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In the wake of Sparrow

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In the wake of Sparrow

Leaning a calloused elbow on the beer-soaked towel draped across the bar at the Builder's Arms, limping out final weeks before it fell to the hipsters' hammer, Shirl confessed, "Sparrow wasn't exactly my fella, y'understand, Father. We both had others. Together we was a bit fiery. When Sparrow was in the grip of the sting, I skedaddled." A flickering neon light illuminated her skin, spidered with bleeds where she'd scrubbed at the in-ground dirt.

If only I'd overruled her objections to my shouting her lunch.

But whilst her *I don't have the fancy clothes* protest had been overcome with a shopping trip, her unspoken *Doors to fancy places are closed to my sort* was an obstacle I couldn't hurdle.

Yet for all Shirl looked like she, too, was limping out last days, her wheeze was more earnest than a preacher's Alleluia. "Send Sparrow off with some frills, Father. While he lived, he got nothing but shit."

"We'll farewell Sparrow with every frill I can think of," I'd promised. The last thing I could do for the old street warrior.

How easy it would have been to cut corners. Who'd listen if my street flock complained? Indeed, how easy would it be to succumb to their own low expectations? For as Shirl had explained when I'd organised a boycott of a slum landlord gouging most of their pension for an earwig-infested room, "Don't sweat it, Father. Sparrow and me, we're not used to much."

Determined I was, on the day of Sparrow's funeral, to get from my room above the greengrocer's to the church before the mourners did. Determined to fire the heaters up and thaw the poor buggers out; to get the urn in the gathering-room warming for a cuppa afterwards.

But as I crunched the ice-spiked grass of the manicured lawn, I spotted huddles of shabby jackets congregated beneath the eaves of Our Lady of Sorrows. Like an impoverished aristocrat clinging to his last vestige of respectability, Paperboy-Billy had donned a tie over his holey jumper.

My veins stuttered on the ice of resentment, colder than the July rain. Would the bloody parish priest leave his collection-plate filling parishioners out in the drizzle when they gathered for the requiem of one of their own?

“Morning Father. Morning,” the huddle chorused. They pinched their smokes between yellowed thumbs and forefingers and stashed the stubs in their pockets.

“Down to street blend, is it, folks?” They smiled as one. “Sorry. I asked someone...” I jiggled the doorknob and sighed, “I’ll fetch the key”.

I grinned at Paperboy’s grumbled, “Father’d disorganise a public shithouse,” followed by urgent whispers of, “Shut it, Paperboy. Where’s ya respect?” and “It’s a church, ya’ mongrel”.

Out of sight, my grins morphed to scowls, and I trod to the presbytery to the rhythm of dark mutterings. This time, I’d tell that parish priest, “You wanna be a good shepherd? Get out and smell like the sheep.”

Seventy-times-seven for forgiveness was beginning to feel like an under-estimate.

To retrieve the key. How could something so simple thrust a knock-about priest into such a frenzy? Yet the hand that reached for the presbytery bell trembled more than a curate’s presiding over his first Mass.

An agonised creaking halted my finger just before it pressed. I peered into the darkness beyond the thick screen and dredged my most cheerful voice. “Just collecting the _”

The heavy door groaned open wider. A voice as thin and urgent as the peep of a baby bird piped, “Hello, Father”. The sight of the still-as-a-plaster-statue little boy in school uniform, clutching a bag emblazoned with a spider-man poised to pounce, burnt like acid thrown on my heart.

While I stood frozen, the child slipped past, leapt down the steps and ran.

It must have taken thirty seconds for my feet to sync with my racing heart.

And then I, too, ran. Round the corner of the old brick monolith, past stained-glass windows fortified with iron grilles against vengeance wreckers. All the time, I called “Please stop...I can help”. Called “You’re not in any trouble...Believe me, please”. Called until I was hoarse. Re-traced my steps. Thrashed through shrubs and trampled flowerbeds to scan the dense branches of pine trees. Peered behind columns and into dark crevices of the grotto where a flat-featured Virgin Mary’s exposed heart bled for the child in her arms who would grow up to beckon ‘little children to come unto him’.

