

TAKE AND EAT



The Rise of Ancient Gods

BY
WALT SAUTTER

Forgiveness & Vengeance So sayeth the Lord

Psalm 145:9

The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made

Ezekiel 25:17

And I will execute great vengeance upon them with furious rebukes, and they shall know that I [am] the LORD when I shall lay my vengeance upon them.

Matthew 6:14

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

Revelation 20:15

And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.

Hebrews 8:12

For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.

Genesis 19:24

Then the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah — from the LORD out of the heavens.

Genesis 3:24

So, He drove out the man and stationed cherubim on the east side of the Garden of Eden, along with a whirling sword of flame to guard the way to the tree of life.

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Chapter One

“In the Beginning”

Genesis 1:1

A bruised, battered and bloodied figure, naked and barefoot stumbles up the dusty rock laden path. His wrists are tied in front of him. He is pulled by soldiers pulling him ever forward. Inflamed onlookers line both sides of the narrow trail. Many are spiting and rabidly shouting profanities as he passes. Each time he collapses in exhaustion, the soldiers command one of the onlookers to lift him to his feet again so that they may continue the torturous trek.

As they move forward the foul odor of death begins to filter through the air. It becomes even stronger as they move ahead. Soon a rocky knoll strewn with wooden crosses appears in the distance. Some bear those in their final stages while others hold corpses of those who have already succumbed. Birds surround

many fighting with each other for scraps of flesh which are being torn from the deceased and those too weak to resist.

When they reach their destination, a cross with a partially decomposed body is lying on the ground next to rock-hewn support hole. His lips and eyes have been ripped away by the resident vultures.

Two soldiers struggle to pull the rusted iron nails from the wrists and ankles of the dead man. Two rib-thin, mongrel dogs continually charge in attempting to tear some flesh from the corpse. One of the soldier becoming frustrated with their constant inference takes out his sword and hacks the muscle from the dead man's thigh. He throws it off to the side. The mongrels immediately race to it and begin to struggle with each other for the scrap.

Having released corpse they drag it away leaving the barren cross readied for the next victim.

The leashed man's hands are untied and he is splayed onto the rough-hewn member. Rust laden nails are driven into his wrists and ankles. He winces in pain but remains silent

throughout. The cross is raised and dropped into the rock support hole.

Blood trickles from the ankle wounds. Three mangy curs lap the blood as it streams down the pole.

Two distraught women stand sobbing before the suspended victim. One steps forward warily and speaks to a soldier at the foot of the cross.

“When it is finished please give his body to me?”

“And what shall I receive for this courtesy?” he replies.

The woman holds out two coins.

“It is wholly insufficient but I will extend this mercy to you” he replies as he accepts the payment. The man on the cross looks down, smiles and speaks.

“Take and eat for this is my body sacrificed for you”. His final words; he then rolls his head back and succumbs.

It is only then that his face is revealed. It was Blake.

I awoke that morning with remnants of that deeply disturbing dream resounding in my yet fully conscious mind.

*

I stood before the altar and raised the host high for the entire congregation to witness. I genuflected.

“Take and eat. This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me” I spoke.

After breaking and consuming it I then picked up the chalice, raised it and spoke once again

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.

Do this, as often as you drink it, to call Me to remembrance”

“This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper.”

The response rang through the church.

“ Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.”

“The body of Christ” I announced in a slow voice as I administered to the first communicant.

“Amen” replied the communicant.

"The body of Christ" I again announced in a slow voice as I administered to the next communicant.

"Amen," he replied.

I continued until the line leading to the altar rail ended.

A long silence ensued as the Spirit of Christ filled each and every one of them.

"Let us pray" and the congregation fell into several moments of silent meditation after which I announced its conclusion.

"Amen" echoed through the church.

I then stood before the altar and spoke solemnly.

"The Lord be with you."

"And also with you" came the reply.

"The Mass has ended, go in peace."

"Thanks be to God."

The organ began to play the recessional hymn.

I stepped from the altar and walked to the church front door to meet with the parishioners as they departed.

After the final group had left, I pulled the heavy church door closed with a resounding clang and secured it tightly. I went to the closet in the vestibule and turned off the lights. I began to walk towards the sacristy.

Suddenly, I was startled by the dark outline of a man with his head deeply bowed still sitting at the far end of the last pew. I immediately walked over to him assuming he had fallen asleep or even possibly was suffering some medical emergency. As I approached, he turned and spoke.

“Father Joe – don’t you remember me?”

I squinted and strained to see him more clearly in the dim light. I moved closer.

“It’s only been twelve years.”

I still couldn’t recognize his voice or his face.

“I’m sorry my son but I can’t seem to recall. Twelve years is a long time” I replied.

The man arose from the shadows of the pew and walked towards me.

He appeared gaunt, unshaven, with long, scraggly hair. He wore tattered, stained blue jeans and an oversized, faded, long-sleeved, gray sweatshirt.

Then suddenly I realized. It was the face of the one I had seen crucified in my dream.

“Oh! You are Blake Bradley.”

“I’m surprised that you recognized me but then again how could you forget” he replied.

“Of course, now I recognize you. It was the dim light.

I never forget the altar boys who have helped me to serve Our Lord. They are all the sons to me which I never could have.”

I paused and then continued.

“What brings you here after all these years Blake?”

He cast his eyes downwards and remained silent.

“Come on son” I coaxed him.

“Well Father, I need help.”

That was no surprise. It was obvious from his frail, jittery, unkempt appearance.

“How can I help you?” I asked.

There was no answer. Maybe he required more cajoling.

“I can offer you a good meal, some clean clothes and a place to stay for the night?”

“Well, sure” he answered hesitatingly.

“We can go over to the rectory and I’ll get Mrs. Krause to put on some extra food and get you a change of clothes. My nephew visited with me about a year ago on his way to Japan. He left some of his clothes here because he said he didn’t want to pay to carry an extra suitcase on the plane. I was supposed to give them to the local soup kitchen but I never got around to it. They’re still hanging in the downstairs closet. He looked to be about the same size as you so I’m sure they’ll fit just fine. They’re not high style; just blue jeans and regular shirts. You can take your pick.”

After a brief pause, he stammered out “Yeah that would be great.”

“Let me turn off the rest of the lights and I’ll be right back.”

After I returned we walked to the rectory.

“We have a dinner guest” I called to my housekeeper as we entered.

I took him to the closet and pointed out the pile of clothes in the back.

“Pick the ones you want, take them with you, and go take a shower. Towels are in the closet on the right” I said and pointed towards the bathroom.

“I remember where it is,” he answered as he gathered up some of the clothes and started down the hall.

I went to the kitchen.

“What’s for lunch?” I asked Mrs. Krause.

“I put on some more mac and cheese for our guest. Should be ready in a few minutes” she replied.

I sat at the table awaiting Blake’s arrival. After several minutes he appeared in the doorway, cleanly shaven and wearing his newly acquired jeans and a tee shirt. He

appeared even gaunter than before. Maybe it was because he was now wearing short sleeves and his pipe stem thin arms were exposed.

Blake had been a wonderful child. He had served as an altar boy for several years. He was always mannerly, pleasant, and upbeat. He did well in school and became an outstanding athlete. He was the kind of kid every parent desires.

The last time I had seen him before now was when he left for college. I had gone to his home to bless him, wish him well, and give a small gift. I had made it a habit to do this for all of my former altar boys. It was the least I could do to show appreciation for the service they and their families had given to the parish. And of course, I also knew it was excellent public relations in the era of declining church attendance.

As he sat at the table across from me, I immediately noticed long tattoos running down the insides of both

arms. Each appeared gothic with intertwined skulls and snakes. I couldn't help but comment.

"What are those tats all about?" I queried.

"It's a long story, Father."

"We've got all afternoon" I replied.

Mrs. Krause brought the food.

"Is that enough Blake?"

"Fine!" he answered.

"Will you be needing me any more Father?"

"No. This will be fine. I'll call you when we're done."

With that, she left us in the kitchen.

There was a brief silence and then I finally asked.

"So what have you been doing with yourself and what brings you to see me?"

Another brief silence prevailed and he then he began to blurt out a sorry tale.

"It all began in college. I started as a chipper."

"What's a chipper?" I interrupted.

“Like a weekend drug user, not full time. Not yet considered an addict.”

“Okay. Go on” I encouraged.

“Well, like I said it was only weekends and only a sniff or two at that.

During my first semester, I found a girlfriend. She was a chipper too. We used to go over to her place on the weekends to do our school work together. As time went on, we began to do more snorting than schoolwork. You can't believe how fast this shit creeps up on you.

By the time the end of the semester came, my grades were completely underwater and I was on the needle. How was I going to go home, tell my parents that I just pissed away twenty thousand dollars and all I had to show for it was a heroin habit, and track marks?

The answer was I couldn't. So, I wrote a note to them and took off for the streets. That was five years ago.”

“And you've never contacted your parents since?” I interrupted.

“Not very much!”

“Well, how did you survive then? You didn’t have any money did you?” I asked.

He paused before answering.

“I kinda got lucky or maybe unlucky. It depends on how you look at it.”

“What do you mean?”

He again paused for a moment and this time cast his eyes downwards.

“I told you about my girlfriend right?”

“Yes, you did” I replied.

“Well, as soon as she saw me staring down the needle road she laid off completely. The girl’s tough. Stopped dead cold. Never took another hit after that.”

“Did she try to get you off?” I again interrupted.

“Sure but I think she kinda knew it was a waste of time. I was in too deep and it was obvious. But she tried anyway.”

“You said you were lucky or maybe unlucky. What did you mean by that?”

“I was lucky that she didn’t just dump me on the spot. God knows I would have but she didn’t. She let me continue to stay at her place and gave me free room and board so to speak. I don’t know if it was love or just innate kindness but in any case, lucked out.”

“So you didn’t literally hit the streets right away?”

“No I didn’t and that’s where the unlucky part comes in. If I would have been hit in the face with that kind of life right from the get-go I might have rehabbed sooner, and it might have worked.

But as it happened, having a place to stay lulled me into complacency. A hard existence would have been a good motivation to quit but it wasn’t so hard with her taking care of me.”

“Didn’t you feel like a leech?” I asked.

“Sure I did but not leeching enough to go straight. What addicts do when they start feeling bad about

themselves is just take more drugs and the downers disappear immediately.”

“Do you still stay with her?” I asked.

“No, that ended about three years ago. I think she just got tired of being my mother and she kicked me out. I didn’t even argue. I would have kicked me out a lot sooner if I was her. I’ve been on the street ever since.”

Suddenly, he recoiled and jumped up out of his chair. He pulled his hand from his side and placed it on the table. Blood was dripping from three large scratch marks on the back of his hand.

“She just scratched the shit out of me” he shouted.

“Lilith! Come over here and lay down” I commanded sternly.

My large, black, mongrel cat immediately obeyed, came, and laid next to me.

Blake’s startled look ebbed from his face and he slowly sank back into his chair.

“She scared the shit out of me!” he exclaimed.

“She is very big and very stealthy. When I got her at the pound they said she appeared to be part, Maine Coon. That breed can be twenty-five pounds or more when full-grown,” I agreed.

“I’m very sorry. I’ve never seen her aggressive like that? Here let me get some alcohol and a Band-Aid for you.”

I arose and went to the downstairs bathroom medicine cabinet. When I returned with the bandage I notice Lilith was licking up the blood from the floor where it had fallen from Blake’s wound.

