

Visitation, an Autoethnodrama in One Act

Description





Visitation, an Autoethnodrama in One Act

Artwork by Johnny Gunn

Author's Memo

In this autoethnodrama, a woman terminates a pregnancy without telling her husband. I am from Granite City, Illinois, a steel town in which The Hope Clinic, one of the first abortion clinics in the country, opened in the late 1970s, directly across of St. Elizabeth's hospital. The doctor and his wife were kidnapped in the 1980s, and, in the end, safely returned. The parish priest confronts the wife on her choice. Ironically, he prompts the dissolution of the marriage and open rejection of belief by the wife, along with male-bonding with the husband.

I grew up Roman Catholic. In fact, my mother was a Catholic grade school teacher. One aspect of growing up Catholic is exposure to the parish priest's attempt to address complex and real-live issues of parishioners in relation to the rigid teachings of the Church. Also, in the past, Catholic priests were given little pastoral training, so they often fumbled in their attempt to help their parishioners.

I am not Catholic today. Not even Christian, in even the general sense. I am not ambivalent to the effect of the Catholic church both on the United States and on the world. For me, there is no way to avoid Catholic teaching as misogynistic. For example, let's take abortion off the table as not an option. One way to minimize abortion is comprehensive sex education and easy access to contraceptives. Yet, the Catholic Church opposes this, too. The inability to control pregnancy falls squarely on women. Unplanned and uncontrolled pregnancy minimizes chances for work and education for women and increases poverty. There are multiple studies to support this claim. I won't list them here. They are easy to find.

Likewise, the threat of violence, a threat almost from men, exists for all women. Even a woman from a very privileged background might walk to her car alone at night. Or have an intimate male partner be

physically violent, even in a small way. Given the social and legal limitations placed on women, the addition of violence compounds the challenges that women face in their everyday life and even more so in times of crisis. Part of men's violence is cyclical: men experience violence as children or young men, which in turn conditions these men to commit violence. The husband in this play is a partially-disabled combat veteran who has not successfully addressed his own experience in the past and the present.

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VISITATION

CHARACTERS

- ANNE ??? white; female; late 20s
- CHRISTOPHER ??? white; male; late 20s to early 30s
- FATHER (Catholic priest) ??? white; male; late 30s to early 40s

TIME

Daytime, summer, late 1970s

SETTING

A track house living room and kitchen. The living room has a couch and love seat (two-seat couch). The kitchen has a table with chairs. A lattice screen acts as a room divider between the two rooms. A hallway leads to the implied off-stage bedrooms.

* * * * *

FADE IN

(ANNE is sitting on the kitchen table that is covered in notebooks and pens. She adjusts her sitting posture slightly and winces. She reaches to her abdomen. She is visibly in pain. CHRISTOPHER opens the back door, sits on the steps leading into the kitchen, and takes his work boots off.)

ANNE

Father will be here soon.

CHRISTOPHER

The gay one or the womanizer?

(CHRISTOPHER enters the kitchen. He looks in the fridge and takes out a six pack of beer that he brings into the living room. When he sits on the couch, he has to manually lift each leg. It's unclear if he is simply tired from work or if his legs have a functional problem. He rather quickly works his way through the six pack as the action progresses.)

ANNE

Rumors.

CHRISTOPHER

That one priest. Gone overnight. And then this one.

ANNE

Gossip.

CHRISTOPHER

It's your church, not mine. Are you going to clean up?

ANNE

Clean what?

CHRISTOPHER

That. On the kitchen table. The mess.

ANNE

What mess?

CHRISTOPHER

What mess?

(ANNE reads over a few pages.)

ANNE

You know what, I've been thinking.

CHRISTOPHER

Thinking?

ANNE

You don't know?

CHRISTOPHER

That is for sure.

ANNE

I had . . . I have dreams, plans, goals.

CHRISTOPHER

To do what?

ANNE

Be a writer. An artist. Travel. How about this? Be happy.

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CHRISTOPHER

You aren't happy?

ANNE

What is happiness?

CHRISTOPHER

That's a rather weak line.

ANNE

Do you have a dream?

CHRISTOPHER

I dream of sitting here, drinking my beer, and relaxing. In quiet.

ANNE

Well, now you can die fulfilled.

CHRISTOPHER

It's not quiet.

ANNE

It will be.

