

Confirmed

By Brian Hartman

(For Mary Anne)

“No disrespect intended, Sister. I just don’t think it’s for me.”

“I understand, David.” She paused. “I’ll pray for you.” The way she said it, it was the closest Dave had ever come to hearing a nun say, “Go fuck yourself.”

“Thank you, Sister.”

Dave hung up the phone. His mother came to the doorway of his room. “Was that Sister Agnes?”

“Yeah. She wanted to know what I decided.”

“What’d you tell her?”

“I told her I wasn’t interested.”

“I hope you were polite.”

“Yeah. I was nice about it. I felt kinda bad, though. She said she’d pray for me.”

“Praying for you’s a *good* thing, Dave.”

Dave turned back to his desk. “Yeah. I mean, I guess. I dunno. Anyway, I told’er thanks.”

“Well, finish your homework and get ready for dinner.” She walked back to the kitchen.

In the morning, Dave got dressed for school. One of the things he liked about Catholic school, especially eighth grade, was they had uniforms. That was one less decision you had to make when you got out of bed in the morning. Light blue dress shirt, navy blue tie, and blue pants. Really simple.

The blue van that drove Dave to school was the same one that had taken him to grammar school for the past four years. It was just a different building. The town had refused to put an elevator into the public high school, but had agreed to pay for Dave’s Catholic school

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education. Since eighth graders went to the high school in public school, Dave started his first year at St. Augustine's.

"Biology is destiny." I wonder who said that...

The van pulled up to the school, and the driver lowered the lift. Dave rolled on and waited for the sound of the lift hitting the ground. He rolled off the lift, up the gray ramp. The school had built it when they had heard he was coming. It was on two levels: *Not a bad job, for only having a few months' notice...* Push three times, turn, push three times, land. He rolled in to class, and sat next to Jimmy, who had befriended him in September.

The day started with the morning prayer. Dave always got the Lord's Prayer mixed up with the Hail Mary.

*Our Father, who art in Heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Blessed art thou among women,
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Give us this day our daily bread...*

After the prayer ended, the principal's voice came over the PA system.

"Good morning, everyone. These are the morning announcements. As a reminder, ticket sales for our presentation of "Guys and Dolls" end this Friday. All the money you have raised is due by the end of the day. Students who raise more than two hundred dollars will receive two extra days added to Easter vacation. The Knights will be playing this Saturday. Let us all pray for a successful, safe game for all players, and for victory for our boys. Tommy Nelson is recovering from his spinal surgery. His family thanks you for your prayers and asks that you continue to pray for his speedy recovery. God bless you, and have a good day."

Sister Mary Ignatius stepped in front of her desk. She was younger than most of the nuns. Maybe in her forties. She wore the traditional Augustinian habit, a black gown, with a

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white wimple. She wore her rosary from the waist of her habit, as if it was a holster for the power of Christ. "Please remember to hand in your permission slips by tomorrow for the retreat on Friday."

Dave leaned over and whispered to Jimmy. "What the hell're we retreating from, anyway, Protestantism?" Jimmy shot him an annoyed glance.

Sister cleared her throat. "David, would you like to share your insight with the class?"

Dave stammered. "Um, no. Not really, Sister."

"Then please don't interrupt again."

"Yes, Sister."

The first class of the day was Religion. Dave couldn't figure out why you'd need a class in religion when you'd been raised your religion your entire life. He liked the class, though. It didn't mean anything to him, so he treated it like a history class. The dogma was easy to memorize, even if it wasn't easy to understand.

"Who can tell me how a prayer is different from magic?"

Dave looked around at the rest of the class and raised his hand. Out of the fourteen kids, only three hands were up, counting Dave's.

"Yes, David?"

"Well, a prayer is talking to God. It doesn't matter much how you do it. A spell, if you say the words wrong, it doesn't work. With a prayer,, it doesn't matter."

"What else?"

"Well, a spell, if you do it right, you get the result you want. A prayer, you might not. You can't command God."

Sister nodded and smiled. "Very good."

This isn't such a hard game to play...