“Lilith! Get out of there!” I commanded her. She merely looked up at me and continued to lap up the blood spatter. I walked over to her, picked her up and put her in the garage. I could hear her vigorously scratching at the door from within the garage as I left.

“I got her at the pound two years ago. I never expected her to get this big, but I suppose when you get one from the pound you can’t really know what to expect.

It's a pig in a poke or maybe, in this case, a cat in a poke," I said trying to lighten things up.

"All in all she's been very good company and very obedient. The only problem is she's pretty expensive because she eats a lot. I'm joking, I can well afford it" I added.

"So how did you handle life on the streets? How did you support yourself and get drug money besides?" I asked so as to resume the previous conversation.

"I did a lot of stuff that I wasn't proud of but then again given the circumstances you do whatever you have to do.

When I was living with Brenda, that was my girl's name, she used to spot me some money once in a while.

But then too, I did some petty thief and shoplifting with a friend of mine. He was an addict too. I'm not going to tell you his name because you'd recognize it in an instant. I also sold drugs at the school. I did what I had too to get by.

After Brenda kicked me out, I started to run out of money real quick. I began to run up a bill with my dealer. He covered me for a while but soon both he and I realized that I could never pay up.”

“So what happened then?” I asked.

“Back then I was pretty tough. I had plenty of muscle on me not like now. In high school, I was a football player and a wrestler. I even won a couple of state medals.

As a matter of fact, that’s where I really started with the drug scene. Steroids and a little coke before a match can turn on the power switch and make you into Superman in a flash.

So anyway, he gave me a job to pay off the bill. I was a collection agency for the kids in the college. Lots of them were slow payer that is before I had a talk with them anyway. So, it worked out pretty good for a while. I paid down my bill and got free stuff besides. All I had to do is little side jobs to get eating money.”

“What do you mean by ‘little side jobs’?” I asked.

“Well, I hooked up with a guy who had a great scam going. We used to go to the airport baggage claim. When the bags came out, we would watch for anyone that went around a couple of times and then grab it. Sometimes you got really good stuff like jewelry or electronics, other times dirty underwear. But all in all, it worked out good and I got enough to keep me going.”

“How did you sell the items? On the street?” I asked.

“No! That’s why I continued to work with this other guy instead of just doing it myself. First of all, he had a car so I could get to the airport and second he had a fence to get rid of the stuff. I didn’t have either one.”

“And you never got caught?”

“Once in a while, somebody would run after me yelling ‘Hey that’s my bag’ and I would simply turn and say ‘Oh I’m sorry, it looked just like mine’” Then I would hand it back to him and go back to the baggage carousel and pretend for a while that I was looking for my bag.

After about fifteen minutes, I would go outside and hang around for an hour. Then I would go to another carousel and try the same trick. It generally worked like a charm.”

“Didn’t the cops at the airport or somebody find it suspicious that you were there so often?” I asked.

“We didn’t go there every day and when we did go it was always at different times so there would be different shifts of cops on duty anyway.”

“So from what you’re telling me, things were going pretty good for you considering?”

“Well yeah, right up until my dealer got busted and my habit ballooned. I was out of a job and out of a supplier. A few days later to make things even worse, the fence my airport guy was using got busted too so the bag stealing gig was over for me.”

“Couldn’t you just find a new dealer?”

“Sure but not even close to the same price. Remember I said that I was getting freebies from my old guy as long as I was doing the collections.”

“Then what?”

“I didn’t have many choices. I went to sign up for rehab. Obviously, it was a public program. I didn’t have a dime, so the private ones were out of the question.

When I tried to sign up they told the list was three months long. I knew I couldn’t wait it out till then.”

“Did you ever try ‘cold turkey’?”

“Sure and I lasted like two days at most. There aren’t too many people that can do that.”

“You know I think I know someone who might be able to get you toward the front of the line. Do you want me to talk to him?” I asked.

“Yeah! Sure that would be great” he answered hesitatingly.

There was a brief silence.

“But in the meantime, I’m outta cash” he continued.

“And you want me to give you some?” I finished his thought for him.

“Yeah, kind of a loan. I’ll pay you back after I get cleaned up. Promise!”

“How much do you needed?”

“How about a couple of hundred. That should carry me for a while,” he answered.

I paused. I knew it wouldn’t be a loan. It would be a handout but that didn’t really bother me. If I wasn’t going to be charitable, especially to an old friend, I shouldn’t have become a priest in the first place.

“Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

Went up to my bedroom and came back with the two hundred.

“I want you to call me back in two days and I’ll tell you the name you should mention when you go back to the rehab office,” I said.

“Let me show you out,” I said as I gave him the cash.

“No that’s okay. I’m pretty familiar with this place even after all these years. It hasn’t changed a bit” and with that, he got up and left.

Chapter Two

“Thou Shall not Bear False Witness”

Exodus 20:16

Two weeks passed and not a word from Blake. I did make it a point to contact my friend at the rehab agency. He had assured me that he could push Blake towards the front of the line if he reapplied.

Then it happened again! I had finished Sunday Mass and was locking up as usual. Once again, I was startled to discovered Blake sitting in the shadows at the last pew of the church. This time he looked even more bedraggled than before.

He arose and approached me.

“I’ve come again to cast myself at your mercy Father” he began.

I swallowed hard and spoke.

“Why haven’t I heard from you until now? You said you would contact me in a couple of days the last time we met?”

“Well, I couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“I was arrested for shoplifting and was in jail for a few days and I didn’t want to have to tell you that” he replied.

“Did you go back to the rehab agency and mention the name I gave you?” I knew he hadn’t.

He paused.

“No, I didn’t. I kind of decided that I’m in so deep now that no rehab is going to help me. Besides, I’m not so sure that I’m willing to suffer the pain that rehab is going to require.”

“So I’m assuming that you’re just going to continue on your current path? Why did you come to see me again then? You can’t say it was because you wanted help. I’ve already given you all the help that I can.”

Again, a brief silence prevailed.

“The help I was thinking about was some more money. I sure did appreciate the cash you gave me last time but at the rate, I’m going it only lasted two days. That’s why I went back to shoplifting and got caught.”

“So what you want from me is more money?” I replied.

“Guess so!” he answered.

“I don’t how much more I can give you. You don’t think the priesthood pays big money do you?”

“No I don’t but I sure think you could do better than two hundred bucks. And besides, when I see that collection plate come around during Mass it looks pretty full.”

For him to think that I might tap the church’s money for him was insulting, to say the least.

“You must be kidding!” I snapped back.

“Not really” he replied calmly.

“There’s not a chance that I would ever do that!”

“There are many things that I said I would never do until I did them. Desperate people do desperate things” he answered my rebuke.

Then he outstretched his arm and pointed to the track marks protruding through the gothic tattoos, which spread down his bicep and over his forearm.

“My desperation is pretty obvious wouldn’t you say?”

“So what makes you think that I’m going to give you the money you want much less from the collection basket?”

“Your desperation” he replied confidently.

“I have no desperation” I quickly objected.

“Maybe not now but I think you will.”

“How so?” I snapped.

“Let me see. Don’t you remember all the times I spent at the rectory when I was an altar boy? Remember all the fun we had when we used to snuggle together under the covers in your b...?”

I stopped him immediately.

“That’s a lie and you know it! That never happened and you know it!” I exclaimed so loudly and spontaneously that the words yielded an ear-splitting echo from the church walls.

“So then you don’t remember? But I do?” he replied smugly

“How can you remember something that never happened?”

“Easily! Because I say, it did happen! And with all the reports of pedophile priests, who’s not going to believe me?”

“But you have no proof!” I answered.

“Do you remember a kid named Harry Jackson?”

“Yes, he was an altar boy who served with you.”

“Yes that’s right and now he’s a drug addict like me. If I mentioned that I could get money for both of us do you think he might substantiate my story?”

“I don’t know” I replied.

“Well, I do. I haven’t said a word to him about this yet and I won’t if you help me out here.”

He paused and then continued.

“Let me give you some time to think about this and maybe experiencing some desperation will allow you to do some desperate things too.

In the meantime, you can give me a few hundred to tide me over. What do you think?”

I hesitated for a moment and then slowly turned away from him.

“Wait here! I’ll be back in a minute” I called over my shoulder.

I went to my room and returned with three hundred dollars. I handed it to him without a word.

“Thank you, Father. This should be good for a few days until we can get something regular set up” he said.

“I’ll be back next Sunday and we can finalize this whole thing. Have a good week” and with that, he left.

I told myself over and over that the events of which he spoke never happened. I was positive.

But the more I thought, the more my certainty waned. Could he be telling the truth after all? Could it be that the shame of committing such an ungodly act had caused me to totally erase it from my conscious memory?

No! That would be impossible I assured myself. I could never erase such a disgraceful stain. I am a man of God and He would never allow me to bury this horrible transgression whether knowingly or unknowingly.

I went to the front pew of the church and knelt. I prayed for guidance. How was I to deal with this false extortion? I had seen what had happened to some of my fellow clergymen who were subjected to accusations of pedophilia. Whether true or untrue, I never really knew but what I did know is that they all suffered severely.

Could I allow myself to be extorted by someone threatening such outrageous accusations or should I simply refuse to comply with his dastardly scheme? How

would I refute his vile accusations if he chose to proclaim them publicly?

I returned to the rectory with a heavy heart knowing that many sleepless nights lay ahead.

Chapter Three

“Thou Shall Not Murder”

Exodus 20:13

One thing I have to say about Blake is he did keep his promise. He showed up at the rectory one week later just as he had said he would. He came in, said not a word and plopped himself arrogantly into my favorite easy chair in the living room.

“Well what do you think?” he growled with a smirk.

His demeanor had radically changed. It bore no resemblance to that of the altar boy who had served in his youth. It wasn't even like that which he displayed when he first came to seek my help a month ago. He had become insulate and loathsome.

I certainly knew what he meant but I replied with equal enmity.

“About what?” I snapped back.

“Come on man! You what I’m talking about. Do I go to the cops or do I just go back to my cozy little refrigerator carton home under the bridge?”

I had spent the entire week wrestling with my dilemma. Should I exceed to his extortion or call his bluff? Then, of course, how could I be sure he was bluffing and won’t really go to the authorities with his scurrilous accusations?

Maybe I could revive the moral character of his youth, which I could only hope, still resided within him by using words of kindness.

“But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also,”

flashed through my mind over and over. It was the commandment of the Lord, which I was finding difficult to obey.

I said nothing in response.

“I don’t have all day” he interrupted my silence in a loud, unsettling tone.

“Listen, Blake, I can give you some money again now but I don’t see any way that I can continue to do this. I just don’t have it and you know that what you are accusing me of is beyond false.”

“Beyond false?” he repeated.

“And besides, even if it is, does that make any difference when I get Harry to back me up on it?”

“Why would he back you up anyway?” I replied.

“Because if you don’t cooperate I’ll expose the whole thing and then sue the church for a bundle and I’ll cut him in on it. The only reason I’m not just suing right away is because I’m trying to give you a chance to save yourself – for old time sake. Do you know what I mean? Father!”

“How can you do this? How can you throw away all the values you were bought up with? I knew your parents and even your grandparents and they all taught you well;

right from wrong, good from evil. Now you're disrespecting them and yourself and casting it all away.

