

Trigger Warning: This work discusses religious trauma and homophobia. Blasphemy, profanity, and some pejoratives are used.

Mea Culpa

Mary's going 'round saying she saw God in her dreams, but I say she ain't saw nothin'. Of course, no one believes me. No one sees me. Good Christians turn a blind eye to the mouse creeping beneath their pews. Benevolence and all that — recipe's in the Bible. I'm too meek to throw out and too filthy to take in. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday — church doors stay open 'cause the Holy Father gets lonely. Wants his children to keep him company so he tells them to confess their sins. Don't believe in sin, but I've got the company sorted. Hidin' in here 'cause I've got nowhere else. Just gotta stay out of sight and the church stays clean.

Last Sunday — heard Mary's tongue slip. *Father, forgive me, I spoke your name in vain.*

S'all bullshit but her secret's safe with me. Got nobody to tell besides — the vagrant sitting at the back of the church ain't meant to speak. Mother cast me out 'cause she ain't got the space for another kid. New baby on the way, so her eldest had to leave. Guess I reminded her too much of the life she lived before me. Now I got no life at all — too busy seeking safety off the streets.

Used to visit the pub down the road before police shut it down. Said there was too much *deviation* going on. Whole scene was a damned recreation of Stonewall except none of the sexual deviants would riot. Reckon I gotta move to New York. Heard that shit illegal here happens there.

Only problem's money. Got just enough to steal — I got nothin'. Cowering in a church and Mary's walking down the aisle. Nine o'clock sharp, every Sunday. Must be worth something to her — to get up so early. She must be desperate. Like me.

S'all bullshit. Going to church ain't gonna make her rich. Tried it and I'm still trying. No god's ever saved me.

"Pardon?" Mary's stopped walking.

Aw hell, I said that aloud. "Nothin'."

She frowns. "What was that — about being saved?"

"Nothin'." I got no hope of fooling Jesus if I can't even fool Mary.

She scowls at my lies and keeps walking. Hikes up her skirts as she ducks into the confessional. I'm convinced she's in the booth alone — never seen a priest come out of it.

"Father, forgive me," Mary starts, "for I have sinned. In my sleep, I kissed somebody. I give penance for my lecherous dreams."

Reading a moth-eaten tome ain't gonna show Mary the true meaning of lechery. "Kissing ain't a sin," I tell her on her way out.

Her eyes widen, then narrow, as she gets pissed. "You were eavesdropping!"

"Ain't my fault you were speaking so loud."

Mary slams the double doors in my face. Defacing the church — now *that's* got to be a sin.

Sunday. Mary glares at me. Sticks her nose in the air and storms past.

“Father, forgive me.” Her voice from the booth is louder than it usually is. “I have dreamt of slighting the girl listens to us speak.”

“What’s got you so pissed at me?” I ask when she emerges.

Mary sniffs. “You wouldn’t want a stranger to know you for your sins.”

S’all bullshit. She’s done nothing wrong.

~

Sunday. Standing in the cold ‘cause Mary’s scheduled a meeting with God. She thanks me stiffly as she leaves — at ten past nine exactly. She holds open the door and I — her dutiful church mouse — duck in.

~

Sunday. Having tea with a saint.

It’s dead silent — don’t know why Mary invited me in. She serves me a slice of cake — lemon and lavender — on a porcelain dish. Never tasted anything as good as it. Never held anything as delicate as this.

Mary clears her throat. “What did you mean when you said kissing wasn’t a sin?”

Porcelain. Reckon it might break ‘cause I’ve touched it.

“Kissing’s about as tame as it gets,” I answer. I’ve seen worse on the streets.

“What about kissing a girl?”

“What *about* kissing a girl?”

“I’ll be condemned,” Mary blurts.

“Bullshit.” Love is no sin.

~

Monday morning. Mary won’t look at me. She wraps herself in clean sheets and cries. Neither of us were crying last night — what changed her mind?

Must be God — going ‘round saying Mary’s caught a disease, when I say she ain’t sick. Of course, no one believes me. Not even Mary.

“*Forgive me,*” she sobs. “*Father, I loved a girl.*”