

THE
GOOD
PRIEST

TINA BEATTIE



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9 Priory Business Park,
Wistow Road, Kibworth Beauchamp,
Leicestershire. LE8 0RX
Tel: 0116 279 2299
Email: books@troubador.co.uk
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ONE

ASH WEDNESDAY

John awakes and licks the sourness from his lips. The sense of a dream lingers, but its memory eludes him. Only a fading anxiety remains on the edges of wakefulness. He lies in bed and listens to the singing bird, then he crosses himself to start the day.

Morning dribbles through the curtains, smudging the room in grey. He rasps his hand against the stubble of his chin, pushes aside the polyester duvet, and settles his feet on the bedside rug. It's Ash Wednesday.

He pulls back the curtains and looks down at the garden smeared in mist. He sees the cat lurking in the shrubbery, watching a blackbird that has alighted on the path. The cat is called Shulamite, Shula for short, after the beautiful black Beloved in the Song of Songs. The trees are greening with the buds of spring. The cherry tree spreads a blush of petals against the sky.

He goes downstairs to make coffee, then he takes his mug back to the bedroom and sits in the armchair next to the window. He crosses himself, and picks up the Divine Office from the table beside him.

Every Lent, he resolves to pray the daily Office as it should be prayed, though never yet has he managed to keep that resolution. This year he knows it will be no different, but he starts as he hopes to continue.

He tries to concentrate, but his gaze wanders to the window. Shula, bored with hunting, has jumped up onto the wooden bench beneath the cherry tree and is grooming herself.

The ghost of a child skips past. She's nine years old, dressed in jeans and wearing a pink sweatshirt with matching ribbons in her hair. She moves with pent-up energy unleashed, her small body a coiled spring set free from the constraints of sitting through the Sunday Mass.

John wipes his hand over his eyes. When he looks again, she has disappeared.

There's already a small queue of parishioners on the benches outside the confessional, when he makes his way through the presbytery door that leads into the church. A smell of incense and candlewax mingles with the remnants of last night's pancake party, wafting in under the door from the presbytery kitchen. He goes into the sacristy and drapes a purple stole over his black shirt, then he makes his way to the confessional.

Sister Gertrude, ninety two and losing her mind, is first in. She kneels on the other side of the grille. He knows it's her because Sister Martha is there to help her and he recognises the older woman's croaked complaint before Sister Martha leaves, closing the door behind her. He sees the shadowy outline of Sister Gertrude's veiled head through the lattice pattern of the grille.

A white lace curtain hangs across the grille, adding to the blur so that the body on the other side melts into the background. It was put there by Edith, who has appointed herself unofficial parish manager and minder to the priest. 'It's important for people to know they're anonymous Father,' she said.

He didn't tell her that he recognizes their shapes and voices if they're regular parishioners. Besides, very few of them kneel behind the grille. Most of them prefer to sit on the chair beside him, knees almost touching, speaking face to face. He doesn't know what Edith prefers, because she goes to confession in another parish.

‘I prefer it that way Father. I don’t like you knowing my secrets, when I have to see you every day.’ It amuses him to think that Edith has a secret life that he knows nothing about – or at least, she wants him to think that she does.

Sister Gertrude is the only one of the parish sisters who still wears a veil. Her head wobbles with the onset of Parkinson’s disease. He uses the formal rite, because he knows she prefers it.

‘May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in his mercy.’ He reads a short extract from the day’s Mass readings.

She wants him to know that Sister Martha has been spying on her again. He murmurs sympathetically and invites her to confess her sins.

‘It’s not me that needs to confess, Father,’ she says. ‘It’s Sister Martha who needs to confess.’

‘Even so, Sister Gertrude, you’re the one in the confessional.’ He speaks mildly, seeking to reassure rather than to chide.

He waits, listening to the wheeze and huff of her breath. When he first came to this parish as a young curate ten years ago, she was a youthful octogenarian. She ran the parish outreach project, taking meals to the homeless and collecting coats and blankets to distribute on winter nights. She visited the sick and gave singing lessons in the parish primary school.

He waits for a moment of lucidity to arrive. Eventually it comes.

‘I’m jealous of her, Father. Sister Martha. She’s been married, you know. She has a grown-up daughter. She joined the community when her husband died. Her daughter comes to visit her. Her name is Patricia. She has a little girl. A beautiful little girl called Lily. Martha’s granddaughter. So pretty, Father. Six years old, she is.’ She falls silent. He waits. ‘The thing is, I’m jealous Father. I’m jealous of Martha. She’s had it all, you see. And I regret not having all that. Marriage. Children. Grandchildren.’ Another pause. ‘My vocation. It was a mistake, Father. God forgive me.’

