

Dan A. Cardoza

Your own personal Jesus

Father Vaughn hit the ground and yellow Disney canaries circled his head. Callahan amused himself by recalling his favorite Mike Tyson quote, “Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.”

Once he and Father Vaughn exited the confessional booth, the town’s beloved priest attempted a run at Callahan with a letter opener in hand. The ornate opener was as sharp as a Samurai Sword. Your Holiness should have known better. Sure, he’d been cunning, and watched a lot of Jeopardy, but he certainly knew that Callahan had proper cause to shoot him right between his devilish green eyes. Callahan wasn’t going to assist the priest in any game of assisted suicide. He wasn’t giving God any reason to feel sorry for the S.O.B.

Just before the skirmish, Callahan had texted the sheriff with the agreed code word, AMEN. Sheriff Byrd was bidding his time up on North Davis Street. He’d been polishing the chrome on his five-cylinder revolver and the coffin sized ammo that fit so nicely. The piece officer always grimaced when he placed each bullet back into its proper hornet cell. The Sheriff could almost sense eternity when he heard the—plop!

Sheriff Byrd and his back up crew had patiently waited. Each deputy assigned a Steeda, Ford Mustang GT. The beloved sheriff wasn’t a budget slouch when it came to fast cars. He allotted at least half his annual budget toward catching the bad guys. Considering all the toothless, meth villains in the county, there would always be a need for speed. Sheriff Byrd’s had been the first to roll out in a squad car. All the officers had children and ADHD trigger fingers.

As Callahan scanned the church for perhaps the last time, he’d thought to pledge another \$100.00 to his favorite charity, the ChildFund in Richmond, Virginia. His knuckled right fist hadn’t ached so badly since he’d four wisdom teeth pulled without Novocain.

/

The doors in Callahan’s mind had been locked for the longest time. You know the ones in the back of your skull with the heavy hinges and the enormous padlocks. All the openings and shuts you’d thought you lost the

key's to. Or so you'd told yourself. Like most locked doors, the intentions are obvious, damned good reasons for something to stay anonymous. And behind each door, something of value that insisted upon staying that way.

There have been explanations why extracting long-term memory is so stubborn. Some reasons are scientific, though mostly convoluted and sketchy. It's because the years have been busy rearranging things up there. Often, ugly and hurtful things that need to stay gone and buried. That is until whatever is on the other side, insists on gnawing itself free.

/

What Callahan remembers about those days, way back then, remains crystal clear.

He'd been so excited. After all, it had been a short distance to Gram's house, from the top of the steps to her fridge. Gram's house was home. The church's stoop had been the closest thing to a basketball court, a place he'd practiced his shitty dribbling skills.

As planned, Callahan clutched his ratty basketball and skipped down the concrete steps' length. He'd headed away from the church and religion. And then suddenly, there was the unmistakable sound of God unlocking the brass bolt from inside the huge, arched door entrance. How could he ever forget? Behind those doors was a reservoir of blood, like in his favorite movie, *The Shinning*. Callahan had watched a boatload of C.D.s' back in the day, mostly horror.

It had been Father Vaughn who'd pushed open the mammoth, ornate doors. He'd always appeared angry before he spoke.

Father Vaughn had been raised farm tough. He'd even acquired a taste for lamb eyes, boiled tender with his mother's dumplings and crispy, fried rooster cones. He was an Irish brand of a man, sporting a heavy, rye whiskey barreled chest.

As the town's priest pounded the large in and outs up against the cedar shingled face of the church, Callahan imagined John Wayne kicking in saloon doors. He juggled this crazy image in his head of an Irish Jesus in a cowboy hat, dressed in shit-kicker boots with real silver spurs. And by God, the Colt Dragoon Revolver would have made any ornery outlaw kneel.

"Callahan, don't r'n away so fast, come in and relieve your burden, son."

"Sure, oh, ok, Father." He'd said, having poorly timed his escape from yet another boring confession with the creepy neighborhood priest.

"For boys like you, Cali, God's doors are always open. I'm always here too, son. Anyways, y' r sins are soft cause y'r young, easily molded, quick to fix, come, come in. I'll make it so it won't hurt. Just give the ole man a minute to swoop under his holy robe. Then we can go for a short ride in the sinning booth."

/

"How long since y' r last confession? I, I know Cali, but I'd love to hear it from you." Father Vaughn had said.

