THE
SPLINTER
Remittance Girl
The Splinter
by Remittance Girl
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“Most likely to become a nun,” Mrs. Gutierrez said, stabbing her bony finger at the text on the page of the glossy yearbook. “We’re a good Catholic family, Father Steven, but this—and in her high school year book! I don’t want my daughter becoming a nun. She’s all I have, my only child. You have to talk to her, Father.”

Father Steven sat across the table from Dolores’s mother and nodded sagely, the way he always did when he was letting one of his parishioners vent. He was actually in full agreement with Eugenia Gutierrez, but was hesitant to elaborate. She pushed the yearbook across the kitchen table to where the priest sat, rattling his teacup in its saucer.

The kitchen was cramped and full of shabby knickknacks. Memorial plates, plastic flowers, a parade of little miniature saints and gaudy devotional candles sat on almost every available surface. The walls were hung with images of the Virgin Mary in her habitual blue cloak. One was clutching a baby Jesus to her chest; the other held her hands wide, exposing a lurid pink heart. Over the melamine kitchen table, a plastic shaded lamp gave everything stark, grimy outlines.

Looking down at the open book, Father Steven recognized a number of the kids. Each was posed in that awkward school-portrait way: bodies angled sideways, faces staring into the lens, their forms framed by an improbably blue sky with puffy clouds. Dolores Gutierrez was in the second row from the top. A fragile girl with long, dark hair parted in the middle and tucked neatly behind her ears. Brown eyes stared up at him and only a hint of a smile showed on her lips. She had a strong chin, like her mother’s. A pretty girl, as her mother had been until work and grief and dental problems had eaten away at her face.

“It’s the same as before, Father. Dolores takes her penance a little too seriously. I thought she’d grow out of it, but—”

Father Steven nodded again. “Still at it, is she?”

Mrs. Gutierrez looked down into her camomile tea, as if she were the Oracle of Delphi. “I don’t know where she gets it from, all this obsession with saints and martyrs. I know you think I’m to blame, but I didn’t tell her those kind of stories. I’ve always thought those stories were not very nice. My sister, Carmen, from San Diego, says I am too strict with her, that I should encourage her to go out more and have a good time. But look at where we live? I want her to have friends. But not in a gang—no! I want her to be a good girl, and find a nice novio and get married.”
Father Steven reached out and patted Mrs. Gutierrez on the hand. “I’ve spoken to her before and I can try again, if you’d like, but she’s of legal age, Eugenia. If she wants to become a nun, and the convent accepts her into the novitiate, there’s not much any of us can do about it.”

“It’s because of her father died, isn’t it?” Mrs. Gutierrez stared at her cupboards as if they were some distant horizon. “If Alfonso hadn’t died—if there had been a man around the house, maybe she’d be happy and looking forward to starting a normal life with family of her own. But she doesn’t want a normal life. She wants to be a nun.”

Struggling to follow the logic, the priest lifted an eyebrow.

“Oh! I didn’t mean to infer that nuns aren’t normal, Father.” Mrs Gutierrez rushed to cover her embarrassment. “The Sisters of the Sacred Heart have been a blessing to our community. I just meant that…”

“Yes, yes, Eugenia. I understand. It’s a special calling that few hear and even fewer follow. A mother naturally wants the comfort of grandchildren. I’ll do my very best to make her see reason.”

“Oh, thank you, Father. I’m so relieved. I’m sure that you can make her see reason.”

The priest stood up from the table, put his dusty black hat on, and allowed Mrs. Gutierrez to help him as he shrugged his big shoulders into his overcoat. “Tell her to come see me on Thursday evening after the Stations of the Cross, in the rectory. I’ll have another chat with her.”

On his walk home, Father Steven was thankful of the chilly autumn evening air. The smell of burning leaves curled round the houses like an old familiar cat. He tried to keep the limp out of his gait, but his hip was giving him pain, an old football injury from a time before time when his world had been a diorama of possibilities.

That was before he had been called to the service of God. He didn’t regret answering, and now he had even more respect for the people who did, but Dolores Gutierrez had no business becoming a nun. She was just too—it was hard to find a word for what she was—devout? Fanatical? She was too fascinated by far with the harsher aspects of Catholicism. He was a Pentecostal man himself.

The neighbourhood had changed and, with it, his parishioners. When he had first been posted to the parish, it had been full of Irish; now there were very few left. The Hispanics had come and brought their strange brand of mysticism...
with them: miracles and visions and bleeding palms, a calendar like a crown of thorns. Their relationship with God was so—he hated to use the word, but it fit—passionate. They were either shooting each other from moving vehicles, or lining up for communion. Their interpretations were so literal, so cruel. It wasn’t that Father Steven didn’t believe in hell. He just disagreed with most of his parishioners on its location.

When Dolores was thirteen, Father Steven had caught her making her way up to the transept of St. Matthew’s on bare, bloodied knees. She was staring up at the crucified Christ with tears streaming down her pretty little face. When he’d asked her what she thought she was up to, she’d told him: “I’m atoning for my sins, Father. I’m paying for them with pain, just like Jesus.”

Even now the unnaturalness of those words coming from the mouth of a thirteen-year-old child made him cringe. Mrs. Gutierrez had visited him not once, but twice, worried about her daughter’s fixation with penance. First she complained that the girl wouldn’t eat. Then, later, she said she knew that Dolores was hurting herself, because she had seen the welts on her back one day.

Father Steven chewed his jaw as he walked. He felt a little guilty that he’d brushed her off, that he’d not asked more questions. That kind of behaviour was not natural, especially in a girl of her age. At one time, the church would have welcomed her kind with open arms. Now, the priest thought, we’re a bit more responsible.
TWO

Dolores smoothed her skirt, tucked her hair behind her ears and knocked on the door that connected St. Matthew’s Church to the rectory. She knew exactly why her mother wanted her to speak to Father Steven, but she wasn’t looking forward to it.

“Come in,” the old priest called.

Letting herself in, she walked down the short hallway to Father Steven’s office. It was an open-plan affair with rainbow posters sporting numerous doves of peace. A priest’s office should be more serious. After all, he was God’s representative. And shouldn’t an emissary of Christ take more pride in his appearance? His collar was undone, his thin grey hair stuck up in places, and she could see food stains on his jacket. He was a good man, but a little messy, Dolores thought.

“My mom said you wanted to see me, Father.”

The priest got up and shuffled around his desk, clearing a stack of papers off a chair. “Indeed, indeed. Have a seat, Dolores.”

When she accepted the chair and he’d lowered his large, tall frame into his seat, Father Steven laced his fat fingers together on the desk. “So, you’re still interested in entering the novitiate, I hear.”

Here it comes, thought Dolores. She sat up straight in her chair and tried to look unswayable. “Well, I haven’t changed my mind, if that’s what you mean, Father.”

The talk took the direction she’d imagined it would: How the fourth commandment was to honour your mother and father; how the life of a nun was only for a very special sort of person; how a good Catholic could serve the church in many ways as a member of the laity. She’d heard it all before, but she made herself listen, trying to keep any annoyance out of her heart. When he finished, Dolores got up.

“Don’t you have any response to those objections?”

“No.” She gave him a smile she hoped was full of obedience and meekness, as a smile should be.

“You’ve given it sincere thought and prayer?”
“I have, Father. And I’m not going to change my mind. I know I am called to the church and to serve God.”

“How do you know?”

She was a little taken aback by the question. She’d used those phrases to explain her decision often, and everyone else had accepted them—well, except her mother. But her mother didn’t understand how strong the call was, couldn’t understand how much she loved God and needed to be with Him. Her mother acted like this was the only case in the world of someone wanting to become a nun. But Saint Catherine had decided to join the sisterhood when she was eleven, and Santa Rosa just a little later.

“It would take a long time to explain, Father. And I’m sure you’re busy.”

“Why don’t you sit back down, young lady? If you’re going to spend the rest of your life in a convent, you can afford to spare a few minutes with me.”

Reluctantly she retook her seat, itching to remind him that very few nuns actually lived in convents anymore. She was pretty sure he knew that.

“I’ve prayed and prayed and I just know it in my heart. I’ve attended Mass every day since I could get here on my own, I’ve gone to confession every week since then, I do my penance with joy in my heart. I love Christ, and I want to become his bride.”

The priest cocked his head to one side. “What is it you love so much about Christ?”

“He suffered for us. He gave his life and died on la Sagrada Cruz to cleanse the world of sin.”

“Indeed he did! So there’s really no reason for you to suffer with such zeal now, is there? Unless of course, you think you can do a better job of suffering than our Dear Lord did.”

Dolores felt her cheeks burn. This was the trap they could always catch you in when you were devout—the sin of pride. Of course she didn’t think that her sufferings could ever, ever compare with those of Jesus’s. And it irked her that her mother had been sharing her private acts with the priest.

“She had no right to tell you about that. That’s between me and God.”

“Old as I am, I’m still the shepherd of my flock, including you, Dolores. Making too much of your sins is prideful, you know. And that, if I may remind you, is one of the seven deadly sins. You’re eighteen, for Pete’s sake. Exactly
how much sinning could you have done? There’s never been anything in your confessions to warrant the kind of punishment you seem to think you deserve.”

“Oh, it’s not just my sins I’m atoning for, Father, but other people’s sins, too. Since they won’t confess or do penance, it’s my duty to do it for them.” It was irritating to have to explain something so obvious, especially to a priest. And besides, it wasn’t just about penance. But she couldn’t tell him that.

“And that sort of thing,” said Father Steven, “is exactly why you have no business becoming a nun. That is not accepted Catholic doctrine. No soul should have to pay for any sins except his or her own, other than original sin, of course.”

“Eve was a bad woman, Father.” Dolores clutched onto something biblical and familiar. She wanted to get him off the topic of penance and couldn’t think of another way to do it. “She ate from the forbidden fruit. She had carnal knowledge.”

“Very few people haven’t. If you’re going to beat yourself for all of us, we should check you into the hospital now.”

“But what about Santa Teresa, San Juan, Saint Catherine and Saint Jerome?” Dolores searched her mind for all the saints she’d read about who had practiced mortification of the flesh—there were so many. Just thinking about them and their lives, and the wonderful closeness they had to God, made her want be like them: to run home, strip off her shirt and put on her cîlice—the waistcoat made of rough metal wire—that she kept hidden in her closet under a stack of Seventeen magazines. “And...what about Santa Rosa, who wore a crown of thorns just like Jesus, so she could feel his sweet pain?”

“They’re all dead.” Father Steven said it as if that’s what they deserved. “We don’t do that sort of thing any more. The church, thank God, has changed somewhat since the middle ages.”

“The Opus Dei still practice the discipline. Are they not members of the church?” Let’s see him refute that, Dolores thought, and then chided herself for her impatience and her pride.

“I’ve been your priest all your life, haven’t I? Your confessor?”

