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Confessional
by Laura Resnick
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I do not recall the moment in which I knew I would sell my soul to have him, nor even the first time his smile brought a flush of mingled shame and desire to my skin. But I will never forget the very first time I heard the voice, the one which answered my prayers and damned me for all eternity.

The soldiers came with the summer that year, chasing out the Nazis and the Fascists as the hot winds from Africa blew fine red dust from the Sahara across the rocky hills and ancient towns of Sicily. After nearly eight years of sleeping alone, I had thought myself accustomed to barren nights, joyless mornings, the cold, empty space beside me, and the undisturbed purity of my virgin white sheets. My husband had disappeared into the belly of the war in Ethiopia in 1935, and I had been unable to learn his fate ever since. I prayed for him three times daily, left weekly offerings on the shrine of Santa Rosalia in the Via dei Miracoli, and begged the Blessed Madonna to care for him tenderly if he were already in heaven. To Saint Monica, patron saint of wives, I prayed that he still lived, that I was not yet a widow, that some word would come soon. Monica, too, had lost a husband in North Africa, and I had believed for so long that she would show me mercy; but now I began to wonder bitterly if I should instead be praying to Saint Paula, she who watches over widows.

All my piety, of course, was as nothing compared to the fervent devotion shown by my husband's mother. Widowed long ago, she now slept in a narrow bed in a small room above me, the room which had been my husband's in childhood. Of her four children, only my husband and one sister -- now living in America with her husband and children -- had survived infancy, and now it fell to me to be the old woman's daughter. But the value of a daughter is negligible compared to the worth of a son, and the old woman's life was now spent praying for my husband and seeking comfort from the Jesuits at Casa Professa, who repeated to her Saint Augustine's assurance that it was not possible to lose a son of so many tears. It was left entirely to me, therefore, to attend to the grueling and mundane matter of our daily survival.

Actually, I preferred it that way. The hard work, the hunt for black market goods, the struggle to secure bread and pasta for another day, and the careful management of too little money were all occupations that prevented me from dwelling too long on the desert which my life had become. In some strange and perverse way, I even welcomed the bombing of Palermo during the battle for Sicily which raged for five weeks that summer. The thundering of the skies, the fires which engulfed whole sections of the city, the trembling of the earth, and the terror of death all quickened my blood and assured me that I

was still alive. And if I clung to life so tenaciously, surely it must still be worth living. In the numb years following my marriage, I had often wondered; I might have even contemplated ending my own bleak existence, did I not know it to be a mortal sin.

Perhaps it was that renewed vulnerability to life -- the rediscovered sensation of my heart pounding with fear, the limp pleasure of relief, and the profound gratitude I knew when experiencing the simplest sensations after enduring the threat of annihilation -- that plunged me again into the warm and turbulent sea of human desires after I had spent so long sitting indifferently on its shores. Perhaps I was seduced by the breath of hope that blew across our hungry land after the brutal years of war. Perhaps I was swept away by the exuberance of the young men who conquered Sicily like the Crusaders, those ancient heroes of so many marionette spectacles and folk songs from my childhood. Maybe it was the late-blooming scent of the season which awoke me, the fragrance which escaped from a million unfurling blossoms, the aroma of ripening crops, the promise of rebirth, the release of Persephone from the dark underworld where Pluto held her captive.

Or perhaps it was only my first glimpse of him which changed everything. Was it a sign, I wonder, that I first saw him at the Fountain of Shame, in the Piazza Pretoria? The nude statues, which had so horrified the palermitani when first unveiled by the northern artist who had created them centuries ago, seemed to glow like living things beneath the dazzling Mediterranean sun on that hot, quiet afternoon. I had expected to be the only person at the fountain at that hour; everyone else should be either eating or sleeping. But Americans, he explained to me later, believe it a sin to sleep in the middle of the day.

