

# Priest & Parishioners

## The Perils of Priesthood

Standing at the edge of the past, he hesitates before making his first step. Few tomorrows lie ahead. Arthritic fingers secure his grip around the carved armrests shaped like lion paws. Delicately resting on the corner of the large marble altar is the Gospel, the good news. Ceremoniously he slowly steps to the altar. He grasps the sides of the great book and lifts it just above his head as the parish obligatorily rejoices in chorus, as he slowly makes his way to the small lectern. The lectern is not unlike a common pedestal. He reads from the Gospel, the very same passages that he has read repeatedly over his forty-eight year tenure as a priest, the only difference being slight omissions and certain lines that can be left out if one wants a more abbreviated version.

He feels exposed standing at the lectern. Years ago, when his church did away with the pulpit was a very sad time for him. He loved his pulpit. It was constructed of dark oak, decoratively ornate with hand carved figures of cherubs and angels. He could stand behind it and deliver the Gospel and his much planned homily to his congregation. He felt safe and secure behind it. Three carpeted steps led up to the semi circle and stand that he places his notes upon, the notes that he would spend Saturday night creating. He used to put a great amount of thought into his homily. He wanted the members of his parish to walk away feeling inspired, moved by his insight. He kept the same hand-wound watch that he received from his father for his sixteenth birthday in his breast pocket. He never forgot to keep it wound. And once he stood before the pulpit ready to commence his homily, he would reach into his pocket, open the case to expose the old face of the watch, and place it on the corner of the pulpit to keep track of time. He would start with his prepared notes then smoothly change over to the *free speak* portion of his lecture. That's when he would use the momentum and subject of his homily to orate in a free-style manner. Never looking down, always looking out to his congregation to drive the point home of whatever he was trying to get across that week.

Once the old time-piece read the bottom of the hour (or a quarter to the top of the hour for the Saturday evening 5:15 mass) he would wrap up his speech, close the time piece, gently place it back into his breast pocket and return to his sturdy altar chair with the lion paw arm rest. Once in his chair he would sit for five or ten seconds before rising and reciting the *Apostles Creed* with the congregation rising in concert to join him – each and every Sunday. He loved this arrangement. He was filled with a certain sense of quality and stability.

There wasn't much to do in his day to day life. There were wedding rehearsals from spring to autumn – and of course the weddings the very next day. There were also home blessings for parishioners who had just purchased a house, confessionals on Wednesday and Thursday evenings, which few if any people showed up for. The ones that did show up were the confessional regulars, confessing any mundane sin from the weeks passed. He knew exactly who the regulars were, even though they knelt behind a

darkened screen. He gave Last Rites to individuals more than you'd expect, to people that were leaving this Earth. He would receive comfort in giving prayer and peace of mind to the elderly, usually nursing home resident, before they shook off their mortal coil. That was one of the jobs that he particularly felt like he was making a difference. He would drive back to the rectory filled with a sense of vigor, he felt much like a wizard or magician reciting lines and extending his palms, and with a slight of hand, give the recipient a sense of well being and security. An arbitrary abracadabra and they were fine, practically anticipating the end of their lives.

Once the pulpit was removed he had to deliver the gospel and homily in front of a small pedestal – he felt exposed. The Church in an effort to “contemporize” removed the pulpit to bring the priest more down to the parishioner’s level. Standing behind a small pedestal he no longer had a place to put his time piece without it sliding off the slanted wooden slate, it would’ve simply fallen to the floor. His words seemed hollow, lifeless, and he began to see that his sentiments were falling on the deaf ears. His parishioners were pre-occupied with their kids who were acting up, misbehaving and drawing attention away from *him*. And on top of that, were also distracting the few that might actually want to take something from mass, as opposed to those who were attending mass purely out of weekly obligation. He was losing his flock – they were straying right before his eyes. Some of his contemporaries actually wore cordless microphones, and were walking around before the pews with nothing in front of them. They were standing on the same plain as the parishioners to speak to them on more of a “personal” level. He couldn’t even fathom doing the same, he felt naked enough already.

He soon realized what little attention his congregation was paying to him. He began recycling the prepared speeches to his captive audience from a year before. No one noticed. No one was the wiser. He then took it a step further and began reciting the same speech that he did just a month prior, all while critically looking to the faces of the crowd, trying to find one incredulous stare – still nothing.

