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Sure

So a priest, an atheist, and your average bro walk into a bar, right? Well not a bar—a priest (a good priest) wouldn't go to a bar. Fuck it—this priest was at a bar, hanging with his best buds, the atheist and Mr. Testosterone. The priest calmly tried to save his friends' souls while the atheist proudly denounced all belief while the former quarterback creepily scanned the bar for “talent.” Of course, the atheist tried to make a case for the content of these women's characters, and of course the priest had something to say about their scant attire and how that, somehow, justified Brad's objectification of them.

The bar was strangely bright. Most bars the men frequented, as you might expect, were dimly lit, allowing them to fade in anonymity as the edges dulled with each drink. But this was a newly opened bar and the new management had not yet attuned the finer nuances of the establishment that subtly determine a patron's experience, and so the men hardly felt like they were celebrating but that they were being interrogated.

“Why's it so fuckin bright in here?” Brad ejaculated.

“Must you swear in front of Father Todd?” Rick asked. “For he shall be smitten should the Almighty witness him in the company of the likes of ye!”

“I respect your path, Richard. Whatever that may be. I just ask that, even though you may not agree with it, you respect mine.”

Father Todd sipped gingerly at his O'Doul's and then held it at his waist with feigned nonchalance as he poured the remainder of his flask into the bottle.

“Come sit with my new parish next Sunday,” he implored. “You might be surprised how you'll feel.”

“I'm pretty sure I know how I'd feel,” Rick replied. “Three times in the past two weeks I've been offered some sort of pamphlet or other by your minions of whatever arbitrary sect of your illusory order. Maybe these jabronies can smell my godless blood curdling in their presence.”

“So, what, you worship Satan or some shit?” Brad asked, his face serious in consternation.

“Oh yes! Hail the Almighty Underlord!”

Brad leaned over to the priest and, pointing over at Rick, said, “This bitch freaky.”

Father Todd, with his false smirk, replied, “I’m sure this is just a poor attempt at humor. Am I correct in saying so, Richard?”

“No.”

“So you do—worship Satan?”

No!”

“You contradict yourself. First, I asked if you were kidding about worshipping Satan, and you replied, ‘No,’ and now when I ask if you do, indeed, worship Satan, you say, ‘No,’ yet again. He who cannot answer Yes or No directly must surely come of evil.”

“Of course I’m fucking kidding,” Rick said. “If I don’t believe in anything why would I believe in Satan? I meant No, you’re not correct in saying it was a poor attempt—I thought it was pretty funny.” He smiled and looked down at his drink. “Also, you butchered that quote.”

“Oh, well if you’re so well versed, let’s—let’s hear it.”

“You’re drunk.”

“And you’re a fool!” the priest declared, tossing his head back, laughing like a sailor.

“Keep drinking your little concoction there, bud.”

Rick grasped his glass tightly as he glared at the priest cackling. This man is too comfortable, he thought. He could see a thick fog envelope the priest that no one else could see. Rick felt naked and cold against the warmth of the haze. And while he felt better for having challenged, and ultimately rejected, the blue pill, he envied the priest.

Brad chugged his Keystone and slammed the can on the bar. “Alright, before you get shards of fuckin glass in your hand, I’ll tell you guys a lit story to ease the tension, my dudes.”

The friends laughed. Father Todd rejoiced in the divine power of laughter and Rick quickly felt bad for having laughed—for having used this “friend” all these years solely for comic relief.

“Okay, so my buddy Kyle told me this one the other night at our boy’s kegger. I got sloshed, bro. You should’ve seen the talent—”

“I was there,” Rick said. “I was right there next to you when Kyle told the story.”

“Okay, so Kyle was out driving one night, trying to clear his head or some shit, and it was *pitch* black out—”

“So . . . I guess you’re going to tell it anyway.”

“Priest ain’t fuckin heard it!”

“What’s that?” Father Todd twitched, wiping the drool from his mouth.

