

JOSEPH GABRIEL    NICHOLAS ANTHONY



BOOK OF ELEANOR

CONFESSIONS  
— OF —  
THE FATHER

**Joseph Gabriel**  
**Nicholas Anthony**

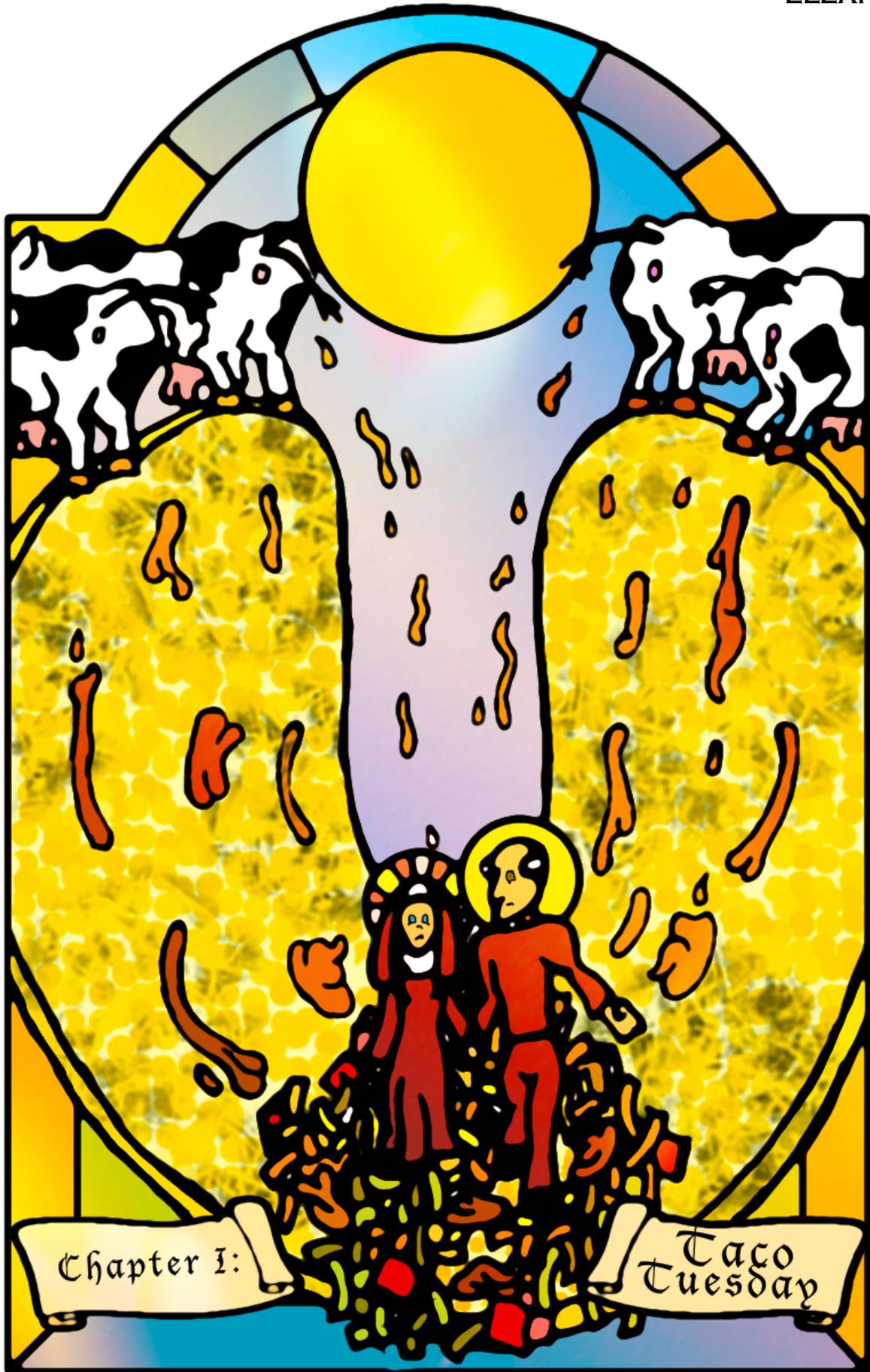
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**Illustrated by Nicholas Anthony**



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# BOOK OF ELEANOR

## *Taco Tuesday*

*1* “Bless me, Father, for I’ve sinned,”

*a strong female voice oozed through the partition.*

<sup>2</sup>The words were thick, as though her vocal cords were wrapped in mucus desperately trying to repair the damage from smoking since middle school.

<sup>3</sup>And one needn’t be a doctor to know such was the case.

<sup>4</sup>“My last confession was two months ago.” That deep bellow could only be one woman: Andrea Wilson. She and her husband, when he used to come, confessed primarily for the purpose of complaining about one another rather than for relieving themselves of their own guilt or reconciling with the Lord. <sup>5</sup>There appeared nothing but mutual

hate and alcohol, I fear, in their doublewide at this late hour and there was little I could do to remedy the matter.

<sup>6</sup>Regardless of how poorly they treated each other, they stayed together to raise their daughter, Lana. <sup>7</sup>They’d been sleeping in separate beds since Lana started kindergarten, and by the devil, that’s been four years now, I suppose.

<sup>8</sup>“Tell me your sins, my Daughter, and let your conscience be at peace.” I repeated it as though I was one of the many workers over at the wheelchair factory, punching in on the spiritual timecard to start another redundant shift and put a band-aid on massive hemorrhaging.

<sup>9</sup>My consumers were just as crippled, if not more so.

<sup>10</sup>“My girl, Lana...” A little burp escaped under her words. That’s when I caught a whiff of what she had for breakfast: not eggs and bacon but rather vodka and tobacco. It was disgusting in a sad kind of way. <sup>11</sup>Selfishly, I wondered for a moment if she was hurting the church’s image.

<sup>12</sup>“She got, well-a, a pink slip last week for cussing out Sister Reeding. Normally, I’d blame Jimmy, for all of the swears he makes to God and me, but these things she said the other day... I haven’t got a clue where she gets it from.”

<sup>13</sup>Yes. Sister Reeding told me about the choice words last Wednesday. It seemed Lana was again poking fun at Emily Chen, the heavy-set Asian girl. Not to throw Lana under the bus — all the third graders called her Emily Ele-fat. <sup>14</sup>Sister Reeding chose to make an example out of one the little rascals, however, and it was not by mere coincidence that she placed a third check next to Lana’s name on the board — which meant she lost second recess. <sup>15</sup>Lana responded unfavorably to being singled out like that and apparently she told Sister Reeding, “Go fuck yourself with one of those splintered rulers you beat the turd burglars straight with.”

<sup>16</sup>Later, Sister Reeding explained everything to me and said she was quoting the child verbatim. I had no earthly idea what she meant.

<sup>17</sup>Turd burglar? I thought. Sister Reeding said it’s some kind of slang made in reference to homos. It made little sense.

<sup>18</sup>So off Lana went to the head of the school who, fortunately for her, was a very reasonable man. <sup>19</sup>“Why would you say

something you know to be inappropriate, Lana?” I said looking at her sternly with a principal’s grimace. “We’ve had conversations about this before.”

<sup>21</sup>“Sister Reeding gets me in trouble for picking on Emily, but she picks on me just as much,” she replied.

<sup>22</sup>“Emily is shy. I find it hard to believe...” I was interrupted. “No, not Emily,” she clarified. “Sister Reeding.”

<sup>23</sup>“...and in any case,” I said slowly and more powerfully, “you’re not speaking to me because of what you’ve done to Emily, but for what you said to Sister Reeding. <sup>24</sup>And this is not the first time we’ve had to talk about inappropriate outbursts. Sister Reeding is not picking on you, child. <sup>25</sup>She’s one of many trying to help you see the error of your ways.”

<sup>26</sup>“Well, Father, you don’t see it all. It’s not fair,” she pleaded in puerile fashion. “She’s going all ball’s deep on me, and I’m sick of it. No one listens...”

<sup>27</sup>Ball’s deep? I pondered.

<sup>28</sup>“Well, I’m sorry you feel that way, Lana, but we cannot have these kinds of disruptions in the classroom. <sup>29</sup>I am not going to punish you this time. Instead, I’ll show you the mercy that God has shown us all. <sup>30</sup>But if you end up having another conversation with me about inappropriate language there will be consequences.”

<sup>31</sup>She didn’t take the loose threat the way I’d intended.

<sup>32</sup>“Well, fuck you, Father. Fuck you in your faggoty ass! God hates fags like you, and I hate you... you fucking butt pirate.”

<sup>33</sup>Butt Pirate? This child was talking nonsense.

<sup>34</sup>Frowning, we both walked to the office to call her parents, and since I didn't know what exactly to say about the whole ordeal, and because I was furious and thinking irrationally, I let Sister Reeding handle her parents.

<sup>35</sup>“Send her home,” I said in the most neutral tone I could muster. I kept the language she said to me secret though, almost as if it were a confession itself.

<sup>36</sup>I suppose in many ways it was.

<sup>37</sup>Even with all my years in the cloth, I'd never understood the God Hates Fags movement of those Baptists. <sup>38</sup>It served only as more proof that Luther's break with the Church was the beginning of man's downfall — and there were many in the Sixteenth Century who thought Luther the Anti-Christ.

<sup>39</sup>Perhaps he was.

<sup>40</sup>The Church holds that it is a sin to act upon fantasies and desires that are against natural law; homo sex is against God's law and is thus one of those unnatural acts. <sup>41</sup>In fact, the word sodomy comes from Sodom and Gomorrah — where God rained fire and brimstone down upon the city dwellers engaging in anal sex — and he struck down homos right alongside their straight counterparts.

<sup>42</sup>It was the act itself which bore meaning, not the particular proclivities of each individual.

<sup>43</sup>With the pressure from liberal agendas to secularize marriage, and what some consider evolving standards of decency, it seemed that even those younger generations devoted to the Church don't understand why gays aren't allowed to marry. <sup>44</sup>Even the children were vocal against those trying to remove the homo from the homo sex. <sup>45</sup>Sister Reeding wasn't even a nun when these turd burglars or butt pirates were physically punished, and sometimes even castrated or killed.

<sup>46</sup>So it's understandable why Sister Reeding sent her to the office to see me.

<sup>47</sup>It wasn't until Eleanor joined my parish that my views of homosexuality changed. Her confessions made me have a deep sympathy for the struggles of homos against the devilkin of debauchery. <sup>48</sup>I wonder what might have been if life were different.

<sup>49</sup>Andrea still blames her husband whom she never misses an opportunity to call Jimmy. <sup>50</sup>It took me about a year to learn that he preferred James, and that Andrea was actually using Jimmy to belittle him.

<sup>51</sup>Despite her own predispositions, Andrea insisted that Lana's foul language came from James.

<sup>52</sup>“—so I told Jimmy that it might be my fault that Lana doesn't like authority, but, you know, Father, if you heard the way he talked to me — well — that would be really something worth confessing. Hic!” <sup>53</sup>The sound of her diaphragm leaping against her lungs echoed

in the box. <sup>54</sup>“Excuse me, Father. Sorry, where was I? Oh, yeah, after Lana came home with the pink slip, I told her I was going to wash her little mouth out with soap and water. <sup>55</sup>And I did. I took the Dove from the bathroom sink and washed it right out.”

<sup>56</sup>Dove soap seemed fitting – God’s promise: sacred peace.

<sup>57</sup>“Are you remorseful for punishing Lana like that?” I asked figuring I might have done something similar for the vulgar words she chose when we spoke. “Well, that wasn’t it, Father. <sup>58</sup>You see, she cursed me out more after we were done with the soap... and in my anger... we did something else to try and... discipline her.”

<sup>59</sup>“And what was that,” I asked curiously.

<sup>60</sup>“Well, we were going to have tacos for dinner, and so this... idea popped in my head, and I told Jimmy to run to the fridge and get a spoon and some of this hot sauce we’d just bought. It was supposed to be very spicy.” <sup>61</sup>She stopped for a moment.

<sup>62</sup>“Yes...,” I said coaxing her forward.

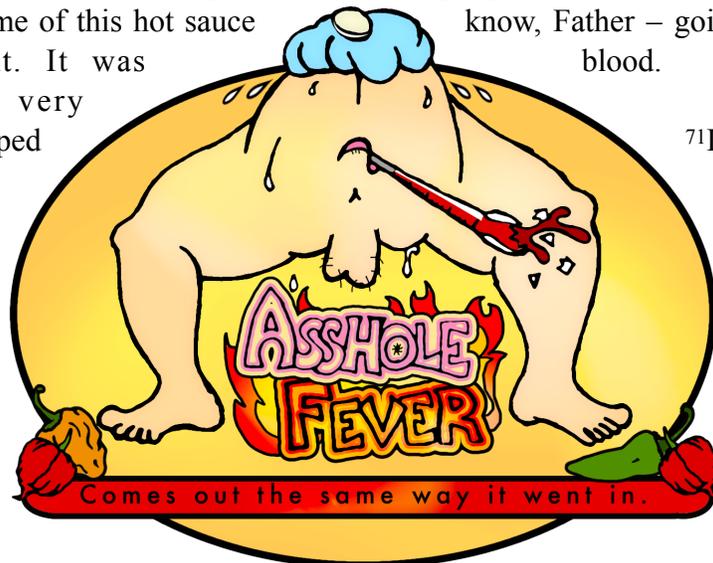
<sup>63</sup>“Well, pardon my language, Father, but the stuff was called Asshole Fever. <sup>64</sup>It said goes out the same way it goes in or something like that on the bottle, and the bottle has a – I can’t really think of any other way to put it – a giant butthole with a thermometer in it’s...”

<sup>64</sup>“Yes, Andrea,” I interrupted slightly repulsed. “I don’t think I need to know what the label looked like. <sup>65</sup>How did you punish Lana with this hot sauce?”

<sup>66</sup>“Well, I put a teaspoon full in her mouth and made her swallow it,” she admitted.

<sup>67</sup>“Well, Father, it wouldn’t have been so bad if Lana hadn’t gotten braces this year.” She let out a series of small coughs culminating in a clearing of her throat. “She cried and screamed after we gave her the hot sauce, but she got over that after an hour or so. <sup>68</sup>But, you see Father, she hadn’t been eating lately. You know, at first, I thought it was because of the hot sauce, but Jimmy blew me off and said I was a stupid bitch. Oh! Pardon that language, Father. So then I thought she was scared with what happened to poor little Matthew and that stomach stuff. <sup>69</sup>Hic! Just terrible, you know he’s just two grades under Lana. <sup>70</sup>I asked a few other people about it, and they said she be – you know, Father – going number two with blood.

<sup>71</sup>I felt bad because I found out that she wasn’t eating because she was fighting me when I was washing her mouth out with soap. <sup>72</sup>The soap bar had been grated like cheese into her braces. It left a film embedded on her teeth that made every meal taste like she was eating chunks of white detergent. <sup>73</sup>Oh Lord have mercy, Father.”