The next morning, he said goodbye to his mother and his stepfather Paul, and rolled

down the ramp, to the sound of the bus honking for him. The retreat was in Hopatcong, which was almost an hour's drive. Dave read his Good News Bible, making underlines and highlights on the passages he knew were going to come up. Mostly, it'd be Genesis. Original sin and all that. Dave hesitated, and then made a note in the margin. He still wasn't used to writing on what he was told was "God's book".

Everyone is born evil, and destined to Hell.

He looked at the note, thought about it, and then made another one:

What about Christie?

The bus arrived at the retreat site. Dave rolled on to the lift, looking around to see who else had arrived. He was the first one there. He rolled down the gravel driveway towards the large retreat house, the only building in sight. There were six or seven steps.

Sister Mary pulled up in her Geo Metro, before the other students arrived. She got out of her car and waved. "Hi, David."

"Hi, Sister."

"I'm glad you could come. I think you'll find it enjoyable."

Dave smiled faintly, glancing down at the gravel. "Thanks, Sister."

"Well," she pressed her hands together, "let's get you inside. No sense waiting out here." She went behind Dave.

Dave looked at Sister, then at the steps. "Uh, Sister, don't you think we should wait for some'a the boys to come? I mean, no offense, but..."

Sister smiled. "The Lord helps those that help themselves, David."

"Well, Jesus never actually *said* that, did He, Sister?"

"No, David. He didn't. But a good idea is a good idea." She put her hands on his push handles. "May I?"

Dave shrugged. "Sure, Sister. Thanks."

Sister pulled Dave up the stairs, then pointed to the right, down a long hallway. "We'll be in the meeting room most of the time. Then you'll split up into boys and girls to discuss..."

certain things." *Oh, God. Here it comes...* "It's going to be mostly about growing in faith, though. Everyone else in the class got confirmed last spring."

"Okay, Sister. Thanks."

Mr. Leary was the next to arrive. He was a lay teacher, but he taught some of the kids religion. There were three teachers for every subject, depending on if you were average, honors, or "remedial". Mr. Leary taught the "remedial" religion class.

"Hello, David."

"Hi, Mr. Leary."

Mr. Leary walked down the hallway to the right.

Asshole...

Dave heard an engine outside and watched the blue and yellow St. Augustine's bus pull up. The kids streamed off and walked into the building, with Sister Daphne, who taught honors religion, following behind.

Sister Daphne led everyone into the meeting room. It was a large room with no windows, white walls, and what looked to be enough chairs for all the students, about forty in all. A large crucifix with a bleeding Christ hung over a whiteboard in the front of the room. The whiteboard had the words:

FINDING YOURSELF IN CHRIST

To the left of the whiteboard was a clock. It was 9:30.

Dave pulled his notebook out of his backpack. He wrote down the words on the whiteboard, and underneath it, wrote:

Ask about Christie!

Sister Daphne stood in front of the class in her Augustinian habit. She had the same rosary as Sister Mary Ignatius, but wore it like a necklace. She was in her eighties, one of those nuns whose retirement plans involved an oaken coffin and pearly gates. "Good morning, class. This retreat is going to be all about getting to know each other, and getting to know yourselves. More importantly, I hope it will help you to explore who you are -- who we *all* are -- in Christ,

and how your education, and your life, is played out in our shared Catholic faith. For your first exercise, you will get to know each other on a deeper level than you ordinarily do during the school year. I want each of you to tell the class something they don't know about you. To ensure you can speak freely, I will leave the room. I will be back in an hour. I will be right in the next room, so please behave yourselves. And remember", she pointed to the bloody crucifix, "*Christ himself* is watching you." Several students shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Dave looked up at the macabre icon, almost expecting its eyes to move, his skepticism momentarily overcome.

With that, she left the room, locking the door from the outside.

Dave felt a tap on his shoulder, and almost jumped.

Jimmy laughed. "Jeez, you *are* new here, aren't you? It's a piece of *wood*, Dave. It can't hurt you. It's not like it's gonna jump down and get all Chuck Norris on your ass."

Dave smiled. "And if it did, it's only, what, six inches tall?"

A few minutes went by. Half of the students were talking, and it seemed like the other half were sushing them, but it couldn't have been that many. After all, who were the other ones talking to?

