk, and the exhaust fans from the kitchen are barely covered by Tommy's cigarette. He goes through two packs each day, which eats into his income. That and his flask of vodka keep his anxiety in check. A doctor years ago told him that there were medications that helped, but Tommy isn't crazy. At least he tells himself that as a justification for the vodka and cigarettes.

His flask is hidden in his front left pocket. He quickly pulls it out and takes a sip. From behind, he feels someone approaching. "Got enough of that for me?" One of the waitresses looks at him with a daring smile. She wasn't unattractive, and Tommy never really did well with women. He says to himself he cannot be gay, because he is Catholic. Then he hands her his pack of cigarettes trying to play the situation off.

"I meant the thing in your pants" as she surreptitiously pulls the flask from his pocket. She had been watching him for a minute or so before he noticed and saw where he hid his stash. She opens the flask and quickly takes a drink. "Whoa. Good stuff."

"Give me that back." Tommy lashes at her and grabs the flask. "Shouldn't you be waiting tables."

"On a break, asshole. You could try to be a lot more fun Mr. Manager." She walks back inside.

#

Junior High School is a tough time for any child. Being a teenager for the first time is a challenge. Puberty is no boy's friend. Becoming a man may be a rite of passage, but it harkens no fond memory for most boys. Like any Junior High student, Tommy starts school book bag in tow in late August. It's hot outside and the old brick building has century old casement single

pane windows. There is no air conditioning. The windows are opened and a transom above the door completes a slight breeze, but the entire class sweats.

Tommy is not unlike other teens. He likes girls now, something that never occurred to him just a short time ago. His clothes aren't fitting as well, his mother reminds him they aren't rich enough to buy new shirts and jeans. He feels he is going to be teased for wearing "high waters" as the hem of his jeans doesn't cover his ankles.

After school Tommy walks home and does his homework like his mother expects. Every day, he repeats the process until the weekend, where he is to go and help Father Kearney.

One weekend, Tommy's fear of the Priest's touch to his shoulder or his pat on Tommy's lower back escalates. As they are alone together, Tommy notices the Father Kearney's right hand is on his shoulder but as he turns back, his left hand is under his robe with an unnatural gesticulation. Tommy is embarrassed and afraid. Father Kearney's right hand vibrates a little and releases. "Good boy. Go on now." A familiar phrase to Tommy, but he is beginning to realize what it meant. Father Kearney was finished, for now.

This became a fairly common occurrence. Tommy, uncertain what to do just stood there as it happened. He tried to think about things with his eyes closed. He tried to recite the lyrics of songs in his head, but he couldn't concentrate. And each time he opened his eyes, the first thing he sees is the statue.

The crucifix is ubiquitous in Catholic Churches. The one in the sacristy where Tommy spends his time with Father Kearney is made of multiple pieces of wood. The cross, made of rough cut lumber with a wooden sign at the top. The body of Christ is a wood carving. It is a wonderful example of folk art and is painted. Christ's head bowed as though he had just given

up. His blood stained wounds of his hands, feet, side, and the roughly carved crown of thorns all adorned with blood. The white cloth covering his loin is perfect, with no stain. The look on his face, defeated.

At 13, Tommy knows what this statue is. He understands the crucifix. But why he sees it now is beyond him. Christ isn't there to help him. He feels defeated. Once again, the flight or fight response is broken. He just stands there each time.

To an exponential effect, he must come to mass the next day and help his Priest. He walks down the aisle with another altar boy carrying candles. Once they are gently placed on both sides of the altar, Tommy sits with a view of Father Kearney directly to his side. Every mass he catches the clergyman smiling as he looks at the young boys to his side.

#

Mrs. Nowak's gray hair and crow's feet are starting to show her age. Tommy is over for dinner this Friday night. Having an adult son is odd for her. She doesn't know how to treat him. Is he her friend or still her subordinate? "I didn't see you in Mass this weekend."

"I had to work."

"The Sabbath is holy. You shouldn't work."

"The owners of my restaurant don't see it that way. I have to keep my job."

"How dreadful."

Mrs. Nowak puts supper on the table. Just like it has always been, mother and son enjoying a meal together. Tommy doesn't really enjoy it, but his guilt keeps him coming back to a mother who doesn't know how to love.

"I was thinking the other day about Father Kearney. What a travesty that was those years ago."

"Can we discuss something else?"

"Whatever is that attitude for?"

"I don't want to talk about ancient history." Tommy sees his mother with his eyes, but in his mind's eye, Declan Kearney's body is laying face down.

The two finish their meal and Tommy gets up, puts his dishes in the sink and kisses his mother on the forehead. "I'll see you later, ma."

"I hope to see you at Mass Sunday."

"We'll see." The words get softer as Tommy walks out quickly.