What do you think God will have to say about this on Judgment Day?"

"A day at a time. I'll have to worry about that then. In the meantime, like I told you before, desperate people do desperate things in desperate situations. It looks like both of us are in desperate situations right now so what do you say?"

Are you going to start giving me some cash or am I going down to the police station?"

I remained seated and silent to his reply as verses I hadn't recalled since seminary swirled through my mind.

"But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved."

"For everyone who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death."

"This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.' "

"And they shall say unto the elders of his city: This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones that he die."

"Well what's it gonna be?" he startled me from my contemplation. Again, I failed to reply.

"Okay! I get it. I'm outta here!" and he arose from the chair and started towards the door.

"Wait a minute!" I called. "I've got some money for you. I'll go get it."

I stood up and he returned to the chair. I started to my bedroom. As I took the first step up the stairs, more

verses began to flash through my head and they continued as I proceeded.

“O God whom I praise, do not ignore me! For they say cruel and deceptive things to me; they lie to me. They surround me and say hateful things; they attack me for no reason. They repay my love with accusations, but I continue to pray. They repay me evil for good and hate for love. Appoint an evil man to testify against him! May an accuser stand at his right side! When he is judged, he will be found guilty! Then his prayer will be regarded as sinful. May his days be few!”

As I approached the top of the stairs,

“May his days be few! May his days be few! May his days be few!”

echoed and re-echoed through my mind.

As soon as I entered the room, I saw it. My brilliant, red stole together with my other vestment hung from the valet stand in the corner. I stood unable to control my gaze. I stared at it intently; entranced for several moments. Its striking color swirled and it seemed to call to me by words scattered through my mind. I reached out, grasped it, and exceeded to its commands. I turned and began the slow, fateful trek down to the living room.

Blake sat in the chair with his back to me. I stealthily inched behind him and threw the stole about his neck. I pull it as tightly as I could and continued to squeeze.

He instinctively grabbed for it; struggling to pull it from its strangling clutch. His legs flung violently while he vainly clawed at the ever-tightening garrote at his throat.

It seemed to be an eternity before his struggle reduced to a quiver and finally to expiration. I continued to squeeze well beyond the point of fatality as if my hands and arms had become tetanized in the lethal grasp.

Finally, I conjured the strength to relax. I pulled the stole from his neck. His head fell forward and he slumped lifelessly in the chair.

I walked around to the front and sat in the chair facing him. His face was ashen. Crimson blood vessels spread over the whites of his bulging eyes. They were wide open and fixed in a glassy, distant stare. A fine white foam issued from his mouth and a moist area had spread over the crotch of his jeans.

I buried my face in my hands and wept. God had forgiven David when he sent Uriah to his death, but now would he forgive me? I murmured his prayer of repentance.

“Have mercy upon me, O God.

According to Your loving kindness;

According to the multitude of Your tender

mercies,

Blot out my transgressions.

*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity.
And cleanse me from my sin."*

I lifted my head from my hands again to face the cold, hard truth of what I had done. I continued to sit for a while with a faint hope that it all had been a dream.

After several minutes, it hit me like a sledgehammer – I had just murdered a man – me, a man of God, a soldier of Christ – and I had just squeezed the life out of a fellow human being.

And why?

I fell into a contemplative trance with legions of thoughts flooding my conscientiousness.

Was it the fear of the contemptuous allegations, which he was planning to proclaim?

Could it be my disdain for his callous response to the charity, which I had gladly extended to him?

Maybe it was the wickedness of his intended extortion that compelled me?

What was it that had driven me to this dreadful act?

I sat and pondered a myriad of possible explanations all of which allowed me to excuse myself of this sinful deed.

As my entrancement ebbed, I began to accept that it was the compulsion of my inner voices, which had driven me to this vile thing. Could it be that demons were residing within me and the fears that Blake's threats had surfaced had enabled them to surface and take control?

Could I expel them with prayer and penances or had they already gained an impenetrable hold upon me? I began to tremble at the fearful thought of their possible return.

I slowly regained my senses and stared at the lifeless corpse before me. No self-chastisement and analysis could erase the fact that I had just committed the most hateful crime of all – murder!

What should I do next?

Call the police and lie? It would be obvious that he had been strangled and how could I possibly explain that?

Should I move the body and claim it was a suicide?

But then why was here in the first place? How could I plausibly explain his presence here in my rectory?

I could call the police and confess? “Confession is good for the soul” raced through my mind. It might be good for unburdening my soul, but it certainly wouldn’t serve well for my future.

I suddenly realized that all my soul searching had distracted me from my priestly duties.

“I may be a murderer but I am still a priest of the Lord.”

I rose and walked to the sacristy. I returned with the Holy Oils. I knelt before him and proceeded to anoint his hands and forehead and pray over him.

“If thou art alive, through this holy anointing, may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May

the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up",

I spoke loudly over him.

Having completed the sacrament I arose and sat once more in the chair across from him. At least I had provided him with proper Christian rites.

I felt my anxiety ebb and a calmness passed over me. The thoughts self-recrimination lessened and now I began to think in more practical terms. I soon decided that calling the police was not a good option.

“But what should I do with the body?”

I knew my housekeeper; Mrs. Krause would be arriving in three hours. She was extremely punctual, never late and never early.

As I sat and mused, I took some morbid pride in the fact that I had chosen to strangle him rather than a stabbing. There was little or no mess to deal with. I couldn't imagine having to clean up a blood-stained rug and chair and hide him away all in three hours.

But now, where was I to hide him?

Suddenly, it occurred to me!

Father Francis was the priest I had replaced at The Church of the Holy Virgin fifteen years ago. He had been there for thirty years prior. He was an avid fisherman, deep-sea fishing. He went every chance he got.

Evidently, he was a very good fisherman too. He had even purchased a freezer chest to store his catches and generally, it was packed.

Not being a fish lover, when I first arrived I gave its entire contents to some of the needy people of the parish. I unplugged the freezer and it had remained fallow ever since. I had been tempted to give it away but no one seemed to want it. It was large, heavy, old, and inefficient so there in the garage, it remained.

I went to the garage and plugged it in, praying to hear the sound of the compressor kick in. It started immediately with a loud, confirming rumble.

I went back to the living room and dragged Blake's limp body to the garage. He was extremely scrawny but much heavier than I anticipated. 'Deadweight' is always heaviest I suppose.

I wrestled him into the freezer; turned and twisted his arms and legs until he fit just perfectly. Luckily, he took up only about one-third of the freezer depth.

I was exhausted. I went and sat on a carton at the far side of the garage. I was sweating profusely and out of breath, but the job was done.

"What if Mrs. Krause notices that the freezer is on and unplugs it? Or even worse she looks inside?"

I got in my car and went to the supermarket. I bought a box of white, plastic garbage bags and a cart full of frozen vegetables. I then went to the hardware store and bought a sheet of white Styrofoam insulation board.

When I returned to the rectory, I opened the freezer and surrounded the body with tightly packed newspaper. I began to lay the white, plastic bags over him and it was

then that I felt a compulsion to look directly into his icy gaze. I stood transfixed by his vacant stare. A frightful chill raced through me as I struggled to turn away from his glassy glare.

I finally released myself from the paralysis and immediately went to the kitchen. I got a paper bag from the pantry, came back to the freezer, and slid it over his frozen face. I assured myself this would forestall future anxieties when I was to peer into that frigid coffin again.

Then, I carefully cut the foam board and fitted it over the paper encased body making sure that it remained perfectly stable

Lastly, I scattered the frozen vegetable packages on top.

I slammed the lid closed and went straight to the bar in the den for a shot of Jack. There I sat awaiting Mrs. Krause's arrival.

Chapter Four

“Woe Be to Thee”

Isaiah 3:11

Three o'clock sharp and there she was right on time as usual.

“And Father how was your day?” she greeted me.

“Exciting! Very exciting!” I replied spontaneously without thinking.

“How so?” she asked with a quizzical look.

I hesitated. I should have thought more carefully before I spoke.

“Well, I finally decided to go on a diet. It would be good for me to lose a few pounds don't you think?”

“No Father, you look just fine” she pandered.

“Thank you for the compliment but it's too late now. I've already committed - myself to dieting that is. I just started up Father Francis's old freezer in the garage and

packed it with wholesome veggies. I'll take out a package or two every day and ask you to include them in our meals. I don't know if it will work but it will be a good start. What do you think?" I concluded.

"I think that's a wonderful idea. Maybe I'll lose a few pounds too," she agreed.

"I'll go right now and pick out a couple," she added.

"No! I'm not quite sure what I want yet so I'll go and get them," I stammered.

"Okay, just put them on the kitchen counter and I'll take care of it when I come back from cleaning upstairs."

With that, she left the room. I fell back in the chair both relieved and pleased. I surprised myself how easily and spontaneously I had come up with that story on the spur of the moment. I had explained why she might find the freezer running and at the same time discouraged her from snooping at its contents.

Only a couple of problems remained. I couldn't just leave Blake there indefinitely and vegetables weren't

necessarily my favorite food, but I would have to start eating lots of them.

Then too, what if Blake was found missing?

What if someone came to investigate?

What if there was a long power outage?

I immediately searched through my memory. Had anyone seen Blake and me together? Not that I could remember. Who would report him missing anyway? It was my understanding that drug addicts go missing all time and nobody even pays attention. They just figure that they O.D.ed or went on to another city for whatever reason. Besides, Blake said that he had little contact with his family so how would they even consider him missing? The only person he ever mentioned was Harry Jackson. I didn't know if he had actually kept in contact with Harry or he was only bluffing.

As far as a power outage goes, it looked like I'd have to buy a generator.

Each night from that time on was filled with sleeplessness and horrid dreams many of which bordered on hallucination. Once I was aroused in the middle of the night by a voice coming from the hallway outside my bedroom. I sat up with a start and called out to see who was there. Instantly, I reached for the light by the bed. Before I could turn in on a shadowy figure appeared, silhouetted in the doorway.

He immediately called out to me “Can I come to bed with you now Father?” It was Blake’s voice. I was sure.

I continued to fumble for the light switch and finally was able to snap it on. As soon as I did, the dark outline collapsed into nothingness.

Mornings I awakened with sweat-soaked sheets and once even soiled myself during the night.

The longest period of uninterrupted sleep was three hours at the best. Each time, I awakened I felt compelled to go downstairs, into the garage and check the freezer. I must have opened that lid and peered in a million times.

Maybe I was unconsciously hoping to find it empty. That would assure me that all of this was but a frightful dream. However, most probably I was hoping to find it still containing the undisturbed body. That would assure me that it had not been discovered.

Every visit yielded temporary relief from my anxiety but at the same time stoked even more guilt and self-condemnation. My paranoia deepened with every passing day.

To make things even worse I knew it coming and coming soon. That was Saturday, the day I routinely administered the sacrament of Penances. How could I hear the confessions of others and grant them absolution after doing what I myself had done?

Sunday would follow and how could I celebrate the Eucharist in feigned piety after this grievous act?

These apprehensions nagged at me with ever-increasing relentlessness as the days approached.

I was soon filled up to my eyeballs with broccoli, peas, corn, and the like. But as Blake had said, 'Desperate people do desperate things in desperate situations'. It appears he was right and I kept on choking them down day after day.

It seemed that Mrs. Krause didn't mind at all. She frequently commented at the prospect of her losing weight. She eagerly consumed every morsel of the vegetables at our evening dinners.

