

Booger

by

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DESCRIPTION

Paul, a former Catholic altar boy, recalls a moment when his true religious faith was revealed to him that was as plain as the nose on his face.

CHARACTERS

- Paul, mid-40s but remembering back

SETTING

- Sunday morning, Communion

TIME

- Before the Catholic Mass started using English

MISCELLANEOUS

- Black alb and white surplice for a Catholic altar boy
- Small table or stool to one side holding a paten, small plate of Communion wafers, a bell, rosary beads

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In the dark, a waft of Gregorian chant. Lights up on PAUL, standing dressed as an altar boy.

I can date my conversion from a rainy Sunday in October during a time before folk masses, when the Soviet Union was godless, when the Liturgy was anesthetically administered in Latin, and all boys, to the nuns, were brazen anthropoids and all girls were angels without any rebates.

PAUL falls to his knees.

I was a pious little prick back then: altar boy, Knights of Christ, CCD prize-winner for blating back the Catechism. I had my warts, of course—but like everyone else I used them to polish my image because in the lacquer-smelling dark of the Saturday confessional, I could pump up the value of my spiritual stock by a penance spoken in the velvet throatiness of remorse. To be free of sin, one had to sin—and I did just enough to get myself cleansed without the inconvenience of being redeemed. In other words, I was a proper Catholic boy—ragged but definitely salvageable, just the way the nuns and priests liked to tenderize their young males.

PAUL rises, picks up the bell.

But at the age of 15—that smoldering inconvenient age—I discovered religious angst—or, more accurately, it found me. A priest teaching my literature class gave me Samuel Beckett to read

(rings the bell)

—and I pored over Beckett as the priests and nuns and Christian brothers, like a Papal press gang, went whacking the bushes for recruits. I tried to convince myself that God had placed a special “come hither” phone call to me—

(rings the bell)

—but then up popped Camus to clear the palate. I tried to squeeze the oil of vocation out of myself—

(rings the bell)

—but Sartre closed the bung-hole. By now, it was only a matter of time before 200-proof Marx and Engels heaved their bulk onto my doorstep. I asked for a sign, some guidance, as to what I should do.

Rings the bell.

The universe works in mysterious ways.

PAUL kneels again.

In those days, we fasted before Communion—not like Ramadan or any of those Jewish celebrations we were taught to secretly despise as heathen—just a matter of a few hours, really—a petite mortification of the flesh. Except that I was in high-octane anxiety about the very roots of my being. No, worse than that—I suspected that everything—those undigested Catechismal verses, the munched-on penances, the Pope’s finger-wagging encyclicals—was evaporating. Deliquescing. So I fasted from Friday fish dinner through Sunday Mass: no nibble, nosh, or guzzle. I figured if Jesus Christ Our Lord and Savior could quest in the desert for forty days, I could at least shrive my soul for forty hours or so.

PAUL stands.

By Saturday night I was glassy-eyed with hunger—a 15-year old boy’s metabolism has no religious tolerance whatsoever. But I fasted on.

PAUL picks up the rosary beads.

I took laps around the rosary beads, read through the hagiographies of the most obscure saints possible, and, above all, tried to reach that empty-headedness I had always been taught was the spine of faith: a voiding out, a giving-up, a giving-over. All this for a deity who, in the last 30 hours, had not once bothered to give me a friendly slap on the wing-bone and say, “Go, boy!” He was tough to crack.

PAUL puts the beads down.

Sunday. I got the bells that day, which meant the other guy helped the priest out at the communion rail. I am kneeling there, the carpet nubble nagging my kneecaps, my temples pulsing like snake’s tongue, my soul welting up like someone whacking your ass with a wet towel—and still no sign. No sign. And for the first time, actual doubt—not just vague suspicions but real excavating doom—nicked a small tear in my soul’s fabric: what if—? what if—? And suddenly at my right hand sat Estragon and at my left Vladimir, and I knew I was the moon hanging in that bone-dry sky. And I then knew this: I had been tricked. (I can’t say if this vision was simply due to glucose-deficiency, but who’s to say that low blood sugar can’t lead to knowledge?)

PAUL kneels.

So the priest and his minion are “Corpus Christi-ing” along the communion rail and I’m wondering how I can exit stage left as quickly as possible. Distracted, jittery, I unconsciously reached up—I’d done this a thousand times, and confessed it in equal measure—I unconsciously reached up, dug a good booger out of my nose, and put it in my mouth. Well, almost in, because as I did it, as I became aware of the finger’s arc, I realized my sign had arrived.

PAUL stands. He takes the paten in one hand. He stretches out his arms, the paten in one hand and the forefinger of his other hand extended as if it has a booger on it. As he speaks, he brings the paten and the booger slowly towards his mouth.

If I ate it, I broke my fast, that carefully suffered homage to my past beliefs. And thus no Communion, thus no common union. If I refused it—well, if I refused, then that meant I agreed to agree with everything, regardless of how much it defied my own being, forever. Forever. Who was I going to honor?

At this point, the paten is under his chin and his finger is at his mouth.

What do you think I did?

PAUL looks back-and-forth from finger to paten.

I had to make a decision quickly—they’d all been fed, and the priest was going to turn to me, the communion wafer moving toward me like a slow-motion bullet. The body of Christ—or my own body? Which one?

PAUL opens his mouth, pauses, puts his finger in his mouth, closes it, and pulls it out with a pop. He also takes the paten and holds it against the back of his head so that it looks like he has a halo.

My name was not going to be listed among the saints.

PAUL takes the paten down and puts it on the table. He begins taking off the garments. He folds and puts them on the table.

I kept my eyes down when the priest came to me. I'm sure he was puzzled. I wasn't. My finger tingled, the pointing finger, the finger of index. It was then that I began my conversion—into the delicious and absurd mayhem of the actual world, into its nurturing chaos and anxiety—in short, into my own air-born and doubt-ridden and without-a-net freedom. I dropped out of the altar-boy line-up, politely refused the priest's brochures about the Trappists, enrolled at the public high school—that den of iniquity!—, and secularized my sideburns. Some people saw this as a tragic loss of my heritage; I saw it as winning by a nose.

PAUL stands in his street clothes.

I really didn't have a choice. Actually, that's not true. I had been given the best choice of all—free and untaxed, with no damnation to pay, no one's nose out of infinite joint—exactly the way a god should make the offer. If I was going to pay through the nose, then I ought to have ownership of all the air that passes through it. And a gift like that was nothing to turn my nose up at, an insight as plain as the nose on my face. Was this an act of adolescent rebellion, or was it an act of mature faith? Look into your own hearts—you will know the answer.

PAUL makes the Vulcan sign with his right hand.

And may the force—the farce, the fierce, the finest—be with you.

BLACKOUT