“And he sees this grizzly, Duck Dynasty-type motherfucker sitting on the side of the road. This dude was *covered* in blood. Looked like some shit straight out of *Hostel*, bro. And I mean *doused*, bro. I’m talkin blood, guts, all over the goddamn road like—”

“Bradley, please,” Father Todd groaned.

Rick said “Get on with it, right? I didn’t know you were such a stickler for concision, priest. Coming from a guy who needs thousands upon thousands of pages to teach him basic common decency.”

“I don’t even know what he’s going on about. I just wish he’d refrain from uttering these obscenities.”

“Figures,” Rick said, biting at his straw. “You really think humans are smarter than any other animal? You could train a cat to be a good person before you could teach a person. Just tell her: This is where you shit; and, uh, don’t be a dick.”

“Richard,” Father Todd said sharply, echoing Rick’s patronizing tone. “Cats’ lives are not nearly as complex as humans’ lives.”

“You know this? You have empirical evidence?”

“I don’t need any data, I don’t need proof! There are some things in this world you don’t need to see to—”

“Right, right, right. Just put any average guy in a house with a cat for a day and see what happens. Who leads the more colorful life? The bug-eyed, potato chip guzzling wastoid, or the—”

“Why are we talkin about fuckin cats?” Brad looked blankly at one and then the other. “You guys good? Can I tell my fuckin story now?”

The priest excused himself and, patting his pockets, walked over to the bathroom.

“So this guy—”

“Wait for the priest to come back. I know the story.” Rick leaned in and whispered to Brad, “What do you think he’s doing in there?”

“I don’t know, pissin? Prayin?” Brad brought his beer to his face only to discover it empty. “Priests piss, right?”

“No, they just sweat holy water.”

Expressionless, Brad turned and made his perfunctory quest to the bar.

“Uno mas,” he said to the bartender, who was clearly Asian.

When he returned to their table, Rick asked him, “You really think he’s praying in the bathroom?”

“I don’t know, man. What do *you* think?”

“I think he’s getting ‘sloshed.’”

“No! Priest?”

“C’mon,” Rick said, shooting Brad a sideways glance. “You didn’t see the flask?”

Brad was dumbfounded. He twisted his mouth as he tried to sort the matter out in his head. How could this be possible? he thought. Then his face suddenly lit up.

“Me and priest are gonna *party!* Hell yeah, that’s the kind of heaven I want to go when I die.”

“Sh! Shh! He’s coming.”

Father Todd tripped over his own foot and composed himself with the aid of the table. “My shoes, ahem—I mean, uh, the bathroom floor was—er, wet.”

“I think you’re wet,” Rick said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nevermind. Sit down. Let’s get back to Brad’s story.”

Brad’s mind was elsewhere, his eyes fixed on the priest, sizing him up, seeing if he could catch a whiff.

“Okay then. I guess I’ll tell the rest: so, right, Kyle spotted this old, bloodied-up biker on the side of the road. At first he panicked and sped off, thinking the guy had just murdered someone or something. But when he looked in his rearview mirror and noticed how the man didn’t react to his passing by, he thought maybe he was hurt. So he turned around and asked the guy if he was alright. The man looked up at Kyle and, with a voice that I could only assume was raspy and hoarse, said, ‘It was either me or the deer.’”

“Such a fuckin badass!” Brad blurted out. “He split that bitch in half!”

“One of God’s creatures has been . . . killed!” Father Todd managed to cry out.
 “And you—you’re celebrating its death?”

“Well, for one thing, they’re overpopulated in this general region, but also—”

“Maybe you really do worship Satan.”

“Who? Me or Brad?”

“You!”

“Why not Brad?” Rick asked. “He gets a real thrill from the story. Just look at his face. He’s ecstatic! He’s ready to fucking hail!”

“He knows not what he does,” Father Todd recited.

