

Peter Maeck

Redeemer

"Will I go to hell, Father Cronin?" Byron said.

"Well, yes, if you died tomorrow."

Byron looked down at his shoes and kept looking at them for many moments, sickened by his parish priest's prediction. Then he looked up. "What if I didn't die tomorrow?"

"Then you would have time to atone and then maybe, just maybe "

"I'd be absolved of my sin?"

"If the work you did was sincere and righteous enough, and if it was arduous enough." After citing various types of arduous penitential work Byron might undertake, Father Cronin tossed out the idea of entering the Catholic priesthood whose requirement of celibacy would keep Byron from repeating the sins of the flesh that had led him to his present dire predicament. Byron seemed an ideal priestly candidate. A parishioner here at St. Mary's since his baptism, he'd always been an especially devout young fellow, attending services regularly, attending Sunday School, going to catechism, confessing his serial fornications to Father Cronin and doing penance for them. He'd first had intercourse at fourteen and from then right through college he'd found himself

unable to stop having it. He'd read the lives of the saints so he knew that Saint Augustine said sex was sinful, even for procreation, and that people should find a way to procreate that didn't excite their senses. But that way hadn't been found yet and Byron viewed sensual pleasure as a venial sin at worst in any case. Until it ultimately led to tragedy and was thereby revealed as a mortal sin, his libertinism barely troubled his conscience at all. Not that Father Cronin had refrained from insisting that it should be troubling. "Your carnal indulgences will land will land you in the pit of hell," he'd warned Byron who nodded while playing Sudoku on his phone under the table. "Are you listening, Byron?"

"You bet."

"What are you doing with your hands under the table?"

"Pardon?" Byron slipped the phone into his pocket and put his empty hands on the table.

"I know nothing" Father Cronin continued, *"which brings the manly mind down from the heights more than a woman's caresses, Augustine wrote. He knew whereof he spoke. If he had not known, he could not have been so sure of what he later would feel bound to renounce. And so, you."*

Byron's mind was wandering. "What?"

"You have known those caresses, and so have full awareness of what, when you renounce them the better to serve your Lord and Master, you will be giving up."

"Oh, absolutely."

"And so you will give them up?"

"I'll give it a shot."

Byron boffed a choirgirl from his church that night and she tested pregnant a month later. As a pro-life Catholic Byron had urged all his previous pregnant partners to bring their pregnancies to full term, although in vain as the women were all pro-choice. But now after reading some very impressive feminist literature Byron was a pro-choicer himself, and so directed his latest paramour to abort. She refused on religious grounds of course but Byron insisted and she, a scant seventeen years old and regarding Byron as a wise father figure, did as he wished then died during the procedure. Her family was socially prominent and she'd been a debutante. The family was told that their beloved's death had resulted from internal bleeding during surgery for a ruptured appendix. She'd had an undiagnosed blood disorder, the doctor said. The doctor was the town's much-admired and much-loved obstetrician and was actually the one who'd delivered Byron almost three decades earlier. Byron blamed the doctor for botching the operation but Father Cronin pressed Byron to consider himself the real murderer for making the girl undergo it, and suggested Byron ponder how God would make him pay for doing so. Sex in itself might be a venial sin, but sex that led to death, two deaths in this case, the fetus's and the mother's, was as mortal a one as you could get. Now Byron was all ears. This time there was no smartphone game under the table nor any flippant empty promises to renounce sex and repent. Byron imagined himself barbecuing so vividly that he literally felt the searing heat under his backside. Celibacy for the glory of God, as Father Cronin was now proposing, was Byron's only possible way out. "But won't my unchaste history bar me from clerical service?" Byron said.

"The key word there," Father Cronin answered, "is *history*. The tree's foliage withers and falls in winter, but in spring the new leaf buds forth."

"You're so right."

"Likewise, a sinner can, if the spirit is strong enough, bud forth his own new leaf, as did Augustine, whose spirit, when it matured, triumphed over the weakness of his youthful flesh, such as yours will do, and such as it *must* do if you are to avoid the eternal torment you have been courting while your flesh has been weak. In this you are a bit like Saint Augustine yourself."

"I'm no saint."

