

## The Virgin in the Window

By Josh McDonald

My phone rang as I settled into a corner table with my coffee and bagel. I figured it was Katie, just waking up and wondering where I was, so I answered without checking the number.

“Hey, Sweetie, I’m busy.”

The voice on the other end was unfamiliar to me. “Is this Sarah Callaghan?”

“Who’s this?”

“Ms. Callaghan, my name is Janet Gaudreau. I’m from the *Daily Record*. I’m wondering if I could get a reaction from you.”

“What?”

“A reaction. About Father Philip Chabot...” A long, uncomfortable pause. “I’d assumed you’d heard,” she said.

“I hadn’t,” I said. “What the hell do you know about that?”

“I know you were the one who brought the charges ...”

“The girl who brought charges was a minor. Her name was never publicized.”

“Not officially,” she said. “But with a little digging ... look, I just thought you might want to make a statement...”

“I don’t.”

“... to tell your side of the story.”

“It’s been thirty years.”

“You really haven’t heard the latest...?”

“I don’t care about the latest,” I told her. “But thanks for thinking of me.”

“Father Chabot had a statement to make,” she said.

“I don’t doubt it.”

“He sees some significance in this move coinciding with that apparition of the Virgin Mary in that window downtown. Like she’s welcoming him, he says. A kind of a sign of God’s grace at work in his life.”

“Good for him. Are we done?”

“Any response to that?”

“None that you could print.”

“All right, then,” she said. “I’ll let you go. Feel free to call me if you change your mind.”

“Goodbye,” I said, and hung up the phone. Then I sat for about twenty minutes wishing my stomach would settle enough for me to enjoy my breakfast.

Since I was already worked up and had nothing to lose, I called home.

“Hey, stranger,” Katie said when she answered the phone. “Where are you?”

“I’m at work. Busy, you know.”

“Yeah. I know,” she said.

“Anyway. It’s been a while. We keep missing each other.”

“I know.”

“Let’s do dinner tonight,” I said. “We’ll go out. My treat. I get off work at five-thirty.”

“My prayer group is meeting at five,” she said apologetically.

“So skip it,” I said. “Just this once.”

“Can we meet after?”

I sighed. “When should I pick you up?”

“It won’t be long,” she said. “Maybe six o’clock? We’ll be at the window.”

“Of course,” I said. That damn window. I shouldn’t have been surprised, really. Katie had always been too Catholic for her own good. When we would have sex she wouldn’t let me finger her too deep because she wanted to preserve her virginity until we could be properly married.

Katie was my second girlfriend, after a long string of boyfriends. I’m still not sure if this is for real or just a mid-life crisis, but I’m enjoying it while it lasts. Katie was a twenty-

something, in every sense of the word. Though she'd always known she was gay (or so she said), I was the first real girlfriend she'd had. She'd fooled around some in college, and eventually arranged some kind of a truce between her faith and her sexuality.

At work I settled in at my desk with a stack of proposals to proofread and edit. There was plenty of work to keep my mind off Father Phil for the rest of the day. So of course I spent the whole time online, reading everything I could find about him.

For all he'd put me through, Father Phil only spent a few years in prison. He was released and very quietly put back to work, rotating in and out of parishes and keeping a low profile. Now he had retired and they'd put him in the diocesan-run assisted-living home. And because the diocesan-run elementary school is right next door, some people took notice that a convicted sex-offender was living in the neighborhood. The church said it was okay because he was closely monitored and has no contact with children any more.

Based on the online comments I found, a surprising number of people still thought of him as a good, upstanding man of god who got railroaded. Probably I shouldn't have read all that, but I couldn't help myself. All these ignorant, uninformed people ready to blame the victim made me feel like I was back in high-school again.

At five-thirty I finished work and took my time getting downtown to the Federal Street Plaza, the site of the celebrated Window. It started a few weeks earlier, after a spell of crazy weather. Freezing rain on Monday had given way to ninety-degree temperatures by Saturday. A large plate-glass window on the front of the One Federal Plaza building had a weird reaction to the extreme weather. The window's chemical coating developed an ornate pattern of incandescent pitting which could, I have to admit, possibly be seen as a kind of abstract-post-impressionist rendering of the Virgin Mary. Since then religious fanatics of all stripes have come out of the woodwork and made it a pilgrimage site.

