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**Faith**

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The chapel at the Sisters of Mercy Medical Center was a study in polychromatic brown, tragically, shit brown. There was light brown, flat interior wall paint, hickory brown mid-shag carpet and republican, deep brown hardwood pews, doors and religious icons. It seemed that the Sisters believed Jesus, in all his crucified glory, appeared atop that dusty hill outside Jerusalem as a darkly-stained oak, Sherwin Williams number sixteen, with varnish.

Harry Follis walked up the aisle with carefully muted steps. He counted the pews: twelve rows of short, wooden, uncomfortable looking pews on either side of the shit brown altar with the shit brown crucifix and the Sherwin Williams Jesus. There were three carpeted steps leading to a small dais. Harry plopped himself down on the top step and surveyed the room. Track lighting, focused solely on the altar, made it difficult to see, but squinting, he was able to ascertain that it was a slow night for prayer at the Sisters of Mercy. A Tuesday.

An older woman with leathery dark skin, salt-and-pepper hair and a trim tweed coat that almost matched her tweed hat, wore a short handled leather pocketbook over her forearm. She had been praying when Harry entered, and she looked at him disdainfully from her place in the third pew.

*Jesus, doesn't anyone sit in the front, ever?* Harry reached into the belt of his beige – faded, shit brown – khakis and drew the pistol.

The woman gasped, crossed herself as an afterthought and stumbled, backing out of the pew; she didn't fall.

'Ma'am?' Harry said. When she did nothing but whine a curious array of vowel sounds and cross herself repeatedly, Harry said, 'Uh, ma'am?'

'What do you . . . what do you want?'

'I'm going to need you to leave now, ma'am.'

Her voice was thin and reedy. 'I wasn't doing anything. Please don't kill me. Please don't kill me.' She crossed herself another two or three times, apparently for good measure.

'Ma'am,' Harry tried to be polite. 'I need the room, ma'am. If you would just head out the back, I would appreciate it.'

She made a shrieking sound that left Harry wondering if perhaps she had a small dog trapped in that little handbag she was squeezing to her breast, one of those freezing Bichon things. When she went through the door and into the hospital corridor, her shriek crescendoed into a full-throated scream.

They would be coming sooner than he had planned.

Harry moved quickly to the double doors at the rear of the chapel and searched around for something to secure them. There was no lock; it seemed the Sisters kept the chapel open twenty-four hours a day. That was decent of them. No one ever knows when it's time to pray. But he couldn't have hospital security followed closely by city S.W.A.T. officers breaking in just yet; he needed a few minutes alone.

The back of each pew was lined with wooden slats to hold copies of hymnals and bibles. Most of these had been stolen, but the slats remained, and Harry tore three from the back of the first two pews. He lodged these between the twin handles of the chapel doors.

'It's not perfect,' he said, wishing he had brought a bicycle chain, 'but it'll do for a few minutes.' Already hearing the low boil of hospital staff responding to the tweed woman's cries, Harry strode back to the altar, retrieved his pistol and sat down.

He took a sip from a paper cup of vending machine coffee.

Around the cup, there were black and red pictures of playing cards: two nines, a five and a Queen. He held the cup up, blocking the irritating glare with his wrist to view the fifth card. It was printed on the bottom in black: the Queen of Clubs.

'Hey, two pair, not bad.' He drank again. There was nothing in the world that tasted quite like hospital vending machine coffee. At fifty cents a cup, it ranked among the nation's greatest values, and over the past three months, Harry was certain he had drunk two hundred and forty cups of the wretched black and shit brown amalgam. 'That's a hundred and twenty dollars on coffee and a shitload of losing hand cups.' There was a gourmet coffee place across the street, but somehow the notion of ordering a non-fat, decaf, low-carb, vanilla bean latte made the concept of suicide much more palatable, and at three dollars a crack, he probably would have shot himself five weeks ago. Harry finished the coffee in one swallow – hospital vending machine portions were never very large – and considered the pistol.

It had been his father's. A simple handgun, it was a .38 special, a service revolver his father had carried for fifteen years until police officers across the country began carrying the slip and glide, semi-automatic, 9 mm metric, Euro weapons they all seemed to have these days.

Dad's old gun.

