

BLESS ME, FATHER

PENANCE WITH A PUNCHLINE!

By TA Powell

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BLESS ME, FATHER

By T.A. Powell

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 MEN, 6 WOMEN)

- FATHER PAT (M) Country priest (*72 lines*)
- JOHN PAUL FITZPATRICK (M) Janitor, nickname FITZ (*327 lines*)
- FARRIS O'MALLEY (M) Young man in love (*48 lines*)
- MRS. BEULAH RAVENSCROFT (F) . Vicarage housekeeper (*44 lines*)
- ROBERTA WHEELER (F)..... Butcher's wife (*58 lines*)
- SHANNON BITTERWAHL (F) Young female (*34 lines*)
- GERMAINE LAWLER (F)..... Village harlot (*61 lines*)
- WIDOW DELANEY (F) FITZ's love interest (*77 lines*)
- IRISH ANGEL (F)..... HOBART's lover (*8 lines*)

SYNOPSIS

A country priest named Father Pat is rehearsing his Christmas sermon when he suddenly takes ill from eating spoils from the church kitchen's fridge - a three week old liver mousse pâté. After he voids himself of the mousse in the confessional box, the housekeeper harangues the janitor, instructing Fitz to clean up the mess and put up a sign postponing confessions for another week. The overzealous vicarage housekeeper, in a hurry to make her way to market to gossip and get soda crackers for the ailing priest, accidentally traps the janitor inside the confessional box. To make matters worse, there is a rumor being spread that the pope's European tour will bring him remarkably close to the small village church and that there is an off-chance that the Holy Father himself will be there to hear confession that very afternoon!

With bucket and mop in hand, the elderly janitor sets out to clean things up a bit. Rumors quickly fly down at the butcher's shop that the pope is filling in for the ailing priest, and parishioners make haste to have their confessions heard by the Holy Father. The janitor, finally frustrated from continually trying to declare himself unworthy of hearing another's confession, decides to declare war on the idiots that continue to confess! The janitor begins doling out penance with a punchline, as he cleans up a lot more than mousse!

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ACT ONE, SCENE 1

Lights up on the vestibule of an Irish country church decorated for the Christmas holidays. FATHER PAT is a very animated, portly, self-absorbed priest, who is more interested in filling his coffers than filling his pews. When the curtain comes up, he is rehearsing his sermon at the pulpit while FITZ, the faithful janitor, is replacing missals and sweeping the aisles. They are getting ready for afternoon confession. FATHER PAT is in either the traditional black cassock or a black on black shirt and pants with a Roman collar. FITZ is an older gentleman in overalls with a thermal shirt underneath, wearing a newsboy cap on his head, and his old overcoat is tossed over the back of a pew.

FATHER PAT: (*Erases something from his sermon. Clears his throat.*) Listen to this, Fitz. Tell me if it hits a homerun or if I need to beef it up a bit. (*FITZ stops and poses with his head resting on his arms, holding the top of the broom. FATHER PAT takes a friendly pose, leaning over the edge of the pulpit to make contact with his pretend audience.*)

“And so, my fellow parishioners...in closing, I’d just like to send you on yer way with one final thought. The good Lord has a job for each one of us to do. Never mind how small or insignificant you might feel it to be. We don’t all get to be the pope, ya know! (*Chortles.*) Some days, a simple kindness is all that the Almighty asks of us. Some days, he asks a great deal, and on others, a great deal more. And then there will come that one day when He will ask for everything you’ve got! And you better be ready to listen and step up to the plate! I’m not talking about the buffet. He doesn’t want yer petty excuses or yer liver mousse! He wants to know what you’re going to do about yer life and how you’re going to clean up yer own mess! So you better have an answer, because He’ll give as well as He gets! And some days, it’s a swift kick in the arse! It can be a hell of a bumpy ride...or a heavenly crossing! Only you can decide how yer soul will travel, first class or stand by! Confession lightens the soul of unnecessary baggage! Either way, if you pack light, you’ll travel quicker!” (*Pauses and picks up the papers, thinking.*)

Hmmm. Not sure if I should leave that in...that may not be what you’re wanting, depending on yer traveling destination, as it were, eh, Fitz? (*Chortles.*) Uh...well, continuing then...

“As me dear old mum, God rest her soul, used to say, ‘Everyone’s got a job to do! The man should build the house with strength

and honor. The woman should clean the house with honesty and respect. The child should fill the house with laughter and love. The Almighty should bless the house, if he finds it worthy! Everything else is garbage and should be tossed out. Garbage is garbage and that's for the pick-up man to deal with, now isn't it?" (*Sighs.*)

Then I thought I'd pause here, just like this for a minute. With me arm dangling just a bit off the side, casual-like. For effect! What do ya think, Fitz? Makes a hell of a statement, doesn't it? I thought the "kick in the arse" part really gave it some meat.

