

# *The Church of Sleep*

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On the sixth day of Venice, Douglas observed to Sam that the real tragedy of life is that it is impossible to visit Harry's Bar for the first time more than once. The remark became stuck in his head, and later somehow led to a talk with the girls where they agreed to split up the next day. Men only, the first time since the holiday began with the train from Derby, having waited for the first off-peak cheaper tickets opportunity, then chunneling straight to Paris. What better way for a Midlander to start on a European journey passing through London without even a glance.

Four days in Paris, then on to the sinking city. The girls were very cavalier about parting company, undoubtedly already eager to saddle themselves with a plethora of fancy label bags. Sam and Miranda -- now secure in their budding relationship, Douglas hiding a sting of jealousy, he and Sharon showing the first signs of wear and tear, strained conversations, the sound of doors closing silently or too loud.

Camouflaging their differences and doubts in an unspoken agreement, the vacation so far had been a blast and a breeze, the tenderness and virtue also returning to their lovemaking.

Pleasantly hungover, the two men enjoyed a late

breakfast at their hotel in Mettre, just outside of Venice. So, what to do? Sam got the idea of getting into the mountains, the Dolomites no less, they checked the net, but the serious peaks were not within reach for a day excursion, most of the chairlifts being closed in the autumn. But they found a circling railway that showed some scenic promise.

The weather was bright. They changed lines at a place called Conegliano into a tram sized set scurrying through small townships and passing under lush wood-covered mountains. They seemed impenetrable, and Sam began to show signs of restlessness, his still boyish forehead locks looking stringy, it had amused Douglas since he met Sam at fourteen, how his friend's hair defined his mood. Sam was not prepared to let the trek slip away, of course he wasn't, a top-ranked amateur cyclist, the last year expanding his activities into the occasional triathlon. Being idle for days just would not do. By the next stop, a town named Feltre, they embarked.

The station was just out of town, to their left yet another green mountain, slumbering in a light mist, looking a bit like a volcano, the trees its running lava. To the right, on a slope, the town centre, but they kept to the margins, bought bottled water and some energy bars at a gas station, then followed a dirt road through empty grazing fields and the inevitable vineyards separated by firm hedges. They may have passed a few before they started noticing them, black rocks, smooth like silk, slightly out of place like spat out from a river, engraved with a white arrow and a single word: CHIESA.

The very next stone pointed to a path in the woods, steep but not uneasy, fissured by dry and sturdy roots from elms and spruces. It led out suddenly into a hard surface road. Sam snorted, said he felt hoaxed somehow, no pot of gold, the church at the end of it was a modest thing, lead-coloured stone, a tiny tower with bars that looked minutes from dropping its silver-plated bell. A busy parking place, even a light blue ice-cream van had set up business for the day, a Friday, and had gathered a small congregation for itself. Behind it, across a valley, several clustering hamlets dented yet another hillside, red roof-tiles drowsily glimmering in the sunlight.

They made their way into the entrance hall, Douglas rolling down his shirt sleeves, Sam removing his cap and sunglasses. Phones mute. Benches encircled the walls, older women with kind walnut faces, attired with black shawls and dark blue dresses with white dots, and families, the men looking trapped in their starch collars, van-food craving tots subdued and hushed by mothers dressed up to look both beautiful and demure. No one made a spectacle of the strangers, except one greying man, following their movements with darting eyes, looking a bit like a shepherd in his white shirt and brown leather vest.

They entered the church proper, a wood door held ajar with a large brick. Twelve rows of grey benches separated by the aisle, a few of them looked brand new, others were flaking like they had gangrene. A candlelight corner, a confession booth. Just one glass window, on the back wall, a kaleidoscope of colours, the feathers of a

fantasy peacock. The sidewalls were decorated with Renaissance style paintings depicting lonely, inquisitive figures clothed in medieval garb traversing vast ominous landscapes, the journeymen approaching or basked in a ray of light, a deity about to reveal its glory. One painting stood out from the others, it showed a closed shell floating on the water, a Venus stillborn.

The priest stood by the altar, dressed in a blue robe, splendiferous blue, he had a baritone beard and a benevolent smile, his hooded eyes halfway closed, looking as serene as the dead Christ on the cross right behind him. He had before him a congregation of about twenty-five souls, some huddled in groups, others sitting alone. A man in ordinary clothes walked among them, climbing gingerly over outstretched legs, he surely was in the process of collecting money, but he was not carrying a net or a tray, and none was offered, even when he stopped and examined faces up close.

It was almost rude.