It was easy to load, easy to aim and easy to fire. One shot; that was all it took. Harry thought back through the years. High school sports, college, women he didn't really remember, cars he had bought, driven and sold, houses, the wedding, Monica, the children, the whole package. It had only been twelve years since he graduated from college, but sometimes it felt longer. Dad had given up the old .38 back in the late eighties. It had grown dusty in a drawer while Harry was away at school, away dating Monica, away getting married and away buying his cars and his house. His father had given it to him a few years back; Harry didn't know why, but he enjoyed having the gun in the house and even took it out to the gravel pit a few times to blast away at a beer can or two. Tonight, it seemed like the perfect weapon for the job, a dusty, forgotten revolver with a dented cylinder.

His chest tightened.

*How can that be? There's nothing in there to tighten. It's heart and lungs, a bit of muscle and a few curly bones, but nothing in there can tighten on its own. Where does that feeling come from? Why does it do that? Could it be the fucking hospital coffee? Should have been drinking the fifty-cent decaf instead. Oh, shit, this is bad. This is it. This is the test.* Harry hadn't expected to get nervous.

This decision had been a long time coming, but he was scared, nevertheless.

Someone pulled on the doors; the purloined wooden slats held firm.

'Hey, you in there,' a gruff voice interrupted his nervous collapse.

'Leave me alone,' Harry said.

'Open the door.'

*What was the matter with this guy? Didn't the old lady tell him I had a gun?*

'No,' Harry said, trying to sound angry, 'fuck off.'

'Hey,' the voice threatened.

Harry fired once into the light brown sheet rock above the double doors. Blam! The old gun exploded inside the small room. It kicked in his hand, animated for a split second, and Harry

realized there would be no turning back. A cloud of gray cordite wafted about his head; he sniffed at it, wondering if the detectives would be able to smell the aftermath of his next shot.

‘Fuck off!’ he shouted.

There was no reply from the corridor. He sniffed at the empty coffee cup and went back to considering the old gun.

Soon - about the time he expected it - there was a hollow knock at the door.

‘What?’

‘Harry!’ The voice was friendly, someone he knew.

‘Who is that?’

‘Mike Davis, Harry. You remember me?’

He did. Mike Davis had worked in his father’s unit for several years. ‘Sure, Sergeant Davis. How are you? Actually, I’m glad they sent you and not someone else.’

‘Me too, Harry. Me too, but it’s Lieutenant Davis now. Can you believe it? Ah, somebody must have fucked something up at the capitol. You know? I mean, what am I doing as a Lieutenant?’ Davis’s voice was a flat resonant monotone through the door. His father’s old colleague was trying too hard to be friendly, a stage actor working to convince patrons in the cheap seats that he was elated about something.

‘Really? Good for you.’ Harry found the conversation absurd and decided to bail out. An uncomfortable silence passed between them.

‘You know, Harry. Why don’t you come on out of there?’

‘I can’t do that Lieutenant,’ he wished he had more coffee.

‘Now Harry. I know you don’t have anybody in there with you, but I won’t be able to keep the S.W.A.T. guys out for too long. You know how this goes. I can’t fool you.’

‘Why? Why do they have to? I’m not doing anything to anybody. This isn’t any of their business. This isn’t any of *your* business.’

‘I know, Harry. I know. Please believe me. And believe me, Harry, I am sorry about Matty. I really am. Jesus Christ, I remember when he was born. When was it . . . three years ago?’

‘Three and a half,’ Harry corrected, his chest tightening again. Tears began to form in the corners of his eyes. Matthew Harrison Follis. Matthew, from the Hebrew word meaning *gift from God*. His son. Three and a half years old last month, and he was dying. He would die before the night was over. His little boy, the boy he had loved more than he had ever loved anything would not see another day.

The Sisters of Mercy had played host to Matty’s arrival. Of course, that had been a different wing than this. There was no joy on this godforsaken wing. That day had been nothing but joy. Harry had loved his parents, loved Monica, loved life, loved learning, loved his siblings, even loved his dog, but he had never known love like that. He believed that he could never love anyone as much as he loved his own children. It was God’s greatest blessing and God’s greatest curse. Life stopped. Plans were forgotten. Goals ignored, all in the interests of loving this little person. When Mary Elizabeth arrived two years later, it had happened anew, all of it, without missing a nuance. It was truly the only miracle Harry Follis had ever known.

Yet, if Matty’s birth had been a miracle, their appointment with the oncologist had been a tragedy.

Metastasized.