But where the brick fortress met the road and still no sign, I knew I'd lost him. Bile scorched my throat and I crouched, heaving and sobbing into a lantana bush.

It was the blood trickling from grazes on hands and forehead that brought me back.

I remembered then, the other lost, shivering and spluttering and stomping their frozen feet. Their endless endurance.

As I plodded back, that hollow prayer *Oh no. Let it not be so* twitched around my lips. I forced it down. It was so. All the charges of neglect and ambition I had levelled (and tried to dismiss as a bitter product of my jealousy's malice at work against the parish priest destined for greatness,) faded in the glare of this, his terrible cruelty. His crime.

Back in the presbytery, I hurled his stapler against the wall and swept his files across the carpet.

The keys weren't on the desk; nor had they been flung on the hallstand.

I must confront him. Yes, I'd take the bastard on. This time, I would do it.

This time...oh my God, how?

Do I smash his handsome face to pulp? Report him to our archbishop?

Or do I tap and call for the keys?

I tapped. I called, "Father".

A minute and a murmur later, the parish priest marked out for great things poked his face around his half-opened door. Thick lips curled over an insolent "Catch if you can," as he tossed me the keys.

This time...this time, I'd cringe down the stairs and mutter my outrage to the wind.

The key refused to align with the lock. It slipped and grated until Paperboy, his tone softened, said, "You look like you've seen a ghost, Father, or gone ten rounds with Dracula," seized the key and let us all into the vestibule.

Past Sparrow's coffin the mourners tiptoed, pausing to touch the wood with gentle, gnarled fingers. As I pulled on my chasuble, Shirl laid a wreath of tired roses, and my self-styled altar-boy Paperboy confided, "Shirl ripped them flowers off a grave yesterday".

Which Bell sister, Ding or Dong, minced down the aisle to take her seat at the organ, I couldn't be sure. Probably Ding. The incense got her nod of approval. The motley congregation I'd paid her my week's stipend to play for, got her prim back.

Shirl had said she'd read. "Ahem," she hawked as she shuffled up behind the lectern. She peered at the yellowed page. She shifted from right to left foot. Her grog-bleared eyes

filled, and she shook her head. And I cursed my thoughtlessness. But before I could offer to read the tiny print, Shirl volunteered, "I'll tell it, Father? I know it real well."

With gruff eloquence, she began. "Consider the sparrows. They've got no shed to store their seeds in. What's worse, they've got no paddock to grow seeds in. Yet God feeds them. And not one of them falls to the ground. 'Cos the Lord hath said: 'I've counted your sparrow feathers, and I've numbered the hairs on your head.'"

When breathlessness halted her, I stepped up and declared, "The word of the Lord."

But Shirl was just warming up. "I don't always understand you, Lord," she cried, clasping her hands in prayer. "Maybe I got the wrong end of the stick, but you let Sparrow fall."

Ding swivelled on her organ stool to mouth a disgusted "STOP THIS" as Shirl pleaded, "Why d'you reckon that is, Father? That the Lord lets some fall? We trust him and he breaks his promise."

In part, it was their earnest eyes boring into me; in part, it was the pursed lips of Ding that goaded me into speaking. But mostly it was the little boy I'd lost who compelled me to confess: "I don't know so much that the Lord has broken his promise. I reckon it might be that some of us, myself included, don't play our part in looking after people. We let ourselves get tied up in knots. Get snagged in the tangles of our miseries and confusions. Fear of the price to be paid if we act, paralyses us."

At their cries of, "No Father, you do look after us," I recollected that I was there to comfort them, not them to reassure me. So we gathered our pain, pushed through to the end, and processioned out to Sparrow's footy team anthem belted out so loud, it drowned Ding's tutt-tutting and stool-scraping.