FITZ: Yer mum really talked like that?

FATHER PAT: Huh? How the hell should I know?

FITZ: Wee bit of a potty mouth, eh?

FATHER PAT: (*Chortles first.*) Potty mouth? Ha! She swore like a drunken sailor. Oh...about the kicking arse thing? No, she never said that as far as I know... (*Chortles.*) She was always a bit of a nag and I was never much of a listener. Blocked most of her ramblings out. Humph. (*Pauses as if remembering.*) Was a nice ending, though, don't ya think? Gives it that, "I'm one of you," kind of touch! You know...all that fluffy family dynamic psychology crap they shove down yer throat at sensitivity training!

FITZ: You took a class on that?

FATHER PAT: Ya can tell, right? (*Looks indignant at FITZ's silence, then looks at FITZ with frustration. FITZ smirks a bit.*) What? Yer right! I never thought about the fact that I might be becoming...too sensitive. Don't want to be seen as a patsy, now do we? Buck up a bit! Right! The kick arse thing stays in! Rather clever plug for confession, too, eh? Monsignor Farley's been on my back again. Numbers were down this month. (*Humph.*) Not happy about that.

FITZ: Smaller turnout of late. Mentioning yer mum is a mite touching. Bit of a pinch on the women's lib thing though, what with the woman cleaning the house reference. Women's Auxiliary Guild will take exception to that, don't ya think?

FATHER PAT: Pish! Only the younger ones. And they don't exactly fill the coffers, now do they? HA! Not enough fundraising or charity work out of them! They're too busy worrying about spreading hips and spreading rumors to focus on the real business of the church.

FITZ: Real business?

FATHER PAT: Yes, you know. Paying the mortgage, keeping the lights on...fixing the roof. That sort of thing.

FITZ: Spreading rumors seems to take precedence over spreading the Word these days, eh?

- FATHER PAT:** S'pose so. I don't waste my time listening to them. Chattering all the time, like a flock of magpies!
- FITZ:** But sometimes there's a small bit of truth to be found buried amongst the lies. Shouldn't you at the very least be listening?
- FATHER PAT:** What? To rumors?
- FITZ:** Yes. Then you might be able to discern the difference and be a bit more helpful. Teach them to occupy their time with something else more...charitable.
- FATHER PAT:** Good luck! They can't help themselves, Fitz! It's a sport for them...born to it, they are. Speaking of which, have you seen Mrs. Ravenscroft about this morning? Missed my usual kippers and toast at breakfast. Long-winded call from Monsignor Farley, I'm afraid. Seems the pope's European tour puts him remarkably close to us. Farley thinks they'll make an exception from schedule to pass our way. The Monsignor fancies himself important enough to warrant an audience with the pope. Doddering old fool.
- FITZ:** The pope?
- FATHER PAT:** No, heavens no. Monsignor Farley! Spent half the morning spouting the virtues of being the largest congregation in the county...the largest flock...blah blah...building funds...blah blah blah. Always wanting to compare bottom lines. It's enough to make me want to retch!
- FITZ:** If the pope's to grace us with a visit, I'll get to work polishing the brasses. Will you be canceling confession this afternoon, then? (*Goes to get supplies, but is stopped by FATHER PAT.*)
- FATHER PAT:** What? On a rumor? Not hardly. There's not that much truth to be found in rumors! The Pope would never stray this far off the path with schedules to be met. Don't know how these rumors get started. Some idiot will have the whole church atwitter with such nonsense. No. I'm certain he'll brush on through, if he hasn't already. Could be the whole tour's a farce, ya know? Farley's been known to tip the chalice a bit! He gets his digs in though. District tithing is down.
- FITZ:** Confession still on, then?
- FATHER PAT:** Right! Confession is a go at four o'clock! It should be a decent crowd, if they're not out scouring the countryside for the popemobile.
- FITZ:** For what? A drive-by confession?
- FATHER PAT:** Ha! Good one, Fitz.
- FITZ:** Saturdays are always the payoff for Friday's frivolities, eh?
- FATHER PAT:** Keep 'em sorry, but keep 'em coming back, I always say. Ha ha! Absolving them of their sins is one thing; teaching them not to commit them again is a bloody nightmare. But then: no crime, no time...in the pews, I always say. Can't run a proper church without a proper crowd, now can you? Father forgive

them for they know not what they do...and that keeps me in business! Nothing ever got built without a little guilt, I always say.