Eventually, Albert spoke up. He was a blond kid, just barely cresting fourteen, with a complexion to match, along with wire-rimmed glasses. Dave always thought he was a nice enough guy, but if you'd just met him, you'd call him a nerd, or maybe a geek, if you knew him for a week or two.

"Uh, we'd better get started. We're going to have to come up with something, or at least answer some questions, when we're done."

From somewhere in the room: "Shut up, Grendel!" (Unfortunately for Albert, the remedial kids were still on *Beowulf*, which the other students had tackled earlier in the year.)

Jimmy shook his head. "No, he's right. We might as well get to this. You're not going to be getting into Lisa's pants *now*, anyway, Brett." He smiled.

Lisa blushed. You could almost see Brett retreat a little in his chair. He recovered, and

then, "Alright, smartass. You volunteering, then?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Sure. What the hell? I'll go first. Alright. So... Something nobody knows about me... Well, I play guitar. I mean, I'm just starting, I guess, but I play."

Brett laughed. "Yeah. Thanks for sharing, dingus. I bet you suck, too."

"Shut up, asshole. I bet your *mom* sucks. I bet she's *good* at it."

Dave turned in his chair towards Brett. "Jesus Christ!", he glanced over at the crucifix, lowering his voice a little. "Could you guys cut it out? Settle this shit after school, if you need to."

Jimmy shrugged, tapping his pen on his chair's desktop. "Well, I shared. Next?"
Everyone reflexively looked at Brett.

Brett sighed. "Alright, fine. Secret... Deep, dark secret... Hell, I've got nothing. What'm I supposed to say here?"

Jimmy sighed. "Just say *something*, okay? Anything. It doesn't have to be like you killed a guy'r anything."

"Fine. Most of you don't know this, I guess. My mom's not my mom. Not my *birth* mother, anyway. My parents're divorced. My dad's got a girlfriend now, and that's who I call mom."

Tommy smiled. "Yeah, I met her. Your mom -- I mean your dad's girlfriend, I guess -- is *hot!*" All the guys made catcall sounds.

"Shut up, man. It's not funny. You guys *suck!*" He looked at Tommy. "At least she's not a moo-cow like *your* mom." He paused, then shook his head. "That's what I get for sharing with *you* assholes."

Dave looked down at his note.

Ask about Christie!

He looked up. "Anybody mind if I go?"

No one spoke.

"Okay. Here's my secret. Well, it's not *really* a secret. The school knows already. Well,

they know *part* of it, already.” He looked down at the note in his notebook. “I’m not confirmed”.

They all just looked at him. In fact, they looked so long that he began to think he hadn’t actually said anything -- that they were still waiting for him to speak. Jimmy pierced the silence.

“We all got confirmed last year. What happened to you? You get left back a grade’r something?”

The kid next to him nudged him. “Confirmation doesn’t go by *grades*, dumbass.”

Dave faced the rest of the class. “No, nothing like that. I mean, I’m on the older side of the grade just because of when I was born, November, but I wasn’t left behind’r anything. I just -- my family’s not religious. They’re Catholic, but not *Catholic*, Catholic. I’m going here because eighth grade in public school is in the high school building, and they won’t build an elevator.”

Mary Anne, a blonde girl with long, fluffed out hair, asked, “So, um, are you going to *get* confirmed?”

Dave rubbed the back of his neck, looking at the ground. “Well, see, here’s the thing. Sister Agnes asked me about that. The school’d given me all the literature -- the Bible, the catechism, the Church history and all that. They wanted me to look it over and get back to them.”

Mary Anne barely whispered, “So? Are you going to?”

What had been a public confession was now a dialogue. Dave was locked on Mary Anne’s blue eyes. “Well, no. I’m not.”

“Why not? Don’t you believe?”

The way she said it, earnestly and with conviction, as if she’d asked him if he believed in oxygen, or evolution, threw Dave off. She wasn’t going to like his answer, and he wasn’t feeling very good about telling her, either. “Well, no. I mean, I *want* to, but I don’t. Not right now.”

“Why not?”

Dave looked down again at the note on his notebook.

Ask about Christie!

Dave turned away from the desktop chair and faced Mary Anne, moving closer to her. She had on the gold crucifix girls got at confirmation, and she was holding it between her pink, polished thumb and forefinger, stroking it while she talked.

