

The Church was smaller than he expected. The photos on their web page made it look larger. The outside was worn, but well maintained. They had replaced one of the tall wooden doors recently, the varnish hadn't bleached in the sun yet.

He entered and, as always, he felt a little smaller. This was the House of God, and he was just some insignificant tiger. He dipped his fingers in the basin of holy water and crossed himself.

He walked between the pews, relieved they were unoccupied. It made sense, it being the middle of the afternoon. He would have been even more uncomfortable if it had been crowded with regular parishioners.

As it was, he was nervous and starting to doubt the wisdom of coming. Part of him said it would be better to just bury his head in the sand. Ignore the growing list of evidence and go back to living the way he had been.

And blowing up at strangers for imagined slight?

He sat down and looked at the cross. Like every depiction of him, well, those who accepted Jesus was cervid, he now knew, his antlers were broken off and made into a crown, with the points sharpened and pressing in his head. His punishment for preaching the existence of Eden and that the Path was the way to return there

He couldn't look at him for long without feeling like he was being judged. Looking down he saw a bible someone left in the nook on the back of the pew in front of him. He took it and leafed through the pages. He looked back up. "God," he whispered, "Why did you make me this way?"

Someone put a hand on his shoulder. "Can I help you?" a woman said.

Patrick jumped out of his fur and landed a couple of feet away panting in fright. He turned and looked at an otter in a cassock. She was also panting, a hand over her heart. It seemed his start had frightened her as much as she had him.

"I'm sorry," he apologized once he found his voice.

"It's alright." She gave him a small smile. "I should have made sure you knew I was there." She sat on the pew. "I'm Mother Rosetta. I don't remember seeing you here before."

"I'm Patrick." He sat a respectable distance away. "I'm not in your parish, I live in Brownstone."

"That isn't exactly nearby," she commented after a moment's thought. "What brought you to our church?"

Patrick hesitated. "I need a different point of view on something. I've been looking online and came across the blogs on your site. They were refreshingly balanced."

She tilted an ear in his direction in an invitation to continue.

"Father Durony, the priest at my Church, he's... Well, I've come to realize the way he interprets the bible isn't the way others do. From the reading I did, he takes a very old fashion view of it."

She gave him a knowing smile. "He's one of the Revivalists then?"

Patrick nodded.

"Yes, they do tend to view God as being fire and brimstone. Why don't you tell me what you need help with?"

"I'm..." He froze. He couldn't say it? He'd been practicing it in his head on the way here and yet the words didn't want to come out?

"You don't have to say it, if you aren't comfortable," she reassured him.

He breathed in, to calm himself. "I have to say it. I've been 'not saying it' for too long, it feel like each time I don't I'm actively encouraging a lie."

Worry appeared on her face.

Patrick closed his eyes and breathed some more. "I'm gay."

There, he'd finally said it... and nothing. No being struck by lightning, no bursting into flames. He opened his eyes in surprise and she was smiling at him.

"I take it you were expecting something to happen?"

"I know it's stupid, but yes I was. It isn't like God has turned anyone back into an animal recently."

She nodded. "I can see how growing up in a revivalist church would cause you to have problems coming to terms with your sexuality."

Patrick leaned back. "Yeah. ever since I've been a kid I've been told how being..." he sighed and forced the word out. "How being gay is the quickest way off the Path. How God hates gays, that they are the work of the devil, stuff like that. If being... gay is so wrong, why did he make me this way?"

She studied him for a moment. "God doesn't hate gays."

"But the bible says he does." he shook the bible he was holding. "That it's against His will."

She took hold of the bible and gently brought it down to his lap. "This book was written by us, not by God."

"But they wrote the words of God, didn't they?"

She smiled and was thoughtful. "Alright, lets say, for a moment, that we accept that those who wrote the bible were indeed, let's call it channeling God. Let's say that's true.

"Do you really think that one of our minds could hold the

thoughts of God and not miss something? Or misunderstand what He thought? God's mind is infinite. He knows everything, he sees everything. Our minds are very much limited. Even if we were to try to hold all that God is, we couldn't. At best we could only hold a very small part of it.

"If his mind is even a little bit like ours, it's a chaotic place, it isn't like a library where everything is ordered with a computer listing where to find everything. It stands to reason that anyone who tried to write down His mind couldn't put everything down, and what they did write might not be correct."

Patrick looked at the book. "So you're saying that the bible isn't accurate because we couldn't understand everything God had meant."

She patted his hand. "No, that's not what I'm saying. That is something someone could argue as being valid. I, personally, don't believe the bible is the word of God.

Patrick stared at her.

"Shocking, I know." She grinned. "Thinks about it. We've had evidence the bible has been modified, rewritten, for decades now. We also know that many of those changes were done to bring the bible in line with what the rulers of the time wanted. Now, I'm not saying there aren't some good ideas in it, but in the end I'm not willing to believe God would have a hand in penning something with so much hate and anger in it.