The friends sat down. Minutes ticked away. No sermon, no psalms, no sound from the small organ in the gallery, fewer pipes than in a pan flute, no prayer. Total silence, the scampering man excepted, the blue clergyman swaying a little, like he was in the groove, most likely his knees were getting the better of him. Then the floor man gave him a sign, a pious equivalent of a high-five, the priest embraced the sky and walked quickly to a side door and opened it. Four men appeared, clad in brown robes, carrying a sedan chair between them, nothing exquisite, nothing befitting a lord of the court, but a modest affair

with a slightly reclining chair clamped to a broad plank.

They placed the chosen patron in the contraption with the utmost care, he didn't react at all, they walked out the door, ceremoniously slow, the priest tailgating them. Just a few heads turned, and even fewer joined in. Outside in the hall, there was a rustling of clothes when everyone rose.

Three of the men paused to don blindfolds, one did not, he had no need for it, his eyes a milky white, the iris a light blue, like a fading print. The gathering followed the men outside, stopping to watch as they crossed the adjacent field -- the unused part of the graveyard, and toward a cypress forest. There was a gap in it, it looked accidental, as if a fleeing animal had brushed through a minute before. The trees swallowed them up.

"The guy is dead," said Sam, sounding like he was stating the obvious. "Was dead on arrival. This was his final wish or something."

"It may actually be a part of how they do things around here," Douglas suggested. "It could be some kind of rehearsal, because he did not look dead to me. He looked like he was sleeping."

Sam shook his head. "They reward them now?"

He laughed, a low rumble. Douglas gave him a stare. The climb had refreshed his friend, made his limbs eager, his hair had regained the texture women fight over to smooth and caress. Talk erupted around them, everybody relaxing, the priest puffing vigorously on a cigarette.

His cassock at this short distance noticeably peppered with tiny, yellow points, stars most likely. The

shepherd was in a troubled conversation with two girls, obviously not from around here, coiffured hair and the diffident expression of city dwellers. We want your "slow food" and your scenery, but do not talk to us, please. Douglas went over and introduced himself, the girls finding their excuse to leave. He established that they could converse in English.

"Could you tell me what is going on here, sir?"

The local beamed, happy to have a new audience. His hair was a little long and parted in the middle, his wrinkles threatened to engulf his forehead. He had a protruding nose, but his lower face was that of a younger man, his jaw stubbed and dimpled like in shaving commercials. He wore a silver medallion around his neck.

"Once a year, on the first Friday of September, we celebrate a saint. The saint of sleep. *Our* saint of sleep."

Sam reached them in time to hear the answer. Douglas knew there was a saint in place for almost everyone and everything, from shorthand writers to mountaineers. And there was a story to be told. A local spin. It had happened during the plague, the Black Death. The saint in question, Emelia, a girl of ten years of age, was living on an isolated farm with her family, an extended family, a dozen people, maybe more.

When the plague hit them, it hit them quickly, from tending the sick to facing your own destiny. In an act of confusion, or mercy, or simply to warn the neighbours to stay away from the doomed house, the mother of the family set fire to the house and everyone in it. She herself stayed outside, drowning herself in the well. But there

was to be one survivor, Emelia, playing in the barn when the sickness fell, she was found in the hayloft. She had slept through the whole thing, three days straight. Douglas' immediate reaction was to ask how that qualifies for sainthood, but thought better of it, the raconteur enraptured by his story. A tale of serenity, not of action, survival of an innocent inside the eye of the storm. A sleeper cannot sin.

"Are you working to make her an official saint?" he asked instead.

"Some do," the man shrugged, wanting no part of it. He had the wistful air of someone who had marginalized himself by bragging too much in his younger days about how he was going to escape this place. But never did.

"What happens to the man in the chair?" Sam asked.

"They are taking him down a path to a chapel nearby. Five minutes go there, no more. Open this day only, the man stays inside, he must sleep ten minutes."

"What happens then?"

The man timed his reply. "Then the saint grants him a place in Paradise."

Douglas pondered this. "But what if he wakes up?"

"Then he has failed. But only partly. He free to see inside holy chapel and is allowed to again to try next year. If he wakes on path, he is not allowed."

"But what if you fake it?"

"What you mean?"

His English was slowly faltering, maybe he was beginning to tire of their company.

"If you pretend to fall asleep?"

The shepherd's brows almost disappeared into his wrinkles. The thought had presumably never occurred to him. He began to retreat.

Douglas approached him. "I am sorry. I meant no disrespect. The man going around the benches is a doctor, am I right?"

"Yes," he admitted, like he was being charged. "Sleeping pills, alcohol. You must not meet the saint pretending in any way."

"Why not?"

