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My Name is Benjamin

An apology. 53 years too late.

I don't understand the emotions that are coming through me. Feels like rapids crashing into you when you paddle upriver. Like one wave after the other.

I close my eyes and cover them with my hands. When they open, I am that scared eight year old boy again. The tall dark walls around me with shafts of light coming from the window, from the brightness of the full moon. I lay with my back on the bed, covered in a blanket that isn't remotely warm enough for the winter cold. I think of how my father would always keep the fire burning all night so we would never grow cold. I hear the stifled cries of sleepless boys like me echo the hall. They all cry for different reasons.

I turn off the television. I don't want to see the Prime Minister's sincere face anymore. The memories come back as haunting as a black night. The shame never washes away. I don't care. The walls of the cabin begin to feel like they're closing in and I decide to go out for a walk.

I walked in a steady pace and then my legs are running. When I look down, they're the legs of a ten year old. Two of my friends are running with me. We look back every now and then, a certain fear driving us onward. The eldest of us, Joey, managed to kill a partridge and we built a fire and roasted the bird. For a moment, we feel as if we are home, hunting and playing in the forests outside our village. Surrounded by the trees, we lose track of the time. Soon, we fall asleep around the fire. I suddenly awoke by a strange sound. Joey was already awake and standing by the dying fire. I remember asking him if they were wolves, but he said, No, they are the priest's dogs. We ran once again. But as fast as we could, those barks still came closer and closer until those dogs circled around us. The dogs were the size of wolves except for the shade of their fur. Theirs was brown. We stood still, afraid their teeth would pierce into our skins. The priest and his men finally caught up to us. The priest was a stout but fierce man, hardly taller than Joey. The priest grabbed Joey and started beating him. He did not say anything but the rage in his dark eyes could say more than he could express. Joey managed to break free of the priest's grasp and Joey ran with the priest chasing. My friend and I stood there, watched by the men as Joey and the priest ran from our sights. From a distance, we could hear Joey scream in pain, and then there was nothing. We then heard their returning footsteps but I was surprised and nervous to see only the priest walking towards us. Let's go, he simply said. My friend and I looked at each other and I whispered, where's Joey? I suddenly felt the hand of the priest hit my face. I stumbled but didn't fall, my hand on my cheek where he struck me, burning. Do not speak that

dirty language, it is a sin, he bellowed. I couldn't say anything as tears formed in my eyes but I didn't want to cry. As we began to walk away, back towards to the school, one of the men asked, what happened to the boy, sir? As the priest washed the blood off his hands by the lake, he replied, he got away.

The ground under my feet is soft. The June grass growing every day. Before me is my son's tombstone. Took his own life when he was 22, nearly ten years ago. He was a smart boy and a natural athlete, but it seemed he harbored dark secrets he was not able to tell me. My wife never let the chance pass by to tell me that it was my fault. She once compared me to a ghost. Haunting but not quite there. I never argued about it. She's gone too.

I fall to my knees to brush off the dirt that formed around the letters of my son's name. Samuel. I loved my son. I just didn't know how to show it. I look at my hands as I set them down on my lap, and they're the hands of a 12 year old. I'm praying in the empty chapel. Although I was in the church, I never really prayed. Often I was confused about who I was praying to. I usually went there to be alone. The nuns assuming I was going to pray to their god didn't seem to mind. I was deep in thought. I never even heard him come in.

Let me go home. Let me feel the embrace of my parents again.

'Benjamin,' said a voice, echoing in the hall. I turned to the voice in surprise. 'I did not mean to frighten you,' the voice, smiled. The voice stood beside me, staring at the cross above us. He kneeled and prayed beside me.

I looked away from him. I remembered him from before in the hall. He had said hello to me and smiled. He was a new teacher. He was a tall man with a kind smile that reminded one of happy memories.

'I am pleased to see you praying,' he said. I only nodded in response, relieved in a way that I wouldn't be punished for being in the church.

'The sisters tell me you are one of the best students but often very quiet,' the voice continued. I nodded again.

'I suppose they are right by your lack of response,' the voice, smiling. He was quiet afterward.

'I'm done praying for now, sir,' I whispered as I rose to my feet. The voice stood as well and faced me. I waited until he said it was fine to go. I didn't turn away from him for fear of punishment.

'I would like to give you a book to aid in your prayers, it's one from my collection,' the voice said. 'It's in the office.' I nodded in acceptance. I didn't want to say no because I didn't want to be punished. He gestured his arms for me to walk in front. He walked quietly behind me. When we reached the office, he opened the door and let me go in first. He went in after me. I heard the door lock click. Then I could only hear my quiet breathing in the office which was filled with books. The voice went and stood before one of the shelves, searching for the book.

The walls were bare except for the Christ nailed on the cross that was hanging just above the door, as light seeped through the closed white lace curtains. A desk was placed in the corner, momentarily in shade as the sun moved to the west. I stood in front of the desk as the voice continued his search for the book.

‘I only had several books of my own but the sisters insisted to add them to the office library when I arrived two weeks ago. I just cannot seem to find it,’ he said, grinning. I nodded and smiled politely.

‘Oh, I finally found it,’ he said. He stood behind me and placed the brown hardcover in my hands. I stared at the cover. What to Pray for When You Pray to Jesus, the title read.

‘Benjamin,’ the voice said. I turned my head to look at him. I smiled a little and he smiled also. He stood three feet taller than me. His towering frame surrounding my diminutive own. He had his hand on my shoulder. But then his hand fell to my lower back and he moved his body, leaning against my own. That cold fear I felt so often it felt normal to me settled deep in my stomach. My body stiffened.

‘It’s alright,’ he whispered.

‘Sir, I...I’ve got to go,’ I said, as I meant to move towards the door, but the sharp pain of his belt on my back stunned me.

‘Don’t move!’ he yelled. The kind voice I heard in the chapel was replaced by a commanding tone that made me feel afraid. I hesitated, the book still in my hands. Once more his belt slashed my back when I didn’t do as he told me to. The pain of it made me dizzy and my knees weakened.

‘Now do as I say. Take off your pants,’ the voice said, his tone a little angrier. I was close to tears. The pain on my back still aching, I placed the book on the desk and my hands did what my mind couldn’t process. I undid my belt and my button, and my pants fell down around my ankles. I remember thinking, what is he going to do to me? He pushed my upper body down to the desk and I heard him shuffle around behind me. I felt frantic as I stared around the office. Then the room filled with cries of pain and they were my own. My hand clenched the book, my eyes closed in agony, my forehead against the firm surface of the desk, and in the far distance, I heard the childish laughter in the playground outside the church.

I look at my 59 year old hands. They’re old now, scarred and broken. I’m holding that same book the voice had given me so long ago. I don’t even know why I’ve kept it after all these years. My hands are shaking, ever since I held it, and without thinking, I toss it into the fireplace and watch it burn. After staring at it a long time, I get off the chair and go to the kitchen. I remember exactly where it is. My son had left it there so many years ago before he died. My hand searching in the dark of the bottom cupboard, and then I feel it. My fingers tenderly around the neck of the bottle as I pulled it out. It felt strange somehow as I held the bottle in my hands. For a moment, I thought of putting it back, I could throw it down the sink. But my fingers don’t listen to the moment in my head. I open it and set the cap on the counter as I take a glass from

the cupboard. I put it on the table and I pour ol' Jack Daniels into the glass, that familiar smell dancing in the air. I look at the glass for a moment, and I realize my hands are no longer shaking. I put the glass to my mouth and I drink, the alcohol burning my lips and throat. I had forgotten the taste of it.

I should've run.