A mistake? No, Gertrude. That's not possible. His heart is beating too fast. If Sister Gertrude repents of her vocation, what then?

'Your vocation was your response to God's call, Gertrude, and maybe it was for the good of others more than yourself.' He can hear the chomping of her jaw on the other side of the grille. Her head wobbles uncontrollably. He seeks refuge in well-worn consolations. 'God is with us in our weakness, Gertrude. Of course God forgives you. Do you want to make an act of contrition?'

'I know why she's spying on me, Father.'

'Why, Gertrude?'

'She wants to steal my jewellery. She has a lover. They're going to run away together, and she's planning to sell my jewellery to pay for it. She thinks I don't know, but I do. When I went to bed last night, I caught her hiding in my wardrobe. She was wearing my tiara. You know, the one Princess Diana gave me. I wore it once to the parish dance.' She wheezes. Is she laughing? 'With my red ball gown,' she adds. She chomps and wobbles, then she says, 'I told Sister Dorothy to phone the police, but she wouldn't. She's sly, that Sister Martha. They all believe her. If they had seen what I've seen ...' She stops abruptly.

He takes advantage of the silence to pronounce absolution. He wishes she would sit in the chair beside him so that he could rest his hand on her head. He makes do with speaking as gently as he can.

'For your penance, Sister Gertrude, you should say one Hail Mary. You can say it now if you like.' He doesn't want her to leave the confessional with even that small burden of duty on her conscience. But she says nothing, and he sees her struggling to her feet. He opens the door and goes round to help her. Sister Martha is there, waiting on the front bench. She gets up and comes over to take the old woman's arm. She's wearing a dark blue skirt and cardigan with a white blouse. She thanks John and

shuffles slowly across the aisle with Sister Gertrude, to await the beginning of Mass.

A vision of Sister Gertrude in a diamond tiara and a red ball gown swims into his mind. He tries to imagine what she looked like when she was young. She still has warm chocolate eyes. Perhaps she was a great beauty. He pushes aside the thought of a laughing young woman at a dance. As he goes back into the confessional he sees Jane Sanderson heaving herself off the bench.

She parks her sleeping toddler in his pushchair outside the door and sits down heavily in the chair next to John's. She is pregnant again – mother of five and a sixth unplanned on the way. She says it's God's will – an uninvited gift perhaps, but who is she to turn it down? Again, and again, and again. She looks exhausted. Pale face, brown hair lank and unbrushed, as if time is too short for vanities. She crosses herself.

'Bless me Father, I have sinned. It's been a month since my last confession.' Jane is devout. She comes to Mass every Sunday and often on weekdays too, after she has dropped the older children off at school. She confesses regularly, once a month.

He invites her to confess her sins before Almighty God, who hears and forgives our darkest faults. She begins to cry. Jane's confessions often begin with tears, as if she carries them inside her from one month to the next, saving them all for Jesus.

'I'm just so tired,' she says. 'I long to be serene and calm and patient, but I lose my temper. I keep shouting at the children. Yesterday I slapped Susy because she wouldn't do her homework. My fingers left a red mark on her arm. She told me she hates me – and the baby. I'm so ashamed Father. She's right to hate me. She's only eight. I ought to understand. I ought to be there for her. I hate myself. I can't cope. I'm tired all the time.' She sniffs and rubs the back of her hand across her nose. He holds out the box of tissues he keeps beside him for such occasions. She takes one and blows her nose noisily. 'And when Pete comes home from

work – he works so hard, I know that – and after he was made redundant, having to take that job in a supermarket, it destroys him inside – and all I can do is complain. And – then we go to bed – and we haven't made love for weeks, and sometimes I think that's the only real pleasure he has left in life, but – I can't bear him to touch me, Father. Because – because it's all his fault. All these children. I want us to stop. But he can't.' John waits as she blows her nose and cries into the tissue. 'Sorry,' she says.

'Take your time, Jane, he says. 'It's alright.'

Head down, she half-whispers to her bulging belly. 'So Father, I hate myself, I hate my husband, and – and most of all I hate God.' She twists the soggy tissue between her fingers. Eventually she shakes her head and offers him a wobbly smile. 'Well,' she says, 'I suppose there's nothing more to say after that, is there?'