N<sub>20</sub>  
17

<sup>74</sup>“Is she still sick—” I ask concerned for Lana, and then remembered little Matthew. “—I mean from the soap. Is she eating now?”  
<sup>75</sup>Their daughter may have been the biggest heathen in third grade, but I didn’t want her to starve because everything tastes like lather.

<sup>76</sup>“Yeah, Father, she’s eating again. And I know now that I should use that liquid – that golden Dial stuff next time – that is until her teeth are all straightened out. I guess, I just felt bad about the soap thing really.”

<sup>77</sup>“How are things with you and James?”

<sup>78</sup>“Well... Jimmy won’t change so I just call upon my Jesus and pray for his strength. Even though he’s a bad husband, he is working extra shifts at the tire shop to pay for Lana’s braces. <sup>79</sup>I guess he’s a good father, Father.” She let out a deep sigh, and I smelled rotten liquor emanate throughout the box. <sup>80</sup>“Honestly, I think raising Lana’s the only thing holding us together. <sup>81</sup>Hic! Sorry. You know, Jimmy and I decided to have a baby because we thought it would bring us closer together, you know, build a family.”

<sup>82</sup>It was not uncommon for couples to make the mistake of thinking a baby will fill the void in their relationship. <sup>83</sup>However, in the case of the Wilson household, James and Andrea were perfectly happy because they could visit the Saddle Saloon together for line dancing and shots.

<sup>84</sup>Now they only drink separately.

<sup>85</sup>“Instead, all these years with all the colic, and the endless diapers, the fights to get into car seats, and the mac-and-cheese ground into the carpet, and just all of the terrible twos and the threes are worse... we just lost that

flame – or whatever we had, Father.” <sup>86</sup>It was no secret that Lana was a handful and was very likely the reason her parents despised each other and found comfort in Marlboros and Popov.

<sup>87</sup>...or did the egg come before the chicken?

<sup>88</sup>“So now she’s older and she’s our whole world.” Although I couldn’t quite tell, I sensed her eyes flicker as she finished that sentence. “She’s all that’s left of us. <sup>89</sup>We were carving jack-o-lanterns last Friday, you know, trying to have family time. <sup>90</sup>And I realized, staring at him holding that big knife, that our little girl hollowed us out like that goddamned pumpkin... Oh! <sup>91</sup>Sorry, Father.” She began to sniffle and cough a bit. “...and then smashed us into the porch just like that god—that damned jack-o-lantern.” <sup>92</sup>Her head was clearly in her hands.

<sup>93</sup>“We’re just shells of ourselves, Father. I’m sorry.”

<sup>94</sup>I let her stew in it all for a few moments and regain her composure. “For penance I want you to pray all the Mysteries of the Rosary, my child. <sup>95</sup>I want you to do one a day for the next four days. You should reflect on each and – this is the important part – I want you to abstain from consuming alcohol until after that fourth day. <sup>96</sup>Can you do that?”

<sup>97</sup>“Yeah, Father.” Hic! “I’m sorry, Father.” She coughs a little more as her head lowers. <sup>98</sup>At first I thought she was praying, but then I realized she just felt foolish for starting the day off with alcohol. <sup>99</sup>“I’ll try.” Hic! “Thank you, Father.” She slid the solid wood partition closed and then opened the door with a small squeak.

<sup>100</sup>She was so ashamed she left without the final prayer and blessing. <sup>101</sup>I derive very little pleasure for making them feel guilty but I know it's necessary that shame rise to the surface so healing might begin.

<sup>102</sup>Checking my watch I noticed there was only six minutes left in the box.

<sup>103</sup>The congregation asked for an additional hour of confession in the mornings on Tuesdays for those that work nights. <sup>104</sup>I was happy to accommodate but it's made the start of the week quite a hurdle considering I still kept my normal 5:30 to 6:00 just like all the other weekdays. <sup>105</sup>The box sometimes feels like a prison when I think about last year and poor little Philip... a confession that will echo in these oak walls for eternity.

<sup>106</sup>The partition slid open and the kneeler creaked. "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned," another female voice began. <sup>107</sup>"It's been three days since my last confession." It was Sister Reeding. <sup>108</sup>She was just in the box with me on Sunday, after second mass.

<sup>109</sup>"Tell me your sins, Sister, and let your conscience be at peace."

<sup>110</sup>"Father, it's poor Matthew. I just wanted God to know that I'm sorry that he is in the hospital – that it is my fault. That heaven forsaken Sloppy Joe..." <sup>111</sup>She was speaking a mile a minute. <sup>112</sup>"I should have stayed home when I was sick. <sup>113</sup>I should have just called in and said that Maryann can make the taco meat. I should have just not—"

<sup>114</sup>"Slow down, my child," I interrupted wondering what she was trying to say. "Take a deep breath and start from the beginning. There is no need to rush."

<sup>115</sup>"Well, Father, at the start of the week, I was quite sick. My stomach was just... all over the place," she said at a more comfortable pace, taking a couple breaths between sentences. <sup>116</sup>"Now, I know that it was probably the hamburger I got from The Saddle Saloon on Saturday..."

<sup>117</sup>"Food poisoning," she said ominously.

<sup>118</sup>"They have no way of knowing but I looked online and found out that Matthew has – it's called O157.H7 – it causes hemorrhagic diarrhea like he has, anyway... But in adults it can cause just diarrhea, without the bleeding and all."

<sup>119</sup>"What are you trying to say, Sister?" I asked again.

<sup>120</sup>"E. coli."

<sup>121</sup>It felt like Philip's ghost was haunting me today. Halloween is this evening, the dead walking among the living. <sup>122</sup>Even though it's been well over a year, every time I use the restroom I can't help but think about my visit to see Mom – how, if I hadn't had Sister Reeding's coffee that morning, things might've been different.

<sup>123</sup>"I wash my hands all the time when I'm in the cafeteria – so much so my skin cracks when the weather changes. <sup>124</sup>I use so much lotion that the gloves won't even go on straight..." I turned my head as obviously as I might. <sup>125</sup>"Anyway," she corrected after sensing my body language, "I remember washing my hands – but you start to wash them not so often when your skin is so raw."

<sup>126</sup>"So, I am convinced," she finally concluded, "that I had the O157.H7 E.coli

and when I made that Sloppy Joe.”

<sup>127</sup>Oh Lord.

<sup>128</sup>“Well, my child, if the Saddle Saloon really used meat that wasn’t fit for human consumption, and if the bacteria was really in the burger—”

<sup>129</sup>She interrupted, “I’m not accusing the Saloon of using bad meat, Father. O157.H7 just sometimes gets into the ground beef because the cows walk in their own feces at the new bigger farms. <sup>130</sup>Like I said, I’ve been reading up on all this...”

<sup>131</sup>As a boy, I lived next to a big farm that eventually got turned into one of these modern concentrated animal farming operations she’s talking about.

<sup>132</sup>“Father,” she began again after silence bore down too heavily upon her conscience, “I don’t want you thinking we serve the children Grade D, But Suitable for Human Consumption meat...”

<sup>133</sup>I supposed she had done her homework.

<sup>134</sup>“That’s all a big myth, anyway. They don’t even grade meat using letters like that. The USDA uses stuff like Prime and Choice and Utility and Canner.”

<sup>135</sup>I tried to move the confession along since it appeared Sister Reeding had jumped



to unreasonable conclusions. “I know, Sister, but if you put bacteria in the Sloppy Joes then wouldn’t the whole school be infected? I mean, if you contaminated the meat?”

<sup>136</sup>Sometimes kids just get sick...

<sup>137</sup>“That’s what I’m worried about, Father,” she says with a most worried tone. “Matthew has a peanut allergy. So when we had PB and J for Meatless Monday, I made him a Sloppy Joe with some of the ground beef we’d prepared for Taco Tuesday. <sup>138</sup>And we have nothing else that we can make for the kids today. <sup>139</sup>I don’t know how to tell the others to throw out tubs of meat without explaining that we infected Matthew.”

<sup>140</sup>“And you know Matthew’s parents – they’d sue us over this,” she continued. “There are countless lawyers who seek out these kinds of cases and sue the pants off of whoever is responsible. <sup>141</sup>They’ll get millions, and the school will go under, Father. I just know it. I can’t have that kind of...”

<sup>142</sup>“Wait, wait, wait a minute, Sister,” I responded unsure how to tackle this issue.

<sup>143</sup>“Forgive my sinful ways, Father. I don’t mean to conceal the truth, but – I mean, the lunch program has no money. And we can’t afford to just throw all that Mexican food in the dumpster like that. The kids will have nothing today.” <sup>144</sup>She let out a weak cry. “I don’t know what to do. Well, I guess I’m here to ask you to bless the food.”

<sup>145</sup>What?

<sup>146</sup>“Maybe God can protect them – protect the children.”

<sup>147</sup>I look down at my watch. It’s 10:28am. Kindergarten eats lunch at 11:15am. Sister Reeding must be desperate – that is, to leave the kitchen an hour before kids started filling the halls for food. <sup>148</sup>And frankly, this was foolish; God wasn’t going to remove E. coli from the meat because I asked that he do so... But, to allay her fear it wouldn’t hurt.

<sup>149</sup>Everyone needs a little help finding peace from the devils of their mind. “We had better go now then,” I said half-heartedly.

<sup>150</sup>“Thank you, Father,” she said gratefully. “Thank you so much.”



*Dia de Muertos*

**2**The raised wooden heels of my black dress shoes click against the hard tile floor as I clutched my prayer book in one hand and my Mexican rosary in the other. <sup>2</sup>The worn rosary has journeyed a long way from my missionary trips — when I visited Central and South America as a newly ordained priest all those years ago.

<sup>3</sup>The streets were filled with people. In two days they would be lighting candles at graves and parading the streets with La Calavera Catrina.

<sup>4</sup>It was about 1:15pm when the first child went to the nurse’s office complaining of stomach aches. Within an hour three children were sent home. <sup>5</sup>I was dumbfounded.

<sup>6</sup>The cold hallway walls echoed as I came to the first of several visits at the children’s ward.

<sup>7</sup>*Matthew Baker, Room 316, University Hospital.*

<sup>8</sup>I had to move quickly.

<sup>9</sup>I expected to see his whole family in the room, but only his brother Peter was at his bedside. Peter wiped his eye with his sleeve. <sup>10</sup>In the two years of having him as an altar boy I’d never known Peter to cry. <sup>12</sup>I knew that he and Matthew were close even though three years separated them.

<sup>13</sup>“Hello, Peter.” I nodded, “How are you holding up?”

<sup>14</sup>Matthew was there sleeping. He had been in the hospital for a couple days now, so his family must have been taking shifts at the hospital in case he woke up. <sup>15</sup>Perhaps the rest of them would be back later tonight.

<sup>16</sup>“Hey, Father.” Peter sniffled.

<sup>17</sup>Matthew was half covered up and rolled in a ball, no doubt from the pain he was experiencing. I moved the blanket up to his shoulders. <sup>18</sup>The room smelled of neutral hospital mixed with some foul rottenness and a hint of iron.

<sup>19</sup>“He keeps throwing them off.” Peter commented, “I’d don’t know, I keep... just... Father, can I ask you a question?”

<sup>20</sup>“Anything, Peter.” He was a sincere and honest boy, always helpful. The other altar boys hate to clean the caked-on wax that surrounds the brass bell snuffer on the candle lighter. <sup>21</sup>After a week of services it’s thick and so charred that your hands get filthy black from even touching it. Peter though — every time he is the altar boy at mass he picks it clean and polishes the brass.

<sup>22</sup>I’d hate to see such exemplary sheep so lost.

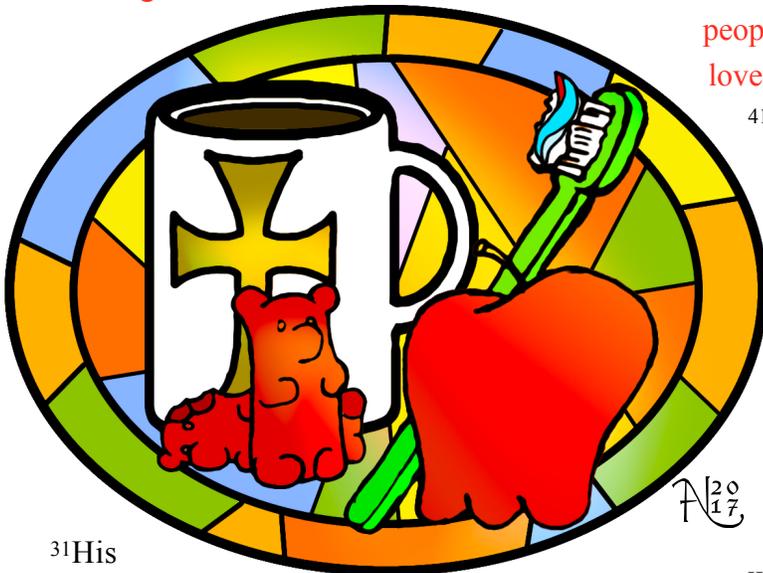
<sup>23</sup>“I just don’t know why,” he paused, “Why would God put my brother through this? He is so little. I mean, it should be me. I pray and pray, and... He really hasn’t done anything wrong. <sup>24</sup>Maybe he’s punishing me because I... well, you know, Father.”

<sup>25</sup>I wasn’t really sure what Peter was referring to in his confessions. He was a saint compared to other kids — kids like Lana.

<sup>26</sup>“My son,” I walked over to Peter and placed my hand on his shoulder, “God isn’t punishing Matthew and he is not punishing you. <sup>27</sup>God is giving us an opportunity to demonstrate our faith.”

<sup>28</sup>“You mean, like a test?”

<sup>29</sup>“Not exactly...” I paused and sat down next to him. <sup>30</sup>“Do you remember what Halloween is from class with Sister Reeding?”



<sup>31</sup>His expression showed that he did not so I continued.

<sup>32</sup>“Halloween is a contraction for All Hallows Eve — that is, the day before All Saints Day. <sup>33</sup>So all of the running around in costumes and scary things, it all comes from preparations for a purely Catholic holiday about our saints.”

<sup>34</sup>“My dad says that it’s idol worship.”

<sup>35</sup>“We don’t worship saints, Peter. Saints are people that we recognize for doing amazing things. <sup>36</sup>They show Heroic Virtue, among other things, and one of those virtues is fortitude. <sup>37</sup>Do you know what fortitude means?”

<sup>38</sup>He shakes his head and I realize that his eyes have completely dried with our conversation. <sup>39</sup>At least this lesson has helped him to not focus on his brother’s pain.

<sup>40</sup>“Think of it like this: if there was no evil in the world, no pain, no suffering, then people would only be able to show God they love and trust Him when things are perfect.

<sup>41</sup>It’s like saying ‘I thank you’ when you get your favorite cinnamon bears while trick-or-treating.” <sup>42</sup>Peter and I had bonded over these hot red guilty pleasures the first Halloween he was an altar boy.

