



Gorden Schweers

Celibacy

Short story

Saint Jude's was exceptionally quiet once the higher grades, the sevens and eights, had left. Thomas and his classmates were subdued by envy while the older grades lined up near the church rectory, waiting for the chartered buses to arrive. The school bell rang just as the buses pulled in to the curb, their tin roofs scrapping the limbs of trees lining the street. Sister Margaret and Sister Benedict hovered above their students, keeping them in disciplined columns until the doors swung open and the students climbed the stairs in single file. Finally the nuns entered, following the last student. With the release of pressure from their brakes and the left turn signals flashing, the buses pulled away, departing for Seattle and the World Science Exposition. The year was 1962.

The tedium of another school day had started. The youngsters were marched in to the empty classrooms like faithful Christian soldiers. But it was hardly fair. The lower grades were left to learn by rote while the other children were enjoying the privileges of travel and adventure. Even Sister Joseph seemed on edge as she moved through the different sections of study, from religion class to mathematics; social studies, English (after lunch) and then history and finally art as the last class of the day. The structure of the lesson plans never changed from day to day or, for that matter, year to year. The school books Thomas's older siblings had scribbled in were handed down to younger children years later and in the same desks they had vacated after their advancement to the superior grades. Inferiority was the legacy of a fractured system of

education. Thomas would never be able to catch up to his brothers and sisters, no matter how hard he applied himself. In case he missed the point, religion class reiterated that Jesus Christ had died on the cross for his sins and the sins of all mankind.

With their catechisms laid away in the desks, Thomas was dreamily admiring his true love, Rebecca, as she reached up on the blackboard to write down the answer to the latest math quiz. The chalk was pointing upwards on the end of her fingers as she wrote down the correct answer to $9 \times 9 + 9 - 6 / 12 = (7)$. Across the front of the classroom a procession of equations begged to be solved. Rebecca was at the head of the class, marking down each answer correctly while Sister Joseph kept track of the time on the watch she held in the palm of her hand on the end of a gold chain. As usual, Rebecca's IQ was outstanding, an inspiration for the rest of the pupils. Privately, Thomas enjoyed watching Rebecca reach up towards the highest questions on the board. Her long hair cascaded down her shoulders and straight back. Just as she finished the last equation and Sister Joseph announced that Rebecca had managed to solve the complex equations in four minutes and twelve seconds, a knock came to the classroom door. The myths Thomas had accepted without question were about to be crushed.

Sister Joseph came back in to the classroom after a message was passed in the hallway by Father Monahan's housekeeper. Sister looked over the faces of her young male students, evaluating each for the responsibility of serving mass, and then chose: *Thomas Gilcrest*. A more reasonable choice would have been Peter Schilling who was a better pupil and a candidate for *Holy Orders*, answering to the question of his future intentions, "*I want to be a*

priest, Father.” But the Gilcrest boy had recently carried his newly starched surplice and cassock across the school yard when Sister Joseph was on duty. That slight distraction seemingly prompted her decision and yet her choice concealed a deeper and far more personal crisis as a nun. Small irritations, such as being left to work all day while her superiors enjoyed the day off in Seattle, added to the disillusionments she was having with her vocation: While the Church in Rome held *high yield investments*, she and the other nuns were working for *free*. When she voiced such opinions, the Sisters of Charity responded by transferring her to different postings in remote and at times poor communities. She had been sent packing four times in the last seven years. More recently, her privacy in the convent had been violated by the disappearance of her diary. When she complained, Mother Superior said *Diaries are the work of the devil*.

Yet another valid reason for her choice of Thomas Gilcrest was his lack of attention. Even after praying the rosary, Sister Joseph could not prevent herself from smoldering with contempt every time she saw Thomas turn his head in Rebecca’s direction. Having made the decision in a few seconds, she said:

“Thomas, you are needed in the church to serve mass.” The rest of the class looked in his direction as if he was receiving a great accolade.

“Me?” asked Thomas, surprised by the suggestion. Just last week at Sunday Mass, he had failed to lift away the satin biretta used by Father Monahan, with the result that Father had sat down and crushed his own tasseled cap with its four peaks. The omission was so public that several parishioners laughed aloud to see their parish priest crush the biretta with his large posterior.

“Yes, you,” Sister Joseph insisted. “When you are done, come directly back to class, do you understand?”