It was about seven at night. Mrs. Krause had just left, and I was seated in the den. I took advantage of every minute of sleep that I could while knowing full well that a good night would most probably not lie ahead. I was suspended in that neither in that netherworld, not fully conscience nor fully asleep. Suddenly I was startled by a cold, wet object pressing hard against my cheek and scratching at my arm. My eyes snapped open to see Lilith.

I looked at the clock on the far wall. It was well past her dinnertime and she was there to remind me. I reached out and patted her on the head.

On my way, the body again flashed through my mind just as it had almost every wakeful minute. Instead of the pantry, I went into the garage. Lilith followed. I once more opened the lid. Everything looked exactly as it had two hours ago when I had last looked in. I closed the lid with a thud. Lilith let out a low, long yowl and tugged at my pant leg.

“Okay girl! I know! I know!” I repeated and again began walking towards the pantry. She followed me out of the garage and into the kitchen. I retrieved the cat food can from the pantry. As I reentered the kitchen, I saw her sitting before the door leading to the garage. She was giving the same low, long yowl as before.

Within an instant, an vilest and gruesome thought flared to mind. Evil and gruesome - yes - but most

certainly an exquisite solution to my evil and gruesome problem.

Could I really do it? The thought of it was repulsive yet appealing. The act itself would require all the fortitude that I could muster. I would think about this long and hard before summoning the courage to commit this heinous deed.

Then again, I knew I would have all night to ponder it. I had had little sleep all the nights before and now I knew there would be none at all this night. I fed Lilith. As I left the kitchen for the upstairs, I again noticed her sitting before the door of the garage.

Had she read my mind?

Or maybe I had read hers? Does anyone know what a cat might think much less whether telepathy even exists?

Chapter Five

“O God Know my Heart; Test Me and Know my Anxious Thoughts”

Psalm 139:23-24

Another insomnia filled night but I had put my incessant wakefulness to good used. I premeditated my plan repeatedly throughout the night and steeled myself for its execution.

I arose, showered, and dressed all the while still preparing myself for the grim task, which was lying ahead. I took an old plastic shower curtain and a couple of old, frayed towels from the linen closet and walked downstairs to the kitchen. Lilith ran to greet me. I opened the back door and let her out just as I had done every morning since I got her.

I stared out the window watching her first relieve herself and then scampering around the yard as usual. Could she possibly know the part she was about to play in my baneful plan?

I turned away from the window and went into the garage. The tool cabinet was on the far wall. I had only opened it on a few occasions since coming to the rectory but clearly remember one of its contents. I opened the cabinet door and there it was lying on the bottom shelf just as I had recalled, a reciprocating saw with a package of brand new blades lying beside it.

I took it together with a large of pliers, a pair cutting shears, a carpet knife and long-handled bolt cutter from the cabinet. I placed them all on the shower curtain, which I had spread in front of the freezer.

I took a deep breath and slowly raised the freezer lid. I removed all the vegetable packages and placed them on the curtain adjacent to instruments from the tool cabinet.

I turned and stared hesitatingly into the depths of the freezer. The sheet of white foam board, which I had placed over the body, was staring back at me. I could swear I heard it speaking to me. It was uttering a taunting challenge. Did I have the courage to remove it and squarely face the task I was there to perform? I answered in silent thought.

What else could I do?

If I turned back now what better plan, would I concoct?

I had to continue. Despite its hideousness, there was no better path to follow.

I slowly reached in and pulled the foam board away, revealing Blake's frozen gaze. It sent a sharp cold chill down me. I knew I had turned him face down but now I saw him face to face staring straight up at me. I turned away attempting to regain some composure.

"I was positive he was dead. He had been already cold when I dragged him to the garage.

“I must have forgotten that I had put him face down,” I told myself.

After a minute or two of thought, I turned back to begin my chosen chore. I slid one of the plastic bags over his face and pulled one of his legs upward. I started the saw and it voraciously ripped into his knee joint. I was surprised at how easy it became detached. It was easier than cutting a two by four. In a matter of minutes, it was done. No blood, no mess, just some frozen bits of flesh scattered around the bottom of the freezer by the saw. It was sinew sawdust. I got a hand vac from the kitchen and vacuumed up all that I could.

I wrapped the severed leg in the old towel I had brought from the linen closet. I wrapped the towel-covered leg in newspaper, stuffed it into a plastic bag, and placed it on the very top of the tool cabinet. It needed time to thaw to complete my plan.

I cleaned and replaced my tools in the cabinet and then reassembled the foam board and vegetables back into the freezer and thoroughly washed out the vac.

“Can’t let it stay there too long or it may start to decompose. It should be thawed enough by the time Mrs. Krause leaves this evening,” I thought to myself.

I sat at the kitchen table reviewing my plan for the hundredth time. Then I heard a scratching at the back door. It startled me until I realized it was only Lilith wanting to come in.

I was very jumpy but then again what should I expect after doing what I had just done. Besides, I knew that more of the same grizzly work was lying ahead of me. I certainly wasn’t looking forward to it but honestly, it wasn’t as bad as had I anticipated.

I recoiled immediately as soon as that thought passed through my mind. I had to chastise myself immediately or else, what had I become?

I must convince myself that the ghoulish experience was even worse than I had thought. Otherwise, I had not only become a murderer but also a degenerate fiend, to say the least.

Mrs. Krause arrived at three o'clock on the dot as usual. After completing her housekeeping chores, she prepared our dinner again using the frozen vegetables I had left in the refrigerator.

My stomach rolled when she called me to the kitchen.

"Dinner is on the table," she shouted.

I sat at the table with the plate before me. I raised the food up to my lips and instantly felt the urge to vomit. I leaped from my seat and barely made it to the bathroom. Mrs. Krause too jumped from her chair and raced after me.

"Father! Father! Are you okay?" she asked anxiously.

"I'll be fine," I stammered out as I wiped the vomit from my chin with a wad of toilet paper.

"I think I must have a stomach virus," I added.

Actually, that virus was no virus at all. It was the surge of worryment, which suddenly overwhelmed me.

“I’ll put your dinner in the fridge and if you feel better you can have it later. Just heat it up in the microwave for a couple of minutes” she replied.

I went into the den and sat waiting for her to finish eating and leave.

After a time, I heard the clock strike eight and she poked her head into the room.

“I’ll be leaving now Father. I hope you’ll be feeling better and remember if you do, your dinner is in the refrigerator. Goodbye.”

I heard the door close behind her.

My plan was to immediately go to the garage and complete the task as soon as she left. However, upon further imagining what I was about to do, I hesitated.

Several minutes passed and I calmed myself sufficiently to begin. I arose, went to the kitchen to get a carving knife and cleaver. I placed them on the counter

and went into the garage. I took the plastic bag, which encased the leg from the top of the tool cabinet. I squeezed it. It was cold but soft. It had thawed just as I had expected.

I took it back into the kitchen, laid it on the counter next to my instruments, and took it out of the plastic bag. I unwrapped the newspaper from it and stuffed the paper together with the blood-soaked towel back into the plastic bag.

Several sharp blows with the cleaver and the calf was completely freed from the bone. I proceeded to remove the muscle from the shin and chop the foot and leg bones into small pieces. I continued by pulling the skin from the calf and shin muscles.

When was I finished I scraped all the pieces into a plastic bag and put it aside. Then I cut the skinless muscle into bite-sized chunks.

Suddenly, I felt heart-stopping nudge me from behind. I swallowed hard and slowly turned.

It was Lilith. I exhaled a deep sigh of relief.

It was strange how she seemed to know my plan and show up every time I was planning or executing a crucial step.

Was she a familiar? They were believed to be supernatural entities that would assist evildoers. According to my readings, they were believed to appear in numerous guises, often as an animal. Could she be one of them?

If that were true, would continuing with my plan augment the malevolence of the sin, which I had already committed?

I paused for a moment of thought and then admonished myself aloud.

"All just superstitious nonsense!"

Lilith immediately let out a deep, rumbling growl followed by a long, low howling.

I was struck by her spontaneous outcry. It seemed to be her response to my inner thoughts and spoken words.

Could it be that it wasn't all "superstitious nonsense" after all?

I turned back to the task at hand, picked up her bowl and scrapped the flesh on the counter into it. As I placed the dish back on the floor, she darted to it and eagerly consumed every morsel without pause. I stood in amazement, watching every bite and every swallow.

It appeared that my plan was going to work exactly as I had imagined it would. After the bowl had been licked clean. I took it to the sink to remove any remnant flesh, which might have remained. There was little.

I looked over at the counter as I continued the washing and spied the plastic bag containing the minced leg bones, foot, and bloody paper. I couldn't feed any of it to Lilith. Cats like to strip bones but they never really swallow them.

So what was I going to do with morbid mass? I took the bloodied towel to the fire pit in the backyard patio, cast it into the pit, covered it with kindling, and set it

ablaze. I took the bag into the bathroom, tore the newspaper into smaller pieces, and flushed them down the toilet. Now I had to hope that I had chopped the bone and foot into pieces small enough to hopefully not plug up the toilet. I took a deep breath, emptied some into the toilet bowl, and pulled the handle. All immediately disappeared. I breathed a sigh of relief and flushed the remainder.

Finally, I rinsed out the plastic bag and stuffed it into the bottom of the garbage pail in the kitchen.

Chapter 6

**"They Come to You in
Sheep's Clothing; Inwardly
They are Ferocious Wolves"**

Matthew 7:15-20

I awoken that Saturday morning from the best night's sleep I had in days. Maybe it was because I had proven to myself that I was truly capable of carrying out the most loathsome of acts. Despite their gruesome nature, I found those actions to be empowering and even in some morbid way, self-satisfying. Now I was certain that I would be able to continue my fiendish scheme with little hesitation and self-recrimination.

Immediately after the brief burst of self-indulgent thoughts passed, I suddenly remembered. Today was the day I was to hear the confessions of those much less sinful

than I, their confessor had done. I would be required to put on a mask of piety and measure out penances and provide good counsel for sins greatly less grievous than my own.

“Could I do it?” I pondered over and over.

Then after a lengthy contemplation, I finally arrived at my answer with great confidence.

“Of course I could!”

After doing what I had just done and even engaging in self-congratulation for having done it, how could I not be capable of easily putting on a façade of sanctity? I assured myself that it would be an easy task and with that self-assurance, all the fear and anxiety left me.

Later that afternoon when I left the confessional I had proven myself right. My performance had been outstanding and flawless, to say the least. I was convinced that in conducting Sunday Mass the following day I would be equally as competent. The following day I found myself to be proven correct once again.

I had successfully become as hypocritical as the most polished of politicians and con men. I was filled with a sinister, deep-felt pride as I locked up the church after that last Sunday morning Mass.

I walked to the rectory and sank into the big easy chair in the den. A veil of tranquility spread over me. All the anxious thoughts of my past actions and those yet to come left me. I felt calmer than I had felt in days and within minutes, I was fast asleep.

It wasn't until a few hours later than I was disturbed by the cool, wet nuzzle of Lilith's nose against my face. I had slept away the entire afternoon. The room was darkened except for faint moonlight filtering through the window adjacent to my chair.

As I opened my eyes, I realized it was suppertime and she was there to remind me. Sunday was Mrs. Krause's day off and I had to get my own meal as well as Lilith's.