Dolores looked at him, knowing what was coming next.

“I presided at your confirmation and I gave you your first communion. I think I’ve more than proved my Catholic credentials to you, yes? This kind of behaviour you’re indulging in is only practiced by a small minority of Catholic extremists—and for good reason. It is generally agreed that mortification of the
flesh serves to concentrate the mind on the flesh rather than on loftier, more Godly things, making it a self-defeating exercise. It used to be that we thought it was an admirable thing, but now we know better. We know that people who do this sort of thing are mentally disturbed.”

“Disturbed?” Dolores crossed her arms over her chest and dug her fingers into the flesh. “Are you saying I’m crazy? Because I love God? Because I want to be close to Him?”

“No. I’m saying that it isn’t natural to beat yourself. And people who do it usually have problems.” Father Steven tilted his head. “I just think that perhaps there is something that is not quite right in your life, Dolores. Is there something you’d like to tell me about?” he said in a softer voice.

Tears pricked at the corner of her eyes. She set her jaw and shook her head. “Nothing, Father. And I’m not crazy. I just want to be like the saints. I want to have a pure soul. Is that so wrong?”

Shifting in his seat, the priest closed his eyes. “There is nothing wrong with wanting to be a good Christian, Dolores. But hurting yourself is no longer an accepted form of devotion. This is my opinion on the matter, but I’d like you to talk to someone who has thought about this issue a lot more than I have. Are you willing to do that?” he asked, opening his eyes, as if on doing it, she would have disappeared like a bad dream.

How wonderful would it be to talk with someone who actually knew something about the ‘discipline’? The thought sent a delightful tingle up her spine. “Of course I would, Father. I’d like to very much.”

“Fine then. I’ll see what I can arrange.”

“Thank you, Father.” Dolores stood up and was about to leave when she remembered the reason she’d come in the first place. “And if I still want to become a nun?”

Father Steven gave her a tired look. “We’ll see. Now get out of my office, you silly girl. And don’t bleed on my carpet on the way out.”

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When the door closed behind the girl, Father Steven gave a sigh of relief and opened his bottom drawer. He pulled out his bottle of malt whiskey and poured a few fingers into a scratched glass he kept in the same drawer. He raised it and looked at the crucifix on the wall beside his desk. “You’ve got a lot to answer for, you know,” he said, and downed the liquid in one gulp.
He didn’t really blame Christ for Dolores Gutierrez’s problems. He’d always seen the Redeemer as a loving and gentle influence on humanity. The church had lost its way many times as far as he was concerned. Far too many unspeakable things had been done in the name of God’s only son. Not the least of which was putting greater importance on punishment than on redemption.

But Dolores was a special case. He couldn’t put his finger on what was so wrong with her, but she made him uncomfortable. A harsh pride that hung around her shoulders like a cloak, heavy and impenetrable. Even when she appeared to be on the verge of tears, the sorrow didn’t make her milder or more communicative; those tears would come down like a glass wall, shutting him and the rest of the world out. As much as he didn’t want to think about it, he had to wonder if Mrs. Gutierrez hadn’t, somehow, caused this in her daughter. Perhaps she’d abused her—or perhaps someone else had. But no one sane, especially not so young, would indulge in such behaviour for no reason.

He wasn’t a psychologist. He didn’t know much about these things. He knew about adultery and violence and alcoholism. He knew all about people who had lost their faith for good reason, and those who had thrown it away. He knew about greed and envy and sloth, too. But he didn’t really know about people like Dolores. And, if it he were to be completely honest with himself, he didn’t want to, either.

Sifting through the mess on his desk, the priest found his address book and, opening it to the letter ‘S’, he began to dial his phone.

After finishing the call, Father Steven closed his eyes and smiled. He was pretty sure that once Dolores Gutierrez got a look at Brother Simon, she’d reconsider her position on mortification. If she still believed the sisterhood was for her, well, at least she’d be entering it with a slightly less violent relationship with God.
THREE

The bus ride took longer than Dolores had thought, and by the time she’d reached the address Father Steven had given her, a cold, thin rain had started. She faced the front steps of a large, shabby-looking brick building, climbed them, and rang the bell.

A young guy answered the door; he wasn’t much older than her, she guessed. His jeans were stained and ripped in places and he wore a faded blue Queen T-shirt. His shaggy, greasy hair, skinny, bruised arms and acne-pocked face made her suspect he did a lot of drugs; all the loser guys at high school looked like that. She glanced down at the address written on the piece of paper to check it again.

“Yeah?” He grinned and looked her over in exactly the sort of way that made Dolores hate the boys at her high school.

“Maybe I’ve got the wrong address. I’m looking for Brother Simon. Is he here?”

“Yup, Si’s here.” The boy pulled the door open. “Come on in.”

Dolores entered the house and noticed the grungy hallway. The linoleum on the floor was worn down to the boards in places and the walls were peeling up near the ceiling. It smelled like cat spray, disinfectant and latex paint.

“Where do I go?” she asked.

“He’s in there.” The boy pointed down the corridor to a frosted glass door that was closed. Before she took a step, he’d raced past her and, turning to the right, began taking a steep set of stairs two at a time.

She walked down the hallway and, knocking at the doorframe, Dolores peered through the glass but could see nothing. “Hello? Brother Simon?”

The man who pulled the door open was tall, very tall. His head was shaved so only a shimmer of pale bristle sparkled as it caught the light. When he stepped under the bare bulb hanging in the hallway, the sight of his face made her freeze.

“You can scream if you want. Lots of people do.”

The skin on his face was seamed with scars. There was a pair of parallel lines running from just below his eyes to his chin, two on either side of his forehead, and a thatched pattern of smaller scars that ribbed his face on both sides from his
cheekbones to his jawline. Worst of all was that his lower lip was cleft cleanly down the middle. When he smiled, the gap made by the cut widened to show a row of even, white teeth.

“Are you…Brother Simon?”

“Si actually. Just Si is good. And you’re Dolores, right?”

“R-right.” She could hardly believe that Father Steven had sent her to see such a freak. Dolores had imagined she’d be having a nice chat on practice and doctrine with an old monk in a habit—well, maybe not a habit—but this man was wearing combat trousers and a ratty plaid shirt.

He dominated the doorway and, when he reached out and guided her through it, she flinched.

“Easy. I look scary, but I’m not,” he said, leading her to an easy chair that faced a frumpy tweed sofa. “Steven Hollis said you might like to have a talk. I’m happy to do that, but I’ll give you a minute to get used to my face if you want. Coffee?”

Dolores sat down and heard the rusty springs squeal beneath her. “No, I’m fine.”

Brother Simon lowered his large body onto the couch and stretched out a pair of very long legs. “You sure?”

“Yes, thanks.”

Dolores crossed her legs at the ankles and pulled the hem of her skirt down, trying to cover her knees. It was just that bit too short when she sat down.

“Wow! You’ve got some war wounds of your own, I see. Didn’t get those falling off a bicycle, did you?”

Dolores looked down at the web of white scars that criss-crossed her knees, and then covered them with her hands, feeling awkward. “How do you know?”

“I just know. That’s all. I know a lot about scars.”

She wasn’t sure how to respond to that, so she changed the subject. “What is this place?”

“It’s a halfway house. For ex-junkies.”

“Oh.”

“I run it. My order focuses on work within the community.”
“Oh,” Dolores echoed. She gnawed on her lower lip, feeling very out of place. “Were you in an accident or something?” Even as the words came out, she cringed. She knew better than to make a point of someone’s disability—it was mean—but this man kind of made her feel mean. It was an unkind thought and she scratched her knee with her fingernail, to remind herself to atone for it later.

“That’s one way of putting it.”

Simon shifted on the couch, leaning back and clasping his hands over his stomach. He looked like a slob, waiting for the football game to begin on TV. “Why’d you figure Father Steven wanted us to meet?”

“I’m… I’m not sure.”

“You don’t want to guess?”

“Because of my… devotions, I guess.” When Father Steven had suggested the meeting, it had sounded like a good idea at the time. But now she wasn’t so sure. It seemed too personal now. Too private. “He said you knew a lot more about penance than he did and that I should talk to you before deciding whether to enter the novitiate.”

“Hmmm.” He beamed her a crooked smile. “And what do you think now?”

“Now? Now I don’t really know. Are you a real monk? Are you even Catholic?”

Brother Simon chuckled. “Oh, yes. Yes to both. But let me ask you something. You know, tit for tat?”

“Sure, I guess.”

“You practice the discipline, right?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about it.”

Suddenly the room felt very small, and the smell of cat spray seemed overwhelming. Dolores fought to keep herself still. “I… You know, I don’t think I want to.”

The man sat forward and rested his elbows on his knees. For all the scars, he had a very open face. Too open, maybe, and searching. “Oh, why? Are you ashamed about it?”

“No,” Dolores thought for a moment, “It’s just… it’s just very personal, that’s
all. I don’t think it’s anyone else’s business.”

“Convenient, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“That it’s private. I find that a lot of the things people claim are private are actually things they’re ashamed of.”

“Why would I need to be ashamed about it?” She could hardly breathe now. A nasty slug of sweat slid down her back. “I’m not ashamed.”

“Okay,” he said, leaning back again. He had grey eyes, and they bored into her. The smile disappeared. “Just how much do you like pain?”

It wasn’t just the question, it was the way he asked it that made Dolores want to get up and leave. But she sat firm; she’d taught herself a lot about how to curb her instincts. “Like pain? Don’t be silly. I don’t like pain.”

“Liar.”

It was as if he’d tossed the word and the word was a big hairy spider; it landed with a soft plop in her lap. “That’s a pretty horrible thing to say. You don’t even know me.”

“Believe me, I know an addict when I see one.”

Dolores shook her head and put on a smile she didn’t feel. “Look. You know what? I don’t think I want to talk to you. I don’t think this is going to help me at all,” she muttered, getting up. A fury suddenly bubbled up inside her and took her by surprise. Anger was a sin, she reminded herself sternly. “I think I should go.”

Simon didn’t get up. He sat on the couch looking at her with an ugly, wrecked grin. “Sure. You do that. But do me a favour. Stay away from the holy orders. There are enough nut-jobs in the church already.”

She glared at him. “You should know.”

“I surely should,” he agreed. He was laughing, as if it was funny.

Dolores felt him follow her out with his eyes. She didn’t look back—she didn’t need to. The recently formed scabs on her back itched in the sweat and in the heat of his stare.

* * * *

“Who was the babe?” asked Jacob. He looked down and smeared at the paint drops that had just splattered onto his favourite Queen T-shirt.
“None of your business.”

Simon stood halfway up the ladder, rolling flat white onto the damp-stained wall in the upstairs back dormitory. “Hold the paint tray a little closer, will you?”

“She’s hot, Si. I mean, well, in that innocent little Red Riding Hood way. You’re old, but you’re not dead, man. You must have noticed.”