“Yes, Sister.” Thomas slipped out of his desk and made his way down the stairs from the classroom to the paved school yard, across to the back door of the rectory, and then in to the sacristy. It was a privilege to enter the area of the church which was off limits to women, including the nuns. A visiting priest was in the vestry, covering his street clothes with a clean alb and chasuble from a closet of sliding doors. A distinguished man with smooth hair and high cheekbones, he had been sent as a locum tenens to take the place of Father Monahan during his absence. When Thomas entered the room the man paused as if to take offense but said nothing as the young boy slipped past him, saying “Hello Father”. The stranger quibbled in response, “Hurry up”.

The aisle behind the altar formed a narrow passageway open to the back wall with a rose window. The stain glass poured light down on a suspended wooden cross with its effigy of a beaten and bloody Jesus, nailed to the cross with great spikes that held his outstretched arms to the ends of a crosstree. Thomas looked above the partition as if compelled; awestruck by a larger than life image of a man dangling from a Roman cross, wearing little else than a tiny towel and with his side sliced open and bleeding. On the head of the effigy, a crown of thorns had been pounded in place, leaving the handsome features streaked with blood. In a short time, Thomas would be kneeling in front of the effigy, stumbling through his Latin *prayers* “*In nomine Patris et filiptu santus...*” while kneeling down and beating his chest at the foot of the cross, “*Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa...*” (*through my fault, through my fault, most grievously through my fault*) - as if by his

own two hands, Thomas and his family and community of friends had hoisted up their Savior to the cross on Golgotha.

Thomas ran down the iron steps that spiraled to a basement storage room where the vestments for the altar boys were kept in rows of tin lockers. Thomas and the others had their own lockers. Inside #19 he found the white surplus with its raglan sleeves which his mother had freshly ironed, along with his black cassock. He slipped in to the robes and ran back up the stairs to the vestry. As a novice, he had memorized the routines to follow for the preparation of a mass. Taking up the propane lance with a flame on the tip, Thomas stood at the altar attempting to ignite the wicks on the top of the beeswax candles. It took a few moments to ignite the wicks of the first two candles and he genuflected when he passed in front of the golden tabernacle of Judea. Thomas prided himself in performing each task well, igniting the wicks without actually seeing them from the base of the altar. Before he could finish, the visiting prelate was at his side, yanking the rod from Thomas' hands and shouting, "Just what do you think you are doing? You don't have my permission to do this! No candles!" To illustrate his opinion, the priest used the cup on the end of the lighter to smother the two burning candles. Returning to the vestry, the priest said over his shoulder, "Candles cost money." Thomas stood watching the smoke rise from the smoldering wicks, like an offering to Jehovah that had been refused. He wondered what he had done wrong that had so incensed the priest. His next task was to fill the decanters with water and wine, and place them on a table to left of the altar.

But the priest insisted he leave the cruet for the wine - empty. Thomas stood holding the cruet in his hand, baffled by the instructions he was receiving. The priest said:

“You do what I say – you understand? Alright, you can put in a drop of wine (nothing more than a drop) and get out on the altar. Mass is starting.”

Thomas rushed to comply and carried the two cruets out to the table near the altar. Meanwhile the priest had already started the mass, even though the church was empty and silent. He was bending down in front of the effigy of the broken man, racing through his prayers as Thomas tried to keep up with him in Latin. The front doors of the church opened and Thomas turned. The priest continued with the service, ignoring the intrusion and disregarding the confused reaction of the boy at his side. From the end of the aisle, past the empty pews, a gaunt undertaker wheeled in a coffin on a trolley and left it at the altar rail. Then he stepped away to have a cigarette near the hearse. The priest remained stooped at the altar, rattling off his prayers in Latin. Thomas looked behind at the coffin. The church was empty. The house keeper had taken up a back pew and sat knitting a new sweater for her niece. Otherwise, the deceased pauper in his pasteboard coffin was getting buried with no one mourning nor praying for him. No one was in the church that cared anything for his passage, his life, his dreams and hardships. No one cared. And it was evident to Thomas that the belligerent priest at his side cared even less. A mass with no candles was raced through at breakneck speed. The priest scarcely waited for Thomas to respond to his own Latin prompts before he moved on to the next ritual, and the one after that. A dab of wine from the decanter was transformed in to the

blood of Jesus Christ at the blink of an eye. All the while, Thomas watched and wondered who the dead man in the coffin had been and why he was being buried by a priest who could care less about his immortal soul. Now that the priest was outside of the watchful eyes of the parish, he resented having to perform an unpaid burial service for a derelict from skid row, a wino who society considered human refuse barely fit for a decent burial. The mass was finished in ten or fifteen minutes.

Back in the sacristy, Thomas was going through the motions of cleaning and putting away the water and wine decanters. All of the ideals he had been taught to memorize in catechism class had been dashed on the rocks. The young priest was disrobing, carefully folding the vestments such that Father Monahan would be pleased to welcome him back again. But he was deeply annoyed that the boy was upset with the way he had rushed through the burial service. Incensed, he tossed the chasuble on to the dressing table and snapped at Thomas, “Look, if you waste your life, you can’t expect a decent funeral.”