Surprised to see him, I stayed in the shadows and stared at him as he walked around the fountain, studying the voluptuous figures with the intent interest of a healthy young man. Young, indeed, I thought, feeling a sweet, forbidden stirring.

Alone and entranced, he gave into his longing and touched one of the statues at last, running his palm along the smooth swell of her naked breast, testing the fecund bulge of her marble belly, stroking the eternal grace of her plump thighs. I swallowed and felt my eyes sting. My heart pounded as if Palermo were being bombed again, and sharp memories of my wakeful nights as a bride burned the hollows of my body. My breath became trapped in my lungs as I watched the young soldier's hands explore the shape and texture of the marble goddess, and my skin tingled as if the hands of my husband were once again touching the paler skin of my belly, the round cushion of my buttocks, the hot flesh between my thighs.

But my husband's face was lost in my memory, and the grainy photograph I kept beside my bed could no longer help me recall it. I remembered, because I had once taken great care to remind myself daily, that he had courted me with charm and boldness, that he had married me within two months of first noticing me at a festival in my native village, and that he had swept me away from my home, my family, and all that was familiar on the day after our wedding. I had gone willingly, barely eighteen years old, confident in his ability to care for me, proud of my place at his side, determined to merit his love, and fierce in my passion for him.

But the bride and groom who posed formally in the photograph on my wall seemed like strangers now, and when I thought of them at all, it was as children I hadn't known very well. Even the foreign soldier, unaware that I watched him as he caressed a lifeless nymph in the Piazza Pretoria, did not seem as young as the impetuous couple in my memory.

Afraid that I would be missed at home if I stayed too long, I crushed my longing, and stepped into the sunlight. The soldier turned suddenly, startled. But, young though he was, he neither blushed nor looked embarrassed. It was as if he saw my hunger, the emptiness of my womb, the stainless sorrow of my bed, and knew how guiltily I had admired his secret seduction.

And so I wasn't surprised to find him waiting for me again the next

day, alone beneath the blinding sun, watching through heavy-lidded eyes as I crossed the warm, smooth stones of the piazza. I kept my eyes lowered, as was fitting, as any proper woman would do, and silently ignored him as he shared the task of filling my water bottles.

He didn't try to speak to me until the third day, and by then, I suppose it was too late for words to protect me. He had very little Italian, and I, of course, spoke no English, but it didn't matter. Every smile and gesture called my soul from my body, and every glance told me he knew it, knew the force of my longing. Everything I said or tried to say was smothered by the heat between us, and I felt more like a clumsy girl than a respectable matron. Finally, fearing temptation more than I had ever feared death, I forced him to admire my wedding ring while I spoke of my husband.

There was little enough to tell, and even less that he could understand. I had been a wife for less than three months when my husband was taken from me and sent far away, to kill other women's husbands or be killed himself.

Perhaps it was a mistake to tell my story to the American boy. Temptation merely grew stronger now that I had added intimacy to the struggle, for the expression in his blue eyes entered my heart and stayed there long after I had left the piazza. That night in my bed, the bed where my husband had not slept in eight years, I dreamed, for the first time ever, of another man. I awoke curled around the pillow, feeling the breeze drift through the window and across my back, aching with yearning for a man I could never bring to this bed. All that morning I worked in a daze, bartered for food as ineptly as a foreigner, mended clothes in a trance, and cast my eyes again and again to the morning sky, longing for the sun to climb to its zenith so that I might go to the Fountain of Shame and see him again.

Just before I was to creep silently out of the house, my mother-in-law had a seizure and began coughing up blood. Though accustomed to caring indifferently for her, today I longed to strangle her, to crush her withered throat between my hands that I might be free to go to the soldier, free, even, to bring him home to my bed. The time for our meeting was long past when the old woman finally stopped coughing and slept peacefully at last. I stumbled to my room, where I flung myself upon the bed and wept violently with frustration.