<sup>43</sup>“But your true gratitude shines through when you get the apple and toothbrush from Dr. Bondeson.” <sup>44</sup>Dr. Bondeson was the dentist in town. He was a good man — Lutheran, but a good man.

<sup>45</sup>“Likewise, your faith and love shine through to God when we feel lost and ignored.”

<sup>46</sup>I felt sorry for Peter blaming himself. The doctor’s couldn’t give him an answer. It was too early for them to tell what Matthew was suffering from, though food poisoning was apparently among the list of things that could be the cause.

<sup>47</sup>Earlier, when I spoke to Peter this morning, he said the doctors were running tests on Matthew. Despite the reality of it all, I was still hoping Sister Reeding was wrong.

<sup>48</sup>Peter asked if I would say a prayer with him for Matthew. Quickly and quietly, I prayed for and blessed Matthew. <sup>49</sup>If the beef could not be blessed surely an innocent child could, and perhaps God would offer him the protection he needed.

<sup>50</sup>Perhaps my lack of faith was the problem earlier...

<sup>51</sup>At first the parents, as well as the nurse, thought it was just a stomach ache from the change of the weather. Everyone understands how children spread the flu among one another. <sup>52</sup>But it became apparent quite quickly that the children were suffering from something other than the common cold.

<sup>53</sup>I hadn’t said anything about it to Sister Reeding. <sup>54</sup>She was already riddled with guilt and won’t leave her home.

<sup>55</sup>Matthew cringed a few times and clutched his knees close to his chest throughout the blessing, but I do not think he ever woke up. I left for another room and another sick child.

<sup>56</sup>*Lord, forgive me*, I thought walking down the hall.

<sup>57</sup>I was very hungry having skipped lunch. At the time it wasn’t that I was worried about the E. coli, it was just that the taco meat powder was overpowering. <sup>58</sup>The dusty smell of dark orange spices had just now began to leave my nose. <sup>59</sup>I don’t know how those women eat lunch after cooking it all morning.

<sup>60</sup>Another smell caught my nose. The soft mixture of green beans and ham cubes sat under tight cellophane wrap in a small dish on the side of the tray. <sup>61</sup>Again I thought of Eleanor. She confessed that in college she and her girlfriend met because they worked in the University cafeteria. <sup>62</sup>It was a low paying job but they were both relatively poor because both of their parents had cut them off for their chosen lifestyle of sin.

<sup>63</sup>The whole place was buffet but everything was individually wrapped. The rich college kids always filled their trays but rarely ate everything. <sup>64</sup>So when spoiled kids returned trays to the little window for washing, Eleanor and her girlfriend would take anything that looked unopened.

<sup>65</sup>As I passed by the tray, I casually scooped up the small dish of green beans and ham cubes. In three chunky sips, the dish was on another tray further down the hall and I entered the next room with a child that couldn't stomach eating.

<sup>66</sup>I spoke with the family for the next boy – a quiet child I didn't really know very well. He didn't appear as bad off at the moment, though it was difficult to gauge these kinds of things. <sup>67</sup>I offered the same prayer with the family and blessed the child, asking that the Lord keep the child and make him whole.

<sup>68</sup>Such a terrible Day of the Dead. In Latin culture it is a day to celebrate the lives of those who have died. In previous years at St. Dominic, I gave a sermon that highlighted my time in Latin America. <sup>69</sup>It's one of the happiest times of the year for me to relive my experiences enjoying another culture while doing the Lord's work.

<sup>70</sup>Today, I prayed in each room that no children become happy little skeletons.

<sup>71</sup>The third child's parents were in the room as well, and again I offered prayers and tried to lift their spirits. The child was actually in the bathroom for most of the conversation. <sup>72</sup>The parents explained that the child had been *pooping blood* the last couple of hours, and that the doctors took a sample of the stool for testing.

<sup>73</sup>"They aren't sure what's going on," the child's father said. "But they are thinking it's food poisoning..." I felt nervousness grab a hold of me, and a bit of sweat emerge on my forehead. "—and you know they all went to Frumpy Franks on that field trip the other day, Father."

<sup>74</sup>The child exited the bathroom at the most opportune time, sniffing and limping towards the bed. <sup>75</sup>The father quickly got up and helped him but the child was still in pain even with the assistance.

<sup>76</sup>I quickly blessed the boy generically because in my haste I realized that I couldn't remember his name nor the surname of the family. <sup>77</sup>It was embarrassing but I don't think the parents realized.

<sup>78</sup>There were four children held behind these sterile off-white walls – suffering while other kids roamed the streets in costumes, trying to amass a horde of candy.

<sup>79</sup>Quickly I left to see the last of them: Emily Chen.

<sup>80</sup>Hospitals: clean death – but this disease is far from clean. Hemorrhagic diarrhea. Even the phrase makes my intestines cringe in pain. The bacteria plaguing my flock makes the problems with my rotten guts seem like a blessing. <sup>81</sup>They cling to life as their kidneys struggle to process the toxins. In my culpability, I prayed deeply that none of my little lambs were lost.

<sup>82</sup>I spent a bit of time researching the symptoms and worst case scenarios on the devil machine before I left the church. The clinical term is hemolytic uremic syndrome – kidney failure. <sup>83</sup>It can be fatal to children under five and the elderly. <sup>84</sup>Thankfully the preschoolers and kindergarteners were having a Halloween party with sensory foods: peeled grapes for eyeballs, carrot sticks for witch fingers, and cooked spaghetti for zombie brains.

<sup>85</sup>Again I was thankful I stayed clear of Taco Tuesday myself. <sup>86</sup>Cakey orange powder saved me from bleeding bowels.

<sup>87</sup>On another tray down the hall sat a red Jell-O cup. My stomach rumbled.

<sup>88</sup>As I walked further down the ward toward Emily's room, I saw Dr. Chen, Emily's father and the biologist who works at the city university. <sup>89</sup>He was in the news recently for some of his research; I'd heard some of the hens squawking about it one day or another after church. A shorter man, he had a black-but-graying goatee, and a short-cut bowl top. <sup>90</sup>I remember from meeting him previously that he appears and speaks in a very stereotypical manner. <sup>91</sup>It was odd considering his pedigree.

<sup>92</sup>The wiggly ruby prize was only a yard or two away.

<sup>93</sup>Chen had all but stopped coming to church as of late. <sup>94</sup>Although I was curious as

to why he hadn't been attending other matters had prevented me from talking to him at student conferences and other times he was around for school purposes.

<sup>95</sup>Although Emily's situation wasn't the best of times, perhaps it was the only time to see what was going on. <sup>96</sup>He noticed me and turned his head abruptly, almost as though he'd hoped I wouldn't notice him.

<sup>97</sup>*Shame on you, Doctor*, I thought, immediately thinking thereafter, *shame on me*. I craved that cherry-flavored gelatin. Despite it, I smiled in a grieving sort of way. <sup>98</sup>“Hello, Dr. Chen,” I opened. “I’m so sorry to hear about Emily. How is she doing?”

<sup>99</sup>Chen is a very strong, stern man from what I could tell of him. It was almost as if he had a Napoleon complex. <sup>100</sup>His spiritual chart was riddled with oddities back in the Library of Sin, and he was one of the few *unknowns* as to where he was headed in the afterlife. His baseline was based upon very weak data. <sup>101</sup>The unconscious racist in me long ago concluded it was all cultural in nature, and in retrospect it was time that I reconsidered Dr. Chen. Perhaps it was a lack of devotion on my part coupled with a language barrier, or perhaps it was also a bit of bias about Chen's work.

<sup>102</sup>It's very difficult to analyze oneself in the context of one's interactions with another.

<sup>103</sup>“Fair enough,” he said bluntly and idiomatically. “She food poisoned. I know. Tests will confirm. She has diarrhea and she defecate blood. <sup>104</sup>Her intestines hemorrhage. She so sick and sad – and little bastard Lana make fun of Emily before she sent home.” Chen’s voice became angry when he spoke of Lana.

<sup>105</sup>Lana had just returned to school after getting a few days out-of-school suspension, and immediately she was back to her usual nastiness... <sup>106</sup>“What did Lana do this time, Doctor?”

<sup>107</sup>“Emily told Sister of stomach aches, and Lana laughed in class, said *well that because you fat ass ate too much*. Emily went to nurse crying, and then we take to hospital. You do nothing about this, Father. This child ridicule my child all time.” <sup>108</sup>Dr. Chen was speaking worse English than usual; he was clearly upset but even in this situation his face said almost nothing of it.

<sup>109</sup>*For once could Lana just make my life easier...*

<sup>110</sup>“Emily is a great student. And I’m sorry for what Lana has done to make this worse. <sup>111</sup>We have punished her for saying these things in the past, and I’ll talk to Sister Reeding as soon as I return to—”

<sup>112</sup>Chen interrupted, “I think lil’ *shibal nyun* Lana poisoned Emily!” I was taken

aback by the harsh accusation. <sup>113</sup>Chen’s emotions were getting the better of him.

<sup>114</sup>“Lana has been warned more than once about her inappropriate language, but she’s never done anything that serious. <sup>115</sup>I will talk to Sister Reeding and make sure Lana is punished for what she said. <sup>116</sup>Are the doctors sure it’s food poisoning, then?”

<sup>117</sup>“Doctors unsure,” he said. “But I sure. I know what bacterial infection does. <sup>118</sup>Emily food poisoned — may die from it. Children die from this kinds things...”

<sup>119</sup>I grew nervous again. *Chen knew*. Would Chen be able to put the pieces together that they are sick from the school food?

<sup>120</sup>In my apprehension I said, “I spoke to another parent just a few moments ago. He mentioned Frumpy Franks.” <sup>121</sup>I immediately felt guilty trying to point the finger somewhere else, and I had little doubt God was disappointed in the flawed humanity which was rearing its ugly head.

<sup>122</sup>*Survival*, I thought in justification and out of necessity.

<sup>123</sup>Chen said nothing in response to my comment, so I tried to change the subject. “Besides this how has your family been doing? <sup>124</sup>I haven’t seen you all that much in church or at school events.”

<sup>125</sup>Chen immediately became sheepish and backed off. “Been real busy renewing research grants, teaching courses,” he admitted. <sup>126</sup>“Not much time, not really pray, more meditate.” He looked down to the ground. <sup>127</sup>“Honest, never understood Catholic – just want Emily in best school. Now I’m afraid I made error in judgment.”

<sup>128</sup>*Does he know? Has he figured it out?* Chen was reputedly a genius when it came to biology. He was doing some cutting edge research and the university was getting national recognition for it. <sup>129</sup>Something to do with viruses... or genes... or nano-something...

<sup>130</sup>“...that God punishing Emily for my sin,” he finished. I was relieved upon hearing his guilt.

<sup>131</sup>“**Doctor, God would not punish you in this manner,**” I said thinking about the conversation I just had with Peter, “**He is benevolent and although He would prefer that you attend church and follow the path, we all still have freewill.**”

<sup>132</sup>After saying that to Chen, I realized why I only half-heartedly blessed the meat. If there were a bacteria in that meat, God was not going to miraculously remove it because I blessed the meat. <sup>133</sup>Even though miraculous cures are the easiest and most common miracles assigned to saints in canonization. <sup>134</sup>Blessing food... doesn’t work like that.

<sup>135</sup>Besides, I think God has other plans for me than canonization.

<sup>136</sup>“**Perhaps you should consider attending church,**” I suggested. “**Confession might ease your burdened mind.**”

<sup>137</sup>Priests can’t turn water into wine... and because of my questioning, because Sister Reeding made me a bit nervous talking about us getting sued, and because I didn’t just throw the meat out and deal with the repercussions, three more children were in the hospital.

<sup>138</sup>This was not acceptable—although it may have been necessary.

<sup>139</sup>“Yes,” he said. “I attend Church next meeting.” He then entered Emily’s room, and I followed behind him. <sup>140</sup>Immediately, I smelled the same deadly stench of E. coli from Matthew’s room. She was half sleeping, and from what I’d heard about her condition, I didn’t want to wake her. <sup>141</sup>It’s been very difficult for her these last few hours. And she would not be getting any regular, restful sleep for the next couple of days at least. People with E. coli constantly need to go to the bathroom and relieve themselves.

<sup>142</sup>By the devil, it was a *rotten* disease... and the devil in me thought for a moment that if Emily makes it through the ordeal maybe she’ll lose a little bit of the weight in the process. <sup>143</sup>The sentiment wasn’t completely malignant.

<sup>145</sup>I gave Emily the same prayer, and her family took strength from it in spite of their cultural differences. I smiled and said that Emily will be in each and every one of my prayers.

<sup>146</sup>As quickly as I entered, I exited. I left Jell-O-less. <sup>147</sup>I had been planning to speak to a father of sorts myself, and I needed to get something real to eat before hitting the long road for Kansas—to the old country, to the farmland, to my father...

...and to the pain.



<sup>148</sup>Frumpy Franks was a major chain restaurant that had been in the city for a couple of decades. <sup>149</sup>They were well established and located all over the country. One even opened in my hometown a few years ago. Most famous for their Frumpy Burgers, hot wings, and beer-battered fries, they also had gluttonous eating contests every year that eventually culminated in a national Thanksgiving gorge-feast.

<sup>150</sup>I was disgusted the first time I'd heard about it. These contests involved eating a five pound burger as quickly as the contestants could; the first person to eat the burger without throwing it up was declared the winner. <sup>151</sup>These burgers were ridiculously big and when the contest was over, the contestants were covered in meaty red-yellow-white filth – and all from stuffing their

faces, contorting their stomachs – intentionally ruining the body God gave them... and all while others starved.

<sup>152</sup>Thinking about it upset me.

<sup>153</sup>Nevertheless, Alex had finally secured a job at Frumpy Franks, working as a dishwasher I believe he said. His mother spoke to me at church several weeks ago, apparently quite proud that her boy had finally done something for himself. <sup>154</sup>When she told me I thought about my assessment of Alexander a year ago.

*<sup>155</sup>He was no more or less than a stupid beast, meant to plow a field in the form of fast food service.*

<sup>156</sup>So proud, she paid the security deposit and first month's rent on an apartment so that he would be close and wouldn't have to drive into the city every other day.

<sup>157</sup>When I called Alexander to congratulate him, he was proud of his accomplishment as well. In the excitement, I agreed to visit him up there before I left to see my father in Kansas. <sup>158</sup>Not wanting to renege on our arrangement despite the sickness abound, I found the store and parked.

<sup>159</sup>I entered the store and immediately saw signs about the contest all over the place. The gluttons would be stuffing their faces very soon apparently: the local contest was in four days.

<sup>160</sup>I looked over the sign.

<sup>161</sup>Apparently they had the contests all over the nation, and the winners of the contests would then have state contests, and eventually there was a contest to declare the nationwide winner.

<sup>162</sup>I looked more closely at the flyer.

