

First Confession
by
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Seven years old and the age of accountability had arrived. If death struck and had a mortal sin on my soul, I would go to hell and burn forever. The nuns and the priest had prepared me for redemption—first confession and communion. I was to confess: disobedience, lies, unclean thoughts, bad acts, swear words, gluttony, dishonesty, stealing, disrespect toward elders, and any behavior that had broken God's and Church's commandments.

The moment came. I did not know how to behave while I waited. In the pew, I sat still like all the others who appeared at ease before delivering their misdeeds to the priest for the first time. A damp chill filled the sanctuary. Boys and girls who went in before me seemed to stay a long time behind the dark glass door. What could the confessor be telling them, asking them? What if I need to pee? Darn it! The thought gave me the urge. The more I thought about it, the more I needed to go. My turn came. I went in and closed the door. Somber silence trapped me. I knelt in the dim light and could not hold my bladder. I wetted my pants. I wondered if the priest would smell the urine. The small window slid open. The priest's face appeared behind the screened opening. My urinary track tightened. The rehearsed words had slipped my mind. I believed the priest could hear my pounding heart. He asked if I had anything to confess. I mumbled a few words. The confessor peered at me over his rimless glasses and asked if this was my first time. I said that it was. "I lied a few times." He told me to recite an Act of Contrition and then be ready to receive Holy Communion. He gave me the Absolution while he made the sign of the cross and slid the small window shut. I stepped out and went to the back pew of the other wing of the church, away from everyone. I knelt and completed my penance. Could I sin again, after I received communion? Instead of going home along the main road, I decided to run across the backfields by the old dump, around the pond and to my house. My experience at the confessional had evaporated. I sat in a rusted Model T-Ford and pretended to drive. The old frame tilted toward the driver's side. I stepped out and tried to close the squeaky door. My right hand on the open window rest and my left on the hinge edge, I pushed. The metal scratched, scraped, and squeaked, but would not close. I pushed harder. The door slammed shut. I felt a sting run up to my elbow. The door had clipped the tip of my index finger. Raw flesh and bone stuck out. Bloody finger pointing up, I ran toward the creek, jumped over the brook, up the hill, around the pond, and picked up pace as I crossed the field to my house. Was this my punishment for not telling the priest all my sins? At home, my mother wrapped the wound and said I would have to see the doctor. I told her about my experience in the confessional.

"You should have gone before going to church," she said.

I told her that I hadn't needed to go. She sent me upstairs to change. Later that afternoon I went back to the dump, found the fingertip, brought it home, and showed it to my mother. Yeeek! She opened the stove cover and had me throw it in the fire. I

looked at the flame, heard the flesh sizzle, and an unfamiliar odor rose. The sound and smell of hell, I thought. Soon after that experience, I became an altar boy.