

The Famine Church

(Story idea by Elfin Vogel)

by

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DESCRIPTION

Where Faith and Property, God and Caesar, meet on the Lower East Side.

CHARACTERS

- MARIA NIEDDA - Long-time and faithful parishioner at St. B's, originally from Puerto Rico. Now is one of the leaders of the group opposing the closing and destruction of the church.
- THE REPRESENTATIVE - Unnamed, represents an "angel" who has made an offer to buy St. B's and create a non-profit use for the building and land. Speaks with an Irish accent.
- FATHER LIONEL ZWELLER - Spokesperson for the Archdiocese, the one who has the authority to put the Cardinal's plans for St. B's into play. Older.

* * * * *

An office in the Archdiocese of New York. FATHER ZWELLER and THE REPRESENTATIVE sit at a table. They do not interact. MARIA NIEDDA enters.

NIEDDA takes this object out of her bag: a large baggie, inside of which is a printed/written-on piece of paper that someone has used as toilet paper. A turd in the baggie as well.

NIEDDA shows it around, then drops it on the table. ZWELLER looks at THE REPRESENTATIVE. THE REPRESENTATIVE does not respond.

ZWELLER

Maria, there is no need [to bring]—

NIEDDA

It sets the tone, so there it stays. Like a centerpiece. We dried out the turd—see?—so it wouldn't go rotten.

NIEDDA picks up the baggie again and drops it.

NIEDDA

Hard—doesn't smell. It's my fellow negotiator—it's got a lot to say, like me. You wanted us here to talk—so let's the four of us talk.

NIEDDA sits.

ZWELLER

Maria, as I've—look, I don't know what else to say—

NIEDDA

You should know—you used to—but that doesn't matter because, leave it to us, we'll do the remembering for you and for the Cardinal—which is why I'm here, isn't it?

ZWELLER

The Cardinal isn't pleased—

NIEDDA

Isn't it?

ZWELLER

Yes.

NIEDDA

And he isn't pleased—good!

ZWELLER

The vigil, the protest—it's gotten—

NIEDDA

Gotten sharp, hasn't it, this time?—raising a “stink”—

ZWELLER

Maria—

NIEDDA

Wait.

NIEDDA looks at the baggie, nods, then turns back to ZWELLER.

NIEDDA

For this right now, right here, my delegate says you should use Mrs. Niedda—and Mrs. Niedda and all of hers are just doing what you and the Cardinal have left us to do—we march around, we shout “Save St. Brigid’s—”

ZWELLER

Then Mrs. N[iedda]—

NIEDDA

But more this time, isn’t it?—harder—smellier—because the insult is bigger! because you had ’em break in like thieves in the night—

ZWELLER

May I [say]—

NIEDDA

You had them rip out the pews—

ZWELLER

It wasn’t my or[der]—

NIEDDA

So from on high—and you carried it out! They trashed the sacristy—the baptismal font! You know this! And then—
(points to baggie)
—our friend.

ZWELLER

You know we have the permis[sion]—

NIEDDA

We blocked that permit—

ZWELLER

For the demolition but—

NIEDDA

We made the court say you can’t just rip it to the bare ground!

ZWELLER

But on the interior [we can]—

NIEDDA

That is just legal mierda.

NIEDDA picks up the baggie.

NIEDDA

The thief you hired shit in the sacristy, Father—sorry, but it is what it is—then wiped himself—fff!—do you see with what—

(reads the paper)

“Siobhan Keely, baptized September 10, 1902”—from the parish re[gister]—

NIEDDA drops the baggie.

NIEDDA

What would you do if someone did this in your home? St. B's is our home, so what would you have us do?

ZWELLER

This home of yours is a structural disaster—

NIEDDA

So what?

ZWELLER

The north wall is cracked top to bot[om]—the mold, the termites—

NIEDDA

So it's falling into dust—so are a lot of us—would you trash us, too?—you miss the point: St. B's is not just the building! How many times do we—you were an assistant here—my mother remembers you—I remember you—

ZWELLER

And I remember you—

NIEDDA

Well good!

ZWELLER

—but the fact remains—

NIEDDA
—she says you loved this place—

ZWELLER
Yes but—

NIEDDA
—so you should know [better]—

ZWELLER
Mrs. Niedda?

NIEDDA
The care of souls—that was your promise—

ZWELLER
Mrs. Niedda?

NIEDDA
—is still your [promise]—

ZWELLER
Maria?!

NIEDDA waits.

ZWELLER
You want a bottom line from me.

NIEDDA
That's why the four of us are here.

