

## **P***ride goeth before*

I first became star struck as an altar boy, a god-fearing child in the maw of a yawning cathedral.

The cathedral was expansive and gilded. Wine bruised the carpet and dust collected deep in the folds of ancient radiators. Trash blew in on glamorous winds and gathered at the feet of the cleric as his eyes raised to God. Such is the nature of theater.

I miss the thrill of being watched. I long for those days as an altar boy, when I still possessed the ingenuous hopes of an understudy. I took the devoted gaze of the crowd for granted then. I didn't realize shame could be cumulative; I thought it faded with time. And, of course, I underestimated the importance of knowing your audience.

Rhonda could dazzle the most straight-laced old biddies, leave them uneasy, yet still somehow satisfied. Flamboyance is an art, it's true, but certain crowds require something more—something magic.

I expected Holy Orders to cast me, like Rhonda, in a ruthless array of roles. But sadly, instead of honing my charisma, it's cramped me into a confessional, where I endlessly wait for the dying to creak in on crutches of guilt. I'm not the diva I dreamed I would be, but rather something supplemental. A collector of gossip—without the satisfaction of reporting anything I'm told. The sins I hear are as

salacious as any star's; they simply lack the glitz of celebrity to make them immortal. Defining the soul with eyeliner can be tricky.

And now I'm walking up the aisle holding the processional cross aloft. I want to strut like a queen, but am kept in check by looks from the prayerful audience. I take to the stage and compose myself as a gleamy-lipped, pious-eyed altar boy. Hair parted at three quarters, sweet on the feel of my emasculating alb, I wait with bells in my hand.

Father Bowlin—seven feet tall and Black Irish—says Mass with a voice like a rolling boulder. His belly is big enough for a benevolent god. His brow sprouts two thick clumps of steely hair. He lifts the Host and heavies his eyes, lowers and codes his voice. A holy light throbs from among his ringlets. I raise the bell and shake out a tiny chime, the closest I ever get to a speaking role.

But the real star of the show is Rhonda. She digs her candy-apple claws into the folds of her choral gown and pulls it thigh high as she mounts the steps to the lectern. Her stilettos and black-stockinged legs are sudden and shapely as they emerge from the neutral vestment. She surveys the crowd with predatory ease.

The audience shuts its eyes and withdraws in prayer. Petitions float from the ends of ascetic eyelashes. The proper place for music is in the choir loft, the crowd believes, at the cathedral's rear, hidden away where it won't distract from the solemnity of the Mass.

But Rhonda has them trained. The saints and angels crowd in miniature around the lofted chalice, extend their matchstick arms to catch the faithful's prayers. Rhonda widens her smile, and a few wayward prayers become lodged between her teeth. Her drawn-on eyebrows rise behind the bangs of an immense bouffant.

She's been as subtle as possible about transitioning her hair from black to its current platinum blond, for although her appearance is meticulously crafted, she hopes to leave some impression of

nature. Over the course of four years, she's worked her way down the home-dye-kit aisle: from jet black to the darkest and medium browns, with a brief detour through wine, then strawberry blond, then back to the standard spectrum, brightening from dishwater to downy blond. Such planning is necessary to retain her position as cantor at a conservative parish. As a flamboyant, almost-50 divorcee she already walks the line. She knows where to temper her tartish tendencies, which shade of lipstick is a hair past respectable.

A sinister, diminutive figure lurks in the choir loft. Pimples cluster at his hairline, and he rests his leather-clad arms on the railing as he surveys the crowd. He's Rhonda's son, Dom, runty even for a 12-year-old. I can feel his sulky gaze, his spite at falling short of the faggy altar boy, his hatred winding out among the wafting prayers. Behind him, the organ pipes begin to thrum; they flood with a hum, then a roar of devotion.

Rhonda bursts into a showy hymn. Its lyrics praise the scent of newborn flesh.

Father Bowlin descends from the stage, cradling a bowl of communion wafers. He recruited Rhonda from an off-Broadway stage, just in time for a woman looking a bit weathered for ingénue roles. His motives, I imagine, came from a fascination with her overwrought femininity—he seems to carry a hint of lavender deep within that belly. A tenderness belies his manly façade. He feeds communion to his flock like a mother bird.

With Rhonda came Dom, a picture of compact impudence, an unhealthy child whose greasy, unblushing cheeks could never fit within the border of a holy card. He was eight when Rhonda began her gig as cantor at the cathedral, yet was still small enough to be cradled in her arms. He soon left those arms, though, and began to adopt a street swagger. His mother tenderly aided him in this, working Pomade through his hair, taking her fingernail clippers to the knee of his jeans. At school, he curses God and slithers beneath the habits of the nuns. He strums a guitar and

snarls about a girl named Sugar. He lost his virginity before his eleventh birthday. Despite his size, girls find him irresistible. He pads his height with attitude.

I once found Dom with Rhonda's purse open on the sacristy floor. He was holding her compact sweetly against his cheek. I ignored him, walked to the wardrobe, and began to pull my alb on over my head. When I emerged from its folds, he was gone, but the purse remained. I scanned the room for witnesses, then emptied the bag in search of makeup, but there was nothing.

I made due by polishing my lips with my tongue. I removed my shoes and trousers, then bunched my alb up around my knees and strutted around on tiptoes. I distorted my face with various looks of rapture, holding my forehead an inch from the mirror. I imagined myself a bloodthirsty saint.

The next Sunday, Dom was in the sacristy again, masculine and skulking. He watched me don my alb with a sneer.

At the lectern, Rhonda warbles and shrieks. The red ring of her mouth contracts and expands in time with the organ chords. She raises her arms as a haughty cue to sing along.