FITZ: So you just pat their wrists and cross yer fingers for results?

FATHER PAT: Beats crossing yer eyes over empty ledgers at bill-paying time! Oh, c'mon, Fitz! Don't be so hard on me. If the good Lord can forgive them, surely you can. Ha! Must remember that one for the Christmas party!

FITZ: But they'll never learn if you don't teach them!

FATHER PAT: *(Stops to write his joke down. Looks up to see the frown on FITZ's face.)* Fitz, don't be such a dolt. They're not supposed to learn. We're all naturally flawed creatures. Thank God. Literally, or I'd be out of a job, and I'm much too old to learn new tricks!

FITZ: We're rather like two peas, then, eh? You and I, both cleaning up messes.

FATHER PAT: Flawed creatures leave behind an awful lot of crap, don't they, Fitz?

FITZ: Aye. That seems to be the currency of our trade!

FATHER PAT: What? Crap? Ha! Never thought of it that way, Fitz. Yes...big creatures leave big piles. *(Chortles.)* You and I will never be out of a job, Fitz!

FITZ: And creatures of habit tend to leave the same big piles over and over and over!

FATHER PAT: That's what keeps them coming back. Hedging their bets. Eternity around a campfire is not all s'mores and Kumbaya! *(Chortles.)* I need to write that down. *(Chortles again.)* Be a hit at the charity talent show. Besides...a good guilt trip away from the Church every now and then brings home a bag full of financial goodies for us, I always say. *(Chortles.)* That's how it's done, Fitz. Never mind this global awareness tripe. Just bring Revelations to their doorsteps and they'll spill their guts, along with their purses, every time! You can run from the Church, but you can't hide from God! *(Picks up a pencil. Licks the tip and scrawls something down on the back of his sermon.)* Hmm...I must remember to write that one down, too. Use that in next week's sermon. You really have to have yer thumb on the pulse of yer parish to be able to push the right buttons! There's a piss-load of profits in guilt and shame if you work 'em right, Fitz. Mark my word. One good adulterous scandal in a modest-sized church can re-roof the vicarage or put an AGA in the kitchen!

FITZ: One adulterous affair?

FATHER PAT: If it's a real humdinger, it will be a new AGA, not refurbished! Yes. A red one, preferably. Always been partial to red. S'pose that's why I want to be a cardinal. *(Chortles.)* Get it, Fitz? Red? Cardinal? Umm. Yes, well. Where is that housekeeper of mine? I'm famished. Had to pick at the nasty

leftovers in the vicarage fridge. You'd think Mrs. Hogan would have learned to make a proper liver mousse pâté after all these years.

FITZ: Not...the liver mousse pâté from the Guild's meeting?

FATHER PAT: S'pose so... (*Gathers his papers.*) Mum made a good pâté, as I recall. Great cook! Old school, she was, about such things. Old school 'bout everything, come to think of it. Hmmm. Perhaps I should have been a better listener. Old school, Fitz! We'd be a sight better if we went back to those days, eh? She always said we seem more confused by choices these days than comforted by them.

FITZ: Can't argue with her on that one.

FATHER PAT: I'm sure she was referring to the fairer sex! Men like us don't have issues with multiple choices...eh?

FITZ: (*Pauses to ponder.*) You mean like blonde, brunette, or red head? Ha! Thanks for the leg up on the part about the pick-up man. We janitors don't get the respect we deserve.

FATHER PAT: Pick-up man? Oh yes, certainly, Fitz. Only don't think of yerself as just a janitor. Think of yerself as a sanitation engineer. Sounds better. Anyway...least I can do. Not much glory in cleaning up other people's messes; might as well get a bit of glory out of yer title.

FITZ: Not much for titles. There's a certain amount of glory in the job though, if you do it well! I like a clean slate, Father. It makes me happy to set things proper. It's like you said, no job too small or insignificant. We can't all be the pope! The good Lord's give me a job...and I'll do it to the best of me ability!

FATHER PAT: Aye. You're a humble soul, Fitz, God love ya. I can't do it! I'm not a prissy man...I just don't like dealing with other people's dirt. I can barely deal with my own! (*Chortles.*) That's why I have you and Mrs. Ravenscroft to clean up after me. (*Climbs down from the pulpit.*)

FITZ: Aye...that ya do.

FATHER PAT: (*Popping his P's.*) So, we're agreed then that the purpose of penance is to reduce the propensity of piles?