He soon stopped caring. He no longer spent Saturday night preparing a speech. He no longer felt the need to iron his black slacks and black button down shirts, or polish his shoes. No one noticed. That clothing was covered by his vestment cloths anyways, and after mass people hurried along to their homes. Church was only their hour intermission from their regular lives. Mass soon became perfunctory. He would join a happy couple in marriage on Saturday afternoon, and Saturday night he would lament that he would never be allowed to marry someone himself. Last Rites became the most painful part of his job. He would provide his brief solace, his comforting words that he no longer believed himself any longer. He would deliver to the exiting individual on their death bed meaningless words while surrounded by their family, and then retire to his home. He wanted to tell the person clinging to life that he has no more insight into what happens after death than they did. He didn’t though. He knows that someday he will be in their position, and will be just as scared as they are. So instead he bites his tongue and bides his time.

One day he is approached by a bright-eyed young boy who wishes to become a priest. He congratulates him on his decision, then immediately dismisses it thinking that soon enough that boy will be diverted by other means. Money, a want to marry, have sex, have children, all of the things that are allowed in the lifestyle *outside* of the church.

Though loneliness is a constant in his life, he feels a sense of connection with his parish community. He is never alone standing before his small congregation, although he finds himself becoming weird. Weird in the way people become when they have spent decades living by themselves.

He doesn't like it. During communion he stands before two long lines. He is one of two who are distributing the Body of Christ. As the parishioners shuffle in two lines to the front, he secretly distinguishes in his mind the parishioners who have spent their entire lives alone. They are easy to spot, not just because they attend mass alone, but how they look, dress, behave. Laurence Talmade, he's a man who is in his fifties. He is always on time and is usually wearing a pale blue button down shirt with his deep blue slacks. His wardrobe choice makes him look like a mail carrier. The hip bag that he always wears across his shoulder doesn't help either. He has always dressed this way. Go back twenty years and the cloths may be different than what he has on today, but exactly the same in appearance. He is always awkward, jumpy and nervous. Laurence cups his hands and receives the Eucharist. He is alone, he assures himself.

Marilyn King is a woman in her late sixties. She has had the same *Little Orphan Annie* hair style for as long as he can remember. Her little, brittle frame is hunched with scoliosis. She extends her pale, spindly, vein roped arms to him to receive the body of Christ. She is alone, he reminds himself again. Marilyn faintly smiles her thin lips as she says Amen. The presentation of a smile cannot compensate the desperate longing within her eyes. She steps to the side, genuflects then walks away. White cat hair clings to the back of her blue wool coat.

Dan Skeldale is a man in his late thirties. Father has watched him grow from an infant child into a middle aged man. He even baptized him. Dan doesn't make eye contact, he hasn't in years. They used to talk to one another years ago when Dan was a young altar server. He always seemed like a nice young man. He used to be bright eyed, and full of a natural charisma and exuberance when he was a child. Danny is alone, he painfully reminds himself. After receiving the Body of the Lord, Danny walks down the side aisle of the church, and exits out of the main doors. Not waiting for the closing prayer and announcements, the way he has done for years now.

The other young boy, the one I mentioned earlier, the one that wanted to become a priest – he will grow into a man and will still want to pursue that life. He will be invited over to the rectory one night to discuss his future plans. He asks Father for a referral to get into seminary school. He will be denied. The young man asks why and Father refuses to give him a reason. He only states that he should do something else with his life.

Against Father's objections the young man undeterred will still pursue his passion for priesthood. He will eventually become a priest. Years later after receiving word of his mentor's declining health, he will drive four hours from his parish to administer Last Rites. The old priest will be lying on a hospital bed, fading from the ravages of pneumonia. His old age and declining health led up to this moment in his long life. The now seasoned middle aged priest delivers with all his heart the Last Rites. The old priest listens intently. It wasn't as bad as he thought it would be, being on the receiving end. It was much the same as when he himself delivered it, he thinks to himself. Only this time he wasn't the one that left the room when it was all over.

