

The Tragic Death of Sister Agnes

The cemetery was wet with damp. The fresh scent of rain-dappled nature swam from all around, bringing a mix of aromas that were simultaneously sweet and bitter to my nose; the perfect concoction. The old stone wall - still darkened by the clinging wetness, but drying here and there - offered their own perfume to the bouquet, but it was difficult to say which overpowered which.

It was only a gentle, intermittent patter of rain the night before. I was sat at my diary, as I often am, scribbling thoughts, musings, plans, ideas, next steps and improvements, when I heard the rapping of a brief shower that sauntered in and away as most of the town were still well abed. I took a moment from my thoughts, placed my pen on the paper with a whispered tap, and tottered over to my small window to just, simply, appreciate it. I'd wanted rain that night, and here it was. I could see the leafy canopy, from this lurching vantage, shift and dip and vibrate at the onslaught, then scanned the horizon – half-blocked by a smattering of houses and stores - then returned contentedly.

Now, the early sun peaked through the vast stretch of clouds, offering a golden tincture to all it touched, but, with the copse of trees that had been here, on these grounds, long before I had, the light was stolen by the canopy, leaving only shadow beneath. The leaves sagged under the weight of the droplets, and every so often, one would trickle off and fall with a silent *splash* below. When the graves were forgotten, the names effaced in both memory and moss, the world still shed tears in mourning.

With a sigh that was neither sorrowful or satisfied, I continued my rounds. In the distance, the immense green which was a constant home to dog walkers, family ventures, picnics, as well as young - and old, where it survived - love wound and rolled in an immense landscape of beauty. A path snaked one way, and a rushing river veered across, with bundled overgrowth and a flora rich bank. This had gratefully accepted the sun's presence, and succumbed to just spread before it in thankful submission. Lounging like a reveller. In the night time, this was a bustling expanse of different shades of shadow - dark, dim and darker - but under the ordinance of illumination, the indescribably stunning aesthetic ruled.

I liked to look upon it on mornings such as this. Each step revealed some further glory in both sight and scent. This was the sort of day that drew my fancy to the church in the first place. Such magnificence in the beauty of things.

I suppose, for me, I found it picturesque – a living masterpiece, and that was not even taking in to account the myriad minutiae details whirring about within. I'd been invited to galleries and museums, gifted with works of art for my quarters, and it was wonderful, even then, to look upon a static image and find something new. Even after decades, it was as if the artists of those pieces had contained secrets that only age and perspective disclosed to me.

But this... a living landscape of never-ending brilliance. Every year a cycle of bright, summery blooming splendour cooled to soothing oranges and yellows of the autumnal pallet, which would fizzle and shiver into bleak and white wintry cloaks - in which trees stood bare and bleak, but beauty withstood stolidly - and finally, then, the rearing buds and endless cocooned colours that had persevered returned, springing in a dazzling flourish, promising the same performance will follow again, again, again. An encore we all welcomed. It could not be matched by even the most gifted artist.

And all that, I daresay, is an injustice to the true beauty of *His* gifts. For that is but the macro, and fallible as I am, I am trounced to combat the aforementioned miniscule details.

Yet, I knew, on that path, the worms and snails who found solace of life within the night would be, now, making their treacle-like rush in to the beds of wet grass in which they would hide and hope to survive ‘til another nightfall.

I knew the birds, the very ones who oft, like now, acted as the melodic herald to my day – singing their chirpy songs gifted only by their creator and instinct – would be preening and tweeting about their nest, if not already mothering their hatchlings. Sometimes I could see them dart through the trees, and hop about triumphantly on the green, stealing hope from those worms, but, that was his plan. The Earth spins, and such is the order. *In all his providence*, we often say, but providence to one is sometimes deprivation for another. But we had a saying for that, too, *the Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away*. Balance exists, even for the Lord himself, and that we must respect. For without balance, where would we be?

Onward. I knew foxes would be retreating in their dens, that the squirrels would be deftly manoeuvring out of their dreys, that all around, in their own homes and houses that obstructed the horizon, my flock would be yawning in to their duties of the day, pondering this problem or that issue, worrying about such a deadline, or smiling at such a feat – truly, humbly wonderful.