"Father, it has been one week."

“Bless you boy, move closer, tell Father what be troublin’ you.”

“Forgive me, Father, but I can’t think of any sins this afternoon.” The one sin Callahan dare not mention was his destructive thoughts. He’d light the Holy Father’s liquored breath on fire.

“We’ll get to any sinnin’ soon enough, Cali boy. I can always come up with some for you if y’r shy a few. I have one hell of an inventory, ‘ey?” Father laughed like he’d won a handful of pickled pig knuckles from a gallon jar down at the neighborhood pub.

Callahan could hear Father Vaughn as he shifted under his robe. He’d pulled himself closer toward Callahan’s shy voice.

“My how you’ve growin’ Cali. My eyes are trained to notice such things. The six’ grade is it, Cali? You shu’d be very proud of y’ r grades, son, your grandmother told me about ’em. An’ your teacher, the lovely Ms. Moore, vah-voom, does girls don’t get much prettier than d’at, do they boy? I bet she even looks dat good cookin’ breakfast in the morn’?”

Callahan delivered his clumsy response flawlessly, “Thanks Father, I think? English happens to be my best subject. Ms. Moore says creative writing is not just about how you jury-rig words together, but also how they sound and feel when they leave your tongue.”

“Oh, you’re a very sensitive boy, mercy Cali. A regular Walt Whitman, ‘ey?”

When he exhaled, Father’s breath stank of pub rag, Callahan imagined the colorful dishcloth soaked in gasoline, a perfect fuse for a Molotov cocktail.

In a baritone voice, Father Vaughn’s lungs exhaled and bellowed carbon dioxide through the complex matrix of perforations that flecked the confessional’s sliding window. The slider had reminded Callahan of the Shoji rice paper dividers he’d hidden behind at the Japanese restaurant down in Redding. As Father Vaughn inhaled, Callahan used his X-ray vision to spy through the pinholes of light as the Holy Father flehmened his olfactory glands. It had been the good father’s craft to detect the slightest molecular emissions of vulnerability from any boy, and now Callahan.

The movie Predator had just come to town. It had been 1987. So Callahan instinctively knew what to look for, including invisible monsters that intend to hunt you.

/

As a kid, Callahan stayed at Gram’s a lot, especially when his mother had been out of town for weeks on end. His mother, Sarah, had worked as a restaurant linen supplier. Mostly, she’d stayed away more than she had to.

Once Gram’s had been subtle, “I think it’s because your mother feels vulnerable since your dad’s a piece of crap. She needs more approval and attention, especially from men.”

Callahan’s thought bubble was obvious, betrayed by his expression, *whatever the hell that means, Gram’s?*

Typically, Callahan's mother would drop him and his older brother off at Gram's on Thursday afternoon's, whether she'd been headed out of town or not. That way, with the two of them gone, she'd have the entire evening to herself.

Often she'd woken early the next morning, after sleeping it off, and head up to Portland. Some mornings she'd slept in late. Then she'd head down to San Francisco, arriving just in time in either direction by early afternoon. Early Saturday morning had been the start of her workweek.

It had been up to Gram's to get us boys off to confession, by late Friday afternoon, and to church on time, early Sunday morning.

As for dad, he hadn't been involved much, hated church. He'd worked six, seven days a week on the green chain, at the Shasta Lumber Company just outside town. He'd preferred night shifts so that he could sleep all day. Grandma often said her son had been, "a complex man, uniquely simple and a good for nothing night-owl, a man who had more needs than wants, unlike Callahan's mother, who had rarely slept and had nothing if not want and desire."

Apparently, the adult mask on my face never gave me away. A lot of Gram's explanations were above my pay grade, way over my head. The bottom line, we had a father, but he'd acted more like a dysfunctional third brother. He'd been married to his work and had drunken himself as far away from any responsibility as he could.

"With his long hours and all," Gram's had said, "He barely has enough time for even the shallowest of relationships. His work is about the art of mental distraction. It's a way he keeps things buried in some sort of emotional graveyard, or hidden away behind some locked door." Gram's had looked at my face as it was advanced Sudoku.

"The rest of any spare time, he worries about how he's going to pay off your mother's obsession for things," Gram's mumbled at the floor as if she'd been ashamed of her words, and for raising such a strange man.

