HAGIOGRAPHY

Daniel Johnson

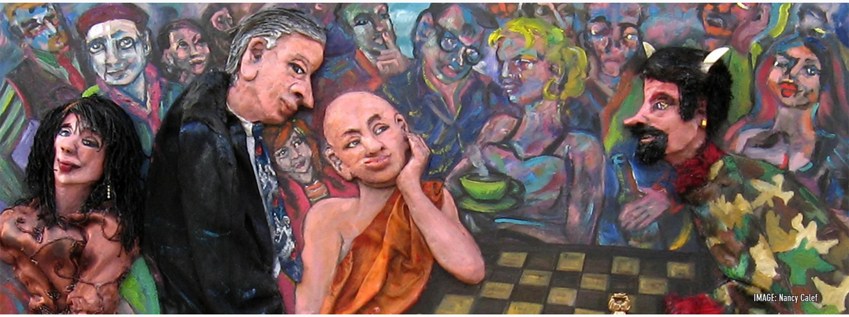
IMAGE: Nancy Calef

Daniel Johnson is a twenty-five-year-old writer from New Jersey. He lives in Cork, Ireland. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Southword, The 2 Meter Review, The Honest Ulsterman, Cork Words,* and *The Citron Review*. He's on Twitter and Instagram @djohnsonwrites and on danieljounsonwriting.wordpress.com.

> "Nothing deserves to be despised more than vice; yet I gave in more and more to vice simply in order not to be despised. If I had not sinned enough to rival other sinners, I used to pretend that I had done things I had not done at all, because I was afraid that innocence would be taken for cowardice and chastity for weakness."
>
> St. Augustine's *Confessions*

I

He put the pen to the paper and willed it to move, tried to imbue it with all the authority he had as a priest of God.

Nothing.

It was late and the study was dark. The rain pelted anxious reminders on the skin of the roof. Only the desk lamp provided the room with a glow of meager light. He took a sip of whiskey and undid his collar, letting it hang loose around his neck. He always wrote his sermons in full garb, cassock and all. With a sigh, he poured more of the amber liquid into the tumbler, and, eyes closed, prayed deeply that some powerful wisdom would flow into his mind, down his arm, into his hand, and be transferred onto the page, as though it was all one big cosmic river. Slowly, he moved the pen, and in his best, most formal handwriting he wrote:

FUCK

II

"Declan, you know Kate Collins fancies you."

"She does not."

"She does. Kate Collins told Mary Donnelly that she fancies you, and Mary Donnelly told me when I saw her at the shop yesterday."

He and Paddy Herlihy were walking home from school in the newfound spring weather. The sun was warm and generous and everything was glowing green. He kicked a rock into the ditch.

Paddy held out a cigarette. "Want one?"

Declan hesitated, then diverted. "No way Kate Collins fancies me."

"She does, boy! I'm not fuckin' lying. Her and her nose both. Ye three can walk to the crossroads together."

"Stop, her nose isn't that big."

"Ah sure, who cares? Just sayin'. Have a fag so."

Paddy held it out closer to his face. "C'mere Deccy, the boys in the pub will laugh us outta the place."

"We can't go to the pub, Paddy."

"Yea, but when we can, they'll kill us if we're too soft for a bit of the leaf, like. And besides, neither Kate Collins or her nose is gonna walk you to the crossroads if she hears you're some soft man afraid of a little fag."

Declan snatched it out of Paddy's outstretched hand. "Gimme a match."

III

On the train to Kilmore he examined the scar tissue. It ran in a deformed track from his pinky finger to an inch above his wrist. The whiteness of his scarred flesh seemed almost luminescent, and at times, he tried to read signs into the markings. Righteousness and petulance gurgled inside him. He often thought of the Stigmata and wished she'd somehow burnt his side or his palms instead.

You will be a true Saint.

He had dreams about fire consuming his hands, yet he knew these flames were powerful and signs of baptism, like the tongues of fire that hovered above the Apostles' heads in that secret room in Jerusalem. Yet sometimes he woke in the dark with crisscrossed, frustrated thoughts of pain and fear and pride and Kate Collins as blood pulsed to his groin.

