

LODGED

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THE PRIEST LEANED IN and his voice gravely dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, as though we were huddled underneath parliament plotting a coup. ‘Your son,’ Father Michael said, ‘might have something *lodged* in him.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ I asked.

‘The P word,’ he said, his eyes darting a full circle.

Pencil, I thought. That made sense. Eli had once chewed a blue crayon and needed his teeth scraped clean. A pencil would be worse. Lead poisoning, surely. Fatal. I pictured my son pale and clutching his stomach, a tiny martyr to stationery misuse.

‘That’s terrible,’ I said, aghast. ‘Will he be okay?’

Father Michael blinked at me and lowered his voice further. ‘Oh, he’s not in pain. That’s just how the disguise works.’

Disguise? What disguise? Was he talking about Eli’s habit of wrapping himself in his blanket and announcing he was a ghost? I frowned, not sure whether I was confused or insulted. Perhaps I had overshared, and could only blame myself.

‘He’s a strong-willed child,’ I said. ‘Always smiling, even when he’s not well.’

‘Exactly,’ Father Michael said, nodding. ‘Always smiling. It’s how they fool you.’

‘They?’ I asked, but he didn’t elaborate, just gave me the kind of look you’d give someone who didn’t know how to

hold a secret. I wanted to laugh, honestly. I did. But there was something unsettling about Father Michael's certainty; something I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

Then it occurred to me that he had uttered P, not for pencil, but for *possession*.

The trouble with my wife Katie, as I'd come to realise over the years, was that she had the most frustrating way of being simultaneously right and entirely unhelpful. She loved Eli as if he were a little porcelain angel, delicate and infallible, a boy whose naked streaks through the garden were practically canonised. Anytime he did something strange - like when he turned his school artbook into a gallery of hollow-eyed faces drawn in frantic charcoal - she would tilt her head thoughtfully and say, 'He's just experimenting.' Then she'd add, as if delivering a sermon, 'Saints were often sinners to begin with,' and out would come a well-timed reference to Saint Augustine. I'd read *Confessions* once and only gathered that Augustine was some ancient man of aristocracy who converted to Catholicism in 400 AD - a bold choice for a time when lions versus Christians was still primetime entertainment.

So when I told Katie about Father Michael's verdict, her reaction was predictably defensive.

‘You told the priest what?’ she said, and set her coffee mug down with unnecessary force.

‘Nothing,’ I replied, my eye caught by the toast crumbs on the table. ‘I just shared my concerns. I had to; he asked what was on my mind.’

‘You don’t have to tell him everything!’

‘Don’t you?’ I asked, regretting the rhetorical trap.

‘That’s not the point,’ she snapped. ‘Eli is five years old, Jon. He’s not even old enough to say proper prayers.’

‘I’ve taught him the Lord’s Prayer,’ I said. ‘He says, *Our Father, who farts in Heaven.*’

That earned me a laugh – a fleeting one, but it was enough to make me feel slightly less stupid.

‘I’m serious, Jon,’ Katie said. ‘I need you to cancel the priest’s visit.’

‘I’m not cancelling it,’ I replied, stubbornly. ‘It’s just tea and a prayer. Eli can join in if he’s not too busy constructing his Lego apocalypse. It’s a good thing.’

‘A good thing?’

‘Yes. It’s an opportunity to get to know our priest better. He cares about our son growing up to be a good Catholic. Isn’t that what we want, more than anything?’

Katie’s frown deepened. ‘We sound like my parents.’

‘It worked for them, didn’t it?’

‘I’m lapsed,’ she said flatly. ‘I haven’t confessed in years.’

‘You are naughty that way,’ I admitted, earning another withering glare. ‘But you’re forgiven.’

‘I don’t need your forgiveness.’

‘No, I mean God’s.’ I paused; how could I authorise Christ’s forgiveness on His behalf as a mere layman? I had overstepped, and instantly cried out to be forgiven, albeit silently.

‘Never mind,’ I said. ‘I appreciate you being so flexible about this.’

‘I am not being flexible about this,’ Katie said. ‘But you are so stubborn, whatever I say, you will just go and do the opposite.’

I couldn’t argue with her point. ‘But listen to me,’ she went on. ‘My son—’

‘Our son,’ I corrected.

‘*Our* son, whatever the righteous Father may believe, is not carrying a little Devil around with him.’

‘How so?’ I asked, sounding dumb, although I was sincerely intrigued by what my wife had to mean exactly by her curious phrasing.

‘You think he’s possessed,’ she stated.

‘I, and Father Michael, do believe he may have some evil spirit lodged in him.’

‘There is nothing lodged,’ she said, exasperated. ‘All he’s got stuck in his chest is a common cold. Poor sod. He needs our understanding, not a cross-examination.’

I wish I could've taken Katie's words for truth, but when Eli walked in at that moment, his hands sticky with some unknown red substance, and muttered, 'I made a potion,' I couldn't help but think that I was right, or that I had latently sworn allegiance to Father Michael's presumption.

He arrived promptly at 3 PM the following afternoon. His cassock swished as he approached our front door. The walk from the Church, Our Lady of the Conception, had evidently agreed with him; his cheeks were flushed with colour, his mood buoyant. I had prepared a pot of English Breakfast tea and arranged a small plate of dark chocolate digestives - the sort of hospitality one extends when a priest comes to potentially diagnose your child with supernatural afflictions.

