

Nothing to Declare

Happiness unappreciated.

Little Rita eagerly looked forward to the day, promised by her mamma for as long as she could remember, that she would make her confession. Actually, it was even before she could remember, because mamma had said, as her proud pappa (now departed for other temptations) held her in his arms, “our little darling, wait until you can go and make your confessions!”

So on Rita’s eighth birthday mamma met her after school, and they walked together to the little church of San Clemente, just a few streets away from where they lived on Via del Colosseo. Rita skipped along excitedly, down the steep steps to the Colosseo, then to Via Labicana. Mamma squeezed her hand and took her into the church. It was small, as Roman churches and basilicas go, nevertheless to a ten year old it was massive and overwhelming. The confession box was tucked away in the far corner on the first level of the church, behind the altar. Not that Rita had never been there before. It was the church in which she was christened, according to mamma, and Rita accompanied her almost every day and watched while she knelt at the altar and thumbed her rosaries and mumbled things under her breath. In fact after her dad departed, they went there even more than once a day.

“Now be sure to tell everything to the Father when he asks you. Just like I told you. OK?” said her mom as she leaned down and gave Rita a little kiss on her forehead.

“I will mamma.”

Her mother knocked lightly on the confessional door and there was a faint rustle of clothing. She opened the door and saw movement through the finely carved confessional window. “In you go. Make sure you kneel nice and straight.”

Rita stepped in, the door closed behind her, and she knelt down, curious to see who was behind the window.

“And what can you tell me this afternoon, my child?” purred the priest.

“My mamma said I have to confess my sins today.”

“Then tell me dear child of Mary mother of God.”

“My mother’s name isn’t Mary. It’s Christina.”

“Yes, of course. What sins do you have to tell me today, my child?”

“I don’t have any, Father. I haven’t done anything bad or anything. I don’t think so.”

“You know that you must always tell the truth to you parents and to your priest, do you not?”

“Yes, Father. My mamma always tells me that. But I can’t think of anything I have done that was bad. I always have a happy time and my mamma has never spanked me. So I can’t have done anything bad, can I?”

“My dear child. Everyone, children included, commits sin. You must have done something bad.”

“You mean my mamma has done something bad?”

“In confession, my child, we can’t talk about your mother. Only your sins.”

“I really don’t have anything to confess, Father. I’m sorry for that.”

“No bad thoughts, even?” asked the priest, slightly annoyed.

“I’m always happy, and I don’t have anything to think about that’s bad.”

“No one is always happy, my child. Are you sure that you are telling the truth?”

“Oh! Father! I would never lie. And now I think I have just committed a sin. I have got upset with you.”

“Do you get upset with your mother?” asked the priest, feeling he was making progress.

“Oh No! Mamma is the sweetest kindest person I know. I love her so much. She couldn’t do anything that would make me have bad thoughts.”

The priest responded, trying to hide his disbelief. “She hasn’t once had to discipline you?”

“I don’t know what that means, Father.”

“I mean, did she say you’ve done something wrong, and punish you for it?”

“No, Father. I told you. I haven’t done anything wrong, ever.”

“No bad thoughts? Jealous of someone perhaps?”

“I don’t think so, Father. What does jealous mean?”

Frustrated, the priest responded. “My child, this confession is over. Please say one Hail Mary twice a day, just to be on the safe side, in case you have not been telling me the truth.”

“But I haven’t confessed to any sins, Father. Why do I have to say a Hail Mary?”

“It is not for a child to question a priest, my dear.” The priest closed the window. There was a scuffle of clothing and shoes scraping the wooden floor, and he was gone. Rita stood up and left. Her mother was waiting by the altar.

“How did it go?” she asked.

“I said I didn’t have any sins to confess and he got angry with me, I think. But I couldn’t see him.”

“What did he say?”

“You said I’m not allowed to tell what we talk about in the confession, didn’t you?”

“Yes, you are right.”

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On her eleventh birthday, Rita asked her mother if she would be going to confession like last year.

“I think we will wait until you are twelve,” she said. “The Father told me he didn’t think you were old enough.”

Rita didn’t question that. Just gave a happy shrug and said, “OK mamma.”