CHRISTOPHER

All I did was come home from work.

ANNE

I was working, too.

CHRISTOPHER

And somehow, I give offense.

ANNE

It's not you.

CHRISTOPHER

It's not you. It's me.

ANNE

I mean it.

CHRISTOPHER

All the worse.

ANNE

Can't you just . . . not exist?

CHRISTOPHER

This isn't our usual give and take.

ANNE

What's to give? What's to take?

CHRISTOPHER

Quoting the Bible on a hot summer afternoon?

ANNE

That's not the Bible.

CHRISTOPHER

Praise Jesus.

ANNE

I've got something to say today.

CHRISTOPHER

What neither of us have had the courage, or the decency, to say out loud.

ANNE

Which is?

CHRISTOPHER

Exactly what we are not going to say.

ANNE

That my life would have been better if you would have died in the war.

(A knock at the door.)

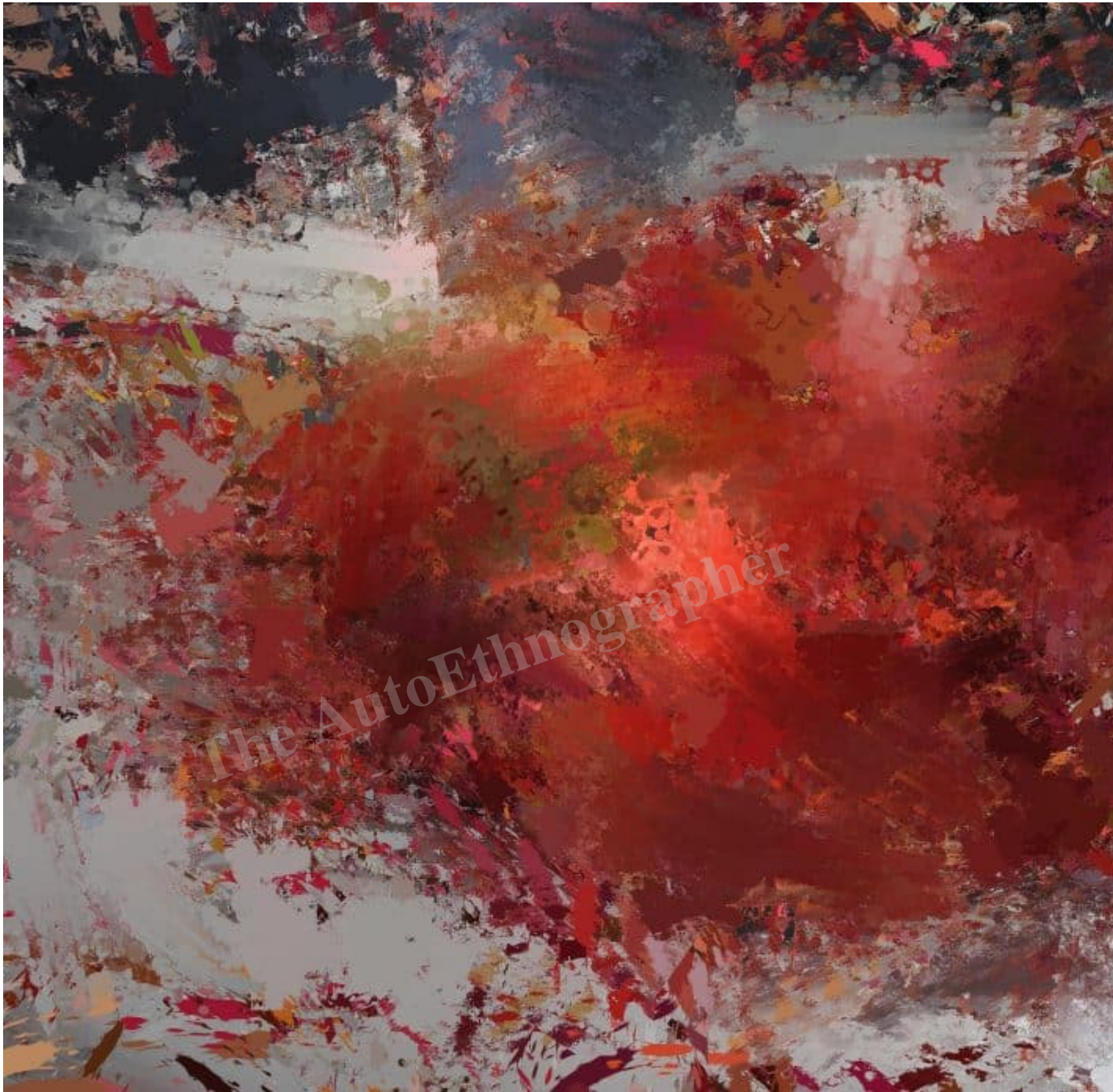
CHRISTOPHER

God has come to hold you to account.