Tea and biscuits in the foyer weren't doing much to thaw the mood, so we re-convened in the Builder's Arms where a round of drinks did the trick. Seated at a scratched old table, smiling at the old jokes, I chastised myself for not being fully present. Wasn't that always the way for these men and women of the street? Forever making do with hand-me-downs and, even from those charged with caring, the dregs of their time?

Yet a scene playing out in my mind was stuck on repeat. Not a scene at which I'd been present, but a vivid horror movie, nevertheless. All the more horrid because it was founded on actual events.

My friend Ernie, a priest devoted to the refugees who clustered in inner-city high-rises, had been summoned to Bishop's Palace some months before.

Strange, Fr Ernie told me, how a great calm settled upon him. The calm of the condemned, of one who was about to lose all he valued, yet knew he had done his best work in the losing of it.

Through the blooming garden he'd tramped, to be greeted by the secretary who stuttered, "I'll l-l-let His Grace know you're here," as she ushered him into a tomlined study of canon law treatises, where a silver teapot glinted on a mahogany table.

His Grace's eyes were slits; his manner was jovial. He alluded to reports that Ernie had sold off a jewelled chalice to fund a promising young refugee's cricket coaching.

How would it go for me if I were summoned? His Grace might say, "Hear you've been playing footy anthems down at Sorrows? And you've handed the homily over to our homeless sister?"

That'd be Ding reporting along the spy network.

At this stage, tension might ease its grip on my shoulders, and like Ernie, I might wash half a sandwich down with a second cuppa. For Ding's revelations were nothing I couldn't handle. I'd promise to do better. No more footy songs in church. I'd pour myself another cuppa and wonder if I might engage his Grace in a conversation about his team's soaring fortunes.

"Hmmm."

Fr Ernie had tried every diversion, but still the conversation faltered. The tips of his Grace's long fingers met in a pyramid, a peaked roof. Despite the lively fire in the grate, shivering seized Ernie. His tea turned rancid and the three-layered, crustless sandwiches morphed to cardboard.

Chalices traded for cricket gear were just the warm-up act.

Accusations cannoned out of our archbishop. "My edict – report suspected abuse to me." "Keep family issues in-house." "Keep police out." "We're under siege – in the media, the community." "Don't give them ammunition."

The words bored into Ernie, swelling the outrage already festering until it exploded out of him in sobbing bullets. "I reported abuse to you once, your Grace. The bastard turned up in a western suburbs parish – to hurt children all over –."

With his beringed hand, His Grace sliced the air and for some minutes, they sat in silence. The ticking of the antique clock marked the countdown to sentencing.

Then our leader rose, drew himself upright, took up his mitre and faced the map of the city adorning one wall. Minutes, he spent studying it. With his back to Ernie, he finally

spoke – in a strangely conciliatory tone. “You told me once, Father, your life’s work is with the city’s refugees? You were ordained to serve them? Yes?”

“Yes,” Ernie managed.

The tip of his Grace’s gold mitre hovered over the map and settled on a suburb so outer it grazed the red line denoting the diocesan boundary. “Pack your things, Father Ernie. Tomorrow morning, report here for parish duties” and he tapped a satellite town, recently carved out of farmland. “I want you as far out of my sight as I can send you.”

Like all who have disobeyed orders in a warzone where blind loyalty is demanded, I too would face the firing squad.

But oh, this poor flock. Who will love them if I go?

Let this cup pass me by, I was praying when Shirl tugged at my sleeve. “You payin’ attention, Father?”

Red-faced Paperboy was about to launch the wake with a poem he’d written especially. He straightened his tie and rapped on the wooden table with his beer glass. Someone pushed a fortifying drink towards him, but he shook his head and grunted, “I need to concentrate.”