“I noticed.”

“So… who is she? Why don’t you introduce her ‘round the next time she comes over.”

“There might not be a next time,” Simon said, “and anyway, she’s got enough problems of her own, without meeting you.”

“Fuck you’re cruel, dude.”

“And you, Jacob, are a junkie. Do you really think you need a woman in your life right now?”

The boy knelt down on the papered floor and poured a large dollop of paint from an open can onto the tray. “No… guess not. But she was kinda hot.”

“That she was. Too hot for you, buddy.”

“Ain’t no such thing. You just want her all to yourself, you perv.”

Simon laughed. “Nah. Opposites attract. The young lady and I have far too much in common.”

“So, why’d she come over?”

The roller made a squelching noise as Simon drew it over the paint in the tray. “To talk.”

“Didn’t sound like it ended so well. She slammed the door on her way out. I guess you didn’t use your charm on her.”

“Do you remember the first time we met, Jacob?”

“Oh, yeah. I was toasted.”

“And how did that go?”

“I think I told you to go fuck yourself, then I left.”

Simon nodded his head. “Do you see a pattern?”

Jacob stared up at the wall, squinting. “I don’t see a pattern, Si. Just a lot of
white."

Brushing a dusting of paint off his scarred cheek, Simon sighed. “That’s why you’re still here.”
FOUR

Dolores knelt in the acid light filtering through her bedroom window, gazing up at the cross above her dresser. Her flail lay dormant in her hand, resting on a bare thigh.

Ever since her visit with Brother Simon, the discipline had felt different. It was fine until the pain became too much for her. But then, instead of being replaced with that wonderful soaring, singing sensation, and the glow that had surrounded everything she looked at, and feeling that God, in the form of the Angel Gabriel or the Virgin stood near her, she just felt sick. Sick and empty.

If only she could focus on how deep her sins were. If only she could keep her mind on how every stroke of the flail on her back was slicing a little more of that awful filth away from her soul… maybe she could keep it up longer, and the sweet sensations would return.

She yearned for the relief that came when her heart shone like pure polished gold, free from all stain, from any taint of evil. She would get up on her knees and arch her back, pushing out her chest to show Him how clean she had made herself. In those moments her whole body vibrated with an invisible, divine energy. It streaked from her toes all the way to her head and back down again. Every muscle quivered with the joy of knowing that she was just that much closer to the purity He required of her.

Dolores closed her eyes and recalled what she’d read in the little, worn book she kept under her pillow: “One perfection is that of those who give themselves up wholly to the castigation of the body, doing great and severe penance.”

If she could just be strong, she could fight her way through the confusion that had plagued her soul ever since her visit to Brother Simon. The minute she felt a faint twitch between her thighs, she raised her flail and began again, to lash her back as fast as she could manage, imagining the Redeemer before her. She moaned softly against her tightly pressed lips. Only when she couldn’t trust herself to stay quiet any longer, when His image grew hazy and indistinct, did she slow her pace. Her body stiffened and she let herself fall forward onto the carpet. For a moment, she thought she could hear singing, but then the nausea came again.
“Dolores.”

“Hello, Brother Simon.”

She stood in the doorway, trying to remember what she’d planned to say. It was gone from her head now.

“I’m glad you came back. Want to come in and talk?” He didn’t wait for her to answer, but waved her through the hallway towards his room.

Dolores took the chair she’d had last time. The springs squealed exactly as they had before, like a small animal being tortured.

“Want coffee?”

She shook her head and kept her eyes on the hands in her lap.

“Tea?”

“No. Nothing. I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine to me.”

Words fluttered just beyond her reach.

“What made you decide to come back?” Simon settled himself on the tweed couch, at the periphery of her vision.

She couldn’t keep the anger out of her eyes as she looked up at him, but she tried to make her voice sound calm. “I think you know.”

“Maybe I do. But why don’t you tell me anyway.”

“You took something from me. Something precious to me. Something that was a very important part of my relationship with God.”

Simon nodded as if he understood something.

“I didn’t take anything from you, Dolores. I just suggested you view that relationship in a different light.”

“You took it…” she whispered. “I hate you for that. I know it’s a sin but I can’t help it; I hate you.”

“Because it doesn’t get you off anymore?”
“Fuck you,” she muttered. She returned her gaze to her hands.

Simon got up and walked around to the back of her chair. “Does saying that feel better?”

“No. You know it doesn’t. Nothing does.”

He stood behind her and she felt him put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s a different kind of pain though, isn’t it? The physical kind seems so much simpler.”

“Cleaner,” she whispered.

“Purer,” he replied.

“Sacred.”

“Ecstatic.”

“True.”

“Yes, true,” he agreed. “Those are the lies we tell ourselves.”

“No!” Dolores shouted. “They’re not lies!”

She felt him slip his hand under her chin and he pulled her head back swiftly, until she was looking up into his scarred face.

“Yes, they are. They’re the lies we tell to give ourselves permission to do it over, and over again.” He bent until his face was close to hers. “Because it’s so sweet, so delicious, so good…and we can’t stop.”

“Shut up!” She screamed into his face. “You make it sound so…”

“Dirty?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, it is. Everything born of lies is.” He let her chin go and straightened himself.

She tracked him as he walked to the couch and sat back down. It was then that she felt the sting of tears on her face. She hadn’t noticed them arrive, but they were there all the same.

“Tell me, what do you use?”

What the hell was he talking about?

“I don’t use drugs.”

“Oh, don’t be dense. You know what I mean.”
She did. And she was damned if she was going to be ashamed of it. Dolores sat up in the chair and gave him a glare. “A cilice.”

“Wow, that’s classy. And what else?”

“A flail,” she said, grudgingly.

“Now there’s a traditionalist’s tool! Where’d ya find that?”

“I bought it online.”

He laughed, it sounded snide and nasty. “Not from the Divinity Supply Store, I guess.”

“Shut up!” There wasn’t much conviction in her voice and she knew it. She felt tired.

“Where from, Dolores?”

“Somewhere else.”

“Shame the devil, tell the truth. Come on.”

“Bondage Warehouse. Okay? You can laugh now. I bet you can’t wait.”

But he didn’t. In fact, he gave her the kindest smile he’d ever offered her. “I’m not laughing, Dolores. It’s not funny. There’s a good reason why you had to buy it there. That’s exactly where it belongs.”

A tear dripped from the edge of her jaw onto her hand. She shook it off. Then another fell. And another. She sniffed.

“Do you get it now? Any little lights coming on?”

Dolores shook her head and felt a stream of tears trickle down her cheeks. She kept on shaking it, as if doing so could keep away all the implications that were flying across like those metal stars in ninja movies.

“Yes you do. I can see you do,” he said gently, getting to his feet. “Let me get you some Kleenex.”

She heard him rummaging around, and she started when a floral box appeared in front of her face. Simon pulled a series of sheets from it and tucked them into her hand. Then he crouched down in front of her, settling the box on her knees. Dolores dabbed at her eyes with the wadded up tissues.

“I’m sorry. Dolores. Right now, I’m really glad I’m not in your shoes, because I’ve been there and I know what it feels like. I wouldn’t want to live through that more than once.”
“Why?” she croaked.

“Because it was bad enough the first time…”

“No! Why?” she repeated as another flood of tears tripped over her lids. “Why did God do this to me?”

“I don’t know that he did. And if he did, I don’t know why.” Simon reached and cradled her cheek with his hand. “I’m so sorry.”

Sorry? What was ‘sorry’? she wondered. How did ‘sorry’ help the horrible ripping shame she felt was going to pull her chest apart? And when it did, what would be inside? Not a shining golden heart, not a beam of divine light, just a black and ugly thing. Oh, God. What was she going to do with all the hollowed out space inside her?

“Oh my God! I…I want to just die.” And she meant it. Never before had she been so sure that nothingness would be the closest thing to heaven she could possibly imagine.

Simon put his arms around her shoulders and hugged her. She didn’t want him to touch her, but she felt too empty to protest.

“I know,” he whispered. “But it will pass.”
Brother Simon paced over the paisley carpet in Father Steven’s study. The priest, sitting behind his desk, glass of whisky in hand, watched the younger man.

“I should be worried?”

Simon shrugged impatiently. “I…I don’t know. Yes, probably. She’s at a pretty delicate time in her life. I’d suggest speaking with her mother, but honestly, how do you go about doing that without, well, breaking a whole lot of confidences?”

“Would you say that your discussion could be covered by the rules of the confessional?” Father Steven worried the liquid in his glass, swirling it around.

“No. Not really. But from an ethical perspective, it would still be a betrayal of a confidence.”

The priest swallowed the last of his drink and leaned back in his office chair. “So what do you suggest?”

“She probably needs to see a counsellor of some sort. My gut feeling is that it’s the usual story. She’s sublimating sexual urges, reinterpreting them as religious devotion, and beating down the physical feelings with pain. Pretty textbook stuff.”

“Are you sure you won’t have one?” Steven Hollis offered, pouring himself another measure.

Simon shook his head, and kept pacing. “I am a little worried about her, though. She needs some guidance through this.”

“So why send her to another stranger? She came clean about it to you. She obviously trusts you. Why don’t you counsel her?”

Brother Simon stopped, jammed his hands into his pockets and looked at the priest. “I can’t. I just don’t have time. Not with the halfway house having to move and all. I’ve got my hands full.”

Father Steven narrowed his eyes. “Got any more excuses?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Jesus, Steven, you can be a real son of a bitch sometimes.”

Laughing away the insult, Father Steven sat up and leaned over his desk. “I think you are the perfect person to counsel her. You have a unique perspective
of her problem, you’ve gone through something similar yourself and you feel compassion for her. Who better than you to see her through it? Anyway, the halfway house is a perfect place to keep an eye on her, and you can keep her busy painting or something. She’s going to need something to make her feel like she’s doing God’s work.”

Simon walked over to the desk and looked down at the priest. “I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

“Listen to me, please! I can’t. It’s just too much for me.”

Impassivity slid over the priest’s animated face. “Too much what? Temptation?”

“Yeah. Too much temptation,” the younger man said flatly.

“Holy Orders are about learning to deal with temptation.”

Simon stood back. “You can’t make me do this. You aren’t even my priest.”

“No, but I have a hell of a lot of pull with the bishop.”

“God, you’re a bastard.”

The priest smiled again, but there was the same lack of empathy on his face. “You’ve got a lot of penance to do, Brother Simon.”

“I babysit heroin addicts, for God’s sake. I’m doing my penance.”

The priest leaned back in his chair again and shook his head slowly. “No you’re not, Simon. That sort of stuff comes easy to you. But penance… penance is hard.”
Dolores shifted her knapsack, and, for the third time in a month, she rang the bell at the old, rundown brick house. She expected to feel something about coming back there, after that horrible last meeting with Brother Simon, but she didn’t. She didn’t feel much of anything.