Dave looked down, then back up.

“Last summer, I went to summer camp. There was this girl. Christie. Well, not ‘girl’, really. She was thirty. But she was about the size of a two year old. She had Downs Syndrome, spina bifida, cerebral palsy, inverted kneecaps, and dwarfism. And to be honest, I might be forgetting a thing or two. Anyway, it got me to thinking. I mean, what the hell? How can there be a God -- a just, loving, omnipotent God -- who lets *that* happen? How does *that* happen, in a universe with a God? And she’s retarded. Not ‘oh, you’re such an idiot’ retarded, but honest-to-God, clinically, medically *retarded*, to the point where she can’t speak. She doesn’t have any chance of understanding anything about salvation, Jesus, or even where the sun goes at night. If biology is destiny, not only does she still have original sin, but she has no chance to *remove* original sin...”

There was silence. Mary Anne was grasping her crucifix, almost tugging on it on the chain, her eyes glistening. “That’s horrible. I feel so sorry that she was born like that. I’m sure she can go to Heaven, though.”

Dave pulled the Good News bible out of his backpack. “Mary Anne, I’ve been through this thing backwards and forwards. They gave me *months* to read this before I gave Sister Agnes my answer. I can’t find anything in here about that. Nothing.” He felt the impact of the words as he watched her face.

“Well,” she began, “you have to have *faith*. To *believe*. You have to trust God.”

Dave nodded. “I know. I *want* to. I just... I can’t find the evidence for it. Maybe it’s because of the kinds of things I’ve been around all my life, or the situations I’ve seen, or... Shit, I don’t now. I just... I can’t get answers to these things.”

Mary Anne almost whispered, “‘To those who believe, no explanation is necessary. To those who don’t, no explanation is possible.’ Mr. Leary says that to us all the time, when we ask

what he calls 'impossible questions'."

Dave nodded, his voice heavy with scorn. "Yeah, that sounds like something he'd say."

Mary Anne blushed a little, looking down at her gray pleated skirt that was half of her uniform. "So... Do you hate us? Christians? Catholics, I mean?"

About two months before, Dave had been up on the second floor during a fire drill. The elevators had gone out, like they were supposed to do in a fire, but it left Dave stuck. All the other kids filed out, but Mary Anne was in the girls' room at the time, so she was the last out. She saw Dave waiting by the top of the stairwell, as he'd been instructed to do.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Dave smiled. "Yeah, I'll be fine. Don't worry about it. It's probably just a drill, anyway, and somebody'll be up to get me soon, if I need to get down."

He'd watched her go down the stairs, heard the footsteps fade, and then watched, surprised, as she came back up.

"I'll wait here with you."

"You're gonna get detention."

"You think I'm gonna let you die over detention?" She touched his shoulder.

Dave smiled. "Thanks."

And, of course, she *had* gotten detention. A week's worth.

Now, as Dave sat there looking at Mary Anne, he moved forward, looking directly into her eyes, his feet almost touching her shins as he faced her. "No, I don't hate you." He cracked a smile, glancing around the room, talking in a louder voice, so everyone could hear him. "It's not like I'm saying, 'Look at those stupid Catholics. What a bunch of idiots!'. It's just something I don't believe. That's all. Maybe I will someday."

Mary Anne touched Dave's hand. "I'm going to pray for you. I mean, I know you don't believe in it, but I'm going to pray for you. Is that okay?" The way she said it, Dave could tell she meant it.

Dave slid his other hand over Mary Anne's, and smiled. "Yeah. I'd like that. Thanks."

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Brett called out from his seat. "Awwwww....!"

Dave let go of Mary Anne's hand, glancing over at Brett while rolling back to his original position.. "Fuck off."

Brett looked around the room, smiling. "Alright, who's the next victim? C'mon, let's get on with it."

No one raised their hands.

Dave looked up at the whiteboard. On one side, Christ was still bleeding. On the other, it was just past ten.

The End

Brian Hartman bio: Brian Hartman lives in Scotch Plains, New Jersey. He has been writing short stories for as long as he can remember. He is currently working on a mosaic novel, Long-Distance Dedications, which he hopes to have finished this year.