

THE MAN WHO WEPT

When I first met him he was already an elderly, scholarly man; a man of God. A man I could talk to for hours. He seemed to me to be the kind of priest that I hoped I would be when I was his age. We would talk for hours covering everything from philosophy to politics. We talked of opportunities taken and lost. He said he had wanted to make a difference and leave this world having achieved something.

As the years went by and I was transferred to another parish, I heard that he became more and more withdrawn, that he would sit alone reading the few books that interested him over and over but really his days and nights were empty now, no one called and no one visited. Truthfully, no one but me had visited for many years. He had slowly and steadily created a routine of loneliness and solitude, building it layer upon layer, protected and cut off. Never having to deal with other people, never having to deal with himself - he developed a protective shell.

It was only in these last months when I came to know who he really was that I found out just what type of difference he had made. I spent his last few weeks with him... but not as a friend.

No matter what it was that he had tried to achieve, in the end everything was coloured and distorted by what had gone before.

He was born and grew up in Leinster, Ireland. His mother was a pianist of some talent; his father had died in one of those wars that swept Europe every few years. His childhood was easy and pampered; he and his mother grew closer as he grew older. Together they would sit at night and listen to Chopin or Mozart but their favourite was Satie. He would brush her hair and she would talk of the world outside, stories of important people with important lives doing important things. She told him that one day he, too, would be one of those people.

She knew him for what he was and understood that his life would be difficult. She tried to prepare him.

One summer, as one of Satie's nocturnes drifted through the still, rich air, he stood fresh from his bath, behind his mother brushing her long auburn hair; she looked at his face reflected in the mirror and her hand reached up and stroked his cheek as she said, "There must always be a reckoning, a collecting of debts. No matter what you do, it will come. What you must do is learn to control this appetite and make it your servant not your master."

From that moment in time he had subconsciously begun to prepare for what was to come. As the years melted and he grew older and his life progressed, he began to convince himself that this accounting would happen in another place, another time and never to him. If he was truthful, though, deep down in the shadowy recess of the place he didn't like to go, he had known that his restitution would be part of the natural order.

One day the men in the uniform of 'accepted morality' had come and suddenly all of the big things and the small things that he had done were laid bare. When they came for him, he did not fight, he did not protest, he did not argue, he went quietly, resigned. He was taken in chains to be charged. His world was beginning to crack but he seemed to float above it. It was

as if he was still in his home, in his favourite armchair watching the events unfold as an audience watches a play.

He remembered that there had been a trial and that people had spoken against him but it did not touch him. They had been talking about someone other than him. He was above all of this.

This was what his mother had prepared him for, for this moment, for this one second in time.

Everything now at the end seemed so trivial. The relationships that he had built and thought so permanent were in reality nothing but transient particles of dust caught in the last embrace of a sunbeam on a cold winter's day.

Each night he was returned under guard to his home. They asked him if needed or wanted anything. One night, he asked for me.

Two nights after my arrival a letter slid silently under the door and down the hall stopping in front of his slippers. It was a plain, brown, envelope with no stamp, no window and on the back it was sealed with a scar of scarlet red sealing wax. He knew what it was the moment he had seen it. He left it sitting unopened on a small, wooden table beside his bed, gathering dust for another two nights. He hoped in some way that it might disappear, dissolve and then he would never have to deal with what he knew was coming.

During these days of denial he did forget. His mind would drift, free from care and almost soar to places where he could roam untroubled by the present and untouched by the past. He would run his hands over the photos that lined the wall, photographs of his Innocents. Photographs that he had taken at the last minute, just as the light left their eyes. Memories and reminders from when he felt he could get away with anything; that it was his right to do whatever, whenever and however, to the faces that now stared back at him. Then, from the corner of his eye - a glimpse in passing, he would catch sight of the letter and the enormity of what had been done by him would come home. It would hit him, hard and cold like a branch that slaps you across the cheek when it is let loose too early by an inconsiderate hiker on a winter trek through the snow.

In the morning he would wash and shave and in the reflection of the mirror the letter would stare at him. It was the one thing after everything that he had done that he could not hide from. The one thing that said "Now is the time. Now at last your truth must be told."

All he had ever wanted was to feel. Now he knew that to feel he had to accept responsibility, to take ownership of his actions.

He had been told that great pain had been suffered. Souls had been ripped open and laid bare. That he was responsible. He had been told that families had been destroyed. He was responsible. He had been told that because of him, because of his actions, others, people he had never met, had died. He was responsible.

The letter stared at him still. It didn't accuse or judge. The stamp-less, windowless envelope stared.

He said, "It had seemed like such a little thing the first time". His arm had brushed against the smooth neck of the Innocent who had sat gazing out the window onto the lush green field of

youth. He leaned in close, his breath warm against the ear. "It was electric", he said, his eyes closed. "Like nothing I have ever felt before."

