

## Passions of a Padre

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In a passion unbroken for more than four hundred years, the diminutive priest finishes his welcoming prayer by bowing to the beloved statue of Our Lady of Perpetual Sympatico, who watches with stoic uncertainty from her vantage point just left of the plain oak alter. Carved from a massive pinon harvested in the Jemez in 1657, by an artist on his way to Eldorado, Our Lady looks as fresh now as she did then. Long revered for her beauty, what elevated her to local sainthood was the miraculous way she survived the devastating fire of 1837, when everything combustible was consumed by hellish flames. The heat was so intense, even the Mexican silver adorning the alter melted. The Santuario was quickly rebuilt with an oak alter appropriately hewed from Sangre de Cristo timbers and tiles fabricated using red clay borrowed from the nearby Santuario de Chimayo. While the tile shows strains from daily communal processions, it's holding

up remarkably well. Today's congregation is as small as it is old, but nonetheless proudly represents the lineage that built and then rebuilt their house of worship. Each family's history of births, marriages, and tragedies is all chronicled in the church's bible of life.

As planned, Jake arrives after mass is underway. If this pans out, and if his guest allows, he'll quietly unload his dolly of Angelica along the side wall of the vestibule then make a quick getaway. Normally he delivers wine during the week, but Padre, the constant schemer, left him no alternative. Not to be outplayed, Jake slides the cases off his dolly without a sound and turns toward the door to perfect his plan. Just as freedom seems within grasp, a gentle tug reminds him a promise is a promise. To argue would only draw attention, so summoning hard to find fortitude, he pushes past escalating trepidation and hurriedly escorts his guest to the back pew. While he wants nothing more than to avoid detected, she's adamant about following proper protocol and is just about to genuflect when-

"Brother Jake," Padre announces in a booming voice bursting with ecumenical joy. "Two weeks in a row?" He smiles jubilantly to his congregation. "Somebody's gotta give that an Amen." Padre's prompting grin bounces from parishioner to parishioner until a murmured choral resonates around the hard stucco walls and smooth satillio tile before seeping into centuries old cracks

and crevices. "This is why," Padre concludes with satisfaction, "ya gotta come to worship. Where else are you gonna witness first hand God's miraculous miracles?"

Jake smiles uncomfortably as the entire congregation turns to stare. He purposefully pushes his guest deeper into the pew hoping it's sufficient to escape their judgment.

"Oh Senor," Padre continues. "How can you settle for so far away when God has prepared a spot for you here?" With theatrical fanfare, Padre leaps to the front pew yanking a piece of paper taped to the well worn oak that reads 'Reserved for Brother Jake and Guest', while motioning for them to come forward. Not wanting to feed Padre's twisted amusement, Jake presses his guest into his preferred spot. If there's one thing he learned, it's that nothing good can come from playing along with whatever Padre has in mind. What Jake doesn't account for, is that his uninitiated accomplice naively views Padre's invitation as a huge honor. Stiffening against Jake's petulant pushing, she sternly whispers, "Did you not hear, we are to sit in front." Like a headstrong boy refusing to leave the dentist's waiting area because he knows from experience what happens next, Jake plops down with stubborn finality, "we're good here."

"That is a place of great honor," she admonishes with eager excitement.

"Trust me, it's not."

"Brother Jake," Padre mischievously smiles after giving his guests sufficient time to argue their respective positions. "I am most pleased to inform you that I must insist."

Jake glares at the grinning priest fully aware of the demented torture that awaits. He turns to restate his decision but finds this woman he barely knows beaming with unbendable pride. He casts back at the entrance, at escape so suddenly unobtainable. Five quick strides to freedom. After all, a promise isn't really a promise, and there's no way Padre catches him before the truck. She'd slow him down, that's the problem. After an agonizing pause in which he runs then re-runs possible scenarios, Jake understands why prisoners walk to the gallows rather than being dragged. He pulls himself up with deflated deliberateness smiling sardonically at his naive companion while secretly searching for some something to change her mind. Just as he decides that the five short strides to the beckoning light of escape really is the path of least consequence, the woman hops past him in the pew, landing seamlessly in the isle. "Thank you Senor Jake," she sings. With all hope for a reasonable outcome dashed, Jake reluctantly steps into the isle. "Be careful what you wish for," he warns.

Begrudgingly Jake follows his enthusiastic guest who feels God's forgiving grace grow each step of her reverent promenade. "He'd run me down," Jake mumbles as he passes the Quintana

brothers who clearly enjoy the way this story will be told and retold up and down the valley.