/

One peculiar Thursday, Callahan uniquely remembered. He and Brother Robbie had been dropped off just in time for one of Gram's sumptuous, early dinners, broiled chicken, sweated hot in oiled rosemary and fennel, mashed potatoes, and boiled artichoke, Father Vaughn's favorite. Father Vaughn had arrived early as usual. He'd been enjoying his coffee and Remy brandy. He'd always positioned himself at the very end of the long, planked kitchen table. He was a sentinel, always on the lookout for any emotional cracks and crevices or human peccadilloes. He'd been a wolf in wolves clothing, and a very cunning wolf at that.

/

In those days, priests were treated as hungry, beloved uncles, incapable of lifting pot or pan. Even though they'd been nimble at emptying the pockets of parishioners of coinage, the churches of Northern California were

needy. To give the rectory cook and housekeeper a break, Gram's had performed her weekly culinary duty. To her, it had been the work of the lord, and especially convenient. She'd never been asked by, Your Holiness, why she'd hadn't attended church a day in her life. She'd been good at geometry. A priest with a full belly has more capacity for forgiveness.

It had been deemed an honor, back then, having a priest over for a hot family supper: It could be June Cutthroat Trout, September venison, even November quail.

Father Vaughn had been designated the town's informal food critique, a devout super tramp. It would be an honor if he'd selected you for just about anything.

Shortly after Gram's and Callahan finished up the dishes, they'd all retreat to the rustic TV room at the back of the house. That's where they'd all watch the network show, Jeopardy. It was thee Father and Gram's would nurse rye whiskey and sharpen their tongues by playing along with Alex Trebek. It had been understandable. Gram's, Father Vaughn, and Alex Trebek had shared the same sarcastic sense of humor.

Jeopardy had been the one thing Father and Callahan had in common, other than confession. Callahan had thought it odd though, how he'd treated Robbie as if he were a saint. He'd been Father's favorite, ordered him to sit next to him. He taught Robbie how to use his knee as a hand rest. Robbie could do nothing wrong.

As hard as Callahan tried not to laugh, Jesus, they'd make him cry. Most of his gasps had been saved for Father and Gram's most inappropriate commentary.

"Alex Trebek, you're such a horn-dog," Gram's once said.

In an instant, Father Vaughn had crowned himself the new Jeopardy host. On queue, he'd read the categories

Gram's picked Floors, for \$200.00.

Father Vaughn, the new Alex Trebek, asked the question, "The main reason you'd kick Alex Trebek out of bed?"

Gram's spoke in her best innocent voice, "What is there's more room on the floor?"

"Correct," Father Vaughn quipped.

Next, Gram's and Father Vaughn cackled as if she'd laid a golden egg. Just like that, Gram's had become a winner. We all buckled and roared as if the devil hadn't given us any choice. Father let Robbie pet his knee as if it were a new puppy.

That night, it had been nearly nine before Father Vaughn let himself out the front door. He hadn't owned a car, ever, so all the locals joked he might be the elusive Peeing Tom.

Gram's had called me aside before hitting the sack for the night, "Callahan, your mother's having another rough patch, son. You're going to have to spend some nights again." Nights meant two or three weeks. And that meant it would be the four of us under the same roof again if you counted grandpa's scary-ass ghost.

He'd been dead some six years now, World War Two asbestos. Callahan could hear him coughing up his bloody lungs in the attic when he couldn't sleep at night.

He loved Gram's as much as his mother back then, maybe more, if being happy around someone counted. Callahan's father had been a good bread earner, but it's difficult to live on bread alone. Callahan and his father would never be close. His father had bonded more with Robbie; he'd been easier to order around. As far as his father had been concerned, it was ok if Callahan lived his entire childhood feeling unwanted.

Gram's had been the strong and nurturing one. She provided just the right ingredients of what Callahan needed to keep his anxiety under control. Over time he'd spend more days with her by choice.

Callahan had worked hard on his relationship with his brother Robbie. But the harder he tried, the more Robbie pulled away. Brother Robbie, two years older, seemed preoccupied. Gradually, Robbie had almost quit talking around any of us. It had been as if he'd been watching some sad movie, alone, in a dark, in an unoccupied theatre.