He will pass away the very next day. His pupil will vie for his home parish, and will take over from the interim priest. The young priest will in the future have great happiness leading the familiar flock. Neighbors, friends, family, everyone who he had grown up knowing will be a part of his parish, looking for his guidance. It will not take long before he realizes why he was dissuaded from becoming a priest, why he never received that referral.

## Sunday's Seductress

She enjoys wearing tiny little short shorts to Sunday morning mass on the hot days of summer. Her parents don't say a word. Their parents were over bearing, and enforced a strict dress code when they attended mass growing up. She likes the feeling of attention by men, and the jealousy from women who were no longer young and in their prime. She can feel the eyes on her backside as she sits or kneels. She knows what they want to do to her. Old men, married men, young boys – it didn't matter. Just so long as they look at her. She often looks off to her side to give long passive stares to gentlemen sitting across the aisle from her. The men admire her emerald eyes that are surrounded by long lashes and dark eyeliner. The light freckles scattered across her upper cheeks and on the bridge of her upturned nose, all of this men memorize from one fleeting glance. The men look at her when she looks at them, their eyes meet. She is very self-assured and is always the last to look away. For that one Sunday, the man that she directs her magnetic gaze upon truly believes that she is attracted to him. The men stand there holding their little child in their arms and capture every glance, hopeful that their wife isn't noticing.

She was the first girl in her class to have sex. She didn't necessarily want to. She didn't enjoy it in the least, but simply wanted to be the first. Eventually she would come to enjoy sex, not because it is pleasurable to her, but because of the power it gives her. She soon gave what was left of her innocence to men who were willing and above all, of a certain standing within her class hierarchy. Like the varsity football quarterback, or a classmate who was the lead in a garage band. Even a dark introverted poet that regurgitated *Velvet Underground* lyrics, and disguised it amongst his own poetry that he would recite in local coffee houses. She would not allow herself to be linked to any one man in particular. She tempted, and lured them in with her inescapable gravity, inviting them into the calm refuge between her thighs, a respite from the squall of emotions that she conjured inside their loins. Men became enchanted under her spell. It turned them into her captive. Trapped amongst her sticky web, they waited patiently as she consumed their hearts, before moving onto the next victim. All that aside, every casualty she left in her wanton wake still praised her, considering it a great feat to have bedded the woman who was the wet-dream of every other boy.

One night she will allow a trusted classmate take nude pictures of her. The impromptu photo shoot will take place on tussled bed sheets with his camera phone. It will be under the guise of trust. Soon after, she will begin to notice snickers and looks of condemnation as she passes through the hallways of the high school. But no one will say a word to her when she inquires. Not even her friends. It isn't long until she realizes that the intimate photos of her had been leaked. Her friends, her enemy's and everyone in between will see her at her most vulnerable. After snatching the phone of a once trusted friend, she will see the images for herself. Dark, unappealing lighting, awkward poses, with red possessed eyes, every line, every blemish – naked for all to see.

She will soon become pregnant, she wants to have an abortion, but her parents say that it is out of the question. She's not entirely sure who the father is. She will ask the most likely suspect if he will be a father to this child. He will say that the child isn't his, and will tell their classmates that she is a whore and a liar. She knows that he could be right. With her reputation in shambles, and the clear evidence of

her exploitations protruding in front of her, she will carry this child while a senior in high school. Her water will break while she is in *Home Economics* class.

After she gives birth to a little baby girl she loses the body that men once praised. She will no longer be the subject of daydream fantasies. Men will no longer look twice when she walks into a room, or admire her once perfect posterior. Sultry glances are now met with looks of confusion or indifference.

She will drop out of high school, and will take the first job that she comes across to support her young child. She will continue to live with her parents, and they will watch her child nightly as she goes to work at an aluminum wire factory. Certain nights she will not be able to bear to show up. She will call in sick, and then proceed to visit a bar where she will drink vodka or rum in hopes of forgetting her situation. She will make herself available to people that she wouldn't have given the time of day to in the past. They will take advantage of her, and will treat her as the garbage that she views herself as. Stiff drinks and long cigarettes will pave her road to ruin.

### **The Hermits Habitat**

He considers himself a freak. He arrives to church a half an hour before anyone else does. He sits in the choir loft that was renovated to make room for the growing congregation. At a quarter after nine he arrives for ten o'clock mass, he climbs the spiral staircase that is covered with green carpet up to the loft. He sits in the furthest back corner near the small door that leads to the church steeple that was only used years ago when the church bells had to be rung by hand. It is the same spot that he sits every Sunday.

