

Dan A. Cardoza

A Sense of Place, a Sense of Loss

“Father Vaughn, it’s been a week since my last confession. Forgive me, but I can’t think of any sins this afternoon.”

“We’ll get to sinnin’ soon enough, Darragh boy.”

I could hear Father, as he shifted closer to the shyness in my voice.

“My how you’ve growin’, the six’ grade is it? You shu’d be very proud of y’r grades, son. An’ your teacher, the lovely Ms. Moore, vah-voom, it doesn’t get any better than d’at, does it? I bet she even looks that good cookin’ breakfast in the morn’?”

“Thanks, Father, I think? English is my best subject. Ms. Moore tells us that creative writing is not just about how you can jury-rig words. It’s more about how the words sound, and how they feel in your mouth.”

“You’re a very sensitive boy, Darragh, a regular Walt Whitman ‘ey?”

When he exhaled, Father’s breath stunk of pub rag. In a baritone voice his lungs bellowed carbon dioxide through a matrix of perforations that flecked the confessional’s sliding window. His window reminded me of rice paper Shoji dividers you can hide behind in Japanese restaurants. When he inhaled, Father flehmened his olfactory glands, in a deliberate action to gauge any molecules of vulnerabilities.

The movie Predator had just come to town, it was 1987. So instinctively I knew what to watch for, including invisible monsters that hunt.

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As a kid, I ended up staying with Gram a lot, especially when mother was out of town for weeks on end, selling company restaurant supplies.

Mostly, mother stayed away more than she had to. Once Gram let on, “I think it’s because she feels weak and vulnerable, needs more approval and attention, especially from men.” Whatever the hell that meant at the time.

Usually, mother dropped us off at Gram’s on Thursday afternoon, after school let out, my younger brother Robbie and me, that way mother had the entire evening to herself. In the morning, she’d wake early and travel to Portland or San Francisco, arriving by late afternoon.

Early Saturday morning was the start of her workweek.

It was left up to Gram to get us off to confession, by late Friday afternoon, and to church on time, Sunday morning. As for dad, he didn’t involve himself much. He worked six, seven days a week on the green chain, at the Shasta Lumber Company in town. He preferred night shifts. Grandma often said he wasn’t a complex man, that he had more needs than wants, unlike mother. Apparently, the adult mask on my face never gave me away. A lot of her explanations were above my pay grade, way over my head.

“With his long hours and all,” she said, “He barely has enough time leftover for even the shallowest of relationships. His work is all about the art of mental distraction. Keeping things buried in some sort of emotional graveyard. The rest of any spare time, he worries about how he’s going to pay off your mother’s obsession for things.” By the time Gram mentioned the word ‘spending’, the crowd in my head was already yelling. I had just rounded third base and was headed for home base.

That peculiar Thursday I uniquely remember, Brother Robbie and me we were dropped off just in time for one of Gram’s sumptuous, early dinners. Father Vaughn had already arrived. He was enjoying his usual coffee and brandy. As I think back, every other Thursday he’d always seat himself at the very end, of what was Gram’s boarding house kitchen table. He was a sentinel, on the lookout for any and all emotional cracks and crevices.

In those days, priests were treated as hungry, beloved uncles, incapable of lifting pot or pan. The churches of Northern California are penniless, emptied pockets without coin for rectory cooks and

housekeepers. Grandmother saw her culinary chores as doing the work of the lord, especially as since she never attended church a day in her life.

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

Father Vaughn was designated the town's informal food critique. It was deemed an honor if he selected you.

Shortly after Gram and I finished washing the dishes, we all retreated to the cabin-like T.V. room at the back of the house. That's where we loved watching the network show, Jeopardy. Father and Grandma drank rye whiskey and enjoyed the sharp tongue of the one and only Alex Trebek. It was understandable. All three of them shared the same sardonic sense of humor.

Jeopardy was the only thing Father and I had in common, other than my confessions. I must though, it wasn't difficult to see that he treated Robbie as if he were a saint. He was Father's favorite. He could do nothing wrong.

As hard as I tried not to laugh, Jesus they made me cry. Most of my gasps were saved for Father Vaughn and Grandmother's most inappropriate commentary.

"Alex Trebek you're such a horn-dog. I'd kick you out of bed."

In an instant, Father Vaughn crowned himself as the new Jeopardy host. On queue he read the Jeopardy board answer, "The main reason why you've just kicked Alex Trebek out of bed?"

Gram quipped, "What is there's more room on the floor?"

Grams and father Vaughn cackled as if she's just laid a golden egg. Just like that-snap, Gram won the round. We all buckled and roared.

That night, it was nearly nine before Father Vaughn let himself out the back door. He didn't own a car, so the locals knew who he was, and why he wandered the night.

Before hitting the bed, Gram's called me aside, "Darragh, your mother's having another rough patch, son. You're going to have to spend some nights again." Nights meant two or three weeks. Then it was only the four of us under the same roof, if you count grandpa's ghost. He'd been dead some six years now from World War Two asbestos. I can still hear him coughing up a lung when I can't sleep at night.

I loved Gram as much as mother then, maybe more, if being happy around someone counts. Father was fine in the role of the bread earner, but that's about all. We weren't close. He seemed more bonded to Robbie than me. As far as he was concerned, it was ok if I lived my whole childhood feeling unwanted.

Gram was the strong and nurturing one. She provided just the right ingredients of what I needed to keep from being neurotic. Over time I'd spend more days with her by choice.

I worked hard at my relationship with Robbie. But the harder I tried, the more he'd pull away. Brother Robbie, a year younger than me, always seemed so preoccupied. Gradually, he'd almost quit talking. It was as if he was watching a sad movie, alone, in some dark, unoccupied, theatre in his mind.