(ANNE stands, walks through the living room, and opens the front door and FATHER enters.)

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CHRISTOPHER

Father?

(CHRISTOPHER holds up his beer as an offer)

ANNE

Fatherâ??

FATHER

Have I comeâ??

ANNE

Coffee?

CHRISTOPHER

Sheâ??ll corrode you from the inside out.

FATHER

Black. No sugar. (Speaking to ANNE)

(FATHER shakes his head â??noâ?• to CHRISTOPHER. ANNE goes into the kitchen.)

CHRISTOPHER

We can skip out for a beer between rounds.

(In the kitchen, ANNE pours two cups of coffee. She reaches behind the coffee percolator and pulls out a pill vial. She shakes out a pill and takes it with her coffee. She puts the vial back.)

FATHER

Fights on this early?

CHRISTOPHER

Fights on this early.

(ANNE brings a cup of coffee to FATHER. She keeps the second and stands in the doorway to the kitchen.)

ANNE

Father, the love seat?

CHRISTOPHER

Yes, Father. The love seat.

(FATHER sits on the love seat.)

FATHER

Your elm, in the front yard, itâ??s blighted. I see witchesâ??-brooms on the top. Not very pretty.

ANNE

Itâ??s a rude tree. Not to be pretty for you.

CHRISTOPHER

They can live for years while theyâ??re dying.

ANNE

Especially when nurtured. He still gives it fertilizer.