<sup>163</sup>All of it started with a local five-pound Frumpy Burger this Saturday. Then, a week later, a five-pound Frumpy Burger with a pound of fries for state. <sup>164</sup>And finally, on Thanksgiving, the national winner had to eat something called the Pilgrim Platter: the five pound of Frumpy Burger, a pound of fries, and 30 hot wings.

<sup>165</sup>There were pictures of people who had previously won the nationwide contest, holding the giant checks with \$250,000.00 printed huge on it. <sup>166</sup>Several of the people that had won were disgustingly fat, having only earned a living through consumption.

<sup>167</sup>Heroes of the modern age, by the devil.

<sup>168</sup>As sad as it was, I'd give them a small token of my own wealth in support of Alexander, and so I had something to eat while I was driving to Kansas.

<sup>169</sup>The menu was littered with poor choices. The board that showed today's special advertised a picture of the hot wings.

*Frumpy's Fingerlicking Feature.* I didn't trust the ground beef in the Frumpy Burgers. The best I could hope for were the wings. Deep-fried as they were, at least they were not the greasy Frumpy burgers or beer-battered fries the place was so widely known for.

<sup>170</sup>I stepped up to the counter. A pile of flyers about the contest sat next to a stack of those little business card size magnets:

*<sup>171</sup>Feelin' Frumpy, We Deliver!*

<sup>172</sup>All followed by the local number and store locations. As I placed my order, I wondered if Alexander's den held any Frumpy Frank's delivery orders. <sup>173</sup>The horrible corporate encouragement for being fat and lazy.

<sup>174</sup>"No hot sauce, please," I told the cashier.

<sup>175</sup>"You wanna what?" he replied. I noticed that he had his tongue pierced with a long piece of metal. Strange. <sup>176</sup>It had to be difficult for the young man to enunciate.

<sup>177</sup>"The hot wings but I can't have anything spicy," I said clarifying.

<sup>178</sup>"Huh?" Obviously this high schooler wasn't listening to me.

<sup>179</sup>I pointed to the sign, "I want what's featured. The wings."

<sup>180</sup>"Oh, you want the Fe'va. 5, 8, 15, or 30 pieces?"

<sup>181</sup>“Eight. Eight will be fine, I’m sure.” I said. I was getting annoyed by his self-inflicted lisp for some reason. <sup>182</sup>Self-mutilation has always bothered me.

<sup>183</sup>“nything else?” he asked and then yelled to someone in back, “we got some’un orderin’ the Fev’a, eight!”

<sup>184</sup>“No, thank you. But I was hoping to speak with one of your employees for a moment, Alexander Simmons?”

<sup>185</sup>“Hey!” the kid yelled back into the void. “Someone ‘ere to see Alex.” <sup>186</sup>The kid handed me my receipt with a number on it. “He’ll be out ‘n a bit.”

<sup>189</sup>Sure enough, before my food had come out, Alexander did. He looked the same as ever... It was hard to tell if he’d gained weight or just maintained. <sup>190</sup>He was a bit filthy – no doubt from working in the back of the restaurant.

<sup>191</sup>Then again, he was already a large boy...

<sup>192</sup>“Hello, Alexander. Congratulations on your new employment.” I smiled and greeted him.

<sup>193</sup>“Thanks, Father. How ya doin’?”

<sup>194</sup>“Very well. Even better now that I see how you’re doing. <sup>195</sup>What do you do here?” I inquired.

<sup>196</sup>“Well, right now ah’m washin’ dishes. It’s fine but ah’m always the last ta leave. Ya wash the big stuff, take the trash ta the dumpster, ah get home late. But if ah do a good job at that then they’re gonna move me on up ta workin’ the fryers.”

<sup>197</sup>His face was beaming. He seemed genuinely pleased with it all. “I wanna work them fryers,” he continued. <sup>198</sup>“Ah hear ya get all the food that isn’ cooked right, and...” <sup>199</sup>He put his hand close to his face as if to whisper, peering off toward the cashier and back at me. <sup>200</sup>“Ah hear ya can make your own food howev’s ya want – ya know, like makin’ huge burgers like the ones in the contest ‘n everything. <sup>201</sup>That’ll give me the edge ah need.”

<sup>202</sup>“What do you mean?”

<sup>203</sup>“The contest, Father! Ah’m ‘onna be in that contest – the burger eatin’ contest.” He pointed to one of the big signs plastered on an entire window. <sup>204</sup>“Ah could be rich if ah win it, and ah can eat burgers all day long.”

<sup>205</sup>“I see,” I flatly responded.

<sup>206</sup>“It’s gonna be huge this year, Father,” he continued. “They’ve already got eleven people signed up.” <sup>207</sup>My upper lip slightly snarled at the thought... it was difficult to hold in my displeasure. “An’ it’s all over the country. <sup>208</sup>They’ve ‘ad so many people enter, they had to ship a special supply of meat out ta each store just ta make sure they ‘ad

enough. Come on – come on back here and look at this.”<sup>209</sup>He stood up from the booth and started walking toward the back of the restaurant. I felt compelled to follow him.

<sup>210</sup>“Are you sure this is—” I began.

<sup>211</sup>“Oh, yea, Father, they all know me. It’s fine,” Alexander assured.

<sup>212</sup>We walked through a swinging door to a pile of dirty dishes at the dishwasher. It didn’t look like any were getting clean, which I guess made sense: Alexander was with me at the moment.

<sup>213</sup>“Come on back here,” he continued. I followed him into a large cooler, where, in the back, we came upon some green tubs sitting on a rack.

<sup>214</sup>“Look at this, Father.” Alexander grabbed one of the green tubs, opened it up, and pulled out a giant frozen burger patty. <sup>215</sup>It was ridiculously big, and for emphasis Alexander held it up alongside his goofy face. <sup>216</sup>He was brimming with delight.

<sup>217</sup>“Ya, see, ya, see, ya see” he said. “Now that’s a big ass burger! Pardon ma language, Father. It’s so big ah’ve to set ‘em out to thaw the night before so they ain’t frozen in the mid—”

<sup>218</sup>“I see. It doesn’t look to be all that healthy, Alexander. How big is—”

<sup>219</sup>“Five pounds! They’re huge, and they’re healthy, Father. <sup>220</sup>They put all kinds of vegetables on the burger. Ah’monna have ta eat somethin’ like a head of lettuce, three tomatoes, half a jar a pickles, 15 slices of cheese, a bunch a onion, and almost half a jar a mayo.” <sup>221</sup>I don’t think he realized that mayo was actually unhealthy, but he was so excited about the whole thing he wouldn’t stop. “...and ah’m gonna eat the whole thing, and ah’m gonna win! <sup>222</sup>I’ve been preparin’ at the new apartment fur weeks. Ya wanna hold one?”

<sup>223</sup>He offered me the opportunity to hold the frozen meat patty in my own hands. “No, thank you. That’s not necessary, Alexander. I, ummm, better get on the road to see my father.” <sup>224</sup>It occurred to me when he tried to hand it to me – he’d been washing dishes not 10 minutes ago. The front of his shirt was caked in filth, as it would be when Alexander joined the other gluttons in a couple of days.

<sup>225</sup>A booming voice came from behind me, near the door to the cooler. “Hey, what’s going on in here?” <sup>226</sup>I turned around and saw a tall, slender man staring at me. No doubt this was the manager – Rick was on his name tag. At that angle, I don’t think he noticed that Alexander was in the cooler with me.

<sup>227</sup>The man looked over me. “Oh, what the...”

<sup>228</sup>Alexander popped out from behind me with one of those patties, interrupting who appeared to be his boss. “Oh, it’s all good,

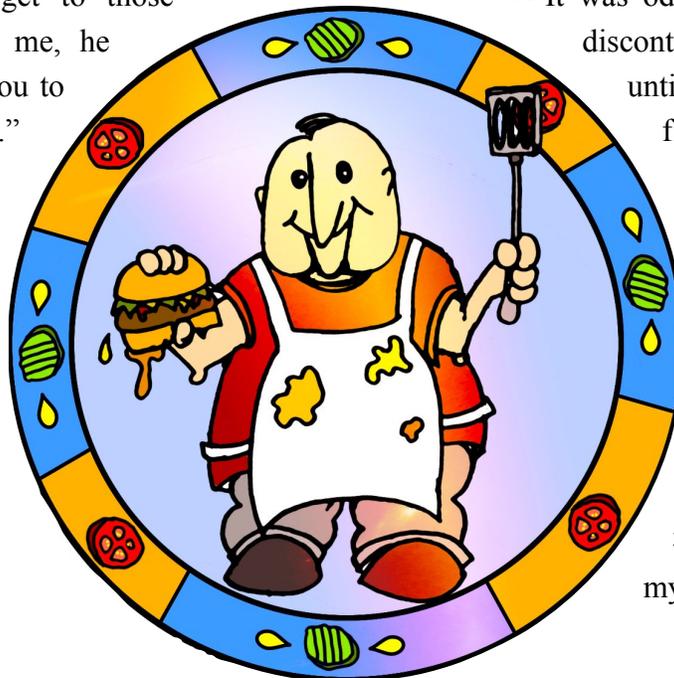
Rick. <sup>229</sup>This is Father Ludwig from ma church. Ah was jus' showin' him the patties fur the burger contest."

<sup>300</sup>"Well, what in the hell is Father Ludwig doing in the back of the house? And why in the hell aren't you washing those dishes that are piling up?" His scorn turned from Alexander and gazed upon me a little less severe. <sup>301</sup>"I'm sorry, Sir, but you're going to need to head back to the front of the store. Customers aren't supposed to be back here."

<sup>302</sup>"Yes," I said. "I apologize." Trying to compensate and perhaps ease the situation, I continued, "I was, ummmm, very interested in your contest, and, aaaaaaaaa, the burgers, and everything. <sup>303</sup>So, aaaaaaaaa, Alexander, being the good worker he is, was kind enough to show me everything and explain how the contest worked, and such..."

<sup>304</sup>He turned and looked at Alex, "Well, thanks Alex. Now get to those dishes." Looking to me, he said, "Sir, I'll help you to the front of the house."

<sup>305</sup>The manager was rather rude, although I understood he had a business to run and Alexander placed him in a bad situation.



N<sub>17</sub><sup>20</sup>

<sup>306</sup>"Las' call for numner 36." The cashier with the mutilated tongue called out as I exited through the silver door.

<sup>307</sup>"That's me." I responded glancing at my receipt.

<sup>308</sup>He handed me the plastic bag containing a rectangular styrofoam box. <sup>309</sup>"Dere ya are, Sir. Have a good day." I held the bag up and looked at the logo printed on the plastic.

<sup>310</sup>A smiling obese man in baggy sweatpants, an oversized T-shirt, and a loose apron splattered with sauces stared back at me at me. His face reminded me of a blobfish, a blobfish laughing. <sup>311</sup>In his right hand he gripped a huge burger with all the trimmings dripping mustard and grease. <sup>312</sup>In his left hand he held up a spatula to the heavens. Surrounded by bubble letters that spelled out: *Cure the Grumpys, eat at Frumpy's.*

<sup>313</sup>It was odd that the remedy for discontent in life is to eat until you are so fat and frumpy you become endearing. <sup>314</sup>This seemed like the perfect place for Alexander to work. He was their living mascot. <sup>315</sup>He had found his calling.

<sup>316</sup>The Lord works in mysterious ways.



*Home Sweet Home*

**3**I arrived at the old farmhouse house late in the day to unpack three days of clothes into my old dresser. <sup>2</sup>The storm I drove into had passed, and the house was almost the same as I'd remembered it all those years ago, though the drive in was quite a bit different. Before Kansas, the rain on the highway forced my focus on the tail lights in front of me. But after the clouds cleared I saw the new Kansas. <sup>3</sup>So many woodlands gone. So many special places I remembered seeing countless times... gone. <sup>4</sup>So much had changed, nature modernized.

<sup>5</sup>Dad was averse to change, a traditionalist through and through.

<sup>6</sup>Factory farming had taken over, and the CAFO's now surrounded the modest plot of land my family had cultivated for generations. <sup>7</sup>For years we had been a lone dairy farm surrounded by beef farms. With the passing of my father, the CAFOs may finally get the opportunity to own the whole state...

<sup>8</sup>Mr. Wallace was looking after the place since dad couldn't manage it any longer. <sup>9</sup>The Wallaces kept his grass-fed cows on acres around the farm house. I guess both benefited from the agreement. The neighboring Brooks family had been asking us to sell for years. <sup>10</sup>But Dad just wouldn't let it go, and he wouldn't even consider selling it, especially not to a CAFO, though he could have used the money.

<sup>11</sup>It was part of the family, and his cattle were part and parcel of the family in his mind. He loved the work, he loved the land, he loved the state, and he loved tradition. <sup>12</sup>As I looked out on the back porch over the entirety of his 364 acre plot, the sun hung low in the sky as the last vestiges of a tree line on the western front. I looked out at our fields with all the beautiful black and white cattle scattered on the plains, some grazing, others nestled tightly together around a watering trough. <sup>13</sup>You didn't really see this kind of farming anymore. <sup>14</sup>All I could think about was Alexander's goofy grin as he held that giant burger patty up alongside his head.

<sup>15</sup>*Look at this big ass burger, Father,* he said. Or something to that effect... the CAFOs had certainly won the war.

<sup>16</sup>As quickly as I took it all in, as quickly as Walden's pond was drained, I left for the hospital to see my withering father.

<sup>17</sup>They didn't have him on the hard narcotics yet. No morphine or anything like that though they did have him on some kind of pain regimen. <sup>18</sup>I think it made him... more talkative than his usual self, but his mind was definitely still there.

<sup>19</sup>As I walked to his room, I realized it wasn't as ominous as the city hospital visit the other day. <sup>20</sup>The difference was the audience: it was perfectly normal for an 87 year-old man like my father to be in the hospital dying. <sup>22</sup>The children on the other hand...

I entered his cold, bland room and pulled aside the curtain partition. <sup>23</sup>The IV dripped like my fingertips after I dip them in the holy water to make the sign of the cross. <sup>24</sup>The television was muted but it was playing some awful soap opera where everyone sleeps with everyone. <sup>25</sup>All I could hear is the faint beeps and clicks that signify life.

<sup>26</sup>He burped a smell of rotting opossum.

<sup>27</sup>“Dad, it’s Liam.” His eyes flickered and he groaned holding his stomach.

<sup>28</sup>“Hello, Liam,” he said to his end table and the wall next to his bed.

<sup>29</sup>“Hello, dad,” I responded. “How are you doing? Are they treating you well?”

<sup>30</sup>“Well enough.” Silence.

<sup>31</sup>“So what are the doctors saying this time?” I ask to keep the conversation alive.

<sup>32</sup>“Well, I’ve still got colon cancer. You know, I just let it go too long. They say I’m dying, Liam, so let’s cut the bullshit. <sup>33</sup>I asked you to visit this time because... I’ve got a great many weights on my mind that need to be eased... and I need to tell someone I trust about a few things so that they don’t die with me.”