*Who uses a fucking word like that? Say it grew. Say it was growing out of control. Say it had moved from his lymph nodes to his lungs and his brain, but don’t fucking tell me that it metastasized. I’ll fucking kill you for that. Don’t use that word about a three year old. Use that word about a fat, slovenly, sixty-eight year old smoker who drinks too much, but don’t use that word about my son.*

Harry’s life had ended; tonight was just a drill. His life had ended that sunny afternoon at the oncologist’s office when the doctor, the thin, fifty-something divorcé with the perfect hair and

the three hundred dollar shoes had told him that his son's cancer had metastasized from his lymph system to his lungs.

*Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.*

It had all come to a stop, and the rest had been a blur, a pointless, effortless, free-floating cloud of confusion in which he had gone about his routines in a gray hooded sweatshirt, a pair of tattered khakis and an old pair of running shoes. *The uniform of the high school football coach*, he thought looking down at himself in the glare of the chapel's track lighting. *That's who I've become.*

'Harry?' It was Mike Davis again.

'Leave me alone, Lieutenant.' It was an effort to respond.

'I can't do that, Harry. Now listen-'

'You're making it difficult for me to do anything else,' Harry interrupted.

'Sorry. But I called your mom and dad. They're on their way.'

*No. No. No. Why did he do that?*

'They're supposed to be watching Mary. They're not supposed to come down here. This was for me and Monica to do together. Just us. No one else.'

'Well, forgive me for saying so, Harry, but you're doing a shitty job of that,' Mike Davis had no business negotiating tense situations.

'Fuck you, Mike.' Rage welled up; Harry felt his vision tunnel. 'You ever lost anyone? Don't answer that. I don't give a fuck. You know, hundreds of kids die every day. I know that. I know that hundreds of kids are dying right now over in Africa or Uzbekistan or wherever the fuck they are, but you know, I don't give a shit. It's a cruel, unfortunate universe, and we struggle under a cruel unfortunate God. What God would do this? What God would take him and leave me here? Can you answer that for me? And I know I'm not supposed to question Him, but this situation makes it hard not to. You know? So, you can take all your bullshit advice and your bullshit chit chat, and you can shove them up your ass. And Mike, fuck you for calling my parents down here. Fuck you for that.'

'Calm down, Harry,' Davis entreated. 'Just calm down. I'm sorry I called them, but they're coming, and there's nothing I can do to keep them away at this point. You know your dad.'

Harry didn't answer.

'Where's Monica?'

'Jesus Christ, Mike, but you suck at this. She's in with Matty. She's been in there for two months. Where the hell do you think she is? Don't break my balls with annoying chatter. I'm trying to-'

'What, Harry? You're trying to do what?'

'Nothing. Leave me alone.' He was suddenly irritated, truly angered by the lieutenant's interruptions. 'Leave me alone for Christ's sake. Send the S.W.A.T. guys if you have to, but leave me alone.'

Harry Follis let the tears come. It was not the first time he had collapsed to the floor of this room, and the mid-shag carpet felt oddly familiar against the side of his face. He watched the carved legs of the uniform pews fade in and out of focus, and time passed. He didn't know how long nor did he know if Mike Davis continued to speak to him through the double doors. When he wrestled himself back into a sitting position, he checked the room for a clock but didn't find one. He had thrown his watch away three weeks earlier; time had lost its meaning, and he glanced at the walls more out of curiosity than any real interest. Cradling the old revolver in his lap, he waited. It was coming.

Harry waited for the inevitable news, the inevitable screaming he would hear when Monica came looking for him. He had told her he was coming down here to talk with God. That was how he had said it, as if he and the Old Man had a direct line to one another. She would come

looking for him; she would be angry at first, angry that he had not been there when Matty passed, but deep down, he knew she wanted to be there alone.

Monica had become a ghost. Emaciated, unable to eat or drink, she had been medicated for the past two weeks - since the coma - and apart from falling with him to the floor of this very same shit brown chapel or sipping at soup in the hospital cafeteria, his hollow-eyed, sunken-cheeked wife had not left their son's room. She would never recover; even taking care of Mary, a task he was certain she would do with abandon, Monica would never recover from this; Harry knew he would spend the rest of his life married to an empty shell.

'Harry?' The voice outside was tentative.

'Mom, please.'

'Harry, I want you to let us in.'

He wiped his nose on the sweatshirt and dried his eyes. 'No, Ma. I can't.'

'Just for a few minutes, we want to talk. Please.'

Thirty-three years later, and he felt obligated to get his tired, weak, suicidal ass up off the floor and open the door for his mother. 'Dad?'

'Yeah?' Harry could tell from the rattle in his father's voice that he wasn't about to risk more than a one-word answer.