You will go to Confession in the morning.

IV

He looked down at the page to examine his work. Whiskey-fueled despair was simmering in his chest. Best leave it off till tomorrow. But anger took lurching, awkward steps to the forefront of his mind. He had the following thoughts:

I am a priest of the Catholic Church. If I say this is a sermon then it is. Who are these muddy-booted alcoholics, self-abusers, and adulterers to cast a mean eye on my Words? This is the Word of the Lord.

Then a knock on the rectory door.

V

"Monsignor Callanan will see you now."

He entered the office. It was covered in dark-paneled wood and bookshelves. The Monsignor sat behind his desk and gestured to a seat in front of him.

"Father Sreenan, I understand that you were attentive, studious, and passionate in your seminary studies. You led your Brothers in daily prayers, Eucharistic adoration, and the Holy Rosary, and, from what I've been told, you've a special fervor for our blessed Jesuit Order. Are these details correct?"

"Yes, Monsignor, you are correct."

"Well, Father Sreenan, then you must understand the needs of the Church, and the sober, eager, hard work that is required to nurture her members. You see, there is a vacancy in the parish of Kilmore, a place on the periphery of our diocese which has desperate need for a Soldier of God such as yourself. You will be posted there as soon as possible."

Grim pride for a moment.

A true Saint.

"Win souls for our Lord, Father Sreenan. The people of Kilmore are your people now. Guide them to salvation as the Good Shepherd."

Your people.

Your people.

Your people.

He found some place out of sight and sobbed with heaving sighs. Tears, hot as fire, streamed down his cheeks.

VI

A knock again, a little louder this time.

He stood up and the whiskey sloshed in his gut. The world felt unreal somehow, and the gloom of the rectory felt wide and deep, as if he wasn't in a room at all. He was almost certain that he could walk into the shadows, past the still-packed boxes, and keep going forever in darkness.

He took a few paces towards the door, paused, inhaled deeply, and turned around to hide the whiskey.

Then he went to the door and opened it.

A young woman stood dripping in the doorway.

"Evening, Father, could I come in?"

He was transfixed by the movement of her lips. Her hair hung down below a brimmed hat that overflowed like the clogged gutters on the eaves of a house. He felt outside himself.
He stepped aside, and the woman looked at him, unsure, then moved past him into the rectory. He followed her with his gaze. For a moment she passed between the border of the moonlight and the dim glow of the lamp and was lost in shadow. He thought he was imagining things, that he would open his eyes and wake up hungover, slumped across his desk in a shard of morning light.

But no.

He closed the door.

VII

"Declan, come here."

He stood before her, no more than eight or nine years of age, and she spoke a series of statements that were not supposed to be conversational or congenial, simply orders and facts, expectations and new scaffolding for his life. She held a book out in front of her to show him the cover.

The Lives of the Saints.

"You are to read this every day. You will study its contents and let them color you as if you are fresh water and this book is tea. You will not bring it out of the house and you will keep it safe. The keys to your life are within this book, the Holy Scripture and the Gospels. These are the only things you will read."

She placed it in his outstretched arms.

It was so heavy.

"Go to your room and become it, son."

VIII

Wasn't he their Shepherd? This was his job, to speak to his flock the untethered words brought forth from his mind in prayerful Communion with God, himself a living representative of Christ, a figure upon the altar enacting the ritual that the Lamb of God had presided over at the Last Supper.

The homily must be glorious, profound, biblical.

In truth, though, he didn't much care about how the sheep in the front took it. Mr. and Mrs. McCarthy and their ilk smiled and nodded at anything he said. They were obsequious, the way they tried to catch his ear after Mass. They reminded him of his own mother that way, swooning over every priest they'd ever met.

Yes, Father. Thank you, Father.

