

# ORDINARY SINS

BY KIRSTIN VALDEZ QUADE

Last night Crystal dreamed she was sitting naked on the corduroy rectory couch next to Father Paul, who was snipping at her fingers with orange-handled scissors. In the dream she was holding a prayer card on which was printed, in place of a saint, a still from her sonogram. She felt stinging cuts on her knuckles and in the webbing between her fingers, saw the warm blood running down her wrists and beading on the laminated surface of the card, but she neither cried for help nor tried to get away; she was pinned to the couch by her pregnant belly.

If the dream hadn't been so unsettling it might have been almost comical, Crystal thought now, Monday morning, as she updated the calendar of events for Our Lady of Seven Sorrows: Father Paul, so benign and solicitous and eager for approval in waking life, starring as the villain in her dream. She glanced down at her fingers typing, intact. If she told Father Paul about her dream—though she wouldn't tell him anything about her life ever again—he'd be concerned and apologetic, as if it weren't Crystal's own warped brain that had cast him in the scene. Even the thought of his concern irritated her. Any minute, Father Paul would walk into the office, and when he did she'd smile as if everything were just fine, as if their conversation on Friday had never happened.

Impressive, how efficiently her subconscious tallied, dismantled, and blended together her sins, molding them all into a tidy and disturbing little narrative as persistent and irksome as pine sap. First, on Friday, she'd been rude to Father Paul. Then, on Saturday, she'd gone to a party at a condo in a new development west of town with friends from Santa Fe High and had spent the evening sipping from other people's drinks. That was bad enough. But she'd also left with someone, a friend of a friend, ridden back to his apartment in his truck, knowing full well that he was drunk but not feeling an ounce of concern for the



babies or for herself. “I’ve never fucked a pregnant girl,” the guy had said softly, watching from the bed in his filthy bedroom as she pulled down her maternity jeans. He’d been cautious and attentive, and for as long as it lasted Crystal had felt deeply sexy and, for the first time in seven months, unburdened.

Only at dawn, once she’d slipped out into the chill and was waiting for a cab on an unfamiliar street in a tired, trucks-on-blocks kind of neighborhood, did it occur to her to worry about the babies, that they’d been squished or knocked about, polluted by his fluids. And Crystal might have been murdered—strangled, shot, beaten beyond recognition. Wasn’t murder the leading cause of death for pregnant women?

With a pang of dismay, she thought of her last checkup. She’d been given a 3-D ultrasound, the latest in prenatal imaging, the technician told her, which they were offering free because they were still training on the machine. The images were terrifying and unreal: boy and girl, fists and ears and pursed lips, bent legs stringy with tendons, alien eyes swollen shut. Everything looked yellow and cold and shiny, as if dipped in wax. “Say hello to your cuties,” the technician had said, and Crystal had watched in silence as they pulsed on the screen.

But today the babies seemed great, kicking up a storm, and she hadn’t been murdered. Saturday had been nothing more than a last hurrah, Crystal reminded herself, a harmless attempt to pretend that her life was still her own, whatever Father Paul or her mother might say. Looked at another way, the dream was even reassuring: at least Crystal *felt* guilt. At least she might think twice next time. Yes, everything was fine, and it was even nice to be back at work, away from her weekend and her nightmare, in the close clutter of the parish office, where the day was predictable, the tasks manageable—where, in theory at any rate, earnest, hopeful work was taking place all around her.

Meanwhile, the real Father Paul was late yet again, this time for his eight-o’clock premarital-counselling appointment. A young couple sat on the couch facing Collette’s desk. The man plucked at one of his sideburns with sullen impatience; the girl sat upright and glanced nervously at him. Every few minutes, Collette looked up from folding the weekly bulletins and glared at them.

From her desk in the corner, Crystal sipped her Diet Coke and watched. Collette’s bad temper was democratic in its reach and, when it wasn’t directed at Crystal, could be very entertaining. Once, when they were alone in the office, Collette had startled her by pausing at her desk and saying, darkly, that

Crystal was an example to young women, choosing life. For a moment Crystal had seen herself as Collette might: a tragic figure, a fallen woman, but, when it came down to it, contrite and virtuous, taking responsibility for her mistake. But then Collette had elaborated: “If girls are going to run around like that, they should pay.”

