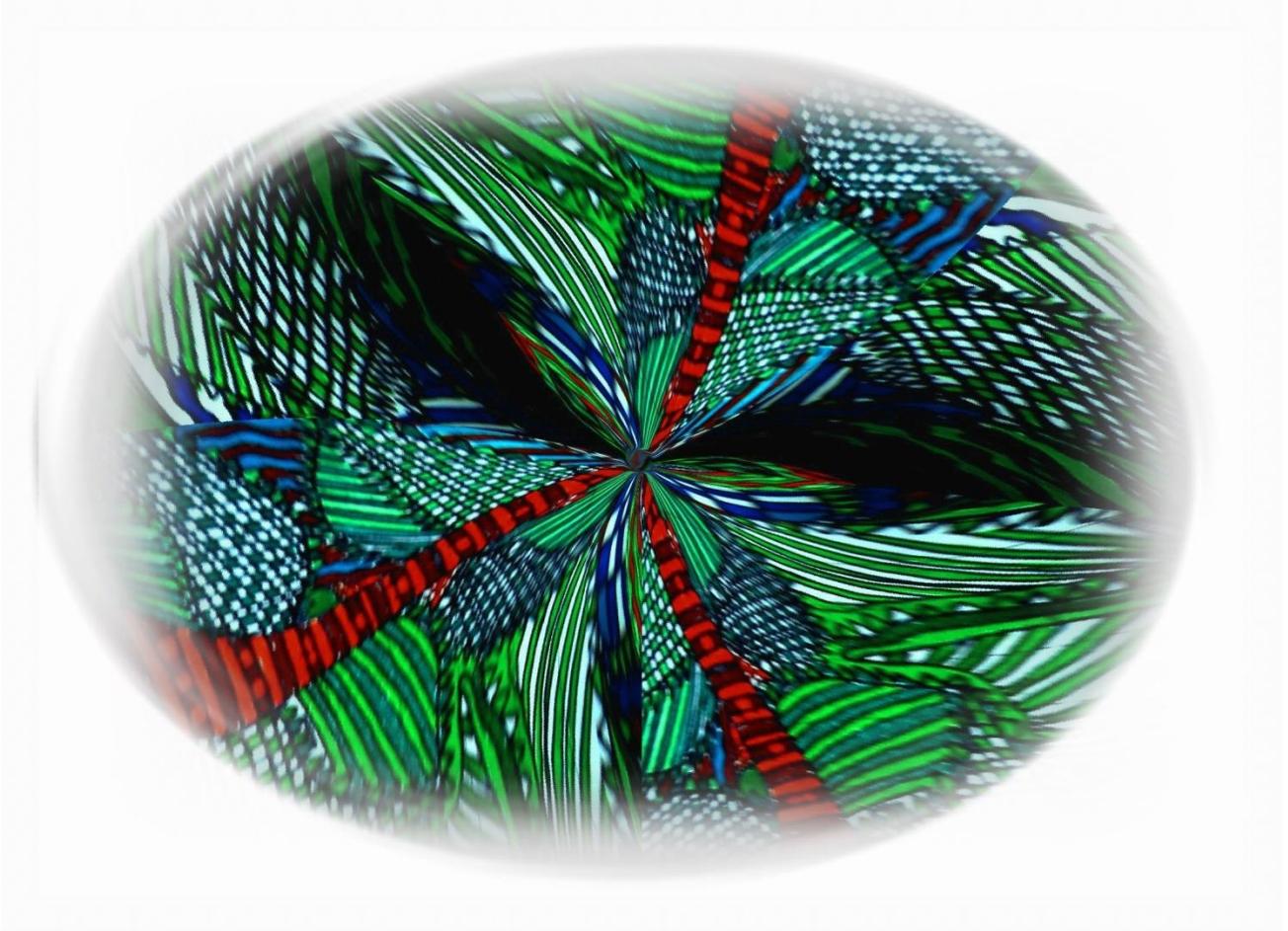


Kickbacks, donkey paws and past reveries.