'For your penance, Jane, I want you to kneel in front of the statue of the *Pietà* and say three Hail Marys.' Then he's astonished to hear himself saying, 'And I want you to say after each Hail Mary, "I am beautiful and God loves me."' Where did that come from? He thinks of the beautiful young woman in a red ball gown and a tiara. He wonders if by some miracle it came from Sister Gertrude.

Jane looks surprised. 'Do you really think that's true, Father?'
'Of course I do Jane.'

Her face is transformed. Jane has dimples when she smiles. He remembers those dimples, framed in a froth of white on her wedding day. She stands up, and he notices that the hem of her dress is coming undone. The dress might once have been bright yellow with white flowers – a springtime dress – but like its wearer it has been wearied by too many pregnancies, and its colours have faded.

He watches her go with a heavy heart.

The door opens and Deacon Jack Logan comes in and settles himself on the chair with a sigh of resignation. Jack's wife Penny

died of a heart attack eight months ago, at the age of seventy three. She and Jack lived in the parish all their lives. They were childhood sweethearts. They have eight children and seventeen grandchildren. Now he is inconsolable. His face is red with shame as he confesses that he is masturbating to relieve the loneliness. John aches, and he recognises it as the ache of envy.

Next in the queue is Luke. John feels a tightening in his chest as Luke sits down and rests his hands on his knees. His skin is smooth and pale against his faded jeans.

Luke has a soft Irish accent. He says he hasn't been to Mass since Christmas. He's had a short-term relationship and lots of hasty fucks. That's what he calls them, 'hasty fucks'. He goes cruising sometimes. He's not confessing to being gay – he has made his peace with God about that – but he knows that this is not the way to live.

'I'd like to meet somebody and get married, but that's not possible, is it Father?' There's something sardonic in the way he says 'Father'.

'With God all things are possible, Luke.'

'With God maybe, Father John, but not with the Church.'

'It's God's Church, Luke.'

'I'm not sure I believe that John.'

John allows a flicker of recognition to pass between them, then he fixes his gaze to the right of Luke's face, where his dark hair curls over the top of his ear.

'We must pray for a spirit of discernment,' he says. 'We're only human. God is with us in our humanity.'

'You don't really believe it either, do you John?'

'Believe what, Luke?'

'That it's God's Church.'

'This isn't about my beliefs. This is the confessional. You need to think of yourself as being alone with Christ.'

'That's another problem. You know one of the reasons I haven't been coming to Mass?' He pauses, eyeing John up and

down, calculating. 'You've surely noticed, John, the crucifix above the altar. Have you ever really looked at it?'

'Yes, of course I have.'

'So you'll know what I mean?' Yes, John knows what he means. 'It's a man up there dying in agony, and I lust after that body. It's beautiful. He's beautiful. The muscles in his arms and legs. The shape of his head. Jesus John, he's practically naked. And I feel so bad about the thoughts I'm having, when I'm meant to be concentrating on the Mass. I want to be alone with Christ, but not in the way you're suggesting.'

'Pray for God's help, Luke. Some of the great mystics used the language of erotic desire in their prayers. Think of Saint John of the Cross. Our human desires are complicated, but what matters most is our desire for God. Maybe it's better to desire him in that confused way, than not to desire him at all.'

He pronounces absolution, and as Luke leaves he keeps his eyes lowered and prays for mercy. He allows himself one quick glance at Luke's buttocks in the firm clutch of his jeans. He wonders if he should have answered Luke's question. Of course I believe this is God's Church, Luke. Otherwise, how could I bear it?

Last in is Holly in a blaze of colour and a waft of perfume mingled with stale cigarette smoke. Holly has orange hair and she's wearing a green scarf around her head. Her neck and wrists and hands are festooned with heavy silver jewellery. His heart lifts.

He remembers the little ghost of his morning prayers. It was some time after Sarah died that Holly emerged from the drab world of despair with dyed hair and brightly coloured clothes and silver jewellery, as if she had decided to make her whole personality a statement of anarchic defiance in the face of death. She dedicated herself with renewed zeal to her academic career, even as she regularly berates herself for not having given more time to Sarah and the rest of her family. She has risen through the academic ranks to become Professor of Medieval Studies at Westonville University.

‘Hello John,’ she says, sitting down next to him.

‘Good morning, Holly.’

‘Here I am again, with my burden of guilt and sin,’ she says. Holly’s appearances in the confessional are intermittent and brash. She does it, she says, out of fidelity to a tradition if not to a god.