The power of this thing inside me terrified me. To soil my husband's sheets with dreams of another man, to long for a gnarled old woman's death that I might fornicate with a stranger... With tears still blurring my vision, I wrapped my best shawl around my shoulders, left the house, and headed for Casa Professa, that I might confess my sins before God.

* * * *

"If he saw us talking like this, what would he do?" the soldier asked me the next afternoon, his Italian slow and awkward.

I sat beside him, my shoulders slumped, my cheeks dampened by droplets of water which the wind carried from the fountain to cool my hot skin. "Who?"

"Your husband."

I shrugged.

"Sicilian men are..." He searched for the words. "You belong to him."

"Yes," I agreed dully, trying to remember the man to whom I belonged, trying to ignore the scent of this stranger to whom no decent woman should even be speaking. I glanced up at his face. He was assessing the risks, calculating the possibilities. I could easily convince him that the penalty for a night of unwed pleasure would be too great, especially considering how difficult it would be to arrange such an opportunity in the first place. Sicilians did not look tolerantly upon a faithless wife.

The wind blew more drops of water onto my cheek. He reached out and brushed them away, and this first feel of his fingers on my skin made me quiver like an animal. "I tried to confess yesterday."

"Confess?" He frowned, puzzled.

"My sins. To a priest."

But, as I sat in the dark womb of the confessional, the words had not come, for I was not truly penitent. Whatever I said, whatever penance I might be given, whatever absolution the priest might grant me, I knew in my heart that I intended to come to Piazza Pretoria again today. I longed to continue committing adultery in my heart. In a life so devoid of other pleasures, I was unwilling to sacrifice this small one. In a world so full of sin, could my near occasion of sin really matter so much? And so I had left the confessional suddenly, unblessed and unshriven, startling the priest in my haste, avoiding the accusing eyes of the Virgin as I rushed out of the Church.

All this I told the soldier, and although he understood none of the words, he knew the heart of my story, and the comfort he gave me, his tongue restless and sweet in my mouth, was both a balm and torment to my embattled soul.

* * * *

"May the Lord be on your lips and in your heart that you may rightly and sincerely confess your sins."

I did not know the voice that reached out to me through the dusty screen as I sat again in the somber darkness of the confessional.

"Bless me father for I have sinned," I began. "My last confession was three weeks ago. Since then I have committed the following sins ..." My heart tried to force its way through my chest, through the sullen black dress I wore in mourning for my parents.

"Yes?"

I opened my mouth, afraid to speak, afraid to part with my joy and be punished for it, yet afraid to carry this secret within me any longer.

"What sins have you committed, my child?"

I swallowed. No words would come. This was my fourth visit to Casa Professa since first seeing the young soldier who haunted my dreams, destroyed my peace of mind, and made me waste my days in longing for those few moments stolen at the Fountain of Shame each afternoon.

_"May the Lord be on your lips and in your heart ... _"

On two previous occasions, I had known the priests giving confession, and I could not bring myself to reveal my treasured secret to them, no matter that my confession would be a sacrament they could not violate. They would make me give up the soldier, and I was not ready.

_"... that you may rightly and sincerely confess your sins. _"

I had come to the Church today at the hour I normally met him, knowing that no one would be here, intending to silently confess to God Himself. I hoped that He would understand, that He had granted me this pleasure to keep, rather than to throw away in guilt and sorrow. So I had been shocked, upon passing the confessional, to hear a voice from within.

"Come, my child, come and confess to me. Come, your heart is troubled, and you are alone. Let me bear the weight of your sins for you."

The voice was so soft, barely louder than the whisper of the morning breeze through the lemon groves of my childhood, yet it seemed to echo throughout the Church, bouncing off the cherubim to whirl around the skirts of the Madonna. The candles seemed to flicker beneath its force, then grow stronger in its wake.

I had walked forward and entered the confessional as if pulled by desire, the way I entered Piazza Pretoria each afternoon. But now, as before, my heart pounded with rebellion and my tongue would not make a penitent confession to this soldier of Christ.

