

The Request

Peter was smoking behind the bushes to the side of St. John's, the small church he had attended since childhood. He positioned himself so he could see who came and went: his son's baseball coach, his old high school flame, his work nemesis from the tannery, and so on, but no one could see him. The waiting and watching had become a weekly ritual, as Peter never felt free to walk right in as the others did.

Although he committed fewer sins than he used to, it was no easier to confess them. This paradox was what he was contemplating as he tossed his cigarette butt into the bush, then he wondered whether it was really a paradox at all or irony or just something that made no damn sense? As he entered, he whispered a short prayer, nothing fancy, something he picked up in AA, hoping this small effort would save him, at least until next week.

As he approached the confessional, Peter heard weeping. In his time outside on this particular day, he hadn't seen anyone enter. Curious, despite better judgment, he continued forward. The last thing he wanted to do was interrupt another poor soul's quest for forgiveness, but something felt very wrong. The curtain to the right of the confessional was quivering; he could feel a slight breeze blowing from inside.

Upon reaching to draw back the curtain, a chill and the strong smell of incense overtook him bringing him back to a different time. He held onto the curtain tightly like he was trying to squeeze something out of it. It felt like the tablecloths his parents used at the Italian restaurant they owned when he was a kid.

Suddenly, the cry from inside turned to a plea, "God, please help me." Peter immediately recognized the voice as one that had haunted him since adolescence. He jumped back and let the curtain slip.

According to the arrangement, Father James wasn't supposed to be conducting confession on Fridays. Peter and the others hadn't asked for much, hadn't made the fuss they could have. Couldn't the church at least respect their one minor request? He momentarily forgot the cry and considered marching over to the parish office to wage a formal complaint. Before he could this, the voice called out again, "Is someone there? I ... think it's a heart attack."

Peter knew he should do something. He was no saint, but he wasn't vicious. After all, hadn't he been taught forgiveness lead to salvation? The elderly priest was not the same man he encountered years ago, and his death could not take away what happened.

Despite this sound reasoning, Peter couldn't be moved to get help. He looked up at the sunlit stain glass window above. The scene depicted a young St. John the Baptist bartering before he become the reforming zealot obsessed with the justice of God, before his head was presented on a platter. Peter acknowledged nothing in his image and walked away.