<sup>34</sup>“Well, dad, you really should not confess your sins to me, I can find another—”

<sup>35</sup>Dad interrupted, “No, no, no goddamnit... I need you to hear it. <sup>36</sup>This is some... private shit that – well – only you should hear.”

<sup>37</sup>“I’ve had a long life,” he continued. “And I’ve done some things for the good of our family... and I—” <sup>38</sup>This time I interjected, “I understand that, dad, but you should really have a priest hear these things—”

<sup>39</sup>“I jerked off in the cow milk all the time.”

<sup>40</sup>Silence. Oh God, the silence. My stomach just turned, and I realized that in the downpour on the drive, I’d forgotten to eat any of that chicken.

<sup>41</sup>“I loved your mother, Liam, I did, but the bitch didn’t satisfy my needs. And she knew it and didn’t care... Eventually, I just started milking myself whenever I’d tend the cattle. <sup>42</sup>I’d just say that I was going to milk the cows, and she knew what that meant. Hell, I’d say I was milking the cows after dinner, and she knew...”

<sup>43</sup>I remembered him saying that on so many occasions throughout my childhood. The harsh realization with accompanying memories which heretofore had been good memories... the contempt I now felt for him and his tainting of the dairy we sold for sexual gratification.

<sup>44</sup>All those times he’d said he was milking the cows. And it never occurred to me until this

moment that we never drank any of the milk we produced. <sup>45</sup>Mom always said our cow's milk was too creamy. The thought made me cringe. I still drank 1% to that day.

<sup>46</sup>*Milking myself*, he said. Pangs of hunger were starting to compel me and my thoughts. I was having a hard time truly appreciating what he was trying to tell me. <sup>47</sup>The hunger demanded my attention.

<sup>48</sup>"I see," was all I could muster.

<sup>49</sup>"At the time I didn't think it was all that bad. The cows didn't mind it, and I wasn't hounding your mother to hike up her skirt all the time. Something about cupping an utter - it's like the biggest pair of tits you'll ever hold. <sup>50</sup>I guess you wouldn't know though. Guess I shouldn't have put that on the table, but now... now I felt like someone else needed to know, especially since your mother's dead. She knew and she understood, though we never spoke of it openly to one another. <sup>51</sup>But I really needed to get that off my chest."

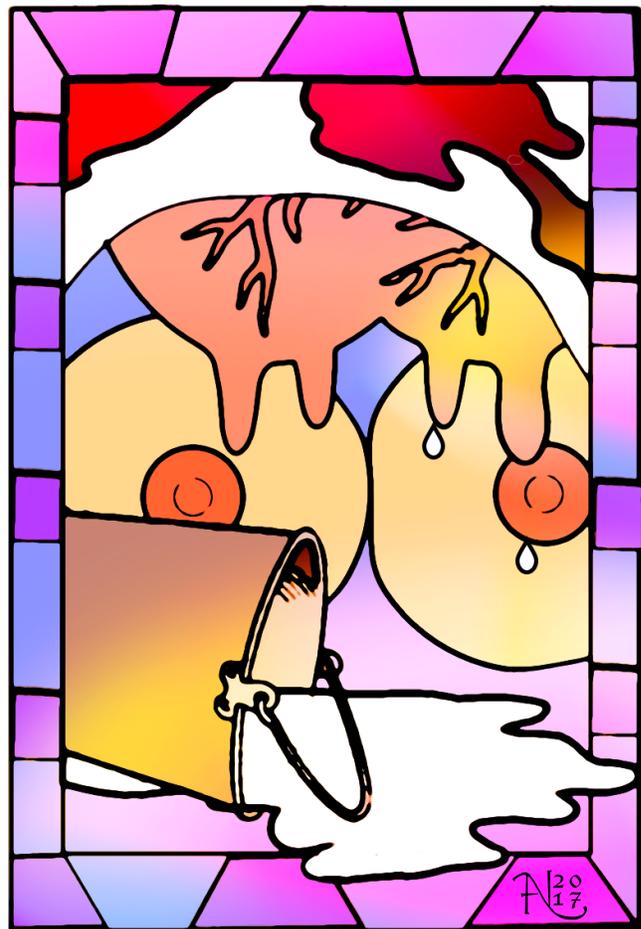
<sup>52</sup>"Do you want reconciliation for those sins," I asked.

<sup>53</sup>"I already have it, thanks," he replied. "But I've got to let some more off of my chest before I die. You can't die with secrets, Liam. <sup>54</sup>It's a sure fire way to see the devil himself." He briefly smirked.

<sup>55</sup>"I stole the farm out from under someone," he began. "That dirty cocksucker, Bill Farmington."

<sup>56</sup>"Bill Farmington..." he remembered. "Yeah, that cocksucker... You know, he drank himself under the table every other night. <sup>57</sup>At that time, I had already owned a little less than half the property, and he and another farmer owned the rest of what we've got today. Farmington owned just under 200 acres though - he had far more land than either Vern or I. <sup>58</sup>That lousy cocksucker..."

<sup>59</sup>"And... hey - you remember Maryann Adams, right?" dad asked.



<sup>60</sup>“Vaguely,” I responded. She had died a few years after I was born. I heard mom and dad mention her once or twice when I was little. Mom said she favored women. My stomach turned inside me as I thought on it; need food immediately – and those wings! <sup>61</sup>Those boneless wings were in the car. If only I could stop dad for a moment and get them... I could eat them in the span of a couple minutes.

<sup>62</sup>“She was my younger half-sister, something like 17-years old when I was – ohhhhhhh – probably 23-24. <sup>63</sup>Came to live with us because her parents caught her whoring.”

<sup>64</sup>Maryann Adams was the first person I ever heard of that liked the same sex. <sup>65</sup>My disgust ran deep considering the way my parents spoke of the lustful things homos do. <sup>66</sup>Then, suddenly my heart sank remembering when Eleanor made her first confession about her girlfriend. <sup>67</sup>The response in my head wasn’t unlike Lana’s, although a lot less colorful.

<sup>68</sup>In the Library of Sin, her book is the one that I cherished most and of which I was the most ashamed. <sup>69</sup>When I read it I can feel my father’s harsh voice as it softens into my own.

<sup>70</sup>My Mary Magdalene.

<sup>71</sup>“Not only was she whoring around for pussy, but she wasn’t worth a good goddamn. Completely useless. <sup>72</sup>Tried to put that bitch to work in the house, and she’d just slither off – jerking around, doing something she wasn’t

supposed to, or trying to find a ride to town... it was always something different. <sup>73</sup>Lazy bitch...”

<sup>74</sup>“Well,” he continued. “I put her to work one evening in September. I got home, and your mother was instantly bitching at me about Maryann, and what a worthless piece of shit she was and all, and I was tired, and I’d had enough. <sup>75</sup>I yelled upstairs for her to dress warm and get out to the truck, and I went to barn and grabbed some tools and a hatchet.”

<sup>76</sup>I didn’t like where this conversation was going.

<sup>77</sup>“Yeah, that bitch and I took the old farm truck and drove to the far end of the fence that used to divide our land with the Farmingtons. <sup>78</sup>On the way there, I tried to play it cool and gave her a few swigs of some Wild Turkey I kept in the truck – you know, to loosen her up a bit.”

<sup>79</sup>I remembered where he hid the whiskey. I had gotten into it once or twice. Even with all this dad was saying, the hunger was somehow winning out for my attention.

<sup>80</sup>“Once we got there,” dad reminisced, “I remember telling her, ‘Alright, now you get on the other side of that fence and walk down into the grass until you find a cow, and move that some bitch on down toward the fence right here. <sup>81</sup>Get a bunch of cows and bring them all on down. And be real quiet about it,” I warned her. “Don’t fuck around.”

<sup>82</sup>“She was real nervous and such, but believe it or not that bitch could get those cows over there pretty quickly. <sup>83</sup>She must have been kicking them in the ass or smacking their ass or something like that in retrospect. She had a half dozen or so over close to me by the time I’d mended the fence back to put them on our land. <sup>84</sup>I’d gotten six or so over the fence, but then she stopped bringing them...”

<sup>85</sup>Dad had won my full attention by this point. Food would have to wait.

<sup>86</sup>“I’d waited, and waited... probably for an hour or so. No sign of her. Nothing. I got a bit nervous, wondering if maybe Farmington found her or something, so I left the fence down, walked back to the truck, and drove back home with the lights off.”

<sup>87</sup>“I remember I was so nervous that night. There were so many possibilities that kept playing out in my mind. *‘Was she too drunk? <sup>88</sup>Did Farmington find her, or was he going to figure out we were stealing his cattle? OR did that worthless cunt just get bored and take off into town?’* I didn’t sleep a wink that night.” Dad seemed to zone out for a moment, perhaps in his own thoughts – almost as though he had forgotten that I was there.

<sup>89</sup>“**So what happened to Maryann?**” I asked bringing him back to the present.

<sup>90</sup>He looked at me for a second. “Oh! Found out two days later that the stupid bitch got kicked in the head by one of the cattle she

tried to move. <sup>91</sup>She didn’t know that you aren’t supposed to get directly behind them like that when you’re moving them. Goofy fucking bitch...” <sup>92</sup>He shook his head with a slight grin after he said it.

<sup>93</sup>“Yeah,” he continued, “one of the cattle clocked her right in the head and down for the count she went. The doctor said the kick didn’t kill her. They found cow shit in her lungs – she was knocked unconscious and fell face first into a fresh pile of cow shit! <sup>94</sup>No cow patties or anything like that – they would have been too hard. Nope, must have been fresh cow shit from the very cow she fucked with.”

<sup>95</sup>“You believe that?” he questioned me. He snapped his fingers. <sup>96</sup>“Bitch was dead...”

<sup>97</sup>“**Wow,**” I said taken back. I knew my father was a coarse man, a tough man made tough by the work he did, but I never knew he was capable of stealing from his neighbor and letting his own flesh and blood die in the process. <sup>98</sup>This was all mind-boggling.

<sup>99</sup>“**So, do you seek recon—**”

<sup>100</sup>“No. You haven’t even heard the *good* part. So get this: Farmington didn’t know what to think about it. I felt him out, and he felt horrible about the girl’s death. <sup>101</sup>Hell, he found her out there, right by around that crooked old oak tree. His work hand said he puked on the spot.

<sup>102</sup>“And when the cops came to my house, I told them I had put her to work that night but she never came home I told them she was lazy and I honestly thought she just took off into town with a girl she’d met. <sup>103</sup>We all walked over to where she died, and by that point they noticed that the fence was down.”

<sup>104</sup>Dad smiled as he remembered this part, “So I looked around and noticed one of Farmington’s cattle on my property. I checked the ear and confirmed and walked the cattle back. ‘What the hell is this,’ I began yelling at that point. <sup>105</sup>‘The hell is this? She went out on the property and noticed that your goddamned fence was busted and tried returning your goddamned cows to your goddamned land and died for it, Farmington. <sup>106</sup>I’ve been telling you for how many years that this old fence needed mending? And now we’ve got to put my sister in the fucking ground!’”

<sup>107</sup>“Didn’t anyone suggest that she may have been stealing the cattle or that something else happened,” I asked questioningly.

<sup>108</sup>“Women are stupid as shit, Liam. You think a woman would hatch up a plan like that? You think women can work tools and open up fence line? <sup>109</sup>No... Women can’t work land or tend cattle...”

<sup>110</sup>It was so matter-of-fact. I was shocked. “And what about mom?”

<sup>111</sup>“What about her?”

<sup>112</sup>“Did she know how all this really happened?”

<sup>113</sup>“She didn’t ask. When we got the land, she just built a stone cross on the ground where Maryann died and planted some flowers. And I sure as shit didn’t tell her or anyone else, until now. <sup>114</sup>That was the one good quality about your mother: she knew how to keep her fucking mouth closed. God rest her soul.”

<sup>115</sup>“Do you want reconcill—”

<sup>116</sup>“No, I don’t want your goddamned idol worship mumbo jumbo, Liam. Now that your mom is gone I’m a Baptist again. <sup>118</sup>I never cared for any of that Pope and dogma bullshit. But your mom just had to have a Catholic wedding.”

<sup>119</sup>We’ve had that conversation before... in fact, it was the last conversation we had.

<sup>120</sup>*Rinng, rinnng. Rinng, rinnng...*

<sup>121</sup>The cell phone. Perhaps God himself was calling to get me out of this situation. *Forgive me that sin, Father.*

<sup>122</sup>“I’m sorry, Dad, but I’ve got to take this.” I quickly walked from the room, wanting to hear no more from him. No more confessions that would alter the way I viewed my family. <sup>123</sup>No more confessions that would alter who I am.

<sup>124</sup>A walked a comfortable distance in the hallway from Dad's room. "Hello, this is Father Ludwig."

<sup>125</sup>"Ah needed ta talk 'n all." There was some sniffing on the other line after the confusing but familiar greeting. "Ah lost ma job 'n all. I doan know what ah'm gonna tell mom."

<sup>126</sup>"What?" I said simplistically, put off by my present circumstances.

<sup>127</sup>"Uhhh... Oh, this is Alex Simmons, Father. Sorry ta bother ya."

<sup>128</sup>*The one and only.* I had no energy left to be disappointed at or scornful towards Alexander. I guess in the grand scheme of things he could be doing things much more contemptible than wasting his own life.

<sup>129</sup>"Yes, Alexander, I recognize your voice. What happened?"

<sup>130</sup>"Well, ah got in some pretty big trouble about showin' you those big burger patties this afternoon 'n all, and ah guess before ah left ah didn't break down the dish room all properly, the night shift dishwasher got real pissed and he quit. So Rick had ta work as the dishwasher. <sup>131</sup>He just called and said he was done coverin' my lazy ass – his words, Father – and then he said ah was done."

<sup>132</sup>The silence performed perfectly.

<sup>133</sup>"Ah doan know what ah'm gonna tell mom, Father. She's gonna kill me. She was so

proud 'n all, and... the only way ah'ma be able ta pay the rent is if ah can win that burger competition. <sup>134</sup>Ah've gotta now.

<sup>135</sup>"Wait, Alexander..." I began when he continued. "My livelihood depends on it now."

<sup>136</sup>"Maybe you should just immediately start searching for a new job," I suggested.

<sup>137</sup>"Yeah, ah will. But that contest is Saturday, and ah've got ta be on my tip top. Ready ta go an win. If I win, I'll get five hundert bucks and I'll go to the state competition next week.

<sup>138</sup>That'll pay the rent fur a bit."

<sup>139</sup>"Are you sure you want to go back to the store for the competition after they just fired you, and all?" I asked.

<sup>140</sup>"Hell yeah – pardon that, Father. Yeah, I wanna show them the terrible mistake they made. Ah'ma get that burger trophy, and ah'ma win that contest. They're gonna regret firin' me, Father. <sup>141</sup>Are you busy Saturday afternoon? Ah'd love ta have you there supportin' me, Father?"

