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about 2,700 words

First Rites

by D.B. Toth

The young priest rounded the corner at 59th street and hurried down Seventh Avenue. It was an unusually warm day in late October and he was without hat or overcoat. His long-sleeved black shirt and pants were starched and ironed and his white collar looked as if it had just been taken out of its wrapper. He walked quickly and his pristine Bible swung playfully with every step.

All along the busy midtown street shopkeepers abandoned their counters and held their faces to the sun. The young priest knew which ones were Catholics, because they greeted him with a “Good Afternoon, Father”, or looked away as if he had caught them in a lie and he felt ashamed because it made him feel good.

Passing St. Patrick’s Cathedral, the heavy doors of the church were pushed open and an old woman made her careful way down the steps. She touched the young priest on the arm and

gave him a toothless smile. The priest smiled back and when he noticed her black armband, he quickened his pace.

On 42nd street, the priest descended the steps to the subway and even though the station was busy with the holiday crowd, people stepped aside when they saw him coming. When he surfaced in Brooklyn, the sky was perfectly balanced between day and dusk and the golden light spilled evenly over the street and it turned fiery when it washed over the autumn leaves.

The doors of the bars and cafes were propped open and the bartenders were smoking their last cigarettes in the doorway before starting their shifts. Some of the stools were already occupied and he supposed that in a few hours most of the bars and clubs would be crowded. The thought filled him with memories of many beer-soaked night and he smiled to no one in particular. As he continued toward the river, the bars and shops gave way to warehouses that had been turned into residential lofts. The priest remembered pictures of the neighborhood taken ten years ago that showed seedy warehouse districts with few people and lots of garbage. Today, the lofts in the same warehouses rented for four thousand a month and there was a Starbucks on the corner. That was the final damnation, the priest supposed.

He was walking against the tide of a one-way street and without slowing his stride, he checked the address on his cell phone. Traffic was light and the only passerby was a boy of ten. He stood out, because this was a neighborhood of young residents and most of their children were infants or toddlers.

A young woman on a bicycle whizzed past the priest and he almost yelled after her, because she was riding the wrong way on the one-way street. But he did not want to frighten her into a crash and watched her brown hair billow in the warm breeze. There was a basket fixed behind the seat and a small dog sat in it, its nose in the wind. The girl was brave, or careless, and

the priest wondered if she was pretty. At the next stop sign she turned around to check on the dog. She was not just pretty, but beautiful and he felt another kind of longing that made him feel immediately ashamed. She caught his gaze and her face lit up with a smile that showed even teeth. She patted the dog on the head and pedaled on.

The streets were narrow and because cars were parked on both sides, it was difficult to see cars approach the intersection. Riding a bicycle in Manhattan was safer, the priest thought, because even though traffic was heavy, you could see cars from a long way off.

At the next intersection the boy was walking slightly ahead of the cyclist and for the first time, the priest saw that he was bouncing a tennis ball against the pavement. He would bounce the ball hard, let it arc above his head before catching it. He had the movements of a natural athlete and he never missed.

Then he came abreast a coffee shop with a jack-o'-lantern in its window. The carved pumpkin was unusually large and the candle that burned in it threw shadows of its jagged teeth against the window. But perhaps what caught the boy's attention was the cigarette that was propped between two teeth, giving the jack-o'-lantern a strangely human look. The boy could not help being transfixed by that image any more than a mosquito could help being drawn to warm blood and as the ball fell, the boy was a split second late and did not reach back far enough, and the ball touched his finger and bounced off and toward the street.

The priest tracked the ball and saw that the girl on the bicycle was probably going to hit it. The next stop light was ten yards away and she has not slowed down. If anything, she was emboldened by the empty traffic and was cycling at a quicker pace. The priest hoped she would not be frightened by the tennis ball and do anything more than pull hard on her brakes. Then he

saw the boy run after the ball and he felt a sinking in his chest. With two quick strides, the boy was in the street, looking neither left nor right, but locked completely on his target.