ZWELLER
It. Can't. Go. On. Like. This.

NIEDDA
(imitating)
And what is to be done?

(chuckles)
Pistols at twenty paces?

THE REPRESENTATIVE

I believe that this is my cue. And so I take it.

THE REPRESENTATIVE faces them both.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

I understand—I understand—all of what just happened had to happen. Two enemies—well, not enemies but duelists—twenty paces, right?—they meet and have to dig trenches, lob shells—again—and then again—again—exhausting, isn't it?—yet hard to stop replaying the already-played-out, making the old wounds bleed—I understand. To let you both know, I was baptized here—first communion, confirmation—the whole dose, right here—so I, too, have a—a bottom line. That comes to this: you—both of you—don't need to do this anymore. Really. Bad blood and other bodily—whatever—exist: over. Mrs. Niedda's group is currently embarrassing the hell out of the Archdiocese with broadcast tales of workmen shitting in and on the sacristy: over. The Archdiocese needs money much more—much more—than it needs broken-backed churches and pain-in-the-neck parishioners: over.

ZWELLER

The Cardinal's time is short—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Mine isn't. But all right—the point of my preliminary. The beloved St. B's—the Famine Church—1848—what a bulls-eye name for the situation in which we find ourselves, isn't it? Everyone is hungry here—everyone wants, and wants hard—and so often in the unfairness of life such hungers go unfilled—the loaves and fishes simply do not show up on cue. Except. For now. Because for both of you an “angel” has arrived. If only the post-potato-blighted Irish dumped here had had such an angelic hand—

ZWELLER

The Cardinal would like to know—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Unimportant who—because miracles need not be named to be named miraculous. Focus as I review. My employer wants to buy the church. Outright. Cash on the barrel, cash on the nail. Then he, or she—ambiguous—will turn it over to a not-for-profit group formed from the “Save St. Brigid’s Brigade”—the SSBB—for the express purpose of providing, TBD, some sort of menu of community services—elder care, perhaps, or much needed after-school programs for “at-risk” youth. It doesn’t matter, really, what.

NIEDDA

We’ve already started the application—

THE REPRESENTATIVE picks up the baggie.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

The important point, not to cut you off, the omega to the alpha here is: no need, anymore, for any more of this.

NIEDDA

We get our church back—not as a church, but—the Cardinal gets his money—the community—

ZWELLER holds up his hand.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

What?

ZWELLER

There has to be a sign—the Cardinal will need a sign—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Of what?

ZWELLER

A sign of good faith—

NIEDDA

Good faith?

ZWELLER

Something to convince him to change—

NIEDDA

The Cardinal doesn't deserve—

ZWELLER

Still—

NIEDDA

The bad faith comes from your side, not ours—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

And we were just getting—

ZWELLER

The Cardinal's "good faith" is that I'm even in this room talking to you, talking to him—you know that the Archdiocese has every right to sell what is clearly its own property—

NIEDDA

And why does the Church need all this money, Father? We've read all the news stories—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Mrs. Niedda—

NIEDDA

What? What would be faith good enough for—

ZWELLER

I can't guarantee how the Cardinal will move on this—offer—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Angelic as it is—

ZWELLER

But I do know that for him to consider it at all—there will have to be a time of—quiet—these things cannot be done well when—

NIEDDA

When the little ones are matching stink for stink?

ZWELLER

Either SSBB stops the protests or this conversation cannot and will not move forward.

NIEDDA

You don't—you doubt if you're going to get the demolition permit—

ZWELLER

I'm saying the Cardinal is not single-minded.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Let me—Mrs. Niedda, you do need to make a decision—I can't do unless you do—

NIEDDA

And I can't decide—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

I understand—but SSBB, by the end of today, needs to. Or else the Famine Church, etcetera, etcetera—you can finish the thought—a gesture, Maria—to balance things—

ZWELLER

It would be good to stop comparing the Archdiocese to an outhouse—

NIEDDA

If—if—then—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Plans move forward.

NIEDDA

And you can make this deal work out?

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Yes.

NIEDDA rises, take the baggie.

NIEDDA

All right—something by the end of the day—

NIEDDA lets her eyes rest on the two of them.

NIEDDA

But—

NIEDDA waits. Then...

NIEDDA

I need a gesture, too, if I'm going to go back—

(to ZWELLER)

Not from you. From the “angel.”

THE REPRESENTATIVE

This is not “good faith” enough for the Brigade?

NIEDDA

I've been at this too long—my catechism taught me angels can be guardians or Lucifers—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

I've talked to the SSBB—

NIEDDA

But I don't want to have to guess—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

You've obviously got something in mind.

