CONFESSION

Rev. Devon Murphy was a Catholic priest at St. Adolphus Church in the town of Ashtigo -- population 1,747 and declining -- located in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, about a mile inland from the blustery shores of Lake Superior.

But "Father Murph," as his parishioners casually nicknamed him, was getting tired.

A priest for the past thirty-four years, Father Murphy had recently celebrated his fifty-ninth birthday. Inwardly, however, it was not a happy occasion for him. His gray hair was thinning and receding. His feet hurt. He was getting more and more paunchy. Arthritis in his hands made him worry that, sooner or later, he might not be able to properly elevate the communion host and chalice during their sacred Consecration. Plus, the number of his active parishioners had dwindled to less than two-hundred. Daily Mass had to be eliminated, with only a Sunday service remaining. Father Murph now needed to travel to the nearby communities of Grand Marais, Au Train, and Munising to administer the sacraments on a rotating basis at their tiny churches. It was a grind -- Masses, confessions, a few weddings, visiting the sick, lots of funerals, and even an increasingly rare Baptism.

Ashtigo was once a thriving community of burly northwoods lumberjacks and the devout Catholic descendents of French-Canadian fur trappers. But those jobs went away when the lumber mills closed decades ago, and most of the people went with them. Now, the town was a sad remnant of its glory days -- consisting of aged retirees and young, unemployed loners who succumbed to drug abuse (mostly fentanyl or crack cocaine) and alcoholism while living on government assistance. Meanwhile, the two taverns in town were usually full, with bored locals having nothing better to do than drink and bitch about virtually everything. Only the warm summers brought out visiting sportsmen -- fishing for plentiful walleye and northern pike -- while hunters drifted in during white-tailed deer season.

Ashtigo was indeed a working class 'flannel shirt - gun rack in the truck - mounted antlered heads and huge fish over the bar or fireplace' kind of town. But the winters here were brutal -- lasting most of eight months every year -- with dreary, gray skies weeks on end, and their accompanying arctic blasts, freezing rain, snow blizzards,' cabin fever,' and despair.

Father Murphy had long ago abandoned his fantasy about rising in the priestly ranks through hard work and some rewarded 'connections' and become an influential Cardinal someday, ideally in Rome itself. However, even he sometimes doubted his own religious faith when overwhelmed with dark bouts of depression and apathy. At such times, though, the aging priest realized that this was just his own personal suffering -- his private 'cross to bear' -- and thus he tried to make the best of his assigned lot in life. Afterwards, Father Murphy prayed intensely to Jesus for mercy and guidance every night before going to bed.

One dismal early February Sunday, after serving Mass (his exhausting fourth time that day) for less than two dozen people at Holy Rosary Church in Grand Marais, Father Murphy was scheduled to hear confessions. (Although the Catholic Church had renamed Confession as the 'Sacrament of Reconciliation,' and provided the opportunity to sit face-to-face in private with a priest to confess one's sins and then be granted absolution, most parishioners still preferred the more secretive and traditional confession booth.)

Father Murph took up his position behind a thick, purple curtain, wearily sat down, and opened the sliding screen panel to hear the first person's confession on the other side of the wooden separation lattice. The listening priest could see the dim silhouette of the parishioner, while the kneeling person making the confession could see only the vague shape of the seated priest. (Of course, Father Murphy could recognize the voice of each penitent by now, and those confessing knew exactly who was the attending priest.) The worn oak booth smelled faintly of church incense residue and some kind of old furniture polish.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been one month since my last confession..." began the first penitent, an elderly woman the priest knew as Dolores. She went on to dutifully list her simple transgressions.

Most confessed sins were of the 'venial' or minor category: lying, impure thoughts, losing one's temper to anger, drunkenness, jealousy, malicious gossip, disobedience to authority, etc. But other sins -- much rarer -- were categorized as 'mortal' or deadly sins, which threatened to endanger one's very soul and could condemn one to everlasting Hell if not forgiven: infidelity, fornication, rape, murder, large monetary embezzlement, or even denunciation of God Himself.

Father Murphy had heard most of humanity's sorry sins over the decades. Such spiritual transgressions repeated themselves time and again. In fact, they became almost boringly routine and predictable. Our flawed species is endlessly plagued with Original Sin, Devon sadly concluded. Another well-known priestly ordeal when sitting in the confessional was having to occasionally endure the sour bad breath, or alcohol fumes from drinkers, or the wheezing of tobacco addicts, wafting through the porous wooden grating.

For penance, Father Murph prescribed the standard saying the rosary daily for a week, or saying multiples of the 'Our Father' or 'Hail Mary' prayers, after the penitent made a good Act of Contrition. The priest then absolved them in God's name, blessed them, and advised them to "go and sin no more."

After today's fourth confession session, though, Father Murphy's mind was starting to drift, and he was beginning to think about lunch after his stomach began growling with hunger. But suddenly, a new voice he didn't recognize entered the booth and spoke.