/

There had been occasions Gram's would let Callahan stay up late. They'd smoke and drink on the screened-in porch. Callahan had coffee and milk in a porcelain coffee mug, with a bottle cap of, "Goat Sweat," as Gram's called it. She'd drink Southern Comfort from her favorite bright red aluminum, cottage cheese cup. One she'd bought from the Shasta Lumber Mercantile and emptied. It had been a sales gimmick, prehistoric click-bait. If you bought what you needed—the cottage cheese—you got to keep what you wanted, the colorful red container with a handle. She loved figuring out ways to make nothing into something, boasting, "Repurposing brings you a little closer to God." She had known to be green back then.

Before we turned in, we'd share one last Camel on the creaky porch. Grandpa had been noisy, but he hadn't smoked in years. A windy incandescent, a sad excuse for light, seemed to be pushed about.

The noisy insects had insisted on their late night Marti Gras, out in the leafy blackness. All the tiny celebration seemed to calm Gram's down, the musical metronome against all the silence rarely failed. In between strobes of brightness, Callahan had noticed how Gram's had dropped her eyes like when you feel sorry for someone or something, or even yourself.

/

Even though Callahan had just turned 42, it hadn't been difficult to place himself back in time, back in the confessional booth. He'd barely turned nine back then, and was about to complete the fourth grade. Father Vaughn had begun his sales pitch.

"Callahan, you're old enough now, maybe you'd benefit from bein' an altar boy, like y' r brau'her Robbie? He's such a good one, such a fast learner."

Callahan had remembered how he'd attempted to change the subject. He'd make-up random shit in an attempt to pinch off the priests psychological tentacles, "Someday maybe, dad will quit the lumber mill and

work on his own. Maybe work as a carpenter. So he can become a contractor, someday. Grade school is something he never finished, but he's smart. He's studying for his State Contractor's license. Once he passes the state contractors test, he'll let me dig ditches for him. Then, I'll be too busy, someday."

Suit yourself, Calli. Ok, son, instead of three Hail Mary's for penance this fine Friday afternoon, let's play a round of Jeopardy?

"But Father, I haven't confessed any sins yet?"

"Does it mahher much son, aren't they all the same, carnal, I mean cardinal in nature, either north, south, east or west?"

Callahan, the category is absolution, for \$200.00. T'ings that make you feel guilty down in y' r tummy?'

"What is, jerking my wonk in the bathtub, father?"

"Aye, hats off, Callahan. Splendid!"

The category remains absolution Callahan. This time it'll be for \$400.00?

"The metrics of calculating sin?"

"What is every minute of every day, father?"

"Jaysus, you're good at d'is Callahan, you're up to \$600.00 already. But I'm sorry. I got to interrupt the last round. I have t'ings to do at the rectory. Today they'll be no penance, and sins are on d'e house."

"Oh, ok Father."

An' Callahan, It's our little secret what you witnessed."

"Witnessed?"

"Yes, Callahan. I mean when you saw the Widow Katie, the cleanin' lady, arriving at the rectory late last Saturday when you were puttin' out the trash? She told me you watched 'er drive around back into the rectory garage."

"I won't tell anyone, Father."

"Callahan me boy, 'er 5:00 A.M. morning eggs and fatty bacon are almost as good as your mum's."

"I swear on your life Father. It's our secret."

"It's your whole family's secret, Callahan boy. Y'r father's been pissy, cause he t' inks you and I look alike. He's mistaken."

"What?"

"Callahan, you be'n so damned handsome and all."

/

Years passed. They folded over each other, adding layers to the heavy stack of coarse flax linen.

Callahan had been working late again. He'd been dead tired. Yet he'd often worked late behind the locked doors. He'd found the scent of air-conditioned printer ink and stacks of plea bargains to be nothing short of intoxicating. One night he'd nearly fallen asleep sitting straight up in a plastic chair.

This particular night, he'd woken himself in the expansive conference room. It had been difficult to do, sit up straight, especially since the cheap vinyl seat insisted on sliding him onto the tiled floor.

He should have been proud, but he hadn't been. After all, he'd become the top assistant in the States Attorney Generals of California. He was fully vested and had been able to save like crazy, working the extra hours in a failed attempt to fool himself he'd retire soon, and get an easier job. Callahan would never retire unless there weren't any more bad guys out there.

This evening had been especially difficult, not because he'd overworked himself again, or had been exhausted. Rather, he'd found himself in the middle of a cluster-bang, smack dab in a mid-life crisis. Losing a brother can do that to you, as well as reviewing a shit-pile full of strong evidence.

And, the pending requirement to time travel back to his childhood didn't help matters either. Like most things way in the hell back there, he hadn't found the time, or the keys that would open all the locked doors. But now he had to.