Father Steven had spoken to her mother, explaining that if Dolores wanted to enter the novitiate, she needed to show a willingness to do community service. Her mother had gone along with it, surprisingly.

“You’ve been real blue lately, sweetheart. Doing some good for others will take your mind off your troubles. You’ll see. And maybe you’ll make some nice new friends.”

“It’s a halfway house for drug addicts, Mom. D’ya really want me to make those kind of friends?”

Her mother smiled and began to take clothes out of Dolores’s dresser drawers and tuck them in the backpack. “You’re a wonderful girl, sweetie. You have a strong sense of right and wrong. I know that you will always choose the right path.”

After her mother had finished packing for her and left the room, Dolores went to her closet and moved aside the stack of magazines. She opened the plain wooden box where she kept her cilice and her flail and stared at the items. Old friends: that’s what they felt like. She hadn’t used them since her last visit to Brother Simon, but she didn’t want to leave them behind.

Ignoring the guilty feeling in the pit of her stomach, she’d closed the box again and slid it into her pack.

***

“Hey! You’re back.”

Dolores looked up to see the junkie guy on the doorstep. “Yeah. I’m back.”

“Si says you’re coming to stay for a while.”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

The boy smiled. He needed to see a dentist real bad. “Well, come in,” he said, reaching for her backpack. “Si’s not here. He’s got some priestly shit to do. He’ll be
Dolores hesitated at first, and then let the boy take her bag, and followed him inside. He began to climb the stairs two at a time. “You’re room’s up here, at the back. We painted it the other day so it’s real nice.”

The guy was talking a mile a minute. He sounded like he was on speed or something. She tried to keep the disgust off her face as he pushed open a door and showed her the room.

“See? Sweet, isn’t it? And you get it all to yourself.” He hefted her backpack onto a simple, single bed by the window. “But... you know. If you get lonely or something, I’m right down the hall.” The boy gave a creepy kind of wheezy laugh.

“Get real,” snapped Dolores. She looked around the room. It had three beds, all exactly the same. Like a dorm. The walls were totally bare, except for a small, plain crucifix above each bed. The sour smell of paint still lingered. “How many people live here?”

“At the moment, just me and Si. The halfway house had to move, cause of some legal shit, or something. The old crew kinda got split up and most of them went to other houses. But me and Si are bros. I’m helping him fix this one up. We’ve done a pretty good job, huh?”

“Spectacular.” Dolores stared at the boy flatly. Watching his reaction, she felt a bit guilty.

“Fuck, you don’t have to be such a bitch. It’s hard work fixing up a house with just two people, you know?”

She offered him an apologetic smile. “Yeah, I guess it is. What’s your name?”

“Jacob. Or Jake. You can call me Jake.”

“Cool, Jake. I’m Dolores. D’ya think I could have a little space now? Just to get unpacked and stuff?”

He gave her a nod and a grin, stuffed his hands into the pockets of his filthy jeans, and sidled out of the room.

* * * *

When Brother Simon came home, he got an earful from Jacob. He lugged the grocery bags into the dingy kitchen feeling like he was being assaulted by a small yappy dog.

“She’s... well, she’s kind of a bitch, actually. But cool, too, if you know what I
"Keep your voice down, Jacob. She’ll hear you."

Simon unpacked the groceries and started handing cans and packages to Jacob, who put them away.

“She’s got that ‘I don’t give a shit about anything’ thing happening,” the boy hissed. It wasn’t any quieter, it just sounded sinister. “But I think she’s maybe a bit messed up. Wanting to become a nun and all. With a body like that? That would be a fuckin’ sin, Si. You know it! She kind of smells good too, and when I left her in her room, she looked a little like she was gonna cry. But she said she needed some space, and so I thought…cool. I get that."

“Plates?”

“What, dude?”

“Can you get some plates? And set the table, okay?”

“Yeah, okay. No probs.”

Brother Simon opened a can and began to heat up some soup. While it was warming, he tore apart lettuce and cut tomatoes for a salad. For a blessed few minutes, Jacob was quiet and it gave Simon time to think about the reality of the situation he found himself in.

Bishop Marquez had refused to budge. Father Steven had gotten to him first, and when Simon had asked for an audience, the deed was signed, sealed and delivered. No amount of reasoning or pleading had made a difference. Dolores was in Simon’s care until he felt she was no risk to herself, and until she had decided whether to apply to enter the novitiate.

He ladled the soup into bowls and pulled a bottle of salad dressing out of the fridge. The old Westinghouse was on its last legs, it hissed like a snake every time he opened the door.

“Can I help with something?”

Simon spun around and practically dropped the salad bowl. This was beyond stupid, he thought. She wasn’t the devil. She was just a really troubled young woman—one of many. He could deal with those; he’d done it before.

Dolores stood by the kitchen door, dressed in a neat pink shirt and a pair of jeans. It looked like it was costing her some effort to interact.

“Yeah, put this on the table, will you?” Simon handed her the salad and the
“Hey, babe!” Jacob said.

Dolores put the bowl on the table and the bottle beside it, pulled out one of the chrome and vinyl chairs and sat down. “Don’t call me babe.”

“No prob.”

Simon brought the bowls of soup to the table and, when they were all seated, began to eat.

“Aren’t you going to say grace?” asked Dolores.

“I do it silently, but you’re welcome to say it aloud if you’d like.”

“Oh, fuck, man? You guys are going to go all holy on me, aren’t you?” protested Jacob. “Simon never pushes that religious crap on people. He’s very cool about it.”

Dolores glared at Jacob and then at Simon. He had to stifle a chuckle. “Jacob, play nice.”

“Fine then.” She clasped her hands in front of her soup bowl. “For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful.”


Jacob snorted. “Yeah, whatever.”

***

The bathroom was just next door to her bedroom, and when Dolores finished brushing her teeth and washing her face, she wrapped her bathrobe tightly around herself and sprinted back to her room.

There was no lock on the door, which made her feel a little insecure. She was pretty sure that Jacob the, was probably not going to break into her room and rape her, but she would have liked to have had a lock anyway. She made a note to ask Simon for one in the morning.

It was chilly in the room. The old radiator was just barely warm, and turning its knob hadn’t done a thing. She took off her bathrobe and spread it out on the top of her bed, and then knelt down beside it and began to pray. She used the rosary her mother gave her to keep count of her prayers.

The hard bare wood felt good against her knees. As she silently mouthed the words, the sparseness of the room engulfed her, and she liked the feeling of dressing.
it. She looked up at the cross above her bed, imagining herself a nun in a convent somewhere in France in the 15th century. This is what it would feel like, she thought: cold and hard. That is what helped her concentrate on her devotions. When she’d finished half the rosary, she got up and crawled under the covers.

For a long time she lay awake, wondering what it would have been like to have faith like Saint Theresa’s. Kneeling in front of her cross, in her bare cell, mortifying her flesh until the Blessed Virgin Mary graced her with Her presence. As if the sound of the whip hitting flesh called Her.

It had never worked for Dolores. No matter how hard she’d used the flail, she’d never had a visitation. And now, she thought sadly, she never would. Because she was nothing but a filthy sinner who liked pain. Whereas Saint Theresa’s heart had been pure, and so her ‘disciplines’ were truly devout and pleasing in God’s eyes.

Being pleasing in God’s eyes, wouldn’t that feel wonderful? Perhaps if she made it so painful that she didn’t like it anymore, that would be enough to please God’s eyes. She thought about her flagellations. About how she had always stopped when she heard the singing. Maybe that was the problem; she’d stopped too soon.

Quietly, she crept out of bed and opened the little fibreboard wardrobe where she had stored her things. Dolores groped for her box, undid it and withdrew her flail.

Kneeling by the bed, she pulled off her nightgown and felt the chill bite into her skin. Her mother’s house had always been toasty warm, even when it snowed. Maybe that was another reason why she had never been pleasing in the eyes of God, because she was too comfortable. But here, in the bare old room, with no heat and only a cross on the wall—maybe here he would see her and find her worthy. She began to use the flail.

Dolores had taught herself to breathe deep with every stroke. If she didn’t, the pain would force little sounds out of her body, so she developed a pattern of breathing in time with the lashes. As she sped up, she would get dizzy, from too much oxygen. So this time, she kept it slow, knowing that eventually, even if it took a long time, she would get to the point where she didn’t like it anymore. And then she’d push herself further, reciting prayers of repentance to keep her mind focused.

* * * *

It was after two o’clock when Simon switched off the lamp in his study and made his way upstairs. The house was old and the stairs creaked loudly. He was
only just getting to learn which ones squealed the loudest and how to avoid them.

As he reached the top of the stairs, he heard a sound. At first he thought it was the wind, blowing a branch against one of the windows. Then his stomach churned.

Still, he had prepared himself mentally for this. He knew what the sound was and he knew he had to stop it. He also knew exactly what was going on in Dolores’s mind. Even now, after so long, the sound made his mouth water.

Father Steven was right: penance is not penance if it isn’t difficult. Simon walked quietly to the end of the corridor until he stood outside Dolores’s door. For a moment, he felt paralyzed. All he could do was count the soft, wet lashes as they fell on her skin.

His lips moved silently as he prayed, trying to stop the counting. Then he knocked at the door.

“Dolores?”

There was no answer. Depending on how long she’d been at it, there probably wouldn’t be one. If she were too far gone, she’d be deaf to practically anything but a nuclear explosion.

“Dolores!” He knocked harder.

The soft sound of the flail didn’t stop. He tensed his jaw, turned the doorknob, and pushed the door open.

The sight of her hit him like a physical blow. Pale and kneeling by the side of the bed, her back a riot of open welts, the tips of the bloodied flail shed their crimson tears in a speckled pattern across the white bedspread in front of her, and up the side of the wall nearest the bed.

He walked over to her and stopped her wrist as she swung it back to deliver another blow.

“You can’t do that here.” He was being as gentle as he could.

She slowly looked up at him, her eyes unfocused and filled with tears. A smile spread across her agitated face. “Am I not pleasing in your eyes, Lord?”

She was wasted on her own endorphins. Simon grabbed a robe that was draped over the bottom of the bed and hung it around her shoulders. He pulled her to her feet, but her legs wouldn’t hold her, so he lifted her onto the bed and rolled her onto her side. Her breathing was shallow and rapid—mild state of
shock.

“Dolores, can you hear me?”

“You’re not God,” she whimpered.

“No. I’m not. He’s not coming.”

“Did he send you instead?” She began to cry in little hiccups.

“No. No he didn’t. It’s just me. Dolores?” He cupped her chin and gave it a little shake and watched as she blinked, her eyes clearing. “You can’t do this here. You can’t.”

“Why?”

“Jacob’s not allowed to do heroin, and you’re not allowed to do this.”