Brad stood up emphatically. “I’ll know exactly what the fuck I’m doin when I punch your fuckin face in. You got dental, bro?”

Father Todd cowered underneath the table as Brad raised his fist to display his dominance.

“Look at yourselves,” Rick said. “You’re a cowering, drunk hypocrite, and you—you’re about to strike a priest.”

“Excuse me,” I said coyly. “Did you just say ‘cowering’?”

Brad redirected his fist toward me, hovering it over my head. “Mind your fuckin business, bro.”

Rick said, “Yeah, I said ‘cowering.’ Uh, why?”

“Oo, I’ll need to edit that out. Hm, what’s a good synonym? ‘Frightened’? No. ‘Cowardly’? No, that’s too close. I like ‘lily-livered,’ what with the whole alcoholism theme going on here with the priest, but I feel it’s a little too pirate-y for the circumstances.”

The profound confusion on their faces made me uncomfortable.

“As you were, gentlemen.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait,” Brad stammered. “What the fuck you sayin’?”

“I’m sorry, I—I shouldn’t have interrupted. Go on.”

Rick asked, “What do you mean ‘edit it out’?”

“Well—”

“Is there a better word to describe this coward?” Rick asked.

“No,” I said. “It’s pretty perfect. I mean, look at him.”

Father Todd crept out from under the table.

Rick asked, "Edit it out of *what*?"

"Oo, yeah. Hm . . . I was, uh, hoping it wouldn't come to this."

There was no getting out of it. I would have to tell them.

"I meant I would have to edit my own usage of 'cowered' to avoid any cross-contamination between character and narrator. That'd be quite sloppy, no?"

Rick leaned in and cocked his brow as he looked me over.

"Are you trying to say that you're me?"

"Well, not exactly. You're a part of me, I'm sure. Maybe, I don't know. Maybe all three of you are. Regardless, your story has inspired me. Thank you."

"This is blasphemy!" Father Todd declared. "There is only one Creator! Only one Almighty God! Only one—"

"Let's not go there, buddy."

Rick asked, "But wouldn't it be *your* story then? You know, if your ridiculous claim were true."

"Sure," I said. "I don't know. Does it matter? I'm inspired, this is great."

"Does it matter?" Brad ejaculated (what a fitting word for this fool's manner of speaking, don't you think? ['ejaculated,' that's good stuff]). "Does it matter if we're real or just fuckin' fairies floatin' in your fuckin' head? Yeah, I'd say it fuckin' matters."

Father Todd began to pray.

"Save it," I told him.

"I knew it!" Rick cried. "I knew it was all bullshit. See, priest? Life is nothing—"

"Maybe your life," I told him. "But you're just as much a fool as the priest: believing in nothing is still belief. Besides, I'm the only real boy in this puppet factory, bitches!" I cackled at them as they looked on in horror. "Solipsism? Schizophrenia? Sure. I don't care: I'm writing again! That's all that matters. And you three fucking clowns helped me get back in the game. So, thank you—oh, and don't worry about the bill. I got you." I winked at them. Weird. I never wink. What a strange phenomenon: winking. What? Who am I?

"Helped you how?" Rick asked.

“You see: I’m the biker, my bike is my writing, and the deer is—I don’t know—criticism, standards, expectations? No longer will I compromise my path and risk damaging my bike—or myself. If I’m going to get bloody either way, it might as well be their blood.”

“Okay,” Rick said. “But what if it’s all bullshit?”

“It probably is,” I said. “But without that bullshit, you wouldn’t exist.”

“I don’t even want to exist.”

“Boo-hoo.” I mocked his stupid face. “What are you, a moody teen who doesn’t want to do his chores? ‘I hate you, mom! I didn’t ask to be born!’”

I made Rick cry one incredibly humiliating tear. I wiped it away with one of those super soft tissues, the nice ones that don’t make your nose red.