Eli, freshly retrieved from nursery school, had no idea the priest was visiting. This was by design; I'd given him no time to concoct one of his cunning schemes. At 5 years old, Eli's trickery was limited – usually impulsive rather than strategic – but Katie insisted he needed to learn the art of appropriateness. She'd even considered teaching him little white lies, just to help him navigate the tricky waters of politeness. After all, the time he'd announced that a friend's crayon drawing stinks like a poo hadn't gone over well with the other mums.

‘Father, good to see you as ever,’ I said, as he stepped inside.

‘How are you, Jon?’ he asked, settling himself on the sofa and resting his hat on his knee. ‘Not too worried about your boy, I hope?’

‘I think we’re fine,’ I said. ‘He’s been quite normal today.’

‘Define normal. Nothing extraordinary?’ His tone carried the weight of theological inquiry.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘he did try to chew my trouser leg on the way into nursery school. There might be a small rip in them.’

‘Oh dear. But no flesh wounds?’

‘Nothing serious,’ I assured him. ‘Just being playful, I think.’

Father Michael raised an eyebrow. ‘Does he often use his teeth? They are a child’s best weapon.’

‘I hadn’t thought of it that way,’ I admitted. ‘But yes, they are sharp objects.’

‘They certainly are.’ He leaned back, eyes wandering towards Eli’s playroom, where the boy was joyfully smashing two dinosaur figurines together. For a moment, I felt guilty for letting the priest observe him like a behavioural scientist studying a strange specimen.

‘Eli,’ I called, stepping into the doorway. ‘Come and say hello to Father Michael.’

To my surprise, Eli came willingly. He even bowed slightly as he approached, but then out came the grin. ‘You’re the man from the church tower,’ he said, pointing at him.

‘Yes, the lectern,’ Father Michael replied. ‘And do you remember what I spoke about from that tower?’

Eli glanced at me, uncertain. ‘Just guess,’ I whispered, giving him an encouraging nod.

‘About the star that guided the kings,’ Eli said.

‘Wonderful. And where did the star lead them?’

‘To the desert,’ Eli replied.

‘Where in the desert?’

‘To God.’

‘Yes,’ said Father Michael, his face lighting up. ‘To the Son of man.’

‘But they didn’t find God,’ Eli said with a wide smile.

‘They found a crying baby. Wah wah wah.’

Father Michael tittered lightly, though his eyes betrayed concern. ‘Eli, why don’t you stand here with your father and say the Lord’s Prayer with me? Just once, and then I’ll leave you to your toys.’

This was, of course, a test – a way to gauge the spiritual temperature of a soul. But my young son, ever the wildcard, simply shook his head and bolted from the room, back to his dinos.

‘Eli!’ I shouted, chasing after him. ‘That was rude. Come back here!’

‘I don’t feel like praying,’ he stated, unapologetic. I let him go; using force wouldn’t have been appropriate.

Father Michael, still seated, tapped his chin thoughtfully. ‘Not in the mood,’ he murmured. ‘Well, let’s give him the benefit of the doubt for now. But bring him to Mass on Sunday. There’s something very unclean here. Something that mocks the faith.’

‘I’m sorry, Father,’ I said. ‘We’ve tried, my wife and I.’

‘Don’t blame yourselves. The devil doesn’t pick and choose. He sees what the eye can see, hears what we hear. It’s not cause and effect out there; it’s chaos. But God speaks to us through that chaos, and I want to help you. You’re a good man. You deserve better. I believe your wife would agree?’

I nodded, then ventured to add my concern. ‘Perhaps we’re being too quick to judge?’

‘There is no judgement being made. I can tell within months of a child’s baptism whether a soul has a nasty lodging.’

‘And could you tell with Eli?’ I asked, despite myself.

Father Michael hesitated, then met my eyes. ‘Do you want the truth?’

‘Yes.’

‘Of course I could. But I don’t go around frightening new members of my parish off with the P word.’

I wasn’t sure what to say, but kept my posture engaged.

‘I would stay longer,’ he said, standing and donning his hat, ‘but there’s never enough time.’

‘Too true,’ I said.

‘Not until eternity. Then we’ll have many more cups of tea together.’

‘I hope so.’

‘Have faith, son.’ And with that, he was gone.

Katie arrived home an hour later with the groceries.

‘You did what?’ she fumed, her voice so sharp I thought I had been cracked with a whip. Her anger, I reasoned, was surely a sin in itself, but of course, she didn’t see it that way. How could she, imbibed with her own wrath? I often countered by doing the only thing a man of faith might: I prayed. For wisdom? Perhaps. For deliverance from earthly ills? Most definitely.

Talking about Eli only stoked the fire, so after a moment to settle the air, I attempted humour, always my shield and sword in such moments. ‘I only gave Father Michael a couple of biscuits,’ I said with a shrug. ‘He looked hungry on his way back to the village.’

Katie’s eyes narrowed to slits. ‘Don’t be ridiculous. He’s frightened Eli! Do you even know what your son told me?’

‘That the Father needs to lose weight?’ I guessed, hoping for a laugh.

‘Everyone needs to lose weight! He said the church is evil. Evil! A place we’re supposed to feel safe in!’

‘Ah, well, that’s how Satan wants us to feel,’ I said, suddenly proud of my sermonising zeal. ‘Can’t you see what’s happening here?’

‘Don’t tell me you’re falling for it.’ Her finger shot out, accusatory, trembling.