I’ve known these people for a long time. As soon as I was placed here, I made a point of visitations, of greetings, of exchanging pleasantries. This town is hardly large. True, every wedding, every communion, every funeral I will see new faces crop up, as bright and promising as the blooms in spring, of which I know have not the time to visit this church each week. To pray, to observe, to confess, to partake – but time has shifted, and that we must respect. Were I to stand on my pulpit to the solid gathering I *do* have, and damn their brethren for refusing to show, well, then I will preach only hate and judgement. That is a side of me I cannot show.

No, I must let the order of things go about as it will. I see myself like an ageing grandparent to the town, and to the order. My children have their lives, their routine and goals – they know where I am if they need me. Should they need my assistance, it is theirs. Should they need my advice, it is theirs. Should they need my comfort, it is theirs.

And I know they love me. I know their faith resides within them – even if but a seedling, all it takes is some event to sprinkle and nurture that in to attendance. Such as the weddings and funerals. Not just me, either. The others who I work with are venerated as much. It’s as if each of them, or at least one of them, are seen as an extended member of family, through the good and the bad.

When Sister Agnes had been pushed into her next life, the turnout for her service brought a tear to my eye. She shared no blood in this town, but she went about her duties as if she was relative to all. Home visits, charity work, school visits – oh, the list was endless as so too was her altruism. Were I to be preoccupied with some demand or other, Sister Agnes would be there to share the burden and allow the clockwork of the church to tick by seamlessly. I learned, in her, I had a servant and friend that would be with me no matter where I went, what I needed, what I requested, and she would bow, gratefully, with her gentle and croaked, “Yes, Father,” and thus, the task would begin.

Unfortunately, even for such a woman of the Lord – loved as she was – she was not protected from the whims of pure evil. For me, it felt as if there was no resistance, no fight. Upon a week, a busy schedule of innumerable visits were to take place and she- oh, poor thing.

They found her body, slumped and sodden on the bank of the river upon which my gaze could currently see. Tangled in the overgrowth, marred and ravaged by the racing water. It was I who had to identify her, and, I’ve seen many a soul’s empty vessel before now, but poor Agnes.

The things that had happened to her, well... it's not for us to dwell on. Poor thing did as I asked, and for such a fate to befall her, it proved that the faith humans have in the Lord is not as impenetrable a shield one would hope.

The turnout for her funeral was like none I had ever seen, even before my placement here. Babies in arms and aged in wheels, every age between were there to pay respects. It confirmed to me, that, within these hearts, the bedrock of faith persisted strong as the earth's core. Though they may be too busy to attend regularly, Sister Agnes had been devout and, in her divine servitude, had affected each of these families in some way. Either directly, or indirectly. Even those who had never spoken to her had a family member who, at some point in their life, had been beneficiary to her role, and there they all stood. Sullen, and tearing; shocked and appalled at the nature of her death.

During the sermon, I begged if anyone had information on the killing, to come forward. The policing staff were working their rounds, they escalated the matter to priority – such a tragedy was unheard of in the town, but, I knew that an interview with the police could not glean the same results as a pressure on the thoughts and conscience of the culprit. The judicial system hold no comparison to the prisons of guilt. We cannot escape those, no matter the deed.

“And thus,” I said, nearing a close, “If the individual, or indeed, individuals are amongst us, weeping with guilt as well as loss, I implore you. Come to me. Confess. Let us discuss your transgression under the eyes of god, so the loss of our dear Sister's life will not equate to the loss of your soul everlasting.”

There was an audible shift of mood upon those words. As if those congregated suddenly realised that amongst them, in sooth, the killer may be standing. That some darkened eye, some falling tear, some wounded countenance may be borne from a burden of grief heavier than just the loss of an innocent woman.