“Why’d you have to typify us so crudely?” Rick asked. “You’re not very creative.”

Father Todd asked, “Did you have to make me a drunk?”

“Would you prefer I had made you a diddler?”

I poured him a shot of his favorite whiskey.

“Yeah, bro,” Brad added. “You could’ve toned up my calves a little bit, bro.”

“Guys, guys, guys. It’s alright,” I consoled them. “Be grateful for the attributes you have, not envious of those you lack. If not for your particular idiosyncrasies and subtleties, you all never would have met. This ostensibly unlikely trio never would have assembled.”

“Elaborate,” Rick said.

“Surely you remember, Rick.”

“Remember what?”

“Oh, I don’t know. The fake weed encounter. Remember that little stunt you two pulled?”

“Fake weed?”

“C’mon, Rick,” Brad said. “You don’t remember? That shit was hilarious.”

“Hilarious?” Father Todd remarked. “You rascallions were nearly arrested. That officer would’ve jailed your sorry behinds had I not stepped in and saved them.”

Rick stared blankly at his friends.

“Your memory’s shot, bro.”

“Yes,” Father Todd chided. “Maybe you should have stuck to the fake stuff.”

Brad nudged the priest’s arm in some awkward display of approval.

“Mm, yes,” Father Todd began. “It was a solemn September noon. The leaves had just begun to fall. Yes, back when autumn’s chill would greet us at its due hour; yes, back before this incessant heat, this unnatural delay—”

Brad barked, “If you bring up that global warmin bullshit one more time I swear to fuckin—”

“END TIMES!” END—”

“You bickering bitches can’t tell a story for shit.”

“Yeah, we get it, priest,” Brad said. “It was fall.” He squinted at Father Todd, and then faced Rick. “Ite, so all this weird dirt was collectin in the corners of those ledges we used to skate after 9th period before Father Josh or Father Glenn—or this bitch—would kick us out.” He paused, lost in reverie. “Damn. Remember when I used to skate, bro? I was fire.”

“Of course,” Rick said, then muttered, “You were a lot cooler then.”

“And the dirt—wait, what was that?”

“Nothing. Go on.”

“Yeah, nothing. I bet.” Brad snorted loudly and spat on the floor of the bar. “So this dirt, it looked just like chronic, bro—I don’t know how you don’t remember this shit—and so like I was sellin at the time, on my grind, you know, and so I had a bunch of these little baggies in my backpack and we filled em up with the shit so we could try to sell it to that fuckin dweeb Harrison who thought he got high off oregano at one of Twinkie’s parties that one time. Then, uh, yeah, cops rolled through.”

“*You* filled up the baggies,” Rick corrected. “I didn’t do shit! And then they put *me* in handcuffs.”

“Ohhhh shit, that’s right.” Brad chuckled, spilling beer on himself. “My b.”

“Ass.”

“Get to the part at the precinct,” I said. “There’s the real heart of the story.”

“That’s okay,” Rick said quickly. “I recall what happened. It’s really not necessary.”

“I, uh, think it is. You guys have built up way too much curiosity at this point—it’s, uh, kind of a tipping point. You have to tell it. Todd, will you do the honors?”

“Why, yes, of course. So, as I was saying, it was a gloomy autumn day,” the priest began.

“You don’t have to—” Rick said, sweating.

“Go on,” I said.

“And the policemen took you both down to the precinct,” the priest continued, despite Rick’s pleading. “They said they would keep you there until your parents arrived. You antagonized the officers—so they had told me when I got there—criticizing their serious approach of handling a matter you found so laughable. You said, ‘What are you going to tell our parents, that we put dirt in bags? O, lock us away!’ Or something equally sarcastic. But the reason I followed the patrol car to the precinct was to tell you about your parents. I had received the call after our class that day, and—”

“Please.”