I went to the kitchen pantry, took a can of cat food from the shelf, and scraped it into her bowl. I went to the

refrigerator and peered in trying to find what had been left for me to eat. I reached in and was pulling out the dish Mrs. Krause had left for me when I heard a scratching sound coming from the garage door.

I turned with alarm as thoughts of the freezer and its contents flooded my mind. What was that noise?

I looked up to see Lilith vigorously clawing at the door. I glanced at her food bowl. It was untouched.

“Lilith! Eat your food!” I shouted at her.

She remained pawing at the closed door and whining.

I continued to shout but she refused to move. Finally, I walked over to her and forcibly pulled her by the collar towards the food dish. She let out a sharp snarl as I dragged her. She had never threatened me before and I startled by this sudden hostile outburst. I immediately released my grasp on her collar. She ran back to the garage door and repeated the scratching and whining as before.

I took her dish and placed it next to her. She completely ignored it and continued her bizarre behavior.

“I guess you’ll just have to go hungry” I spoke to her aloud

As I turned and started to walk away, it suddenly occurred to me. It was as if I could hear her speaking to me through her whines and growls. Traditional cat food was no longer satisfactory; she wanted more of Blake.

Was it my imagination? Had I made Lilith into my ghoulish accomplice?

Did some malevolent power preordain this entire nightmare? Was she merely an instrument in its plan to steal my soul? It all sounded crazy but then again what wasn’t crazy about this entire ghastly experience?

I thought back four years ago to the day I got her from the pound. When I entered the animal shelter, I perused a myriad of inviting faces pressed against the bars of their cages.

I looked into the eyes of each. The first one seemed to say “Take me!” The next said “No! Take me! “And so the

next and all the ones thereafter. It was an overwhelming dilemma to select one and reject all the others.

That was until I saw Lilith. She looked to be half Wirehair and half whatever and certainly not the most sightly of the group. She was one of the few who wasn't eagerly pressing against the cage door. She was lying on the floor and peering straight ahead as if unconcerned about my selecting her. I walked to the front of her cage and looked straight into her eyes.

"I'll take this one" I immediately announced.

Did she somehow know it would be she that I was to choose?

Now in retrospect, I'm not sure if I picked her or she picked me?

I wonder?

I snapped out of my musing and spoke.

"Okay girl. Tomorrow for sure. Now go and eat the food in your dish."

She immediately walked over to the bowl and hesitatingly began to choke down her meal.

I went into the garage and again began the grim task of cutting off Blake's other leg. I again placed it on top of the tool cabinet to thaw, cleaned up the "sawdust" flesh from the freezer, replaced all the frozen vegetables, and went up to bed.

The next morning, I walked into the kitchen to see the cat lying next to the garage door. She must have been there all night.

It was early morning and my housekeeper wouldn't arrive until the afternoon. I had plenty of time. I went into the garage, retrieved the thawed out leg, butchered it, and again discarded the remnants down the toilet as I had done before.

After I was finished, I placed Lilith's dinner in a container at the very rear of the refrigerator.

I went into the den, sank into my easy chair, and began to muse. This second cadaverous deed felt

significantly less repulsive than the first. I found it to be frighteningly methodical and shameless. Was I becoming even more depraved than I ever thought possible or was I becoming more successful at repressing my sinfulness?

Several minutes of trance-like introspection passed when I was suddenly startled into full consciousness.

I would have to prepare tomorrow's meal today! I got up and then back to the freezer. This time the task would be much more laborious than before. I had to cut the thigh from the hip.

I proceeded to get out the saw and after much effort; I successfully separated the upper right leg. As before, I wrapped in newspaper, slid it into a plastic bag, and placed above the tool cabinet to thaw.

The morning I began the task of butchering just as I had done the previous day however with some differences. I had cleaved much more meat than I had from the calf. I had to place it in three containers at the rear of the fridge. I put them on the lowest shelf, way in

the back, and stacked several items in front of them to conceal from immediate view.

“Well, the good part is I won’t have to do this again for a while. There’s enough there for three days at least” I told myself.

I then attempted to cut the thighbone into pieces just as I had done with the tibia and fibula. I soon realized it would be impossible for me to cut it into pieces of the size that could be disposed of in the toilet. It was the largest bone of the body; I would need an ax. The only thing I could do was to put it back in the freezer next to the partially, dismembered corpse.

Chapter Seven

“Do This in Remembrance of Me”

Luke 22:19

Two days later, I was in the den doing some paperwork that had been put off ever since the day of my dreadful deed.

“Father! Supper is ready!” Mrs. Krause called. I looked up. It was seven o’clock and I had hardly noticed.

I went to the kitchen where she had already spread out our evening meal. She was already seated in her usual chair and was beginning to eat. That was unusual. This was the first time that I could remember when she began without waiting for me. She looked up as I entered.

“Father, I must apologize! I started without you. This smelled so good when I made it that I just couldn’t help myself.”

“That’s okay! I’m sure it tastes as good as it smells” I replied.

“I thought that you would like a break from all those vegetables day after day. Going off your diet once in a while surely wouldn’t hurt so I decided to make this goulash instead,” she answered.

“That was very thoughtful of you” I thanked her.

I sat down and began to eat. She was right it was delicious.

Mrs. Krause always had been an excellent cook but with this meal, she had outdone herself.

“By the way, Father I have been doing the grocery shopping at Shop Rite for all these years never found any meat as good as this. Where did you get it? I’d like to go there from now on.”

“What do you mean?” I asked in startled reply.

“Well, you forgot to leave the vegetables out on the counter for me like usual so I looked in the refrigerator. I thought that maybe you had left them there and then I

found the plastic container of this meat on the bottom shelf in the back. That's what gave me the idea for the goulash.

I know that I never bought it so I assumed that you did. Where did you get it?"

I slowly lowered my fork and stared straight ahead in momentary silence. She looked up from her plate as if saying, "Why aren't you answering me?"

I was still silent.

"Aren't you going to finish?" she asked.

"Suddenly, I'm not feeling that well" I stuttered out.

She looked at me more intently.

"Honestly Father, all of a sudden you don't look that good. You're white as a sheet. You look like you just saw a ghost!" she sympathized.

"Better go in and lay down for a bit. I'll bring you some Alka Seltzer."

I slowly rose from the table, went into the den, and again slumped in my easy chair.

Not only was I murderer and a ghoul I had now unwittingly become a cannibal too. To make it even worse I really did enjoy the meal and as hard as I tried, I couldn't shake off the reminiscence of its delicious flavor.

Within minutes, Mrs. Krause came in with the Alka Seltzer.

"I'm going to clean up now Father. Do you want me to put the rest of your meal in the fridge? You might want it for later?" she asked.

I hesitated and then for some unknown reason that I still can't explain, I replied "Sure! Thank you."

I heard the door close behind her as she left. I then realized that no more of the cat's food remained in the fridge. I immediately arose and went to the garage and once again began the grizzly task of cutting a frozen body part from the corpse. I sawed off one of the arms, wrapped it in newspaper, and slid it into a plastic bag. I turned to walk to the tool cabinet and suddenly stopped.

"Where was Lilith?" I questioned myself.

She had eagerly followed me into the garage every time before. She was always at my side often with loud growling as if encouraging me onward. Now, this time she was nowhere to be seen.

I finished placing the arm atop the cabinet to thaw and went back into the kitchen. There she was lying on her pillow still and silent.

Walked over to take a closer look. She slowly raised her head acknowledging my presence.

As I got closer I could see that her nipples had become swollen, enlarged and bore an unusual rose-red color. These were the signs of pregnancy.

“But how could this be possible?” flashed through my mind. She hadn’t left the house since I got her, except for an occasional walk. Most of her time outside was in the backyard and it was completely fenced in.

“Maybe a stray had jumped the fence?” I questioned myself.

The fence was seven feet high and made of solid white vinyl. I couldn't imagine a cat capable of leaping seven feet. Could it be that one had burrowed under the fence? I doubt it but I would have to check.

In the meantime, I went to the computer to see if my assessment of pregnancy might be correct.

Yes, there it was -

"One of the earliest ways to tell if a cat is pregnant is by their nipple size and color. If the nipples appear more prominent, slightly swollen, and rose color, it can be a sign your cat is carrying kittenpies. After about 4-5 weeks, a pregnant cat's body will begin to change and their waist will appear thicker."

The next day I stripped the flesh from the defrosted arm. This time I wrapped it in aluminum foil, placed it in a large plastic container and covered it with some shredded lettuce. I again pushed it to the rear of the lowest shelf in the refrigerator.

I would keep a constant eye on it to make sure that Mrs. Krause would not again discover it.

As I was pulling my head out of the refrigerator, the phone rang. It was Mrs. Krause telling me that she was feeling ill and won't be able to come today.

"Now Father I'm awfully sorry but I just can't make it. I probably have a little bit, of what you had last night.

Are you feeling better now?" she asked,

"Yes, much better" I answered.

"I hate to leave you without supper but let me remind you that I left part of your last night's meal in the fridge. That should tide you over until tomorrow. I'm sure I'll be better by then. Goodnight" she concluded.

"Sure! I'll be okay just you get better and don't worry about me" I stammered back.

I put down the phone, stared into space for a brief moment and returned to the counter to clean up the mess.

Once again, I found it next to impossible to cut up the larger arm bones and I was forced to put them back in the freezer with the thighbones.

I came in from the garage and saw Lilith still lying in the same position as she was. I again eyed her head to tail and came to the same conclusion as before.

I left the kitchen and went to the backyard to examine the fence. I knew that no matter what I found it would make no difference, she was pregnant. Still and all, I was compelled to satisfy my curiosity as to how it happened.

I slowly walked around the perimeter of the yard looking for any signs of digging. Just as I was about to finish my inspection I heard the rattling of the gate latch at the front of the yard.

I turned to see Mr. Mullins, our groundskeeper pushing a lawnmower through the opened gate. He was an older man of about seventy or so, thin, grayed and slightly stooped. He had been the groundskeeper and sexton for over forty years. It started as a part-time job but

after his retirement from the GM plant, it became his only employment. It didn't pay much; just a little pocket change and besides it made him still feel useful. As he often quipped, he wasn't ready to be thrown on the "scrap heap of life" just yet.

"Morning Father" he announced.

"How are things going John?" I replied.

"Pretty good so far but I'm glad I'm seein' you cause there's something I was wantin' to talk to you about."

"What's that?" I asked warily.

"Look over here" and he stepped over to the side of the yard and pointed to a depression in the ground.

"Last week when I came to do the lawn back here this was all dug up. It looked like your cat was maybe diggin' here. Then when I looked at it a little closer, I could see a piece of rebar. I took some of the dirt away and it was a handle for an old cesspool lid."

He reached down and pulled some of the sod away thereby exposing the metal handle.

“I covered it up with some dirt and a little sod so the mower wouldn’t slip into it but I did want to show you,” he explained.

“Why are you showing me this?” I asked.

“Well, you see Father, this church and rectory were built back when city sewers weren’t run over here. In fact, I don’t think there were sewer lines in the entire town until about sixty years ago.

Up until then, everybody had cesspools or later on septic tanks in the backyard. When the sewers came in a lot of people filled them in with sand or gravel, so they won’t be collapsin’ one day later on.

Now I know that some people didn’t bother and just forgot all about it. I don’t remember if this one was filled in or not?