“Heads up!” the priest yelled and with relief saw the girl make a sharp swerve. The movement caught the boy’s attention and he stopped dead in his tracks, narrowly missing the turning handlebars.

The priest noticed he had been holding his breath and he let out a sigh of relief. The girl kept riding, letting the momentum carry her back toward the middle of the street. When it was all over, and for long years after, the priest wondered if it would have made a difference if she had come to a full stop. She pedaled on, the edges of her hair filtering the falling sun. Beyond her, the East River was bathed in orange and it looked clean and inviting. A strange stillness hung in the air, or perhaps he imagined it afterwards, the way any life-defining moment takes on the air of the melodramatic once it’s over. Still, he would wonder into old age how he could not have heard the car before, when it came barreling over the corner at forty miles an hour. One second the street was empty save for the girl, the next moment a huge black car blocked out the sun.

The girl never had a chance. The car hit her dead on, hurling her into the windshield. The force pushed her upwards and she rolled over the roof and landed on the pavement like a Barbie doll thrown in anger. The priest heard the screeching of the brakes and saw the car come to a rest about five yards up. He tried to see the driver, but the windows were tinted. All he could see (in crystal clear detail) was that it was old and dented with missing hubcaps.

Frozen in place, the priest waited for the driver’s door to open. Hours dragged by, then the engine wailed, the tires spun and the car was gone. The spell was broken. The priest realized that the boy was standing by his side. He looked incredibly young, too young to have caused all

this mayhem, and despite it, the priest felt a deep anger rise up in him. You stupid child, he thought, didn't anyone tell you to look both ways when crossing the street? Then he saw the wild fear in the boy's eyes and he put a hand on his shoulder.

"Wait here. Whatever happens, just wait, okay?" The boy nodded, the only sign that he understood. The priest ran to the girl, which was like opening the umbrella after the rain had passed. She lay not more than five yards away. As he got closer, he became aware of another sound, an atonal, rhythmic yapping and when he reached the girl, he remembered the little dog that was now barking and running circles around its owner.

He knelt beside the girl. She lay on her back and she was dying. The priest, who had had no medical training and was afraid of needles, knew this right away. It was not the unnatural angle at which her body lay, nor the blood that was streaked across her blouse, but the way her eyes looked, as if they already belonged somewhere else.

He knew he should not move her. He dropped his cell phone twice before he got his trembling under control. She's dying, a human being is dying in front of me and I can't even get it together to make a phone call. He punched 911 and with a trembling voice gave the operator the address.

The priest could not remember ever feeling so helpless. He took the girl's hand, because that's what people did in movies. They also said something reassuring, like "you're going to be all right", but he could not bring himself to say this. She tugged at his hand and her strength surprised him. Her eyes fluttered open and the priest understood that she was trying to say something. He leaned closer and put his ear to her mouth.

"Last rites, . . . Father".

At first the priest thought she was speaking about her father, having recalled an ancient memory, for he imagined the dying person to be like a dreamer who recalls snatches of unconnected dreams. He gave her a reassuring smile. But she repeated what she said and fixed her eyes on his collar. And lest he miss even that sign, she touched her crucifix. The priest had not noticed it before, because it was halfway tucked inside her blouse and because it was matted with blood-covered hair. It was made of silver and depicted the shape of the suffering Redeemer in minute detail. But the blood which covered it was not merely an artistic touch.

Last Rites. The young priest felt the rest of his wind being sucked out of him and dissipate in the fall twilight. He looked squarely in the girl's eyes and opened his mouth to tell her the truth, but no words came. He became aware of the little dog barking and poking its nose at the girl's rib cage and an instinct kicked in, as if a primordial cog had turned and he knew what he had to do. He turned to the nearest bystander, an overweight young man wearing a faded Mets T-shirt.

