

Shoot Me, Jesus

Brian Allan Skinner

“Please, dear Jesus, just shoot me,” I thought.

Or was it a prayer? Probably not a good prayer. Or, worse, had I said it out loud?

I loosened my tie and looked around the church. The sun had not yet risen. The windows looked like pieces of darkness polished and bolted together. There was some activity in the sacristy as two altar boys in their street clothes scurried back and forth. The two candles they’d lit on the altar didn’t offer much light back where I sat.

I occupied our usual place in the next-to-last pew. Antonio and I never took the last pew. According to the Gospel, the last would be first, and we didn’t want to have to go first. That was the place in church where we felt comfortable.

Now that Antonio was gone, I wondered what was the point of my going on. It hadn’t been two days yet and I missed him more than I could stand. We’d worked together and lived practically our entire lives together. I was asking Jesus to take me too. Eighty was old enough.

Feeling uneasy alone in the house with Antonio’s body, I’d got the neighbor girl down the road, Hermione, to drive me before dawn to Santa Monica’s Church on her way to work at Walton’s. Antonio and I sometimes watched her four-year-old, Adám, when her mama’s sciatica kicked up. The boy was a joy. The most marvelous thing was discovering a brand new world through his eyes. We told Hermione it wasn’t ever a bother. She repaid us in cherry jack *empenadas*, which we never turned down.

I sat back in the pew and caught a couple winks. When I awoke, the first glint of daylight shone through the rose window above the altar, now draped with the funeral altar cloths of black and purple. It was the first time I’d been at church without Antonio. But he was on his way.

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Antonio’s sister had insisted on having the wake in our house, the *casita* Antonio inherited from his *abuela*. Since getting out of the army three years before Korea, it was the only place we’d ever lived. But it was not home to me any longer. Without my *compadre* around, it was only walls and floors and furniture. Now I didn’t have even that.

“This house belonged to my brother,” Benita told me before the mourners arrived. “Now that he’s gone, you will have to leave. He did not make a will. The house is mine now. It always goes to family. You are not family, Six.”

“But I am his best friend,” I replied. “Even now.”

“That doesn’t count. It’s the law: property goes to relatives. If there’s anything of yours here, you better clear it out after the funeral tomorrow. I have tenants that will be moving in next week.”

I was not stunned by this. Benita, who once called me her “other brother,” had grown cold toward us the last couple of years, even before Antonio took sick. It was not long after the Red Willow County assessor sent a notice of our property’s value—not the tumbledown house we struggled to keep in repair—but the five acres on which it stood. There were so many zeroes the number nearly rolled out of our heads. Benita’s mouth hung open, and nothing pleasant or comforting has come out of it since.

The undertaker had laid Antonio out on our poor sofa. Its springs were sprung and the cushions sunk nearly to the floor. He was a little long for it. We’d always napped on the bed upstairs. He looked so uncomfortable. And cold. I complained to Benita.

“It’s been our family custom for two hundred years,” she told me. “If it’ll make you feel better, I’ll bring a blanket from upstairs.”

“He liked the Hopi one.”

It was probably Benita’s first time in our bedroom. Either she didn’t care what Antonio liked or else she didn’t know one tribe’s work from another’s. She brought the blanket from the Pendleton tribe.

“There’s only one bed up there,” she said.

“Yes, we shared it.”

“How cozy,” she snapped.

“Yes, it was, especially in winter.”

She ignored my remark and stretched the wool blanket over him. She folded his hands on top of it.

“His hands were always cold,” I told her.

“Then you arrange him. I’m waiting for the aunties with their goodies.”

She went out the door to the parlor and stood on the front porch. I’d always found her quite attractive, sharing traits with her older brother. But her silhouette revealed how she had allowed herself to go from ravishing to roly-poly one *concha* at a time.

It was almost sunset, the last strands of rose and gold outlining The Mountain. Above, it was deep indigo speckled with stars, like the lid of a God-size enamel coffee pot.

Only a day earlier, Antonio called me to his side, reaching for my hand.

“Better say *adios, mi compadre*. I’m on my way out the door.”

