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Kevin Weidner

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BANG, BANG, BLOOD AND SUFFOCATION

Kevin Weidner

I hadn't been inside a church in maybe twenty years, but when I drove by the parish sign advertising renovation work at St. Aquinas' I figured why the hell not, work is work. I pulled up to the rectory office, gave my name inside, and they told me to show up Monday morning.

At home, though, I started feeling like a liar. The nice lady had not asked me if I belong to that parish, or if I was even a practicing Catholic. Maybe it didn't matter. Still, she hadn't asked me when was my last confession or my last eucharist, or did I currently have any mortal sins weighing, unaccounted for, on my soul. She had not bothered to check, even, if I had any goodness at all in this heart of mine. I felt really bad about this. If she had asked, I would have been compelled, Catholic-guilt and all even for the strayed sheep, to tell her no, I grew up, sure enough, a county over and no, truth be told, I had not practiced anything of the sort in years. I would have been made to say I couldn't remember my last confession, nor the last time my filthy tongue had touched the dry wafer of holy flesh. Admittedly, I would not have told her of the weights on my soul, tarnished as it was like siding in need of a good powerwash—maybe rotted like a fish pulled from water and left on hot summer asphalt—but I would, probably, have insisted on some deeper goodness still present in my heart, like roadkill not yet entirely ruined. Alas, alas.

We are all, all of us, God's children, is what I grew up hearing, and He loves us all, though somewhere along the way I'd got the sense of being loved a little less. Things just hadn't gone right for a while. There were deaths, and terrible ones at that. My father, a Conservation Officer, had been shot dead by deer hunters he was tracking for illegal hunting in the offseason. My good friend buried alive, and suffocated, in a corn bin at the ethanol plant. Jobs, you might imagine, started seeming very dangerous to me after that. Take also the loneliness. Gutted, I was, after Sally left, because of the cheating on Sally with the court clerk, who I met, incidentally, because of the burglary charges and, you see, this goes on.

So I needed the job whether I was feeling guilty about it or not.

We were taking a break from hauling wooden pews out of the church and one of the men I was working with told us a story.

He'd been fishing down in the Ozarks last month with his son and daughter. He said they do this every summer, they rent a campsite and take his little Bass Tracker and troll the edges of a mountain lake. Well, he said, it had been two days and they'd got exactly nothing. "Not so much as a bite," he said. The three of them were getting frustrated out there on the water. The sun was hot, striking off the surface of the lake, and it didn't help that the summer speedboating crowd was out making wakes in the middle. "Everyone was on edge," he said, meaning him, his son, his daughter. He considered pulling up the trolling motor, gunning back to the dock, and going to the grocery for salmon filets or tuna steaks to put on the grill.

He paused the story here and said, "Boy there's really nothing like grilled salmon with a little lemon pepper," and the other men nodded and said, "Yup," and "Amen to that." Myself, I was curious, sure, about where the story was going—who doesn't like a good story?—but I had not taken a real liking to these men, not yet. The three of them, I could tell, were men of the church—not priests, I don't mean—but the churchgoing type with perfect little children—probably two each, a boy and girl, and probably named Joseph and Mary, too—and the prettiest wives you could find, but not the kind of women who would put out, the kind of women I have wasted half my life chasing. Alas, and poor me. No, these men stirred something in me.

"Well, anyway," Sam said and continued the story. He said he caught himself getting worked up out there and he knew his kids would start picking up on this, taking his cues, so he talked himself down. Sam, he said he said to himself, now this is quality time you're spending with your kids and what does it matter if you catch anything at all. So he calmed himself down a bit and told his kids it was time for a few quiet moments. And in those quiet moments, Sam said, he said a quiet little prayer to God, he said, God I sure appreciate the time I'm getting to spend with my kids, but just to make sure they're enjoying it too, could you help us out with a bite or two.

At this point Sam paused for effect. I was very skeptical about the direction of this fishing story.

"Well, what do you know," Sam said, "not five minutes later my little Mary caught a smallmouth the size of her head. So that just goes to show." Sam trailed off, leaving the other men nodding.

And that was it. That was the story Sam told.

I got pretty pissed about that and said, "Sam, what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

He raised his eyebrows. He was surprised, you see. "What?" he said.

"What are you getting at?" I said. "You think you're better than us?"

"What? No, I just. . ." He stammered, trying to make sense. The other two were quiet, watching the both of us. "I just thought it was a nice story to share."

"Dammit, Sam," I said. "It's not a competition."

"No, of course not," he said. He paused. "Wait, how do you mean?"

"You think you're better than us because God reached down and shoved a damn bass on your girl's hook."

"No of course I don't!" he said.

"I thought it was a fine story," Terry said, rubbing his arm.

"Shut up, Terry," I said.

I turned back to Sam. He had a look on his face like his dog just died, the look that's sad but trying to hide it because dammit, it's just a dog. I felt bad. What did I care about this man and his kids and a smallmouth?

"Ah, screw it," I said. "Let's get back to it."