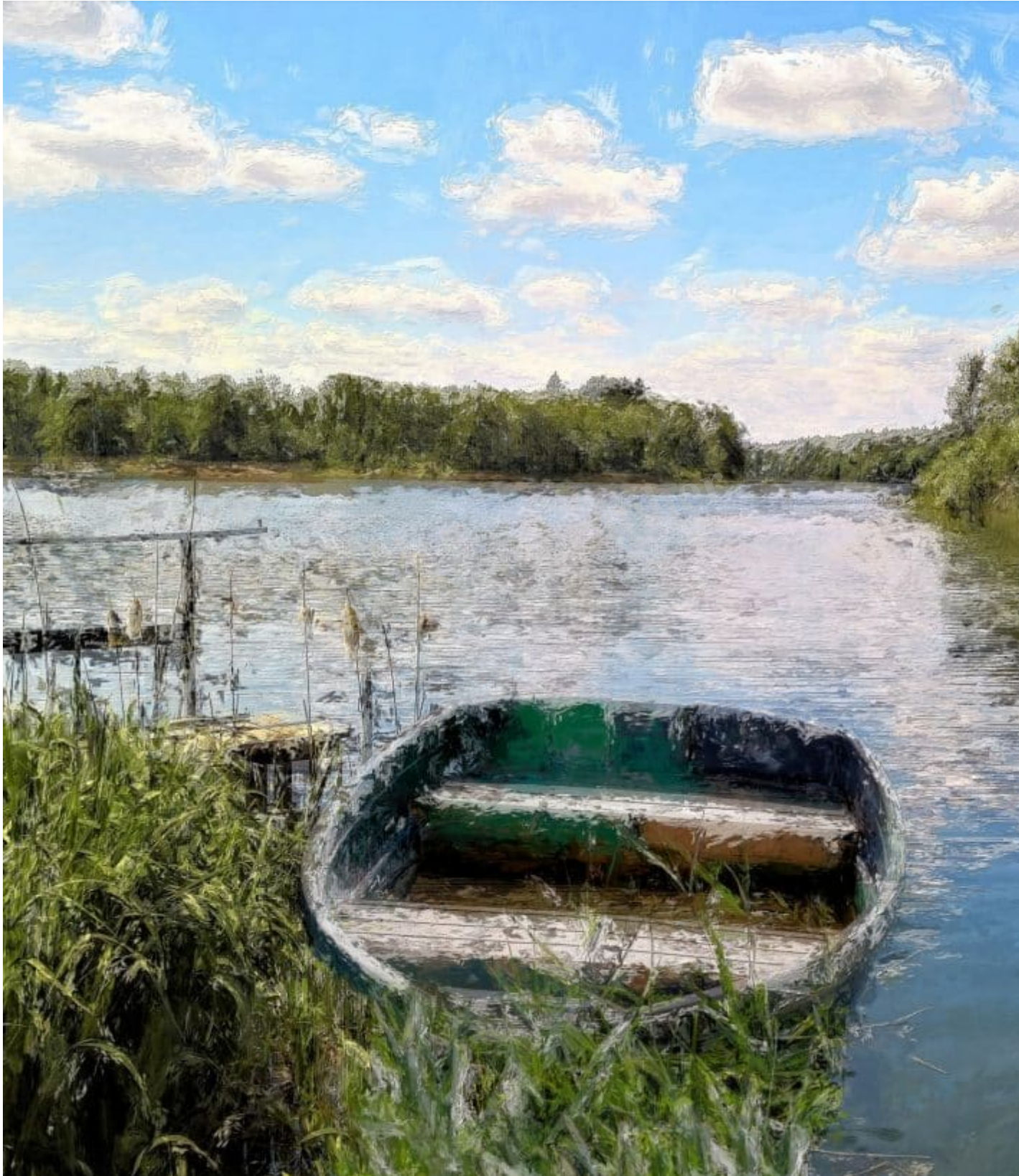
FATHER

Everything has a right to life. Even the dying. How have you been? (Speaking to CHRISTOPHER.)

CHRISTOPHER

Good. Fishing on the weekends. I am a fisher of fish.

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ANNE

Out all day, Father. In the summer he leaves before breakfast on Saturday and doesn't come back until after supper Sunday.

CHRISTOPHER

It's a blessing to both of us.

ANNE

Amen to that.

FATHER

The new job?

CHRISTOPHER

I'm in yard maintenance.

ANNE

He should move to the furnace soon.

CHRISTOPHER and ANNE

The bonus is better there.

FATHER

That is good. All work?

CHRISTOPHER

Father, please. No.

FATHER

And how have you been? (Speaking to the ANNE.)

ANNE

Me?

FATHER

Yes, you. How . . . have you . . . been?

CHRISTOPHER

That's a TV-mystery tone of voice, Father. *How . . . have you . . . been?* (Mimicking Peter

Faulk.)

FATHER

Itâ??s nothing. Nothing much. Nothing much at all. Sister Mary. . . well, more than one of the Sisters, at the hospital, they pray, you know, for the unborn. They often hold vigil at that place, across from St. Mollaâ??s Hospital.

ANNE

Iâ??m familiar with the hospital, Father. My doctor is there.

CHRISTOPHER

What are you saying, exactly, Father? (Speaking to FATHER.) You didnâ??t go out with the Sisters, did you? (Speaking to ANNE.)

FATHER

The Church has so many challenges today.

ANNE

Yes, Father, the Church does have challenges.

FATHER

Many challenges.

ANNE

Challenges.

CHRISTOPHER

Does the Church have challenges? Seems it does.

(CHRISTOPHER finishes the beer, and again manually moves his legs as he stands. When upright, he raises the empty can to the priest, who again nods â??no.â?• He puts the empty can on the coffee table, then goes into the kitchen, and stares into the fridge.)

FATHER

She has . . . recently . . . more than normal . . . been at that place . . . more often.

(He speaks lowly, not a whisper, just enough so that CHRISTOPHER in the kitchen canâ??t hear.)

CHRISTOPHER

What is the priest saying? (Speaking from the kitchen.)

ANNE

Father?

FATHER

Itâ??s just she saw . . . She thinks that she saw . . .

ANNE

Father, no. Not here.

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CHRISTOPHER

Secret Church teachings? Like the Masons? (Speaking from the kitchen.)

(CHRISTOPHER takes a six-pack of beer from the fridge, and then stands next to ANNE near the kitchen door.)

ANNE

Catholics can't join the Masons.

CHRISTOPHER

The Church against funny hats and go-carts?

ANNE

That's the Shriners.

CHRISTOPHER

More complicated than the Catholic Church.