“But…” She sounded so small and so far away. An odd little giggle rose in her throat. “It’s not the same.”

“Yes, it is. It’s exactly the same.”

Just then, all the resolution seemed to drain out of him. Simon knelt down beside the bed and stroked her cheek, brushing the sweat-damp hair away. He felt his cock stir and thicken instantly. Panicking, he stood up, his palm was damp with her sweat and he rubbed it off on his shirt. He couldn’t stay, but he knew he shouldn’t leave her in this state, either.

Stepping away from the bed, he watched as her breathing slowed. She would sleep for a long, long time, he knew—like the dead. Blood from her shoulder had seeped through the material of the robe and pinpricks of red blossomed there. The sight of it almost brought him to orgasm.

Simon turned and fled.
The bright winter sun filtering through the dusty window is what woke her. Looking at it, Dolores realised it must be far past nine already. She moved a little and groaned, remembering what she’d done to herself.

Sitting up made her wince. The blood had dried on her back, and the robe had stuck, in places, to the wounds. She pulled the coverlet off the bed and wrapped it around her. The least painful way to deal with her problem was to stand in the shower and get everything really wet. She’d been in this predicament before.

As she’d showered, waiting for the water to soften the scabs, a vague and very disturbing memory bubbled to the surface. Dolores knew better than to cover her skin with anything if she’d drawn blood. She recalled a voice. Like God’s voice, but not. A touch on her cheek.

Even under the heat of the shower, she got goose pimples. It gave her the courage to pull the robe free of her skin with one good tug. When she was washed and had salved her back, and put her clothes on, she tiptoed downstairs. The last person she wanted to run into was Brother Simon.

“Good morning, Dolores.”


“Get yourself some coffee, or tea, and then come to my study please. We need to talk.”

In the kitchen, she hoped that she could buy herself some time by making coffee, but the electric pot was full and simmering away. She poured herself a cup and wasted some time looking for a sugar bowl in unlikely places.

“It’s in the cupboard with the cups.”

She looked up to see Jacob, shirtless and scratching his crotch through the same pair of jeans he was wearing yesterday. “Don’t you change your clothes, ever?”

“I take them off to wash them.”

Dolores gave him a disgusted look as she heaped numerous spoonfuls of sugar into her coffee. “And when’s that?”
“Why? You offering?”

She was about to tell him to take a hike, when she got an idea. How much talking to Brother Simon could she do if she was busy? She took a sip of her coffee and felt the sugar coat her teeth. “Okay.”

“Really?” Jacob slid past her just a little too close to get to the coffee pot. “You serious?”

“Yup. Give them to me. I’ll wash them, if you’ll tell me where the machine is.”

“All right! It’s in the basement.” He began unbuttoning his fly.

“Not here, you pervert! Get your clothes together—all of them, and I’ll do them. Well, maybe not your underwear.”

“Hey, no problem there. I don’t wear any.”

“Dolores?” called Simon from the hallway.

“Shit.”

She gave Jacob another disgusted glare and carried her cup out of the kitchen.

Bother Simon was standing at his door looking a little annoyed. “Is now convenient?”

“Actually I told Jacob I’d wash his clothes for him.” Dolores gave Simon her sunniest smile.

“In… Now,” Simon ordered, holding the door to his study open.

Dolores hunched her shoulders and went in. She sat in the same old armchair, watching him. Instead of taking his usual place on the sofa, he perched on the edge of his desk, behind her, so she had to crane her neck to see him. It made the welts on her back throb. “I could just get the laundry started and come back,” she offered, hoping for a reprieve.

“Jacob can do his own laundry. We need to have a talk about last night.”

Dolores considered playing dumb, but she was pretty sure it wouldn’t fly. Silence was a better tactic.

“You have to promise me that you won’t self-flagellate in this house. Do you understand?”

She sat mute, gripping her coffee mug. He came around and stood in front of
her, looking down. The thin, thatching scars on his cheeks stood out white against
his skin, the other’s seemed like deep folds.

“Do you understand, Dolores? I have to have your word on this.”
She looked up at him. “I can’t give you my word on that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t keep that promise.”

He grimaced and crouched down in front of her. “You can’t use and be in this
house.”

“Mortification of the flesh isn’t heroin. It’s not illegal, it’s not immoral, it’s an
act of devotion to God.” Dolores looked directly into his eyes, challenging him.

“Not when you do it.”

She thought for a moment. “It makes me feel sick now. I don’t like it
anymore. So I know—I just know—it’s a sincere act of contrition.”

Simon licked his scarred lips. “I saw you.”

“That was wrong. Everyone has a right to private worship. Everyone.”

The hand he reached forward caught in her hair as he cupped the back of her
head and made her look at him. “Listen to me. I saw you. Get it?”

She jerked her shoulder to get his hand off her neck. “And?”

“That was no act of contrition. That was an act of erotic self-flagellation. You
were so far gone when I walked into that room you didn’t even notice I was there.
Naked, bleeding, panting…”

Suddenly he released her and got up, turning his back to her and breathing
deeply. “I know exactly what that is because I’ve been there so many times. You
have no idea.”

She could see from the set of his shoulders that he was trying to keep his
temper. “Your scars—you did that to yourself, didn’t you?”

“Yup.” He turned around and crouched back down in front of her chair.
“Look at my face, Dolores. This is how it ends. Do you think I’m pleasing in the
eyes of God?”

Dolores looked away, but he grabbed her chin roughly and pulled her face
back to his. “Do you think so?” he demanded.
For the first time, she looked at Brother Simon’s face—really looked at it. Each of the scars, and the features in between and, for the first time she noticed that, between all the scars, he was handsome. He looked a bit like St. Francis.

Fumbling, Simon began to undo the buttons on his shirt. “Pretty? Do you think it’s pretty? Do you think that God would want any creature he made to do this to the body he gave them?”

Her gaze slipped from his face to his chest. “Oh, my God…”

Whorls and lines, puncture marks, words and raised symbols. Instantly and without thinking, she reached out a hand and touched one of the ridged scars with her fingertip. It followed the strange terrain of his skin down and over to just where his heart sat, beating hard beneath the surface.

“It’s…”

Dolores’s head was buzzing, like a million bees were zooming around trying to find a way out. She put her coffee mug on the floor and, with her other hand, traced another set of skin engravings on the opposite side of his chest. Nothing could have made her look away. The patterns danced and wove together as if they were alive. And they were.

“…beautiful.”

Her body compelled her forward, like being pulled on a string attached to something deep in her tummy. She edged off the chair and onto her knees in front of it, pressing her mouth against the swirling, dancing, speaking skin.

The deepest, longest electrical shock: that’s what it felt like against her lips. Her body shuddered at the contact. As if all the pain he’d suffered to make these scars poured down her throat.

Simon made a noise. She felt him try and pull away, but she wrapped her arms around his neck and clung on tight. His hands were on her arms, trying to pull them away.

“Don’t—Dolores. Stop. Please!”

She couldn’t stop. Closing her eyes, she smeared her cheek across the embossed flesh. Behind her lids, each bump, each ridge was a gloriously illuminated line on a map—a divine map. A map of God’s Kingdom, like the one she’d been trying to make on her own skin.

“Get off!”
The force of the push sent her backwards, slamming her spine against the seat of the chair. She glared at him. How could he be so cruel as to keep this from her? Then she saw the fear and hurt in his face.

Pulling herself upright, she stumbled and ran out of his study.

* * * *

“What’s up with her, Si?” Jacob bumped into Simon in the hallway. “She’s way upset, man.”

“Seems so.”

“And what’s up your ass, badman? Did you guys have a fight? Because, if she’s leaving, it’s your fault. She was gonna do my laundry.”

Simon couldn’t help rolling his eyes. “Well, damnit, that’s why she’s here, Jacob! To do your laundry.” He put his arm around Jacob’s shoulder and laughed. “You’re a sexist pig, you know that?”

They walked upstairs together and carried the ladder into the front bedroom. It was the room with the most water damage, and someone had papered the walls. They needed to be stripped and sanded. And he’d have to find some money to get the roof fixed.

As the two of them tore the old paper away, another gaudier layer was revealed beneath the first. Scraping away at the wall felt good and Jacob kept up his usual running commentary on everything under the sun. It took Simon’s mind off what had happened in his office. He didn’t want to think about it, or what he was going to do with Dolores.

No, he thought as he worked the scraper hard over the mouldy wall covering. That’s not right. Dolores was Dolores. The bigger question was, what was he going to do with himself?

He’d had his lapses on the celibacy front. Few men who took Holy Orders hadn’t struggled with that particular thorn. But it hadn’t been a problem for a very long time because he’d found something that seemed like such a perfect substitute. Of course, he hadn’t realized what was happening at first. Like Dolores, he convinced himself that penance, of a physical kind, would bring him to a state of grace, and the greater his acts of mortification, the more visible the wounds, the further he had strayed from reality.

Until someone sane stepped in and stopped him. Now, of course, the problem was that he didn’t do that anymore.
“Are you even listening to what I’m saying, man?”

“What?” Simon looked over at Jacob. “What were you saying?”

“You’re digging a hole into the outside wall, dude.” The boy pointed to the wall in front of Simon. There was a tool-sized trench, three inches thick, in the plaster.

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The very last thing she wanted to do was have to go into that room with Simon and ask Jacob about his clothes. Dolores opted for trampling on privacy; she went into his room and picked up every piece of clothing that was lying around on the floor, under the bed, in the closet. Half of the items were stiff with paint, and true to his word, she found absolutely no underwear.

Wrestling everything into a garbage bag, she dragged it down the stairs and went looking for the basement. The first door she opened turned out to be the front sitting room. Except there was no furniture in it, and she had found the source of the cat smell. One of the side windows was broken, and the neighborhood stray had obviously found his way in.

The next door she opened was a closet. It had a unique smell of its own. Not like the sitting room, it was more of a rotted vegetable odour. Two more empty rooms later, she gave up on the hallway, searched the kitchen and found it. She should have known: all horror films have their basement doors in the kitchen. She opened it and peered down into the murk. Creepy.

Unlike in horror films, the light switch at the top of the stairs did work, and Dolores decided that it wasn’t all that creepy after all. She descended, dragging the bag of laundry behind her. It wasn’t just Jacob’s stuff that needed washing; her own robe and bedspread were in need of attention, too.

The basement smelled of damp, but otherwise, it was in better shape than a lot of the house. There was a very old washer, and a very new dryer in the corner, by the stairs. She sorted the wash out on the floor and put in a load, added the soap and started the machine.

It wasn’t the nicest place to hang out, but Dolores was not in a hurry to run into Simon, so she sat down on the bottom step and watched the machine wiggle for a while. The wall opposite the washer and dryer was odd. Not really a wall, just a lattice of support beams, but if she looked at it just so, two of the old wood beams made the outline of a cross. The cross-bar was at chest height and she giggled as she walked over to it and stretched out her arms. A perfect fit. Could a
person be sainted if they were martyred in a basement doing laundry?