‘Falling for what, Katie? For God? I’ve been a believer since long before we met. I thought you had been one, too.’

She hesitated, her mouth working on words that weren’t quite ready to be found.

‘And now you’re just being weak,’ I said, admittedly overstepping my good intentions.

‘Weak!’ She spat. ‘Oh, that’s rich coming from you. You believe every lie the priest tells you - or anyone else in authority! That’s weakness!’

She was livid now, practically steaming like a kettle. I hadn’t seen her this unhinged since I accidentally tossed half a bottle of her precious Merlot during Lent. In that moment, as she stood quivering with rage, Katie looked to me less like my wife and more like a little devil herself. But

I quickly cast the thought aside, horrified at my own mind, and refocused on Christ. What, I wondered, would He do?

‘Come to church on Sunday,’ I said, adopting a steadier tone. ‘Please. Let’s set an example for Eli. It can’t do him any harm.’

‘No!’ she shouted. ‘He’s old enough to decide for himself now.’

‘But he’s only five,’ I said.

‘Not too young to be possessed, apparently.’

I protested. ‘Babies can be possessed before they’re even born.’

‘Now you’ve really lost your senses!’ she cried, throwing up her hands in mock surrender.

Perhaps she was right. Perhaps good sense had fled me entirely.

Katie stormed out of the room, leaving me alone in the tense silence. I sat, conflicted, stewing over the argument. But then I reminded myself: the path of righteousness was never meant to be easy. A good father must suffer. A good father must face the truth with courage. How could I stand by and watch my family lose their faith – mock the very virtues faith was meant to bring? By the will of God, I would endure the spitting and gnashing of teeth. I draw the line at a crown of thorns, though. I was not born to be a saint, a prophet, or the second Christ. Just a reliable husband, with a penchant for prayer and strong brews.

The next morning, I found Eli alone by his bedside reading and asked if he'd come to church on Sunday morning.

'No!' he screamed, his voice sounding an alarm through the house.

'But there'll be biscuits afterwards,' I said. 'Lots of chocolate ones.'

'I hate biscuits!' he howled, his face contorted with theatrical fury. 'I hate, I hate, I hate them! I only like Mummy's cooking!'

Before I could muster a response, he threw himself from the bed in a grand display of rejection and began banging his forehead against the carpet with all the religiosity of a penitent monk. 'No, no, no!' he wailed, exorcising his very soul.

At that moment, Katie appeared in the doorway and paused, her eyes flitting between Eli's dramatic performance and my anxious face. I could see the question forming: was this a horror scene or simply a restless child at the height of rebellion? She opted for the latter.

'Come on, Eli,' she said, gently enough, as though speaking to a kitten rather than a demon. 'Let's get some breakfast down you.'

Instantly, he obeyed, springing to his feet and trotting after her as though the previous tantrum had been a mirage. I sighed deeply and crossed myself, muttering a

prayer for forgiveness. What kind of shepherd couldn't lead his own family to Mass? Surely I was failing in my duty to bring them to thanksgiving before the Creator on His day of rest.

Mass itself was, as always, beautiful. Father Michael presided over the liturgy with a solemn grace that made the mysteries of the Eucharist feel alive. It was this beauty – the sacrifice of Christ, the perfection of the ritual – that had drawn me to Catholicism in the first place. Do I truly believe I'm consuming flesh? Not exactly. But the symbolism is so pure, so transformative, that I can't help but feel united with Christ when I partake in the consecrated bread. I imagine Father Michael would disapprove of this semi-heretical view, but I've never been overly concerned with dogma. Christ only asked for faith and followership; the finer theological points, I suspect, are for the bureaucrats of heaven to untangle and make known to us somehow.

Today's homily was, conveniently, about the sanctity of family and the devils that conspire to tear it apart. Father Michael even included a pointed reference to 'turning hearts to God when thoughts of separation occur.'

'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,' Father intoned from Scripture. I then mentally added my usual private addendum: 'and forgive those who cast bad looks upon us,' I whispered. I couldn't

help it; the dismissive sideways glances of others often riled me. Katie always said I was too sensitive. ‘People are grumpy - it’s rarely about you.’ She was probably right. But I’d reply, ‘It’s not about me, it’s about Christ. If He took our sins personally, why shouldn’t I feel slighted on His behalf?’ This Christian reasoning truly served to madden her.

After the service, I found myself cornered by Wendy from the congregation, who launched into a tirade about the Gentiles and their role as ‘the race of the world.’ I wasn’t entirely sure what she meant by that, so I nodded politely and made my excuses, edging towards Father Michael, who was deep in conversation with Theodore about food banks and dwindling donations.

Eventually, he turned to me. ‘Jon,’ he said, clapping a hand on my shoulder. ‘Good to see you.’

‘And you, Father.’

‘I hope I wasn’t too harsh in confession earlier,’ he said.

‘Not at all. My lustful thoughts shame me every day,’ I said.

He smiled indulgently. ‘You’re an honest man, Jon. A good Catholic. Just remember – beat your chest before bed every night.’

‘I do, Father,’ I said solemnly. ‘And with great grievance.’

‘Good. Now, how’s the little rascal? Tell me he hasn’t become a Methodist like his Auntie.’

‘God, no,’ I said with a laugh.

‘And your wife? She hasn’t joined them, has she?’

‘She wouldn’t be seen dead in a Methodist congregation,’
I said.