"Welcome," Padre warmly sings as his guests approach.

"Welcome my Sister and my Brother. I welcome you." Padre takes the woman's hand guiding her into the front pew. "God welcomes you." He grabs Jake's reluctant hand beaming with a triumph that completely covers Jake's scowl. "Your brothers and sisters welcome you." Padre faces the congregation, "Brother Jake just delivered a new batch of Angelica, Nuevo México's true sacramental wine." Padre notices the Quintana brothers sit a little straighter, slightly more proud following his announcement. He knows the legend of the Quintana illegal liquor enterprise and suspects they're linked to Jake's Angelica even though they deny it. Padre doesn't really care, his interest in Angelica lays in its rich Latino history and the pride he feels each time he blesses it. Padre's suspicions about the Quintana brothers comes mostly from rumors. One advantage to performing in a Salsa band is you hear things. Wherever stories of the legendary New Mexico Mula are told, or whenever a bottle of Mula magically appears in the parking lot of a club where he's performing, the Quintana name inevitably gets mentioned. He's asked the brothers point blank about Mula numerous times and all they'll confirm are parts of the story he already knows. They never connect themselves with the legend and smile mischievously if he pushes the matter. Padre

is all but certain Jake secretly makes Mula for the Quintana brothers, and if so, his Angelica recipe, which Jake claims originated in 1568, is probably also from them. Angelica dates all the way back to when the Quintana family first arrived in New Mexico and everyone in the valley knows the Quintanas have been making and selling contraband alcohol hundreds of years before their east coast rivals.

"In addition to bringing Angelica," Padre continues. "Jake's brought a guest." If Padre didn't already have every congregant's full and undivided attention, he does now. That Jake would attend church at all is going to melt gossip wires up and down the valley, that he shows up with a much younger woman two weeks in a row borders on scandalous. Padre takes Sympatico's hand. "What's your name my child?" he asks in a gentle manner that makes her feel they are only two people in the room, like old friends having coffee at a sidewalk cafe on a calm spring day.

But the feeling can't be sustained as Sympatico quickly realizes they're not at a cafe and a man like Padre would never been seen on a sidewalk with someone like her. She lowers her head in sudden shame and embarrassment, it's one thing to be invited to the front pew, but being worthy to be talked to is altogether different. Making matters worse, she's conflicted by the question; is her name the one given at birth, the one Miguel made her use when she was his captive, or is she the person Jake

heroically allowed to be reborn? She bows her head. How does God know her? "Sympatico," she softly whispers going with the name Jake bestowed.

"Que?" Padre loudly fires back.

"Sympatico!" Jake blurts out rescuing her from Padre's inquisition.

Padre walks to the center of the church to face his congregation. "It appears Brother Jake's brought us both Angelica and Sympatico." He opens his arms, "Let's all welcome sister Sympatico to our family of faith." When the applause ends Padre again stands in front of his guest. "Where you're from?" he asks in a gentle tone.

Now Sympatico understands why Jake resisted Padre's earlier invitation. "Bolivia," she whispers still keeping her head down.

"Que?" Padre prods.

"Bolivia!" Jake once more booms to her rescue.

"Bolivia!" Padre shouts. He dashes to the center of the church shouting with such ecumenical authority Sympatico wonders what's so wrong with her country. "Simon Bolivar! The only man in history to have a country named after him. My brothers and sisters," Padre jubilantly explains. "In my home country of Venezuela, Simon Bolivar is a saint. The George Washington of South American; only he wasn't a racist. Simon believed in the same principles as Thomas Jefferson, only when he proclaimed all

men are created equal, he did not exclude Latinos, Indians, Blacks, Asians, and everyone who didn't look like him. When Senor Bolivar defeated the corrupt Spanish Army, he did not seize land from those with legal claims to parlay out for political favors, that's the purview of the American government. Such a great, great man was Simon Bolivar."

Emelia often told Jake about Padre's strong political beliefs but he never thought much of it, until now. While not surprised, Jake's impressed Padre is so open about his radical views. For members of Padre's congregation who regularly attend Mass though, nothing so far is unusual.

"I once visited Bolivia," Padre continues. "Before seminary when I still had hair." He laughs while running his hand over his bald head. "I went with my Dad to support the gas field workers in their protests. As in my home country, the people of Bolivia were fighting against corrupt corporations who rob us of our resources and exploit our people. Such a beautiful place. And Bolivians, so proud and determined." Padre stands in front of Sympatico beaming with pride. "I was honored to stand with my Bolivian brothers and sisters in their struggle for justice."