His eyes glazed for a moment while he searched for an answer or avoided it.

A movement in the leaves, murmur, an early return, the sleeper walking among the men, grinning sheepishly, showing his hands in a happy gesture of default, a player who has missed a penalty in a game the team still won.

The shepherd whistled under his breath. "He must have awakened before they reached the chapel. It is not easy. Now he can never try again."

"How many has made it?" asked Sam.

"None. Many. I do not know."

Sam was in the long run not one for enigmatic answers. "What do you mean by that? Have you tried it?"

Douglas intervened. "Is there a vow of silence involved?"

The shepherd nodded. Douglas thanked him for his patience. He and Sam ventured back inside. The same procedure -- the silent priest, the rummaging physician with his watery eyes, the carriers playing hide and hide in the sacristy.



"You could do it," Douglas whispered.

"Sorry?"

"Fake it. With all your training, the low heart-rhythm you boast about."

"I never boast."

"The big business assistant manager, aren't you supposed to be a power-nap guy?"

"What about you? You are never more than half awake anyway."

"Sleeping on command? Not remotely possible."

Sam folded his hands behind his neck, like he was testing if slumber was indeed conceivable.

"Care to make it interesting?" he said with an American intonation, broader than a Texan in Vegas.

Douglas suggested a twenty.

"Euros?"

"No! Of course not! When we are back home."

Sam gave his companion a sly wink. "What if I do pretend?"

"Still a twenty, if you do not get caught, that is."

Sam grinned like the proverbial cat. "I'll bring back a piece of Paradise..."

Douglas moved further down the bench. Sam closed his eyes. The doctor seemed at first reluctant, like he sensed something could be amiss, but when he finally made his way over, he caved in at once and gave the signal.

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Back on the train, the afternoon sun was playing havoc with light and shadow. They shared the rest of the water, Sam suppressing a series of belches while squinting out the window. The sombre green of olive trees.

"Still not telling?"

Sam put on his sunglasses. "The pact between saint and man cannot be broken."

"But you cheated!"

"How do you know?"

"I get it. They didn't offer you their prize pig or the major's horny virgin twin daughters, and now you are taking it out on me."

Sam had come out of the woods with a bashful grin, not telegraphing his victory, and there were indeed no festivities, just acknowledgments and a firm handshake from the priest. Everybody prepared to go home. The shepherd approached them. He had removed the medallion from his neck and clutched it in his right hand, maybe it doubled as a rosary.

"So...no more today," said Douglas, suddenly fed up with all this questioning.

"One sleeper a year, that is all."

They watched people leaving, a rotund kid smiling at the promise of dinner.

"Where in England are you from?" the shepherd asked.

"Derbyshire. Buxton. Sam was raised in Matlock. I live in Derby now."

"Matlock. As the detective."

"Yes. The detective."

The shepherd cleared his throat, looking at Sam, offering his hand.

"This is a St. Christopher medallion, as you may know he protects travellers. I want you to have it."

Sam looked away and scratched his head in feigned ignorance. Douglas stepped in and took it. The shepherd touched his arm, said nothing more.

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"There is not much to tell, really. My humble servants waited outside after placing me in the chapel, a tiny wooden thing darkened by age. A shed, actually. There was straw on the floor like in a barn, some icons on the mason walls, fresh garlands, and some candles that looked as if they had been there for centuries. And that shell painting, much cruder and smaller. I rather fancied the one in the church, didn't you? There were some peculiar drawings all over the place, straight into the walls, small dots of flame, sparkling, like the moment you light a match. I almost got out of the chair to explore before I remembered I was asleep."

He changed gears. "I will definitely not mention this tiny achievement in the Christmas letter this year. Maybe we should keep it quiet. The girls, you know."

"Why?"

"Miranda may applaud now, but time will shrink my glorious day down to one word: Cheat."

"Right. That was what I saw on the priest's vestments. Tiny flames."

"Yes. How strange it all was. Must go back for red nose day tomorrow. How many stations until we change trains?"

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Scarfs, underwear, perfume, white chocolate, a Moreno vase, a Rialto miniature. Some items already in the suitcase, some waiting your approval tomorrow, gentlemen. Douglas made a remark about channel shopping that either needed pruning or elaboration. Drinking all alone in the hotel restaurant, they enjoyed the privacy, Sam forever the entertainer, tonight both dominant and including. In a quiet moment, Sharon raised her wine glass to Douglas, first he felt elated, touched even, but then he noticed her expression, something slithering underneath her composure, maybe something beyond repair. They decided to order a second dinner to halt their runaway boozing. Sam excused himself, somewhat abruptly, murmuring something to Miranda about you know what I like.