The young man opened his cell phone, then snapped it shut. “Eight-fifty-seven,” he said. “Jesus. I got *work* to do.”

“He’ll be here,” the girl said. She looked at Crystal and gave her a miserable, apologetic smile. She’d dressed for the appointment: black pants tight around the thighs, shirt made of a cheap stretchy satin. Her hair was down, sprayed into crispy waves around her face. A gold cross hung from her neck. Crystal imagined she’d dug it out so that Father Paul would think she was a virgin, which was what Crystal herself had done when she took the job, two years ago.

Since the arrival of Father Leon, the young Nigerian priest, three months before, Father Paul had been sleeping past his alarm. Crystal enjoyed the thought of the priests chattering away late into the night like girls at a sleepover—but the idea of humorless, aloof Father Leon saying anything that wasn’t strictly necessary defied imagination. Sometimes, to amuse herself, Crystal experimented by greeting him with wide-ranging degrees of enthusiasm, but Father Leon gave her the same solemn nod every time.

More likely, Father Paul stayed up late reading. In the afternoons Crystal cleaned the rectory, and Father Paul’s study, with its crowded, dusty shelves and uneven stacks of books, was the most difficult of her jobs. Or it would have been, if she’d ever done it properly. Usually she swiped her paper towel along the edge of the shelves and vacuumed around the papers and wool cardigans and scattered shoes and books. Church histories, Pacific naval battles, C.I.A. conspiracies. If she mentioned his books—how many he had or how busy they must keep him—Father Paul generally cracked some mild self-deprecating joke and changed the subject to television, as if out of consideration for Crystal. He loved crime shows, the same ones Crystal occasionally watched at night, in which naked young women showed up dead in hotel bathrooms. “My guilty pleasure,” Father Paul said, shrugging good-naturedly.

Crystal didn’t like thinking about a priest’s guilty pleasures. But, actually, she couldn’t see Father Paul being truly guilty of anything. Even the crime shows were part of an act, she suspected, to prove that he was a little naughty. Human. During Lent he’d made a big show of sneaking handfuls of M&M’s from

the glass bowl on Collette's desk, the woman's one concession to office niceties.

"Oh, you know me," Father Paul would say, jiggling the candy in his palm before tossing back a mouthful, and Crystal would smile gamely.

*"Half of me loves being a pirate,  
and half of me regrets it."*

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"Guess he has to have something," Collette said once after Father Paul left. "These alcoholics never get any better, just switch one thing for another. He better watch it."

Crystal had rolled her eyes. Twenty-eight years clean, Father Paul had announced last month, on his anniversary, and his air of celebration had seemed just as overblown as Collette's cynicism.

Father Paul would, as always, feel terrible about being late for the couple's appointment. He'd take off his glasses and press his thumbs into his eyes, and his lapse would probably show up in his homily, as his lapses always did. His sins were so vanilla that you almost had to wonder whether he committed them just to have something to talk about on Sundays. Even his alcoholism and his journey to recovery had been wrung of any possible drama by how thoroughly and publicly he had examined them. In the next several days he'd repeatedly bring up this morning's tardiness, and Crystal would have to tell him each time that it was an honest mistake, that everyone makes mistakes.

The young man bounced his leg, and the heavy heel of his work boot thumped. Finally, he stood. He planted his fists on the cluttered edge of Collette's desk and leaned in. "I'm not waiting around all day."

His fiancée widened her eyes. But, if he meant to intimidate, he'd picked the wrong person. Collette had worked in the parish office for years. Her tasks were menial and few, but she sat at her desk all day like a toad, grumbling in Spanish as she opened offertory envelopes and pasted labels. Though her desk was closest to the door, she did not greet people when they came in. If spoken to, she sighed, set down whatever she was working on, and looked so put-upon that, more often than not, people made hasty apologies and turned to Crystal for what they needed.

Collette jerked her porous, wrinkled chin at the young man. “You got things to do? So get away with you, then.”