And so, a year went by and at last, her twelfth birthday arrived, celebrated with her friends and cousins. And after they had left, Rita asked, “am I going to confession today?”

“I have made an appointment for you tomorrow. I’m not sure if it will be the same priest. But it shouldn’t matter. They all work for Jesus and Mary.”

“Do they get paid?” asked Rita innocently.

“Of course, but not by Jesus and Mary, silly! The Pope pays them, I guess.”

“That’s very good of the Pope. He must be a very kind man.”

“He is.”

“And very rich too. There are so many Fathers to pay.”

“I have booked you in for tomorrow after school, at San Clemente. Do you think you can go there on your own?”

“I’ve been there so often, mamma. I’m sure I can go there. I just knock on the confessional door when I get there, *è vero?*”

“Yes. And it’s the same confessional as before, down behind the altar, in the corner. Don’t be late.”

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Right on time, Rita knocked gently on the confessional door. She heard the rustle of clothing and stepped in. She had tried to prepare herself this time. Read some stories about people going to confession. How they were supposed to think hard about what bad things they had done, read the ten commandments and go through each one to see if they had broken any of them. This she did very carefully. She read every commandment and decided that she had not broken any of them. Even the one about honoring your parents. She wasn’t quite sure what the word “honoring” meant, but if it meant did she do what her mother told her, she had, every time and always. Of course, she couldn’t say anything about her father because he had departed a long time ago, when she was a baby. She wished that one day she might get to meet him. But wishing for that wasn’t a sin was it? Maybe it was honoring him in his absence?”

“Good afternoon my child,” said the priest. It was the same voice that she remembered from two years ago.

“Bless me Father, for I have not sinned or anything as far as I can remember,” said Rita, shifting a little on her knees.

“But my child, that is not possible. When did you confess last?”

“Two years ago, Father. It was my first confession.”

“And you have not made one since then?”

“No. Mamma said I wasn’t old enough, but now I am. I think the Father told her that.”

“Then I will ask Jesus and Mary to overlook that, only this one time. But my child, remember you must confess every week, more if necessary.”

“I will Father. But it’s the same this time.”

“What do you mean?”

“I read all the ten commandments. And I haven’t broken any of them.”

“Have you not disobeyed your parents?”

“Never would I do that to my mamma. My dad left and I never knew him.”

“Bad thoughts?”

“I don’t think so. But I really don’t know what bad thoughts are. I’ve always been a happy kid. Never a dull moment, my cousins say.”

“My child, it is a grave sin to lie to your priest in confession. Of course, lying is a sin at any time and for any reason.”

“I don’t lie, Father, I would never do that. I am always happy. I have nothing to lie about.”

“Are you not lying to me now?” asked the priest with a touch of belligerence.

“Oh no! Father! I would never do that! I love Jesus and Mary so much, how could I do that to you?”

The priest took a deep breath. He had never experienced anything like this. He should have spoken more to the girl’s mother after the girl’s first confession, but did not because of the sacred bond between confessor and priest that their exchanges should never be revealed.

He had another go at it.

“Have you never wished for something that another girl had, maybe one of your playmates?” he asked, this time he would surely trap her.

“Oh no Father, I would never covet my playmate’s toys.”

The Father was taken aback. “You know what covet means?” he asked incredulously.

“Oh yes, Father I read it in the ten commandments. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife.”

“Not even one of your playmate’s dolls?”

“Oh, Father, I think I made a mistake. I had this really pretty Barbie doll.”

“Go on.”

“And I was playing with Tina, my cousin, and she started to cry.”

“And?”

“She said my doll was prettier than hers, and she wished she had it.”

“Are you sure it was not the other way around?”

“Oh no, Father. But then I was feeling so sorry for her, I gave her my doll. And that made her very happy, and made me very happy too. Was it selfish of me to feel sorry for her?”

“I don’t think so,” answered the Father, again crushed by

this child's unmitigated happiness. He was on the verge of giving up, but then, against his better judgement, decided to have one more try. He coughed a nervous cough. The child was twelve. There was one way in which he could catch her, no, that was not a good way to think about it, help her discover the sins that hovered deep inside the body.