"God doesn't hate you. He doesn't hate anyone."

"How about his enemies?"

"God doesn't have enemies."

"Of course he does. All those terrorists. The attacks in the early twenty first century, what was going on in Kenya on the thirties?"

"They aren't God's enemies. God made them, he made all of us, how could they be his enemies?"

"But they follow other Gods."

"No, they don't." She paused. "At least, I don't believe they do. They might have given Him a different name, but there is only one God. Not one true God, simply one God."

"Then why did they attack us? why did they call us heathen? The massacres in Kenya, the deaths in the Congo?"

"Because they are people, they aren't perfect. Like you and me, they are flawed, and for whatever reason they decided to use God as an excuse to make war instead of following Him to peace."

She was right, Patrick realized. He'd seen it in his neighborhood often enough. People proclaiming God's name while doing something He would never approve of.

"Then what about God's first creation? He had to hate him

for disobeying Him. He destroyed them after all."

She canted her head. "Did He? The bible simply says the He removed man from Eden for eating the apple. I prefer to think that he took them somewhere else. Maybe a world of their own, where they could learn the consequences of their action. After all, when we asked permission to eat the apple, he warned us we had to leave. That once we had the knowledge the fruit brought, Eden wouldn't be for us anymore.

"After man was removed from Eden," she recited, "God elevated the animals to take his place, to care for Eden."

"Except the snake," Patrick added by rote.

Mother Rosetta smiled. "Yes, except the snake. For the part it played in offering the apple to man it has been fated to always crawl on the ground as a simple beast. But for the rest of us, we grew and cared for Eden, until the day our curiosity grew too strong. We tasted the apple and left Eden."

"Do you think we'll ever make it back there?"

She didn't answer immediately. "I don't know. I'd like to think God wants us to, since he sent his Son to show us the Path." She leaned toward him. "Did you ever think about why Jesus came to us as a cervid, instead of, say, a lion, or a tiger?"

Patrick shrugged. "Not really."

"I believe it's so we would see that power, strength, wasn't what would get us back to Eden. Cervids aren't exactly known to be strong, although they certainly aren't the weakest of us. He wanted us to see it was our actions that would lead us back to Eden."

Patrick looked at the bible in his hand, rubbed the worn cover. "If I can't use the bible to figure out what the Path is, How am I ever going to find my way to Eden?"

"God gave you the only tool you need to find your way back." She reached over and put a hand over his chest. "He gave you a heart. He gave you the ability to feel, to care and to love. If you follow it, are nice to your neighbor, eventually you'll find your way back."

Patrick let out a sardonic chuckle. "I hate to break it to you Mother, but being nice doesn't exactly cut it in this world."

"You're right. When I say nice I don't mean you should lay down and let others trample you. God wants you to defend yourself. He wants you to defend others, if need be, but do so without malice. Don't seek revenge, seek justice. Keep anger out of the fight."

Patrick was silent for a moment. "That might be easier said than done," he sighed.

She looked at him inquisitively.

"I have some anger issues," he admitted.

"How bad is it? have you ever wanted to hurt someone?"

Patrick wanted to deny it. "Sometime. Mostly I scream a lot, but recently, with... this, I've been lashing out at things."

"Do you think that will go away once you resolve the issue?"

Patrick considered it. "I think so. I've been calmer ever since realizing that what I knew of God might not be all there was."

She nodded. "If you don't mind me asking, what made you start questioning your sexuality?"

"I'm not ready to talk about that, not yet. But it isn't that I had sex. I'm not ready for that."

"I understand. When you are, you know where to find me. I'm just what, a five hours walk away?"

Patrick chuckled. "Closer to three."

She smirked at him. "Closer to three, he said, like even that's an easy walk."

"I like to walk."

She shook her head in amusement. "Tell you what. Let me give you my number."

Patrick chuckled. "I don't have a phone."

She started at him. "How can you not have a phone?"

Patrick shrugged. "Never had one, I can't afford the plans, so I managed without."

"Well, I'm not sure how I can give it to you then."

"Just read it out, I'll remember it."

She looked unsure, but pulled out her phone and read off her number. Patrick repeated it to her, then a few time in his head.

"If you ever need to talk, call me, day or night." She stood. "Will you be staying? Mass is in a bout an hour."

"I can't. I'm working and with the walk, I'll be there just in time.."

"Alright, you're always welcome here. have a good day, and God bless you."

"Thank you Mother." Patrick stood in the aisle, looking are Jesus. He crossed himself and headed out. He stopped before leaving the Church. Next to the door was the donation box. He didn't normally give anything, he had so little already, but he dug in his pocket and pulled out the ten and twenty.

He didn't have time to go home, so he'd have to buy something on the way. What could he afford to give? food wasn't exactly cheap. He put the twenty in the box.

He'd buy a sandwich and soda on the way. He'd eat more at the bar. Don didn't have food, but he didn't mind if Patrick ate a lot of the peanuts.