The priest could make out the blond halo on the stairs in front of the building, from very far away.

The concrete walkway sent up mirages in small waves of fury in the depressing heat. The oblong shaped neat row of trees, next to the private road that lead to the entrance of the chapel and the main building, brought refreshing coolness to the priest walking in the shadows.

He felt relieved to see that it was only a child sitting there. He prepared himself by taking out a tiny purse from the hidden pocket inside his lightweight cloak. When he stopped to gaze into the eyes of the would be begging urchin, he could suddenly feel chills running down his spine. It was a small girl, the girl of his dreams, holding him in a position of frozen shock. He found his voice after the best of a mutual couple of minutes worth of stares of the utmost curiosity too and fro: "who are you and where are you from?"

The little girl refused to let the moment go. He simply could not stop looking. Forget skimming, he was being scanned in the minutest detail. "I need confession right now".

The priest wanted to say you are too young, too small, too ..... The girl got up expecting him to let her into the church. She was at a stretch of the imagination maybe 6 years old, .... maybe. The rod straight back and the manner in which she carried herself, belonged to the heavily burdened and the deeply suffering.

The priest showed her where to sit and went and first prayed in the vestibule behind the small enclosure and then presented himself. Through the tiny spy hole behind the curtain, he could make out nothing. Then something green as his eyes adjusted to the darkness and he suddenly realized that he was looking into the pupil of something. The girl did not move, when he threw himself backwards onto the chair.

She kept her face against the cloth almost throughout the whole ordeal. She was kneeling on the chair instead of merely sitting on it.

"I am not allowed to call you "Father", I speak only to our real God that way. I came to apologize."

"I also came to ask forgiveness. I can sweep the church or clean the silverware. Grandma showed me how to polish the silverware. I also know how to polish copperware. I can do that without messing. Polly showed me how. I am sorry that is all I can do to make.... ". He heard papers rustling in the quiet and after about 5 minutes, approached the spy hole. It took at least another 30 seconds for the girl to fish out the piece of paper, she put into the top lining of her panty, in the double seam covering the elastic. She laboriously made a tiny hole in her best panty's elastic covering, so that she could hide things away, from prying eyes.

She did that without once pulling up the front of her dress. She unrolled the little piece of paper and read out loud – "restitution" –

" Restitution for what?"

"For having taken 16 shots at you, with my Grandpa's pellet shotgun, while you were driving your buggy during the eighteen hundreds" The priest had to stop himself from laughing incredulously.

He remembered his dream. He only shared **that** with God. His dream of a small, moving heap of leaves, on a garage roof, taking pot shots at him. *Then* a face peeking out for only a fraction of a time. The girl kept quiet. She was listening attentively.

After what must have felt like a lifetime, she spoke again." I will come back to explain when I can. I eloped from home. I came to visit my other Grandmother today. She'll know I am gone and she will call my mother and father again. I am always in trouble. I will also have to refuse to tell them the truth. They do not understand God and or the nature of time. "

"I bless you with Psalm 91".

"I hope you can forgive me."

In her childlike mind, that took care of business and Helena got up and ran out of the church, trying her utmost not to look at the gory seen at the front end of the church, depicting the crucifixion of Christ in a

bloody manner. The priest caught up with her, at the far end of the gravel road. Helena held her midriff and was bellowing with laughter. "Sir, you look like a man with a Palen – a black one. The wind in your spiritual parachute drove you like a wound up dinky toy up the lane. The gravel made the music. But you will chase even the angels away if you make such a ruckus, you have to be quiet and peaceful to find the truth."

Father Bernardus felt very angry. "Yes, you little twit and you can maybe find peace if you had cared to wait for the answer to your question. QUESTIONS!!"

The little girl, beamed at Bernardus, she was on familiar territory. "Ductive thinking and no time to answer".

The priest instinctively knew what she meant. She kept walking in the direction of her Grandmother's house.

