

*- Prelude -*

"Begin my son. Tell me of your sins, past and present."

"I, I don't know what to say."

"Why are you here then?"

"I didn't know where else to go. I need help."

"Do you know what confession is lad?"

"Not really. I mean we, my family, we come to church on Sundays and I've heard of it but I've never been in this box before."

"I see. Look, I'm busy Brandon, I don't have no time for games."

"Wait, please I need your help! Something's wrong with me, I can feel it."

"Calm down. Perhaps it's something medicinal and Doctor Norrish might be better—"

"Nah, it's not like that. It feels like I'm burning on the inside and I'm having weird dreams."

"When did all this begin?"

"It's been going on for a while. Two month ago when school started again, well its gotten much worse since then."

"Have you spoken to anyone else about this? Your family or a friend?"

"Only my best friend Sean, Sean Nickel. I think my Mum knows something's up with me though. Sean told me not to come see you because I'll get into trouble but I had to."

"I can only help with your spirit, your soul. Confession is for repenting against sins one has committed and it sounds to me like you have an illness of some kind. ... Did you ride your bike to town?"

"Yeah, I came straight here from school."

"So your Mother doesn't even know you're here?"

"No."

"It's clear to me confession is not what you need. Why don't we go call your mother and—"

"Oh no, don't do that! She'll tell my Dad and he'll beat me like he use to do to my brother Malcolm."

"As you wish son, as you wish. Understand anything you tell me in here is strictly confidential. This conversation is between you, me and God, no one else."

"What do I do Father, to stop the burning I mean? Can you make it stop?"

"I have only a basic understanding of medicine and there could be so many different things causing this. It might be as simple as heartburn. A part of my service to this parish is aiding the sick, showing them the way to God and through him the strength to persevere."

"How do I do that?"

"I tell you what, why don't we prove these symptoms to be physical and not of your spirit. Then you'll see you're really better off going to see a Doctor."

"No Doctor! I've got no money and I don't want my parents to find out. Please Father."

"Fine. ... As this is your first time to confession, you can perform a small penance and then be on your way."

"What do I do?"

"Go kneel before the image of Christ and offer a heartfelt prayer. I'll then bless you and you'll be free to go."

"Okay father."

The wooden doors creaked on their hinges as they exited the small cubicles. Their footfalls echoed within the otherwise silent stone building. The church was empty as Father Tomley had been out tending the garden when the insistent boy arrived. He had discarded his wide brimmed hat and boots at the doorway and hastily thrown his robe over plain trousers and a flannelette work shirt. Tuesday afternoon at 4 pm was not exactly a busy time in his routine week.

Brandon dutifully walked over to the cross and knelt before it. Wearing his light grey shirt and black pants with matching school shoes the boy looked out of sorts, like an altar boy who had forgotten to adorn his white robe. The priest returned his Rosary beads to an ornately gilded box on the wall. He extracted a small vial, closed the box, turned and walked over to the boy.

"Go with the grace of God child" said Tomley as he shook the vial of holy water, raining small droplets of the blessed water upon the boy.

Brandon rocked back and forth, his arms shook as he visibly paled. Suddenly he turned to the side and vomited a gelatinous substance, a dark red bloody ooze. Tomley rushed to catch the boy as he had fainted away.

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Sarah Maitland had settled into university life with ease, enjoying the schooling and her new found suite of friends. Grantiff University had been built 12 years ago upon a dairy and cattle farm, donated to the South Gippsland shire from the estate of the late widow Mrs. Farnsworth. Sarah listened to her iPod as she jogged along the meandering path, using the beat of the music to maintain a steady rhythm, matched by the pounding of her worn sneakers.

The Farnsworth and many others throughout the coastal region of Victoria had proud roots back to the convict days. The hardened prisoners, with the promise of a chance to live free, had carved a living out of the rolling hills and forests. Now the entire south eastern Victorian coastline boasted some of the most prized rural farming land anywhere in Australia.

Something flickered amongst the trees to her left and instinctively Sarah slowed, turning her head to look. As the sky was almost at sunset, the burst of light made no sense to the twenty one year old. Curiosity getting the better of her, she switched off the music and pulled both ear phones away. Moving cautiously she stepped off the path and tried to gain a better vantage point.

Again the light shone once, twice then darkness. Sarah reasoned it must be a car headlight or someone with a torch. The idea of another person out here perhaps a student, perhaps not, made her cautious. She had told Rachel her roommate she would be back within an hour and she really didn't have time to dally.

"Who's there?" called Sarah, trying not to sound frightened.

The light flickered once more as something new and unexpected caught Sarah's attention. The unmistakable sound of a crying child. The tone of sadness made Sarah's feet begin to move of their own accord. Her pace quickened, bolstered by a sense of need to reach the child. She held one hand up in front of her face to fend away the worst of the low hanging branches. Like her father and brother Trent, Sarah was a smidge over six foot and always hitting her head on things. A moment later she drew to a halt at the edge of a small clearing. A small girl knelt in the middle, her head hanging low toward the moss covered ground.

Sarah guessed the girl must have been five or six. She wore a tattered, aged dress and her hair was a mess of twigs and leaves. The girl held a long silver metallic torch and every few seconds her thumb moved the switch on and off. In the flickering blasts of white light, Sarah's hand went to her mouth

as she could see the girls entire form was covered in blood. Slowly the head lifted and the small face looked up to the arts student with pleading eyes.

"Oh dear!"

Sarah moved closer, eventually stopping before the child and bending over to comfort her.

"There there, where's your Mother you poor thing?"

The crying stopped as the girl gazed up at Sarah with the strangest look in her eyes. The tears were gone replaced by something else, something sinister, a look of defiant confidence. Sarah could see a twinkle of madness and recoiled in surprise.

"What?" muttered Sarah as she moved to take a step backward in confusion.

In an instant the world around Sarah exploded as all manner of foliage debris whipped upwards. A second later she was hoisted high into the air by heavily bound netting.

"Help help!" screamed Sarah in panic.

"Help Help" mimicked the child in a mean, teasing voice.

The girl, also swept up by the netting, wriggled within the confines until she faced Sarah. Strangest of all the child began to calmly hum a haunting tune, as if this were any other day. Pausing mid tune she ran her tiny tongue along Sarah's closest arm and lower back, savouring the sweaty flavours from her running shirt.

As the net spun around and around Sarah could see a group of people wearing heavy dark cloaks gazing up at her. The strangers all wore the same dead pan stoic aspect. Something sharp bit at Sarah's lower back causing her to smart. A few seconds later her eyes rolled up into her head and the world descended into darkness.