When he looked at her in surprise, Collette held his gaze. “I mean it. Get out. We don’t want you here.”

The man stepped back, glanced uncertainly at the door, then at Crystal.

“Please,” the girl said, eyes filling, voice tragic. “We *have* to meet Father Paul. We’re not even done with the premarital questionnaire. The wedding’s on Saturday!”

Collette turned to Crystal. “Go find him.”

Crystal fixed her eyes on the screen and clattered away at the keyboard. “Actually, I’m in the middle of something.”

“And if he’s not there bring that Father Leon.” Collette snorted, as she always did when mentioning the new priest.

The girl’s face registered dismay, because Father Paul was beloved and Father Leon was not, but what could you do? A priest was a priest, even if he was just a pastoral vicar newly arrived from Africa, and you had to act grateful.

Now Collette said, “It’ll do that man good to socialize him. You hear me, Crystal? Go on.”

Crystal pushed herself up from her desk, tugging her shirt over her belly. “*Fine.*”

**T**he job was supposed to have been temporary, a pause before college, but here she still was, needing the money more than ever. When Crystal first started showing, she worried that she might have to leave, but to her relief her pregnancy had elicited surprisingly positive reactions, Collette notwithstanding. The ladies in the Altar Society had given her an array of miniature garments in pink and blue. Her mother, usually so needy and resentful, was pleased that Crystal had given up her apartment and moved back home. She talked incessantly about the babies, prepared plates of

protein- and calcium-rich foods, loudly beseeched God to keep them healthy. Crystal was grateful—she was—but still hated that her mother had to be involved. “Where were you, staying out all hours?” her mother asked when Crystal got home Sunday morning. “You know better. And me home alone waiting.”

But no one was as sympathetic as Father Paul. Perhaps because she was young and pregnant or because she cleaned the rectory, he was always reaching out, thanking Crystal for her hard work, taking an interest. “Anytime you need an ear or a hand,” he’d say as she Windexed the patio doors. He seemed eager for her good opinion, seemed to want her to confide in him.

Once, she had admitted that the babies’ father was out of the picture, though she hadn’t revealed how little she’d known him—another hookup, another party.

“I’m so sorry,” Father Paul had said, his eyes soft and his voice rich with empathy. Then, after a moment, “You know, the sacrament of Reconciliation is such a gift.”

When Father Leon’s arrival was announced, Crystal had expected someone energetic and progressive and possibly tiresome, setting up basketball games and youth activities and regular soup kitchens in the hall. She’d thought that the new priest might joke with her, might offer real comfort that came from his contemporary understanding of how the world actually worked.

Instead of invigorating the parish, though, Father Leon’s arrival had strained its atmosphere. “Would you believe he told me to type up his homily?” Collette had hissed, thrusting a legal pad into Father Paul’s chest. “Who does he think he is?”

“I’ll talk to him,” Father Paul had promised, but the same day he’d drawn Crystal aside and asked her to type it. “Please. As a favor to me.” So, ever since, it had fallen to her to decipher Father Leon’s slanted, feminine cursive. Each time Crystal handed Father Leon the printed pages, dense with abstractions and Biblical quotations, he murmured a wooden thank-you without looking at her, already scanning his words.

Rather than sticking to love and brotherhood and the primacy of conscience, Father Leon went right for the hot-button issues, criticizing the permissiveness of American society. “Tolerance of sin is not a Christian virtue, and homosexuality is a sin, full stop,” Father Leon had told the congregation during an

early weekday Mass. “Even in this house of God, I can smell the stink of Satan. He has found purchase in the hearts of some gathered here today.” Crystal pictured him scowling down from the pulpit, in his cassock looking like an unpleasant child forced to play dress-up.

There had been very few people present, but one of them was the president of the Altar Society, whose fourteen-year-old grandson was gay. She’d stormed into the office in a rage. “The stink of Satan? Shame on him,” she told Father Paul. “God forgive me, but that man doesn’t belong here.”

“He’s young, he’s full of ideas. He’s getting his sea legs,” Father Paul had said, looking fretful. “We’re lucky to have him, with so few young men entering the priesthood.”