When I arrived Katie and her prayer group were kneeling on the pavement in front of the window, praying the rosary. I tried to retreat quietly to a corner of the plaza to wait, but I managed to trip on a loose brick and make a spectacle of myself. Katie caught my eye and,

without ever losing the rhythm of her prayers, motioned for me to come join them. I gestured back that I'd wait for her at the restaurant at the end of the plaza, and I headed in that direction. Public displays of adulation are not my thing.

They had been at one time. I was a teenager when my parents split up, and my reaction was to throw myself whole-hog into religion. Prayers and devotions, novenas and rosaries, I did everything Father Phil said I should do. Even those things that didn't seem right to me, I did anyway because he wanted me to and I trusted him.

In the restaurant I settled in at the bar to wait for Katie. She arrived somewhere in the middle of my third whiskey sour and we were escorted to our table.

I started perusing the wine list. Katie sat looking at me instead of at the menu.

She reached across the table and took my hand, asking, "So what's been going on?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just stuff. Work, busy, the usual stuff."

"Well I'm glad you could make time for me," she said, very sincerely, without a hint of sarcasm. I gave her a smile and she squeezed my hand, and we turned our attention to the menu. I quickly settled on the first entrée I saw for under twenty dollars and returned to the wine list.

"So," I asked her, "what have you been doing?"

"The usual," she said. I wasn't looking at her but I could hear the shrug in her voice. She went on to tell me all about her latest fundraising effort. She was the marketing and development director for some charity run by the Sisters of Mercy, and she tended to get very enthusiastic about everything they did. Much as I tried to be supportive, at some point I had to tune her out as I continued smiling and nodding and making noises of encouragement.

I tuned back in when I heard a shift in her topic of conversation. "...just that I'm not really sure where this relationship is going," she was saying.

"Let's not get into this now," I said.

"When else can we get into this? I never see you anymore."

Because I don't want to get into this. But I couldn't say that. Instead I said, "I'm just ... I'm sorry, it's been a little ... I've been out of sorts, I guess."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"It's nothing."

"I wish you'd tell me."

"It's nothing," I said, and focused intently on the wine list. After a moment or two, Katie got the hint and started looking at the menu.

After a minute she put it down and looked at me. "I just want to know where you think this is going. Us – this relationship – where are we going?"

I shrugged. "I like to take these things a day at a time. Live in the moment, you know?"

"Well the moment right now is very unsatisfying," she said.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"So ... are we stuck here? Or are we getting out of this rut? I need to know there's something better down the road."

"Like what?"

"I don't know." She fidgeted with her menu, not quite looking at it. I could see she was working herself up to something. "I've always dreamed ... I mean ... I guess what it comes down to is, I want to be married. We could, you know. It's legal now and, I mean, why not?"

"Your church would never approve."

"My Church will come around," she said. "I mean, look at that." She pointed out the window behind me at where the crowd of worshippers was still gathered. "Just look at what's going on out there. The Church never really wanted all that kind of attention paid to the Mother of God, you know. That was a popular movement – a groundswell that grew until the leaders couldn't ignore it any more. If you look at the history of the Church they're always a few steps behind. Every significant development in Church history has come from the bottom up. If we take the lead, the leaders will follow."

I grunted noncommittally, deflecting the topic as our waitress approached.

"Think about it," Katie said, and we turned our attention to ordering.

The waitress left. We sat in silence until she returned with our drinks.

"Say," I said casually, once we were alone again, "did you hear anything about that priest? The one who'd been in jail...?"

"No. Who was it?"

I shrugged. "Some priest ... I guess he had sex with a girl, a teenager, back in the Eighties."

"Oh." Katie's face fell. "One of those." In her world clergy and religious only got arrested for things like peace protests and civil disobedience.

"Anyway, he's retired now and living in a home near the school. And it's got some people upset. It's all over the news, I'm surprised you haven't heard."