She stood there for a while, her fingertips brushing against the rough texture of the thick wooden beam. Closing her eyes, she tried to imagine it was the texture on Brother Simon’s chest, but it didn’t work. Even in the brief amount of time she’d had, her fingers had memorized the tracery of lines and dots that she had touched.

“What the fuck?”

Dolores jumped at the voice. Jacob’s face peered from between the supports on the stairs.

“You’re a very weird chick, you know that?” He stomped down the stairs and smirked at her. “But, if you’re into that sort of thing, I guess I could be cool with that.”

“What do you want?” She could hear the ring of defensiveness in her voice. It was better than sounding embarrassed.

“Filler? You know, for the walls?” Jacob walked into the back of the basement, his voice echoing off the walls, even as the darkness swallowed him. “Si’s not on his game. He gouged a huge hole in the wall. I think you got him upset.”

He re-emerged with a crusty pail and a box of something. “What was the fight about? Who was gonna be on top?” he teased.

“You’re really, really disgusting, and a pervert! You know that?”

“Oh, hey! I forgot to give you these jeans. Do you want them now?” Jacob laughed and feigned unbuttoning them again. Then, suddenly he stopped. He was looking down at the pile of whites on the floor. He bent down and picked up her bathrobe. It was still damp from the shower, but it had dried some and the bloodstains had turned a rusty brown. “Shit. Are you hurt?” Jacob turned the garment around in his hand.

“Give that back, you asshole,” she said, making a grab for it.

“No, come now, really. Are you okay?”

For a moment, Dolores didn’t say anything. Then she put on her cute face and smiled at him. “Of course I’m okay. I’ve got my period, that’s all.”

His expression was priceless. He dropped the robe and stepped over the pile of laundry. “Oh, sorry,” he mumbled, as he climbed up the basement steps, two at
Dolores giggled. A year ago, she’d have been far too embarrassed to even mention the word “period” in front of a boy. Now she was using it as camouflage. Still, she’d told a lie, and that was a sin.

She followed Jacob up the basement steps. Her mother had made her promise that she’d call her every day, and Dolores kept her promises.
“Well, that explains it,” said Jacob, working water into the powdered filler. Simon was on the ladder, scraping off the more difficult scraps of wallpaper, up by the ceiling. “Explains what?”

“Dolores. She’s probably not actually a bitch. She’s just on the rag right now.” At first Simon cringed at the crudity, but then he stopped scraping. “She told you that?” It sounded very out of character for Dolores.

“Yeah. I think she was a little embarrassed about it.”

“She just offered the information?” The whole interchange was sounding odd to him.

“Nah, her nightie or whatever in the pile of laundry was all bloody. I thought she was hurt or something. Geeze, so shoot me, dude! I don’t get the whole nightwear stuff, man. Why bother?”

It occurred to Simon that for all Jacob’s worldly experience, he didn’t really know much about women. Still, mused Simon, why’d she lie? Why didn’t she just tell him to mind his own business? That she’d lied was significant: it meant she felt guilty about it. And if she felt shame about it, then perhaps he could use her conscience to persuade her to stop.

Climbing down off the ladder, he brushed the fragments of paint and paper off his head and shoulders. “Mr. Bronson is delivering a TV this afternoon. He’s donated it. It’s second-hand—pretty old, I think, but it will probably get most of the channels.”

Jacob looked up at him like an ecstatic five-year-old. “A TV? Fuckin’ all right! It’s sure better than spending every evening in my room beatin’ my meat.”

Simon gave him a pained look. “Way, way, way too much information, Jacob.”

He heard Jacob laughing behind him as he made his way down the stairs. Although he tried very hard to never make religious values an issue in his halfway house, the residents were predictable in their overwhelming need to say things they thought would shock him—Jacob in particular. Simon took it all in good humour, knowing that if the boy was trying to shock him, then he cared about what Simon thought. That bond had seen them through some rough times.
As he rounded the door of his study, he stopped. Dolores was just hanging up the phone.

“You’re welcome to use the phone anytime. I can give you some privacy if you want.”

She wouldn’t look at him, and her face had gone bright red. “It’s fine. I just owed my mom a call.” She made her way towards the door, without once glancing up at him.

As she passed him, he caught her arm gently. “Hey. Dolores.”

“Yeah?”

“When things go strange, and get weird, and you live in a house with other people, it doesn’t work if you don’t confront the problems. They just get worse.”

She didn’t move or pull away, but wouldn’t raise her eyes either.

“Let’s talk about what happened. Clear the air. It’ll be good for both of us.”

“I don’t want to sit down and talk about it.”

Simon nodded. “Fine. We can stand right here and do it. Okay?”

“Okay.” It was a mousy little noise. Simon marvelled; there were so many facets to Dolores.

“I’m sorry for pushing you away. I know it probably felt terrible and hurt your feelings, too.”

“Yup. It did.”

Simon stared at the dingy window beyond his desk for a moment, trying to make sure he was careful with his words. “I like you Dolores. I think you’re a really brave young woman. And you’re attractive—very attractive. But I have taken a vow of celibacy and I have to protect myself from situations that would tempt me to break that vow.”

“I understand that.”

Her response surprised him; it was extremely mature. That made it far easier to continue. “I don’t put any of the blame on you, you understand. It’s my vow and my responsibility, but I regret pushing you, and I’m sorry for any pain it caused you.”

He looked over at her. His height made him tower above her and he cringed inwardly thinking of the force he’d used. Her face was hidden from him, but her
dark head nodded.

“I’m sorry, too, Brother Simon. I’m sorry for putting you in that position. I shouldn’t have touched you like that. I know it was wrong. It was a sin.”

Something about the way she spoke made his heart sink. He was listening to her build a litany of transgressions for the next time she took the flail to her back. Instantly, he was painfully aware of how his hand encircled her upper arm. He fought the instinct to let it go.

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to touch and be touched. It’s not a sin. Every human needs to be touched. It reminds us of our mortality, and our fragility and how precious life is.”

“There’s no need to find excuses for me. It was lust,” she said flatly.

“I guess maybe it was. But, so what? As sins go, lust is a pretty minor one in my books.”

She turned to him and looked up into his face. “You don’t get to decide which sin counts and which one doesn’t. Only God can do that.”

Her expression made his heart race and his stomach churn. It was fevered, intense and pitiless. If anyone ever wondered what the sixteenth century Spanish priests of the Inquisition looked like, this was probably it. Born of cruelty, and narrowness, and pushing down drives until it all curdled into corruption. Simon loved his faith, but sometimes he could feel nothing but hatred for the church.

He couldn’t help himself. He clasped her head in both his hands and brought his face inches from hers. “How the hell did you get so nasty? Who made you so judgemental and intolerant?”

He let her struggle uselessly to pull her head out of his grasp. The kick that she landed on his shin hardly registered. He just kept looking in her eyes, trying to find the source of all that anger.

She stopped struggling and then she spoke. “I confess to Almighty God, to blessed Mary ever Virgin, to blessed Michael the Archangel, to blessed John the Baptist, to the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, to all the saints and to you, brothers and to you Father, that I have sinned exceedingly, in thought, word and deed: through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.” She recited the Mea Culpa with the kind of zeal only a pope could appreciate.

He let her go. “I’m not a priest, Dolores. I can’t hear your confession or grant you absolution.”
Her face twisted into a small smile. She lifted her arms and wrapped them around his neck, pulling herself up on her toes. “Then what are you good for?” she whispered, pressing her body against his. Her tongue flicked out and touched his ruined bottom lip.

Then she kissed him. It was a violent, brutal kiss. Anyone other than Simon would have been shocked at how intentional and feral it was. But he understood. Christ, he understood. He felt her teeth cut his lip and he responded, wrapping his arms around her and pressing her to him. He was truly lost.

And it didn’t seem to matter, as he pulled her to the floor, biting at her face and her neck, or as he tore at the front of her blouse and tugged it off her shoulders. She didn’t bother to fiddle with the buttons of his shirt, he heard the little patters as they scattered on the linoleum. A high, soft keening came from her throat as she pressed her bare skin against his chest.

His fingertips flitted over the raised flesh of her back. He felt his cock swell painfully, trapped beneath her weight. Her mouth was at his chest, her legs straddling his hips, her neat navy skirt rucked up around her own. She rocked as she suckled at the lined scars. It was hard to remind himself that this was no experienced adult he was dealing with. He stroked her back gently.

“I’m sorry,” she moaned once, before pressing her full lips back against his skin.

“Don’t be. I’m not.”

Simon didn’t move. He lay there and felt her mouth devour him, felt her wetness seep through her own clothes and his. He lay there and prayed as each roll of her hips brought him closer and closer to coming.

He wasn’t sorry.

That was his prayer: the one he repeated over and over again as her hard, small nipples raked across his chest, as she began to buck and shudder on top of him and as he took her hips in his hands and arched his own until his whole body trembled with pleasure. A warm gush spread across his lower stomach as he ejaculated. It felt like baptism.

Slowly, Dolores pulled herself up. “So…” she said, her eyes still unfocused. “That was sex.”

Simon swallowed and caught his breath. “Well, it was a very close cousin.”

She put her head back down on his chest, as if she were listening for a
heartbeat. “Do you think God will forgive us?” Her voice sounded frightened.

“I think he’d forgive you in a heartbeat.” Again, he trailed his fingers along the raw wreckage of her back. The question was, would she forgive herself?
Of course it was awkward. What had he expected? Simon ran into her on the stairs as she was bringing up a pile of clean clothes. Just as they met on the landing, the doorbell rang and Jacob went careening past them to open the door, screaming, “Come to Papa, baby!”

Dolores clutched the laundry to her chest and looked startled.

Simon chuckled. “The TV has arrived.”

“Guess he likes television, huh?”

Simon opened his mouth, ready to explain why Jacob was so happy to have one and thought the better of it. “For reasons that don’t bear repeating, I promise. You all right?” He touched her cheek with his fingertips. It felt feverish.

“I don’t really know.”

“Want a hug?”

Her gaze stretched past him down the stairs to where the new-old cabinet TV was being manhandled into the living room. “He’ll see.”

Simon was momentarily torn; he felt both anger and guilt. “I don’t care if Jacob sees. I don’t believe in keeping dirty little secrets.”

“I do,” she whispered, and pulled her face away. She looked frightened. “Please, don’t tell him.”

“Ohway. I won’t.”

“Where’s your shirt?”

He looked down at himself. “On me?”

“No. The other one, from this morning.”

“In my room, why?”

He wanted to do something for her—to say something that would make her feel better, but before he could think of anything, she was gone, running up the rest of the stairs. “I can sew those buttons back on it, if you want,” Dolores called as she went.

