THE CONFESSION

A SHORT STORY



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The sun shone through the stained-glass windows, illuminating the chapel in a cascade of life and colour. Father Michael loved Saturday morning confession; it was one of his more peaceful duties that, in many ways, went a long way to strengthening his own faith. He saw a purity in the revelation of human weakness. A purity that became whiter and brighter as the soul became unburdened.

He stopped for a moment by the sacristy door, to take it all in. The glory of Christ, seen through a coloured glass. The joy of redemption, lived through the disclosure of sin.

To the side of the door, Rosemary, the parish housekeeper, stood halfway up a stepladder cleaning one of the two small sacristy side-windows.

As the priest edged his way around her, he said, 'May I come through?'

The woman yelped; the stepladder wobbled. 'Good Lord, Father,' she said, her hand and wet cloth clutched to her chest. 'You'll give me a heart-attack.'

'Sorry Rosemary,' Father Michael replied and, feeling somewhat guilty, shuffled around her and proceeded down the steps of the altar into the chapel proper.

Mrs Kelly was sitting in her usual seat in the first pew, clicking and whispering her way through the rosary.

Father Michael patted her on the shoulder.

She looked up with annoyance, then said, 'Good morning Father,' and continued with her devotions.

Farther down the aisle, in the pew opposite the confessional box marked *Fr Daly*, four teenage boys sat giggling. It was obvious they were not here by choice and would prefer to be out kicking a ball against the wall of Anderson's Gardening Supplies.

A mother with her daughter sat behind them, the little girl dressed in her bride-like First Holy Communion dress and her mother whispering chastisements, as the girl fidgeted in the seat.

When Father Michael reached the Saturday confessional ensemble, however, they stopped and sat up, like naughty children upon realising the headmaster had entered the classroom. He nodded a *hello* and, entering the confessional, sat down, took out his stole, placed it around his neck, blessed himself, said a brief silent prayer and switched on the outside light to indicate he was in session.

He waited. Nobody entered.

He waited another while then, thinking the indicator light might be on the blink, got up to check. As he did so, the door of the neighbouring compartment opened and a person entered. Father Michael sat down. A moment of silence followed, and he sensed the person to be nervous, assuming them to be one of the teenage lads,

anxious about admitting to another bout of stealing beers and cigarettes from Dunville Wines. He gave the boy some space but, when the silence had stretched to an annoying timescale, he said, 'So what is it you would like to confess, young lad.'

The reply came in the voice of a man.

'You have to help me,' it said.

'That's what I'm here for.'

Another moment's pause followed, and then, 'Do you believe dreams can be evil?'

The question stumped the priest. He thought for a second, before replying, 'There is evil inside all of us. What is . . .?'

'Just answer the question,' the voice snapped. 'Do you believe dreams can be evil?'

'Perhaps. But is there anything in particular you'd like to confess?'

'Answer the question,' the man snapped again.

'Look now. If you want to make a confession, I am here to . . .'

'I knew you couldn't help,' the man interrupted, and got up to leave.

'Okay. Don't go. Tell me about this dream. I'm listening.'

The man kneeled again and, after a few tense seconds, began, 'You see, it's a recurring dream.'

'Continue.'

'I'm walking through the snow. Beautiful snow. Winter but sunny. I'm coming out from a copse of trees and I can hear children laughing. It feels so perfect. It feels right. Anyway, I look across and can see a building, like a school but somehow, it's not a school either. I go towards the building. Children are playing on swings and merry-go-rounds. They're wearing winter anoraks. Bright yellow. With their hoods up and tied at the neck.' The man uttered a nervous laugh. 'I walk across, and they're smiling at me. It's lovely. Safe. Reminds me of my own childhood. I look down the side of the building and there's another child standing alone, also wearing an anorak but this one is red. They are scratching in the snow with their foot. When curiosity gets the better of me, I approach. It's a girl. Writing the word *FATHER* in the snow.

'*Why are you writing in the snow?* I ask.