A brief pause, as our salads arrived. We ate silently for a full minute or so before Katie spoke up.

"You know that was all blown way out of proportion," she said.

"What was?"

"The whole priest sex-abuse thing. It was mostly a made-up scandal."

"Oh really."

"A lot of opportunistic lawyers trying to soak the Church for all they could get," she said.

"You think so?"

"The sad thing is, the kids are still the victims. They may or may not have been victims of abuse by priests, but they were definitely victims of the greedy lawyers who just used them for a lot of money and publicity."

"Gee, my lawyers worked *pro-bono*," I said. I have no idea if it was true or not; my mother took care of all that and I never knew what was going on with that side of it. Katie shut up and just stared at me, dumbstruck.

“Father Phil victimized me,” I said. “My lawyers empowered me. They made it stop. They were the heroes. I can’t speak for anyone else ... I don’t know ... but ... well, it’s not all about money, okay?”

Katie took several moments to process this before she could say anything. “I had no idea ... you never told me ...”

“I didn’t want ... I try not to think about it. I wanted to put it behind me. I *had* put it behind me, until...”

“Oh, you poor thing,” she said. She reached to take both my hands in hers but I pulled back.

“No,” I said. “It was a long time ago. It’s old news. Ancient history. I’m over it now.” She gave me this look like I was one of her charity cases. “Anyway, he’s back now and, well it’s dredged up some old feelings and I thought you should know is all. If I’m a little out of sorts ...” She nodded enthusiastically.

“Stop that,” I said.

“What?”

“Stop being so agreeable.”

“Um ... I ...” she stammered, “uh, okay, what ...?”

“Look, I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m not even sure what I’m feeling right now. I just ... I don’t know. Forget it. Forget I said anything.”

“Have you thought ...” Katie offered tentatively, “I mean therapy can be very helpful, sometimes, just to sort through your feelings and all that. Have you thought about it?”

“More than thought about it,” I said. “In twenty-seven years I’ve seen nineteen therapists. It’s probably a record. I don’t think there are any therapists around here that I haven’t tried.”

She picked at her food for a while before speaking up again. “Why so many? Therapists, I mean. If you stick with one ...”

"I don't want to talk about it," I said. Even as I said it I was aware that these were more or less the last words I'd said to each of those therapists.

Our entrees arrived and we spent the next few minutes enjoying the meal, each of us lost in our own thoughts. Katie was first to break the silence.

"So how do you feel about it?" she asked. "Now that he's here, I mean."

"If you're thinking of becoming my next therapist, I can tell you right now it won't end well."

"Sarah, honey." She seemed to be getting annoyed. She only called me "honey" when she was annoyed. "I just want to help. How can I help?"

"You can drop it."

Which she did, though she clearly didn't like it. But it was a full five minutes before she spoke again.

"Look, I can't possibly imagine what you're going through – what you've been going through ..." I nodded in agreement and continued eating as she went on. "I guess I can understand now why you never go to church." I nodded some more and hoped she'd drop this topic soon. "I just – I think – I mean, at some point you have to get past all this. You have to move on." More nodding from me, with a silent plea to shut the fuck up already. "And it seems like, I don't know, maybe you're still clinging to your anger." Enthusiastic nodding on my part. "And that's not a healthy thing, you know?" I left off nodding and just glared at her. At least she had the decency to avert her eyes as she went on: "I mean at some point you have to let it go, right? You have to forgive." And with that she lifted her eyes, tentatively, to mine. Whatever she saw there was not what she'd hoped for. "You ... just have to."

"No. I don't," I said, and I stuffed my mouth full of chicken croquette so I wouldn't have to say more.

"I know how hard it is," she said, then, "I mean, I don't, of course. But I do know it is hard. I appreciate that. Harder than I can imagine. But you can't let it eat you up inside like this. Just offer it up."



"I don't know what that means."

"It means ... you know ... you offer it. Up." She gestured, pushing her hands upward, to make it clearer. "To God." There was something painful about watching her struggle with the realization that she didn't know what it meant either.