There were occasions Gram would let me stay up late with her. We'd smoke and drink. I'd have milk and coffee in a porcelain coffee mug. She'd drink Southern Comfort from her favorite bright red aluminum, cottage cheese cup she'd bought at the Shasta Mercantile. It was a sales gimmick of course, like prehistoric click-bait. If you bought what you needed—the cottage cheese, you got to keep what you wanted—the colorful container with a handle. She loved figuring out ways to make something from nothing, always boasted, “Repurposing brings me a little closer to the Lord.”

Before bed, we shared one last Camel on the creaky back porch. A windy incandescent, a sad excuse of a bulb altered darkness and light. This wind-gear metronome on the planked ceiling seemed to settle Gram down. But in between the strobes of light, I noticed how she'd dropped her eyes. She looked as if she felt sorry about something.

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Even though I'm actually 42 now, I can easily place myself back in time, back in the confessional booth.

I'm barely eleven, and about to complete the sixth grade. Father Vaughn begins his sales pitch.

“Darragh, 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”

I quickly change the subject. I make-up random shit in an attempt to pinch off his psychological tentacles, “Someday maybe, dad is still on the green chain at the lumber mill. But he wants a new job as a carpenter. He only completed the fourth grade. He's studying for his State Contractor's license. He says after he passes his tests. He'll let me dig ditches for him, minimum wage.”

Suit yourself Darragh. Ok, instead of three Hail Mary's for penance, let's play a round of Jeopardy.

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

"Does it mahher much son, aren't they all the same, carnal, I mean Cardinal?"

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

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

"Ah, hats off, Darragh. Splendid!"

The category is remains absolution Darragh, 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 Darragh, 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, any sins are on d'e house.

An' Darragh, It's our little secret what you witnessed. I mean about Widow Katie, the cleanin' lady, not leaving the rectory last Saturday? She told me you watched 'er drive around back into the rectory garage. Darragh me boy, 'er 5:00 A.M. morning eggs and bacon are almost as good as your mum's."

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

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Years pass. They fold themselves, one over the other, with each year, a taller stack.

I'm still at work. It's late. I'm dead tired. Yet the scent of printer ink and stacks of plea bargains and guilty convictions is intoxicating. I'm nearly asleep sitting straight up.

I'm all alone in the expansive conference room. It's difficult to do, sit up straight this late, because of the way the cheap vinyl seats want you to slide onto the floor.

I should be proud, but I'm not. After all, I'm the top assistant in the California Attorney General's office, fully vested and saving money like crazy for when I never retire. I should be thrilled, but there's more dirty work left to do.

This late evening is difficult, not only because I'm overworked and tired, but because I've found myself in the middle of a mid-life crisis. Losing a brother can do that to you, as well as going over a shit-pile of strong evidence. And I need to travel back in time in the middle of grieving. Most things back there, I hardly want to remember. It's painful and generates anxiety.

I've been tasked to assist the local authorities in making a controversial arrest. But first they need a confession. That's my specialty.

I'll be heading up to Shasta City, near the Oregon border. Back through a knife rack full of painful seasons and invisible cuts that never quite heal. Back to the city where I grew up, came from. Back to the place that makes you who you are. Of course I'm much older, more confident, not that alienated kid anymore, but...

I'm going to assist the Siskiyou County Sheriff's Department in making an ironclad arrest, long overdue. While there, I intend to see family. This is the easy part, most of my relatives are in same place, at the city cemetery. Unfortunately this includes my insatiable mother, who was killed in a car accident, in Canyon City, Oregon. She had a long lifeline, but got too distracted. Angry dad died too, the day he said he didn't want to see me anymore, shortly after his real son Robbie's suicide.

Grams recently passed too, at the age of wise old age of 81, all her parts wore out. It was just in the nick of time, Father Vaughn gave her eulogy I'm told. He won't be around much longer either. Oh, he's not in poor health, or anything like that, although he's much older. And, it's not that he ever wants to retire, or for any other generic reason. It's because he's going to be in a California State prison soon. For a change, the State of California's made an important decision, now that we have enough evidence.

I'll cast off for my long journey in the morning, and arrive by late Friday afternoon.

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Darragh, I knew you would be back someday, son. Should I address you as chief now?

"Funny Father, I'm just an assistant to the *chief*. How'd you know it was me?"

"You can never brush away the smell of mill town sawdust, son. It's in your shoes. An' it's under the tip of y'r tongue, Darragh."

"Jeopardy Father?"

"Of course, I've been waitin' a lot of years to finish the round."

"Father, this final round, I'll be Alex Trebek. The category is absolution, for \$1000.00. The thing you feel, when you violate a young boys trust and love?"

"Of course, the answer is Guilt Darragh, we all have it, share it."

"Wrong father, you didn't precede your answer with a question. You lose."

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

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

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

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

“Darragh, your words are killing me, they’re .40 calibers. An’ now you come all the way up here and expect important answers that begin as questions?”

“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, Darragh?”

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

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

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

“Now more than ever Darragh, mercy demands it”

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As I shave off the corners of the interstate and head south on I-5, the highway slithers and serpentine down the mountain side in shadows. I’m heading back to the sweet green fields of the Sacramento valley. With each mile in the rear view, the broken yellow divider line in the pavement seems to diminish. It’s an illusion attempt to suture all the cuts I’m attempting to leave behind me.

But as I wheel the darkening asphalt, I realize it’s impossible for some wounds to completely heal. Invisible scars will have to do me for now.

The End