Callahan had a warrant to Tango, criminal charges he'd bring to the party. Any free-floating anxiety, or any questions about the past would have to wait. He had been tasked to assist the local authorities in making a controversial arrest and present the charges in person. But first, there'd be the final confession.

And so, Callahan headed back up to Shasta City, up near the Oregon border. Back through a knife rack full of painful cuts and invisible slices that never quite heal. Back to the city where he grew up, ran away from, the kind of place that makes you who you are, have become. Of course, he was much older, more confident, not some alienated kid anymore. And not all the memories had been worth destroying.

Callahan would assist the Siskiyou County Sheriff's Department in making the arrest, long overdue. While there, he'd visit family. This would be the easy part. Most of his relatives were together, in the cities cemetery. Unfortunately, this included his insatiable mother, who'd killed herself in a drunken single-car accident in Canyon City, Oregon, six years prior. Callahan's angry dad had died too, the day he'd said he didn't want to see Callahan anymore, not long after his real son Robbie's suicide.

Gram's recently passed too, at the wise old age of 81. All her beautiful parts had worn out. It wasn't that long ago. Father Vaughn had given the eulogy, I'm told. He wouldn't be around much longer either. Oh, he wasn't in poor health or anything like that, although all of his sins had made him crooked and slumped over. And, it's not like he wanted to retire. He exquisitely loved his work.

Father Vaughn would be leaving the church because he'd soon be relocating to the California State prison system. Folsom prison if Callahan had his way. It would be easier to attend any parole hearings and keep an eye on him. For a change, the State of California's had made a just and moral decision, now that they'd been presented a landslide of evidence.

Callahan cast off in his pirate ship and began his long journey back in time. He'd arrive by Friday afternoon, just in time for Jeopardy.

/

“Callahan, I knew you’d be back someday, son. Should I address you as chief now, big shot chief?”

“Very funny, Father, I’m just an assistant to the *chief*. How’d you know it was me?”

“You can never dust away the smell of mill town sawdust, son. It’s in your shoes. An’ it’s under the tip of y’ r tongue, Cali.”

“Jeopardy Father?”

“Of course, I’ve been waitin’ a lot of years to finish our round.”

“Father, for this final round, I’ll be Alex Trebek. The category is absolution again, for \$1000.00. I’ll even ask the question for you, “The thing you feel when you violate a young boy’s trust and love?”

“Of course, the answer is Guilt Cali; we all have it, share it.”

“Wrong father, incorrect, you didn’t precede your answer with the required question. You lose.”

“Well played, son. Aren’t you the smart one, a real detective, Chief–Obi–Wan Kenobi, ‘ey.”

“If I were really smart, Father, I could—would have figured things out years ago. Way before Robbie hung himself last year in Oakland. I would have taken you out.”

“Callahan, why do you place me in the middle of all d’is anger, son? Robbie said he felt so much behh’er when we confessed to each other. You know what I mean?”

“Robbie was blood Father. We shared everything, except the same father. You are the one who convinced him to be your Altar-boy, remember? None of our prayers were good enough to save him.”

“Callahan, your words are explosive, .40 cal. An’ you come all the way up here and expect important answers about categories that begin with questions? It’s so confusing.”

“Father, save your questions and answers for a higher power, higher than the one you keep in the box on the altar.”

“Well d’en, where do we go from here, Callahan?”

“That depends where you want to get to Father.”

“I don’t much care anymore, Cali, not after today. My life will never be the same. Go? Maybe I’ll end up in the direction of forgiveness?”

“Only if you choose the long walk, on the long road, and if you have enough tomorrow’s to get you there, father. After all, the highways of sin are endless. By the way, should I keep calling you, Father?”

“Now more than ever Callahan, mercy demands it”

/

On the way home, Callahan shaved off the corners of the interstate and headed south on I-5. The highway slithered and contoured, cascading down the mountains, darkening in the slow molasses of shadows. Callahan was headed back to the sweet green fields of spring in the Sacramento valley, a lifetime away from early Augusts’ steep sienna hills. And with each mile in the rearview, the broken yellows in the pavement attempted

to suture the past. But Callahan knew this to be an illusion, the incisions of his past too deep for genuine healing.

But as he wheeled into the light of the darkening asphalt, he realized the ever-growing Invisible scars would somehow have to do.