“Though you may be haunted with the memories of what you did, know that no deed is beyond forgiveness.” My voice cracked, here. Almost betraying the emotion bubbling within. Something I tried to resist always. “We, in our blinded conscience, view sin differently from the Lord above. We sieve actions through a moral filter, and believe that some sins are too large to pass through. But no. That is not true. To him who sees all, knows all- knows, already, who did this- you can be forgiven. He is ready, I am ready. All sin is equal in the eyes of God, and thus, all sin, no matter the mortal attachment to severity, *can* and *will* be forgiven, provided you confess. Confess and repent, and you are saved.”

That was months ago, now. The congregation filtered out with many a kind words offered to me upon departure. I smiled at some, realising these were the very words I'd given them to bolster their mental fortitude in times of trial.

And, each Saturday, I sat in the confession booth, waiting. My home for the following two hours would be the wooden bench. I would open the door to find it varnished and glimmering green from the sunlight, cordially transformed from the stained-glass window which permitted it entry, until I closed it behind me to the sworn secrecy of shadow. The dusted floor, only disturbed on this side by my own footfall would swirl in a sudden chaos then settle. And then, I waited. And waited. My thoughts partaking in the same routine of chaos and settling, chaos and settling as I pondered on who stole the life from Agnes.

They had to be weak-willed, that much was clear. The things they did to her showed they had given over to temptation; they allowed their urges to mutiny their reason, and morality capitulated. They let the depths of depravity bubble, gargle and foam to the forefront, commandeering all sense. And then, tossed aside in a panicked attempt to hide the body. I wanted to meet with this individual. I must know who, within this town, did this.

Most weeks, there was nothing. Some, a few visitors would take residence in the other booth, and through a fanciful latticework of black steel, they would spill their sins. Theft, infidelity, violence, most were, and even then, through that same scale of morality, easily forgiven by myself, never mind the deity from which they wished for vindication, or absolution. Yet, none – not a soul approached to either confess to the murder of Sister Agnes, nor even admit complicity, not even a morsel of information in which I could discover who did such a thing.

I thought, perhaps they were worried such a discussion would lead to their arrest – but such a thing was impossible. Their confessions were between their god and them, I was just a conduit who would receive the news and relay their forgiveness, if such was granted. I even went as far as turning to prayer myself, which I had not done in a long time – especially not for something so personal.

And then, today. The booth was occupied, and finally...

The silhouette was tall, lithe and nimble. A male, clear to see, who sat down with such a delicacy that it was almost as if the darkened figure was indeed pure, silent shadow. His presence already felt different. People usually come with cologne, perfume, aftershave – some pleasant aroma clouding them, as if they had made an effort when they were to put themselves before the direct judgement of their Lord.

But this man. Sweat, exasperation, desperation – I'd smelled it before in my past. In fact, I'd produced it – there was a dark time in me when my faith was questioned, and a succession of sin and corruption swiftly took its place, but soon, I balanced. Balance. I say it always, life is all about balance. It was after that time I was repositioned to this very church, dealing with this very man who sat, and fretted, and, though silent, I could almost hear the parade of thoughts booming in his conscience.

I did not speak first, as I could feel the risk of flight already. The anxiety gushed through the divider like a flood, drenching me and my booth in rising anticipation. His breathing grew faster, as if he were drowning in the flood he authored, gulping for air and struggling to stay afloat. This was not a flood any olive branch could redeem.

It was strange that, to feel the energy of someone, and let it describe so much. Most people were nervous through here, true, but from their initial entrance, I could usually decipher and sleuth, with some accuracy, the nature of their sin. And this- this was him. I knew it.

Finally, he spoke. No, he whispered, a low, remorseful and toneless sound. Whether meek or masked, I knew not. But, the words left. "F-forgive me, Father. For I have sinned."

I smiled in spite of myself. Though, whether for the fact he had let the guilt of conscience bear so heavily it crushed until he had to let it out, as if a festering poison. Or perhaps because of how he approached this; he was not a regular church-goer. He did not know exactly how this worked, but that bothered me not. The important thing was that he was present, and willing.

"How long has it been since your last confession, my child?" I prompted, keeping my tone calm, trusting.