I’d no sooner leaned over him, putting my lips to his mouth, than he breathed his last. His eyes were already closed, his lips curved in the sly smile he still wore in death.

I did not want to touch Antonio again. Though less stiff than earlier, he still seemed made of wood with a coating of wax. It was hard not to break down. His hands would be warmer under the blanket.

The complement of aunties arrived with their platters of food. Tia Maria, Tia Leonora... I recognized them all. As soon as they whisked the food into the kitchen, they returned to lay their heads on my shoulder and weep. I had been good before that.

I lost my self-control and had to go out back where Antonio and I used to sit at night and watch the sky swirl around us. Another car pulled up and parked outside the corral gate, someone who knew company comes around the back. I wiped my eyes on my jacket cuffs.

It was Phineas, a guy Antonio and I used to work with at *Mila-Grow Nursery*. He was a skinny fellow, a few years younger than we were. Antonio joked that you could throw a handful of corn at him and miss. He was the only one of our crew left besides me.

Phineas carried a cold six-pack of Dos Equis. He wrangled two cans from their plastic rings and popped their tabs. We clunked our cans together and took a long draught for Antonio.

Putting his hand on my shoulder, Phineas looked in my eyes. His own brimmed with tears but none escaped. He said not a word, and I knew exactly what he meant. We sat down in the pair of wooden rockers under the *portalo*. I shut my eyes for a minute. The smell of sagebrush and piñon floated on the evening breeze.

I did not return inside. Phineas, not brave enough to go see Antonio, said “Good night.” He took the unopened beers with him. Benita and the other mourners left, taking with them the leftover food. I was glad to be alone again, though I did not want to be by myself.

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I awoke at the back of the church after more than a couple of winks. The two altar boys, now in their vestments, lifted the lid of the censer and spooned more incense on top of the glowing charcoal. I smiled, knowing what fascination smoke and fire hold for ten-year-old boys.

The fragrant smoke rose and twisted and tumbled, reaching even the back of the church. The smell of lemon oil used to polish the pews and woodwork mingled with it. I decided that mixture of aromas was what peacefulness smelled like.

A bier draped in black waited behind me in the vestibule, ready to bear its load. The sunlight streaming through the windows scattered colored patches around the church. A dozen people now sat in the pews. The remaining candles on the altar had been lit.

Father McLarkin, who knew I called him Father Malarkey behind his back, strode to the back of the church. His cassock flapped around his ankles. I stood with difficulty as he approached, hooking my cane on the back of the pew in front. He rested his hand on my shoulder and, like Phineas, he said nothing. His sorrow, too, shone in his eyes.

Father Malarkey gestured to the altar boys and Sister Lucinda what to do next. The organist practiced a reedy hymn. Closing my eyes, I floated up with the music, and the incense, and my prayer to Jesus to please shoot me right then and there.

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I awoke with a start. Never had I seen the church so full. I recited the Lord's Prayer. The words rolled off my lips automatically while the real praying was going on inside.

"Dear Jesus, I'm sorry," I thought. "How can I be so thick-headed?"

I stood up, latched onto my cane, and stepped out of the pew. Walking to where Benita sat with the rest of her immediate family in the first two rows of pews, I turned and bowed to her.

"What're you doing, Six? Have you lost your mind?" she said in a whisper that could've been heard on the steps outside.

"I've come to forgive you," I told her.

"For what? I haven't done anything."

"I forgive you for being lying and greedy, for taking my half of the house. I didn't want to live there without Antonio around anyhow. Good-bye, Benita."

She puffed up her cheeks and shot out her lips as though to deliver a long, slow volley of nastiness, but nothing came out. I bowed and turned away.

I made it back to my pew just as the organ roared the processional "Saint Patrick's Breastplate." The people stood.

*I bind unto myself today
The virtues of the star lit heaven,
The glorious sun's life giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable earth, the deep salt sea
Around the old eternal rocks.*

It was a hard piece to follow, much less sing. I hauled myself upright about the time everyone sat down again.

Though there was no breeze, the flag started slipping from Antonio's polished wooden casket. The lid opened up.

"Careful, Antonio," I hollered. "The flag's going to wind up on the floor."

