

Light in the Darkness

How long had it been since he sat in a place like this? Vic Dolens struggled to remember. Eighteen, nineteen years? No, twenty. It felt strange to be here again, almost like returning to a boyhood home where his family had not lived for years, and where he no longer belonged. Yet he did call it home once; maybe he could again.

The sheer immensity of the place dwarfed his problems for a minute or two, then threatened to swallow him into nothingness. What did his life matter anyway? Did anyone even care about him? Certainly nobody here.

The last rays of the afternoon sun filtered through the large windows, softening every contour with a muted gray that would soon ebb into a featureless black. A time of day soothing and unsettling at once. The stillness, disrupted only by the occasional creak of a door and click of heels on the floor, calmed the turmoil of his thoughts at first, but then replaced it with a disturbing emptiness.

Had he made a mistake in coming here after all these years? There were still a couple of people in line; he had time enough to leave. But no, he couldn't go on like this anymore. Vic

leaned against the back of the oak bench, sensing how its hardness offered no comfort. Closing his eyes, he thought again, this has to end today. He reached into his jacket pocket and fingered the cold steel. Now was the time. There was no other. Ten minutes later no one else was waiting in line.

Finally, the red light above the doorframe on the right went out; the heavy door squeaked open; and the last person stepped out and exited the building. Vic sat there all alone. At last his turn had come. He rose, strode towards the open door, and entered a space no larger than a small closet. Once he had closed the door behind him, he stood in total darkness. He lowered himself to his knees and then heard the solid-wood screen slide back behind the small latticed window. From the other side emerged a faint, almost imperceptible light.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been twenty years since my last confession.”

“Have you been away from the Church all this time, my son?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Church law commands you to attend mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, and to miss mass on those days is a mortal sin. But God will forgive you if you are truly contrite, my son.”

“Well, that’s not really why I’m here, Father. I kind of lost my faith in the Church a long time ago.”

“Then, why have you come to confession? Do you want to confess a sin, my son?”

“Yes, Father, I do.” Vic braced himself, taking a deep breath. “I’m going to commit suicide. Today. When I leave here. And I want you to give me absolution, so I can die in peace.”

“What? You want me to forgive you for a sin you haven’t even committed?”

“After I commit it, it will be too late. My life has been pure hell, and I don’t want to suffer in Hell for all eternity for what I am about to do.”

“But absolution requires the firm resolve not to sin again, and you intend to go out and immediately commit the very sin for which you seek absolution.”

No response.

The priest did not speak for a moment. “What has brought you to such a pass, my son?”

“My wife has finally left me. She says I don’t know how to be close, I cling to her out of a fear of abandonment, but when she tries to get close, I panic and flee. I think she’s right. It’s been that way with a long series of women I’ve been involved with.”

“Involved with? You know that fornication is a mortal sin, my son.”

Vic sighed out of frustration. “And I relapsed when she left. I was clean for the two years we were married, but I’ve had drinking and drugging problems since my early twenties. Hard liquor and heroin were the only ways to numb the pain and forget the memories.”

“The abuse of alcohol and drugs is a serious sin against the virtue of temperance, my son.”

Irritated, Vic shook his head, wondering why he was even talking. Yet, for some reason, he went on. “And then I lost my job. I’m a frame carpenter. But when I didn’t show up for work because I was too smacked out to go, they just fired me. The two years I was married are the only time I’ve been able to hold down a steady job. My drinking and drugging always got in the way before. Alone, addicted, jobless. I just can’t go on. It has to stop. Today. When I leave.”

Vic was determined, even if it meant defying the priest, the Church, and God himself.

“You must pray for divine help, my son.”

“I’ve been praying every day for the last twenty-four years,” Vic nearly shouted, “and there’s no help in sight.”

“I thought you said you stopped practicing your faith twenty years ago.”

“I stopped going to church when I moved out of my parents’ house at eighteen. Something happened four years earlier, when I was fourteen. I’ve never told anyone about it.”

“You are protected by the seal of confession, my son. Only God will hear what you say here. Speak freely.”

Vic felt a shudder of fear and anxiety run down his spine; he swallowed hard. But, then, what did he have to lose? It would all be over with soon anyway.

“I was raped towards the end of my eighth-grade year.”

He nearly choked on the words.

“My family moved that summer, shortly after it happened. I felt terrible, you know. . . . guilty . . . like it was all my fault because I didn’t stop it. I couldn’t get it out of my head. It kept forcing its way into my thoughts.”

The tightness in his chest made it difficult to get the words out.