Thomas knew enough not to question any of the nuns or priests, and said quietly, “Yes, Father”. It was his duty to clean the sacristy and he left the vestry just as much as to avoid the priest and his anger. Cloths of linen were unrolled to protect the surfaces from dust. The church was deathly quiet. The grey coffin was sitting at the communion rail, waiting for the undertakers to return for its cremation: *dust to dust, ashes to ashes*. Leaving his tasks, Thomas responded to the impulse to stand vigil near the coffin. Touching the paper surface, he said a prayer for the deceased, ending not with *Amen* but rather with *I’m sorry* – as if the corpse inside could actually hear the final consolatory words. An instant

later Thomas looked up and saw the snake eyes of the priest staring back at him from the door at the sacristy. The boy's face turned crimson: years of discipline in the school system had taught him that adults were infallible in what they did and said. Yet something was wrong. Thomas couldn't understand what that was. His heart told him the human being in the coffin had once been a decent man. But the priest stood and stared at him with intense contempt until Thomas slipped his hand off the pressboard lid and finished his small duties around the altar. When he entered the vestry, the priest had left.

Thomas had a commitment to return to class. Instantly (as if some nefarious drug was infusing his cortex) he was back thinking of Rebecca and under the spell of how beautiful she was when the midday sun filled the classroom with sweet light. Thomas ran down the spiral metal stairs to the changing room, slipping off his surplus and black cassock in front of locker #19. Then a bolt of lightning struck Thomas Gilcrest. The priest stepped out from the other side of the locker room. Thomas was shaken by the imposition. Saying nothing, the tall priest paced around him with a mean domineering look in his eyes. Thomas stammered:

“I-I have to get back to school, Father.”

The priest said nothing. Instead he gripped the boy's shoulder. Next he grabbed Thomas' school shirt, almost ripping it away from his neck when the boy resisted. Thomas was terrified. This stranger was showing every intention of doing him irreparable damage. Finally, the pedophile commanded:

“Get your pants down!”

Thomas was shocked. Shocked and terrified. For once in his life he had to summon the strength to resist those who had kept him subservient from the moment of his baptism at the font. He tried to speak but managed only to shake his head, refusing to cooperate with such a monster. The priest had worked in orphanages for boys and boarding schools run by priests and brothers, and knew how to handle youngsters like Thomas who refused to cooperate. In his mind, the image of the boy praying over the human refuse in the coffin irked him enough to justify assaulting the boy right there and then, just as he had done countless other times to young men under his care and supervision in other institutions. Thomas raised his arm to force the priest to release his hold on his shirt, but the priest proved far stronger. An imbalance developed though the priest had complete control over the boy. The terrible fear of being harmed by a diseased hyena was the boy's only defense. Whimpering and crying, he collapsed to the floor at the priest's feet, trying to hide beneath one of the benches. The priest was grappling with him, tearing at his clothing, threatening him in every way possible.

With no warning, the priest hoisted the boy up off of the floor and slammed him against the metal lockers. Thomas shifted to the right and away from the priest but in a second he had dropped into the space of his open locker. The priest was furious, fuming:

“Alright, you can have it that way then!” Thomas drew his arms back as the metal door was slammed in his face. He was imprisoned in a narrow metal coffin. The only light and air coming in to the locker was from a series of small ventilation louvers at the top of the metal door. The handle had been latched shut. Outside, pressing his face up against the metal louvers, the

the head of a serpent. The candles burning in red cups wavered as if teased by a soft wind. His second scream reached up as high as the beaten effigy on the Roman cross. And the next scream of terror gave pause to the soul of the deceased wretch as he stood on the banks of the River Styx. Never to return, the man vacillated. Smiling, he made a final observation of the world that had disparaged him, saying:

You're one fine boy, Thomas Gilcrest. One fine boy!

Outside the locker door, the priest realized that anyone entering the upstairs pews would hear the boy and come running to investigate. His position could be jeopardized. It was foolhardy to try to deal with this pretentious upstart. But the boy's naive holier-than-thou attitude needed to be straightened out. The screaming continued. Now he had to do something quickly and so, releasing the latch on the metal locker, he sprinted up the spiral stairs and out the vestry door to his car. It was recess time for the school and the priest waved to Sister Joseph as she stood watching over her students in the grounds. Sister Joseph waved back to Father Richard Thievin, the young handsome priest who it was rumored would one day become their next bishop.

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