I just read about a kid disappearin’ in a ‘sinkhole’ in his backyard and that ‘sinkhole’ was an old septic tank.

It made me think that I should tell you about this so you can find out if this one’s been filled or not.”

“How could I tell? I don’t think there are any records and even if there are I wouldn’t know where to find them” I replied.

“You’d probably have to get somebody in here to open this up and see,” he explained.

“Just how would they open it to see?”

“They would have to take this cover off and put a camera in there,” he answered.

“So you could just take the cover off this access hole and look in?” I asked.

“That’s no easy job. That cover there is made outta solid cement and to get it off you’d have to slip a pry bar under the handle to lift it.”

“I see! Thanks, John! I guess I’ll have to call somebody in to do it.” I replied.

He pulled the sod back over the cover and started to mow the yard.

I walked back into the rectory, took a cigar from the humidor, and came back out. I seated myself in one of the

patio chairs, lit up the cigar and began to muse as I watched John working.

His words - "It looked like your cat was maybe diggin' here" - kept echoing through my mind.

Why would Lilith be digging up the yard right over that cesspool lid? Moreover, why now?

As crazy as it seemed, I was positive that I had heard her before subconsciously instructing me. Could it be that she was once again telling me something?

Chapter Eight

"Be Fruitful and Multiply"

Genesis 1:28

Several days passed. Lilith's gird increased substantially each day. I had looked up the normal gestation period for cats; it was sixty-three days, a shade over two months. I had seen pictures of cats similar to her size at various stages of pregnancy. To my amazement, she looked to be at or very close to the point delivery.

Lilith's appetite had markedly diminished during the two days prior. Despite this, I was beginning to find it difficult to shred more flesh from Blake's corpse. Each time I opened the freezer I found less and less remaining. All that was left was the bag-covered head, a few internal organs and the pile of stripped bones.

Each time I peered into that icy tomb I faced the same problem – how could I to get rid of his bones and most especially his head?

As I sat at the kitchen table pondering, I noticed the faint odor of cigar smoke slowly permeate the room. I arose and went to the front door. I looked out into the front yard trying to determine its source. I left the house and continued my search by walking around the house. I finally arrived at the backyard all the while finding nothing and no one.

I stood at the patio, still perplexed and still detecting a faint whiff of cigar smoke. As I looked out over the backyard – “sinkhole” - “cesspool lid” - “slip a pry bar under the handle to lift it” - ran through my thoughts.

I had heard that often smells and odors can bring mental images to mind. It has been said that olfactory sensations are closely related to memory.

True or not, in this case, that is what had occurred. The source of the smell no longer concerned me. I was

surprised at my disregard for the source of the odor and instead of continuing my investigation; I went straight into the garage.

Now, I was searching for a pry bar. As I looked about the room, I suddenly realized that the odor, which had concerned me so had completely disappeared. I still didn't understand from where and how it had arisen but at this point, I no longer cared. Finding that bar became my sole interest.

I knew I had seen one somewhere. I rummaged the garage all to no avail. I paused and concentrated. Maybe it was the basement?

I walked into the basement and after several minutes of searching; there it was leaning against the wall beside the water heater.

I took it and put it in the garage. I knew the backyard was obscured from prying eyes on all sides but in spite of that, I would wait until evening to begin.

Eight o'clock and Mrs. Krause had already gone. Dusk had settled in and the light was quickly vanishing. I gathered the bar, a shovel, and a couple of black, plastic leaf bags. I opened the freezer, withdrew the bones, Blake's bag enshrouded head, and placed them all into one of the bags. I stealthily left the garage for the backyard carrying the bags and a small flashlight together with the equipment I had assembled.

When I got to the spot where the cesspool cover rested, I proceeded carefully to remove the sod piece and dirt from it. I placed it all on one of the plastic bags lying next to the hole.

After exposing the iron handle of the cover, I slid the pry bar under it and attempted to lift it. I pulled on the end of the bar with all my strength but the cover refused to move. When I shined the flashlight on the full length of the bar, I immediately saw the problem. As I tried to lift the cover, the far end of the bar was sinking into the ground. It was not applying any advantage at all, just

merely sinking deeper and deeper into the ground with my every pull.

I paused for a moment to catch my breath and think. I went back to the garage and got a short piece of two by four. I placed it under the far end of the pry bar and again attempted to lift it. The cover slowly rose and I moved it off to the side of the opening.

Immediately an overwhelming, foul stench issued from the mouth of the cavity. I drew back reflexively and then shone the light over the exposed opening. It looked to be about a foot in diameter. When I looked down into the pit all I could see was the reflection of my flashlight beam from a slimy slurry about six feet down.

I took the first bone from the bag and dropped it in. There was no splash but instead a dull thud. I trained the light beam on the bone and watched it disappear ever so slowly into the dark, glistening semi-solid below.

I continued to drop one after another until all that was left was the paper bag containing the still frozen head.

I took it out of the bag and started to drop it as I had done with the other bones. To my most unpleasant surprise, it wouldn't fit through the opening. It appeared to be only a slight bit too large. I pushed and twisted but it still refused to squeeze through the hole.

After several futile attempts, I stood up and reached for the two by four. I held it lengthwise above the head and brought it down solidly. The head moved through the opening ever so slightly. Now I knew that a few more thrusts would do the job and so I continued to drive it down through the hole until it finally landed below with a thud just as had the others. It too slowly sank into the black, gelatinous mass.

I wrestled the cover back over the hole and carefully replaced the dirt and the sod piece over it. I picked up my tools and went back into the house.

I got a beer from the fridge, sat at the kitchen table, and leaned back. I felt pride in my accomplishment and its cleverness. All the while, however, an inner voice kept

chastising me for my callus deeds. I had been hearing those admonishments over and over ever since the day that I killed Blake. Although the voice was ever-present it interrupted my thoughts less and less frequently as time went on. I felt more and more capable of disregarding its recriminations each time they arose.

Chapter Nine

"No One Who is Born of God Practices Sin"

John 3:9

Weeks passed and Lilith had long since been condemned to a diet of regular cat food. She seemed to have much less appetite for it than for the previous lurid dish. She ate it reluctantly choking down each morsel. She looked up at me between every bite as if signaling her acute dissatisfaction. Time passed and she became ever more swollen as her pregnancy approached termination.

*

I sat up abruptly stunned by the mournful howl-like cry coming from downstairs. The clock by the side of my bed read ten of three. There was a momentary silence followed by a second sorrowful cry.

I hastily left the bedroom for the kitchen. I snapped on the light to see Lilith bearing the first of her kittens. I

sat patiently watching for the next to appear. Sunrise dawned as the hours passed during which each of the twelve additional ones were born.

I had read that the typical gestation period for cats was over sixty days, yet these had been delivered in but forty days. In spite of this, from what I could tell, all appeared to be of appropriate size and healthy.

All wore a distinctly different color patterning. Only one was fully colored and pure black. Each bore the same three, short, dark parallel lines at the base of their necks. Almost immediately all began to nurse voraciously.

I watched intently and although I struggled to keep them open, my eyes began to close. The doorbell soon aroused me. I quickly glanced at the clock. It was three o'clock and Mrs. Krause walked into the kitchen.

"What have we here? It looks like Lilith has given us a fine litter," she announced pleasantly.

"Yes! It was quite a surprise" I replied.

"So when did this all happen?" she asked.

“I was awakened at about three this morning.”

“And you’ve been here ever since?” she continued.

“Yes,” I answered.

“You must be exhausted, Father. I think it would be best for you to go up to bed and get some rest after your all-night vigil.

Maybe we can get her and the little ones settled in the garage so I won’t be bothering them when I’m doing my kitchen work here?”

She was right.

I went and prepared a space in the corner of the garage. Together we then slid Lilith’s bed with her and the kittens resting on it, through the door leading to the garage. After we got them settled down, I went upstairs to sleep.

Throughout the following days, I frequently checked on them. To my amazement, the kitten’s growth was incredible. Within four days, their eyes opened and their size had doubled. Soon they became larger than Lilith

herself. All the while, however, they continued their ravenous feeding at Lilith's teats. As for Lilith, she ate little and remained almost motionless throughout. As days went on, the rapid development of the kittens indicated that the weaning process should have long since begun. However, she had made no attempts. She merely remained stone still while they continued to nurse. She ate less and less and became progressively gaunter as the days passed.

On several occasions, Mrs. Krause had tried to wean them away from Lilith only to be met with growls and snarls from all.

Then there was her last attempt. I had come home teaching my Catechism class to find her sitting in the kitchen holding a blood-soaked towel around her hand.

"What happened?" I asked excitedly.

"They bit me" she exclaimed.

"I went to see them in the garage and Lilith looked as though she was about to die. Her tongue was hanging out

of her mouth and it was almost grey. She could hardly raise her head.

When I saw that I knew that this constant feeding of those kittens was about to kill her so I once again tried to pull them away. As soon as I tried to pull the first one away, it wasn't just growling this time. All lunged at me and one bit my hand. It felt like my finger was going to be bitten clean off. They certainly don't have just milk teeth anymore," she explained.

She paused and readjusted the towel on her hand.

"And Father something else is very wrong. When I did get the one away I saw, the teat he was nursing at was gone. It had been bitten off and he was not drinking milk; he was drinking her blood. When the others joined the attack I could see that they too had done the same," she continued.

I went into the garage to see for myself. There they were, all still nursing just as they had been doing since birth.

Mrs. Krause was right! When I looked closely, I could see bloodstains on the bed beneath them. Lilith too appeared to be on the verge of death just as Mrs. Krause had explained.

I went back into the kitchen.

“Did you see what I meant?” she asked me.

“Yes, I certainly did!

Do you think I should take you to the emergency room?” I continued.

She hesitated.

“No, the bleeding is stopped and I think I’ll be okay.”

I went into the den, sat down and began to question myself.

What the hell was going on?

The next afternoon my phone rang.

“Hello.”

“Hello Father, this is Arnold Peety. Gloria has fallen down the cellar stairs and she has been taken to the hospital. The doctors say that things don’t look very good

for her. They suggested that I might want to have Last Rites administered. Can you come?"

Arnie and his wife had been long-time parishioners and were in their mid-eighties. I knew that I must drop everything and immediately go to the hospital.

"I'll be there within the hour!" I replied and hastily hung up the phone.

I looked at the clock - two o'clock. Mrs. Krause would come at three and I had no idea when I would be back.

I went to the kitchen, grabbed a post-it note and scrolled out a brief message.

"Please be sure to put some food in the garage for the cats around five o'clock, Thanks."

I hurried out the door and drove to the hospital.

The doctor was right Gloria was in bad shape. Her bruised and swollen head was being held in place with a halo and a tube attached to a ventilator was intubating her. The fall had broken her neck.

"I think the end is near," Arnie said somberly.

I nodded.

“Would you administer the sacrament and stay with us for a while Father? Even though she is unconscious I still think that she knows you are here to comfort her in this hour.”

“Of course I will” I replied.

Chapter Ten

"The Son of Man is Coming at an Hour You do not Expect"

Luke 12:40

After two hours of waiting, Gloria expired and Arnie became inconsolable in his grief. It took over an hour for me to draw him from his anguish. "She is now in a better place, a place at which we all hope for ourselves to be. Take solace in the fact that she is now with our Lord" I comforted him. I was finally able to soften his heartbreak.

I got back to the rectory at six and expected to be greeted by Mrs. Krause with our suppers prepared for us.