#

Young Tommy has told no one. In fact, he doesn't experience his Priest's touch every weekend, just on occasion. His mother believes Father Kearney should be renamed Saint Kearney. She has placed him in her hierarchy. The Father, Son, Holy Ghost at the top, Mary, then Father Kearney beats out Joseph, the Pope, and all the Saints. She volunteers and makes her son do the same, just uncertain of what he has volunteered for.

Only months before his 14th birthday, another escalation. Tommy, hoping to avoid another of these is preparing the sacramentals as he is told. He feels the Priest's hand on his shoulder and Tommy freezes. The older and taller man moves his hand gently down the side and reaches into Tommy's pants.

Confused and scared. His pulse is up. He hears the ringing. Time stops. Then amidst the ringing, the double pat on the back and the familiar phrase. "Good boy, go on home now."

No one has ever touched Tommy on his private areas. His mother, ever the prude would not approve of him being anything but a perfect well behaved gentleman. He has now been violated. Crying, he walks out thinking to himself this is all his fault.

He tells his mother he isn't feeling well after walking home from the parish. Upstairs in his bedroom, Tommy cries into his pillow. No one is there to protect him. No one is there to hear him confess his sin. The Priest and his mother are supposed to protect him, now he feels she is aware and does nothing. Mother doesn't know, but teenagers figure out quickly parents know things. She must know. She must be ok with it.

#

Standing at the counter of the restaurant, Tommy sees patrons at the bar talking. There is a television behind the bar with the days news on. A story about the retribution the church is getting for the sexual abuse scandal. One man turns to his bar mate, "Its about time. These guys have been covering this up for way too long."

"Nothing will happen from it., never does."

"These lawsuits aren't nothing."

"Most of these pervs are dead now. How is that justice?"

Tommy hears that statement and sees Kearney's body laying in front of him. This was twenty years ago, but it is as fresh in his mind as twenty seconds ago, maybe more so. He plays the final blow over and over again in his head. The wind from the free swing of his arm, the pressure as he stabbed the neck of his assailant. It is the past, and it is the present.

For two decades, Tommy has wrestled with the argument. Was this self-defense or was it sin? He never wins, he never loses. It goes on and on in his head.

#

A month has gone by. Tommy has returned multiple times to the scene of the crime and Father Kearney acts as though nothing happened between them. Doubting his memory, Tommy tried to move on, but just being in the building instills fear. Being around the person who touches him, scares him. No one is around for him. No one protects him.

As they finish their preparations for tomorrow's mass, the hand touches Tommy's shoulder. Tommy's fear keeps him frozen. He feels the abuser's hand movement. A moment of clarity comes as Tommy realizes this escalation will not be the last. He has thought this, but always felt it would change.

Instead of closing his eyes, he looks up. Directly in front of him is a crucifix that usually is placed on the altar. It is cheap, like much of the items in this parish. A pot metal painted to look like gold and from the pews it looks the part. The crucifix's adornments are gothic on the ends and come to a sharp point. It sits on a six inch round base that keeps it from falling over.

In one quick motion, Tommy moves away from the Priest, who doesn't realize what is happening. In full erotic thought, he hasn't realized the difference in Tommy. Tommy takes his right hand, grabs the crucifix and swings it his rapist. The top of the crucifix hits Father Kearney right in his neck, severing his carotid artery. The look of shock on his face is terrifying and something Tommy will never forget.

Father Kearney falls face first into the ground and stops moving. The crucifix is still lodged in Kearney's neck. Tommy kicks his leg. Nothing. No movement. No sound. Tommy abruptly turns around and leaves as quickly as possible.

#

The pain is dulled by the vodka. It takes more now. Just a few years ago, the bottle would last a few days. Now, one a day. This and the two packs of cigarettes are just to maintain. Tommy goes back and forth, will he go to hell or did he defend himself? What if those two are not mutually exclusive.

It's a Saturday and he is partway through his bottle when he starts to take a walk. He sees the church and is beckoned in for some reason, but not before a sacramental shot of vodka from his flask. There is a small queue at the confessional. Tommy sits down and looks at the people ahead of him. He waits thinking about his guilt.

It's his turn, he stands, takes a deep breath and steps into the booth. The sound of a small door opening and he can see the priest through a metal grate. Tommy sits for a minute, but it feels like hours for both men.

"Forgive me Father, for I have sinned." Tommy's first confession in some time.

"Go on my son."

Silence.

"Tommy, are you ok?"

"I can't do this." Tommy stands up and walks out.

#

The phone on the kitchen wall rings loudly. Tommy's mother walks over to it and picks up the phone. "Hello" in her pleasant voice. On the other end of this conversation is a muffled voice. Only his mother can hear it. Her face begins to show surprise, then fear, then tears. She hangs up the phone and calls Tommy into the kitchen.