Gravel-voiced, the Bard of the Builders’ Arms introduced his offering. “This is for Sparrow, an argumentative bastard if ever there was one, who thought he was indestructible. And who’s let us all down on that score:

Into the depths of the aqua sky

Went Sparrow from Killroy

Paperboy’s car no longer his abode

Deep in the mists of time he rode

No boss, No doss, No fucking loss

To those below

“Who’s bein’ disrespectful again?” demanded Shirl when the laughter died. “Youse, yes even you Father, show some reverence for the dead.”

That was when I should have gone down on my knees and washed her feet with my tears. I had not earned that ‘even you, Father’. Wallowing in terrors that trumped any pursuit of justice, I was the least worthy of all at the Builder’s Arms.

“It’s just a bit of fun, Shirl. Sparrow was Irish. He’d be enjoying an irreverent wake,” I assured her, and she slumped back and submitted to the merriment.

“I made another poem...a respectful one.” When Shirl gave the nod, Paperboy sang his composition as if it were a love song.

*Sparrow was only a boy from Killroy
His mother's pride and his father's joy – not!
He drank his plonk and sting with zest;
McWilliams, he thought was the very best;
Then he took a last nip and went for a trip
With a tag on his toe for a ticket*

Reminded of why we'd gathered, a pall descended. Tormented by the blank spots on Sparrow's death certificate, I seized this last chance to wheedle the story of Sparrow's name from Shirl.

Lubricated with liquor, Shirl's tongue loosened. “Sparrow reckoned he was like a sparrow...like THE sparrow,” she corrected herself. “From the story – about the drought. Sparrow and Bluetit were slumped on a withered tree, when a farmer, a rich fella who could buy in feed, dumped a pile of dung. Full of undigested grain, it was.

Well, the moment Farmer had shuffled off in his gumboots. Sparrow and Bluetit fluttered down and gobbled belly-fulls of the stinking stuff. Afterwards, Sparrow crawled to the fence and slept. But old Bluetit flew up, singing joyfully. Of course, a hungry hawk heard, fell on him and scoffed him down, didn't he?”

Shirl leaned in. “Sparrow reckoned he was like that sparrow – he might have had to eat shit, but he didn't have to sing about it.”

Yes, Sparrow was, to the last, a defiant old man. I'd bailed him recently, after an arrest for drunk and disorderly, and the black eye he sported told me that, stuffed as he was after years on skid-row, the police hadn't taken him in without a fight.

“He must have belonged to someone – sometime. Is there anything about his name to help trace some rels?”

“Phillips? Name of his last foster family – kicked him out when he was twelve.”

“Sent him spiralling, Shirl?”

“No, Father, he was well gone before they booted him. ‘Incorrigible,’ they said. It's what the magistrate who sentenced him to his first stint in juvey called him, too. What set him off was the bloke who fiddled with him. Abused him from when he was a wee nipper.”

The dread I'd been swallowing for hours rose again. “A priest?” I whispered.

“A priest? No bloody way. Priests was always good to Sparrow. It were his old man what molested him. Sort of thing that, scratch the surface, you’ll find in nearly all our stories...Why Father? You’ve gone green.”

“So, it wasn’t a priest?”

“Sparrow cherished his faith. Reckoned Mass was the only place in this city where he was welcomed. Not chased away. Said you lot were the only ones he could trust... you’d always give him a feed. Not that he begged much. More a hustler. Reckoned some would line up for anything, even if it were only a shit sandwich on offer.”

“Shirl, there’s something I gotta do. I’m sorry. So sorry.”

As I settled the tab, I glimpsed her bewildered face and even from a distance, I could see hurt clouding her eyes. But I had lost too many moments. I could not lose this one.

At the crossroads, I gazed at our bishop’s white mansion atop a hill, then turned away and trod the unforgiving concrete path in the opposite direction.

As I stepped up to the door of the police station, I whispered, “Unforgivably late for you, Sparrow, for whom we were the ones you could trust; pitifully little for a school-boy, who found out we weren’t; but for the other sparrows of our city, it’s one less monstrous hawk to prey upon you.”