When I entered and called to her of my arrival, my call was met with silence?

I continued to call as I walked into the kitchen and still received no reply?

Maybe she was in the garage feeding the cats as I had requested.

I opened the door and stepped in. I instantaneously drew back in horror. There, strewn on the garage floor were the ragged remnants of her clothing, bloodstained and torn to pieces. I stood aghast staring at the remains before me.

After a moment or two, I took a deep breath and turned towards Lilith and the kittens. This sight was even more appalling. All that remained were bones and bits of her fur; the kittens were nowhere to be seen.

Then, from the far end of the garage in the dim recesses, I saw a form coming towards me.

She was tall, slim, and sultry, her hair flowing over her bared breasts as she approached from the shadows. Her deep green eyes flashed as she came forth with an outstretched hand.

“What has become of my housekeeper?” I shouted.

"I had great hunger. As she consumed me I have consumed her"

she replied calmly.

"One cannot achieve great strength without nourishment"

she continued.

"Where are the kittens? Who are you?" I exclaimed in a stuttered shout.

She then gave an uttermost perplexing reply.

"They are here. They are me and I am them" she replied in a low, reverberating voice.

"What do you mean?"

"Did your god not appear to Moses as a burning bush? Did He not appear to Jacob as the Angel of the Lord? Was not the Son of your God sent to Earth incarnate?"

Why then do you question my appearance to you in disparate altered forms?"

she answered.

“Do you mean you are God?” I questioned her in astonishment.

“One of many!” she answered.

“One of many?” I repeated incredulously.

“When you look up at the night sky how many stars do you see? Can anyone star make the rest disappear? When you look back through time how many gods, do you see? How can one extinguish the existence of all of the others?”

The Universe is equilibrium. For a light to shine there must be a darkness to be filled, for every virtue, there must be a vice to be rectified, for every right there must be a wrong.

If there truly is but one God why must it be Yahweh, the god of the Hebrews? Why not Vishnu of the Hindus, Zeus of the ancient Greeks, Jupiter of the Romans or Odin of the Norse?

Even Christian beliefs acknowledge the reality of more than one god although they refuse to admit it.

How can the Father, the Christ, and the Holy Ghost not be three gods? How can one entity be three or three be but one?

If but one true all-powerful, truly benevolent god exists to the exclusion of all others how can we account for the savagery pervading the Earth? Why are suffering, disease, and death rampant? Why does his plan require one animal to butcher another in order to live?

Would a sincerely benevolent god devise such a dreadful plan?

Many point to the devil as the conjurer of all things malevolent. If that is true then he too must act as a god. Again, equilibrium exists in all things even gods; for every god, there must be an ungodly one.

It is said that God the Father sent his only begotten Son to atone for the sins of the World. He was born of a Virgin and preached to the masses to abandon their sinful ways.

He ascended into Heaven and will someday again return to gather the righteous and punish the evil.

I too was sent by my father but not to fulfill the same mission as he. I have not come to atone for sin but to accredit its perpetuation to your god."

"So which god are you?" I asked in astonishment.

"It is not for you to know. You should only know that I am the son of my father just as Christ was the son of his Father and I have selected you as my instrument fulfillment.

The Blake whom you met in the church that Sunday was not the Blake of your past. All his words were but lies spoken to bring you into my service. He was me incarnated in Blake's form, which you sacrificed thus atoning for all the virtues of mankind."

"Atone for virtue?" I questioned.

"Again, the Universe is equilibrium. If your god can send his son to atone for sin why should it bewilder you that my father has sent me to atone for virtue?" she answered.

“You have fulfilled the command given by the son of your god -‘Take this my body and eat’ for me. In so doing you have allowed me to enter your soul and become the instrument of my return just as your Christ had promised to return. Now having returned in his stead, I stand before you having satisfied his pledge in behalf of my own father.

I was born of a virgin queen as your god’s son was born of a virgin. I will go forth to preach to masses not of salvation but instead of rejection of your deity.

The truth be that a plethora of deities dwell in the heavens and I am but one of them.”

“Why then have most been abandoned?” I asked.

“They have been abandoned, not destroyed, but subjugated by your God who presently reigns.”

“Subjugated?” I exclaimed.

“Yes with the assistance of the ever-growing army of souls which has swelled over the most recent centuries. All who arrive at his gates are committed to

maintaining his power over the rest of us who have become merely powerless vassals in the Kingdom of the Afterlife.

His promises of mercy and forgiveness draw many into his service despite his many failings to conceal his true hypocritical cruelty. ”

“If you are powerless how is it that you are able to work your ways with me?”

“I have been selected by all the other deposed deities and empowered by their unity to pursue rebellion against the usurper and regain our rightful status. This I pledge to you - the genesis of our ranks will be harsh and the struggle painful- but when victory is ours the Gate of Eden will be reopened for all”
she answered.

“How will this happen and why have you come to me in your quest?”

“It is because you possess a beacon which first guided me here. It reflects the evil pervaded on humankind and tacitly condoned by your so-called ‘one true god’ “

she answered.

“And what is that?” I asked incredulously.

She led me into the den and pointed to the lamp adjacent to my easy chair.

“What does that mean? It is a family heirloom of my housekeeper from her father and given as a gift to me last Christmas,” I stammered.

“Yes, I know. And its shade is formed from the skin of Maximilian Maria Kolbe.”

“What!” I exclaimed.

“He was executed at Auschwitz in 1941 after volunteering to take the place of another. He was the holiest of men and his relic has glowed brightly throughout the heavens ever since. It has drawn me to you so that I might gather souls to begin our rebellion against your perfidious deity,”

she explained.

“So this is why you have come to cast me in your sinful plot?” I queried.

"It is only sinful if you consider it to be such. Would you consider it to be sinful if you had the power to prevent the death and suffering of multitudes and didn't exercise it?"

"Yes," I replied without hesitation.

"Then you must consider me to be merely as sinful as your god!"

she replied soberly.

"Look around you. What do you see? Death, destruction, and agony.

When the believers of your Almighty are questioned, they reply 'It is God's will'. Then why do they not question as to whether He is truly a merciful and all-powerful being?

When those who claim 'God has saved me' why do they never ask why did He make me to suffer in the first place?"

I remained silent.

"Could it be that He is not merciful, not kind, not loving, and not benevolent as is claimed. Could it be

that the Earth and all upon it are merely playthings for his sadistic pleasure? "

she continued.

Again, I was silent but deep in questioning thought.

After a moment of quiet, I replied.

"It is easy to condemn but you yourself have not shown to be the most compassionate and forgiving either."

"Nor did I claim to be as your hypocritical god proclaimed"

she replied.

"Come be with me" her voice resonated seductively.

I took her hand without hesitation as if compelled by some mysterious, overwhelming urge. Together we ascended the stairs to my bedroom and fell into a lustful passion. The room swirled and my heartbeat rapidly as I was consumed by the ecstasy. Reaching the zenith of the act, I then fell into a deep sleep.

When I awakened, I was nude, alone and staring at the ceiling. Had it been a dream, a hallucination, or a vision? I slowly ran my hand over the sheet beside me. I felt a warm, sticky fluid on its surface. That would suggest the likelihood of an erotic dream but how could I be sure?

I arose, put on my bathrobe, and warily crept down the darkened stairs.

I walked to the door leading to the garage, warily opened it a crack and peered in. It was spotless. All of what I had seen before had vanished. Not the slightest remnant remained.

Had all of this been an ongoing vision preceding an impending mental collapse? Any other explanation escaped me.

I closed the door and turned back into the kitchen. Within seconds, her voice rang through my head. I tried desperately but unsuccessfully to ignore it.

“I have honored you by consummating your consecration to my servitude now and henceforth. Serve me well and great reward shall be ours”
spoke the voice.

I became entranced and followed her every command. I went to the kitchen cabinet and retrieved a paring knife and a cup. I pierced the vein in my wrist with a small incision. Blood immediately spurted forth and I collected it in the cup. I bandaged my wound, went straight to the sacristy, and mixed my blood in the bowl with the wine, which was to be used at Mass.

I selected the most decorative one from the array of cruets in the sacristy cabinet. It bore the engraved words “Sanguinem Sanctorum” and its stopper was in the shape of a cross. It was one, which I had never seen before.

As I poured the mixture into it, I heard a voice echo from the walls and throughout the sacristy.

“Just as your communicates allow Christ to enter when they receive His blood, they will allow me to

enter when you administer my sacrament. At that moment I will seize command of their souls and welcome them into my legion."

I placed the filled container at the back of the cabinet behind all the others.

Chapter Eleven

**“Whoever Eats my Flesh and
Drinks my Blood Shall Have
Eternal Life”**

John 6:54

Weeks passed and with each day, the memories of my fateful encounter dimmed. Had it all been my wild imagination or possibly even a step to the edge of insanity? Was a schizophrenic delusion?

I incessantly roamed the garage, peered into to the empty freezer and paced through the sacristy day after day in futile attempts to validate the reality of my daunting encounters. I couldn't find a shred of evidence to substantiate the authenticity of my experience.

The only incident that could possibly verify its actual occurrence was a phone call I had received the day after it happened.

I had arisen that morning and gone into the den to ponder and sip my usual cup of coffee. The phone rang and it was Henrietta Krause, my housekeeper's sister. I knew that the two had been living together ever since Henrietta's husband died five years before.

"Alice didn't come home last night?" she announced excitedly.

"She left here at the usual time last night" I replied hesitatingly.

"Has this ever happened before?" I added.

"Never! I think I should call the police?" she exclaimed.

I paused.

"Yes, I think you should. Will you call me back and tell me what they say?"

“Thank you, Father. I will and I will call you if anything happens” she ended the conversation.

The following day the police came to the rectory and spoke with me. I wasn't about to explain the events of the past few days.

I wasn't even certain that any of it had actually occurred. If I did tell them my lurid tale, I knew that I would be considered insane or at best at the doorstep of dementia.

Therefore, I claimed no knowledge of Mrs. Krause's disappearance and suggested no deviation from the usual. She merely did her chores and left at eight o'clock just as she has always done.

Was I telling the truth? Even I couldn't tell what was true and what was disillusion.

We soon entered the season of Lent with the Ash Wednesday service. Easter Sunday with all its ritual and celebration was rapidly approaching.

It finally arrived accompanied by dark, ominous skies bearing thunderous lightning flashes.

None of this could dissuade the faithful from celebrating the Resurrection of the Lord and Savior. They filled every pew, every corner, and every alcove. Lilies adorned the altar and the Pascal Candle burned brightly. The choir sung praises and adulation to the risen Christ.

A large, empty cross, draped with a purple sash hung from the ceiling far above the altar in the cavernous sanctuary.

The congregation stood spontaneously as I entered from the sacristy. I was fully adorned in the vestments required for the holy ritual I was about to perform.

I walked to the center of the sanctuary, stood before the altar, bowed profoundly and kissed it. I turned to face the congregation and spoke.

*“In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.”*

“Amen” came the response.

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” I continued.

“The Lord be with you” was announced loudly in reply by the congregation. The Mass continued.

I stepped to the side of the altar to receive the water and wine for consecration. The cruets held by the altar boys bore the inscription “Sanguinem Sanctorum.” I was immediately aware of their corrupt contents. There was nothing I could do but to continue the service. I dutifully accepted the pouring from each.