"What's up with him?" asked Sharon in her sing-song voice.

"Some big race coming up," Miranda laughed. "Messages to be checked, equipment to be repaired or bought. He could be hours, lost in the web..."

"Bicycle! Bicycle!" Sharon exclaimed. They all joined in, lyrics half remembered -- made a waiter smile,

the bartender frown.

Douglas remembered his pocketed treasure. "Look what I got from a local."

"You should wear it," said Sharon, without really looking at it.

"Let me do the honours," said Miranda, stood up and made a curtsy. Her fingers cool to the touch.

They skipped starters and ordered the largest steaks available to mankind. The food came. No Sam. Miranda placed the napkin in her lap, her hands fidgeting with a breadstick.

"This is getting a tad predictable..."

"I'll fetch," said Douglas.

Their adjoining rooms were on the second floor, he used the stairs, feeling out of breath and somewhat dizzy, linked it to the hours of transport. A touch of moving sickness. And booze. Only three sheets to the wind, hopefully. He knocked on the door, tried the phone. No one answered. Now he had to go downstairs and get the key card from Miranda. Maybe Sam was listening to music on headphones. Or to bicycle sounds. The code bar had a flashing yellow light, he tried it, the door was open. He moved slowly down the narrow corridor while calling out for him, passing the cupboards and the bathroom. The stench reached his nostrils a fraction of a second before he entered the room, a scared voice in his head pleading him to retreat, not to look, a voice that knew it was about to be ignored.

Sam was on the bed on his back, burned to a crisp, knuckles protruding through the charred flesh, his eyes

boiling, small blue flames living off his fat. Douglas instinctively covered his mouth and nose with his hand, almost shamefully so. The wall he stood by was spotted with soot, and small circles of light sparkled in the plaster, the damage confined to Sam's side of the bed, his table lamp twisted to a cinder. While he watched, Sam's lower jaw broke off, teeth settling on his chest like scattered pearls. There was a sound. There was another person in the room.

She sat on the windowsill, legs trashing like a child will do, her grey wool shirt reaching her ankles. She looked at him, stillness in her light brown eyes.

"You are the saint," Douglas said.

She didn't even blink. There was a ring of yellow hue around her pupils, her small face almost plain with lack of emotion, a Venus that had dived back into the shell and closed it behind her. A portrait of the banality of evil, no remorse nor triumph, no psychology. Just a predator waiting for him to make a move. Even so, he wanted to shout why, because there has to be a why.

"Emelia," he said. "You are a fraud."

The legs paused.

"You never slept. You were awake all the time, you knew about sickness and how it spreads, you hid in the barn because you were afraid, your family turning into boil-ridden monsters, monsters looking for you, calling your name. Your mother maybe made a final effort at night to tend to the animals, she glimpsed you in the loft, but too weak she turned back to tell the others, you sneaked up behind her and snatched her oil lamp, before

you pushed her down the well. You were just a little girl scared out of her wits. And now you are nothing. A fake. Not worthy of any paradise, you think you have found your true calling. I pity you."

The girl moved swiftly, her footprints glowing fire, he braced himself and met her halfway, she stood before him, tiny as a snake. His mind clouded over, and he blacked out, when he came to, he was on the bed next to Sam. He tried but he could not move. The girl sat on the edge, staring intently, not at him, but at his throat. The St. Christopher medallion. She gave a smile that contained everything a smile should not. She gently raised his head, reached behind him and plumped up the pillows.

"Five minutes," she whispered.

He tried. He really tried.

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"Barfleur? On the coast. Very windy. Near Cherbourg? Yvonne studies there."

"Umbrellas. Catherine Deneuve. Very nice."

"You got it."

"What are you going to be, Yvonne?"

"A teacher."

"And you, Marco? Marc, forgive me."

"I already am one."

The young French couple smiled at the man in the white shirt and brown vest, enjoying the conversation, almost like a game, searching and finding the right words in Italian, French or English.

There was a stir, the carriers came out, a man with a handlebar moustache snoring in the chair.

"He is for real," said Marc.

A kid turned to hush him, louder than he had spoken. The priest smiled at this, two of the men paused to fasten blindfolds, a third had of such no need, eyes of veiny white, the fourth was leaning towards the chair, listening intently. Yvonne noticed that he had some kind of medallion around his neck. When he finally turned around, he stared right at Marc, but with two black and empty sockets. Yvonne sensed a chill down her spine. It felt like looking down a bottomless pit. Marc was not aware of this; he was looking at the man in the vest.

"What happens now?" he whispered

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