FATHER

If the Sister (Speaking to ANNE) . . . if she were wrong, we could over look. . . but if the good Sister is in the right . . . and a sincere contrition and repentance . . . of course. You understand . . . how difficult . . . this is . . . for me.

CHRISTOPHER

Why . . . are you . . . speaking . . . like . . . this?

ANNE

Don't be sarcastic. (Speaking to CHRISTOPHER.) What exactly is difficult for you, Father?

FATHER

Saying it. Saying it out loud. Saying any of it out loud. Sometimes things can be . . . how do we say . . . they are less real if they are never named. I entered a cloistered seminary when I was fourteen. They didn't really prepare us for this type of thing.

ANNE

I've changed my mind. Say it, Father. Go ahead. Say it.

FATHER

I don't know that I should

CHRISTOPHER

A woman's prerogative to change her mind..

(CHRISTOPHER makes his way to the couch. Again, he helps himself to sit and opens another beer.)

No. Don't say it. I don't know what it is, though I have my suspicions. If you don't say it, then it won't exist. Isn't that right, Father? God spoke. And there was creation. No speaking. No creation. Silence doesn't deny reality. Silence denies reality its reality.

FATHER

I think that it's for the best. I won't say it. Out loud. But you must know.

ANNE

No. Go ahead, Father. Once you say something, it's like taking something away, a little bit of innocence. And you never get it back. Let's all lose our innocence today.

CHRISTOPHER

You and me could lose our innocence later tonight.

ANNE

It wasn't the first. What Father said.

CHRISTOPHER

Father didn't say anything.

FATHER

I didn't say anything.

ANNE

You didn't have to. Things don't need to be spoken to exist. Life doesn't just happen out of nothing. Time passes, moment by moment, cause and effect, one after the other. Forever. The Sisters saw me at the clinic.





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CHRISTOPHER

The clinic?

ANNE

The clinic.

CHRISTOPHER

Why the clinic?

ANNE

As a patient.

CHRISTOPHER

A patient?

ANNE

Yes. A patient.

CHRISTOPHER

What are you saying?

ANNE

That I did what Father said that I did.

FATHER

I didn't say anything. In particular.

ANNE

And it wasn't the first. The first was when you were gone.

CHRISTOPHER

When I was deployed.

ANNE

Gone.

CHRISTOPHER

Deployed.

ANNE

You volunteered for multiple deployments.

CHRISTOPHER

They needed me.

ANNE

Over three years.

CHRISTOPHER

They needed me.

(CHRISTOPHER begins to stand, as if he will charge ANNE, but his legs do not support his will. He almost falls, steadies himself on the edge of the couch.)

ANNE

I need you.

CHRISTOPHER

And who now?

ANNE

Who do you think?

CHRISTOPHER

Who could I not?

ANNE

Don't say things like that.

(CHRISTOPHER charges ANNE and grabs her wrists. She drops the coffee cup. The priest intervenes. The two men reach for each other. CHRISTOPHER pushes at the priest, then swings, but unsteadily, and misses. The priest, without hesitation, lands a left hook against CHRISTOPHER's head without dropping his coffee cup. CHRISTOPHER falls to the floor. His body is similar to Mary in the Pietà)





FATHER

God forgive me.

CHRISTOPHER

This is the first time that I've ever respected you, Father. First time I ever respected a priest, minister, rabbi, high poohbah, whatever you want to call them. Call you.

FATHER

I . . . I don't know what to say.

CHRISTOPHER

You said enough. And you said all that needed to be said. You said what I . . . what we . . . already know. The guys at work. Their wives. It's a small town. You did good, Father. You did real good. Now we really know how things are.

ANNE

It was yours.

FATHER

I didn't say anything.

CHRISTOPHER

This time?

FATHER

Forgiveness . . . is to be had if asked for. God is gracious.

(FATHER reaches down to CHRISTOPHER. CHRISTOPHER waves him off and slowly, with effort, stands. ANNE lays down on the couch. Her body position is similar to Jesus in the Pietà .)

CHRISTOPHER

So, Father, what gives?

FATHER

Golden Glove. In high school. The Monsignor let me box through seminary. Said it was a good way to let go of tension. But once I was ordained, well, boxing is not becoming of a priest.

CHRISTOPHER

Can't escape the violence inside of us, can we, Father?

FATHER

The flesh is weak.