“The authorities informed me that your parents had been in a severe car accident. They didn’t know who else to call.” He gently placed his hand over Rick’s closed fist. “It’s alright, Richard. You can talk about it. You’re so angry at the world. Let it out. I’m here for you. *We* are here for you.”

Rick’s eyes reddened and his mouth twitched as he struggled to get out a word without breaking the seal on the spillway of tears he’d dammed up all these years.

“Why?” he cried. “Why them? They were such good people. Why!”

“I’m sorry, Rick,” I said. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

Brad patted Rick’s shoulder. “It was shitty, no doubt, bro. But at least you had priest to look out for you, you know.”

“I’ll always be here for you, Richard.”

The men embraced, huddling in the warmth of their communion, dispelling the fog of irony that repressed their homosocial love. They closed their eyes and grew silent.

“Well I’m sober,” I said. “How about a round of shots, boys. C’mon, priest, you know you can’t pass up a thimble of the good stuff.”

“You did this!” Rick shouted, rising from his seat. “You killed them.”

He grabbed me by the collar of my coat; I could smell the beer on his breath and see bits of pretzels wedged between his yellow-tinged teeth.

“You took them away from me. So make this right. Bring them back.”

“I—I can’t do that.”

“Bring them back!”

“They’re dead, Rick,” I told him.

“I said—”

“I know what you said. I just . . . can’t do anything about it.”

“Why not? If none of this is real anyway, why not just give me my happy fantasy?”

“Because it’s not about you,” I said flatly.

“What!” Rick screamed at my face.

“Nothing. I was just fooling with ya, friend.” I punched him lightly on the shoulder.

“Take it easy, buddy boy. I’m not some puppet master controlling every little detail of your life. I just, uh, I don’t know, wanted to see how far I could go with it.”

He let go of my collar.

“Relax,” I said. “Take a shot.”

They all stared at me quizzically, disturbed. I took my shot in futile hopes that they would follow suit. “Listen, I’m pretty drunk. I’m sorry. I’ve been mulling over this whole God complex idea for a few days now and I thought I’d play with it a little bit. I mean, I hate how often stories resort to biblical allusions—sorry, priest—but I thought by making the transition from some Old Testament God to a merciful New Testament one I’d, uh, strengthen my ethos and win your favor. But again, I guess I took it a little too far. I apologize, sincerely.” I put on my best solemn face to convince them of my purported sincerity—and then, to spark things back up, I said, “C’mon, guys . . . shots.”

But Brad said, “How’d you know about the fake weed thing though?”

“Just a lucky guess, really. I just strung some words together and hoped you’d have some associative memory so it would seem like I knew what I was talking about. You know, like what psychics do to weasel money out of people.”

“So you’re a liar!” Father Todd declared.

“Eh, I’d say more so just a troll, but—”

“You sadistic, manipulative, sociopathic . . .”

“Yep, keep em comin,” I said, taking a shot for each insult he laid on me. “I deserve it.”

“Self-indulgent, heartless, conman piece of shit, asshole . . .”

After the twentieth or so I could no longer speak. The men had become nebulous blobs at which I gestured unintelligibly. I could understand fragments of what they were saying but my abilities to decipher the relations between, and aptly respond to, them were lost.

“Let’s get out of here, guys,” Rick said. “Fuck this guy.”

Father Todd downed his shot and then the trio exited the bar. They turned to take one last look at me. Despite my impaired motor functions, I attempted an emphatic wink.

The streets were sparsely lit. There seemed to be inconsistent distances between lampposts.

“What the fuck is that?” Brad called out, pointing at an indistinct form in the road. It seemed to be breathing but immobile. Maybe it was hurt, they thought.

“It’s probably nothing,” Rick said.

They walked slowly toward it, afraid what they might discover. They stopped. And when they stopped, it stopped breathing. They ran over to at last discern the nature of the animal.

“What is this beast?” the priest asked.

“I think it’s a—”

Splat!

A nondescript vehicle decimated the carcass and doused the men with its contents.