FITZ: Aye...that's an awful lot of P's and piles! (*FATHER PAT grunts in agreement and FITZ mumbles under his breath.*) Ya don't like cleaning it up, that's for sure. But ya don't mind sweeping under the rug, either. That's why it just keeps piling up about here! I doubt the pope himself would be able to clean up all the messes left festering around this place!

FATHER PAT: What was that?

FITZ: If I were Pope for a day...

BEULAH RAVENSCROFT is the housekeeper for both the church and the vicarage. She bustles in, clad in a blouse, skirt, and apron

and with her hair pinned up, to inform the priest that his lunch is ready.

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: (*Out of breath.*) Father? Father Pat?

FATHER PAT: That you, Mrs. Ravenscroft?

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: Here ye are. Been turning the vicarage upside down looking for ya. Hello to ya, Fitz. Lunch is served. C'mon now. I'll not be heating it up again. Tough as shoe leather it'll be if I do. Not to mention me whole kitchen could go up in smoke! The old AGA's on her last legs, same as me! 'Bout to give out! You can add that to yer holiday wish list, Father! (*FATHER PAT takes out his pencil stub and jots it down.*)

FITZ: So... (*Looks slyly at FATHER PAT and winks.*) You'll be needing a new stove by year's end, eh, Mrs. Ravenscroft?

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: Long before that or it'll be the end of suppers and heat altogether for ya both, I'm afraid!

FATHER PAT: There ya have it, Fitz! Like I always say. What we need now is a one humdinger of a scandalous love affair! Apparently before the week's out, from Mrs. Ravenscroft's report!

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: Father Pat! I'm a happily married woman!

FATHER PAT: Not for you, Beulah, for God's sake. For me!

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: For you? But you're a man of the cloth! Have ye lost yer mind?

FATHER PAT: No... (*Groans.*) But I think I'm about to loose a bit of mousse!

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: What mousse?

FITZ: The one in the kitchen.

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: There's a mousse in the kitchen? Good Lord, and we've the pope coming this afternoon! Don't just stand there, Fitz. Do something or there'll be droppings everywhere! Oh, and I just mopped the floors! Call the butcher. He'll know what to do.

FITZ: About the mousse?

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: (*Howling and flailing her arms about.*) Yes... catch him! Clean him! Cook him! Just do something!

FATHER PAT: Droppings? Oooohhh.

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: Yes! And be quick about it before he makes another pile in there! (*Picks her apron up symbolically.*)

FITZ: I believe he's about to make a pile in here. (*Points to FATHER PAT.*)

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: Let's off to the house with ya, then. (*Moves towards FATHER PAT to aid him.*) I was at the butcher's shop this morning. Is it true, Fitz? Is the Holy Father stopping by for tea this afternoon? I'll be needing to pull out the good silver, then. Fitz, get rid of the mousse! I'll not step foot back in that kitchen till the foul thing is gone!

FATHER PAT: That's (*Points to MRS. RAVENSCROFT.*) how the rumors get started, Fitz! Beulah and the butcher's wife! Veal cutlets and venial sin all served up with gravy and new potatoes! Argh. That woman gives me a pain in the...argh. (*Groans and holds his belly.*)

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: C'mon, Father Pat. (*Tries to hold him up by the arm.*) Care for a spot of lunch, Fitz? I've plenty for two.

FATHER PAT: Lunch? Argh...

FITZ: Thank ya just the same, Beulah, but I've brung me own bag today.

FATHER PAT: Bag? I may be needing... Mrs. Ravenscroft? (*Starts to move slowly towards the confessional box.*) I'm feeling a bit peckish. Perhaps just a bit of clear broth for lunch. (*Gets near the confessional door.*) I suddenly don't feel quite like myself. Maybe I should lie down for a wee bit before confession. (*Hiccups.*) Ooh. I seem to be burping back some of Mrs. Hogan's liver mousse and it didn't taste that well the first trip down.

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: Mrs. Hogan's mousse? She's been off on holiday to visit her sister in Derry since the Guild's last potluck three weeks ago! Don't tell me she forgot to take her casserole dish home with her?

FATHER PAT: Did you say...three weeks? Oohhhhh... (*Covers his mouth and swings his head into the confessional box, groaning, then runs from the sanctuary mimicking vomiting sounds.*)

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: Ahhh! Not the confessional! I just had the upholstery cleaned! Oooh! And me best walking shoes, too! Fitz? Clean up this mess and I'll get his holiness over to the vicarage loo! Father? Oh...not on the carpet! I just had it cleaned! Father...in the waste can! The waste ca... Oh...not that! That's an umbrella stand, for God's sake! Fitz! You better pray it doesn't rain today!