The audience approaches the stage in single file, plowing aside the glitz with a serene armor. Father Bowlin stoops to rest the Host on extended tongues. They receive the body of Christ; they crack and dissolve it against the roofs of their mouths, careful to avoid the blasphemy of teeth. The wafers absorb and circulate and surround every head like a halo.

I move to clear the altar and prepare the Host for its return to the tabernacle. I've honed my peripheral vision to track Rhonda's sizzle and flash. Both jealous and enamored of her, I anticipate each hammy expression, each willful display of leg.

One Sunday, I waited alone in the sacristy with only a few minutes left before the Mass was scheduled to begin. I'd donned my

alb, lit the candles, and was standing offstage, uncertain, clutching the brass staff of the processional cross. Father Bowlin was nowhere to be found.

The backstage door swung open, and Rhonda and Father Bowlin stumbled through in a cloud of giggles and fermentation. The priest was in the throes of a low-register laugh, his hand over his mouth like an old maid. Rhonda's head blurred amid a gray-speckled feather boa. They halted when they saw me standing ready in the shadow of the cross. Rhonda wrapped her talons around the doorjamb for support, grinding her jaw toward sobriety. Father Bowlin bent unsteadily to pick a stray feather from her bouffant.

Rhonda looked at me as if for the first time, one eyebrow arched in disgust. She let loose a snort, and turned with a dramatic swish. Musky feathers dusted my cheek; a spray of mites and dandruff tickled my nose. She centered her stride as she moved off to put on her choral gown.

It's my time to shine. I place the leftover wafers in the chalice and drape it with linen for the Mass' solemn denouement. Rhonda steps away from the lectern as the organ eases into a quiet dirge.

Before I turn to carry the Eucharist back to its chamber, I see Dom's head climb to a wobbly new prominence above the horizon of the choir loft. Whatever he's standing on is unsteady, for he pitches and shifts and struggles for his center of gravity. A report shocks the building—the sound of a foundation snapping in two. Dom topples over the railing and into the crowd below.

The cathedral is no stranger to disturbances. Bats and pigeons sometimes star in minor comedies here. Flitting down from the bell tower, each entrance provokes a slapstick chase. Winos and madmen, heretics and con artists have interrupted Masses, striding

up the aisle in the midst of the Liturgy, shouting and cursing and instating themselves as bloodshot nobility. It's usually a welcome distraction—a giggle for the children, an adrenaline boost for the ushers who escort the intruders back to the street.

But now a child lies crumpled between the pews.

A cry arises. The familiar pattern of sitting and rising and kneeling falls away as the audience congregates around the body. Rhonda sheds her shoes and races down the aisle, her robe flying higher than ever. She pushes aside the befuddled bystanders and stoops to cradle her fallen son. Father Bowlin approaches, murmuring words of comfort. As if reminded of her current role, she arranges the wrinkles of her face and gown in imitation of the Pieta. A beam of light, gilded by the stained-glass virgin's halo, alights in her nest of hair. A tear slides down her cheek and glances off Dom's oily head.

I see something else glinting from the floor. It's a black reflective object, vaguely cone-shaped and four inches long. It's the evidence of Dom's folly: the broken heel of one of his mother's shoes.

I clutch the covered chalice, saddened my moment of glory has been stolen, and shift, unseen, to return the sacred objects to their cupboard. My hands, steady around the stem of the cup, stay hidden beneath the shroud as I picture the tiny morsels of flesh cradled in the chalice's bowl. They lurk beneath the innocent cloth, soaked in boozy blood.

Rhonda has upstaged the stage. Drenched in the audience, she plies a sympathy so complete, she's no longer just an actress. She's the act. A Host unto herself. I want to get to the meat of a role like that, to claw my way through the linen. But I know I don't have the nails for it. I loosen my grip on the chalice, slacken its levelness, and drip wine across the carpet and out the door.

Like any man-made building, the cathedral's vaulted reach for heaven failed. Despite its crucial floor plan, its outstretched wings of dogma,

there was enough echo to allow for uninvited gods. For just like the Tower of Babel, pride brought about its fall.

Perhaps Dom suffered a similar fate. No one else noticed the broken heel that day, but if they had, would they have understood him any better than I? By cramming his feet into those shoes and striding along the edge of a precipice, he strove for the divine feminine, one might say. And given the tenuous mold of his persona, this makes sense. I myself witnessed a structural flaw in his machismo that morning in the sacristy.

But what if Dom's quest was for the masculine ideal of height? Babel's construction was, after all, a testosterone-fueled act of hubris. One that let in every language, even as a jealous god sought to drive out all the gods that came before. And when you leave the door open, there's no escaping night.

But back to the light: there's no question Dom died pretty. Once I lost my more cherubic attributes, I was doomed. Aging men can't be taxidermied together with feathers and foundation in the same way Rhonda could. And appearance is everything in a vocation like mine.

I squint at books in this confessional, poring over a pantheon of imaginary roles. Anyone who's studied scripture will agree: Jesus was a showman. It's the devil who prefers to work in secrecy. Which one performed magic tricks in front of thousands? And which prefers to tempt in moments of solitude?

I clutch the bloodstained linen in the dimness, looking for meaning in its scarlet splotches. But no face of Christ appears; no virgin comes to turn the stains to roses. The one small sign I've found is a Rorschach blot at the outermost edge of the cloth: a wide-eyed, neckless owl.

Some legends say the owl is one of three disobedient sisters, cursed with nocturnal urges so she could never again see the sun. Others say she pecked out her own mother's eyes in exchange for the gift of flight. I envy her ambition, as foolhardy as it may have

been. Few are so adept at posing artifice as instinct. Believe me, I know. It's a long way to fall in the quest for height, for the heavens, for command of the greatest stage.