“Tommy, sweety, there has been an accident.” Her tears getting worse as her voice begins to tremble. “Father Kearney is dead. It seems he fell in the sacristy while praying.”

Afraid, Tommy says nothing. His mother takes his stoicism for sadness, but he can’t believe she thinks he was praying. He begins to wonder how long it will take someone to understand what he did. All the thoughts of the night’s events go through his head. No one else was there. The parish has no cameras or security. No one saw him walk home. Then, a slight rapping comes from the home’s entrance.

Tommy’s mother, pats her hands down her dress and tried to stand up straight. She wipes the tears from her eyes and walks to the door. Through the glass she can tell that two police officers are at her door. “Mrs. Nowak?” An officer asks.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Is your son Tommy home?”

“What, may I ask, is this for?”

“Father Declan Kearney was found dead this evening. According to the parish secretary, Tommy was with him earlier and could have been the last person to see him alive. We think it was an accident, but need to talk with him.”

“Yes, of course.” In polite tone, then turns her head and raises her voice. “Tommy.” She immediately turns back to the two officers and invites them in to her humble home. In the kitchen, they sit at the table and she asks if they’d like something to drink.

“You’re very kind to offer Miss Nowak, but no thank you, we’ll be quick.”

“Mrs. Nowak.”

“I’m sorry ma’am. Is your husband not home.”

"Tommy's father is not. I haven't seen him in some time." The officers realizing there are domestic issues that do not need addressed at this time.

The awkwardness in the room sits in the air like a thing smog. It chokes any conversation out of the new acquaintances. Tommy, who didn't stray too far, walks in the room and sees two police officers. He freezes. Maybe he should just confess and be done with it.

"Tommy, your mom tells me you're aware that Father Kearney passed away earlier. Is that true."

"Yes, sir."

"We believe it was an accident, but it's my understanding you were the last person to see him alive. Is that true?"

"I saw him earlier at the parish. We were setting up for mass tomorrow." Tommy is still very nervous and he begins to sweat. His eyes move briskly around the room as he studies the look on the face of each officer and then his mother before coming back to the conversation. Now testing his ability, he asks, "Do you know what happened?"

"Father Kearney was a little older. We believe he slipped and fell. It was an accident."

"I didn't see that happen." Tommy thinks to himself that he hasn't technically lied yet. "I walked out after we finished."

"OK, that's what we thought. Tommy, thank you for being brave and talking to us." The tone is meant to reassure, but it shrank him. "Mrs. Nowak, my apologies for the late hour of our visit." He drew out the Mrs. Part showing her that he listened.

"Yes, of course. If you'll show yourselves out, we are in mourning for the loss of Father Kearney."

"Good night ma'am."

Tommy goes up to his room. Neither he, nor his mother speak further that evening for different reasons. She, in mourning. He, dealing with guilt. Tommy lays on his bed and looks up at the white ceiling and stares at a water stain from a roof failure a couple of years ago. He sees the imperfection in his ceiling and starts to pray.

But he can't. He feels guilty and wants ask for forgiveness. But God hasn't asked for forgiveness. God put him in that room. Jesus watched him from the cross as he was attacked. How can he pray to a God that let that happen? How can he be forgiven for breaking a commandment?

#

Mrs. Nowak is watching her nightly news program. A slight rapping at her door. She wonder to herself what could it be. She thinks Tommy must be here, but why would he knock. As she gets to the door, the silhouette is familiar. Two police officers.

"Mrs. Nowak?"

"Yes, officer, what can I do for you?"

" Is Tomasz Nowak your son?" He over pronounces the 'z' showing he isn't Polish.

"Yes, where is he? Is something the matter? He's not in jail, is he?" Mother is getting worked up thinking of what Tommy has done.

"Mrs. Nowak, I don't know how to tell you this, we found Tommy. He left a note."

As she reads his suicide note, the horror of her son's pain stabs her in the heart. She never imagined Tommy killed anyone. 'He's a good boy,' she always told herself. Reading the note, tears begin dropping from her eyes. She doesn't realize she is crying.

"Thank you officers." She says in an attempt to pull herself together. The two policemen disappear and she closes the door. She grabs her coat and doily before walking to the church. She lets herself in and finds the Priest there.

"Mrs. Nowak, how are you?"

Silence.

"Can I help you with something?"

More silence.

"Mrs. Nowak?"

"Can we pray for Tommy?"

"Is he ok?" Knowing he saw Tommy earlier at his attempted confession.

Her hand is shaking. She begins to cry. In the stillness of the church late in the evening, she understands what her son did, but still doesn't grasp her part. "He was a good boy. And he killed twice."