‘It’s the same old things,’ she says. ‘I drink too much, I smoke too much and I can be bitchy as hell to my colleagues at work. And I still fight with Steve, and my bloody lazy sons get on my tits, but I think they need to take some share of the blame for that. I love them all – adore them really – even Steve though he can be a totally miserable sod, and I pray for them every day in spite of the fact that I’m not sure there’s anyone there to pray to, but I don’t need to drag all that angst in here. It’s not sin. It’s just life.’

She fixes him for a moment with those green eyes that always seem to hover between laughter and grief, as if she hasn’t quite decided how to react to the absurdity of life. John thinks this is grace. Holly makes him feel the way he would like to feel – but rarely does – when he prays.

‘If there’s a god, I don’t blame him,’ she says. ‘You know that. I don’t hate God either. I don’t think why me, because why not me?’ She swallows, and wraps a corner of her scarf around her finger. ‘I just wish it didn’t hurt so much. I’m tired of the grief of being alive. I’m tired of Steve hating a god he no longer believes in, and resenting me because I refuse to become an angry atheist like him.’ She gives a wry smile. ‘Do you remember John, when you first came here, Steve was the stalwart of the parish? The best of buddies with God. Huh.’ Her voice thickens. She looks away, then she sighs and looks him full in the face.

‘I wonder if what I’m feeling is despair, and I know that despair is a terrible sin. So John, I really do repent of my despair, and if there’s a god anywhere out there, I beg him to give me the grace to forgive myself and to learn to live again. What happened

to Sarah – I'm not going to let it destroy my marriage and my family, but sometimes I think it really has destroyed me John.' She emphasises the word 'me', as if that's the one thing she has been unable to salvage from the wreckage. Her voice has slipped down the registers of grief.

He wonders if Holly's intermittent confessions are linked to these moods. She never speaks like this when they have dinner or go walking together. But then, people don't, do they? They don't say in public what they say in the confessional. They don't even say in the intimacy of friendship what they say in the confessional, and he regards Holly as his best friend.

He wants to reassure her. Surely, despair is drab and cold and lifeless? Despair doesn't swirl in the colourful excess of a person like Holly, does it? Or is all the gaiety of the world a gaudy veil thrown over the void?

He watches her as she whirls out, then he takes off his stole and bows his head to say a final prayer before leaving the confessional. He is surprised when he looks up to see a figure kneeling on the other side of the grille. He must have come in very quietly. At the same time, John becomes aware of how cold it is. He hadn't noticed before. He wonders if the church heating has been turned off, and makes a mental note to check. He puts the stole back on and waits for the figure to speak.

'Bless me Father. I have sinned.' The voice is smooth, with a slight lisp. Ssinned. A faint smell of aftershave or cologne drifts through the grille. John remembers the feeling of anxiety upon waking that morning – the forgotten dream that left its mood upon him. It's a feeling of *déjà vu*, but it skitters away before he can make sense of it.

He pronounces the opening words of the rite and invites the man to make his confession.

'My sin is a sin of intention. I intend to do evil, pure evil,' says the voice from the other side.

'What?'

‘I’m sure you know what Augustine said about Lucretia, Father. According to Augustine, Lucretia should not have committed suicide because she was raped. Being raped isn’t a sin, even if a woman gets some pleasure from the experience, because she had no intention of sinning. So a raped virgin is still a virgin. On the other hand, if a virgin dies on her way to an assignation, even though she never actually commits the sin, she’s no longer a virgin when she dies. So even if I die now and never get to do what I plan to do, I shall go to hell because I intend to do evil, and only some accident or act of God can stop me. Perhaps you should pray for that, Father John. Pray for God to stop me, so that you’ll never know the horror of what I intend to do.’

‘Do I know you?’ Something is stirring, a distant association trying to become a conscious thought.

‘What matters is that I know you, Father John. You are to be put to the test.’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’ The man can surely hear the dread in his voice. What is this? What’s going on?

‘You’ll find out soon enough. But now, what are you going to do, Father John? This is the confessional. I’ve come to confess to you that I intend to do evil. You can’t absolve me, because I don’t repent of that evil intention. If I repented of it, the intention would no longer exist, and therefore my sin would have vanished even before I confessed it.’ He laughs softly. It’s a terrible sound. ‘It’s the perfect sin, the impossible confession – to intend to do pure evil. The perfect act of contrition – to repent of the intention. A firm purpose of amendment – I shall never have such an intention again. The perfect confession – forgiven and cleansed even before the words are out of my mouth.’ He pauses. John’s mind is reeling. His hands are clammy. The man continues. ‘But the intention remains Father, and I don’t intend to change my mind – or rather, my will. It’s the will, isn’t it, that’s involved in sin? The devil can’t change a person’s will. He can

only exploit an existing weakness, a desire we haven't conquered. So I take full responsibility for willing what I intend to do. It's my heart's desire.'