It had been easy. He had liked it. He was good at it.

It had been erotic and sexual, something that had been denied him for so many years. He had felt alive. The feeling of fullness and elation had lasted ever so briefly. He had hoped, expected even, that it, the feeling, would stay with him for a longer time, but like so many other things in his life it had faded quickly and drifted to the back of his already cluttered and fractured mind.

All he wanted was to feel.

The letter... the letter sat patiently, waiting for him to open it. Tomorrow... maybe, yes always tomorrow.

Finally, it got to the stage where he could not feel anything unless the risk was bigger. It was like skiing, the beginners' slopes had been mastered, the intermediates' tamed, and now he had to conquer the moguls of the advanced slope to begin to get even a hint of the pleasure he had felt the first time. To feel the adrenaline rush that would fill each fibre of his body.

At first he had been careful. He had a small grey car that he would use to tour the counties and then the country. Never going to the same place twice, always making sure he was a part of the white noise of life. He knew who to look for, the Innocent who sat alone, the sullen withdrawn one, the one who looked most vulnerable. He could pick them. He had always been a good judge of character. Then, as the years progressed, he became brazen; he flaunted his power. No one said anything... ever. No one asked, "Where do you go Father, why do you go so often?" He was allowed to hunt freely. He cared for nothing anymore but his pleasure.

Was it really pleasure that drew him further, deeper and darker into what he now considered his right? This was his purpose so it was his right, he was teaching them, they were asking for it. They were eager participants and in some cases, he knew, they were the initiators. They taunted him with their eyes and with their soft fluid physiques. Pleasure was too easy; he justified this as his art, a talent to be nurtured.

He was good at it.

Years went by. There were whisperings and rumours, but he was never implicated.

Then, one spring, as the last of the winter snow melted into the black earth, the first was found. An area of the "Old Forest" had to be cleared. As the gardeners and builders dug up the rich fertile ground, the first set of remains was unearthed. At first it was thought it was an anomaly, then they found another and another until over twenty three graves were discovered, some with more than one Innocent asleep in it.

In his arrogance, he had become careless and finally the evidence pointed back to him. His car had been seen once too often in a small country town miles from where he should have been. His picture was remembered by a shop keeper, an old woman, a passer-by. There was such uproar when it was finally discovered that he was the one, he was the person who had done what others could not even begin to imagine.

He had only ever wanted to feel.

The paper-thin precepts that kept society caged and ordered had been ripped and left shredded in the defiled earth. People were numb at first. He had been living with them, moving through their lives, touching them. In the early days he had comforted them, he had been there to support and offer solace. He shared their grief. He had heard their confessions. He was one of them.

He had only ever wanted to feel.

The numbness faded and the rage grew, gathering fury and retribution along in its wake. There was talk that he should be taken straight away. "Do to him", they screamed, "Do to him what he had done to them. An eye for an eye." Law and liberalism shook around him.

"Was it", he thought, "Such a bad thing I had done?" He rationalised that he had in fact shown to the world that they needed to take more care. "Had not others done much worse and gone unpunished? Why should I of all people be called to account?"

Standing in front of the photographs that lined his wall he could remember each face. They had been so young and so trusting. None had cried out; none had questioned what he was about to do; all of them had looked to him as a child would look to a loved parent. How many were there in total? One was too many, twenty was...

The letter, lying, unmoving on the table, the letter that could no longer be denied.

His pale translucent hand with the tea stained age spots and blue veins that traced a road map through the sparse grey hairs to his wrist, the hand that had helped him do the unthinkable, unspeakable things he had done, reached out.

With care and patience - the same care and patience he had shown his Innocents, he broke the scarlet red wax seal of government. Slowly, so slowly as if his time had stopped, he slid out the yellow sheet of paper.

He had only ever wanted to feel.

He had been good at it.

Carefully he read the black typed words; his eyes followed line by line, word by word, name by name; his mouth soundlessly spoke the truth and now, finally, at the end, it all made sense. Case by case, article by article his crime was laid bare. Once more the photographs on his wall were given names, histories and humanity. Each moment of his "art" was laid before him but now he took no pleasure.

He was good at it.

His breathing slowed and his eyes began to close as the letter slipped slowly, silently from his hand and fell like the first reluctant leaf of autumn to the floor.

He looked at me, his eyes wide with understanding and finally in those last few hours he knew the enormity of what he had done.

He had only ever wanted to feel.

He turned to me at last and asked if I would hear his confession, he knelt on the hard wooden floor and made the sign of the cross and asked God to forgive him his sins. Finally in these, his last hours, he knew who and what he was.

He was taken that next day in the cold dawn by the unnamed uniformed Officers of State and Humanity and justice, as prescribed, was finally done to him.

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