A spray of pure sulfuric acid to the face at the age of twenty-four, melted his skin, and left him irreparably damaged. He was blinded in one eye. He considers it a blessing. It's less he can see himself with. After numerous surgeries where skin was grafted from the backs of his legs, he is left with a face that hardly resembles his old. The skin is stretched and taught over his scowled mug. It is always dry, sore and in pain. With every facial expression he is reminded of his appearance. The tragic accident not only deformed his face, but burned him just the same inside. He became a quiet loner who goes to great lengths to avoid any human contact. That was over twenty years ago. He received a large settlement check from the farmer's coop where he worked and from the acid producer. He also receives disability checks from the government. With a portion of the money he purchased a small house out in the country, far away from anyone. It is the only place where he truly feels comfortable. There is no one there to look at him with disgust. He doesn't have any mirrors in his house. It's not that having mirrors would allow him to forget what he looks like, but at least reminds him less often.

He never talks to his family, he hasn't for years. They would call him if he owned a telephone. The first few months after the accident people reached out to him. He only ignored them. His father, mother, sister, friends and ex-coworkers, all of them wanted to help. They would stop by to visit, but he would never open the door. Standing in his kitchen he could see shadowy figures through the glass of the front door, hidden behind a light blue dusty curtain. He would creep up the stairs, careful not to make a sound, making his way to the empty bedroom that faced the front driveway where he could watch below. They at first feared that he was dead, but could see that the grass was well trimmed, and mail wasn't

piling up. Eventually they would give up, walk back to their cars and leave with him watching them the entire time. Eventually all ties were severed with anyone who cared about him.

A few years later he would occasionally see a strange car drive up his long driveway, and not stop, but circle around slowly before leaving. It was always a woman by herself. He thought that it looked like his sister but could hardly tell with the sun reflecting off the car windows.

Late night trips to the supermarket just before they closed, he was able to pick up the essentials without saying a word. Copious amounts of microwave meals and hard alcohol filled his shopping cart. He could never fully cope with what had happened to him. He drowned his anger and agony in alcohol. He always felt good after the first few drinks, but the feelings would always subside. Each night acceptance would morph into despair. He would stumble to bed, or simply lie on the couch he was sitting on, and sleep it off until morning when he would wake up, disappointed to see that he was still alive.

Growing tired of his nightly ritual, he weaned himself off of alcohol, and began to reintroduce himself back into society. Years behind a locked door made it difficult for him to be out in public.

Drives down familiar country sides, and through the lesser traveled streets in town provided a nice respite from his self imposed exile. Children have come to recognize the distinctive old muffler that one could hear rumbling up sleepy streets on balmy summer evenings. Young kids heard horror stories from the older kids about him. How his mother poured kerosene on his face when he was a child, and lit it on fire as punishment for his wrong doings. The lore went that if you look at him in the eyes he will sneak into your house while you're sleeping and douse your face in kerosene, and light it on fire just like his mother did to him. Incredulous kids would scoff at the story, but hid behind houses, trees and bushes when the truck would rumble past, just the same as the cowardly kids. It wasn't worth putting your skepticism to the test. Clenching their eyes tightly shut, only the brave would steal a quick glance.

While driving, he often leans to his right side to look at himself in the eyes in the rear view mirror. Looking back at him is his one functional eye, the eye that was untouched by the corrosive substance years ago. He sees himself briefly as the man he once was.

Part of his reintroduction to society included weekly church attendance. He never did it in the past. His family was never particularly religious. He somewhat enjoyed going to church. It gave him a reason to get up on Sunday mornings. He was apprehensive at first leaving his home during day light. With his specific spot far in the back of the church, he feels like he isn't on display. He isn't a sideshow for people to silently mock. He isn't bothered. Nobody sits directly next to him in the pew. He listens and follows along to the scripture readings and gospel closely. He listens intently to homily every Sunday. Whenever his mind begins to drift and wander he snaps his attention back to what is at hand. He figures that he has too much time already to simply sit and think. He never walks in line to the front of the church to receive communion. After mass he sits patiently for the families to file out, converse with one another on the front steps, before placing their children into the back of their shiny SUVs to depart for home where they will sit down for their Sunday dinners. Eventually he gets up, and with fair haste he exits out of the side door, and briskly walks to his old rusted orange 4x4 pick-up truck, and drives back home.