We worked more on emptying the church of pews, the sun coming down and shining into the stained glass on the west wall of the church where Jesus lugged that big cross endlessly. We all worked in silence mostly, the mood having shifted into something more personal and introspective, I guess everybody thinking about what had happened on break, and what it meant for them. Maybe they were all just angry with me, the outsider, for having soured the mood.

Myself, I was reflecting on why I had got so pissed at Sam's story, other than the fact that it was meaningless and inconsequential, a solid waste of my time. I guessed it was a bit of jealousy, a feeling maybe I'd been hung out on the line and wanted to hear more stories like that, stories a man like me could relate to, not miracle fish and kid anglers and beautiful, prudish wives. Isn't a church a place for sad stories, for struggles? What else? Pilate sentences Christ to death and drags his cross all the way to the hill and then — right there on the wall for chrissake — the hammers, the cross. Bang, bang, blood and suffocation. Think about that.

And I did, for the rest of the afternoon.

After we called it, I asked Sam to get a drink with me. He hesitated, for obvious reasons, I suppose, then agreed. We went down to the Post. *Jeopardy!* was on the television and all the town's old mainstays crowded up at the bar on red leather stools. The men at the bar were all sorts. Ben the house painter with white splotches all over his painter's pants. Three retired men, Art, Danny, and Eugene — and Eugene in his denim overalls and sporting an orange Hawaiian shirt. A young gas station attendant everyone called Boob. And me, and Sam in his blue jeans and tucked-in shirt.

When we walked in the men were discussing one of the show's contestants.

"Computer systems specialist," Danny repeated when the contestants were

introduced.

“What in the hell is that?” Art said, and then, “Sorry, ladies,” over his shoulder to the two middle-aged women in the back. I had not noticed them.

“No problem, honey,” one said. I had seen them here a few times, maybe, but did not know their names.

“I’ll tell you what—” Boob said from down at the end.

“Shut up, Boob, you fuck-up,” Eugene said and Danny laughed.

“Sorry, ladies,” Art said.

“No problem, honey,” the same woman said.

“I’ve never been here before,” Sam said when we bellied up.

“It’s a good time,” I said and ordered beers.

“He’s got a tie on,” Danny observed. “So we’re talking business world.”

“But short sleeves,” Art said.

“What you make of that?” Danny said.

“Looks like an asshole to me,” Eugene said.

“No problem, honeys,” the woman said.

“Real businessmen wear long sleeves,” Art said.

“What do you know about real businessmen?” Eugene said.

“I wear a tie to work,” Boob said, from the end.

“Boob, so help me God—” Eugene said and stopped himself.

“What a place,” Sam said. He shifted on his stool and brought his feet up to rest on the rungs.

“What do you think, buddy?” I said. I was trying to make nice, I think.

“I could maybe like it,” he said.

I ordered more beers and the other men kept talking, harping on about businessmen and slick sonsofbitches, pausing occasionally to play along with the game. Sam, I could tell, was loosening up, even answering a question or two. Maybe he was beginning to come around.

“You know,” he said, taking deliberate care with his words, “it’s been a long time since I’ve been out on the town.”

“Nicaragua,” Boob said loudly.

“Fuck you, Boob, you couldn’t find Nicaragua on a goddamned map,” Eugene said. And this time Sam grinned, just a little, into his beer.

“It’s what happens when you get yourself kids and a woman,” I said. This was a truth I reminded myself often, a sort of consolation for my wearied and lonely self. At this point I was feeling good and drunk, feeling a bit better about what happened earlier.

“It isn’t even true,” Sam said.

“What’s not?” I said.

“The story. I didn’t go to the Ozarks this summer with my kids.”

“No?”

He shook his head. “Elizabeth moved out and took the kids with her to Arizona.”

Well fuck me sideways if that wasn’t the best news I’d heard in a long time. Not for this poor man, no, losing his wife and his kids, that was terrible, but the implications of his lie were magnificent for me. Maybe we weren’t so different, this man and me. Maybe we were in it for the same thing.

“Well Jesus Christ, Sam,” I said, and for a moment he looked startled at the Good Lord’s name. Then he smiled.

“Pretty bad, huh,” he said.

I shook my head ferociously and felt so close to him in that moment that I immediately unloaded on him the more recent sins of my life, straight from this roadkill heart of mine. I told him about losing my job and taking up gambling, about burglarizing the old woman’s fine china. I told him about the courthouse clerk and how she wanted me to fuck her in a judge’s robe, and I did, how severely I administered her carnal justice, and how Sally left because of it. Then—justice! justice!—I slammed my drink and drug Sam out into the parking lot, whereupon I opened my trunk and showed him the several gold chalices I’d stolen, just earlier, from the church’s sanctuary. He laughed, or he vomited there at his feet, and as soon as I’d unloaded all this on Sam, my heart—that ruinous, rotten thing—my heart rose up like an Easter sun, big, bright, and bloody.

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Kevin Weidner hails from Missouri and currently lives in Tuscaloosa, where he received an MFA in prose from the University of Alabama. Work has appeared in *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, *storySouth*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Hobart*, and elsewhere.