NIEDDA

The Brigade—they're good people—they remember Loisaida, they remember the tents in the Park, they've seen so much get lost, trashed, sold—what they want is not hard—

NIEDDA sits down, stares at THE REPRESENTATIVE.

NIEDDA

Before I go back, I've got to know what kind of “angel”—look me in the eyes and tell me—because I'm going to have to look straight into their eyes, and them into mine, and I can't have any “maybe” there at all. So tell me.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

What did I say when I met with the Brigade?

NIEDDA

You promised.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

What did I promise?

NIEDDA

You know what you promised.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Exactly. I haven't changed. "Angel" hasn't changed. Promise hasn't changed.

THE REPRESENTATIVE and NIEDDA hold each other's gaze.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

The Brigade will see. They will see, Maria. And everything they want—that the Famine Church represents—all will be honored. That is the "angel" you've got. It won't be long now.

THE REPRESENTATIVE reaches into an inner pocket and pulls out an envelope, hands it over to NIEDDA, who opens it and reads.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

That's something I wanted to show you.

NIEDDA

I don't understand—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

It's a confirmation card—my confirmation card—I got it when I was confirmed here—I told you that—see the little Holy Ghost medal—

NIEDDA

How old were you when—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Twelve.

NIEDDA

Me, too. I don't remember you.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

I don't remember you, either—bigger parish in those days, right?

ZWELLER

Right.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

A hopping place—but those classes we had to take—"soldier of Christ"—

NIEDDA

Do you remember the day?

THE REPRESENTATIVE

I remember how embarrassing it felt to get slapped by the bishop in front of all the guys and girls—

NIEDDA glances at ZWELLER.

NIEDDA

What?

THE REPRESENTATIVE

A little slap, yes—but still, when you're twelve—

NIEDDA

In front of all the boys and girls—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

(touches forehead)

Didn't mind the oil up here, but the slap—

NIEDDA

Yes, the slap. Thank you.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Are you all right? Does the card—

NIEDDA

What you have given me—

NIEDDA puts the card in her bag.

NIEDDA

—is exactly—well, let’s say that with your gift I don’t even need to talk with them because I know what they’d have me say.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

I don’t—

NIEDDA

Tell your “angel” that this buying the church from him and then allowing us, the grateful ones, to use it for our social services—no.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

I don’t under[stand]—

NIEDDA

No. I think this deal needs changing.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Why—

NIEDDA

Let’s say your “angel” donates the money to us and we buy the building—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

He can’t give—

NIEDDA

Or she—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

—money to you—you’re not incor[porated]—

NIEDDA

Or the “angel”—he or she—buys the building with the Brigade as the owner of record—our name on the deed—

NIEDDA looks at them both.

NIEDDA

Good faith is all I’m asking. Door Number 1 or Door Number 2.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

One or the other—done—the “angel” is not single-minded either. I promise to make all this come to something that will give everyone peace of mind. Go home, Maria—I will work this out—have the Brigade keep working out its plans about what it's going to do when this deal gets done—you wanted a clinic, a food bank—draw up the plans.

NIEDDA eyes them both.

NIEDDA

All right.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Good.

NIEDDA

But—though thanks for the suggestion—we are not going home. We can picket and vigil and draw up plans all at the same time—we multitask! No going home until we have—

NIEDDA slaps the back of her right hand into her left palm.

NIEDDA

—in our hand. That makes the only sense, right? Because good faith always comes out better with a little pressure. Well—good. A good day.

NIEDDA leaves.

ZWELLER

You shit.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

What?

ZWELLER

We had them! We had them! She was ready to make them go—and then you fuck it up.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

With what?

ZWELLER

With that bullshit confirmation story.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Hmm. Something did shift in her—

ZWELLER

Because she knew you were a fucking liar!

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Of course I'm lying to her—

ZWELLER

But not so she's supposed to know it! Where'd you get that cocked-up fucking bullshit card?

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Online—but what—

ZWELLER

The parish priest in those days—and the bishop—hated—mixing girls and boys—if they'd had their way, girls would've never seen the light of day—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Oh—

ZWELLER

“Oh”—and there you go—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Shit—

ZWELLER

Reminiscing about getting slapped—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

No wonder she—

ZWELLER

Wouldn't have happened under their regime—boys here, girls there, slap, slap, girls go home, boys go play. You just shit in her house—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

You need to make this go away.

ZWELLER

“You shit on her” is your fucking problem, not mine—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

You need to make her go away.