'She looks up, peering from under the hood of her red coat. *Will you help me find my father?* she asks. But I'm at a loss, I don't know what to say. *Help me find my father*, she says again, and then her face lights up, *He's coming*, she shouts with a giggle. *Father's coming*. She grabs my hand, ushers me in through a door into the building and points up a flight of stairs. I look back at her. She's smiling. *Father is up there. Go to him.*

'How can I refuse, she's so small and helpless. I start up the stairs. She follows two steps behind, smiling with her bright little face. On the next level everything is black. Not just dark but a wall of blackness barring my way from going any farther. I'm scared. There's something up there. I can feel it. *Father* is up there. I don't want to go but, looking back and seeing the girl's eyes begging me to do so, I go on.' The

man went silent. His breath sounded short, as though every word he'd uttered had ripped the air from his lungs.

Father Michael remained silent.

The man continued, 'So, I started up the stairs and I can feel it now. There's something there. Something diabolical. Evil. I can see it too. I can see *Him*, the one the little girl in the red coat calls *Father,* a shadow rippling behind the curtain of darkness. I'm so close *He* could pull me in, but *He* doesnt, it has to be my choice, to step inside, to go into that place, of pain, and misery, and destitution, which feels so wrong but also so so enticing. I hesitate. The girl pleads, *go to Father*. *Set yourself free*. *Set Him free*. But I can't. I'm too scared. I'm a coward. So, I turn to leave. At that moment, the girl's face contorts, changes, warps into something brutal and demonic. Scaly skin. Lizardy eyes. Fingers becoming long and talon-like. She charges at me. Bites my arm, her jagged teeth sinking into my flesh. The other children have come to join her. They are snarling. They're on top of me, biting, pushing me up the stairs, pushing me through the black curtain into the void.' The man paused, caught his breath. 'That's usually when I wake up. Cold. Sweating. Terrified. Except for last night, that is. Because, this time, I went all the way in. And why I am here today. You see, *Father* told me to come. Told me to set *Him* free.'

For a few moments, neither the man nor Father Michael said a word.

The priest, however, spoke first. 'Well, that's quite the dream you had there. But I think you've come to the wrong person. A psychiatrist might be better to help you decipher the meaning of all this. It's not really my place. I'm just a lowly cleric. Doing the Lord's work. I leave the brain stuff to the professionals.' He laughed, a vain attempt to lighten the mood.

The man stayed silent.

'Okay then,' Father Michael said. 'In answer to your original question, *can dreams be evil?* The answer is no. It is people who are evil, or at any case, it is people who have the capacity to be evil. It's inherent in all of us. Don't get me wrong the Devil exists, in all his wicked ways but he is within us, corrupting what is virtuous about being one of God's children. Our mission in this life is not to give in, to follow the Lord, the Scriptures, and to be good and honest, with consideration for all who walk in the light of God. That is how we overcome evil. I wouldn't be reading too much into these dreams, though. They were nightmares, frightening to say the least, you even had the hairs standing on the back of my neck there at one point, but maybe that's all they were. Scary nightmares. Really scary nightmares.' He laughed again. The man didn't. 'So, is there anything else you'd like to confess? Because that is something I can help you with.'

The man said nothing.

The priest tapped the grill, said, 'Sir? Are you okay?' rose, and added, 'I'm coming round.'

As he exited the confessional, his foot slipped on something wet. He looked down. A stream of blood flowed in bright, scarlet rivulets along the aisle. He looked

up. The four teenage boys lay draped over the back of their pew, heads lolled to one side, their mouths gaping and their chests cleaved open to the neck.

Gorge rose in Father Micael's throat.

He gulped it down and, moving closer through impulse more than will, saw the mother, slumped across the pew to the rear of the boys, her decapitated head sitting on her lap and, at her feet, her daughter's bloodsplattered first communion dress poking out from underneath the bench.

He bolted for the front of the chapel and the blessed sacristy, passing Mrs. Kelly on the way, where she sat, rosary beads still in hand, with blood gushing from the gash cleaved across her throat. He carried on. Reached the altar and scanned the area around the sacristy door for Rosemary.

She wasn't there. Only the stepladder, lying on its side.

Thank God, he thought. *She made it out*.

Then he spied her, splayed upon the wall above the tabernacle in a blasphemous parody of the crucified Christ. A sight Father Michael Daly took with him into darkness.

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