<sup>142</sup>I wasn't sure what to say. There were too many considerations, too many skeletons floating around my mind. "Sure, I'll cheer for you at the competition, Alexander."

<sup>143</sup>"Ya will? Thanks, Father. I always know I can count on you."

<sup>144</sup>We said a few more pleasantries, and thankfully, I got him off of the phone. I immediately regretted agreeing to go to that barbarous event this weekend, but it got me away from my father's confession. <sup>145</sup>He didn't care for the practices of Catholics -- he just wanted to offload his shame onto someone else before he expired.

<sup>146</sup>He wasn't interested in reconciliation...

<sup>147</sup>I walked back into the room, and after a moment sitting beside him, he continued right where he'd left off.

<sup>148</sup>"Yeah..." Dad pleasantly reminisced, "anyway, that's how we got the other half of the farm. Farmington wasn't a real man, and he couldn't deal with the guilt. <sup>149</sup>I'd really convinced him that her death was on his hands, and when I had him sued he didn't even fight it. <sup>150</sup>He signed the land over to me as a settlement and died by the bottle a few years later. And you know what, Liam?"

<sup>151</sup>"What's that," I asked.

<sup>152</sup>"That stupid bitch sister of mine was finally worth a damn," he finished.

<sup>153</sup>I was perplexed. Surely he's making all this up. Maybe the medication is having an effect on his memory, or maybe he was delusional.

<sup>154</sup>"No, a man has to work with what he's got," he concluded.

<sup>155</sup>*Rinnng, rinnng. Rinnng, rinnng -*

<sup>156</sup>"Sorry, it's the church." I excused myself to the hallway again. "Hello."

<sup>157</sup>"Father, It's Sister Reeding. I apologize for interrupting your visit to see your father. More children are getting sick. <sup>158</sup>I don't know what to tell the parents." She was talking a mile a minute again.

<sup>159</sup>"Slow down and breathe." I said and she rambled a bit more between details and her anxiety before I interrupted, "Listen, I will cut my trip short and be back tomorrow."

<sup>160</sup>"But, Father, your dad—"

<sup>161</sup>"He has been battling this for a while, I think the parish needs me more right now."

<sup>162</sup>"Thank you, Father. Send my best to your dad."

<sup>163</sup>"Thanks." I say to Sister Reeding before re-entering the hospital room. <sup>164</sup>"Dad, I've got to go home early, I've got an emergency church thing that I have to tend to."

<sup>165</sup>"That's the worst of it anyway." *Thank God*, I thought. <sup>166</sup>"Liam, I need something of you before you head back. That burger joint downtown. Frumpy Frank's."

<sup>167</sup>"I know the one." I scuffed.

<sup>168</sup>“This hospital food is fucking horrible. Would you go and get me one of those Frumpy Burgers and fries. It’s the least you could do for the man that raised you.”

<sup>169</sup>“Sure.”

<sup>170</sup>The drive to the local Frumpy Franks was against traffic and I decided to go inside instead of the drive through since the young man with the tongue mutilation had a difficult time understanding me, I couldn’t imagine them taking an order over a speaker system.

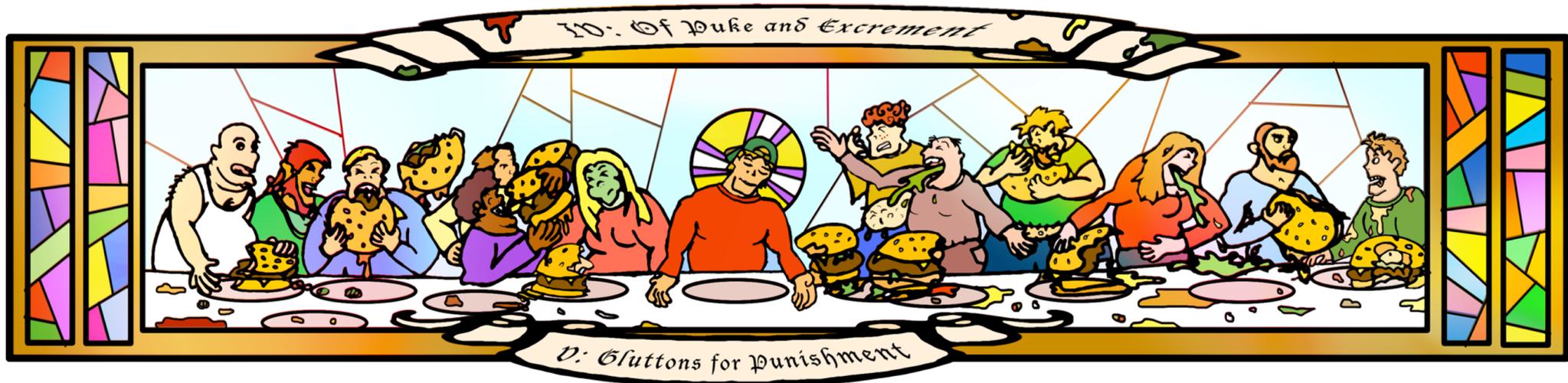
<sup>171</sup>I darted and in got the burger. I looked over at *my* food. It was dinner time. The wings just sitting there, tempting me. <sup>172</sup>In the parking lot of the hospital, I opened the styrofoam lid and quickly ate three of the wings. <sup>173</sup>Within seconds it felt like Lucifer smacked me across the lips.

<sup>174</sup>*The Feva’!* The Asshole Fever. <sup>175</sup>Damn them.

<sup>176</sup>Sweat poured down my brow as I rode the elevator to the sixth floor. My father this time looked delighted to see me. “Thank ya, Liam. Ever since *The Sunrise Diner* closed, the best this town has to offer is Frumpy Frank’s.” *Goddamn you, Frumpy Frank’s.* <sup>177</sup>The corners of my mouth sizzled with spicy hell.

<sup>178</sup>“This hospital food is bullshit. I mean, it’s like someone actually shits in it.” <sup>179</sup>With those words, I picked up the bedpan on the counter next to my father and stuffed it in my coat.

<sup>180</sup>And I knew what needed to be done.



*Of Puke and Excrement*

4“Would you like to get soda or a candy bar? We have about 30 miles before the next gas station.”<sup>2</sup>We had been driving so much I couldn’t remember the last time we stopped for real food.

<sup>3</sup>“I might get a little something. Thanks, Father,” she said picking up an Almond Joy. “Oops. Sorry... Liam.”

<sup>4</sup>I told Sister Reeding that we should use our first names while we are on the road. Habit keeps her calling me Father. I suppose it simply looks like she is my daughter. <sup>5</sup>I guess she is young enough, though I never thought of her in that way.

<sup>6</sup>Sister Reeding grabbed two bags, one of cheese-pretzel Combos and the other of Sour Patch Kids.

<sup>7</sup>Must have been quite a while since we last ate.

<sup>8</sup>I looked out the convenience store wall of windows. The setting sun refracted through the cellophane packaging of a wide variety of adult magazines. <sup>9</sup>Red and orange clouds hung over the mountains on the horizon.

<sup>10</sup>Sister Reeding took a Coke out of the cooler and grabbed a stick of jerky as she rounded the shelves.

<sup>11</sup>I slid the the soda and sweet and salty treats across the worn counter. I got myself a Heath bar and coffee. <sup>12</sup>Like Peter, I am particularly fond of those cinnamon bears but the hard red gelatin gets stuck in my bridgework.

<sup>13</sup>It’s a bit odd that I enjoy hot cinnamon candy so much but can’t handle spicy foods. How things would be so different if I hadn’t had those hot wings. <sup>14</sup>I now understand poor Lana’s pain.

<sup>15</sup>Asshole Feva’ - the seed of Satan himself.



<sup>16</sup>The clerk said the dairy coolers were all the way in the back of the store, behind aisle 21. Hell between my cheeks. <sup>17</sup>Sure to be hell between my other cheeks as well. What was it that Andrea said?

<sup>18</sup>*Comes out the same way it went in.*

<sup>19</sup>Freezer Section: Frozen Pizzas, Ice cream, TV dinners

<sup>20</sup>My mouth was tainted with so much asshole fever that my throat spasmed, attempting to reject whatever it could.

<sup>21</sup>I was brought back to my childhood, when my father would enter the Elk’s Lodge chili cook off. He would always try to maximize the heat. <sup>22</sup>Weeks before the contest, we would sit there and try his chili over and over again. <sup>23</sup>Even after all those years of eating

his chili, I never grew to like spicy foods. Perhaps that constant exposure to hot peppers took its toll on my bowels.

<sup>24</sup>Stomach ulcers. Colon cancer. IBS.

<sup>25</sup>Aisle 6: Condiments - Ketchup, Mayonnaise, Pickle Relish

<sup>26</sup>I was practically running down the center aisle. Again my hard heel clicked against the tile floor, but like a galloping horse this time.

<sup>27</sup>A mother and her three redhead children clogged the right lane so I dart around a display of vanilla wafers and banana pudding. Three boxes of the tan cookies tumble to the ground as my elbow clipped the shelf. <sup>28</sup>I barely paused.

<sup>29</sup>All I could think about was mouth ulcers and white hot pokers.

<sup>30</sup>Aisle 13: Cereal, Oatmeal, and Pastries.

<sup>31</sup>A morbidly obese woman pulled her motorized scooter cart out in front of me. I was trapped by her turtle pace. <sup>32</sup>The scooter's battery moaned under the driver's weight and the month's supply of Spaghetti-Os and chocolate sandwich cookies.

<sup>33</sup>A whole supermarket full of gluttons!

<sup>34</sup>Aisle 19: Marketdown Halloween Candy - Candy Corn and Fun Size Diabetes

<sup>35</sup>Finally, salvation shown behind glass doors. White gallon jugs crowned in a red lid. Light at the end of the tunnel.

<sup>36</sup>When my father made chili we each had a cold glass of whole milk. Milk from the store, of course. It was the only time my mother bought whole milk. <sup>37</sup>Dad said that the milk had a fat in it, something called casein. He said casein worked like the tallow fat in the homemade soap we made. <sup>38</sup>The casein surrounded the capsaicin and washed it down - cooling your mouth.

<sup>39</sup>He insisted that it had to be whole milk. Whole milk has all the fatty cream still in it.

<sup>40</sup>With my hip holding open the door as it fogs from the warm store, I shoved my hands into the handles of two jugs. I turned marching with two gallons of whole milk toward the checkout and then the parking lot.

<sup>41</sup>I zig-zagged between carts and ducked into Aisle 5 to get around a pallet of saltine crackers. I raced to the self-checkout. I'd paid in a matter of seconds and was moments away from baptizing my taste buds in the white waters.

<sup>42</sup>The pink of my lips burned between the crevices, and I was on my way out the door when I ran into Christopher Moore. "Hey, Liam!" he called catching me in the larger foyer where you get hit with the blast of warm air beside a herd of shopping carts. <sup>43</sup>"Liam, it's Chris." He stood blocking my exit with his wife.

<sup>44</sup>I licked my tongue around my mouth spreading the fiery seventh circle of hell into my five o'clock shadow.

<sup>45</sup>*Damn you, Frumpy Frank's! Damn you, Christopher Moore!*

<sup>46</sup>He ran his fingers through his full head of light grey hair. "What brings you back to the old stomping grounds?"

<sup>47</sup>*Save me*, I pleaded to the Lord. "My father, he's in the—"

<sup>48</sup>"Say no more. Parents, ya know. We were just in town visiting with my folks. Seems the older we get the more we look and act like them, ya know. Yeah..." <sup>49</sup>In the awkward pause I stared at the glass door automatically opening for another pair of shoppers. "So what you doin' now?"

<sup>50</sup>"I'm a priest at a little parish called St. Dominic's in—"

<sup>51</sup>"A priest! Wow, better watch what I say." He huffed. "I always thought, well..."

<sup>52</sup>"What are you doing?" I asked slightly in a aggravated tone. Christopher's ego read the comment differently, however.

<sup>53</sup>"I'm an artist. Live in Chicago now." Christopher never struck me as artistic. He was really good with his hands, I'll give him that. Making things, sure, but I never thought of him as a creative person. <sup>54</sup>"Yeah, my wife. Oh, sorry, this is my wife Isabelle. Hey, you

know what, I'm in a gallery next year. <sup>55</sup>It's probably a busy time for you, around Christmas and all, but you should come up and visit. It'll be my kids and grandkids, but I think you would get a kick out of some of the stuff."

<sup>56</sup>"Maybe." I tried to evade but the question hung and it seemed like the only way to end it quickly was to agree. <sup>57</sup>"Sure, we should get together. Somewhere nice, not the foyer of a grocery store."

<sup>58</sup>"Great! Well, *Father*, it was really great seeing you again." He smiled.

<sup>59</sup>"Been a pleasure." I lied, "Nice to meet you, Isabelle." I slightly bowed and ran into the parking lot.

<sup>60</sup>And before I could even close the door to Old Faithful I was chugging, guzzling whole milk so fast that it ran like thin rivers from the corners of my mouth. <sup>61</sup>Like cold winter snow falling on a dying volcano, waves of tender cooling slowly cleansed my blistered tongue.

<sup>62</sup>*Thank you, Jesus.*



<sup>63</sup>"There it is. Route E. Take a left." She pointed at the white sign and then took another bite of her Almond Joy. <sup>64</sup>"So what makes you stay? Stay at St. Dominic, I mean?"

<sup>65</sup>“Well...,” I worked the Heath bar from between my molars. Sister Reeding knew that I was coming up on 15 years at St. Dominic. I had petitioned to the bishop once already at the end of ten years of service. <sup>66</sup>Soon I was going to have to make a request to continue my work at St. Dominic again.

<sup>67</sup>“St. Dominic has been very good to me.” It wasn’t unheard of for a priest in his later years to stay at a rural church. “Honestly, I think that it’s the kids really. <sup>68</sup>Watching them grow and mature.” I thought about the Library of Sin, and all the records I’d kept, tracking my flock. <sup>69</sup>How starting over again at some new parish at my age would be a disaster for my flock. <sup>70</sup>And it would be torture knowing these people’s souls but not keeping them on the path.

<sup>71</sup>“The kids...” She whimpered a bit. “I just —”

<sup>72</sup>“They are getting better, dear.” I touched her shoulder. “There is nothing more you could have—”

<sup>73</sup>“I’m just happy you did something. What would have happened to the kids if you hadn’t blessed that meat, Father? I know you saved them. <sup>74</sup>They survived because of your prayers.”

<sup>75</sup>“I don’t—”

<sup>76</sup>“Father, I know because He is still working miracles through you. <sup>77</sup>You are still saving lives.”

<sup>78</sup>The last rays of light slipped behind the mountain. I didn’t know what to say. I swallowed the chocolate and toffee mush and sipped my coffee. <sup>79</sup>Darkness and silence filled the cabin once again.



<sup>80</sup>The smell was fresh. Not fresh like cut grass or a new can of tennis balls, but fresh and steamy. <sup>81</sup>I parked the car at the end of the dirt path. The headlights danced along the shafts of grass as the wind blew a smell of money across our family’s land. <sup>82</sup>I took the bedpan I took from the hospital out from the trunk.