"You are troubled."

How soothing, how gentle was that voice! My eyes misted as I admitted, "Father, I have taken Holy Communion three times now without confessing to the sins which weigh on my soul."

I expected a lecture, possibly anger, and certainly a heavy penance for this alone, regardless of the nature of my other sins. So I was surprised into a watery sob when the priest said only, "Then surely you have only taken comfort from your Savior in your time of need, as He intended."

The teachings of my youth forced me to explain, "Not really, Father. I just didn't want my mother-in-law to know that my soul is stained with sin, and she would if I didn't take Communion." There. My cowardice was out in the open, my guilty fear of the old woman's critical gaze and sharp questions.

"Well, it's understandable that you wouldn't want to fight with your mother-in-law."

I shifted uncomfortably. "Do you really think so, Father?"

"Of course. But wouldn't you like to share the nature of your sins with me?" he prodded gently. "Wouldn't you like to be absolved?"

Unlike the other priests, who I believed would merely condemn me as a faithless woman, he sounded as if he would truly forgive me and bestow the blessings of the Church and all her saints upon me, freeing me from this insane thing that drove me. So I told him my story.

"But this isn't a sin," he said at last, his voice as smooth as silk, as sweet as almond wine. "All you've done is fetch water in the piazza each day. It's not your fault that he's there."

"But, Father, I long to see him. I would go to the farthest fountain in the city every day if I knew he would be there. I dream of him at night, I think of him all day. I imagine... I imagine him doing things I should only allow my husband to do."

"But it's all in your mind," he argued. "You haven't harmed anyone."

I told him of how I had wished for my mother-in-law's death, even wished to kill her myself.

"She's an old woman," he said soothingly. "Irritating, narrow-minded, and obsessed with her son."

"Yes," I whispered, wondering how he knew.

"She has only survived for so long because she's too mean to die and too stubborn to give up hope that your husband may still be alive."

"That's... true," I breathed. It was as if he had read my mind, as if he could see the old woman scolding the children who played in our street, scowling at the dinner I had prepared, mending and tending masculine clothing which would probably never be worn again.

"It's no wonder you sometimes think about killing her."

"Not sometimes, Father. Just the once."

"Really? Just once? Are you sure?"

I frowned. "I ..." Had I thought of it more than once, perhaps? "Well, I've often thought I would rather not live in the same house with her, but I never..." I sighed softly and closed my eyes. Had I wished for her death before, but just been too afraid to acknowledge it? Had I wanted to kill her more than once, but never admitted it to myself?

"I guess I do sometimes think of killing her," I said slowly.

"Yes, I thought so."

"Oh, Father!" I started to cry.

"Shhh, shhh. It's all right. You've confessed. Now these sins are lifted from you."

"But, Father, I must tell you... I'm not repentant. I want to see him again. I will go to Piazza Pretoria again. Even as I confess myself to you, I am thinking about the next time I will see him."

"I know."

It was all he said before absolving me.

"Don't I have to..." I paused, confused. "Don't you want to give me a penance, Father?"

"No, I don't think so. Just come see me again. Soon."

"When will you be here again?"

"I will be here whenever you want me," he whispered.

The Church was still empty when I left. No priests, no sinners, no faithful. Only me.

* * * *

"You sound troubled today," the priest said to me, his voice floating smoothly through the screen that separated us.

"Yes, Father. I'm glad you're here."

As he had promised, he was there every time I went to confession, which was now almost every day. I thought he must live in that confessional, since I was never able to come at the same time two days in a row. But whether I came at first light, in the evening, or during the hot, lazy hours of the afternoon, he was waiting for me.

"Has the young man upset you?"

I had seen the soldier not more than an hour ago, and I was still flushed and trembling, my insides twisted with frustration, my belly burning like the heart of a fire.

"No, Father. He behaved very properly."

