

Bless Me, Father, for I Have Sinned, Ray Bradbury

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It was just before midnight on Christmas Eve when Father Mellon woke, having slept for only a few minutes. He had a most peculiar urge to rise, go, and swing wide the front door of his church to let the snow in and then go sit in the confessional to wait.

Wait for what? Who could say? Who might tell? But the urge was so incredibly strong it was not to be denied.

“What’s going on here?” he muttered quietly to himself, as he dressed. “I am going mad, am I not? At this hour, who could possibly want or need, and why in blazes should I—”

But dress he did and down he went and opened wide the front door of the church and stood in awe of the great artwork beyond, better than any painting in history, a tapestry of snow weaving in laces and gentling to roofs and shadowing the lamps and putting shawls on the huddled masses of cars waiting to be blessed at the curb.

The snow touched the pavements and then his eyelids and then his heart. He found himself holding his breath with the fickle beauties and then, turning, the snow following at his back, he went to hide in the confessional.

Damn fool, he thought. Stupid old man. Out of here! Back to your bed!

But then he heard it; a sound at the door, and footsteps scraping on the pavestones of the church, and at last the damp rustle of some invader fresh to the other side of the confessional. Father Mellon waited.

“Bless me,” a man’s voice whispered, “for I have sinned!”

Stunned at the quickness of this asking, Father Mellon could only retort:

“How could you know the church would be open and I here?”

“I prayed, Father,” was the quiet reply. “God made you come open up.” There seemed no answer to this, so the old priest, and what sounded like a hoarse old sinner, sat for a long cold moment as the clock itched on toward midnight, and at last the refugee from darkness repeated: “Bless this sinner, Father!”

But in place of the usual unguents and ointments of words, with Christmas hurrying fast through the snow, Father Mellon leaned toward the lattice window and could not help saying:

“It must be a terrible load of sin you carry to have driven you out on such a night on an impossible mission that turned possible only because God heard and pushed me out of bed.”

“It is a terrible list, Father, as you will find!”

“Then speak, son,” said the priest, “before we both freeze—”

“Well, it was this way—” whispered the wintry voice behind the thin paneling. “—Sixty years back—”

“Speak up! Sixty?!” The priest gasped. “That long past?”

“Sixty!” And there was a tormented silence.

“Go on,” said the priest, ashamed of interrupting.

“Sixty years this week, when I was twelve,” said the gray voice, “I Christmas-shopped with my grandmother in a small town back East. We walked both ways. In those days, who had a car? We walked, and coming home with the wrapped gifts, my grandma said something, I’ve long since forgotten what, and I got mad and ran ahead, away from her.

Far off, I could hear her call and then cry, terribly, for me to come back, come back, but I wouldn’t. She wailed so, I knew I had hurt her, which made me feel strong and good, so I ran even more, laughing, and beat her to the house and when she came in she was gasping and weeping as if never to stop. I felt ashamed and ran to hide . . .”

There was a long silence.

The priest prompted, "Is that it?"

"The list is long," mourned the voice beyond the thin panel.

"Continue," said the priest, eyes shut.

"I did much the same to my mother, before New Year's. She angered me. I ran. I heard her cry out behind me. I smiled and ran faster. Why? Why, oh God, why?"

The priest had no answer.

"Is that it, then?" he murmured, at last, feeling strangely moved toward the old man beyond.

"One summer day," said the voice, "some bullies beat me. When they were gone, on a bush I saw two butterflies, embraced, lovely. I hated their happiness. I grabbed them in my fist and pulverized them to dust. Oh, Father, the shame!"

The wind blew in the church door at that moment and both of them glanced up to see a Christmas ghost of snow turned about in the door and falling away in drifts of whiteness to scatter on the pavings.

"There's one last terrible thing," said the old man, hidden away with his grief. And then he said:

"When I was thirteen, again in Christmas week, my dog Bo ran away and was lost three days and nights. I loved him more than life itself. He was special and loving and fine. And all of a sudden the beast was gone, and all his beauty with him.