"Not yet."

Byron thrilled to a mental image of himself as one of the friars in a Fra Angelico altarpiece with a halo on his head.

"Think it over, Byron, come back to me with any questions, take all the time you like."

"No, I'm in."

"Pardon?"

"You've just lifted a great weight."

"You must be your own weightlifter."

"God give me strength."

"He will do so once you commit to him."

"Then I commit."

"You mean that you will pursue holy orders?"

"Absolutely."

"Slow down, my son. I want you to sleep on this. Give yourself at least a day, get back to me when you're ready."

"No, let's do this."

"Well, well, Byron. Then you are vowing that from this moment you will abstain from all sexual activity on pain of loss of clerical state achieved in this life, and loss of eternal bliss in the next which, if you falter, will be spent in the roiling cauldron of hell?"

"Correct."

Ever since the young girl died in the abortion Byron had been plagued by gruesome nightmares from which he awoke wailing and sweat-drenched, but after this conversation with Father Cronin he had the best night of sleep in his life. Three years later he had his master of theology degree and had shed about eighty percent of the crushing guilt he'd incurred by indulging his carnal lusts. He'd actually been suicidal and only his knowledge of what awaited him as a mortal sinner in the afterlife had held him at the brink. But now his commitment to divine service had put him on the road to full remission of his sins. By staying alert, steering warily, and avoiding the potholes and icy patches of sexual temptation going forward he'd be right with God for the rest of his life, and beyond.

As much as Byron was pleased to be saving himself, he discovered equal pleasure in focusing divine light on others, especially those who had for whatever reasons done more than a bit of the devil's work. Indeed, reclaiming others' souls was precisely the work which, added to his faith, would reclaim his own soul. Thus he spent an immensely gratifying transitional year before ordination ministering to the female inmates at a state prison. He became close with one inmate in particular, a woman name Maddie Trask who was serving a ten-year sentence but which Byron got knocked down to five by convincing the parole board that her soul had been

purified by acceptance of Jesus Christ. On the morning of her release he drove Maddie home. "What's the first thing you'll do when you walk in your door?" he asked her.

"You can't guess, Father Byron?"

"No, tell me, Maddie. Right off the bat, what's it going to be?" Of course, he wanted her to say she'd go down on her knees and thank God for her deliverance.

"Well, of course I'll go down on my knees and thank God for my deliverance," Maddie said with a wink that meant this was something she would never do. Despite Father Byron's year-long effort to Christianize Maddie, by which he'd make a quantum leap toward Saint Peter's Gate himself, she remained an atheist. How could she believe in God if God let a person be born who would do the terrible thing she had done? Maybe Father Byron thought he had failed by not making her a Christian. But in making her truly remorseful for her criminal act and by instilling in her a desire to be a good, caring, and productive member of society going forward he had not failed at all.

"I can't thank a God I don't believe in," Maddie said. "But I will go down on my knees and thank *you*." Father Byron had told the parole board that Maddie's criminal behavior had been due to lack of religious faith and that now, with his help, she had accepted the Lord's grace and so, if released, she would lead an upright life. Maddie affirmed to the board that all that was true, even though the part about becoming a Christian was not. Since she wasn't really a Christian she had no fear of eternal damnation for being untruthful. The end justified the means and this splendid end was achieved only with Father Byron's gallant, steadfast support. Maddie didn't believe that there was a Man Upstairs called God but she believed in godly humans, and Father Byron was one of them.

They turned onto Maddie's street. Her small shingled house with peeling blue paint was at the end of the block. Her sister was the prosperous owner of a day spa and had paid off the mortgage so Maddie would have a house to come home to when she was out from behind bars. This sister lived less than an hour away but was busy with church vestry business and so couldn't welcome Maddie home in person.

Father Byron stopped the car in front of Maddie's house but he didn't turn off the engine. Maddie knew he wanted her just to leave without any blubbing farewells. He was passionate about his faith but raw emotion embarrassed him. Maddie had strong feelings for him and didn't want to leave him so she just sat there. Finally, Father Byron said, "Well, good luck, Maddie."

"Before I go, Father Byron." She stopped there, didn't finish her thought. Her mouth was dry, her tongue felt swollen.