Father Paul had begun to show signs of tension: the oversleeping, for one. He also seemed to have amped up his benevolence, as if to make up for Father Leon’s coldness. While Father Leon stayed shut away in his study, Father Paul always seemed to be lying in wait for Crystal when she came to clean, ready with a smile or a kind word. He was lonely, maybe, Crystal thought, or maybe, with Father Leon chipping in, he just had less to do. Over and over he offered her help, over and over he brought up Reconciliation, as if he had an urgent personal stake in her salvation.

*“Still not funny. Try jamming yourselves all together into the car.”*

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So, after months of putting it off, she’d gone to confession. But there, in the dark confessional, something had happened: Crystal had actually felt bad about not having been a virgin since she was sixteen, had almost believed that sex wasn’t completely ordinary. The sudden sense of her own remorse had made her words waver, and she was overcome by the vastness of her insult to God. She had believed truly, as she never had

before, that Father Paul—this man whose dishes she washed and laundry she folded, who left drops of urine on the toilet seat—could deliver her apology to God. She’d caught her breath and felt tears burn her eyes, until, from the other side of the screen, Father Paul had dropped into his most soothing voice. “We can hate the sin but love the sinner.”

Crystal must have been seeking punishment, humiliation, shame. She must have been trying to hold tight to her guilt or to shock him out of his infuriating tenderness, because what else could explain what came out of her mouth next? “But, Father, it wasn’t just regular sex. He went in behind, too.”

There was a long, terrible silence. Beyond the confessional, the empty church breathed and creaked. Outside, a motorcycle roared past. Crystal gripped one hand with the other. Finally she heard the unsticking of lips and Father Paul said, “Consider this a new chance, and ask God to help you be the mother your babies deserve.”

Confession was confidential, of course, and Father Paul gave no sign that he knew who had been on the other side of the screen—and, who knows, maybe he didn’t, though he’d have to be a fool not to—but Crystal couldn’t stand to be around him for weeks afterward. She felt ambushed and stupid. In the office, she kept her head behind the computer monitor when he passed through. Most afternoons Father Paul had appointments, so she cleaned the rectory when he was out.

Really, it was a miracle that she’d managed to avoid him for as long as she had. But on Friday, as she was putting the rags and detergents under the sink, Father Paul had come into the freshly mopped kitchen. He’d leaned against the counter and watched her. “You must miss the father,” he’d said, and Crystal had had to sink back on her heels and nod politely.

Father Paul furrowed his brow and the creases went all the way up his bald red head. “Even if it wasn’t the right partnership, it must pain you to be embarking on this alone. But we’re here for you.” His voice was insistent. “The parish will stand by you and your children.”

Father Paul paused. He seemed to be thinking something over, and, with a sense of vertigo, Crystal imagined him imagining her in the throes of all sorts of mortifying, sweaty exertions.

Then he crossed the damp linoleum—leaving dull footprints—and dug in his pocket. He presented her with a laminated prayer card of the Santo Niño de Atocha. “I’ve been wanting to give you this.”

Crystal turned the card in her hand, flushing. The Santo Niño: Christ Child with long dress and pilgrim’s staff, dark curls tucked under wide-brimmed hat, walking under the stars across mesas and winding among piñon. He walked so far and so long, searching for miracles to perform, that he wore the soles of



his shoes to nothing. In the chapel in Chimayo devoted to him, along with prayers and petitions and milagros, people left him children's shoes—knit booties and beaded moccasins and sneakers and patent-leather Mary Janes scuffed at the toe.

“Thanks,” she mumbled.

Father Paul smiled with relief. He waved her away, pleased with himself. “You should pray with your babies. They can hear you, you know.” He stood smiling at her for another torturously long moment, then left.

Crystal gripped the card, enraged. Who was Father Paul to tell her that her life might be saved by a child? What could he possibly know about being trapped forever by your own stupid biology? Or about the defeat of moving home, where every night your mother was on the living-room couch, suit skirt unzipped, watching a game show and eating microwaved hash browns slathered in red chile, her smelly panty-hosed feet on the coffee table?