"Touching?" he asked in a thin voice.

"Touching, Father? I don't know what. It's not a sin to touch something, is it?"

"Sometimes it is."

"I mean, once I touched mamma's hot iron and burned my finger. Was that a sin?"

"Well, if your mother told you not to touch the iron, then yes, it was a sin because you disobeyed her. You violated the fifth commandment."

"I don't remember her telling me not to. But I suppose she might have when I was really little."

"There, you see. You did have a sin to report."

"I have always tried very hard to obey my mamma. I never disobeyed her on purpose. So I don't think that's a sin."

The priest, in spite of himself, coughed a nervous cough again, and said, "have you ever touched yourself?"

"Don't be silly, Father, of course I have. I do it every day when I wash my hands and face. That's not a sin is it?"

"Mostly, not. But there are places on your body that you should not touch."

"You mean my..." Rita put her hands to her face covering her eyes, "I can't even imagine it."

"Perhaps I should speak with your mother."

"About touching myself? But everyone has to go to the toilet, don't they? How can you not?"

"It isn't what I was thinking," said the Father, immediately regretting having said it. Fortunately, Rita did not follow the thread.

"Father, when you think, do you think bad thoughts?" asked Rita innocently.

"We all do, my dear, even priests," he answered, relieved. "That's why I also go to confession every few days."

"I'm glad you do. Hey! One day I could hear your confession

after you've heard mine," said Rita with a giggle.

"You have to be a priest to hear a confession. It's the work of Jesus and Mary."

"Mom said you get paid for your work by the Pope."

"On earth that is so," boasted the priest.

"So who pays the Pope then? Jesus and Mary?"

"Of course not. They are in Heaven. But my child, let's get back to your confession."

"Sorry Father. Thank you for listening to me. I'm a bit of a chatterbox when I get started, my mamma is always saying. Do I have to say any Hail Marys?"

"It's always a good idea to say some, even if you haven't committed any sins. So I will leave it to you to decide how many you want to say."

"Thank you, Father."

"May the peace of God be with you, my child." The priest gave a sigh of relief and left the confessional.

Rita's mother waited for her in front of the basilica. As you may have guessed, she was a devout catholic, very careful to follow all the requirements of ritual and practice of the catholic church. "She is such a perfect child," she muttered to herself. But as soon as she said it, she crossed herself and looked up saying, "forgive me Jesus for I have sinned the sin of pride." There had never been a time when she had to scold her little girl, even raise her voice. The child was so happy. Yet it seemed that her happiness caused much trouble for others, especially the priest who had heard her first confession. The priest had in fact broken the sacramental seal and hinted to her what had happened in the first confession. She was very grateful for the priest's concern and his sharing it with her, but at the same time, the Father had been forced by Rita's happiness to break one of the most sacred rules of the church.

Rita, her innocence radiating like a halo, knew nothing of this. She simply enjoyed life and found not the slightest speck of badness even in situations that were awful, her absent father for example, or the day she tripped on a cobblestone near the Colosseo and broke her arm. She did not cry at all. Just said she was sorry for slipping over and causing such fuss. Why was she so happy? Was there something wrong with her? She looked up and saw

Rita skipping happily towards her. Everything must have gone well. Too well, perhaps?

“How was confession?” she asked.

“The Father was very nice.”

“How many Hail Marys do you have to say?”

“Mamma. You told me I’m not allowed to tell what happened in confession.”

“Children are allowed to tell their mothers. Didn’t the Father tell you that?”

“No. He just said I can say as many Hail Marys as I want.”

“Nothing more?”

“Lots more. We talked a lot, or, maybe I talked a lot.”

“You had a lot to tell him?”

“Well, he said some silly things.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t think I should say, should I?”

“It’s different between mothers and daughters.”

“So would you tell me what you say in your confession?”

“Well no. It’s not like that. I’m not allowed.”

“That doesn’t seem fair.” Rita gave a little giggle, then looked up, “but I don’t mind. I can tell you the silly things that the Father said. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind that.”

“Go on.”

“Well, he asked me whether I touch myself...”

Moral: The innocence of youth feeds the guilt of adulthood.

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