"Bless me, Father, for I have greatly sinned. It has been about twenty years since my last confession," the strange male voice nervously admitted.

"Why did you stay away so long, my son?" the priest gently asked, immediately perking up. "God always welcomes us back with love and forgiveness, regardless of what we have done in our lives."

"I did something terrible, Father. I had to finally tell someone. Keeping it inside was eating me alive."

"Please tell me, then, what happened."

"Two years ago...those three nuns that were strangled to death in Wisconsin? You see, Father, it was me...I was the one who killed them." The man's voice cracked.

Father Murphy vividly remembered the heinous, senseless crime that stunned the nation. Three young novice Carmelite nuns had been murdered in their convent in rural Shawano, Wisconsin. They were innocently left behind while their seventeen older sisters traveled to a necessary religious conference in Green Bay, about thirty-three miles east. The case was never solved, and the killer (or killers) never found. There were no eyewitnesses, and the only clues found were a few strands of dark male hair on the carpeting in one of the nun's rooms. The victims had been trussed -- wrists and ankles -- with ordinary clothesline rope, their mouths silenced with silver duct tape, and their eyes blindfolded with their own removed black stockings. They were not sexually molested, but all three had been slowly choked to death with the murderer's bare hands.

Yet here, right across from him in a confession booth, was an anonymous man who just claimed that he did that horrific deed!

"Did you go to the police? You must turn yourself in right away," the priest urgently pleaded. "This is both for the moral justice of the law and for the forgiveness of God. Do you realize how important this is, my son? You must do this!"

But there was no response. The priest repeated himself, but still, there was silence.

Then the mystery voice said, "I'll think about it, Father. I'll try to come back later sometime."

However, when Father Murphy -- unsatisfied --quickly got up to meet and discuss matters further with his visitor, ready to offer the privacy of the nearby rectory building, he discovered that the unidentified man had already left the church. The priest had no clue as to the man's age, facial features, physical build, what clothing he was wearing, or any other descriptors. Father Murph rushed outside the church, but saw no rapidly departing vehicle or person fleeing on foot.

All that evening, the priest pondered what to do. He decided the following morning to drive the two hours west to Marquette -- the largest city in Michigan's U.P. -- and discuss the matter in person with his church superior, Monsignor Xavier O'Conner.

The drive was hazardous on the recently plowed but still icy roads through the cold and silent pine forests. Devon prayed that his battered but trusty green Volvo would make the trip safely. At least the Swedes built a sturdy car with a dependable heater, he mused, while listening to local AM talk radio. The country was going to hell, was the general call-in consensus. Yep, the priest agreed. If only people would faithfully keep to the teachings of the Bible, life would be so much better for everybody, he believed.

Once in Marquette, Father Murphy went directly to the castle-like headquarters building of the Catholic Church there. Over welcomed hot coffee, he explained to his superior what had transpired in the confessional the day before.

"Well, Devon, this is a serious matter, to be sure," Monsignor O'Conner stated, with his still-noticeable, slight Irish accent. "You know that we can never disclose any sins confessed in confidentiality once inside our Church. We cannot inform the police, for example, in this case. All we can do is urge the sinner to turn himself in to the proper authorities. You could accompany the suspect to the police for spiritual support if you like. But that is all that our Canon Law allows."

Needing to follow the usual reporting procedures of the rigid Catholic hierarchy, Xavier next telephoned the leading prelate in Michigan, Archbishop Patrick Cleary, in Lansing, for any further discussion or advice. After outlining the situation, the Monsignor listened carefully to his superior, then thanked the Archbishop and ended the call. Turning to Devon, Xavier revealed, "He agrees with what you and I had earlier discussed. 100% confidentiality of any sins, however terrible -- when given in official Church confession -- is absolute. But Cleary added that nothing is to be said to the press at this time, unless the person somehow reappears in your confession box and later turns himself into the police, and you are asked how you came upon him. The Archbishop stressed that the Church cannot afford any negative publicity or false speculation regarding a still notorious and unsolved crime. That's it."

Father Murphy drove back to his home parish rectory at St. Adolphus in Ashtigo. He only hoped that the mysterious confessor would come back, and repent.

Weeks passed, with nothing.

Then, on a drizzly noontime in early April, again at Holy Rosary Church in Grand Marais, the stranger suddenly reappeared while Father Murph was hearing confessions after Sunday Mass.

"Bless me Father, for I have greatly sinned..." the familiar voice began again. "I have thought about what you said the last time we talked, and I'm ready now to turn myself in," he confessed. The man agreed to meet face-to-face with the priest outside at the adjoining rectory when Father Murph was finished with his confessions for the day.

The priest later noticed that the stranger was in his mid-30s, of average height and build, clean-shaven, with dark brown hair and hazel eyes. He looked more like an innocent, adult version of a classic altar boy, the priest thought, and was certainly not the fearsome image of a suspected mass-murderer. The man gave his name as Dwight Lindsay.