Since the day he had asked about my husband, the day I had cried over my failure to confess and he had kissed me like a lover, he had not attempted to touch me again. But his eyes gave him away, as mine surely did, too. He wanted what I wanted, his dreams were an echo of mine.

"He hasn't suggested he wants to be alone with you? Some place private, with a locked door?"

"No, Father." I shrugged. "He knows I'm married."

"But he also knows you don't really have a husband anymore."

"How can you say that, Father? Doesn't the Church teach us that we are married forever?"

"Not if you're widowed."

"But I don't know if I'm widowed!"

"For the sake of argument, let's say you are." I might have been surprised, except that Jesuits love to say things for the sake of argument. "Would this American marry you?"

I swallowed the thickness in my throat and admitted, "No, Father. He has a woman in America. He told me. Anyhow, I'm older than he is, and we can hardly speak to each other, and..." I stopped before my voice broke and shamed me more.

"Ah, well, so he's on fire for you, but you think he will do nothing about it."

"That's right, Father."

"But you wish he would."

"Father!"

"This is your confession, isn't it? Don't you want to be truthful?"

"Yes, but..." I nodded, for he was right, as usual. "Yes, I want him to do something about it. But I know he won't."

"And if he won't, who will?"

* * * *

I thought of the tender flesh beneath his jaw. It looked as soft and smooth as a baby's, such a contrast to the stubbly brown beard that sometimes shadowed his face. His buttocks were high and round, as firm and ripe as young fruit. Did all American soldiers wear their trousers so tight? Did they all carry the secrets of paradise in their eyes? Or was I right -- was it only him? Was he unique, special, a shining example of young manhood in all its raw potential, a man unlike any other man before or since?

The downy hair on his nape grew longer as summer drew to a close, and I hoped he wouldn't have it cut. The scent of his skin lingered with me throughout the day, and I tried to recall it as I pressed my face into my pillow and writhed against my mattress at night.

"I can't stand it, Father. I can't, I can't, I can't..." My voice choked on a sob, my hands trembled as I clasped them together beseechingly.

"I know, my child." The warm voice was drenched in sympathy, in sorrow, in shared suffering.

"Have you ever burned, Father? Burned until you heard, saw, felt, knew nothing but the flame?"

"My child, my child..."

"Oh, Father. I think I'm dying. Only death could hurt so much."

"God does not wish you to suffer so."

"Then tell Him to put a stop to it! Tell Him to stop tearing my heart out this way!"

"Perhaps He has not put this man in your path to torment you," the priest suggested.

"How can you say that?" I cried.

"Perhaps you misunderstand His intentions, my child. I think He may have sent this man to you as a gift."

I stopped sobbing, stopped breathing. "A gift?"

"You have been so lonely for so long. Perhaps He sent this man to ease you."

"No." I shook my head. "No, He..."

"Why else would the man have been waiting for you at the Piazza Pretoria?"

"At the Fountain of Shame," I said.

"At a place for lovers. At a time of day when no civilized person should be out in the streets."

"But Americans don't -- "

"Could it be that destiny, that God Himself sent you to each other?" He paused before saying more quietly, "Perhaps He intends you to comfort each other."

"Father..." I leaned forward, intent, my heart thudding slowly and heavily. "You're speaking of adultery."

"As Adam and Eve comforted each other."

"And they were cast out of Eden, he to toil ceaselessly and she to bear in pain."

"They were punished for disobedience, not love."

"You are urging me to mortal sin, Father."

"And if you confess, can I not also absolve you of it?"

* * * *

I did not know if he truly could relieve my soul of a mortal sin, but I soon ceased to care.

"Father, he told me today that he will be sent away soon. To the north, with the rest of his company." I was breathless, having run all the way to the Church. "Oh, Father, he's going away!"

"I see."

"I'll never see him again!" It was as if my body were being torn apart, piece by piece.

"When will he leave?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"Then there's time."