Many years in the future a young couple will move into the nearest house to his, which is still three miles down the road from his home. A young boy will accompany his father on visit to introduce

themselves with a basket of homemade raspberry muffins, and a glass quart of fresh, all natural, bovine growth hormone free, unhomogenized, whole milk from organically fed, free-range Holstein cows. The father also will hope to have the opportunity to inquire about a wood splitter that they could possibly borrow, or if this new acquaintance might know of someone who possesses one. The young couple will have purchased the house of their dreams, and will want to provide for themselves. The husband feels an inborn urge to harvest the fallen trees on their land to provide heat for their home, before the upcoming winter.

The father and son approach the old dilapidated house, stepping through the overgrown grass, and knock on the bent screen door. There will be no answer. He knocks again. He observes his surroundings once more, and fears that either the house is abandoned or much worse, the resident has died inside. He places his hand over his eyes to act as a visor so he can block out the bright September sky to peer inside. The father tells his son to wait on the porch. He opens the screen door, and steps inside the musty old house. He cries out hello, he says that he hopes that he's not intruding. The father walks through the kitchen and stops in the center of the living room to find a body lying on the couch. The body looks worse than dead, it appears that he had been dead for weeks. The father stands and stares at it. He knows that he should call for an ambulance, or someone, but for the moment he just stands there, and looked at the body as it lays motionless on the couch. The father lamented the passing of this mysterious old man, but felt that he was fortunate to have this sobering life experience, one that he could tell in great emotional detail to his friends from the city when they visit. The son can't wait any longer on the porch. He wants to see what his father was so captivated by. He quietly opens the screen door, and makes his way across the stained carpet, and to his father's side. The father slowly tussles his son's hair, and rests his hand on the side of the boy's temple, bringing his head it close to his waist. The father's voice quivered as he tells his son that the end of life isn't always pretty, but it's natural, it's inevitable. The father and son stood by body a little longer, the father drinking up the sights, smells and eerie vacancy of sound in this somber situation (the better to recall it with). The father wonders what his name was, what kind of a man he was, and why his CHEST IS GENTLY RISING AND FALLING!?!?! The father takes a giant step backwards, pulling his young son with him. He shoves his son back outside, and out to his little truck. He grabs his phone off of the front seat and quickly dials 911.

The father and son stand in the overgrown grass of the old house as paramedics wheel the disfigured man out on a gurney to the awaiting ambulance. The man had suffered multiple strokes in his empty house where he had no one to help him, not that he would have wanted anyone's help.

After treatment his new home became a nursing home. The only surviving member of his family, his now elderly sister, put his affairs in order and for the first time in decades she is able to talk to her big brother. For the first time he allows himself to meet his sister's husband of forty years, and the children their children who are fully grown and have children of their own. He soon realizes that he is no longer so different looking. The skin on his face has softened over the years, and he now appears similar to the age-ravaged residents at the nursing home. He doesn't feel any reason to be ashamed, or to remove himself from society any longer. He eats meals with other elders in the nursing home cafeteria. He allows himself to be transported to parades in the summer, sitting amongst individuals that are similar in appearance. The father and son that saved his life, along with the man's wife will visit him once a week. They will eat Sunday dinner with him. At first because they're interested in who he was. And then because they will feel that it is a good life lesson to their only son. And finally they will continue to eat Sunday dinner with

him out of pity and obligation. He appreciates their visits greatly. He appreciates that their son isn't afraid to look him in the eye. He will lament the time that he has spent in solitude....but that all won't be for many years.

### **The Implacable Past**

And then there was the lawyer. He was eighteen when the accident occurred. His best friend and he were both back from college for the summer, and spent a Friday night drinking at a bar, reminiscing about old times. They both felt like they had become adults in their year apart. Drinking too much beer that night as people tend to do when they are engaged in long conversation, they clumsily walked under humming street lamps through the parking lot to his friend's car. They drove separate but left together, his friend seemingly being in better condition to drive. Loose gravel under worn car tires caused them to careen off the winding road, and into a drainage ditch. Both he and his friend were thrown from the car and landed in a farm field. He had minor cuts and bruises, and a slight concussion – he walked away from the crash. His friend did not.