The two men talked briefly, but Father Murphy didn't press his visitor about why he committed the crimes. He wanted to drive instead a half-hour to the larger-than-Ashtigo police department in Munising and deposit the self-confessed killer into custody.

The police read Dwight Lindsay his rights to an attorney, then questioned him. He willfully outlined on video how the murders were committed, but refused to say exactly why he killed the three novice nuns. He silently signed a written transcript confession. A few strands of his hair were collected with Dwight's permission, then examined for DNA, to compare his with those fibers which were found at the convent crime scene.

They matched.

A court-appointed attorney, Sherry Curett, was provided. She soon realized that this case was a lost cause: this guy was going one-way to the Death House. The entire saga was soon leaked to the media, which caused the expected storm of frenzied news coverage -- first in Michigan, then nationwide. But Dwight Lindsay refused all requests for media interviews. The only outside person who was approved to visit him by his own request was Father Devon Murphy.

The trial was fast-tracked, and held in the western Upper Peninsula town of Baraga. The jury found him -- Dwight being calm and unemotional -- guilty on three counts of murder, and Judge Charles Forester sentenced Lindsay to death without appeal in the state's gas chamber at the Standish Max (Level V) Correctional Facility. Sentence to be executed within twelve months.

Father Murph visited Dwight twice a month, to pray with him and offer any encouraging spiritual comfort. But Dwight was more a listener than a talker, and the priest found out little about the young man's background or his thoughts.

The Ashtigo priest, however, was shocked -- as was the press, and the other prison inmates and staff -- when Lindsay unexpectedly died while suffering a seizure in his solitary cell one stormy night. Some folks were outraged that the brutal killer had been cheated of an agonizing death in the gas chamber, but most people were simply glad that he was finally gone off the earth. An autopsy later revealed that Dwight had died of a cancerous brain tumor.

Father Murphy was chosen to preside and offer a few prayers over the burial of the convict's cremated remains in the unmarked Potter's Field behind the prison. The priest had nothing further to say to the media, as he had been directed by Archbishop Cleary. The last chapter of this case was concluded.

The months went by.

Summer -- with its vacationers to nearby Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore and the annual arrival of earnest Lake Superior fishermen -- had already come and gone. Snow and the blustery north winds returned, as usual, in early October, blowing away any colorful remaining tree leaves. Here we go again, Father Murph realized with futility. The cold and damp snuck cruelly into his joints and bones.

It was a Sunday in mid-November that the priest was hearing confession in his home parish of St. Adolphus in Ashtigo. A voice he semi-recognized spoke to him behind the latticed screen in the booth. Alarmed, he thought he was imagining things; it sounded very much like Dwight Lindsay!

"Bless me, Father, for I have greatly sinned.." the dark male voice began. Then it continued. "But I don't care. I gave up on your stupid religion years ago. I'm going to Hell anyway for what I did. So just listen carefully to what I'm going to tell you, Padre." The ominous voice hissed like a snake.

Father Murphy was clearly frightened by these menacing words, as the voice continued.

"I'm Dwight's twin brother, Darrell. I was the one who killed those nuns, not him. I hated nuns all during the elementary Catholic school years that our parents forced us to attend. The 'penguins,' we called them...Always watching you, just waiting for a chance to hit you or punish you or embarrass you in front of your friends. I swore I'd get back at them one day, and I did."

"Oh my God, no..." the priest murmured. He sat upright and cleared his throat of its gripping fear and directly asked, "Why, then, did Dwight confess to your crimes?"

"My brother really loved me, as I loved him. We were very close, and the two of us wound up as each other's only real friends in this world. I told him what I had done over in Wisconsin. Naturally, he was shocked at first, but I explained that I simply had to do it. You should know that Dwight never judged me for what I did. So we came up with a plan. You see, using an assumed name in Indiana, Dwight found out that he had an inoperable brain tumor, and the doctors gave him only a few more months to live. So my brother volunteered to confess to my crimes to spare my life, knowing that he would be dying soon anyway -- either in behind regular bars or on death row. He sacrificed himself so that I could live, don't you see? And doesn't your Bible say something like: 'there is no love greater than a man lay down his own life for his brother'?"

"So that is how the DNA of your hair fibers at the crime scene matched your twin brother's...they were identical," Father Murphy realized, then remarked.

"Exactly, Padre! Now you know the true story. I gotta run now. But don't try and follow me. I've got a 9mm in my pocket, and I'm not afraid to use it. I suppose you'll skip the absolution and the blessing part of this confession, right? Maybe you can say some 'Hail Marys' for me later, huh?" the psychopath added, sarcastically. "Well..so long, Father..."

Stunned, Father Murphy waited a few minutes, then stepped shakily out of the wooden Confessional booth.

The church was empty.

The huge crucifix of a vanquished Christ hung high above the altar, staring, yet mute. The bewildered priest collapsed on his kneels at the nearest pew and wept, sobbing aloud, "Dear God... please...please...tell me what I must do!"

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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