Heartsick, Crystal thought of her old apartment, quiet and hers alone. Maybe she'd never wanted escape, college, a future, she thought bitterly. Maybe some part of her had been seeking a comforting narrowing of possibilities, an excuse to give up on her life. If this was all life was—working in the office of a small Santa Fe parish, living at home with her mother and twin babies—then it was at least manageable.

She had thrown the prayer card out, right there in the kitchen trash. She had slammed the back door, leaving the little Santo Niño with his girlish misty eyes gazing up, daring Father Paul to find him.

**N**ow, as Crystal crossed the parking lot toward the rectory, she hoped that he hadn't. She'd been bratty, throwing out his gift. Because what would she have preferred? To be scolded? To be made to sit facing the congregation each Sunday during Mass, the way pregnant girls were punished in the old days?

The wind was blowing, and leaves and dust skittered across the blacktop. It was late fall now, chilly, but Crystal was sweating through her shirt. Pregnancy had made her clammy and zitty and fat.

She flapped her arms, willing the dark spots to dry, and pushed open the back door of the rectory. She was greeted by the familiar hush and the smell of old cooking. On the stove were the gray remains of a pan-fried steak; on the counter, a sticky ice-cream carton. The sink was full of dishes—couldn't they just put them in the dishwasher?

"Father Paul?" she called. He wasn't in his study. She started down the dim carpeted hall, lightening her step out of habit as she passed Father Leon's closed study door. No matter the hour, the rectory, with its small windows and sheer drapes, always felt muted with late-afternoon light.

"Father Paul?" she called again, as much to announce herself as to find him. She hoped he wasn't still asleep. What if she had to step into his bedroom, shake him awake? She recoiled at the thought of touching his bony shoulder through his pajamas.

But, thank God, the bedroom was empty, the bed with its incongruous floral spread made in Father Paul's usual hasty way. It was a weird room, she often thought. Maybe it was a result of the vow of poverty, or the sign of a sparse personality, but there were few personal effects: a kachina, a bottle of Jergens lotion, some change, and a couple of bent collars. No boxes of letters or journals or bedside drawers to snoop through—though she'd looked once, a little. The only trace of the individual who'd slept here for decades was a photograph: Father Paul as a happy young priest standing beside a beaming woman who must be his mother, a woman who, with her high cheekbones and heavy black eyebrows, might have been a distant relative of Crystal herself.

Maybe Father Paul had dropped dead, Crystal thought with a thrill of fear. At the end of the shadowy hall, the bathroom door was open, the pink tile glowing, and she approached with reluctance. "Father Paul?" Empty.

For a long moment she stood outside Father Leon's study. For the first time Crystal wondered how it was for Father Paul, having to mediate between Father Leon and everyone else, how it was for each of them, living here so intimately with a complete stranger.

Finally, she tapped and opened the door. Father Leon looked up from his desk and frowned at her from behind his giant, smoky plastic-rimmed glasses. Barely thirty and already so stern. You wouldn't catch Father Leon admitting mistakes to the congregation. She couldn't begin to guess what went on in his

mind.

“Is this important, Miss? I am in the midst of doing my work.”

“Sorry to bother you,” Crystal said. “But have you seen Father Paul? His appointment is waiting.”

“I have not seen Father Lujan this morning.”

Father Leon would have made a much more sinister dream villain, with his thick accent and his formal English. Though this was probably racist. Crystal shifted in the doorway. “You have no idea where he is? Would you meet with the couple, then?”

Father Leon closed his eyes with forbearance.

“Sorry. Collette told me to ask.”

*“I do support your right to free  
speech—I just don’t support your  
tone.”*

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Father Leon regarded her coldly. He paused with his palms on his book, then stood. “I will go.”

“Thank you *so* much, Father Leon,” she said, her voice bright and emphatic and teetering just this side of sarcasm.

He walked past without looking at her.

In the kitchen, Crystal rinsed the dishes and loaded them into the dishwasher. She didn’t care if she was racist or not, Father Leon was a jerk. Crystal couldn’t help smiling at the thought of him baffling the couple with his accent, advising them with nervous grimness about natural family planning.