I waited. I cried. I waited. I prayed. I shouted under my breath. I knew he would never, never come back! And then, oh, then, that Christmas Eve at two in the morning, with sleet on the pavements and icicles on roofs and snow falling, I heard a sound in my sleep and woke to hear him scratching the door! I bounded from bed so fast I almost killed myself! I yanked the door open and there was my miserable dog, shivering, excited, covered with dirty slush.

I yelled, pulled him in, slammed the door, fell to my knees, grabbed him and wept. What a gift, what a gift! I called his name over and over, and he wept with me, all whines and agonies of joy. And then I stopped.

Do you know what I did then? Can you guess the terrible thing? I beat him. Yes, beat him. With my fists, my hands, my palms, and my fists again, crying: how dare you leave, how dare you run off, how dare you do that to me, how dare you, how dare!?

And I beat and beat until I was weak and sobbed and had to stop for I saw what I'd done, and he just stood and took it all as if he knew he deserved it, he had failed my love and now I was failing his, and I pulled off and tears streamed from my eyes, my breath strangled, and I grabbed him again and crushed him to me but this time cried: forgive, oh please, Bo, forgive. I didn't mean it. Oh, Bo, forgive . . .

"But, oh, Father, he couldn't forgive me. Who was he? A beast, an animal, a dog, my love. And he looked at me with such great dark eyes that it locked my heart and it's been locked forever after with shame.

I could not then forgive myself. All these years, the memory of my love and how I failed him, and every Christmas since, not the rest of the year, but every Christmas Eve, his ghost comes back, I see the dog, I hear the beating, I know my failure. Oh, God!"

The man fell silent, weeping.

And at last the old priest dared a word: "And that is why you are here?"

"Yes, Father. Isn't it awful? Isn't it terrible?"

The priest could not answer, for tears were streaming down his face, too, and he found himself unaccountably short of breath.

"Will God forgive me, Father?" asked the other.

"Yes."

"Will you forgive me, Father?"

“Yes. But let me tell you something now, son. When I was ten, the same things happened. My parents, of course, but then—my dog, the love of my life, who ran off and I hated him for leaving me, and when he came back I, too, loved and beat him, then went back to love. Until this night, I have told no one. The shame has stayed put all these years. I have confessed all to my priest-confessor. But never that. So—”

There was a pause.

“So, Father?”

“Lord, Lord, dear man, God will forgive us. At long last, we have brought it out, dared to say. And I, I will forgive you. But finally—”
The old priest could not go on, for new tears were really pouring down his face now.

The stranger on the other side guessed this and very carefully inquired,
“Do you want my forgiveness, Father?”

The priest nodded, silently. Perhaps the other felt the shadow of the nod, for he quickly said, “Ah, well. It’s given.”

And they both sat there for a long moment in the dark and another ghost moved to stand in the door, then sank to snow and drifted away.

“Before you go,” said the priest, “come share a glass of wine.”

The great clock in the square across from the church struck midnight.

“It’s Christmas, Father,” said the voice from behind the panel.

“The finest Christmas ever, I think.”

“The finest.”

The old priest rose and stepped out.

He waited a moment for some stir, some movement from the opposite side of the confessional.

There was no sound.

Frowning, the priest reached out and opened the confessional door and peered into the cubicle.

There was nothing and no one there.

His jaw dropped. Snow moved along the back of his neck.

He put his hand out to feel the darkness.

The place was empty.

Turning, he stared at the entry door, and hurried over to look out.

Snow fell in the last tones of far clocks late-sounding the hour. The streets were deserted.

Turning again, he saw the tall mirror that stood in the church entry.

There was an old man, himself, reflected in the cold glass.

Almost without thinking, he raised his hand and made the sign of blessing. The reflection in the mirror did likewise.

Then the old priest, wiping his eyes, turned a last time, and went to find the wine.

Outside, Christmas, like the snow, was everywhere.

The End