His friend died in that farm field, but officially his death was called at the hospital. Being merely the passenger that fateful night he wasn't at fault. Both were intoxicated after all, it was an error in judgment on both their parts. After 200 hours of community service and alcohol education courses, he went on with his life.

Now truly an adult he has a beautiful wife and four lovely children, two girls and two boys. He's a lawyer now. He lives in a large house with four bathrooms, six bedrooms, a study/library, and a four stall garage, all located just off from a country club golf course which he is a member of. Naturally he earns a good living, but refuses to spend too much time at the office, choosing instead to spend time with his family.

He doesn't think about the accident every day, but he does think about it often – particularly on Sundays. He wonders if his lost friend's family would have been like his own. He wonders if their children would have played together, and become friends like he and his friend once were. He wonders why he lived and his friend died from the very same accident. Every happy moment with his family – when his children said their first words (each time they said *dad*) to their first steps, and first days of school. Each great moment he thought about his friend. Sometimes it was only a pang, only a prick to the back of the brain that reminded him that his friend will never get to experience what he is feeling. And other times he is over shadowed by a gray cloud of depression that he must mask – lest the kids get suspicious as to why. He sometimes feels like he is drowning, suffocating inside from his guilt. His friend is personified in his mind as black bile that is bubbling deep within his bowels, building pressure, and looking for any way out. He asks for forgiveness. He kneels in church before mass begins. He kneels longer than anyone else. He admires his family while he kneels. He prays for forgiveness. He knew, and will always know who in fact who was driving the car that night. He remembers telling his friend to pull over when it appeared that he was going to fall asleep behind the wheel. He remembers driving too fast on unfamiliar roads.

Everyone walks around shrouded beneath a layer of skin, a blanket for their bones – a solitary, self-contained envelope. It comprises a small amount of our body, but it's what we present to the world, the very tip of our iceberg. Our skin tells a story with every indelible mark. A scar, a line, a birthmark or tattoo, they are an echo that fades over time like a ripple slowly expanding in still waters. But that's only the thin, superficial crust that conceals what is truly happening beneath the surface. Some flesh coverings are young, elastic, and softly supple to the touch. Others are tender, concealed and obscured beneath vestment cloths. Some have been wounded, marred and disfigured from the past. Still more seem unyielding and calloused, but will break with the slightest prick. If you were to peel away this skin, this shallow veneer, and expose what is beneath it to the outside world. You would see the thoughts we keep to ourselves, dreams that cannot be told to anyone. True motives, raw emotions, passions, anguish, agony – all of it touch the chilled air before spilling out onto the ground, exposed for all to see. Its best we keep cloaked, protected, wrapped safely in our blankets.

The lawyer loves his life, he loves his wife, he loves his children. He loves the girl's ass that is wearing the short shorts kneeling before him. He wonders what her salty skin tastes like. He wonders if there is a heaven, if there is an eternal afterlife, if he will be allowed in, if he will see his friend, and if he will be forgiven. In life there are constantly questions, in death he hopes that they will all be answered. He ushers his family past the parishioners that are standing on the front steps talking to one another. The young seductress follows her parents past the onlookers, sauntering the entire way, spreading her scent while stealing men's glances. The priest gathers the collection basket, and puts the money into the thick cloth bank bag that he will place into the sacristy safe. Then he walks the pews, collecting the random balled-up tissues, discarded pieces of paper, and other bits of garbage. He folds up the kneelers, and takes one last look before leaving the empty church to make the short walk to his empty rectory. He sees the same mysterious man sitting up in the choir loft in the far corner. As always he gives him a simple head nod.

After some time passes, the recluse gets up, exits the church out of the side door, and returns to his old orange pick-up truck where he will slowly drive back home. He hides once again deep in his house, escaping into his bedroom, far away from beautiful, critical eyes. He lies down with blankets pulled over him, in his bed, in the far room, down the long hallway, up the flight of steps, past the kitchen, past the living room, past the porch, across the lawn, down the long driveway, miles away from anyone.