Crystal wiped the counters and rinsed the sponge, which was already slick and smelly, even though she’d just put out a new one. When she shut off the faucet, she heard Father Paul calling from somewhere in the house.

“Crystal?”

She looked in the living room—there was the couch from her dream—and down the hall. Father Paul poked his head out his bedroom door, then withdrew it.

Crystal dried her hands on a dish towel as she retraced her steps.

“Jeez, Father Paul. Where’ve you been hiding? I looked everywhere for you.”

He was in his usual black pants and shirt and collar, but barefoot, standing in the middle of his room.

Crystal hesitated in the doorway; she’d never been in the bedroom when he was there. “Are you O.K., Father Paul?”

“He’s gone, right?”

“Father Leon? He’s down at the office. Meeting with your eight-o’clock. Did you forget about them?”

“Come in, please.”

“O.K.,” Crystal said warily. The card. Had he found the card? She scanned the room again—top of the bureau, bedside table—but it wasn’t there. Could he tell that she didn’t want to go near him?

She stepped unwillingly across the threshold, but Father Paul drew her by the wrist to the closet door. “I need you to throw something away for me.” His voice was low. He pointed to a perfectly good rolling carry-on suitcase standing upright under the neat row of black shirts and pants.

“Throw that away? But why?” She hoped it wasn’t infested with bedbugs or fleas.

He cleared his throat, seeming to reach for some authority. “Just put it in the dumpster, Crystal.” He extended the handle and pushed the suitcase at her. Inside, something clinked softly.

“What’s in there, Father Paul? I can’t just—” What crime was she being asked to cover up?

“Don’t look inside,” he said, but he made no move to stop her when she lowered herself with difficulty and drew the zipper.

The suitcase was filled with empty vodka bottles. Nearly all were glass minis, but there were also several cheap plastic fifths. Taaka, Empire, Neva.

“Father Paul,” Crystal said carefully, standing. “You’ve been clean twenty-eight years.”

He inclined his head with exaggerated patience. “Yes, Crystal. That is why I need you to get rid of this.”

She sniffed. She’d never smelled liquor on him, but you never really got that close to a priest, did you? “Have you been drinking this morning?” she asked, but Father Paul just gave her a withering look.

“Do you need me to get Collette? Let me get Collette.” Collette would know what to do. She’d snort and scoff and put Father Paul right.

“No! Listen to me. I can’t trust anyone else. You know why he’s here, don’t you? To force me out.”

“Father Leon? That’s silly. Father Leon could never replace you.” She tried to envision the young priest plotting in his study and laughed a little. “Father Paul, honestly, no one even likes him. You *are* the parish.”

Father Paul took off his glasses and rubbed first one lens then the other on his shirt. Without the glasses, his eyes looked small and red, the skin around them wrinkled, shiny, thin. He pinched a lens between his thumb and forefinger. “Let me explain something to you, Crystal. When the bishop makes these assignments, he makes them for a reason. That man”—he jutted his chin toward the door—“the Church in Nigeria, in Africa in general, it’s very . . . traditional. The fact is, they think I’m weak, and they’ve sent him to ruin me.”

“That can’t be.” Crystal supposed what he said was plausible. “The Da Vinci Code,” the sex-abuse scandals: everyone knew the Church could be ruthless. “No one wants to hurt you, Father Paul,” she said without conviction.

He replaced the glasses over his closed eyes and seemed to come to a decision. “The fact is, I don’t even know that *I’m* the one drinking. I’m telling you, that man is like a cat, playing his mind games.”

“What?”

“I’ve tried locking the door, but he gets in. I wake up and the bottles are there, and I can feel it in my system. I know he’s been here.”

“Come on, Father Paul,” Crystal said sharply. What was he saying—that Father Leon was creeping into his bedroom at night, plying him with liquor? Or that Father Leon was deploying some dark sorcery?

“You don’t believe me. Fine.”