"Yes?"

"Nothing."

"Are you okay?"

"I want to thank you properly for all you've done for me."

"I was just doing my job."

Just doing his job? She was just his *job*? Period? Damn. But she let it go. "Of course, Father Byron, and you did a good job. Your abbot will like that. Now you can go and be ordained."

"Anyway, Maddie" Father Byron said, "you've thanked me plenty over these twelve months. Every day, I think. I'm not sure I deserve such thanks."

Right now Maddie wanted to do more just just say thank you to Father Byron for the millionth time, she wanted to express her deep feelings for him in a more compelling way. She knew she should ask him first if she could do what she had in mind but she was afraid he'd say no given that he was a priest so she just went ahead and did it.

"Jesus!" Father Byron shrieked, pulling away after she'd kissed him. She'd aimed for his cheek but he'd turned his head at something in the road so she'd ended up kissing his ear. Now he was looking straight at her and his face was tight and pained as if Maddie had bitten his ear not kissed it.

"Jesus!" Maddie said right back. "You can't let a girl kiss you because then you couldn't be ordained? Because being kissed makes you not celibate?" She was being facetious but serious at the same time.

"Of course not," Father Byron said.

"Of course not what?"

"Of course that wouldn't mean that I wasn't still celibate."

"And you want to stay celibate."

"I want to be a priest."

"Why do you want to be a priest?"

"That's a strange question, after you've known me this long."

"So what's the strange answer?"

"I want to spread God's Word to all who have ears to hear, as well as to those who don't."

"You can't do that and fuck?"

"Not in my job."

"Above your pay grade, is it?"

Byron chose to ignore Maddie's clear suggestion that priests higher up took liberties with their flocks, even though Byron was perfectly aware that some priests did.

"Have you ever?" Maddie asked him.

"Have I ever what?"

"What we're talking about."

"You mean have I always been celibate? Yes, I have been, for the most part."

"What do you mean 'for the most part:'"

"I've only been with a woman once." Of course, Byron had been with many women, so many he'd lost count.

"Did you like it?"

"What?"

"Being with a woman, as you said." She gave the words "being with a woman" a sarcastic inflection.

"I don't remember."

"Sure, you do."

"I didn't like it enough to keep doing it. The decision to be celibate after that wasn't a difficult one. I didn't feel I was giving very much up. Didn't we have this conversation a few months ago?"

Yes, they had had this conversation a few months ago but Maddie wanted to go further with it. "Do you still feel that way?"

"What way?"

"That you didn't give much up."

"Absolutely."

"That must feel good."

"It feels feels right."

"Because otherwise what a hell of a life wanting something you couldn't have because you're a priest."

Once again, Maddie was thinking of those pedophile priests who wanted something they couldn't have and went and got it anyway.

"That would be unpleasant," Father Byron agreed. He turned the ignition key which made the engine squawk harshly since the engine was running already. He'd forgotten the engine was running.

"Do you want to come in, Father Byron?"

"I'm sorry?"

"To my house. Do you want a cup of coffee?"

"I've got to be going."

"Whiskey? Gin?"

"No, thank you."

"Good because I don't have any whiskey or gin. I don't have anything, food, toilet paper, anything. I've been away five years, my cupboard is bare."

Father Byron drove Maddie to the Kroger's. They picked up food, toilet paper, the basics. He paid. She was grateful. Then they went to Bunny's Liquors and got the whiskey and the gin. He didn't offer to pay for the liquor so she paid out of her \$200 prison release allowance.

Then they were in her house and she poured Father Byron two fingers of gin and when he'd drunk those two fingers she poured him another two fingers while she drank the same amounts that he drank and then she kissed him this time right on his mouth and he shrieked "Jesus!" again and smacked her across the face hard enough to draw blood and then he left the house and drove away. Two weeks later he was ordained and upon Father Cronin's retirement he was tapped by St. Mary's to be their new parish priest. Thus would begin the trickling down to zero of the remainder of his mortal guilt. Meanwhile, Maddie went out and committed the same crime that had gotten her imprisoned five years earlier only this time with God's help, prayed for and received, she eluded capture and remains at large to this day.

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