<sup>83</sup>I had a long walk across the field to the Brooks’ Farm.

<sup>84</sup>The sun had set on me as I was letting my stomach settle. The taste of milk soured by bile lingered. The last three-quarters of the gallon sat on the floorboard of Old Faithful. <sup>85</sup>I had returned from hell with the burn lifted from my tongue but now revenge burned my heart and guts.

<sup>86</sup>The moon glowed lighting my way. In the distance I saw the crooked old oak tree. Like a twisted silhouette against the blanket of stars.

<sup>89</sup>As a boy, I played around that same tree, scattered my toys in the dirt, and hid in its shade. It was out of place in the middle of the field, those random oases in the middle of farmland. In my youth, I would climb up to the top of her branches, pray, and ponder those simple things children ponder. <sup>90</sup>It was in that tree that I first thought about becoming a man of the cloth.

<sup>91</sup>I was around Lana's age. Sitting against the rough bark looking up at the massive heavens contemplating the majestic creation of the entire universe. <sup>92</sup>My parents sent me to Catholic school at the behest of my mother. But after the sixth grade nun died, there was not going to be a sixth grade. <sup>93</sup>And so I began at public school.

<sup>94</sup>Later we discovered the nun suffered from bulimia nervosa. She hid her binge eating and purging from shame until she contracted Boerhaave syndrome. <sup>95</sup>Her esophagus ruptured because she never sought treatment and the 100% mortality rate claimed her.

<sup>96</sup>When Eleanor confessed to her struggle with bulimia, I urged her to get medical treatment. She was so thin, but I never would have expected it.

<sup>97</sup>On one side there sits Alexander. On the other, Eleanor.

<sup>98</sup>After the sixth grade nun's death I questioned God's plan. <sup>99</sup>Why would he torture one of his chosen with such

dissatisfaction and pain? <sup>100</sup>I begged for a sign. He sent me a stone cross embedded with time into the fertile soil.

<sup>101</sup>The marker my mother built for Maryann.

<sup>102</sup>The smell was growing stronger. I was close to the property line between the Brooks Farm and ours. <sup>103</sup>As I came over the hill, as much of a hill Kansas can have, the land opened to a mud brown pit. <sup>104</sup>Metal fences cut the liquid earth into dividing the land into narrow paths and piles of dirt.

<sup>105</sup>Bare and rancid.

<sup>106</sup>What I saw looked like a prison yard. And between the posts and sludge wandered cattle as far as the eye could see. <sup>107</sup>Packed into the muddy field they mooed covered in their own muck.

<sup>108</sup>And inside the gut of each cow grew our salvation. The special type of E. coli also festering inside of the growing number of St. Dominic children. <sup>109</sup>It wasn't in the grass-fed cows. It had to be these filthy beasts lumbering between corn-filled troughs.

<sup>110</sup>Quickly and quietly I shuffled down the small hill. I squeezed between the bars of the fence. My shoes immediately sank into some feces and mud mixture on the ground.

<sup>111</sup>Cattle scattered quickly and then as though they forgot wandered aimlessly again. In the corner of the field sat a huge pile swarming with black flies in the moonlight.

*Gluttons for Punishment*

<sup>112</sup>I plunged the bedpan into the mountain of manure. Like a shovel, I lifted a heaping mound from the center. The smell made me want to puke again. With the other hand I pulled the plastic bag with the laughing blobfish in an apron printed on the front. <sup>113</sup>As I lowered the bedpan into the bag, a brown smear ran on the other side of the lettering on the bag.

<sup>114</sup>A huff of air escaped from the bag of cow feces as I knotted the handles. The smell this time was too much and milk erupted from me onto the brown mountain. <sup>115</sup>I fell to my knees. My hands buried in the thick sticky sludge. My slacks, like a year ago, covered.

<sup>116</sup>The decades had washed the dense odor of burger before slaughter from my mind, and it was too much now.

<sup>117</sup>I vomited three more times on the way back to the car. <sup>118</sup>It was not the reminiscing you read about in novels, but it would ultimately serve a purpose.



**5** “Are you hot or cold?” I

broke the silence and gestured at the heat control knob that pointed a hair right of the blue into the red. <sup>2</sup>The November wind outside howled against the seams of the windows.

<sup>3</sup>“My feet are a little chilly,” Sister Reeding said shoving her feet further under the dash toward the lower vent. <sup>4</sup>Her bag of Sour Patch Kids crinkled as she dug her wet fingertip into the corner to coat it in sour sugar. I turned the knob further red and pushed the hot air onto the floorboard. <sup>5</sup>Licking her finger, she shuffled the old map against her lap. “I think we are supposed to take

*N<sub>17</sub><sup>20</sup>* I-93 west another 32 miles.”

<sup>6</sup>I refused to use any of these Global Positioning machines, letting some satellite know where I am at all times, your every movement in some database. <sup>7</sup>Best if there no record of where we were going, what we’re doing.

<sup>8</sup>“Very well,” I said before the dark highway swallowed the conversation. <sup>9</sup>I stared in

silence with my mind cluttered with the stops made over the road trip. <sup>10</sup>So far we had visited thirteen and intend on visiting another seven before returning home.

<sup>11</sup>Thanksgiving was coming. Declaring an appreciation for what they have by going shopping at midnight for ridiculous deals.

<sup>12</sup>Gluttony and greed veiled by a country praying “Thank you, Jesus, for—white meat smothered in brown gravy and Black Friday ads.”

<sup>13</sup>“Tell me more about your decision to join the convent,” I awkwardly asked as a river of headlights on our left endlessly flows against the pitch black and humming of rubber on asphalt.

<sup>14</sup>“Well,” she folded the map against its creases on her legs. <sup>15</sup>“Well, it was around this time of year. My father asked if I was bringing anyone to Thanksgiving dinner.” Discarding the sour candy bag she opens the Combos. <sup>16</sup>“What he meant was someone that he approved of. <sup>17</sup>When I told him that he wouldn’t have to worry about that anymore, that I was going to be celibate...”

<sup>18</sup>She bit around the small cylindrical pretzel until all that was left was the yellow nacho cheese inside dusted with the fragments of white.

<sup>19</sup> “...he seemed so relieved—I mean, at the Thanksgiving dinner, during the blessing he

thanked God, in front of my whole extended family. <sup>20</sup>He told them all about the ‘valley of darkness’ <sup>21</sup>I had returned from. He thanked God for giving him his little girl back.”

<sup>22</sup>She threw the nacho cheese center into her mouth and started the process with another.

<sup>23</sup>“I was just so embarrassed. I ate so I wouldn’t have to talk to any of my aunts and uncles, even my grandmother. <sup>24</sup>After that day, I never looked at Thanksgiving, or food, the same way.”



<sup>25</sup>Saturday I woke up to the sound of the phone.

<sup>26</sup>*Rinnng, rinnng. Rinng, rinnng.*

<sup>27</sup>“Hello,” I said rubbing the visions and dreams from my eyes. “Father Ludwig.”

<sup>28</sup>“Uhh, hey Father, it’s me, Alex Simmons. Ah was wonderin’ if you were still gonna come ta ma contest today ‘n all. Be nice ta have a cheerin’ section. <sup>29</sup>Ma ain’t gonna be there. She still thinks it’s wrong thry fired me. But I told ‘er ah’m gonna win the contest, show’em real good. <sup>30</sup>Ya know.”

<sup>31</sup>“Yes, Alexander.” I replied cautiously, “I will be coming. It’s at two o’clock still?”

<sup>32</sup>“Yep. If ya wanna bring Deacon Bob er Sister Reeding, that’d be really nice too.”

<sup>33</sup>“I will ask Sister Reeding. Deacon Bob won’t be back until Monday. <sup>34</sup>He is seeing family.”

<sup>35</sup>The store looked identical to the one in my hometown. The franchise produced almost complete duplicates of the restaurant layout. <sup>36</sup>However, the contest was being held in the parking lot. <sup>37</sup>We had to park toward the back of the lot as the festivities were densely packed around the store front.

<sup>38</sup>I grabbed my coffee Thermos and opened the passenger door to let Sister Reeding out of Old Faithful. <sup>39</sup>The air was crisp but not too cold. Most of the audience wore light jackets. <sup>40</sup>Dead leaves blew across the pavement. Families wandered around the tables where people tried new food options they distributed at the booths bordering the main dining area. Frumpy Frank’s used the contest as a way to make money but also to do research on which new burgers, sauces, and sides they should offer.

<sup>41</sup>It was not unlike the Elk’s chili contest. Patrons would pay a fee and receive a bracelet and tickets. The tickets were votes that you would place in different ceramic banks shaped like the Frank mascot holding the burger and spatula. <sup>42</sup>The food items that received the most tickets would

be considered for inclusion in the local menu.

<sup>43</sup>Certain items like the burgers and common sides were featured in all locations but with the ticket system Frumpy Franks could tailor the food to the tastes of the local population. Alexander explained to me how the event was one of the greatest in the city. <sup>44</sup>His fascination with Frumpy’s food made it obvious that working in the fast food kitchen probably was his dream job.

<sup>45</sup>We walked pass a large bouncy house, a person dressed in a plush costume of Frumpy Frank, and a large wooden panel where you could stick your face through a hole and take pictures as a Frumpy mascot. <sup>46</sup>A father held his son’s head through one of the holes that made his offspring into the chartreuse monster that looks like a mentally ill muppet holding a puce cartoon of french fries. <sup>47</sup>The child’s apparent mother looked through the hole to a persimmon colored Sneetch-like caricature holding a basket of spicy buffalo wings.



Finally, we came to the main table set on a short stage between two tall banners advertising *The Fev'a* omitting the “asshole” part of the title. It featured the persimmon Sneetch with a thermometer and ice bag on its head instead of the weeping butthole which appears on the bottled sauce. <sup>48</sup>*Comes out the same way it went in!* it reads above a vendor selling the bottles with the weeping butthole on them.

<sup>49</sup>It really is astounding that people would frequent this event with their children while that disgusting smut was all around them.

<sup>50</sup>Alexander saw us from the stage, and called us over to the side where two steps lead up to the thirteen contestant chairs. “Father! Ya made it!” he exclaimed. “We’re ‘bout ta start ‘n ah was worried ya weren’t gonna make it ‘n time. Hi, Sista Reedin’.” <sup>51</sup>I switched my hold on the Thermos to shake his hand. “Father, always drinkin’ yer coffee. <sup>52</sup>Ya know, that stuff can give ya the shakes and even kill ya!”

<sup>53</sup>Peter’s ghost haunts me with Alexander’s words.

<sup>54</sup>He led us over to his spot at the table. “This is where ah’m gonna win ‘er all.” I looked out over the festival crowd of this autumn Saturday.

<sup>55</sup>“How do you win?” asked Sister Reeding.

<sup>56</sup>“Attention, attention, ladies and gentleman!” announced Rick, the manager of the store, over the PA system. <sup>57</sup>“We are starting the contest in a couple minutes. Please grab something from the booths and take a seat in the audience.”

<sup>58</sup>“Ya have ta finish the whole burger first. Come ‘ere, let me show ya, they got ‘em in the middle of the dinin’ area. <sup>59</sup>They’re under glass. And if ya throw-up,” Alexander clumsily explains, “you’re disqualified.”

<sup>60</sup>“While you find your chair please pass by the center display where we feature the burgers our thirteen contestants will be devouring for a chance to win five-hundred dollars!”

<sup>61</sup>We made our way down the two steps from the stage and headed over to the middle of all the tables. I didn’t notice them before since we made our way around the border of the festival. <sup>62</sup>Sure enough, thirteen burgers sat under huge glass covers, displayed on pillars surrounded by a velvet rope. They were works of art in a way, the way that the commercials make them appear. <sup>63</sup>Obviously more time was spent on these thirteen burgers than probably all the inferior burgers passed out today.

<sup>64</sup>“That one’s mine!” Alexander said pointing to the number seven flag stuck in the top of the burger pinning green olive to the bun.

<sup>65</sup>He then pointed to the number seven on the

contestant sticker as he stuck it to his thick chest.

<sup>66</sup>This was my opportunity, probably the only one I was going to get. I had carefully planned up to this point but knew that the most critical stage was going to have to be a quick assessment of the situation.

<sup>67</sup>In the commotion of everyone crowding and taking a seat. I turned quickly and faked an accidental fall into Sister Reeding, pushing her over the velvet rope into the pillar holding Alexander's burger. <sup>68</sup>She stumbled and fell, grabbing the tray on which the burger sat. The burger crashed to the ground along with Sister Reeding, and the glass cover – which was actually plastic, not glass – bounced and rolled with Alexander chasing it as it inched toward the crowd. <sup>69</sup>The bun slid off all the slick piled high toppings and Sister Reeding face-planted into the meaty patty in a manner probably not dissimilar to Maryann on that fateful night.

<sup>70</sup>I took the lid off my Thermos before I grabbed her by the shoulder to lift her from drowning in ketchup, mayo, and mustard. As she wiped the orange mixture of sauces from her eyes and tried to slop it back on the burger, I quickly dumped a small amount of the contents in the Thermos onto the patty. <sup>71</sup>I then planted my hand on the burger and rubbed the cow shit deep into the flame broiled burger. <sup>72</sup>I then grabbed sections of the lettuce leaves and covered it back up all the way with condiments.

Alexander returned frantic. <sup>73</sup>“Father! Hurry get that bun ‘n toppin’s back on the burger or ah’ll be disqualified!”

<sup>74</sup>I threw on the pickles and tomato slices and Alexander grabbed the top bun covered in dirt and dead tree leaves. <sup>75</sup>I adjusted the toothpick with the number seven flag and we quickly positioned the bun on top. Alexander covered it with the glass cover.

<sup>76</sup>Only three small children stood staring at the event that only lasted no more than 15 seconds. <sup>77</sup>I returned the pillar to the upright position and Alexander lifted the fifteen pound monstrosity back onto the pillar.

<sup>78</sup>I pulled Sister Reeding back over the velvet rope while he finished the job.

<sup>79</sup>“Attention, contestants, attention: Would all the competitors please report to the main table?” the announcer asked rhetorically.

<sup>80</sup>“That’s me!” Alexander shouted.

<sup>81</sup>A moment later, thirteen staff members come and take the burgers under glass covers to the main table. Alexander takes his seat next to the other gluttons. <sup>82</sup>“Ladies and Gentleman, welcome to Frumpy Frank’s Behemoth Burger Competition! Please take your seats and let me introduce this year’s competitors.”

<sup>83</sup>The crowd cheers. Rick introduced each competitor one by one. I felt a twinge of disgust when Rick said, “Alexander Simmons.” The competitors sat in a row along the table with Alex in the middle. The fast food version of Da Vinci’s Last Supper on display celebrating obesity. <sup>84</sup>After a brief explanation of the rules, the announcer shouts “3... 2... 1... Let’s Get Frumpy!” into the microphone and a large red LED clock starts.