Could he possibly believe himself? No one could sleep through that. And, however odd and standoffish Father Leon might be, she didn’t think he was malicious. Or stupid enough to force liquor down his superior’s throat after a few weeks on the job. Which meant that Father Paul was either lying or out of his mind. But she could think of no reason for him to lie; he could easily throw the bottles away in the dead of night. Why seek her out and show her the bottles unless he truly believed he was in danger? This was crazy—and cruel, too, Crystal thought with a rush of outrage, scapegoating a friendless, homesick man. Moments ago, sitting behind his big desk, Father Leon had just looked young and alone. No wonder he hid out in his study.

She thought of Collette’s grim warning that alcoholics never recovered. Had Father Paul spent the past twenty-eight years craving self-destruction, pulling back at the last minute each time? Maybe with Father Leon here to share duties, he’d let himself go—just an occasional sip at first, and then everything slid out from under him, leaving him to retreat into this insane story, paranoid and ashamed with his stash of empties.

Crystal flushed with irritation. Why couldn’t Father Paul just admit that he’d fallen off the wagon? Why this elaborate ruse? All that hoopla over being late, as if his minor sins needed so much more forgiveness than Crystal’s major ones, as if Crystal were expected to screw up, whereas it was a big fucking deal when he did. He couldn’t help proving to her just how bad she was, lording it over her, shoving it in her face. It wasn’t enough that she’d had to humiliate herself in confession? She had to humor him, too? “I’m going to get Collette,” she said.

“No! You can’t leave.” His voice dropped again. Father Paul reached for her arm, but she dodged his touch. “You have to help me. I’ve helped you.”

Crystal stepped back, looked around the room. “O.K. Fine. I’ll throw away your suitcase.”

Gladness lit through her at the prospect of escape. She’d walk briskly across the carpet, rolling the suitcase behind her, like a businesswoman at the airport. Down the back steps, and then she’d be outside in the cool day, free from the oppressive hush of the rectory, free from Father Paul and whatever demons had caught hold of him. “It’ll be O.K.,” she promised. The cheer in her voice was genuine. “Maybe get a bite to eat, splash some water on your face.”

He looked her up and down, his mouth tense. Some new emotion had shifted his expression—dissatisfaction that he hadn’t convinced her of Father Leon’s treachery, perhaps, or disappointment at her eagerness to leave.

*“And how does it make you feel  
when she jumps over you and calls  
you a lazy dog?”*

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“Why do you keep avoiding me, after all I’ve done?”

Now he was looking not at her but at the sun-faded framed poster above her shoulder: the Pietà, a souvenir from someone’s long-ago trip to St. Peter’s Basilica. “You know,” he said calmly, “Father Leon doesn’t like you.”

“I know,” she said, though she hadn’t known, not exactly.

“He said we should let you go. He didn’t want you sitting in the front office.” Father Paul straightened now, oddly pleased.

Earlier, then, when Father Leon had glared at her from behind his desk, he hadn’t been merely irritated at the interruption; she saw now that he’d been horrified by her messy fecundity. No real surprise, but, still, Crystal had let herself believe that her body didn’t matter. She’d let herself believe that it was irrelevant to her work, that she was safe here and forgiven.

The real surprise, though, was that Father Paul wanted to hurt her. Courteous, heedful, absurd Father Paul. Father Paul, who saw pain in every face and gesture, whether it was there or not, wanted to hurt her, and that was what stung. She'd thought that she could disdain Father Paul's kindness, and that it would somehow remain intact: unconditional, holy, and inhuman. Astonishing that she had been capable of such faith.

"Well, who does that man think he is, telling us how to do things? I defended you. I put myself on the line for you." His tone was wheedling. "I gave you the Santo Niño, too. Did you know the Santo Niño was my mother's favorite?" He stuck out his chin, defiant. "Once a week she went to the Santuario in Chimayo. Used to walk there every Good Friday."

"It was nice of you to give me the card," Crystal said, regarding him with loathing. "I appreciated that."

They stood facing each other, and time held steady. All her speculation, and Crystal didn't know the first thing about this man. Then Father Paul bent suddenly at the waist, gasping like a sprinter.

When he rose, his face was purple. He backed against the wall, pushing against it with his palms as if it might relent and absorb him. "Forgive me. I never should have said any of that." He slid to the floor. His black pants tugged up, and his head drooped to his knees.