ZWELLER

Like I said—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Lionel—

ZWELLER

The Church can wait forever—but not your consortium guys—and it’s not like they’re the only developers in this city—

THE REPRESENTATIVE reaches into his briefcase.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Lionel—Lionel—having your balls tucked in a vice—

THE REPRESENTATIVE throws a folder on the table.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

—has turned you stupid and forgetful. Those other developers don’t have the gold that I have. Do they.

THE REPRESENTATIVE opens the folder: pictures, letters, etc.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

They don’t have the perfect blackmail “in” that I have—a priest with—

ZWELLER

Shut up—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

A priest with a family. At least you’re not fucking little boys. You aren’t, are you? No—

THE REPRESENTATIVE looks at a picture.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Not when you have two of your own. The good father.

ZWELLER

You said—

THE REPRESENTATIVE

And I won't—Lionel, I'm not interested in ruin—I'm not like that.

ZWELLER

Just a slimy fuck.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

There's a deal in this for you and yours—if—some of the apartments are going to have terrific views, just—spectacular—bright, airy, spacious—listen to that real estate! Just right for two sons and a wife who must hide in the shadows. Eh?

ZWELLER stares into space.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Her name on the deed, of course—no one the wiser. All sorts of possibilities open up if—

THE REPRESENTATIVE takes back the folder.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

These consortium guys—butchers, sharks—they want what you've promised to deliver to me—church, land, air rights—and they want them more or less now. I could put you and yours on Page 6, so to speak—or not.

ZWELLER

And embarrass the Cardinal?

THE REPRESENTATIVE

You think he gives two fucking communion wafers for his “fixer”? Because that’s all you’ve ever been—the Cardinal’s fixer. He’s been inoculated against you for years. The Cardinal and my consortium guys—different clothes outside, same creamy filling inside. If you talked to him right now, he would say just what I’m saying to you, only with longer syllables and more theology. Cardinal on one side, consortium guys on the other, and ssquueezze!

THE REPRESENTATIVE watches ZWELLER stew. He pulls another card out of his pocket, slides it across the table to him.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

I sympathize. Buying online—amazing. It’s a mass card, turn of the century, from St. Brigid’s—a mass said for the saving of a soul. Ah, those were the days—when priests could go around “priesting”—saving souls instead of their own arses—take the card.

ZWELLER

I don’t want it.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Take the card—it’s your only ticket to the healing process now. Take the card.

ZWELLER takes the card.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

I hate second thoughts—they just slow things down—here is the solution to the equation: Maria can’t be allowed to continue. That card? It has a “sell-by” date called “very soon.” Now it’s time to be a fixer for yourself—and your own. “Bright, airy, spacious” sounds very very good. Be a guardian angel—just be it soon. There is nothing else for you to do, Lionel—you will keep Maria quiet and you will move forward on signing the land and buildings over to me for the handsome penny my consortium guys will turn over to the Cardinal. Quid. Pro. Fucking. Quo. Now I am going to leave, and you are going to do what you need to do to fix what needs to be fixed. Te absolve.

THE REPRESENTATIVE leaves. ZWELLER begins to cry with great sorrow.

* * * * *

NIEDDA stands in a downlight, like the light over an outside door. Darkness all around. She fumbles in her bag for a set of keys. a FIGURE glides out of the darkness. In one swift motion, the FIGURE grabs NIEDDA from behind and cuts her throat, then exits.

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ZWELLER's office. THE REPRESENTATIVE drops four large binders on the table, one by one, as he speaks.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

They toyed with the idea—of calling it “Famine Court,” in a homage—of sorts—

(drops binder)

—but neither that nor “Famine Condominiums” nor “Famine Co-op” worked either—

(drops binder)

—it’s pretty clear why. They haven’t settled on a name yet—perhaps “St. Brigid’s Court”—

(drops binder)

—you know, following the tradition of naming a development after the thing that’s disappeared to build it—“Fox Run” where no foxes will ever run again—

(drops binder)

—“Whispering Pines”—but no name yet. They will—they will find one—and time, indeed, will march on. Have your legal team review them, and then we’ll set a date for the signing.

THE REPRESENTATIVE moves to leave.

THE REP

I couldn’t get you the penthouse, but you’ll like where they’ll be. A shame about Maria.

ZWELLER

A shame. Yes.

ZWELLER gets up from his desk, the mass card in his hand. He offers the card to THE REPRESENTATIVE, who does not take it, who stares at it.

ZWELLER

Take good care of yourself. It is a dangerous world out there.

ZWELLER holds the card out until THE REPRESENTATIVE takes it.

Blackout.