Father Michael swallowed a smirk, but as the words left my mouth, I realised I might have overindulged in ill humour. A joke too far. Still, Father only gave me a knowing look before moving on. Perhaps, I mused, even Christ might have chuckled now and then. Who could face humanity’s antics with a straight face forever? Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, if they had used descriptive language in their Gospels, may have had the inclination to describe Christ’s humour at the puzzled look from crowds upon hearing his parables: for he watched them with glee and laughed on with compassion.

‘You have a habit of digging holes for yourself,’ Katie once told me, which was not a reflection of my own self-belief. Her favourite critique of my humour was delivered with surgical precision, ‘The jokes aren’t funny to begin with, so why bother? It only makes your awkwardness worse.’ I begged to differ. Sometimes, just sometimes, I managed to pull off a moment of charm, the kind that passes for actually having a sense of humour. Katie was just a tough audience. The only time I’d truly seen her amused was at Eli’s fourth birthday party when I donned a clown costume. There I was, a grown man

pulling coloured ribbons out of my ears while the children howled with laughter, and Katie – dear, stoic Katie – actually smirked. I suppose humiliation is my comedic sweet spot.

‘On a more serious note,’ Father Michael began, his tone a scalpel cutting through the pleasantries. ‘What’s the excuse this week?’

‘Eli’s got a cough,’ I offered weakly.

Father’s eyebrows rose. I could feel his gaze drilling into my skull, his mind somehow pressing against mine like a spiritual telescope peering through my flesh and bones. Lying to him was as futile as lying to God.

‘He didn’t want to come, did he?’ Father said knowingly. ‘He told you something nasty. What was it?’

‘He...’

‘Was it something venomous?’

‘Quite, Father,’ I admitted reluctantly. ‘Hatred.’

‘A strong word for a child. And Katie? What did she say?’

‘Nothing. She just comforted him.’

‘No mother’s wrath?’

‘None,’ I replied, feeling oddly defensive.

‘Goodness me,’ Father muttered, rubbing his chin. I could see the wheels turning in his head, a plan forming. ‘Arrange a time for me to visit again when she’s not there, and we’ll pray together.’

I hesitated. The idea of an exorcism – no matter how casual the Father made it sound – felt extreme. And frankly, I didn't want to waste his time chasing down Eli's tantrums.

He read my doubt instantly. 'It's time to get rid of it,' he said, his voice firm. 'Buckle up, Jon. Don't be afraid. Do this for your family. The worst that can happen is we both get spat on, and Katie comes pleading at my door for an annulment.'

The man had a way of cutting through one's resolve with equal parts conviction and gallows humour. I nodded, unsure whether I was agreeing to his plan or simply acknowledging the sheer inevitability of it all.

I rarely had the house to myself; Katie and I weren't much for dating. The theatre? Twice a year, at best. But Katie, to her credit, had her regular social life. Every month, she and her friends scheduled an evening of dining and catching up. Tonight, she was off to meet Sophie at some new Japanese restaurant in town.

'You're welcome to come,' she said, which I immediately deflected. 'No, no, you go spend time with Sophie. I'll wind down here, maybe even finish my report in blessed quiet.'

As she grabbed her coat, she paused. 'Don't let Eli stay up watching TV. I won't be back late.'

‘You’re off early,’ I observed, noting the hour.

‘We’re visiting the Minster first, before it closes,’ she said, coloured with an air of satisfaction that felt a bit strong for an Anglican place of worship. I smiled, pleased for her. It was a subtle jab though, no doubt. Katie hailed from a so-called progressive family that had a soft spot for the Church of England and its modern approach to faith. She had a tendency to extol the virtues of a forward-thinking church – one more concerned with the future than the traditions of the past. This was, of course, why she had flatly refused to learn Latin, dubbing it ‘a dead language.’ In my heart of hearts, I knew Katie wasn’t as devoted to being a Catholic as I was. The parish might’ve been desperate for converts, but her path to the fold was paved with only ten Hail Marys and two hours a week studying the Catechism during a single Lent. Still, I had never criticised her denominative doubts, not until now.

‘Tea and prayers before dinner, then. Lovely,’ I said diplomatically. ‘Have a great time.’

Katie paused, checking her handbag. ‘Sophie’s turned atheist,’ she said.

‘Oh no. You can try and show her the light,’ I teased.

‘Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not the evangelical type, am I?’

‘Of course not,’ I said. ‘But you needn’t be religious to pray.’

She rolled her head in annoyance, already halfway out the door. ‘Not now, Jon. I’m late. Bye! Oh, and get Eli to read Pullman, would you? He needs to move on from those nursery books. Doesn’t matter if he can’t pronounce half the words. That’s how you learn.’

‘Agreed,’ I said, though I doubted I’d pry him away from his cartoons.

At precisely 7p.m., Father Michael arrived, the scent of sardines and toast preceding him.

‘Delicious,’ I remarked as he stepped into the hall. ‘Sardines?’

‘Not so pious,’ he admitted with a shrug. ‘I shouldn’t be eating fish on non-feast days. Fasting is the proper way. Lent is forever, you know.’ Then he asked, wasting no time, ‘Shall we get straight on with the blessing?’

‘Yes. He’s in his room,’ I said, hot with anticipation.