“Hey, Si! Come and look, bro. It’s fucking working!”
Simon went down into the living room. It was empty but for some old boxes and the enormous, archaic TV, and it stank of cat spray.

“Some people are so easy to please.” He ruffled Jacob’s hair.

The colour on the screen was muted with age. Behind the curved glass, Tom was racing around trying to beat the shit out of Jerry before devouring him.

Simon glanced down at Jacob. The boy was hypnotized, sitting on the filthy floor with his arms wrapped around his knees. Momentarily he had a flash of what Jacob must have been like as a child, before his father beat the crap out of him, before his mother had abandoned him for alcohol, before Jacob had met smack.

There was no taking back time. No going back and doing it again, differently. There was only what was, and what could be tomorrow. It was a cruel God that had invented linear time.

“Don’t you think you’d be more comfortable on a couch?”

Jacob looked up at him. “Fuck, yeah. That would be sweet.”

“Then get off your lazy ass and help me move the one from the study. And maybe you can get those boxes out of here. They stink.”

* * *

Dolores stood at the sink, waiting for the water to fill it. Jacob had somehow persuaded her to do the dishes, and the minute they’d finished dinner, he was running out of the kitchen “They’re showing the Magnificent Seven on Channel Nine. When I was a kid, I fucking loved that movie.”

She didn’t actually mind, it was her job to do the dishes at home. Plus, she didn’t want to think too much about stuff, so she concentrated on getting the spaghetti sauce off the plates.

“I’ll help,” said Simon, stepping up to the sink next to her.

“No… it’s nothing. There’s only the three of us. It’s easy.”

He reached around her and grabbed the dishtowel off the hook on the wall. She could smell him.

“Just hand the clean ones over, Dolores. Just because Jacob thinks that women are meant for domestic slavery doesn’t mean I do.” Simon held out his hand.

She passed him one of the dishes. He stood beside her, almost touching her
side, drying the plate. It was hard to be so close to him. It made her skin itch and tingle. Her nipples hardened and throbbed. She couldn’t concentrate on what she was doing. She handed him another plate.

“Ooh, I see you’re getting generous,” Simon teased as he took it.

Dolores smiled a little. “Do you sing?”

“Very badly, do you?”

“Yup. My mom and I always sing while we’re washing dishes.”

“So sing me something.”

“Okay. Like what?” She handed him the last plate and started on the cutlery.

“Singer’s choice.”

She straightened her posture, thought for a moment, and then began in a high, sweet tone: “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice. Rejoice. Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.”

When she finished, she looked over at Simon. “Well?”

“You’ve got a beautiful voice. Pure and sweet.”

She handed him the last of the cutlery and looked down into the dirty dishwater. “Too bad I’m not.”

Dolores felt him put his arm around her shoulder. “That’s bullshit.”

Biting her lip, she could feel the tears fill her eyes. She shook her head. “It’s not. No matter how hard I try, I’ll never be pure and sweet.”

Simon turned her towards him and enfolded her in his arms. Even as she wept, she could feel herself melt. His warmth, his smell, the mushy thud of his heartbeat: all those things spoke directly to her body. He rubbed his chin against the top of her head and pressed his face into her hair. She heard him breathe in deep, and then let it out.

“Oh, Dolores. What in the world are we going to do with you?” He stroked her hair as he spoke, and swayed her a little in his arms. “I don’t know how to fix you. I don’t know how to give you what you want.”

She reached around and clasped her hands together, hugging him tight. “Yes you do.”

“Then you tell me. You tell me how.” He stroked her back.
She could feel the dull blooms of pain as his hands ran over the raw spots. And just like earlier in the day, she could feel his hardness pressing against her tummy. She knew they hadn’t had sex—well, not really sex—and she knew he wanted it. Her mother had told her that all men did, all the time. Maybe they could trade; she could give him what he wanted, and he would give her what she wanted.

“You know how,” she whispered.

“No. I don’t. You tell me.”

“Help me to be pure and sweet in His eyes, like the saints. If I am, He’ll come to me. I can be with Him.”

She felt him kiss her hair. “I don’t know how to do that.”

“That’s okay,” she said, determined now. Every saint that ever lived had made sacrifices. That was what being a saint was all about. “I’ll show you.”

She grabbed his hand, walking out of the kitchen and pulling him behind her up the stairs.
Had she been any other woman, he would have known how to react, but with Dolores he was lost. She led him into the middle of her room and closed the door behind them.

It was no use counting all the reasons why he should walk out. She was practically a child, he was responsible for her wellbeing, and she was incapable of making reasoned decisions. It was a breach of trust, a breach of his vows, and worst of all it was a breach of his own morals. He knew all of this, and none of it mattered. He stood there, swaying in the terrible rush of self-loathing, and yet he couldn’t leave.

She opened her wardrobe and, very deliberately, without any fanfare, started to remove her clothes. The way she did it was so purposeful, as if he wasn’t there, with none of the guile of someone undressing for a lover. She just took off her garments, folded them and hung them up; it was that simple.

Naked, she lay down on the bed, on her back and stretched her arms and legs out.

“Okay,” she said, staring up at the ceiling. “We can do it now.”

He looked down at her body and, noticing the cruciform pose. “Do what?”

“Sex.”

Good God, he thought, I’m with a child.

It hardly mattered that she was of legal age; she had no idea what she was doing. It was far more than the fact that she was a virgin. She was absolutely innocent. It horrified and fascinated him; it aroused him because, as much as he wanted to deny it, there was something heartbreakingly absurd and magical about her.

“Or… we could do yoga,” he teased, pushing away his desire.

She turned her head towards him and scowled. “Don’t be mean! I’m doing the best I can. Come on.”

He sat on the side of her bed, taking her out-flung hand, covering it with his. She had beautiful, pale skin. In places he could see fine, blue veins through its translucency. Although dark-haired, she had a fine down of silvery white hair on her thighs and her forearms.
“Dolores, what are you doing?”

Her face darkened. “Don’t you want me?”

“I most certainly do.”

“Then come on, let’s have sex. It’s my first time, but I’ve read about this, so don’t worry—I won’t cry or anything.”

If he were to describe this scene to anyone, they wouldn’t believe him. It was surreal. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Do you want me?”

Dolores looked back up at the ceiling. She gnawed on her lower lip, saying nothing.

“Scoot over, will you?”

She glanced at him and shimmied to the other side of the bed. Simon kicked his shoes off and stretched out beside her.

“That’s better,” he murmured. He looked down her body, the nipples of her modest, perfect breasts rigid in the cold air. “Don’t you want a blanket or something?”

“No. I’m fine. Just—you know—go for it.”

Simon fished for her hand, the one nearest to him, and pulled it up onto his chest, covering it with his own. Then, he reached over to the bedside lamp and switched it off. “I’d rather just talk for a while, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure, I guess. But you’re really not like any boy I ever met. They’re always trying to get into a girl’s pants.”

“I’m not a boy.”

“I know that.”

There was silence in the room. He expected her to say more but she didn’t.

“Tell me, exactly why did you want to have sex?”

“Aren’t you just glad I do?”

“Not really. I’d like you to tell me why.”

He heard her sigh impatiently and she rolled over towards him, nestling up
against him. “I thought if I gave you sex, then you’d help me with what I needed.”

“Which is what?”

Dolores scrambled off the bed, and he heard her open the cupboard door and root around. She took her place next to him again, dropping something on his chest. He didn’t need to touch it; he knew exactly what it was.

“I can’t, Dolores.”

“Please. I can’t do it by myself. I’ve tried, but I get tired and dizzy. You have to help me, Simon, please. I want to see the Virgin. I want to feel her grace pouring down on me, cleansing me of sin, and taking me into the divine light.”

She reached her arm over him, pulling herself up, until her face was next to his. “Please, Simon. I feel so alone. I need to be with Her.”

“I just can’t do it. I’m sorry.”

He felt her press her lips against his cheek, and she took the flail off his chest.

“Okay,” she whispered. The bed creaked as she moved off it. Simon heard her knees hit the wooden floor, and a breathy whisper as she started to pray.

The sharp wet sound of the lashes on the flail echoed softly off the wall, each followed by a small chirp that interrupted the prayer.

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee…”

He tried not to listen, tried not to imagine the sweet sting of pain that every stroke brought, or the way it changed to a prickly ache as the skin began to swell. He felt panic and a low throbbing in the pit of his stomach as he grew erect. His fists were clenched, and he squeezed his eyes shut. His mouth flooded with saliva and he wanted to crawl out of his skin and kneel down next to her. So badly. So, so badly.

“Dolores?” His voice cracked as he said her name.

“…is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God…”

Again he called her name, but there was no answer.

Simon stared up into the dark, echoing the words of her prayer under his breath. Each stroke of the flail embedded the words deeper into his skin, like a hammer sinking nails. His eyes watered, the strokes biting at his own flesh as surely as they tore at hers. He should stop her; he should get up and put a stop to this now, but he felt pinned into place by the voluptuousness of her act, one he knew so well.
As she went on, her breathing took on a deep, slow rhythm and her exhalations became guttural sighs. Almost against his will, he began to breathe with her; his groin tightened reflexively at each stroke.

What could he offer her that could compared to this—this scaling of a divine mountain, this leaping towards the face of God? I will be Yours, it proclaimed. I will not be dust. I will not be nothing. I will not be used except for sacrifice.

He closed his eyes and prayed for her. “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.”

Stars flared behind his eyelids. They mated and multiplied with the fall of the flail. How could he help her after convincing himself that what they craved was unattainable? And yet he wanted with all his heart for her to have what she sought, in the way she sought it. In his mind, her desire and his desire for her became one. The colossal, unquenchable yearning he had trained himself to suppress for so long ate into his resignation. To be lifted up, consumed and remade as part of the divine order of things—to be alone no longer.

Two feet away, perhaps three, she was there—a willing lamb. The fact that she was brutalizing her own body should have killed his desire, but far from it; Dolores was unspeakably beautiful in her pursuit of annihilation.

Simon unbuttoned his fly and grabbed onto his cock, engorged and already sticky with anticipation. He tugged himself viciously, cursing himself and a God who seemed so entirely deficient. What God would look away from her purity, from the sweetness of her gift? How could Simon ever love a God like that?

Lurching up, Simon reached across the bed, breaching the membrane between belief and abandonment. His fingers closed on hair tangled from her exertions. With one great yank, he pulled her onto the bed.

“No!” she wailed. “I can almost hear them, singing.”

Pushing her onto her stomach, Simon pinned her with his body and used his knees to pry her legs apart. She smelled of blood, ferrous and salty.

“If God is too stupid to have you, I will.”

He angled himself, and pushed his cock into her.
TWELVE

She knew she was hyperventilating and that she needed to stop it. This is how God does it, wrenching you out of this world and transporting you to another, she reasoned. Fainting would be a mistake.

