

HE FELT TERRIBLE FOR PREMATURELY KICKING OUT THE CONGREGATION, and even worse for hurrying them out into the blistering cold. But as soon as he got the message from his brother-in-law nothing else mattered.

Dozens of congratulations and commendations swamped him as the people funnelled out into the midnight air.

'A child to be born on Christmas day! How wonderful for you, Father!' said Martin, a much older gentleman with thick glasses, thick wrists, and a head moulded by a WW2 Brodie steel helmet.

'Reminds me of a certain somebody,' the priest winked. He couldn't get them out fast enough.

'Will you be picking up where you left off tomorrow, then?'

'I'm afraid I won't be here tomorrow, Martin. Hopefully, I'll have my hands full,' he said with a smile. 'I'll ensure Father Tipper gives a memorable service though. And Merry Christmas to you.'

The last member stepped out and the doors were promptly shut and locked. Despite his excited trembles, the priest insisted he stop to breathe for a moment, gather his thoughts, and steady his heart. But his heart ceased to relent. They're on their way to the hospital, he thought. I'll meet them there. The priest was slender enough that it wasn't uncommon for his stole to slip off his shoulders during service, so the moment he got a chance he took it off and put it in safekeeping.

Dashing from one task to the next, he barely had enough breath to blow out the candles, and the blood of Christ almost sloshed out of its bronze chalice as he went to pour it back into its original container, to be preserved for the following day's service. The last red drop dived off the rim when thunder grumbled in the distance. 'I'm going as fast as I can,' he said to the statue of Jesus on the cross above the altar. Torrential rain immediately followed to pick up where it had left off, eroding more of the church's stone façade. The priest stored the wine and the small silver platter of wafers in a cabinet off the sanctuary and continued on with his closing duties.

Thunder then bombed heavily like a freight train careening over the church roof, so the desperate beatings occurring on the front door could

not be heard. The priest hurried down the nave collecting the hymn books and whatever litter was left behind until he stumbled upon a black, gentlemanly umbrella lying on the last pew. I suppose I was quick to empty the premises, he thought, easy to forget an umbrella in that case. The door was disturbed once more, and this time the priest heard it. He picked up the umbrella and strode over, eager to bring a smile to the face of a drenched friend. He undid all the locks and swung open the robust, wooden door. ‘Forget something—’ Rainwater splashed at his shoes as he stood before a dark figure, unrecognisable and unwanting of an umbrella. Black hair smeared down his forehead like starved leeches and his ragged clothes were finally getting the rinse they needed. ‘I’m sorry, I was just closing . . .’

The stranger’s head fell to his chest and he began weeping, adding to the puddles at his feet. The priest quickly glanced at his watch. I still have time, he thought. He beckoned the stranger in, but there was a hesitation.

‘Are you . . . inviting me in?’ the stranger shivered.

‘Yes, of course I am. It’s wet and cold. Come inside, at least for a minute. I’m just finishing up.’ The stranger edged in, and the door was gently closed behind him. ‘What is troubling you, friend?’ the priest asked, turning the top lock.

The stranger was all choked up, and so the priest invited him to sit at the nearest pew at the end of the row. The stranger did so, and the priest hooked the umbrella onto his backrest and settled into the pew in front. The odour emanating from the stranger oozed down the back of the priest’s throat. The stranger wiped away his tears with stained and sodden sleeves.

‘I want to die,’ he said.

‘Oh,’ replied the priest. Another quick glance at his watch.

‘But I can’t.’

‘Good man,’ he said with automatic sincerity. ‘There must be people who love you and care for you. It’ll only hurt them to see you gone so soon. How about you come tomorrow morning for our Christmas service? The more the merrier.’

The stranger stood and backed up a little, still dripping on the

burgundy carpet. ‘Look-see,’ he said, hoisting up his sleeves revealing rows of jagged scars twisting around his forearms. ‘I’ve tried over and over again . . .’ He pulled up his layers revealing his torso: deep dimples and grooves shotgunned in a sooty mauve. His frame was blemished like rotten fruit. Naturally, it was difficult for the priest to stomach the vision before him, but the exposure of skin released more volatilised scent particles into the atmosphere causing the priest to drastically reduce his oxygen intake.

‘I’m so sorry for whatever it is you’re going through. I’d like to help you, but there’s only so much that can be done now. So please, I insist, come back tomo—’

The stranger pulled out a large cutting knife and wielded it with quivering white-hot knuckles. The priest panicked with every last drop of saliva in his mouth evaporating in an instant. A thousand thoughts sprinted through his head, all leading up to one locality: My child. ‘Please. I have a baby on the way—’ The stranger hardly skipped a beat and punctured his own neck at full force. He didn’t even make a sound, and the priest watched a little light die in his eyes as the knife was yanked out again. Blood sprayed out like a swarm of locusts and drenched the priest as he flung himself out of his seat to catch the falling man. The priest’s hands were drowned as he applied pressure to the wound. So much red, as if he’d struck oil in hell.

There was a rapping at the door again. ‘*Thank you, Jesus!*’ the priest unknowingly said aloud. He took the man’s hand and placed it over the gushing slit and advised him to press down. He hobbled over on debilitated legs, and when he got to the door he reached out for the lock but saw his hands bathed in glistening crimson. He froze in that instant. How could he possibly explain this? There is no truth that will be true enough for anyone on the other side of that door. The rapping recommenced, startling the priest back to the present.

‘Father?’ called a voice muffled by the wet cacophony outside. ‘Father? It’s Martin. I left my brolly.’ He pounded again. ‘Father?’ The priest flinched at every thud. Each thump echoed louder and louder throughout

the modest church hall, but the beating on the door was no match for the beating in his chest. 'Father, I know you're in there; your car's still here.'

I have to get to the hospital, the priest thought, but I can't if I'm trapped in here. 'Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth,' he whispered. 'Thy word is thy truth.' He sucked in a quick gust and released it to the floor. 'Martin . . . Just a sec . . .'

He unlocked the door and opened it barely a crack. Martin pushed, which the priest was not expecting, and so he pushed back.

'What's the matter? Let me in.'

'I'll get your broolly, just give me a second—'

Martin thrust. 'Stop this at once! It's pouring!' The priest was overpowered and the thunder crashed in with Martin as he stormed past without even a glance. To see anything was impossible anyway as the warmth inside fogged his glasses. He wiped them clean and then put them back on before stopping dead still at the massacre on the floor. He slowly turned back to the priest who looked forlorn in the dark of the entrance. The priest gently pressed a bloodied palm on the door and slowly began closing it. 'What are you doing?' said Martin.

'I have to explain,' the priest replied.

'No. Not to me, you don't.'

'He just came in. I don't know who he is, or what he wanted—'

'Father, the less I know the better—'

'You have to believe me!' Martin replied with nothing but a look. A look of shattered trust and crumbled confidence. 'Martin, please, help me. What do I do?'

'You should call the police,' he said, abandoning his umbrella and marching back toward the exit. 'And pray God has mercy on your soul—'

The priest intercepted him halfway. 'It's not what it looks like, I swear. I didn't do it!'

*Thanks for reading.*

*The entire short story is available upon request or online at leading eBook stores...*

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