'Dad, I want you to get Mike and whoever's with him down to the far end of the hallway. I don't have anyone in here with me; so, the last thing they want is to upset me enough to shoot myself. Tell them, Dad. Get them down the hall, because if I see Mike's fat ass through this door, I'm going to shoot a hole in it.'

It was Lieutenant Davis who answered, 'No problem, Harry. No problem.'

There was an exchange of harsh whispers, muted but readily overheard through the doors.

*Just get them all back.*

*Have to worry about you two.*

*Not going to shoot us.*

*Has a daughter. Monica needs us. He knows that.*

*Suicidal, not a fucking murderer.*

*Just get back.*

'Harry,' his father said, 'they're gone.'

He slid the slats back far enough for one door to open. Holding his breath and praying he could trust his parents enough not to allow a rank of S.W.A.T. officers to burst in, Harry stepped back.

His mother and father joined him in the chapel; Harry re-secured the doors.

They walked in silence up the aisle. His parents sat together in the second pew, and Harry dropped back onto the carpeted dais with the track lighting and the Sherwin Williams Jesus.

His mother was already crying. 'Why are you doing this? Why aren't you in there with Monica? This is such a-'

'A what, Mom? A cowardly thing to do?' He searched her face, 'It's alright. There's nothing you can say that will make me feel any worse tonight. So, have at me.'

'You should be in there with Matty and Monica.'

Harry felt the muscles in his face relax; he feared he was looking down at his parents with a vacuous, slack-jawed gaze that implied too little sleep and too much alcohol. He stared at a knot in the grain pattern on their pew. It seemed as good a place to focus as any.

'I'm going with him.'

'What? What do you mean?'

'Do you believe in Heaven, Mom? Dad? I think you do. I think you always have, but do you *really* believe in Heaven?'

His father nodded, a minimalist gesture.

His mother whispered, ‘yes.’

‘Yes,’ Harry confirmed. “Good. I do, too. I truly do, and if Matty is going tonight, I’m going with him.”

‘Do you have any idea how insane that sounds?’ His mother rose halfway then sat back down. ‘That isn’t faith. That’s . . . I don’t know what that is, Harry, but you can’t do it. You just can’t. Think of Monica. Think of Mary. She’s such a little girl. She needs a father.’

‘She’ll have you two. She’ll have Uncle Jeff and Uncle Stan.’ He tried to force the images of Mary Elizabeth from his mind and failed. She was his baby girl: the only woman ever to control him completely; all it took was a giggle and a cereal smooch. He coughed, sobbed and wiped his nose on his sweatshirt. ‘She’ll be alright. Monica will take care of her.’

‘It’s Matty’s time, Harry.’

‘Don’t you say that!’ He stood up, raging. ‘Don’t you dare say that to me! It is not his time. He’s three, and this is the most cruelly criminal thing I can imagine. It’s my time. It’s your time, but it is not his time.’ Harry sat back down, sorry he had lost his temper. ‘If he’s going, I’m going with him. Tell me the truth; if you believe in Heaven, and you believe that’s where he’s going, why would you let him go alone? He belongs with me. We belong together. We were supposed to have years and years together, and he’s leaving tonight. Well, that is not at all okay with me, and I’m going. There is nothing that can keep me from him. There is no Heavenly place, no purgatory, no nebulous spiritual plane that can keep me from finding him. And I am not about to stay here and have him go anywhere alone. Not alone. Not for two minutes will he be by himself!’

‘He’ll be with Jesus.’ His mother was weeping now; it was difficult to understand what she was saying. ‘He’ll be with God, Harry. You don’t have to worry about him. Mourn him, yes. Mourn him and remember him forever, but you have to have faith, Harry. You have to have faith that God will protect him.’

‘That’s not good enough for me, Mom. It isn’t. He needs me with him, and I’m going.’

‘*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live,*’ she held up what must have been the last remaining bible in the Sisters of Mercy chapel. ‘Don’t you remember? *Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.* Don’t you remember that, Harry?’

‘Don’t quote scripture to me, Mom. Please. You’re talking about the same Jesus who said *he who loves his son more than Me is not worthy of Me.* Well, given that bit of scripture, I’m not worthy.’ He picked up the coffee cup, crushed it in his fist and tossed it several pews back. ‘And I’d guess that you and Dad aren’t worthy either. Sixty years, Dad, and have you ever prayed for anything but the health and happiness of your family?’

‘No,’ his father pressed his lips together. His face was a mask of anguish.

‘*He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.*’ Harry quoted. ‘I lose. I can’t measure up to that standard. I’ll ask Him to forgive me when I get there.’