The fact that God had chosen Simon to do his work for him didn’t surprise her at all. None of the saints had been perfect people; that’s why God had chosen them, to test them and to show the world that the lowest amongst us could be an instrument of God’s work. But it had happened so fast. Well, she just hadn’t been quite ready for it.

Still, it was hard to breathe with all his weight on top of her. She felt him push inside her, and that was okay, not nearly as bad as people said it was. Just a little pain at the beginning as he entered—a little resistance—and then ‘pop’. But now he lay on top of her, panting and still, Dolores felt his penis pulsing like a beacon. Her own muscles did the same. It was hard to tell them apart, really.

Dolores wondered whether she should keep praying, just to show that she was in the spirit of the thing. But prayers had always seemed like the way you talk to God when he’s far away, and now that He was here, it seemed wrong somehow.

When he started to move inside her, it felt all right. But then Simon gave a low sob, and then another, and she couldn’t help being a little angry. After all, if she could deal with this, he should be able to, as well.

“Don’t cry, Simon.” Her words losing themselves in the bedclothes.

The sound he made was miserable. How could anyone be miserable when he’d been chosen by God? Dolores raised her head. “Be happy, Simon, He’s with us. He’s with us now. I can feel him.”

And she could. Like earlier in the day, that soaring feeling that started in her belly and came rushing up her chest. It overwhelmed her with joy, even as Simon pushed into her again and moaned. It felt like he was pushing all the mortal things away, making her clean and pure, but filled, too. Filled with a beautiful spirit.

Maybe that was what the emptiness inside her was for, to be filled up by the Holy Spirit. And now she could feel it filling up, a warm, golden vapour that made her chest swell and pushed through her body. Dolores was sure that if she could look at her body right now, it would be glowing with a glorious light.

She wanted to cry for joy, to sing the words to some amazing hymn that had
“Simon, Simon! It’s beautiful.”

“Is it?” he panted.

“Yes. It’s wonderful. I can feel Him inside me, making me all pure.”

Simon didn’t say anything back, but his arm burrowed beneath her and she felt his hand grab her down there. Then he pushed inside harder.

Something took her body. She felt it like a swoop, like a great hand circled her waist and pulled her up, her limbs going numb in the gravity. And being pulled into the thin air of heaven, Dolores fought for breath.

The squeaks of the bed died in her ears, and she could hear a sound like a strong wind rushing past her. It was like before, only much stronger. And she had to admit, she was a little scared as she felt all her muscles begin to quake.

She was glad Simon was there with her. Alone, she didn’t know how she would have reacted. Her hand groped for his and she closed around it tight.

“Don’t… don’t let me go, Simon.”

“I won’t.”

A jolt ripped through her body, and then another. “Oh, God!”

Suddenly everything stopped existing. As if there was only God, and Dolores, a little spark in a pool of water, trembling and ecstatic to be alive at the beginning of the world. A gush of warmth poured into the pool, enveloping the spark and catching alight.

And then it was over. All over. Almost as quickly as it began. Dolores felt herself fall to earth with a thud. She lay there panting. Simon shifted on top of her, kissing her cheek.

“Thank you,” she whispered, still out of breath.

“For what?”

“For taking me to God.”

For a long time Simon didn’t say anything. She felt him pull himself out of her and a warm gush of fluid followed. He lay beside her and covered her with his arm.

“That wasn’t God,” he said.
“Shut up, it was.”

“No. That was just an orgasm.”

Dolores sat up, looking down at him in the dark. “Don’t be mean. Simon. It was God. I felt Him.”

How could he be so damn cruel? Why would he want to take this away from her? She kicked his leg with her foot. It was all she could think of to do. “It was!”

He turned and caught her foot as she tried to kick him again. “Fine. It was.”

A moment of doubt crossed her mind, but she shook it away. “Then why’d you say it wasn’t?”

Even in the darkness, she could see the outline of his face. It looked funny, troubled. Simon grabbed her arm and pulled her back down onto the bed. His arms surrounded her, holding her tighter than was comfortable.

“I was just testing.”

That’s when she felt a sting in her chest. She put her hand up to it and realized that she’d been lying on her rosary and that it had broken. The beads lay in clumps on the bedspread and the little central wooden cross had broken in two, a splinter from it had stuck in her skin. But Dolores was too tired to care.

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There wasn’t as much blood as he thought there would be. Simon tamped her back with the warm, wet washcloth. She didn’t wake as he washed her. Dead to the world in some dream where angels danced around her bed and the Holy Ghost put on a Las Vegas extravaganza for her, he mused.

He cleaned himself off her legs. She made a little squeak in her sleep as he wiped away the evidence of how very far he’d fallen from grace.

Simon knew he should tell her—really tell her—that what happened didn’t have anything to do with God. But he also knew that he couldn’t, that he was the basest of cowards because he would not ruin that for her. One day, he was sure, it would become obvious to her that there wasn’t anything the least bit holy about it. It was just sex, plain and simple.

He got off the bed and pulled the bedspread over her sleeping form, gave her one last kiss, and left the room.
“Dolores? Wake up.”

She was already awake, or at least halfway there. Opening her eyes, she saw Jacob standing in the open doorway of her room. The light was very bright, stinging her eyes until she closed them again.

“How’s wrong?”

Jacob walked into the room, grabbed hold of a corner of the blanket and tugged it. “You gotta come, Dolores. You’ve gotta come now! I don’t know what to do.”

She eyed him angrily, but she wrapped the cover around her tighter and got off the bed. He kept pulling it, and she moved if only to stop him from pulling it off her. She followed him into the hallway as he babbled.

“It was getting sort of late… I’d fallen asleep on the couch, watching TV, you know? So when I woke up and saw that it was already nine, I thought, ‘Shit! Where the fuck’s Si?’ So I went into his office to see if he was working already. But no. And his coat was still on the rack, so it’s not like he’d gone out or anything. So…so I thought, ‘Fuck, lazy bastard’s not up yet!’ And it made me feel kinda good, because usually I’m the lazy one. So, I went to his room to get him up. He’s usually up way before me. Usually gets up really early, like six or seven or some fuckin’ crazy time. I even brought him some coffee. I knocked, you know? I did. But nothing. So I opened his door…”

They were standing outside the door to Simon’s room. Dolores’s heart was racing now. She looked at the spilled coffee and the broken mug on the floor. The door was ajar, and she pushed it open wider with her bare foot.

“Yeah… Fuck! What the hell?” Jacob’s voice was gumming up. He started to sob. “Jesus, dude…Si! Fuck!”

Simon was hanging from an old curtain railing above a dusty window. It sagged under his weight. Bright light streamed around and passed him, giving
him a kind of halo all over. It had snowed overnight.

Dolores squinted through the glare. It didn’t really look like Simon. His tongue bulged out, and the scars on his face stood out bone-white against his dark, bruised face. She couldn’t see what was around his neck. The light around it was too bright and the skin had swollen a bit, hiding it.

She shuffled further into the room, to where he hung, and poked out a hand to touch Simon’s, hanging limply at his side. She grasped it in her own.

Behind her, Jacob was crying. “He was fine, man! Just fine. And then you came and you fucked him up. You fucked him up!”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

She pulled the hand up to her face, it was cold and mottled and smelled of nothing. Not Simon’s hand, she thought, just something pretending to be his. “We have to phone someone,” she said, letting the impostor’s hand drop.

Dolores stepped past Jacob who was sitting on the floor, and went down the stairs to make the phone call.

The police came, and so did the ambulance people. She watched while they cut Simon down and put him on a gurney, covered him up and took him away. Well, it wasn’t really Simon, but they didn’t know that.

The police asked Jacob lots of questions and she heard him screaming at them through the study door. She felt sorry for him, because she knew they’d think he had something to do with it, being a junkie and all.

But when they questioned Dolores, she told them the truth. ‘I don’t keep dirty little secrets,’ Simon had said, and she wanted to keep faith with him, so she told them everything. They treated her nicely—too nicely—she thought. When she told them about God, they just smiled.

Father Steven arrived a little later and made her get dressed. She tried to tell him that it wasn’t Simon’s fault—that some people don’t have the strength to see God and go on living in this world afterwards. She wondered if she could herself.

“Hush up,” said Father Steven. “It’s not your fault.”

He talked with the police too and then he took her home.
EPILOGUE

In the pale gold morning light, with the smell of the sea drifting through their room, Dolores left her own scar alone and let her fingertips drift over the needle marks that had almost faded to nothing on Jacob’s arm. The residence was still fast asleep, but the sound of singing had woken Dolores. The angels in her head often did.

He grunted and smacked his lips in that way he always did on waking. “Are the rugrats up yet?.”

The day usually started with playful squeals and laughter from the dormitory. At seven there were baths and breakfast, followed by the usual fights about swallowing medicine. Dolores prayed for the day when anti-retrovirals would come suspended in a nice cherry-flavoured syrup. But the drug companies were like everyone else; when people thought of HIV, no one thought about kids—especially not in Mexico. The older children weren’t much of a problem, but the younger ones had trouble getting the big pills down. They had to be chopped in to bits, and then the taste was horribly bitter. Jacob had discovered that chocolate pudding made extra chocolaty, worked pretty well as camouflage. Failing that, he’d bribed them with games. Whatever worked.

“It’s still early, only six or so.” Dolores rolled over and snuggled up against his warm body. The firm bulge of his morning erection made her smile.

That contact with Jacob’s desire always made her think of Simon. She missed him—so did Jacob. The night before he died was the last time Dolores had whipped herself. She’d left the flail at the house and never came back for it, never bought another. She wasn’t sure of much about that time, but she was sure that Simon had saved them both.

For a long time, Jacob hadn’t wanted to see her or talk to her. He’d blamed her for Simon’s death. For a while he went back on the smack. But one day, he turned up at her mother’s house looking for her. Little by little, they became friends again. They had to, because nothing would ever erase the bond of having known Simon.

Jacob chuckled sleepily and threw his arm over her. “Would you be wanting something?”

Beneath the sheet, Dolores pulled off her cotton nightdress and wrapped herself around his body. “Yes, in fact, I do.” She nuzzled his neck and kissed him.
His hands slid down her back and he pulled her on top of him. “And what would that be?”

She giggled and kissed him deeply, feeling him swell. “You know.”

He raised his eyebrows and his hips seductively, grinding his hard-on into her pubic bone. “No. I really don’t. You’re gonna have to ask for it.”

Dolores pushed her hips back at him. “You’re such a freak.”

“Me? Freak? Oh, look who’s talking! Say it.”

“No.”

“Oh, come on. You know I love it when you say it, you freak.” He brushed a finger over her erect nipple and smiled. “Say it, or you don’t get any.”

“Okay. Fine. I’m not too proud to beg.” Dolores grinned back at him, and licked the tip of his nose with her tongue.

“I know you’re not. So, say it.”

“Take me to God.”
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