Sympatico raises her head slightly, finding Padre's face full of inviting warmth. She allows herself to hold eye contact long enough to acknowledge the things he said, then quickly returns to looking at her hands folded neatly in her lap.



Satisfied he's made his point, Padre returns to the front of the church. He has a history of making profound points in theatrically unconventional ways. Today he's working off a combination of prepared material and stuff he's creating on the fly. "Brothers and Sisters." Padre changes to a more serious tone. "I will dispense with the readings and go straight to the homily. But before we begin-" Padre walks to the alter and grabs a small wooden crucifix and carries it to Sympatico. "Please hold this for me."

Sympatico gingerly accepts the crucifix, quickly placing it in her lap where it can be more closely examined. The simple cross is constructed from some kind of hard wood with tiny holes on all four corners that probably once secured a Jesus statue. The cross is faded, dented, and scratched in such a worn way it almost seems natural that the statue would be missing. The wood has a smooth oily sheen, probably from being held through countless vigils.

"The crucifix I gave Sympatico," Padre announces to his congregation, "is very old and missing its Christ statue." He returns to his spot in front of the alter. "A Polish priest gave it to me during seminary. You probably never noticed it resting on the alter, but it's always there each time I perform a mass. I'm going to share with you the lesson that came with this crucifix." Padre looks at Jake, "Tell me if I get any of this

wrong."

Jake sneers, he knew sooner or later Padre would get around to him.

"You may not know this," Padre tells his listeners, "but Brother Jake is Polish. His maternal great-grandmother grew up in the town where I attended Seminary. Jake doesn't like to admit it because he thinks he has to be this high-brow scientist, but inside he has a profound Polish faith that rivals we Latinos."

Sympatico glances at her scowling benefactor not sure what to think. One could easily say Jake is a kind man, a man of deep integrity and honor, but to say he's a man of faith? The scowl on his face alone questions whether she's more right than Padre.

"Polish people are both proud and patriotic," Padre continues. "One hundred and fifty years ago though, their country ceased to even exist when Russia and Germany carved up chunks for themselves. A huge purge ensued with thousands executed. Somehow though, the Polish people persevere. They struggled and eventually won back their country only to have it happen all over again in World War II. First the Germans purged millions through their evil, then the Russians forced them into the Soviet Union and an even more horrific purge followed by an unspeakably sadistic evil. Again, the Polish people struggled. It takes many years but again they win their freedom thanks in part to great men like Lech Walesa and our beloved Pope John Paul." Padre

pauses to make the sign of the cross to honor his former Pope. He glances at Jake and as predicted, finds him glaring back with a stoic stare.

"The Polish people are not only proud, patriotic, and full of faith, they are not afraid to force change. That is how you preserver my friends; working nonstop, often in stealth, to bring about change. We misguidedly admire the loud agitators, the falsetto gibberish of politicians who demand change but never take a measure of risk. But my brothers and sisters, it is the stealth men and woman who toil in silence, like doctors and nurses in a crisis who are the true catalyts." Padre looks at Jake as he delivers his prognosis. "Someday, I believe brother Jake will be drawn into a situation causing his proud Polish instincts to rise up and preserver toward change."

Jake does not appreciate being talked about in this context. In part because he's modest, but also because of the super-secret subversion he and his cabal are engaged in. He glares at Padre for any indication he knows more than he lets on, but Padre just smiles back gregariously. In a hybrid combination of anger and frustration, Jake looks down to watch Sympatico fidget with her statue-less crucifix.

"I told you that story," Padre continues. "So I could tell you this one. There's a painting in a small Polish monastery in a village called Czestochowa. The painting is known as the Black

Madonna, but the faithful call it Our Lady of Sorrows. Legend holds this icon was painted by the Apostle Luke on the cedar table Mary, Joseph, and Jesus had in their home. Since Joseph and Jesus were carpenters, it could easily be from a table they made. The icon came to Czestochowa in the thirteen hundreds by way of Ukraine and Hungary. How it got there is a matter of disputed history, but regardless, the icon's been in Poland for the last seven-hundred years.