What he really wanted was to command those quiet ones towards the back. Their skulls were thick as cowhide. They were so simple and devout that they were under the unconscious illusion that they didn't need him. They thought the religion was canned and in the press. They knew it by rote. Theirs was the sin of complacency and satisfaction, a kind of slinking, disguised pride. But what is the Church without a priest, the strong arm of the vicar of Christ? Fuck them if they thought they'd the Holy Roman religion squared away. They had nothing figured.

Ye cannot confess to the cows, ye dirty fuckers.

Yes, he was drunk.

IX

Sermon Notes on *The Lives of the Saints* — Deaths

1. St. Stephen
    - Struck with rocks until he ceased to breathe
2. St. Bartholomew
    - Flayed alive
    - Died of his wounds, probably
3. St. Dymphna
    - Loved the unlovely
    - Was beheaded by own father
4. St. Cassian
    - Faithful in obscurity
    - "Asked his students to strike more forcefully with their penknives so he might meet God more swiftly"
5. St. Sebastian
    - Was tied to a tree and punctured with many arrows
    - Recovered
    - Later, clubbed to death
        - Body was dumped in the Roman sewer
    - Expectations fulfilled
6. St. Lawrence
    - An idealistic dream
    - Was held over a grill of open flames and burnt to death
    - "O Saintliness that is brought in death by fire!"

Such are the sacrifices we must make for God, you heretical half-heathen bastards. You bring shame to Our Lord the way you go about town keeping these nasty little secrets deep in your pockets. You will bring them to me and with my right hand that knows the pain of Christ and the pain of Hell, I will dole out penance for you to do right by God.

The Sacrament of Confession will be offered every Sunday and Thursday from 6 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

X

"How are you settling in, Father?"

The woman spoke nervously. He realized now how cluttered the rectory was. She stood near his desk. There was just a narrow pathway from the door, no room for even a chair.
A niggling thought swam to the surface of his mind.

Don't get my papers wet.

The woman stood there dripping and awkward. She looked around the room, looked down at the desk.

"You're writing, Father?"

"Yes."

The sound of his own voice startled him. He hadn't felt like he'd made a choice to answer her. He felt far away. The young woman's presence spooked him. He was alone and she was some sourceless noise made in the freakish shadows outside himself.

The woman looked back to the desk. For a moment her eyes caught on something, just long enough to be perceptible. She tried to look elsewhere, but he'd seen.

She'd noticed the *F U C K.*

XI

"Hello, Kate."

"Hi, Declan."

"Would you like to walk down the road?"

"To the crossroads maybe?"

"Sure, yea, that'd be grand."

They walked in the golden spring. He swatted away tiny clouds of mayflies and she touched his arm so gently. She smiled at the things he said, even dumb things, awkward things, and it was like he was hardly walking at all but levitating, moving in a space benevolently governed by the altruistic curvature of her lips and the whiteness of her teeth.

“What do you think you’d like to be when you’re older?” he asked.

“A doctor for animals, I think. I hate it when the lambs get sick.”

He loved her in that moment.

I know where power comes from.

I am virgin and pure.

I pray the Holy Rosary every day.

I am weak.

I live for my mother.

I have a destiny, preordained.

I hold malice and the desire for power veiled thinly within my heart.

I only wish to win souls for God.

I am scarred, on my right hand, by my mother.

I exist within God.

I am God himself.

XIII

“Declan Sreenan, wake up!”

His mother was standing over him in the darkness holding a lump of something. He sat up, rubbing sleep from his eyes, and she threw it at him.

His school clothes.

“For the sake of bleeding Jesus Christ on the Cross, which hand did you smoke them with?”

Something dropped heavy in his stomach. Panic. He answered her desperately.

“No, I didn’t.”

She grabbed him by the hair and dragged him out of bed half naked. She pulled hard and he was terrified by her strength. She led him begging and pleading down the hall to the sitting room and threw him on the ground next to the fire. It was lit and crackling, and there was a bucket of water next to the grate.

“Declan Augustine Sreenan, I asked you which hand you smoked them with.”

She towered over him, casting a long, thin shadow. She looked sharp, like a spear.