FITZ: (*Averts his eyes and scrunches up his face. Looks up at the altar as though talking to God. Walks over to the side and looks down. Squirms.*) Father Pat was right! Flawed creatures leave big piles!

BLACKOUT.

ACT ONE, SCENE 2

Lights up on the church as FITZ brings in a mop, bucket and some rags. A "Postponed" sign is leaning against the bucket on the floor. MRS. RAVENSCROFT enters with her hat, jacket and purse on her arm, preparing to leave. The confessional boxes are against the wall at this point. When MRS. RAVENSCROFT closes the door

accidentally as she leaves, the lights dim low as if the door closing on FITZ takes out the light. In the low lighting, the confessional wagon turns so the three-sided open end is to the audience. Audience's visual is of all three boxes. Center box is for FITZ. Sliding window doors are on either side, closed at this point.

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: *(Sets down her purse to put on her coat.)*

Fitz? His imminence is still driving the porcelain bus, as it were, so I'll be off to the market to pick up some seltzer and soda crackers. Thanks for cleaning things up a mite. I get terrible sick breathing in that foul odor. Thank God he missed kippers this morning! What a stench that would have made, eh? I'd be grateful if you'd clean out the confessional for me. Oh, before I forget. Father wants ya to post the sign about confession being cancelled this afternoon. There's no sin bad enough that can't be waiting a day or two to pardon! I'll be back to check on him. *(Turns to leave without her purse.)* Will ya be needing anything from town? I can bring it by when I come back.

FITZ: How bout the pope, then? Janitoring's too much glory for just one man to handle! I'd be more than glad to trade places with him today.

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: Trade places with the pope? And have his Holiness cleaning up after Father Pat? You're a dodgy one all right, Fitz! Don't forget...put out yer sign or you'll have half the county tracking up the church with this muck. If I see the pope, I'll give him leave to take the afternoon off. Tell him you can handle things about here for him! *(She smiles and shakes her head.)* Don't forget the sign!

FITZ: *(Salutes with his hand.)* From one John Paul to another... You tell the pope that Fitz is on duty! I'll set things proper for him. *(Chuckles to himself.)* I'll just want to finish cleaning out the confessional first, before a stain sets in.

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: All right, then. I'll be off.

She exits. FITZ grabs a pile of rags and the bucket and goes into the confessional.

FITZ: Agh. How the devil did he get it all the way in the corner? It's seeped under the other side. Oh, what a mess he's left me to clean up!

He bends over and MRS. RAVENSCROFT comes back through to gather up her purse off the front pew, bumping the bucket so that she knocks the sign face down and closes the door on the center confessional box. Lights start to dim slowly.

MRS. RAVENSCROFT: Forgot to tell ya...the lock on the confessional box's a bit sticky. You'll be wanting some Three In One oil for that. (*Looks around.*) Fitz? Want me to pick some up? Never mind ya, then...I'll just round it up meself and bring it back after a bit. He won't need it right away, what with confessions cancelled and all.

MRS. RAVENSCROFT exits, whistling a tune. Then the doorknob jiggles. Lights dim as low as possible as the confessional wagon is moved into center stage and pin spots come up on box interiors.

FITZ: (*FITZ bends over to pick up rags and tosses them into the bucket, then reaches for the door.*) Beulah? (*Jiggles doorknob.*) Mrs. Ravenscroft? Halloo? This is not funny! What the devil's wrong with this door? Beulah! (*Pauses to listen to the silence. A woman in her fifties enters the sanctuary wearing a scarf and a pair of sunglasses. She tips her glasses down to see if the place is empty, then goes to the confessional box on stage right and hears FITZ speaking.*) No use sneaking around out there! I hear ya. Oh, for the love of God...open that door this instant! (*She opens the door and then quickly kneels down. FITZ perks up his head and listens intently when he hears a noise inside the other confessional.*) What took you so long, woman? You confessed in private not moments ago that you couldn't deal with this kind of mess alone. It was too much for ya...wanted the pope to handle it, did ya now? (*Woman pulls out her hanky and nods her head shamefully.*) Patronizing yer way into me graces. (*Woman shakes her head in earnest.*) You think you're disgusted by all this? (*Woman nods her head again.*) It's enough to make meself heave at the stench coming up from the other side of this wall. You have no shame for what you've done! (*Woman gasps.*) Well? C'mon with ya now. What have ya to say for yerself, woman?

GERMAINE: Uh...uh...I'm sorry?