‘That’s Matthew 10:37.’

‘Right, Matthew. It’s Hebrew for *gift from God.*’

His mother gripped his father’s wrist with whitening knuckles. Her bony hands looked ancient, brittle, about to crumble to dust. ‘This is not the way into Heaven.’

‘Why not? I’ve done what the Bible teaches: I’ve been kind, forgiving, loving. I’ve told the truth, said I was sorry when I fucked up, went to work every day, and I’ve believed. I have. I believe in Heaven. I believe in it enough to go right now, tonight. Matty is not going by himself. I will go, and I will find him, and I will be there with him when you two arrive and Monica and Mary arrive. That’s love, Mom. You know I’m right.’

‘You’re wrong, and I want you to give me the gun.’

‘Sorry. I truly am sorry, but he’s my son, and this is my choice.’

The scream began as a distant wail, a faint, warbling cry that Harry tried to avoid by bowing his head, praying it wasn't Monica coming for him. Perhaps if he moved quickly enough, slipped to one side briefly, the sound of her screams might pass him by, might miss him somehow, might not come true. But they came in a wave that flooded the chapel with hoarse, unholy desperation. There was no corner in which to disappear.

Matty was dead.

Harry Follis' stomach clenched so tightly that he doubled over; his throat closed, and his vision faded to a point of brilliant track lighting overhead. It was happening; it was here now, and it was happening. *Please, God, take it back. Turn us back. Anything at all. I'll give forty years just to see him for five more minutes. Please. Let him stay. Take me right now. Take me right here. Let him stay. Please.*

The double doors rattled violently, but the wooden slats held.

'Harry!' It was his wife.

The gun forgotten, Harry ran to back of the chapel, slid the makeshift deadbolt aside and threw open the doors.

Four S.W.A.T. officers tackled him to the mid-shag, shit brown carpet, knocking the wind out of him and cracking one of his ribs. They were all speaking at once, barking orders into his face. He had no strength to comply, no understanding of what they wanted; so, Harry simply went limp. He gave up and channeled all his faith into one mighty prayer that God would take him away. He didn't need to see Monica; she knew he loved her. He didn't need to see Mary; although, what a pleasure it would be to have one of their impossibly endearing little chats over imagined tea and cookies. He didn't need to say good-bye to his parents; they had heard his arguments. Harry simply wanted death to take him, and he tried through sheer will to pass away there on the floor.

It didn't work.

Rolling him onto his stomach and cuffing his hands behind his back, the officers didn't allow him to catch his breath; they didn't let him to talk with his wife. Somewhere off to his left, Monica was screaming, but one of the city cops, not a S.W.A.T. officer, just a beat cop, was holding her back. She looked ghastly; pale and drawn, her face was a cadaverous mix of wild, reckless despair and mind-numbing disbelief. She was shouting something to him, but he couldn't make it out. Instead, he heard another voice, low and determined, from farther away.

'Harry.'

The officers pulled him to his feet; Monica threw her arms around his neck. He struggled against the handcuffs but couldn't return her embrace, couldn't offer her any comfort. Every time he tried to reach for her, a bolt of fiery pain shot through his rib cage.

'Harry.' The voice was more insistent this time.

His mother moved up the aisle, ushering Monica into the hallway. *Good. They have each other. At least they'll get through the night.*

'Harry.'

He looked around, forcing himself to focus. The glare from the track lighting was overwhelming, worse than it had been, and he blinked repeatedly to catch sight of his father standing stolid and impassive some distance away. Still unable to draw an entire breath, Harry raised his eyebrows at the older man.

'You're right, Harry.'

'What?' he rasped.

The officers dragged him through the glut of hospital security, curious nurses, patients and visitors who had clogged the corridor; the tweed woman was there, too. Mike Davis was apparently not very good at establishing a perimeter either.

'You're right, Harry.' His father raised a hand to him. It was a gesture, not a wave or a salute but a gesture, something that said, *I understand.*

Harry shook his head, 'No.' He struggled to speak, struggled to get the officers' attention. 'Let me go. Look back there, inside! Let me go!'

'You take care of Monica and Mary. Look in on your mother from time to time, too.'

'No, Dad.' Harry kicked and twisted until his rib felt as though it would puncture his lung, but the S.W.A.T. officers wouldn't be budged. 'Dad, no. No!' Harry's heart broke as he watched his father raise the old revolver beneath his chin.

'I'll go with him, Harry. I'll go with Matty. You stay here.'