"For us? But how, Father? How? Where can we go? He shares quarters with three other soldiers, and I live with my mother-in-law. I have no car, no money for a hotel, no -- "

"You have a home. The only difficulty is your mother-in-law."

"Yes, but..."

"If you eliminate her, he will certainly come home with you."

"But how can I 'eliminate' her? She can't go to the country. She's too ill, and besides, she has no family there, no one to stay with. She hasn't slept anywhere but her own bed in over thirty years. I can't -- "

"She's an old woman," he said, his voice soft with kindness. "Sickly and ill, coughing up blood, weak and living in terrible pain. She has lost her husband, her son, her youth and beauty..." He sighed sadly, the sound wafting through the somber confines of the confessional. "It would be kinder for God to take her now. Don't you think God would like your help?"

"My help?"

"End her suffering, my child. She will look down on you from heaven and thank you for it."

My head swam. Grotesquely shaped spots slithered through my vision.

"You're asking me to... kill her? To murder the old woman?"

"It's best for everyone, my child. Surely, it's God's plan."

"Father, I can't..."

"Do you think those visions of wringing her neck were your own?" he asked quietly, his voice filling my senses. "No! They were sent to you, to guide you, to show you the way. What is left for this old woman except grief and loneliness? What is left for this soldier except death on a foreign battlefield?"

"No, Father, please..."

"And who can ease their pain? Who can help them at the end of their days? You, and you alone."

"For You alone are the Holy One," I breathed, "You alone are the Lord."

"Yes!"

"But _murder... _"

"You will confess to me, and I will relieve you of your sin."

"A gift from God," I whispered.

"I absolve you..."

"A vision from God."

"...in the name of the Father, and the Son..."

"God's plan."

"...and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

"Amen."

* * * *

I went to Casa Professa the next day, shortly before the midday meal. It was crowded, full of penitent, wailing women, black-veiled widows, and wide-eyed children. I waited impatiently until his confessional was empty, then went to him.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I have murdered the mother of my husband," I whispered in a rush, the Lord on my lips and in my heart.

"What have you done with the body?"

"She's in her room, on her bed." I shuddered as I remembered her loose skin sliding under my fingers, the muscles of her throat convulsing beneath my palms as I pressed harder, harder. She had fought me for a long time, clinging to life despite God's will. "She was... much stronger than I had thought."

"She is at peace now."

"I'll report her death tomorrow. After he has gone. I will not waste any more of the time we have left." The death rituals would be elaborate, even though she was not my mother and hardly anyone would mourn her passing. I felt I owed it to her in exchange for the night in paradise which her death would grant me.

"Tomorrow, then," he agreed.

"Only, Father, does it matter that she died without last rites?"

"I prefer it that way."

"You prefer? I don't understand."

"Now she's mine." And somehow, his voice had changed, all its silken kindness seeping away.

"Yours?" I whispered.

"You have delivered her to me. You have delivered yourself. And very soon, you will deliver him to me, too."

"Deliverance?" I said, my breath pushing harshly through a tight throat. "I thought this was deliverance."

"Murder and adultery? My child, as you very well know, they are both mortal sins. You've just committed one, and you're going to commit the other before the day is out."

I raised a shaking hand to the screen. "Who are you?"

"I am the answer to your prayers."

"I never prayed for this!"

"You prayed for a way to have him. You prayed for the sin instead of the penance."

I had never heard such contempt in my life. "No!"

"Yes! I heard you. You were willing to give all eternity for a night with him."

"No, it's not true!"
"I came when you called."
"Oh, God."
"Not quite. Guess again."
"No!"

"Go to him, my child. He's waiting for you now, in the Piazza Pretoria, waiting for you to take him to a quiet room, a locked door, a wide bed with stainless sheets that bear the scent of your skin." The voice was thick with promise, glowing with ardor. "Go to him."

"No," I said, my arms braced against the sweating wood, my palms slick with fear. "No, you can't have him. I won't give him to you."