I led Father Michael through the modest expanse of our home, feeling a simmer of pride as his eyes lingered on the statuette of the Virgin Mary perched on the mantelpiece. I had deliberately positioned her just so – tilted slightly forward, gazing serenely past the china, reigning over the room with more prominence than even the family portrait. That photograph, for the record, captured us sodden and shivering atop some unnamed peak in the Scottish Highlands. Eli had been the star of the expedition, bounding ahead with the vigour of a born adventurer while

Katie and I lagged behind, wheezing like stranded hikers in a reality TV show. Sometimes I pictured Eli following in my father's footsteps - charting Arctic waters, snapping photos of safaris, or circumnavigating the globe in some rickety craft, risking respectable danger at every turn.

But such visions were abruptly cast aside when I opened Eli's bedroom door and gasped. The boy was gone.

'Don't panic,' Father Michael said, as calm as a shepherd surveying a particularly restless sheep in a scattered flock.

'He's just hiding,' I stammered. 'Let me check the playroom.'

But I knew better. He wasn't in the playroom. Nor under my bed. Nor, heaven help us, in the boot of the car. He was gone.

'I need to call Katie,' I said.

'No, don't do that,' Father replied firmly. 'Let's check the road. Does he wander off often?'

I hesitated. 'Once, at the beach.' But that was because Katie and I walked on for ten minutes without checking back over our shoulders – parenting at its finest. 'He was here fifteen minutes ago,' I said, trying to keep the edge of panic from my voice.

'Then he can't have gone far. Go, bring the boy home. I'll wait here.'

Father Michael settled onto the sofa with a saintly serenity. It struck me as both reassuring and mildly

infuriating. While I was prepared to run myself ragged in the icy dark, he simply gazed at the Virgin Mary with the vision of a carefree noble, perhaps not dissimilar to how Christ felt contemplating on the cross.

I bolted out the door, gulping the cold air and reminding myself to breathe properly – through the nose, deep and slowly. The street was empty under the dim glow of streetlamps. I scanned every shadow and garden, careful not to alarm the neighbours by appearing as some deranged prowler. Eli loved climbing trees, but none of the bare oaks bore his silhouette.

Then my mind turned to the meadow at the end of the road, a spot he often retreated to in spring to whisper to lambs and hide in the underbrush, bleating like a lost one. For a brief, misguided moment, I thought this peculiar habit was an expression of his budding faith. But no – it was simply Eli's boundless love for small creatures. Bugs, worms, birds – he collected them like treasures, but always returned them to the wild with gentle care. It suddenly struck me that in good likelihood young St. Francis of Assisi had done the same. 'St. Francis,' I muttered under my breath, scanning the dark expanse. 'Guide me to my son, the animal.'

And there he was. A small figure knelt in the meadow, leaning into the earth, seemingly searching for tiny bugs to save from the approaching frost.

But then he howled – a raw, feral sound that rose from the depths of the earth as though summoned by the fury of a world teetering on the edge of damnation. The very air around me seemed to quiver. I scratched my chin in disbelief, half-convinced I was dreaming, and, to make sure, yanked out a small tuft of facial hair. The sting confirmed my grim reality.

The howling ebbed, giving way to a low, eerie murmur to make one's blood run freezing. Every fibre of my being screamed to dash into the dark and rescue my son, but terror pinned me in place. Instead my thoughts turned, with no small amount of cowardice, to Father Michael. If anyone could handle this, surely it was the man with a thoroughfare to Heaven.

I sprinted back to the house, bursting into the living room where the Father was slumped in his chair, head bowed in serene repose. His eyes snapped open as I cried, 'Father, please, come quickly!'

Without a word, he roused himself, still moving with an assured calmness. He reached for a bottle of holy water and fingered the crucifix around his neck. 'Lead the way,' he said, and off we went to bless a creature of the night.

We arrived at the meadow, my breath visible in the icy air. There lay Eli, sprawled on the grass under the spectral light of the moon. I pointed shakily. 'Over there!'

Father Michael squinted, his brow furrowing. ‘He’s holding something,’ he observed. ‘Let’s just hope he isn’t smeared in poo.’

‘He’s probably holding an insect,’ I said.

‘Wait a moment,’ Father Michael said, and halted abruptly. ‘The farmer who owns this land – he isn’t, by any chance, a madman, is he? Or she?’

‘No, he’s fairly normal,’ I replied, though my confidence wavered.

‘No shotguns then?’

‘No.’

‘That’ll do, then.’

‘Well, not that I know of.’

Father Michael resumed his march, clearly unbothered by my faltering assurances. I trailed behind and mumbled to myself. ‘At least, I can’t think of any... I mean, at any rate.’ He ignored me entirely, his cassock swaying determinedly in the moonlight.

We drew closer, and then we saw him. Eli turned slowly to face us, stepping out of the darkness like a shadow unmoored. There was no sound, only a disquieting stillness, as a smaller shadow swayed behind him – the silhouette of something he cradled, rocking back and forth on the grass as though he had fashioned a nest for whatever unspeakable purpose had gripped his soul.

‘You go,’ Father Michael said, stopping in his tracks.

‘But.’

‘Just go talk sense to your son. And if he spits, raise your arm. That’s the signal.’

‘Which arm?’

‘Your right one, of course.’

‘Okay, but how will I know if he spits? Will it just be a ball of phlegm?’

‘He’ll have saliva coating his mouth. That’s usually a giveaway.’