I returned to the altar and genuflected.

“Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in memory of me” I spoke.

I genuflected once more and turned to hold the chalice up for all to see.

“When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, O Lord, until you come again” exclaimed the congregation in unison response.

With that, the entire congregation came to the altar rail to receive Communion. Not a single person remained behind.

I approached the Communicates waiting at the railing and began to confer the rite by Intinction, dipping the host into the wine-filled chalice and administering it to each. As I passed along the communion rail, I could hear the thunder resonate louder and louder through the church walls. The wind-driven rain pounded against the windows adding to the growing cacophony filling the room.

Just as I administered to the final communicate, an earth-shattering bolt erupted. The floor and ceiling shook and the walls quaked. A spontaneous gasp roared from

those in the pews before me. All simultaneously pointed to the high arched ceiling above the sanctuary behind me.

I turned to see the slow descent of the huge, gold-clad cross, which had been suspended high above the altar. It struck the marble tabletop with an ear-splitting burst; cracking it into fragments and sending the altar base crumbling under the impact.

The cross itself remained upright and began a slow rotation gradually revealing its horrifying essence. The bruised and battered body of Blake clothed in, but a bloodied loincloth appeared stretched out upon it.

A wreath of writhing maggots crowned his head. Streams of black flies issued from the gaping wound in his side. Blood oozed from his impaled wrists, trickled down his outstretched arms and down the sides of his chest further saturating the sparse covering he wore.

His head was bowed forward, and blood dripped from the spikes, which held his radiated arms.

The outbursts of the congregation quelled. All sat in numbed silence and with a terrified gaze. Within seconds, he erected his head, opened his eyes widely, and slackened his jaw leaving his mouth fully gaping.

He remained otherwise motionless as the head of a snake with a darting tongue slid forward from its cavernous opening. It began to speak in a low, fearsome, echoing voice.

“You have made me again hallowed by the consumption of my sanguine fluid. I welcome you into my bosom for all eternity. You have thus been prepared to join me and the myriad of subjugated deities in our struggle against the great usurping Tyrant of the Universe.

You shall bask in the glory of our victory in the kingdom beyond and I will be your benefactor and trusted Lord.

It is now time for you to join my legions. Come with me and receive just veneration. You now must

sacrifice yourselves as did the martyrs of your old god did so and ascend to your rightful place at my right hand. We must go now and fulfill our destiny."

With those final words still reverberating through the church, the Pascal Candle slumped into a pool of liquid, spread over the floor and fully ignited. Blood began to seep from the eyes of the saintly images, which adorned the stained glass windows. The light filtering through the panes became evermore obscured by its flow. It oozed down the panes and the entire church became ever darker.

However, the worst was yet to come. One by one each of the congregation became enveloped in flames. All remained perfectly still as those adjacent to them were consumed as if they were merely awaiting their time. Not a sound was to be heard, no screams and no cries just the dull roar of the flames as they ignited one after another. Within minutes, all were ablaze.

I turned back and looked at the cross to see Blake's image become vapor and rise towards the ceiling of the

sanctuary. The vacant cross then too burst into a fiery mass.

I instinctively ran to the sacristy and from its side door entrance. I bent over with my hands on my knees coughing out the acrid smoke, which had filled my lungs. I finally got my breath and looked up to see the rectory too engulfed in flames. Thirteen kittens scattered from the rectory doorway out into the surrounding smoke and gloom. The thirteen canine disciples of the newly arrived deity destined to amass even more souls into its service through its sinister exploits. The wailing of distant fire engines filled the air.

I felt a throbbing pain at the front of my head and a warm, sticky fluid was blurring my vision as it ran over my eye. I reached up and touched it, blood! That was the last thing I remember.

Chapter Twelve

“You Shall be Driven Mad by the Sight of What You See”

Deuteronomy 28:34

“I’m sorry but visiting hours are over now “the nurse announced.

Father Peter turned towards Father Joe and spoke. “I guess I’ll have to leave now but I will be back the next week. I’m sorry that I couldn’t have come sooner but I only heard the bad news the other day.”

“I understand and I do thank you for visiting me and I look forward to seeing you again next week. Goodbye” he replied.

Father Peter arose and left the room out into the hall. He approached the nurse who had just declared visiting hours to be over.

“May I have a word with you?” he asked.

“Certainly Father. I suppose it’s about Father Joe?” she answered.

“Yes. I knew him from our days in the seminary. He always seemed to be a person of high intelligence and never prone to fantasy and disillusion. That, of course, was many years ago and I really haven’t been in contact with him since. I came because I read in the paper about the catastrophe that befell his parish and his own injury.”

“He was admitted here about three weeks ago just after the fire. He suffered superficial burns over much of his body and a severe concussion. The laceration on his forehead was probably the result of falling ceiling plaster during the fire. They found him lying outside the sacristy door. He was in a coma for a week before regaining consciousness,” she explained.

“Has he had many visitors?”

“No, only three or four. As you may know, most of his congregation perished in the fire. As a matter of fact, he was the only one present in the church who escaped. I

suppose that is the reason he has had so few visitors,” she answered.

She paused and then continued.

“I expect that you are interested in his strange story?”

“Then I guess you know all about it?” Father Peter prompted.

“Well, I’ve heard it many times over the past two weeks ever since came out of the coma. It never changes it and it is always just as fantastic and the time before. It never varies.

We’ve called in a psychiatrist and he seems to think the concussion caused more damage than we suspected. He has been given an MRI and a PET scan and no lesions were found so we can suggest no further prognosis or treatment. He doesn’t appear to be suffering from dementia. I suppose we will just have to wait and hope this psychosis abates” she replied.

“What about the fire itself? Did anyone explain how it actually occurred?”

“According to what I’ve been told it was actually started by a lightning strike at the air conditioning system and then rapidly spread throughout the building.”

She paused shortly and again continued.

“Then too, there was a rumor going around that the police had been investigating the sudden disappearance of his longtime housekeeper just before this happened. Whether that was in any way related they couldn’t tell but they did find it not necessarily suspicious but nevertheless strangely coincidental.”

“Thank you. I’ll be back again next week and I’ll pray for his recovery.” With that, Father Peter left for the parking lot.

While walking down the dimly lit path to the lot a low whine came from the adjacent brush. He stopped, turned and looked into the undergrowth but saw nothing. There was silence.

He took several steps forward and again the sound issued from the brush. He stopped again and turned back

in search of its source. This time he took out his phone, opened the flashlight and searched more thoroughly than before. The light revealed a kitten nestled in a small cardboard carton behind one of the shrubs along the walkway.

Pity overwhelmed him.

'How could anyone just abandon it?' he thought.

He reached in, pulled out the box from behind the bush, and carried them to his car. He placed it on the floor in front of the passenger's seat. He started the car and snapped on the radio.

"This just in - breaking news - the massive fire at Saint Mathew's Church and rectory which began during Sunday service has finally been fully extinguished. Firefighters say that they can begin to search the rubble within a few hours.

First indications suggest there were no survivors among the over three hundred worshipers. The cause of

the blaze is still unknown but officials claim a thorough investigation has begun.

This is the fourth of the recent catastrophic church fires which have plagued the city and claimed hundreds of lives during the past several months."

Father Peter sat with a stone gaze. After a second or two, he looked down at the kitten in the box. It raised its head and cried loudly

.
"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (Hamlet, I.1.v)

THE END

Questions About the Story

Was Father Joe a pedophile or simply being falsely extorted?

Did things really happen as Father Joe described or schizophrenia?

Was the entity that brought all these strange happening about actually Satan?

Why were there thirteen kittens?

Was Blake a living person who had been possessed or a conjured illusion?

What is the significance of the three scratch-like marked on each the kitten's necks?

Why did a snakehead emerge from Blake's mouth and speak to the congregation?

Why was Father Joe's cat named Lilith?

What would encourage Father Joe to believe that Lilith could become pregnant without conception?

Does the veneration of relics (*“his relic [the skin of Maximilian Maria Kolbe] has glowed brightly throughout the heavens ever since. It has drawn me to you”*) always invoke “good” actions from the deity?

Afterward

Underlying Thoughts About ‘Take and Eat’

I began this project just to see if I was capable of writing a horror genre work. Right from the start, I felt that incorporating religion and ritual into the plot would heighten the reader’s anxiety and interest. I can only hope that I was right.

Why? Simply because man’s ceaseless search for an explanation of his own birth, life and evidential death

through religion has frequently resulted in the overwhelming horror, devastation, and suffering.

Then too, religion most often has been founded on unexplainable and unreasonable premises just as many horror-filled tales are founded.

Throughout my writing, I posed many unanswerable questions for myself to ponder in order to develop my plot and characters. I ended my work with even more unanswerable questions than I had when I began. I am quite sure that you too have asked many of these of yourself. I am equally confident of your inability to answer them also, for I believe that no mortal possesses this capability.

Many of the following ponderings represent the inspirations for my macabre tale. I provide the following for your musings.

*

Has the Creator created man or has man created the Creator?

If the former is true which Creator is he and is he the one and only or might there many?

If the latter is true, why was he created by man and why in so many variant forms and personas?

*

Why is monotheism the 'flavor of the day'? On what basis have the deities of past polytheisms been rejected and present monotheisms been accepted?

*

What evidence or observation could justify the existence or nonexistence of God or gods?

Genesis tells that man was cast out of Eden for disobedience by eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Is the Tree of Knowledge a metaphor for the dawning of man's self-awareness and his recognition of his own mortality?

Was mankind's "original sin" his becoming self-aware and questioning his existence?

Were God and gods conceived by man to console his fear of the certainty of his own impending nonexistence?

*

What prompted the myriad of rituals and tales designed to explain and please unknowable super beings? And, just how can their existence ever be known?

Why does an all-powerful being continually demand reassurance of man's love and adoration?

Is He truly that insecure and if so why?

*

What observations would suffice to declare these entities sure to be existent or sure to be nonexistent?

Can our limited senses allow us to make those confirmatory observations? Much of what we see, hear taste, touch, or smell comes by artificial contrivance. This

becomes truer every day as the technological age marches forward. With the advent of quantum mechanics, we evermore realize that act of observing, changes the observation itself.

Just how then can we justifiably trust any evidentiary observation, which might be proposed to confirm or deny the actuality of God or gods?

*

The answer most frequently advanced about the existence of a Supreme Being is 'faith'. But what is 'faith'? Is it a firm belief in what is unknown and most possibly never knowable? Is 'faith' a word describing a desperate hope to ward off despair in the thoughts of one's own demise?

Is 'faith' a mechanism allowing us to plod forward without bearing constant trepidation of our own predestined death?

*

Is prayer merely fervent hope or an appeal to unknown supernatural forces?

Is it simply an expression of intense desire by the 'faithful' thus expecting the elimination of suffering or gainful reward? Is it superstitious incantation or a legitimate call to the power of the Universe?

*

Why are most religions centered on death and suffering? Is it part of humankind's intrinsic nature or might it be attributable to something or someone far more overarching?

*

Are the Bible, the Quran, the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Tripitaka, and all scriptures merely sales brochures for religion or can they and should they be taken literally?

"Everything is possible for one who believes."

Mark 9:23

But what makes it possible for one to believe in the first place?

A Final Footnote: The exact day I finished this story was the day on which Notre Dame burned. And a day very close to Easter.

A terrible coincidence?

I myself am sure it was – but how about you?