“I only had one. Only one!”

“You will not keep secrets from me, son.”

There was execution in her voice, the tightening of a hangman’s knot, the finality of a guillotine, and there was an intense righteousness in the way she uttered son.

“Mother, I’m sorry.”

“Lying, deceit, disobedience, lack of faith! Those degenerate vices are for old, stupid men who rot away in stinking pubs to drink and smoke their Godless lives away.”

She lunged and seized his arm, dragging him towards the fire. She spoke now in a dutiful tone, fiercely calm and firm.

“Hell is a lake of fire. A place where vice rules your soul and you pay for it with unbearable pain.”

She thrust his hand over the flames.

“I have such plans for you, Declan. You will be a great man one day. You will be no lesser than a true Saint.”

He cried out at the heat of the fire.

“This is only a fraction of the pain of Hellfire. Go and pray on this when you next see the burn of a cigarette. Will you disobey me again?”

"No! I promise, no!"

"No, you will not."

She held his arm down even closer to the flames and he felt it sear his flesh. He screamed in agony. Then she took his arm and dunked it violently in the water. She left him sobbing on the floor, hand submerged in the bucket.

"Go to bed," his mother said, "You will go to Confession in the morning."

XIV

Feeling returned. He felt indignant. He had the following thoughts:

How dare she read my writings! Who is this woman? What business does she have in my house? Am I not a disciple of God? I'm not some farmer she might call around to for tea and a fucking chat, am I? She stands there as if I owe her something. Does the sheep ask questions of the Shepherd? How much time has passed since she came through the door? I am marked by God. I am made well balanced as a sword by God. I am authorized by Him.

"Father, I wonder if I might ask—"

"Excuse me, Miss—?"

"Ms. O'Neil."

"O'Neil. Yes. Excuse me, Miss O'Neil, you. . . ." He recalibrated, began again, and spoke dutifully, lecturing. "Miss O'Neil, this is the house of God, an extension of the Church. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, Father, your home. And I—"

"No, Miss O'Neil. God's home."

"Yes, Father, God's home."

"When you come to the house of God, do you bless yourself?"

"I do, Father, yes."

He turned suddenly, gesturing towards the door. "I did not see you bless yourself when you stepped across the threshold there."

"I must have forgotten. My apologies, Father. I'd no intention—"

"Intention. There is a word I'd like to dwell on, Miss O'Neil. What is your intention coming to God's house at this hour to interrupt me at my study?"
He stepped towards her. He could see her flustered eyes flash in the gloom as the beginnings of tears caught the lamplight.

"Well, I, uhm, Father, I wanted to seek your advice on something myself and my mother—"

"Mother?"

"Yes, Father, my mother and I—"

"Miss O'Neil, I am going to stop you there. I am not sent to Kilmore to be counselor, schoolmaster or neighbor. I am no more a therapist than I am a billy goat. I am here to save my parishioners' immortal souls."

"Oh, y-yes, Father, I never meant you were a goat."

"I never said you said that, Miss O'Neil." He could see tears drop from the brims of her eyes, little winking crystals.

"No, eh, you didn't. I'd better leave you go, Father. I'm sorry for intruding."

"That's alright, Miss O'Neil."

She stepped towards the door. He moved to the side to let her go, and as she passed, he felt her wetness soak into his shirt, smelled the scent of her hair through the rain soak. He noticed the gleam of the moonlight off the whiteness in her nervous parting smile as she turned and stood in the doorway.

Kate Collins stood too, alone near the crossroads still. She would stand there for the rest of his life, and he knew in his dreams he'd run, on some inverted country road, to meet her, a cigarette lit in his right hand, to kiss her lips and make love to her in some darkening field and have beautiful children whom he would love. Yes, he would love them greatly. Love them violently. Love them enough, even, to burn the flesh of their bodies.

These would be his dreams, and dreams they would remain.

"Father Sreenan, I—"

"Will see you in Confession tomorrow."

"Yes, Father. I will see you in Confession tomorrow."