'So why are you here?' John forces the words up past the constriction in his throat.

'Because I want you to pray for me, Father John. Pray that I'll see the evil of my ways and repent. Pray for me to be delivered from evil. Oh, and pray for yourself while you're at it. Let's see who wins, eh?'

'This is insane. You need help.'

'On the contrary. I'm probably the most rational and sane person you'll ever meet.' He waits for that to sink in, then he says, 'Think of Job, Father John. An innocent man. A good man. But he just happened to be the one God and Satan picked on to play dice with the universe. And now, they're at it again, and this time they've chosen you. Oh, happy man, to be chosen by God. God must love you very much. God must trust your faith to put you through this, to invite me to torment you as Satan tormented Job.'

'This isn't a confession. You're not repenting of anything.'

The man laughs that awful quiet laugh again. 'I'm confessing an evil intention. I'm asking you to pray for me to repent. What more do you want, Father John? And remember, you're bound by the seal of the confessional, so I know that I can absolutely trust you never to tell anybody about this. Pray for me, and let's see if God can redeem us both. But in the meantime, my intention is pure I can assure you, untainted by any doubt. I intend to commit acts of pure evil.'

It's so cold. John sits in silence, unable to pray or to speak. The stranger waits, and eventually a voice speaks. It's John's voice, but it feels as if it's coming from somewhere outside of himself.

'It isn't possible to do pure evil,' says the voice, 'because evil is lack, and pure evil would be pure lack. Every act of evil is

possessed of some good, because it exists in the act, and the act is an act of being, and being is good. You can't do pure evil, for evil has no existence. It could be pure only in nothingness and non-being. Pure evil would actually be pure good, for evil wouldn't exist.' He must have heard that somewhere. It must be some memory of a lecture he once sat through, dredged up through his frozen mind.

There's a long silence. He feels the stranger peering at him through the curtained grille.

'I knew you'd be a good priest,' says the man eventually. 'Let me go away and reflect on those words. Save the absolution for another time. As I say, I'm not sorry, so there's no point in absolving me, is there? But you can pray for me. Ask God to show me the error of my ways, before it's too late. As we both agree, with God all things are possible. And I'm sure I don't need to remind you again about the seal of the confessional. This is just between us. Well, us and God, of course, and Satan. I must congratulate you on your recall of Aquinas, Father John. As you know from your own argument, Aquinas argues that even the devil is not pure evil because he exists, and existence is a good. Well, well, well, that means there are four of us all in on the secret. How crowded these confessionals can become. Goodbye Father. I'll be back.' The man slithers soundlessly out of the confessional.

John's limbs are still stiff with cold. He dreads going out there. He has a sudden horror of finding them all dead or disappeared. The silence is so absolute.

But they are there, waiting for Mass to begin. Bob Carpenter is playing the organ, with the tune of *Ave Maria* in there somewhere struggling to get out. He has been the church organist for thirty years but his playing never did improve with practice, and now his arthritic joints mangle whatever vestiges of tunefulness there once were in his playing.

John forces his body between the pews and smiles a greeting to the people gathering for Mass. The church is relatively full.

Ash Wednesday still draws people with some atavistic sense of obligation. In the front row, the prayer group is praying the rosary, and a few rows back Jane is sitting with her toddler on her lap. Sister Gertrude is complaining about something to Sister Martha, and in the background are the familiar watery gurgles coming from the ancient central heating system. He nods to Bob as he passes the organ and Bob nods back, his brow furrowed with concentration and the tip of his tongue protruding from the side of his mouth.

John's knees feel weak as he goes into the sacristy and prepares to say Mass. Deacon Jack is there, alone with his guilt and his grief. John struggles to focus. His hands shake as he ties the girdle around his waist, praying for continence and chastity as he was taught to do.

The liturgy unfolds and the people come up to have the sign of the cross smeared on their foreheads with ash.

'Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return,' he says in rhythmic repetition, lingering over the touch of each forehead beneath the cushion of his thumb. Some priests don't say that any more. It's too morbid, they say. They substitute something more benign, like 'The peace of Christ be in your heart'. But he doesn't find it morbid. It astounds him anew every year to be reminded that, in the vast mystery of the cosmos, each mortal being is a speck of dust pulsating with the being of God.

'Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return.'

'Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return.'

'Remember you are dust ...'

'Remember'