I didn’t feel too reassured. Yet as I looked closer, I felt some relief; Eli still appeared human, at least outwardly. But the anxiety remained, prickling at my neck like a crawling spider. My young adult imagination betrayed me; I envisioned the moment the page of this comic would turn to gore and be splattered in blood, the panels twisting into grotesque shapes.

I felt profoundly alone. Trapped between a son who might or might not be possessed and a priest who seemed far too comfortable with the idea of demonic spitting. How had it come to this? Was this my fate – to stand at the edge of some cosmic battleground, despairing and uncertain? A heavy melancholy settled on my heart, pulling my thoughts to darker places. Perhaps this was my moment of crucifixion – a trial I was destined to endure like Christ. Blessed are they who are persecuted, I thought to myself, attempting to muster saintly courage. For theirs is the

kingdom of Heaven. Life is short, thank God, and surely I can endure its hardships until I am finally granted a glimpse of my Maker.

My trembling hands clasped together. ‘O Lord’, I prayed. ‘Secure me a place in Heaven. Please, not the pains of Hell. Deliver me to the place where your love is eternal. Amen.’ The prayer did little to steady my nerves, but it filled the silence as I drew closer to Eli. Then, breath held, I paused directly behind him, and he suddenly spoke.

‘Daddy, why are you here?’

His voice startled me. Eli rarely called me Daddy, and when he did, it was usually part of a well-rehearsed negotiation strategy. It was the title he deployed to inquire why his mother wouldn’t let him eat cake for breakfast or why bedtime existed at all. But this wasn’t that voice. This was quieter, almost cunning, and it crawled into my ears like a serpent.

‘Hello, Eli,’ I said, striving for calm authority, though the effect landed somewhere closer to an anxious teacher scolding a delinquent child. ‘I’m here to take you home because... Well, it’s late.’

I braced for the inevitable rebuttal - why do I have to? Why do I always have to? - but before I could finish my sentence or invent a plausible excuse involving his mother’s impending return, Eli turned fully to face me. And that’s when I saw it.

A sheep's skull.

It rested in his small hands like a grotesque trophy, its jaw chiselled and fringed with a loose, bloodied patch of fur.

'What on earth,' the words escaped my lips in a helpless sputter of disbelief.

'It's just a baby lamb's head,' Eli said, matter-of-factly. 'I found it.'

My gaze drifted to his fingers, stained a charcoal red, as though he'd been roasting them over an open flame. A shiver worked its way down my spine and then leapt into my toes like a bolt of electricity.

'Eli, this, this is...' I faltered.

'It's okay. Just death,' he said with a shrug, as if he were discussing a slightly overcooked roast. Then he spat on the ground. The signal.

My arm shot into the air, and Father Michael responded with commendable speed. His boots crunched through the grass in a hasty march. But before he could reach us, something far worse happened.

Eli began to laugh. It wasn't a child's laugh – the kind that spills out in giddy waves at the sight of a cute puppy. No, this was a guttural, inhuman noise, half-cackle, half-screech, like a crow coughing up broken glass. It rattled through the atmosphere with malice and a deranged kind of delight.

Father Michael reached my side just as Eli tightened his grip on the skull, holding it as though it were a sacred relic. He began to speak to it, his voice descending into a slurry of guttural vowels and rasping consonants. It was a language I didn't recognise, if it was a language at all.

I whispered another prayer, trembling. 'O Lord, you who know eternal love, take me to the place where love reigns forever – but if possible, could I have just a small taste of it now, before I lose my mind completely?'

'Keep praying,' Father Michael urged, his voice low but firm. He stepped forward, gripping the crucifix that hung around his neck. Then, raising his free hand, he spoke with the full weight of priestly authority.

'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,' he intoned, bellowing out across the field. 'I command you, Beelzebub, leave this child! Leave him unharmed, in the name of the Lord!'

The wind seemed to still around us, but the shadows deepened. Eli's laughter faltered, and then his eyes burned brighter. The battle went on, as he shrieked – sharp and feral – and before I could react, he hurled the bloodied skull at Father Michael, who ducked with a surprising agility for a man of his years. By this point, I was stuck in horror.

Then Eli bolted, sprinting towards the fence with the determination of a creature fleeing captivity.

Father Michael nudged me awake, and I tried to chase after Eli, but my boots skidded on the slick grass. My son was quick, but I was desperate, and desperation always wins. I caught up to him just before the fence, grabbing hold of his arm and dragging him down onto the wet earth. He thrashed beneath me. His small frame pulsed with a surprising, devilish strength.

‘Calm down,’ I said through gritted teeth.

He bucked and squirmed, shouting, ‘Let me go!’

I tightened my grip and pinned him more firmly. This wasn’t my first time restraining him – there’d been that incident on the beach, years ago, when he’d broken free of Katie and me, tearing down the shoreline like some wild colt. Was he just eager to grow up already, to leave us behind? Were we really such terrible parents?

‘If you stop now, we can go home,’ I tried, while wobbling on my knees, feeling like a beggar and a commander at the same time.

‘No!’ he screamed, raw with rage. ‘Let me go!’

Father Michael appeared above us, wielding the holy water, the weapon of divine justice. He leaned down and grimly commanded once more, ‘Come out, you unclean spirit! You blasphemous beast! Leave this child!’

Eli writhed harder, trembling violently. He let out a guttural groan, and for a brief moment, I thought his body might shatter in my arms.

And then, just as suddenly as it had started, it was over. He slackened, and the fire ebbed away, leaving him limp and eerily calm. I held him close and cradled him in my right arm, no more threatening than a sleepy toddler.