"I-I- oh, god." He shifted in the seat, and I could see a flurry of movement within the darkness. "I've nev- never been in- never confessed, Father."

"Let that not affect you, child," I placated. "The important thing is you are here now."

There was a pregnant pause, as I waited for him to lead, and he, in turn, waited for my guidance. After a while, I spoke. "What is the nature of your confession?"

I heard his mouth open and close, dry and failing. Then, finally, "It- it's bad, Father. It's- oh, god. It's bad."

"Ah, the very nature of the sacrament of confession is to forgive the bad."

“This isn’t forgivable,” he stated. A tone that brook no argument.

“Everything can be forgiven,” I replied, calmly, though my insides were shaking with nerves. “And that is why I am here.” There was another pause, in which he only shifted again, fidgeting restlessly. “Would you like to start with something you deem smaller, until we continue to the deed that summoned you here?”

“I- I- When I was- No- Sorry- I-” His rapid sentences gave way to a defeated sob, and I sat quietly as the emotions, like a volcano, stirred from magma, to eruption, to lava, to rock, and thus, he was calmer once more. “I killed her.”

People often say their heart skips a beat, and I’ve never felt that before – but now, it happened. Though, within the heartbeat, years of work, years of thought, years of patience and understanding jolted and flashed back, in a fraction of their nurturing, before I steadied.

“Sister Agnes?” I asked, ensuring he could hear the dejection in my voice.

His reply was more sobbing. It went on for a long time, or perhaps it was only seconds, my mind was wandering, thinking about my friend. Her devotion. Her willingness to follow any order.

“Why did you take her life?” I asked.

Once more, he took a while to respond. As if trying to gather his thoughts. I offered him the time. “It felt- it felt as if something overtook me,” then he added quickly, as if trying to cut in before the judgement, “but- but that’s not me trying to- to- uh- *shirk* responsibility.” He paused, as if waiting for some rebuke, but there was none, so he continued. “I was out for a jog. Just on the green over the back, there. I do it every morning. And, usually, its bare- it’s empty. But she was just walking, Father.” His voice cracked, but he poured on. “She- she was just minding her own business, and I felt this- this- this, sudden, overwhelming sense of control. I felt like a wolf. Felt- felt like before me, this fragile, feeble woman- felt like she was mine. She belonged to me. I’ve never thought like that before,” he pleaded, “I’m married. I have kids. I’ve never, Father- never-”

What he had never done I wasn’t told, as it seemed the admission broke him down. As he wept, defeated, I realised it was my turn to speak.

“My child,” I said, thinking about how this man, his hands, his fists, his genitals- how they... “Temptation is often subliminal. Every day we are offered endless chances to give in, to turn away from the eyes of god, to let the dark urges rise and steal us away. Every day. The effectiveness is in the subterfuge. A little submission to it, here and there, soon dilutes and desensitises us to take another step- a further step. It is so easy, to allow the hidden seed to nestle within our mind, and slowly, surely, the stem of sin grows, and grows.

“Those who wish us to sin are masterful in their offering. They can wrap it up in neat little gifts, or hide it in the shadows as they show us the light. It is possible for even the most virtuous of hands, holding gold in its palm, to have the blood that provided it dripping beneath. It is dependent on your faith, your endurance, your mental might to withstand this poison.” I paused there, letting it settle. He was clearly a dangerous man, but I had to make sure. Was this a moment of madness, or was this telling, foreshadowing? “You tell me you’ve never felt like that before?”

A muffled sob, and a slow droopy nod was his reply.

“Then do you not see your strength of fortitude?” I offered, bringing back that olive branch. “You are not defined by your one sin, my child. Were that to be the truth, then every human would have no business with the lord. Our saviour died for this very thing- this sin- he sacrificed his own life so that you, all of you, may be forgiven. My child, is that what you want? Do you want forgiveness?”

“Father, that- that’s not all,” the man admitted. “Sister Agnes- she- she-” His voice was barely audible. Just terror and tears manifesting as words. My heart began to hammer in my chest now, each beat, booming brontides of thunder. He added in a whisper. “She’s here.”