We finished our dinners in silence, a prickly silence which lingered while the check came, while the waitress took my credit card, then brought it back with the slip to be signed.

"Katie. Sweetie," I said. "You know I care about you." She nodded. "I don't want to hurt you. The thing is, I know I will someday."

"Sure," she said. "It happens. They always say you hurt the ones you love, right?"

"Stop with the platitudes. I'm trying to be serious here."

"So am I," she said. "People hurt each other. I know that. I understand. If we're going to love each other we have to forgive. That's my point. That's what I was saying just now..."

"Look," I cut her off. "I wish I could give you that." I got up from the table. I wanted to look at her. Of all the relationships I'd ended over the years, this was the first to end face-to-face and on reasonably good terms. I felt that I ought to look her in the eye, that I at least owed her that much. But I couldn't. "I'd love to be that person for you. But I can't. I do hope you find someone who can," I said as I walked away and left the restaurant.

The sun was low in the sky as I crossed the plaza. The image of the Virgin in the window glowed brighter than I'd seen before. I paused to watch the crowd of the devoted as they said their prayers and made their oblations, and I hated them all. For years I'd been afraid to truly hate them because once I'd been just like them. Hating them would be like hating myself. Except, that self was long gone. She was dead. She'd been snuffed out by an opportunistic priest who had never really cared what he was doing to that young girl so long as his own needs were satisfied. How the hell do you forgive that? I was half tempted to march back into the restaurant just to present this question to Katie.

The sun set and the crowd dispersed, singly, in pairs, or in small groups. I focused my hate then, targeting each of them individually. The withered old lady who wore the lace doily-

thing on her head because Saint Paul says women should keep their heads covered – I hated her for clinging to this bit of ancient Middle-eastern misogyny just because they'd put it in the bible. Or the young couple who were so timid and meek with each other because of what they'd been told by grown men who can't handle their own sexuality – I hated them for buying into it all, because thirty years ago that girl who had once been me had bought into it all. Everything that happened to me since then was her fault. All these people, all of us, were willing accomplices, the blind following the blind and never allowing ourselves to know better. Give us a ceremony and something to believe in, someone else's sins to condemn, and we'll all ignore the evils committed right under our own noses.

Among the last to leave was an elderly couple. They were old and frail and clung to each other so it was impossible to tell who was supporting whom. In them I saw nothing to hate, nothing of that girl I once was. No, there was something of her in them – there was her hope. The girl I'd been would have seen them as something to look forward to – the kind of relationship a naïve teenager could still believe in. I was able to hate them now because they were a living example of something I'd longed for, flaunting themselves mere moments after I'd walked out on yet another relationship.

I turned back toward the image of the Virgin in the window, which appeared to glow more intensely in the fading light. By now a solitary person remained, a withered and bent old man huddled in his wheelchair. It took a moment to recognize him, and several moments more to convince myself that I was not mistaken. I wasn't. It really was him.

I hadn't seen him in almost thirty years, and those years had not been kind to him. He was a far cry now from the handsome middle-aged priest I'd once known. He stared vacantly at the image in the window, his once-bright caramel-brown eyes now pale and watery. His hands were gnarled and twisted and probably unusable and he hunched in his wheelchair, his body as twisted and broken as his soul had always been. But still, unmistakably, it was him.

I stood beside him. My heart was pounding so hard I couldn't think. All these years I'd imagined this possibility, imagined all the things I might say or do, but had never bothered to settle on one – never expected I'd need to.

I took a deep breath.

"Hello, Father Phil."

"Hello, child," he responded automatically. His voice came as a hoarse and halting whisper. When I continued to stare at him, he looked at me, squinting through a myopic haze.

"Do I know you?"

"You did, once."

He squinted at me a moment more, then shrugged. "I knew ... lots of people."

I asked, "In the biblical sense?" and his jaw twitched.

"...false accusations," he muttered.

I grabbed the arms of his chair and turned him to face me. I leaned in close, nose-to-nose. "We both know that's bullshit."

He stared at me. "You were the one ... weren't you? Brought the charges...?"

"Damn right I did."