CHRISTOPHER

Well, if youâ??d been on R&R during deployment with me, youâ??d know the flesh is quite strong.

Look at her. Like a stone. Girl, get up.

(ANNE sits up.)

ANNE

Come. (Motions to CHRISTOPHER.) Sit with me. (She pats the spot next to her.)

CHRISTOPHER

Are you drunk?

ANNE

Unfortunately, no.

CHRISTOPHER

Iâ??m the one whoâ??s drunk.

ANNE

Fortunately, yes.

(ANNE stands and pushes past the men and sits at a kitchen chair behind the screen that separates the living room from the kitchen.)

Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. (She makes the sign of the cross.)

FATHER

I cannot hear your confession now.

ANNE

I have secrets to confess. Secrets Iâ??ve even kept from myself.

CHRISTOPHER

You have secrets from me that you only tell a priest?

ANNE

Every wife has secrets from her husband.

CHRISTOPHER

I donâ??t have any secrets from you.

ANNE

Youâ??d need an inner life to have secrets.

FATHER

If you need to confess your sinsâ??

ANNE

Oh, Father. Thatâ??s not what I meant at all.

FATHER

You donâ??t want to confess?

ANNE

I do want to confess. Do you want to know what Iâ??m confessing? I donâ??t believe any of it anymore.





FATHER

You don't believe in God.

ANNE

I believe, just not in God. Or the Church.

FATHER

Not in God.

CHRISTOPHER

Not in sin, either, it seems.

ANNE

You think I've sinned. And you, too. Both of you do.

CHRISTOPHER

I don't believe in sin.

ANNE

Oh, but you do. More so than him. He thinks sin is real but God can erase sin. Just, poof, make it go away. You think sin is real and eternal. No salvation. Not damned if you do, damned if you don't. Just damned.

CHRISTOPHER

That's enough.

FATHER

Let her speak.

CHRISTOPHER

I said, it's enough. How long? You. How long have you been like this?

ANNE

I can't remember. Sometime when you were gone. I woke up one day. Next to some . . . man. Don't look surprised. You suspected. You knew. You did the same. He was young. Handsome. Like you. But present. I can't say something broke inside of me. Something was already broke. At that moment, I realized it. I've just pretended for years.

FATHER

The world is ill. Broken. Sinful. But God??

ANNE

No, Father. The ??world,?• as you call it, is not broken. But there is something broken in this world. That is for sure.

CHRISTOPHER

This has been my life since I got back. I donâ??t know how I could have been . . . Father, she has been derelict in her marital duties. So, if Sister So-and-so did see my dear wife at that clinic, I canâ??t be certain if I am supposed to be offended or grateful.

FATHER

Offended or grateful for what?

ANNE

My abortion.

FATHER

That word. Please donâ??t say that word.

ANNE

I can give you the details. Would you like the details?

CHRISTOPHER

Yeah, the details. Tell us how you spread your legs?

ANNE

I hate you.





FATHER

She doesn't mean it.

(Without any hinderance from his legs, CHRISTOPHER turns the coffee table over. He pauses, out of breath, and falls to his knees. ANNE comes around the divider into the living room. She sits on the floor next to her husband and pulls him down onto her lap. Their body positions are suggestive of the PietÃ .)

FATHER

This is really enough.

CHRISTOPHER

I'm sorry. I just . . . lost control.

ANNE

It's over.

CHRISTOPHER

Over?

FATHER

Let me help you. You are in need.

ANNE

I can't take help from a stranger.

CHRISTOPHER

The priest is no stranger.

ANNE

I meant you.

CHRISTOPHER

I didn't offer you any help.

FATHER

I am no stranger.

(ANNE pushes CHRISTOPHER off her. She stands and walks to the front door.)

CHRISTOPHER

Where are you going?

ANNE

Away

CHRISTOPHER

What can I do?

ANNE

Make a wish.

CHRISTOPHER

For what?

ANNE

For what? For what else?

CHRISTOPHER

For love?

ANNE

For happiness.

CHRISTOPHER

Happiness doesn't exit.

FATHER

Miracles do happen.

ANNE

No, Father. They don't.

FATHER

We all live in the delusion of sin.

ANNE

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We all do live in delusion. But not of sin.

(ANNE leaves through the front door.)

CHRISTOPHER

Come back.

FATHER

She will return.

CHRISTOPHER

She is gone.

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FADE OUT

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