“When I started high school in the fall, I couldn’t concentrate in class, and my grades dropped. I couldn’t sleep at night, and if I did, I woke up with nightmares about it . . . I was always angry and would explode over nothing. So I kept getting into fights with the other kids and into trouble with the school authorities . . . When I wasn’t angry, I was depressed, or just numb. This is hard to say . . . but I started burning myself with cigarettes.”

He lowered his head out of embarrassment. How could he explain that?

“I know it sounds crazy, but somehow the pain felt good. It was a way to let my anger and sadness out. And when I felt physical pain, I didn’t feel the emotional pain so much . . . At

least I was in control of what was happening to my body. My whole body is still covered with the scars from those burns. But eventually the burning wasn't enough. So I started using alcohol and drugs, and . . . well . . . you know the rest of the story."

There. He had said it. A momentary feeling of relief, before the gravity of it all weighed heavily on his shoulders again.

The priest softened his tone. "Who did this to you, my son?"

"You won't believe it, Father; it was our parish priest. I was just learning to be an altar boy. He would invite me to the rectory on Saturdays after acolyte practice. He would say that in the order of nature we first have to learn to love the members of our own sex before we can love someone of the opposite sex but that in our culture men didn't know how to love each other. And he talked about how David and Jonathan in the Old Testament loved each other and kissed each other and about how John reclined on Jesus' breast during the last supper because he was the disciple whom Jesus loved. And he quoted St. Paul, who said we should greet one another with a holy kiss. Well, the kisses were just the beginning of it, but, believe me, there was nothing holy about them. After a couple of months of that, one Saturday he . . . "

A knot in his throat, tears in his eyes, Vic couldn't go on. He could almost feel the hands of the priest touching him again . . . down there. Revulsion. Recoil. Burning shame.

"You say this happened twenty-four years ago?"

"Yes." Overwhelmed by the memories, Vic couldn't understand why the date was important.

The priest paused for a long time. "And where did this happen?"

"In Shady Hollow, but what the hell does that have to do with anything?" Exasperated by the idle question, Vic pulled a gun from his jacket pocket. "Are you going to give me absolution

or not?" he screamed. "If you don't, I'll shoot myself right here!" He cocked the gun and held it against his right temple.

"Wait! . . . I prayed this day would never come," the priest stammered, his voice quavering, "but somehow I always knew it would."

"What?" Vic wasn't at all prepared for that statement.

"There is nothing to absolve you of. It is not you who have sinned; it is I. And this is not your confession; it is mine."

"W-what do you mean?" Vic lowered the gun, confused.

"I am the priest who abused you. I was transferred to this parish just last year."

"You're Father Viazio? You're the one who ruined my life? You son of a bitch! I ought to blow your fucking brains out right here." Vic pushed the gun barrel against the latticed window, pointing it at the priest. Suddenly he was sinking into a whirlpool of rage.

"That Saturday was the one and only time I ever did such a thing. I was going through a personal crisis, doubting my vocation. I just wanted a little human warmth and didn't know where else to turn. I know I did you a terrible wrong, but I have confessed my sin and have tried to atone by being a good priest ever since." He didn't sound convinced. Was he just making excuses?

"Well, that may be good enough for God, but it's not good enough for me." Vic's finger itched on the trigger.

"Can you forgive me?" The priest sniffled.

Caught off guard by the question, Vic thought a long while, weighing the possibilities.

"After absolution comes penance, right?"

"Yes."

“Then, I’ll absolve you, but you have to do the penance I give you.”

“Anything you ask.” The priest’s voice trembled again, probably his hands as well.

“First thing tomorrow you go to the bishop, tell him what you did to me, and resign as pastor of the parish. Then you go straight to the police station and turn yourself in. Maybe you’ll sit in prison for the next twenty years, see what it’s like to get raped. It would still be a lighter sentence than the one I got.”

Stunned silence at first. Then a hiccupped sob. Finally, his voice breaking along with his entire world, Father Viazo said, “I will do as you say . . . but on one condition.”

“What?”

“You promise not to kill yourself.”

Vic uncocked the gun.

“Deal.”

The red light above the doorframe went off; the heavy door grated in its hinges; and Vic stepped out of the confessional. Now he had no need for absolution. He let out a big sigh.

Once outside the church, Victor Dolens looked up at the stars in the sky and thought to himself, there is light in the darkness.

Glossary of Names

Vic(tor): the short form is meant in the police-jargon sense of the victim; the long form is the Latin word *victor*, the victorious one

Dolens: the one who is suffering or in pain (Latin)

Viazo: around 1500 the word meant “voyage” in Italian and appears in the title of a work by Niccolò da Poggibonsi. By happy coincidence for this story, it means “I rape” in modern Greek. A real, though rare last name, it was borne at least by Àngel Toldrà Viazo, an Catalanian editor of postcards.