"Originally, Our Lady of Sorrows, was painted in bright colors with both the virgin Mary and the blessed Christ child alive in olive hues. In the early fourteen hundreds though, during one of the many German invasions, the painting gets damaged by fire. While the monastery's destroyed, miraculously the painting is not. The fire does however cause the faces of Mary and Jesus to turn black while all the other brilliant colors, miraculously hold true. After the fire, the German's did what the German's do and plundered what's left of the monastery. They load the icon in a wagon along with their other spoils and start back to Germany. That's when the second miracle of Czestochowa occurs. As the barbarians pull away from the monastery, the wagon containing the Black Madonna grows heavy. The further they move the heavier the wagon becomes until no matter how many oxen are attached, the wagon will not budge. It sinks into the dry dirt all the way to its axles."

Padre's face is animated with his signature sign a good moral awaits attentive listeners. "A German officer gets so mad he throws the icon on the ground and suddenly, the wagon lunges forward freed from it's burden. As German soldiers march past the damaged painting lying on the ground, another officer takes his sword and wickedly swipes at the icon inflicting two deep cuts on Mary's cheek. That's when the third miracle of Czestochowa happens. Witnesses told with horror how the wounds on Mary's cheek start to bleed and how, when the German officer attempts to strike a third blow, he suddenly falls to the ground dying a deservedly bitter death.

"The Polish people return their icon to Czestochowa and in time repeal the barbarian invaders. They slowly rebuild their monastery, making the icon their symbol of perseverance. The two scars on Mary's cheek become a measure of how God protects those who suffer. In the mid sixteen-hundreds, the Swedish army invades Poland and that's when the fourth miracle of Czestochowa is revealed. For over a month the monastery Prior and a tiny group of locals hold the mighty Swedish army at bay. These brave men, protected by their Black Madonna, not only save the monastery, they turn the course of the war. During World War II the savage German and Russian armies are so afraid of the Black Madonna's power, neither dares to enter Czestochowa."

Padre returns to the alter where he picks up a horse

farrier's nail, which is flat and looks like a miniature dagger. He holds the nail between his thumb and finger with his arm raised so the congregation can see it. "I told you that story, so I can tell you why I have this horseshoe nail, and why I gave Sympatico my crucifix missing its statue of Jesus." Padre walks down the center isle of the church showing the congregation the nail before stopping in front of Sympatico. "Please accept this gift."

Sympatico shifts the crucifix to her left hand and takes the nail without fully looking up. Padre returns to the front of the church. "This nail is very similar in design to nails used by Roman's. Remember brothers and sisters, Jesus willingly allowed himself to be crucified. Did he feel pain? Yes. Did he suffer? Absolutely. He willingly did so to remind us not only of our sins, but to demonstrate that he, like each and every one of you, must persevere. It's as much a part of life as breathing or eating. Everyone suffers; some seemingly more than others, but I can assure you, no one escapes this burden. No one's perseverance goes untested. But we as individuals, as members of our family of faith, as a New Mexico community, we survive. Like the Polish people who persevered through so much, better days are ahead. We're all on a journey to God's house even if the paths we take are varied. The challenges I face are different from yours, but they are challenges nonetheless."

Padre narrows his sermon to Sympatico. "I had you hold my well worn cross to symbolize that you, like each of us, has a cross to bear. Whatever God put on your cross in the past; whatever is placed on it in the future, is for a purpose. Just as Simon was there to help Jesus carry his cross when the burden got too heavy, there will be people along your journey who will help carry yours." Padre looks at Jake. He waits until his dear friend makes eye contact. "I have no doubt some of you are right now being called upon."

Jake looks away without expression knowing Padre continues to stare. As soon as Jake appeared in church last week with a battered Sympatico in tow, Padre's known the invisible hand of God is working some sort of plan through his friend. There's a reason Emelia brought Jake to him. A reason Sympatico is here now. Padre has hoped, even prayed, all his life that God would have a purpose for him. He has no way of knowing what, or how, or even why, but is certain his purpose is about to be revealed. Call it the intuition of a humble Parish Fryer. He's convinced that somehow he is linked to Jake, and by extension, to whatever Jake and his cohorts are up to.

Padre continues with renewed conviction. "Pain and suffering is the part of faith that makes us strong. God never promised life would be easy. He did promise to help us preserver. He gave the Black Madonna of Czestochowa to the people of Poland. A

symbol of his promise." Padre moves in front of Sympatico. "Keep this nail as a symbol of the fact that no matter what path God has chosen for you, no matter how you have suffered, it is for a reason. He loves you as much as he loves each of us." Padre pauses to let his guidance settle in on Sympatico's unsettled soul. He then side steps to Jake. Taking his time, mostly for dramatic effect, Padre leans over the pew and whispers to his friend with inviting faith, "same goes for you, Cabron."