"For what it is worth, I forgive you. But I need to know, how did you know where to find me? How did you know it was not just a dream or your imagination running away with you?"

The halo dropped, and he could here a deep sigh. "I do not have to dream, I can remember everything about that time. Maybe only, the things I don't want to remember."

"Is your grandfather still alive?"

"Yes but he will die, in five years time". Father Bernardus, halted his footsteps. "I am sorry. I have tried to wing it - but - what exactly do you mean?"

The girl dropped her chin and sparked her eyes at him. "Truth is important. There is no religion higher than the truth ". "You need quiet and "ductive" thinking to find it."

"I have already told you."

"Ductive thinking is; s. l. o. w"

The pharmacist neared the stop sign on the corner of Russel and Kempston Avenue, and followed the conversation drifting on the wind.

The speaker was a thin, bare foot girl with wild hair, tip toe dancing on the hot pavement. She was ticking things off on her fingers as the priest leaned forward. The thin man, in his robe, looked anxious and in high color.

The pharmacist looked into his rearview mirror and kept his position at the stop sign.

The man in the car taught his children and grandchildren for the next 40 years of his life, what s. l. o. w. meant.

**S: Speaking, not merely talking.**

**L:** Listening, not merely hearing.

**O:** Observing, not merely looking.

**W:** Writing, not merely scribbling.

The priest walked back slowly to the church. Helena waved at him and ran off, with the upcoming tan of her derriere, uppermost in her mind. He found the church building open just as he'd left it. He however was a changed man. He cancelled the program for the rest of that day, all except evening mass. He prayed for a very long time and lit a huge candle for Helena that day and every day for the rest of his earthly life. His face was still tear stricken when he walked home to his humble abode later that night.

He would only see Helena again at the age of 65 years, in the city of New York in 2009. He saw the hunchbacked woman, sitting on the front steps of the church from afar.

He greeted her through tears of joy. "How did you manage to find me?"

"I didn't, the Holy Spirit did". They greeted each other with a warm hug and quietly walked through the crunchy snow, into the now unlocked church.

"This is just the donkey's paws, the priest said."

The woman said: "Do you think someone in heaven receives some kickbacks for arranging these meetings?"

They both giggled shyly, but warmly, when they entered his office. They spent days and nights together talking, debating, arguing and just being. She taught him how to bake pumpkin cakes, pumpkin bread, pumpkin peels with fried onions and rosemary and every possible thing – pumpkin – and steered clear of Halloween. They laughed about the good-natured farmers who brought the priest hundreds of pumpkins into town, with joy. He faced a high gas bill and blessed many New Yorkers with the transformed booty.

The priest was much older than Helena, but declared on the day that she'd left that he'd never loved another human being in quite the same way or never probably will. It was a Godly love that transcended time, space, age and common things. He did not desire her body or her soul. He simply and purely loved her spirit. He was at peace, sad but not heartbroken. He knew that which he loved in her, was the Holy Spirit. He loved how her essence experienced the love of the Father.

Helena always sent him letters. She would go and throw a glass bottle into the sea wherever she went and always address it to him. She could not risk ever keeping contact with him openly. She did however love him deeply. He was one of her jewels. He reinforced her faith in her God, the only God that could look past religions, sins and the prefab walls of people's worldly desires so common to men.

The priest dreamed of letters, swirling on water at regular intervals. The Holy Spirit kept him in contact with Helena. Theirs was a love story that could only be told in the heavenly courts where the angels tread and sang to their mutual Father. It had a divine nature, and the crystal-clear structure of it,

resonated across the earth. If the priest, could ever forget Helena or visa versa, they only had to pass a pumpkin to remember. When Helena left New York, she told the priest that when they ever meet across time and space again – she'll bring a pumpkin. He just grimaced and pulled a face and said - "just don't wait until I'm 65 again!" They both went their own separate ways through a veil of tears - again –

Song: Jim Croce: Time in A Bottle