"Get this goddamned dog outta here," the priest growled and he was surprised at the anger in his voice. The young man scooped up the dog and took a few respectful steps back. Out of the corner of his eyes, the priest saw that several more bystanders have joined the scene.

He opened the Bible. The unworn pages crackled and the book opened to the Psalms. The young priest saw this as a sign and started scanning the verses. As his fingers moved of their own, another part of him was aware of a distant memory of a college frat brother who prided himself on being the only English Literature major in a house of Philistines. With the perfect recollection of an irrelevant dream, he remembered Bones posing the question of the week:

Who was the poet who lived before Shakespeare, but who is more often quoted than Shakespeare? There isn't a time when his work is not being recited somewhere.

“Those who want to kill me will be destroyed; They will go down to the depths of the earth,” the priest read.

The girl's eyes relaxed and for a second he thought she was gone. Then her eyes opened, very slowly as if fighting against a weight and he knew he had to hurry. He snapped the Bible shut and made the sign of the cross.

“In the name of the Father, The Son, and the Holy Spirit, I absolve you of all your sins. In the name of the all that is holy, I cleanse you of all sin. You may enter heaven and sit at the right hand of God.”

The priest's voice trembled, but he continued. The girl looked at him and smiled, her white teeth now stained red. She gave the priest's hand one last squeeze as if to signal she had heard him, and then her hand dropped to her side and she was still. The priest always assumed that the act of dying was like air being let out of a balloon and was surprised that it was more like a rope being cut. A dozen or so people were now gathered around the girl's body but the priest did not see the boy. An old man took off his trench coat and covered her body. For a long time the air was empty, then the silence was shattered by the shriek of an ambulance.

The priest sat down on the curb. He put his head in his hands and wept. He did not know how much time has passed. Someone laid a gentle hand on his shoulder and helped him to his feet. A paramedic. His uniform was faintly streaked with blood. He lit a cigarette and blew smoke, like he had all the time in the world. He did have all the time in the world now, the priest thought and tears welled up in his eyes again.

“She’s gone,” the paramedic said, as if he was talking about the weather. “Thank God you were here to give her the last rites,” he finished, touching the crucifix around his own neck.

“Cops are on their way. They’ll take your statement. Did you see the driver?”

“No.” He took off,” the priest said.

“Animals.” The paramedic threw away his cigarette.

“All who swear by God will glory in him, while the mouths of liars will be silenced,” the priest said and gave a sad laugh.

The medic’s eyes softened.

“Was this your first one, Father?”

“Yes.”

“It gets easier,” he said and clapped him on the shoulder.

I doubt that very seriously, the priest thought and for the second time in the last half hour he heard sirens.

That was his cue to leave. It was the only thing he could think of doing. He thought about going home, but the vision of an empty apartment made his heart ache and he wandered on, without realizing that he was heading toward his original destination.

The most famous poet in the world? King David, Bones would confide in a hushed tone after his frat brothers threatened him with bodily harm if he didn’t reveal the answer. He wrote the first 49 Psalms and his work is recited in churches all over the world.

On a street facing the river, the priest stepped to the doorway of a warehouse and rang the buzzer. The only thing that spoke of urban renewal was the modern buzzer with an LCD screen attached to it. The screen blinked once and the priest knew that someone was looking at him

from above and he wondered if he looked as bad as he felt. But the buzzer sounded and he was allowed to push the door open.

He climbed the steps with trembling legs. The door of apartment 5E was ajar. He stepped into the foyer and nearly collided with a black-caped crusader who was on his way to the kitchen. The superhero mumbled an apology, gave him the sideways glance and a thumbs up. Through the narrow doorway of the kitchen, the priest could see the Phantom of the Opera conversing with Richard Nixon. The priest mixed himself a gin & tonic at the table that was stacked with bottles, plastic cups and a bucket of ice.

An angel glided into the room.

“Holy shit, Peter. You ought to win a prize for most realistic costume. Happy Halloween!”

She kissed him on the lips and when Peter put his arms around her, he could feel her paper wings.