FITZ: That's it? Ya think the Almighty will forgive ya for leaving me with this tripe? (*Woman puts her hands together, as if to pray.*) Ya think I'll be inclined to forgive ya after this? Remember...you came to me for help! (*Woman nods.*) I never complain about having to clean up most messes...but this is definitely above and beyond the call of duty! (*Woman nods her head in agreement.*) No one in their right mind would ever have the gall to stick somebody else with this kind of mess to shovel out without so much as a thank you or offering of gratitude! It's enough to make me want to hurl! There'll be some fancy footwork for ya to be performing for yer penance after this little stunt of yers! Speak up, woman! And I hope ya brought the Three In One with ya.

(*Woman makes the sign of the cross.*) No Three In One...and we're both stuck in this hell for longer than either of us care to be! So...out with ya. What have ya to say about that? (*Confessional window slides open slowly.*)

GERMAINE: (*Timidly.*) Bless me, Father...for I have sinned. It has been...

FITZ: What? Oh, my... No! You mustn't! I'm not Father Pat!

GERMAINE: No need confessing to me. I wouldn't know the vicar's name. It's been a long time since I've stepped through these doors.

FITZ: Father Pat's not available.

GERMAINE: Who's Father Pat? Where is the vicar?

FITZ: He's...ah... (*Hesitates.*) Driving a bus. Yes...terrible mishap. He had an accident with a three week old mouse.

GERMAINE: Argh. That's terrible.

FITZ: Yes. It upset him, so he had to leave the church.

GERMAINE: Left the collar behind, eh? (*Humph.*) Well, then. Who is it that's sitting in his chair now?

FITZ: It's me. John Paul Fi...

GERMAINE: Ohhh... Your Holiness! Ah! I thought it was just a rumor. Was down at the butcher's shop this morning. They've a special on veal cutlets, you know. Overheard Beulah talking about ya and thought it was a sign! I said to meself, if it be the Almighty's wish that I finally come back to the fold, may it be the Pope himself to hear me confession.

FITZ: No, you don't understand! I can't hear yer confession! I don't know what to say, I'm not allowed to listen to another...

GERMAINE: Word! I don't blame you. Everything you said a moment ago is true. It was patronizing of me to make a fleece with the Lord. You just sit tight and let me get through this. It's taken me almost forty years to get up me courage.

FITZ: Forty years or naught, I can't hear yer confession because I can't forgive yer sins.

GERMAINE: I know! I know. (*Sighs.*) Only the Almighty can truly forgive me. I'll not be blaming ya! I can't forgive meself, either. But there'll be no forgiving me until I come clean and learn to clean up me own messes! That's what you said. And you were right! 'Tis a nasty bucket of tripe I've been hauling around with me for far too many years. I need to get this off me chest or there'll be no saving my soul! I'll be doomed to the eternal fires for sure. Please indulge me, yer Holiness! If I don't confess to you...I may never have the nerve to try again and be damned forever! Hallo? (*FITZ sits in silence.*) Yer Holiness?

FITZ: Damned forever, you say? (*Pauses to think.*) That's an awful lot of s'more-ing, I'm thinking.

GERMAINE: Beggin yer pardon? Did you say an awful lot of whoring?

FITZ: (*Sighs.*) Did I?

GERMAINE: Wow! You really are good. I never even told you...

FITZ: Let's make a deal. (*Woman nods.*) How 'bout you forget about thinking I'm the Pope and just call me John Paul, and we'll talk as though we were just a couple of lost souls trying to find our way through life together?

GERMAINE: Aye. I see now that there was a reason God chose ya for this kind of work, Yer Holi... Sorry. Me new best friend, John Paul. You've a kind heart and a clear sense of justice, I'm thinking.

FITZ: Ya haven't heard me penance for ya yet!

GERMAINE: Aye. But you haven't heard me confession, neither. 'Tis you that may do the greater suffering after all!

FITZ: (*Chuckles.*) Ha...a sinner with a sense of humor! All right, then. Let's have a go at saving yer soul. Friend to friend.

GERMAINE: I'm a bit rusty. May I start at the beginning again? It's easier to remember if I start there.

FITZ: Feel free... (*Toys with the doorknob.*) I'm a captive audience!

GERMAINE: Bless me, Father, I mean, John Paul. It's been... (*Gets off track.*) Ya said we could just chat as friends?

FITZ: It'd be more comfortable...for us both. Trust me.

GERMAINE: It's been...uh. It's been...

FITZ: What's the problem?

GERMAINE: It's been...so long since I've been to confession, I can't even remember the rest of the prayer.

FITZ: Then skip the prayer and let's get right to the meat of the thing!