I paused, at that. And tried to formulate my best possible response. “How do you mean?” is all I could muster.

“I see her,” he said. “She is in here with me. She- she won’t go.” He muttered a prayer that fell on deaf ears. Not mine. Not gods. Definitely not Agnes’. “Every day since. She- she stands with me. Beside me. When I’m in bed with my wife, she watches from the foot. She sneers and glares at me. In the dark, her eyes- they glow- they, oh god- they can’t be ignored. Even when I close my own I can see them follow me.

“When I’m in work, she waits behind my chair. I see her shadow falling over me. I’ve tried drinking her away, but she only- oh, god. The world blurs, but *she* is constant. When I’m jogging, she is at the spot I saw her. Watching me. Watching, and staring.

“Guilt is a terrible ailment, my child.”

“No, Father. She *is* there. Be- beaten and bruised. She-” a deep, shuddered intake of breath. “Her face purple and blackened- I can see the dints. The imprints of my fists. Her eye is sunken, the skin is broken, the blood is crusted. She- she’s smiling at me now, Father. Missing the teeth that I knocked out. She’s listening. She enjoys my fear. It was only glimpses at first, but- but the more I think on what I did- the stronger her presence is. She follows me every step. Every thought. I’m dogged by her. My dreams just replay her murder- over and over and over- I- I- I can’t- I want it to end, Father. I- I tried to- to take my own- my- but she- she won’t allow it.” He broke down at that. “She won’t allow it, Father. She won’t let me rest.”

I listened for a while, as he sobbed. His mind was addled by this, but it seemed to me, quite clearly, he was here not for absolution, not for penance, but because this wraith had attached itself to him, and he needed exorcism from its clutch. That is not what the sacrament of confession is for. And, so, I pushed.

“Does she speak to you, my child?” I asked, needing to understand. Needing to know for sure before I continued.

“Yes, Father.”

“And what does my old friend say?”

“Sometimes she- that morning- she repeats her cries, her screams. And other times, that- she says... th-tha-that- my soul...”

“Is forfeit?” I finished.

“Yes, Father.”

“And do you believe it is?” I asked. “Do you feel so broken by what you did, that your soul is fragmented, shattered to shrapnel and detritus? Mangled beyond all forgiveness. Do you, in your heart of hearts, feel as if what you’ve done is the work of a moment of madness, or do you believe that your deed, your murder, was the devil working within you?”

Suddenly, the grate separating us clanged with a reverberating bang. I could see the tips of his fingers poking through, the nails rotten and overgrown, like a nest of snakes, slithering through desperately for the taste of shrift. An exoneration. Something to peel away Sister Agnes from him. But, I could not offer it to him. No. I could not. Not that I was withholding. I was physically incapable.

His mouth was brought to the grate, now. He was whispering, primal and visceral, through it, flecks of saliva dotted through, peppering my cassock. The stench of liquor gassed in. “You said nothing is beyond forgiveness, Father! You promised. The devil! It’s the devil in me. It

wasn't me. It wasn't my actions. I need him out. The devil or a demon." He fizzled away in to weeping once more.

I smiled, then. It had worked.

The moment I was placed here, I could sense a fragility in Agnes, and I knew her faith was wavering. It was easy, almost too easy, to show her that the power of the opposition was greater, more immediate than that of her usual object of worship. That *he* listened. Even for something as simple as a gentle patter of rain, if you served him loyally, he would deliver.

I showed her that, when you take a deep breath, it's inhalation and exhalation. It's balance. When you step back and conceptualise that the world, the spirits, divinity is a cycle, a contract, and that she was on the losing side, the waning, flailing side, you can begin to understand.

I showed her that she devoted her life to the greed and selfishness of humanity. They ignored the call of god a long time ago, and it was impossible to win them back. God was dying. His hold was ebbing, his might was fallible. The people she'd worked for her entire life, they only sought her out when they needed her services. They wouldn't spend a second thinking about her miserable duties, until it benefited them. They cared not about god, until their loved ones died and they needed to believe they lived on. They cared not about divinity, until it joined them in holy matrimony. They cared nothing of faith, until they believed it was a vaccine, something you inject your child with at birth to allow them to sin, sin, sin and be forgiven.