Father Michael, still muttering prayers of thanksgiving, walked beside us as we made our way home. The streetlights were on, and it wasn't until we turned the corner and saw Katie's car in the driveway, headlights beaming like the eyes of some great accusing beast, that I realised how dark it had grown.

'Oh no,' I groaned, coming to a halt. 'Father, my wife's home.'

Father Michael frowned. 'And?'

'She'll be mad,' I said.

'It's only your wife,' he said, serenely brushing dirt from his robes.

'She won't see it that way,' I muttered.

But Father Michael waved away my concern. 'Fear not,' he declared. 'I am here to bless her, too.'

For some reason, at that moment, I had an epiphany about faith. It wasn't really about theology or doctrine – it was about goodwill between people. That's why I loved the Mass. There was always a guarantee of human warmth, a genuine smile from someone after the service, or perhaps a quiet exchange of joy between an elderly lady and a young gentleman during it. This blessing of unadulterated

kindness wasn't guaranteed anywhere else, certainly not in the secular world. Out there, the demons ran rampant, though they didn't bother with horns and pitchforks. No, these devils drove 4x4s with boots stuffed full of consumer goods, orchestrated family meltdowns in IKEA, and bickered endlessly over which mind-numbing TV show to watch next. Satan was everywhere, as clever as God Himself, and at least twice as demanding.

Katie stepped out of the car and slammed the door with a vigour that promised trouble. Eli broke free from my side and bolted straight to her, arms outstretched, his palms still stained crimson with sheep's blood.

'Mummy!' he cried.

Katie's eyes widened in horror. 'What in God's name,' she gasped, staring at his hands before turning her glare on me and Father Michael. 'What have you done to him?'

I opened my mouth to respond, perhaps to deflect or at least explain, but she cut me off, shaking her head furiously as if she could ward off whatever madness she thought we'd brought into her life. Her handbag fell onto the driveway, her keys and phone spilling out unheeded.

She snatched Eli's small, stained hands in hers and turned his palms over frantically searching for a laceration to explain the gore. 'Where is he bleeding, Jon? Answer me!' She looked from the crimson smears to Father Michael's impassive, holy water-wielding silhouette. A

terrible conclusion formed in her mind. ‘What kind of archaic ritual is this? Did you cut him?’

‘It’s animal blood!’ I blurted out.

‘What animal!’ she shouted, her eyes blazing.

I paused, the answer caught in my throat. ‘A sheep...’

She stared at me, and then without another word, she spun on her heels, took Eli by the hand, and marched him inside.

I looked helplessly at Father Michael, who merely placed a steadying hand on my arm. ‘Let us be patient,’ he said. ‘She will return when she is ready. This is perfectly natural.’

Perfectly natural? My wife had just whisked away our bloodstained child without so much as a chance to explain, and I was supposed to believe this was expected behaviour? But true to his word, Katie emerged a few moments later, having deposited Eli in his room. She shut the front door firmly behind her, turned to face us, and crossed her arms like a royal demanding tribute.

Father Michael was unperturbed. He stepped forward and gracefully raised his hand. ‘Bless you, Katie,’ he intoned solemnly, making the sign of the cross over her head. ‘In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.’

She didn’t rebuke him – perhaps out of sheer shock – but her glare could have turned water straight into vinegar.

‘What in the hell happened while I was out?’ she demanded. ‘He’s completely shaken up!’

I glanced at Father Michael, hoping he might have a divinely inspired explanation ready to go. But he just gave me a fatherly look, clearly, he was leaving this one to me.

‘Eli needs spiritual help,’ I said.

Katie crossed her arms like a barricade and fired back, ‘It’s only since you started going to church that he’s become like this!’

Father Michael interjected. ‘He ran from John and found a sheep skull in the paddock yonder. He caressed it, heralding death, and chanted in a goblin’s tongue.’

‘I know how it sounds,’ I added hastily. ‘But the Devil works in mysterious ways.’ I gestured at Father Michael as though his clerical collar added weight to my argument. ‘Please, Katie, let him finish what we’ve started.’

Father Michael rested a reassuring hand on my arm in his unflappable manner, but Katie had heard enough.

‘You’re both crazy!’ she yelled, then pivoted on her heel and went inside. The door slammed behind her with a ferocity that made both of us flinch.

‘I’m sure your son’s alright,’ Father Michael said. ‘But do go and check. And keep an eye on Katie too.’ He paused, and then imparted his wisdom at a whisper, ‘And remember, all you need is to choose love over hate.’

With that blessing out of the way, I went inside. Upstairs, I found Katie sitting by Eli's bedside, her hand resting on his shoulder. Eli was fast asleep, innocently, as if the earlier events had just been a bad dream of mine.

'Is he okay?' I asked softly.

'He's fine,' Katie said.

'Are you sure?' I pressed, glancing nervously at Eli as if he might sprout horns at any moment.

Katie turned to me sharply. 'Listen to yourself. You sound terrified of your own son. It's ridiculous. He's always been fine, and he always will be fine.'

I nodded, pretending to agree, but the image of Eli cradling that skull flashed in my mind continuously. 'If you'd seen what I saw...' I murmured.

Katie ignored me and rose to leave. 'Did you have a nice evening?' I asked, awkwardly attempting small talk as she brushed past me. She stopped, her hand on the doorframe, then left without a word.

