

Confessional

The man in the stall next to Marlin heaved a throaty cough and wagged his left Timberland boot under the divider.

“Any T.P. over there, brother?”

From his seated perch on the edge of a stained ceramic toilet in Tip Top Truck Plaza off the Ohio turnpike, Marlin winced with disdain. His tweed jacket strained against his hunched shoulders. He had stopped there on his way home to vomit, or at least to pacify the tumbling vertigo that turned four lanes into sixteen.

The stall beside him was peppered with words and drawings etched from metal objects, permanent markers, lipstick. *RIP Nicky. Only the good die young. Ohio can suck it. I didn't mean to hurt you, Lynda.* The banality of these phrases disgusted Marlin.

He thought of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, how earnestly the saint had written his most horrible sins. The academic dean at Sinclair Community College wouldn't let him teach it. He told Marlin, “You know Augustine is far too religiously charged for our students,” even though they both knew that few students bothered to read the syllabus, let alone the assigned readings. The students at Sinclair weren't the brightest pick of the litter.

Another cough came from the stall beside Marlin.

“Look, brother, all I need is a few squares.”

The man stuck a stubby-fingered hand under the divider and flapped it expectantly. Marlin wadded up a handful of thin toilet paper and dropped it in the waiting hand.

“Much obliged.”

Marlin paused to study his own hand. It shook. Tiny rhythmic contractions, like sad vibrato on an imaginary violin. The tremors began last week. Marlin wondered if his students noticed. He guessed not. Still, he tried to use fewer gestures, write less on the chalkboard.

Another surge of vertiginous nausea hit him. The stench of the bathroom sent him reeling back to his boyhood farm in Illinois, the burning reek of manure, the slack faces of cattle. He hated their hulking stupidity.

Marlin focused on the cool metal door in front of him, imagined it was creamy parchment paper. He pulled a black felt pen from his lapel and began to write on the dented metal, in shaky letters, a list of sins he had committed:

I threw a rock through Minda Cleever's window when I was nine because I felt like it.

I roughed up Mike Hammon because he sang Broadway songs in the locker room.

I smoked a joint at a Jefferson Airplane concert in 1969 and didn't hate it.

I was an inch away from getting cold feet at the altar (Brenda Johnson; June 8, 1972).

I left Brenda for three weeks when the boys were young.

I clipped somebody's side mirror in Chicago and didn't bother to stop.

I haven't told Brenda the diagnosis.

Marlin lowered his hand and read over his sins with a sense of satisfaction. That was enough.

Mary Roth
Broadside Fiction Contest
First place



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