I showed her it was unacceptable. It was disgusting. These people- this flock- it was poisoned, tainted, corrupt. They cared not for her, but for what she offered. What she did for them. She was a figure of servitude, and nothing more. To them. To god. To the nature of things.

I showed her it wasn't the only option. That people in our order were already realising, had been for a long time. That town by town, placement by placement, over years, the bidding had changed.

I explained to her about balance, about how the world truly works – that in her worships and prayers, she was only paying attention to one side of the story. She thanked the light, but ignored the shadow. She thought of providence, but not of the cost. She thanked god for all his gifts, but was ignorant to their source. The bird eats the worm, one is nurtured, the other is sacrificed. Which is the work of god, and which is of the opposition?

I displayed, that in us, sin comes naturally, and that is because the presence of Lucifer is stronger than that of *Him*. Ha! *Him*! An old, fragile king, ruling over an echoed kingdom of salt and sand. It was crumbling all around him. And in each pillar razed? Modernity- lust-passion- urge... the grasp of our Lord Lucifer was growing ever stronger. What modicum of *His* presence remained, was nestled in the cradle of sin. What candle of holiness still guttered, the tallow had run out. It was ready to hiss and fizzled with a phantom flicker.

I showed her a night of wild passion, and through thrusts explained to her that this world is like a canvas, and only with age and perspective do we truly uncover the beauty of it.

And thus, we made a plan. We fed poison in our sermons. We reached out, subliminally, in schools, in speeches, in visits. I made sure she had gone to every house, bearing the gifts, and in their selfish gratitude, she would feed temptation, sin, taint. We engineered the whole thing, and I promised her that life everlasting, she would receive – all she had to do was believe. And she believed.

And, it worked. It worked. This man, this lost sheep. He was dogged by her everlasting soul, and she would feed in pure delight on his horror. Oh, my last convert haunted her murderer until he took his own life; descended in to a dismal madness. But he was lonely. He was introverted. This man. A wife, kids? Sister Agnes was in him, and his soul was hers. She would ferry it to the Lord of Shadow when his sorry existence was snuffed, and she would then know

the true power of a deity. And she would thank me, when my turn came. I knew that. I knew that.

“I’m afraid,” I said to the man. “You do not belong in these grounds. Your sin cannot be forgiven, your soul cannot be redeemed. It has already been claimed. Remove yourself, sinner. You are damned.”

I left him. Hearing him plead, either with the empty booth, or the wraith of Agnes. Each sob a testament to god’s weakness, or Lucifer’s strength. My feet carried me, weightless and giddy with success. The more souls I fed, the more I converted, the greater my reward would be. For years, before I turned, I prayed, and offered, and abstained from natural urges, and my reward was silence, emptiness. But to Lucifer, oh, his validation was instant, his gratitude was vocal, direct.

A week later, the man was found dead. His child had run to a neighbour, besides himself, traumatised. His Father had strangled his mother, screaming if she didn’t leave him alone, he’d kill the “nun slut” all over again. By the time police had arrived, the house was ablaze.

I was immeasurably proud of Agnes. Ancient, she was. Elderly and frail in life. Yet, it took less than five years to get her to this point, and look at what she had achieved. Adept, clearly.

It shook the town. Much more than the tragic death of Sister Agnes. She was nothing to them, truly, but he was just like them. One of them. His murder suicide had revealed that within them, their sin is stronger. It was only a matter of time before the seeds scattered from that event would take root, and our work here was done.

Sister Agnes, she will be rewarded.

And I- it will be easy for me to move to a new town. A new church. New nuns. Let us see. Let us tell the story of the world, for within us, sin wins out. You may disagree. You may not like my words. But the fact confession is needed, proves that we cannot fight it – only attempt to absolve ourselves of the guilt. Selfish. Depraved. That is our nature, and so I beg, embrace your truth. Look at the state of the world – the darkness is winning.

Accept it, and revel.

I did.