GERMAINE: Right. Like a veal cutlet! Would ya be wanting me to start with '60, then?

FITZ: Sixty what?

GERMAINE: You know...1960-something! Sex, drugs...rock and roll! That sort of thing.

FITZ: How 'bout we all move a little forward from that?

GERMAINE: Certainly, yer Imminence... The '70s, then!

FITZ: '70s?

GERMAINE: Smashing good times! Free love and all that. (*Giggles.*) I was just a wee girl of seventeen when I had me first real beau...

FITZ: How old are ye now? (*Pauses and holds up his fingers ready to count.*) If ya don't mind me asking? One friend to another...as it were.

GERMAINE: Fifty-five and fit as a fiddle.

FITZ: (*FITZ does the adding on his fingers and looks deflated.*) How 'bout we skip the earlier years and move straight ahead? Me health's not that good.

GERMAINE: Ah, yes! Well, that would be...hmmm. Where was I?

FITZ: The '80s! (*Sighs heavily.*)

GERMAINE: That was a decade to remember! Big hair...big bands...big... Oh. Beggin yer pardon, yer Holiness.

FITZ: John Paul! Just...John Paul.

GERMAINE: Gotcha! John Paul "The Just"! On to the '80s, then. Sex, lies and video tapes! That covers it in a nutshell, eh, yer Holiness? That's the decade things really started to fall apart with me. I married three different men.

FITZ: Not at the same time, I hope!

GERMAINE: Aye. Good one! A pontiff with a punch line! 'Course not. I married all three separately...for separate reasons.

FITZ: I'm almost afraid to ask why...so I won't. Eighties were sex, lies and video tapes...and the '90s, then?

GERMAINE: Ah! The '90s? That's when they invented the DVD! (*Humph.*) You have no idea the clarity...

FITZ: Dear God, woman. I'll be a dead man before we reach the millennium! Not even the pope should be forced to survive such confessions!

GERMAINE: That's why today had to be the day and you had to be the one. I can't go on like this.

FITZ: Then don't!

GERMAINE: You mean...just quit...having sex all together?

FITZ: Well...it depends. Are ye married?

GERMAINE: Yes.

FITZ: And yer husband's not happy with such an active sex life?

GERMAINE: If he knew about it, he wouldn't be!

FITZ: Dear God!

GERMAINE: That's me sin, John Paul. The sin of promiscuity. Me name's Germaine Lawler but folks tend to call me...Never Germaine and Quite Lawless! I'm a scarlet woman, yer Grace. I can't help but appreciate a pretty man's arse...with me hands!

FITZ: Couldn't you just appreciate it from afar...with just yer eyes? No, never mind. That's still a sin, isn't it?

GERMAINE: Yer askin me? I can't help meself! I covet me neighbor's...bum...several times a month!

FITZ: Could I put you on hold for a moment? (*Calmly slides the screen closed and panics once it's shut.*)

GERMAINE: Aye. Certainly has been a long time...things have really changed!

FITZ: (*Hyperventilating.*) I can't do this! (*Tries the doorknob again. Checks the other window screen and starts to panic. Looks up toward God.*) I was only trying to clean up a little...mousse. I'm trapped. Tell me what to do, Lord! (*Silence for a moment, while he listens intently.*) Okay... Well, then...send me a sign, will ya? And hurry! It stinks in here something fierce! (*Tapping comes at*

the window screen.) That was quick! (Looks all around him for the source of the noise, thinking its God.) What is it you want me to do, Lord?

GERMAINE: *(Whispers into the screen.) Are ya ready? (FITZ nods his head "yes".) I want you to open the window, John Paul.*

FITZ: Me too! Oh... Yes, yer Heavenly Father, right away. Well, I'll be...damned. So this is how this works!

GERMAINE: *(Whispers again.) John Paul?*

FITZ: Yesss? *(Looks around.)*

GERMAINE: I'm ready to hear me penance now!

FITZ: Yer penance? Oh, aye. It's you. Forgot about ya for a minute there. Hmmm. Coveting yer neighbor's, uh... Well, coveting, while a very real sin, is not the root of yer troubles. Yer real trouble, as I see it, is boredom.

GERMAINE: Boredom? I don't recall that as being one of the seven deadly sins. What kind of sin is it?

FITZ: The most dangerous kind, I'm thinking!

GERMAINE: What do ya mean?

FITZ: You love yer husband, right?

GERMAINE: Right...so?

FITZ: So... What yer craving is variety!

GERMAINE: Right! I like different...and pretty...and often!

FITZ: Well! The good Lord's got a few cravings of His own.