He shook his head and muttered something that sounded like "pain in the ass." He looked at me, squinting, peering through old and rheumy eyes. "You ruined my life," he said.

"I ruined *your* life..?"

"Four years...in prison... do you know... what it's like for someone ... like me...? Someone... in for ... sexual abuse...?"

"Do you know what it's like to be a victim of sexual abuse?"

"I do now," he said.

"Well, karma's a bitch, ain't it?"

"Still," he said, as he maneuvered his twisted, arthritic hand to the joystick of his chair and turned away from me, "I forgive you."

“Fuck you!” I called after him as he moved away. “What makes you think I want your fucking forgiveness anyway?” He waved the back of a hand at me –a dismissive gesture ... or an unsuccessful attempt at flipping me off? The state of his hands made it hard to be sure. “I don’t forgive you,” I shouted. “I never will! I hope you burn in hell!”

“God forgives me,” he said. “You ... fuck yourself.”

I turned to leave, and caught my foot on that loose brick in the sidewalk. I snatched it up, wanting to hurl it in frustration as hard and as far as I could, right at Father Phil’s head. I doubted, though, that Phil’s god would forgive an agnostic lesbian for cracking open a poor old priest’s skull. Katie’s god might – or would at least be more sympathetic. But Katie’s god is too Pollyanna-ish, and would probably encourage us all to join hands and sing *Kumbaya* and pretend that nothing bad had ever happened.

I looked to the large plate-glass window looming over me. In the fading light, the colors had deepened. The rosy-faced Virgin in the sky-blue cloak had become an olive-skinned face peering out from a midnight-blue *hijab*. I saw, or maybe felt more than saw, a sadness in this woman. I saw a woman who had been promised in marriage as a girl, shamed as a teen for being unmarried and pregnant. Was it by rape, or by her own betrothed who never owned up to the fact? Or could it be that the old stories were right, that it had in fact been her god, a deity who should have known full well how such women were treated in that society and still left her in this situation, at the mercy of a husband’s beneficence?

And then to see her first-born son tortured and executed by the Romans ... I saw a woman who had known suffering.

For a moment I actually felt as though she was looking at me, sympathizing, commiserating. For a moment it felt as though she was reaching inside my soul, reaching down into my anger, wanting to draw it out, to add my anger to her own where it would be lost, like a bucketful of water thrown into the ocean.

I resisted. My anger was the only thing I had left that was truly mine.

Except, of course, that it wasn't. That anger was just another part of Father Phil's legacy. That small, twisted, broken old man who couldn't face real life and adult relationships had bundled up all his fears and insecurities, all his anger and self-loathing, and dumped it on me. And now I was stuck with it, with no way to get rid of it.

*Forgive*, said a chorus of voices from inside my head – Katie, all my ex-therapists, a few clergy and a couple of boyfriends from my past, all giving me this same advice: *Let it go. Forgive.*

*I can't*, I told them all. *How can I forgive what he did to me?... I trusted him ... I loved him, and he ... and the only way out of it is to let him off the hook? Fuck that. And fuck him. And fuck you, too.*

*Do it for yourself*, they said. *Your soul is poisoned. Expel the poison.*

*It's all I have left ...*

*But it's not really yours, is it?*

*No ... but ... when the anger is gone ... what's left?*

*Wouldn't you like to find out?*

I came suddenly back to my senses, back into the present, back to myself. The brick, heavy and solid, was still there in my hand. Father Phil was nowhere to be seen. The streets were empty. I took one last look at the window. In the darkness, only the vague shadow of the Virgin was still visible. As I turned to leave, I threw the brick as hard and as far as I could. The window shattered. Somewhere inside the building, an alarm went off.

"Forgive that," I said to whoever was listening.

The End

# Writing Raw

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**Josh McDonald bio:** Josh McDonald is a freelance writer and a Jack-of-all-creative-trades. His writings, comics, and cartoons have been published in The National Catholic Reporter, Commonweal Magazine, and on the website BustedHalo.com. He holds a BA in film-making from Bard College and is active in local community theater. A member of the [Burlington Writers Workshop](#), McDonald and his wife currently live in Essex Junction, Vermont.