"I forgive you." Her voice was cold.

"Forgiveness," Father Paul said, as though the word disgusted him. "Forgiveness is a drug, too. Believe me. You can forgive and forgive until you're high on it and you can't stop. It'll numb you as much as any of that stuff." He extended his foot and kicked the suitcase, which tipped, spilling bottles onto the carpet.

Crystal had the drowning sense that she'd lost track of what they were talking about.

"I know you don't like me," Father Paul said, looking up at her.

And what could Crystal say? *Don't be silly. Of course I do.* And then there she'd be, lying to a priest.

She should leave, go back to the office and pretend that none of this had happened. Instead, she crossed the room and sat beside him.



“Please just hold me?” He looked at her as if asking permission, and when she neither gave nor withheld it, he leaned into her and rested his head on her shoulder.

She might have expected to be filled with a deep, sexual revulsion, but she wasn’t. She didn’t touch him, but she didn’t push him away, either. Instead, Crystal placed her head against the wall and waited.

Inside her, the babies stirred. She remembered the weekend and the icy horror that had swamped her when she realized how she’d put them at risk. She remembered the ultrasound stills, how she’d studied them, straining to connect the images to children, to her children, children who would come to shape her life. “Have you picked names?” the guy had asked Saturday night. She’d pretended to be asleep so that she wouldn’t have to lie. Where were her instincts? Where was the biological imperative to keep them safe? There must be some blockage, some deep damage that left her so cold.

Crystal saw herself standing on that ratty street at dawn, waiting for the cab to take her away from her mistake. But instead of the cab it was the Santo Niño who would find her. The soles of his shoes would be worn away, his little toes poking through the leather. He would take Crystal’s hand in his pudgy one and lead her home. It was a lovely notion, and Crystal almost allowed herself to sink into it.

But no. Crystal saw that she had misunderstood. In giving her the Santo Niño, Father Paul hadn’t meant that He would save *her*. And he hadn’t meant that the twins would save her, either. Even Father Paul, with all his hope, knew better. Instead, he’d been offering the prayer that the Santo Niño might save those babies from whatever Crystal was bound to do to them.

Father Paul’s head was heavy, and she could smell his scalp: a warm, sour smell. For a moment in confession, she’d believed that he could absolve her. And, even now that he was diminished and trembling and possibly insane, part of her still believed.

“I don’t even talk to them,” Crystal said.

Father Paul took a deep, shuddering breath, like a child calming himself after a long cry.

The sun filtered through the lace curtains above their heads. The window’s reflection was a mottled square of light on the glass of the framed poster, obscuring the image.

Crystal saw that who she was didn't matter to Father Paul, that in his mind she'd turned into something else completely. Mary Magdalene, maybe: the whore who instead of washing His feet Cloroxed the bathroom. Or the Virgin up there on the wall, holding her dead adult son across her lap. Father Paul's own mother, even. And, for reasons she didn't understand, Crystal didn't resent this. Maybe later she would; maybe in a day, or in an hour, she'd feel compromised and used, and would hate Father Paul for it; but right now it seemed so easy to sit with him. The relief was astonishing, that Crystal could be the kind of person who might meet another person's need.

She watched the square of light in the glass. She breathed, and Father Paul breathed, and she felt the babies shift, navigating the tight space inside her.

And then, on the other side of the rectory, the back door opened and slammed shut. Father Leon's steps crossed the kitchen linoleum. On his way to his study, he would pass Father Paul's open door. He would see the suitcase, the strewn bottles, the two of them nearly embracing on the bedroom floor.

Father Leon would look from one to the other, his expression shading from perplexed to angry, but his gaze would rest on Crystal, because he would understand that she was guilty of something that she couldn't deny or put into words.

Crystal considered pulling away. There was still time. She might still hide the evidence, meet Father Leon casually in the hall, dish towel in hand. Beside her, she felt Father Paul tense and push his face into her shoulder.

"You're fine," Crystal said. She placed her hand over Father Paul's, but she was picturing her babies. Sheer skin, warm tangled limbs, tiny blue beating hearts. "You're fine." ♦