GERMAINE: *(Aghast.)* The good Lord's got cravings?

FITZ: Not like yers, thank heavens!

GERMAINE: But He likes variety just the same, I'm betting.

FITZ: Yes! *(Pause.)*

GERMAINE: So?

FITZ: So quit committing the same old stupid sin time after time. For the love of God, give the Almighty his due. If you're going to go through all the trouble to commit a sin in the first place...be creative about it!

GERMAINE: I don't understand, yer Imminence.

FITZ: Maybe this will help. I remember as a wee child, I once saw a sign that said: "Christ died for yer sins. Make it worth His while!" To be quite honest, I thought it was funny.

GERMAINE: Funny, yer Grace?

FITZ: Just John Paul! Yes...funny. My father didn't think it was funny at all. Put meself in a bit of a pinch over it. Two schools of thought there: mine and everyone else's. One...that we should never sin again to pay Christ back for His sacrifice. The other: if He died for us...the least we can do is make our sin a real whopper and keep it entertaining enough to honor that sacrifice! Now, I know that sounds sacrilegious, but think for a minute. Odds are much greater that we'll commit a sin than not and He

knows that! So the joke's on us. The only one shocked by the fact that we're not perfect...is us.

GERMAINE: I see... What yer saying is, the Almighty wants me to be...more creative? Like, He wants my original sin to be just a tad bit more...ORIGINAL?

FITZ: No! You've missed the point. He doesn't want you to sin at all, if that's possible. He gives you the chance to choose. He's counting on you to be a bit more disciplined. But if you're hell-bent on doing it anyway, THINK ABOUT IT BEFORE YA COMMIT IT, and you might find that... (*GERMAINE gasps and starts to think.*)

GERMAINE: I leave him no choice but to think I'm stupid and boring! Ugh! I never thought of it that way. I understand now. The Almighty needs me to change me ways!

FITZ: The Almighty doesn't need anything at all - you do, my dear woman! What I'm trying to say is, if you spend just a little more time in crafting yer sins, ya just might use that extra minute to see the humor in the whole situation and not commit them at all!

GERMAINE: Got it! Thank you for being so blunt, John Paul. I shan't repeat such things again.

FITZ: He'll be mighty grateful to hear that. I know I am! I'd hang meself if I had to listen to this same crap over and over and over again. (*Chuckles.*)

GERMAINE: There was a reason God chose you for this job, John Paul. I've never thought about this...this way before.

FITZ: Not bloody likely any one else ever has either! Now...for yer penance. I want ya to go home and decorate yer tree.

GERMAINE: That's it? That's me penance? (*Pause.*) Decorate a tree?

FITZ: Aye. With every ornament you pull out of a box, I want you to imagine it as one of your sins. A pretty, shiny, sparkling little distraction of temptation and lust.

GERMAINE: Well, when you say it that way, it doesn't sound so bad. Hah! Really puts you in the spirit, eh, yer Grace? (*Thinks.*) Sounds like all I'm really guilty of is coveting me neighbor's Christmas balls!

FITZ: (*Dumbfounded at her analysis.*) Figuratively speaking.

GERMAINE: Oh, not figuratively at all, yer Grace. Quite literally, I'm confessing! So what do I do when I'm finished decorating, yer Holiness?

FITZ: Ya have a lot of decorations, do ya now?

GERMAINE: Aye! Hundreds. Been collecting the pretties for years, ya know?

FITZ: I do now. And so does your heavenly Father.

GERMAINE: So, what's the rest of me penance?

BLESS ME, FATHER

FITZ: I want you to stand back, take a long look, and take into consideration with each pretty little decoration how many times you hung your Savior on that tree with those pretty, shiny little balls of yer neighbors!

GERMAINE: Oh my...

FITZ: (*Smirking and pleased with himself.*) You ponder that for awhile and then sleep on it. In yer own home...in yer own bed. With yer own HUSBAND! Merry Christmas to ya now and happy decorating!

GERMAINE: Oh my.... (*She gets up and exits the confessional, awestruck.*) Merry Christmas as well, yer Grace.

FITZ: Not yer Grace, my dear woman. Just John Paul.

GERMAINE: Aye! Very just indeed! (*She exits.*)

BLACKOUT.

ACT ONE, SCENE 3

Lights up in the confessional as FITZ tries the doorknob again to no avail. There is a woman in her fifties, dressed to the nines, in the confessional box on stage left. She checks her face in a compact, then she slides open the window screen that separates her from FITZ.

ROBERTA: Bless me, Father, for I have sinned...

FITZ: Ohhh, for God's sake! Not again!

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