"You might as well. He's your payment. The thing you most desire in all the world, in exchange for the thing I most covet."

"My soul," I sighed, feeling its loss already.

"Go to him."

"No. The old woman and I will have to be enough for you."

"Are you burning?" he whispered.

"Stop," I begged, the flames engulfing me. I could have him at last. He awaited me, and there was nothing and no one to stop us.

"Do you long for him? Do you dream of him pressing you into the pillows, parting your thighs, his teeth marks on your skin, his gasps smothered in your hair..."

"Stop it!" My flesh tingled, awaiting his touch. My eyes misted as I struggled to my feet, weak-kneed with desire.

"He longs for you, too," whispered the voice, intensifying the throbbing in my belly. "Will you deny him?"

"Leave me alone!" I shouted, rising at last and forcing my way into the sunlight. "You can't have him!"

Two dozen startled people turned and stared at me. One of the aloof priests of Casa Professa tried to restrain me as I beat my fists on the wooden door of the confessional.

"_Signora! _"

I jerked away from the Jesuit's touch and, with all my might, yanked open the ancient door, tearing it from its hinges with my ferocity. There was no one inside.

"_Signora, prego! _"

_Do you burn, my child, do you burn? _

"Stop it!" I screamed as the voice echoed through the Church. People chattered around me, muttering that I was insane, wondering if I was dangerous.

_He waits for you now, at the Fountain of Shame. Go to him, go to him. Take him home to your waiting bed. He is your reward. He will be your comfort throughout eternity, a memory of paradise as you wail with the damned. _

"No!" I cried. "_No! _ Not like this!"

* * * *

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." I knelt before the priest, the stone floor cold beneath my shins, the prison gown rough against my knees.

"And what are your sins?"

The Dominican friar was old, chubby, effeminate, and sour-faced. His gaze was disapproving as it glanced over my snarled hair, my dirty cheeks, and my sunken eyes, which everyone said had the light of the Devil in them.

"Adultery, Father. I betrayed my husband with another man. And I betrayed the man I loved, too, by leading Satan to him."

The voice had followed me, tormented me, driven me to him in the end. Now I prayed three times daily for his soul, not knowing whether he had died in the war or returned to his woman in America. I prayed only that he had been spared my fate, for he was not one of the faithful. Surely hell only belonged to those of us who believed in heaven, too? I prayed that it was so.

I carried the memory of him in my arms and in my bed through all the days and months and years that followed, as I will carry it with me into the

torments of hell for all eternity, for such a memory was the price I set long ago.

"Also, murder, Father. I murdered my husband's mother."

The soldier and I were awakened when officials came to the house to question me. Neighbors had heard the old woman's cries and struggles that morning. He seemed more appalled than anyone else when my mother-in-law's body was discovered, her throat bearing the marks of my fingers, her face twisted with terror. He looked at me one last time before I was taken away, horror marring his beautiful features.

"I also lied to my husband, Father. I told him I couldn't remember doing any of this."

He had returned from Africa, after nearly ten years as a prisoner of war, to find his adulterous wife in prison for the murder of his mother. What could I say without hurting him more? Better he should think me mad. Shortly after seeing me, he hanged himself.

"I have incited men to evil acts, sinful deeds. Fornication, suicide..."

I named more recent sins, ending the recitation at last and waiting for forgiveness. The silence weighed heavily on my soul.

"Father, will you grant me absolution?"

There was no answer. I looked up into a face suddenly gone young, pale, and innocent with fear.

"They said you were..." His breath rasped through his open mouth. "They said I would see it, in your eyes..."

"Father?"

His lips moved, but in fervent prayer, not in blessing. Eyes wide, he crossed himself, stumbled as he backed away from me, then turned and fled through the door, letting it slam shut behind him with dark finality.

I lowered my head wearily, but not in defeat. The world was full of priests, and I could ask for yet another one. I would try again, for such was my right as one of the faithful.

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