'Sorry,' I called after her, but it was the kind of apology that lacked conviction, too little, too late.

Later, I found her in our bedroom, standing by the window, staring into the night.

'Why is Father Michael still outside our house?' she asked coldly.

I stuttered. 'Oh, stupid me. I forgot to go back and talk to him.'

I bolted downstairs and flung open the front door. Father Michael was still standing there, his silhouette framed by the glow of the porch light.

‘Sorry, Father,’ I panted. ‘I forgot to...’

‘No need to explain,’ he said, smiling faintly. ‘Let us finish what we started.’

‘I just checked on Eli. He’s sleeping soundly,’ I said.

‘That’s a good sign,’ he said with a nod. ‘He’s healed. But if he wakes in the night and acts strangely again, just use the peace of Christ. He will intercede for you.’

‘Thank you, Father,’ I said, though I was still unsettled.

‘Don’t be afraid. It’s normal behaviour, really.’

‘Normal?’

‘Yes, in such circumstances. As for the Devil... One gets used to it, when you work as I do. Be watchful, but never fearful.’ With that, he gave a final blessing and departed into the night.

When I returned to the bedroom, Katie was still standing at the window, knuckles pale against the glass. She didn’t look at me, just uttered, ‘Something’s got to change.’

‘Like what?’ I asked cautiously.

‘You’re too set on God,’ she said, like it was a crime. And that stung. It also confused me. This was the same woman who, when we first met, had waxed poetic about

her faith. Had I done this to her? Turned her hope into scepticism, her salvation into an arrowhead?

But instead of defending myself, I decided to concede, at least in part. ‘Yes, you’re right,’ I said. ‘I’ve been trying to serve two masters.’

Her shoulders relaxed. ‘So you apologise?’

‘Of course,’ I said earnestly. ‘But I still want to protect our son from harm. Don’t forget, we got married in a church. Our marriage comes from God; it can’t be separated from Him. He is our master.’

The air grew with silence, and I wasn’t sure if I’d made things better or worse. My zeal had surprised even me, but then Katie’s response surprised me too. For the Lord works in mysterious ways.

‘You’re right, then,’ she said quietly. ‘I’m sorry too.’

A smile formed on my face as she moved to sit on the bed. I stayed where I was, unsure of my welcome. ‘It’s over now, anyway,’ I said. ‘Father Michael said so. It was just a mild form of the P word... Possession.’

Katie sprawled back against the pillows and smirked a little, her body supine but her mind clearly racing. ‘He’s a bit of a dodgy priest, though,’ she said. ‘You’ll admit that much.’

I couldn’t help but laugh. ‘Father Michael’s a character,’ I said.

‘I preferred Father Thomas,’ she said.

I didn't agree with her, but left that out of it. 'At least Father Michael is genuine,' I said. 'Not a phony. And there are far too many phonies in the world.'

'It's a crazy world,' Katie said, in a moment of melancholy.

'How was Sophie this evening?' I asked.

'Oh, she's going through a rough patch,' Katie said. Then added mockingly, 'But she's not possessed!'

I eventually drifted off to sleep, but morning brought no peace. A thud at my feet startled me awake. Groggily, I looked down and saw it – the skull. And there was Eli, standing beside it, with an eerie intent.

'Hello, Daddy,' he said, in a sing-song voice that chilled me. 'It's a present for you and Mummy. A reminder of death. Soon, we'll all be dead, and it's coming for us.'

My tongue froze. Was I still dreaming? No, Katie was awake too, her long intake of breath confirming the nightmare was very real.

'What are you doing with that skull, Eli,' she said, half-scolding, half-panicked.

Eli didn't flinch. He scooped the skull into his arms like a cherished toy and, with gravitas, declared, 'I want breakfast early, because one day we're all going to die.'

Katie groaned and pressed her palms to her face in exasperation. 'Oh God, now he's obsessed with death! Why can't he just be normal? What's next?'

I shrugged. ‘I suppose an obsession with Christ wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.’

Katie sighed heavily, and then let out a small shriek of frustration and surrender.

Later, I recounted the incident to Father Michael.

He was positively thrilled. ‘Wonderful!’ he exclaimed, clasping his hands together. ‘He’s discovered mortality! Such a precocious mind. This is the gateway to faith – understanding death as the doorway to salvation through Christ. Every Christian must face death to truly comprehend the Resurrection.’

I wasn’t entirely convinced, but I nodded at a theological point well said. After all, I did have a weakness for the infectiousness of priestly sermonising.

The next Sabbath, Eli accompanied us to church, though I convinced him to leave the skull behind, strategically placed on his nightstand like some morbid relic. Strangely, he seemed to have found complete solace in its presence. I began to wonder if this macabre fixation wasn’t a simple childhood curiosity, but something deeper. A conversion of sorts? He was only five, after all. For now, I could only be grateful Eli no longer drew demons in class. His teacher, however, reported a new development: dark, brooding scenes of something resembling country landscapes that carried a weight far beyond his years.

After Mass, Father Michael pulled me aside with a knowing smile. ‘A secret for you,’ he said. ‘Often, possession is the first sign of holiness, especially in children. You may hope, therefore, that Eli has a great future ahead of him.’

My relief was short-lived, as the thought soon occurred to me that greatness in a prophet often comes at a terrible price – gruesome deaths and such. I decided then and there not to share Father Michael’s encouragement with Katie, and to consider the whole matter closed.