<sup>85</sup>The next thirty-nine minutes, twenty-three seconds, and eighty-four milliseconds were filled with a disgusting montage of slop and grease dripping off of double chins and contestant after contestant being disqualified for erupting in puke.

<sup>86</sup>The whole time Alexander’s face was a mixture of repulsion and determination. Between bites he states, “Father, ah’ve got ta finish. But this burger tastes like shit!”

<sup>87</sup>“Alexander, you need this.” I encouraged him toward victory.

<sup>88</sup>“That’s it! That’s it, ladies and gentleman! The winner of this year’s Frumpy Frank’s Behemoth Burger competition is Alex Simmons!” the announcer states as Alexander bites the olive from the toothpick flag. <sup>89</sup>Sitting back he loosens his belt.

<sup>90</sup>“Ah did it, Father!” *Buuuurp!* “Ah did it!”



<sup>91</sup>“That’s our exit.” Sister Reeding points with the tip of her long Slim Jim. <sup>92</sup>“So, what did Alex’s mom say on the phone?”

<sup>93</sup>“She said that he is coming home tomorrow. It was definitely food poisoning but the worst of it is over.” <sup>94</sup>I turned the wheel and took the exit ramp. “The doctor said he had never seen an infection that severe before.”

<sup>95</sup>“It says take the third turn on the roundabout.” Chewing on the spiced meat, she holds the small piece of paper with the address. <sup>96</sup>“He was in there about week, wasn’t he?”

<sup>97</sup>“I think it was five days.” A lot had happened in those five days. Some Sister Reeding knew, most she did not. <sup>98</sup>“He’s competing in the state competition despite his doctor urging him not to.”

<sup>99</sup>“It is horrible. What they did to him, to the students, to all those other people across the country. <sup>100</sup>I’ll never eat fast food again.”

<sup>101</sup>“Well, hopefully all that will change.” I tried to comfort her. <sup>102</sup>“At this stoplight make a right. There it is.” <sup>103</sup>And there it was, another Frumpy Frank’s.



<sup>104</sup>Two days after the contest, I received a phone call from the hospital in my hometown.

<sup>105</sup>My father had passed.

<sup>106</sup>Again, I made the trip to rural Kansas. The arrangements were easy to make. I had helped a few families at St. Dominic go through the expensive process of burying loved ones.

<sup>107</sup>The service was simple, the sermon was as powerful as any Baptist reverend could make.

<sup>108</sup>*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*

<sup>109</sup>And then it was done. I was a 61 year old orphan with 364 acres of pasture and a sealed letter Mr. Wallace gave me with my father's last wishes.

<sup>110</sup>I wandered the pasture holding the envelope. Beating it's thick folded paper insides against my palm as I thought about the future. I had been so preoccupied with Frumpy Frank's, with Alexander's contest,

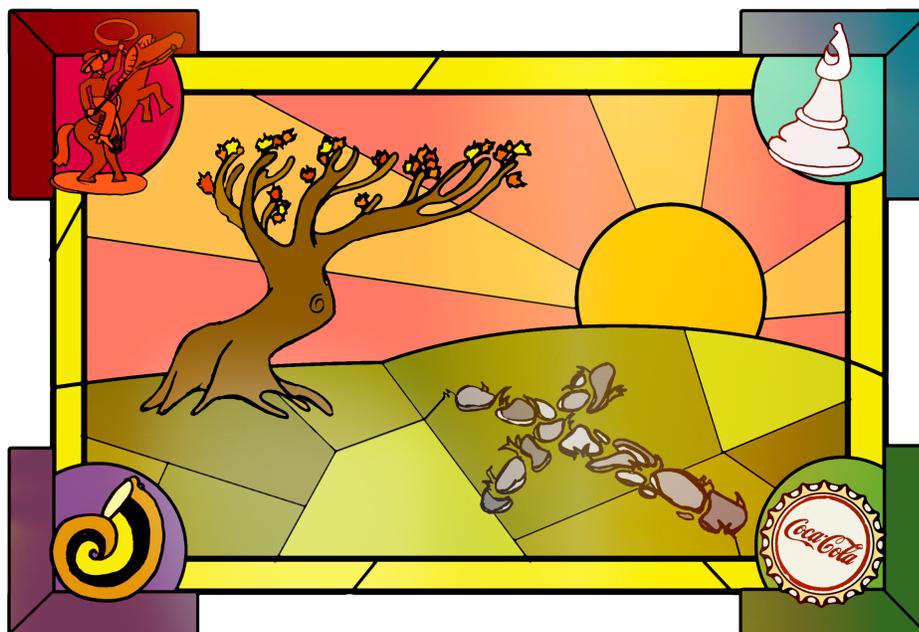
with my burning lips that the last words he said were something about napkins.

<sup>111</sup>Now that he was gone, there were so many things I wanted to know. <sup>112</sup>I lumbered through the field praying for more stories, more awful confessions that could shed some light on the man I was still becoming.

<sup>113</sup>It seemed utterly pointless.

<sup>114</sup>Soon, I came to the old crooked oak tree. For the first time in over four decades I sat in her shade. <sup>115</sup>My suit gathered the ground's dust as I rested my back against her trunk. I drew with a stick in the dirt. <sup>116</sup>Then something caught my eye. <sup>117</sup>A faint glimmer under a roots. I stuck my hand into the hole. From the gap I pulled a vintage Band-aids tin.

<sup>118</sup>It was one of the few time capsules I hid on the 364 acres. Inside I found a white bishop from chess club at public school, a red plastic cowboy on a horse, an old brass key, a snail shell, and an old Coke-a-Cola bottle cap.



<sup>119</sup>I remembered the bottle cap. The Sunrise Diner had the only soda-pop vending machine. <sup>120</sup>I thought it was the coolest thing. My family went there every month because the diner bought their beef directly from the neighboring farms and milk for their milk shakes from our farm.

<sup>121</sup>Locally owned. Locally supplied.

<sup>122</sup>I remembered the day my father gave me ten cents for every “A” when I graduated six grade. With each dime I got six ounces of cola. <sup>123</sup>I was not allowed to get milkshakes, so cola was a real treat. The bottle caps were hidden all over the farm in tins just like this one.

<sup>124</sup>Frumpy Frank’s had put The Sunrise Diner out of business. Frumpy Frank’s had ruined the neighboring family farms. <sup>125</sup>Frumpy Frank’s had brought the threat of CAFOs to my doorstep.

<sup>126</sup>Frumpy Frank’s had just begun to pay.

<sup>127</sup>The rancid smell of cow feces lingered on the new November wind. And suddenly I knew that there is only one way to see my dad again. <sup>128</sup>To see him despite his blasphemous Baptist ways. I would have to fall further.

<sup>129</sup>The envelope, his final wishes, would have to wait.



<sup>130</sup>It was 11:42pm. We had been waiting at the far end of the lot for about half an hour. Then, finally, the dishwasher appeared from the rear door lugging a heavy wet bag of garbage over to the dumpster. <sup>131</sup>I sprang from my car. He hurled the bag over the rim of the huge metal container with a thud. <sup>132</sup>As he lumbered back to the rear door with his head hung low from exhaustion, I called out in my best impression of Alexander.

<sup>133</sup>“Hey, ya guys closed? Ah was hopin’ ta get a burger, ya know.”

<sup>134</sup>“Nay, sorry. Kitchen’s closed.” He pulled the rear door open and flings it wide. <sup>135</sup>They always did. Tired from slaving in front of a hot metal steam oven. Dripping with funk and water all down his slick brown plastic apron. <sup>136</sup>He sloshes against the puddles that linger on the orange tiles.

<sup>137</sup>“Damn!” I say as I quickly took one of those thin business card size magnets out of my pocket. <sup>138</sup>And just before the metal door came to the frame, I covered the latch hole with the magnet preventing the locking mechanism from entering the socket.

<sup>139</sup>*Click-shick.*

<sup>140</sup>*Feelin’ Frumpy, We Deliver.*

<sup>141</sup>The elementary teachers use this trick all the time to keep from locking themselves out

of their classroom. <sup>142</sup>The magnet sticks tight against the metal frame unnoticed.

<sup>143</sup>“Did it work?” Sister Reeding asked as I reentered the car.

<sup>144</sup>“I think so. We will have to wait and see.”

<sup>145</sup>There was a period of dark silence.

<sup>146</sup>“You know what I was saying earlier, about Lana.” She cut into the whispering night wind. <sup>147</sup>“Can I tell you something? It has been weighing on me.”

<sup>148</sup>“Go ahead, my child.”

<sup>149</sup>“It’s Lana’s mom, Andrea. I don’t know how to say this but...” she paused and took a deep breath, “...she reminds me of Sally. <sup>150</sup>It’s not just that she looks like Sally, but the way she carries herself, the way she talks, the way she dresses sometimes.”

<sup>151</sup>My mind started flipping through her volume in the Library of Sin. <sup>152</sup>Page after page of what she missed about Sally.

<sup>153</sup>“Father, sometimes I provoke Lana. Sometimes I push her until she acts out, so that I have to call her mother. I feel so awful. It’s so wrong. But I can’t help it.” <sup>154</sup>Her voice cracked and I knew tears were on the way. <sup>155</sup>“I was so excited last month, before everything with the E. coli, when you told me to call her mother and have her take Lana home. <sup>156</sup>I started fantasizing about what she

was going to wear, how she was going to smell, how she—”

<sup>157</sup>Then, she broke. She started to sob.

<sup>158</sup>It had been years since she spoke of these urges.

<sup>159</sup>“My child.” I touched her bony shoulder. I didn’t know what to say. I thought she was past this. <sup>160</sup>No matter how I separated them in my mind.

<sup>161</sup>Little lesbian Eleanor still lived in Sister Reeding.

<sup>162</sup>She cried and then dried her eyes on her sleeve, “I think the dishwasher is leaving now.”

<sup>163</sup>“Are you going to be okay?”

<sup>164</sup>She nodded. After the dishwasher walked out the manager followed behind him shortly thereafter. Once both cars were safely away, I opened the trunk and took out a hardback Bible. <sup>165</sup>Then, with a black ski-mask over my face, I quickly moved across the otherwise empty parking lot. <sup>166</sup>As I grabbed the handle, I said a small prayer. <sup>167</sup>*Click-shick*. The magnet trick had worked. <sup>168</sup>I thanked the elementary teachers as I stepped onto the drying orange tile.

<sup>169</sup>I moved through the back of the house quickly, in the same way as the other Frumpy Frank’s. <sup>170</sup>The walk-in was around the corner

from the dishwasher, and just outside the cooler I found the thawing tubs marked for the contest in a day for the state competition.

<sup>171</sup>In the dim glow of the parking lot lamps, I opened the Bible. The pages were glued together and the inside was hollowed to create a compartment concealed between Genesis and Revelations. <sup>172</sup>In the square pocket the vintage Band-aid tin packed with Brook's farm manure waited.

<sup>173</sup>Sister Reeding thought I was blessing the meat with scripture, that I was researching on the devil's machine where the next state contest was going to be to prevent further pain and excise the demons from the meat patties, that I could bless away food poisoning and save others the fate of Matthew, Emily, and Alexander.

<sup>174</sup>She came with me, while Deacon Reynolds watched over things because she believed it is part of her penance, that by assisting me she is righting those old wrongs.

<sup>175</sup>That I was lying to her to do the Lord's work was my only regret.

Patty after patty I massaged the O157.H7 into the softening patties. <sup>176</sup>I buried small amounts of cow shit into each one.

<sup>177</sup>Alexander's sacrifice was just the beginning of Frank's fall.

<sup>178</sup>On the table in front of me was a bottle of Asshole Fever. <sup>179</sup>Before I finished, I felt compelled to pocket the bottle of the hot sauce.

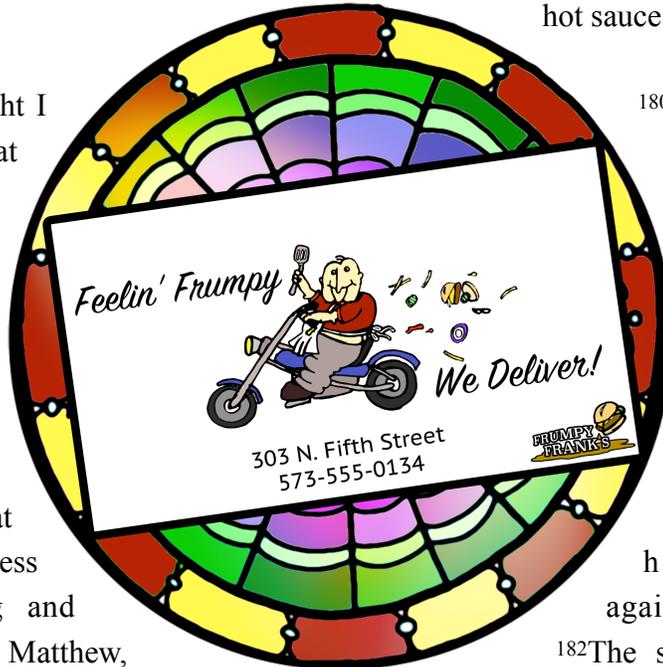
<sup>180</sup>On my way out I removed the magnet and let the door latch shut. *Click-click.* As I got back to the car, Sister Reeding was behind Old Faithful. <sup>181</sup>I gave her a moment as I heard splashing against the pavement.

<sup>182</sup>The same sound I made not too long ago.

<sup>183</sup>"Sorry, Father." she says, "I think that all that sugar is disagreeing with my stomach."

<sup>184</sup>Such a horrible disease...

<sup>185</sup>Poor Eleanor. Forgive her Lord, for she knows not what she does.



<sup>180</sup>/<sub>17</sub>

*Liam J. Reeding*



JOSEPH GABRIEL



NICHOLAS ANTHONY



Confessions of the Father follows the journey of a Catholic priest and his intentional fall from grace to save his congregation. Listening to the confessions of his parish, the Father decides to do more than help them atone: he decides to out do them.

FATHER LUDWIG  
WILL RETURN IN



BOOK OF CHRISTOPHER



Originally, Nicholas Anthony and Joseph Gabriel wrote a mission statement to form a collective of artists based in Missouri and dedicated to creating something beautiful, something inspiring, something to share with the world.

...something that would leave a lasting impression.

Instead we drank Bourbon and Scotch, and dreamed up a monstrosity that threatens our very hold on reality. We called the plethora leviathans plaguing our lives "Modern Gods" and have since offered up our creative energies as a sacrifice to appease the foul beasts.

Creativity is a miraculous curse.

Visit [www.moderngods.org](http://www.moderngods.org) to hear the songs and you will bear witness to these relentless yet playful gods as they develop through countless retellings. In the end, the art looks good on your fridge, the music is perfect for disturbing the peace, and the writings are great when you need to spend a hot minute on the toilet.

It's your choice: read or wipe

— but regardless, enjoy.



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