I traversed the length of the nave before even a corner of Old Glory touched the ground. I hadn't moved that fast in years. No one paid me any mind. Antonio sat up in the casket and, swinging a leg over the side, climbed out and stood before me. He wasn't the old Antonio but the restored one, the one from when we first moved into his *abuela's* house nearly sixty years ago. He was incredibly handsome, shining. I didn't know what to say.

"I thought you were dead."

"I am, but now so are you."

"Whad'ya mean? I'm at your funeral. They played the hymn you wanted, Antonio."

"I heard. Look back at yourself," he said, cocking his head.

I turned and saw myself, looking fast asleep, eyes clamped shut. *Checking for leaks*, Antonio used to say.

"I still say that, Six. Jesus answered your prayer."

"What? To shoot me?"

"Close enough: a heart attack, quick and easy. Died in your sleep, right there in the penultimate pew. We can be together again."

"There's a two-bit word if I ever heard one," I said.

“Thank you for forgiving Benita. It’s what Jesus wanted you to do. That’s what I wanted you to do, Six.”

“Well, I did it anyway,” I said.

Antonio laughed and I shushed him.

“They can’t hear us. We’re dead, remember?”

“It’s confusing walking around in my restored self from when I was twenty while looking at my old self back there. Let’s stay for the rest of mass.”

Antonio and I walked to the last pew, still unoccupied, and sat next to each other. I put my hand on top of his. He’d warmed up nicely.

After the Communion, Antonio told me something he wasn’t supposed to tell me.

“They don’t like it when I peek at the future, but we’re both going to be saints, Six: the Roman Catholic Church’s first gay saints.”

“You know I don’t care for that word. Are you serious?”

“Would you rather *holy homos*?”

“Saints? How about that?” I remarked. “What’ll they call us? We’re not martyrs or doctors of the Church.”

“They will call us Saints Antonio and Sixtus, Blesséd Friends.”

“That we were. But Sixtus?”

“The Church likes anything Latin. It sounds official. Don’t forget, it’s people doing this naming and sanctifying. We’re all a little crazy. But sainthood comes with obligations, rarely pleasant. Little Adám there in front of us is going to develop cystic fibrosis in a couple years.”

“No, sweet Jesus. Take me instead.”

“He already has. But Adám’s Mama will tell him to pray to his Uncle Six to please ask Jesus to spare him for his Mama’s sake. You manage to wangle that favor, that miracle, out of The Man Upstairs. Adám gets cured. That gets people talking and praying. Word gets around. First you, then me. We’re gonna have lots to do. You’re gonna have to pray your ass off.”

“I already did,” I said.

“You’re gonna have to sit with Adám through all the doctors and hospitals, clinics and technicians, diagnoses and prognoses, praying for him all the time.”

“Will he be able to see me next to him?”

“No, but he’ll know you’re there.”

Little Adám, on the pew next to my corpse, patted my hand.

“Wake up, Uncle Six.”

The boy’s mother looked over at him. I hadn’t expected Hermione to come to the funeral, since she’d come to the wake last night. She discovered she cannot wake me. Poor girl. I would have liked to spare her that.

After the Blessing and Dismissal, the ushers rolled Antonio’s casket to the vestibule. The congregation rose and passed down the nave. They paused in front of me—my corpse—and bent forward to say a few words or touch my shoulder. I just stared straight ahead like a stuffed owl.

The mourners touched or kissed the flag on Antonio’s casket. When the last of them had gone out, two of the ushers folded the flag properly into a three-cornered hat and handed it to Benita.

“I see you gave my old railroad lantern to Adám,” Antonio remarked. “That’s good. He will shine his light every place he goes.”

“That lantern’s the only thing I took from the house. I wanted to leave our house to Hermione and little Adám like we discussed, but Benita snatched it. Could you talk to her? Or maybe a ghostly appearance around midnight might do the trick.”

“Her change of heart will be my miracle to plead for. She’s my sister. Don’t worry”

Antonio and I stepped out of the pew.

“You ready, buddy?” he asked.

“Yeah, I guess I’m ready. I love you Antonio. I always had trouble saying it with words.”

Antonio leaned into my ear. I thought for a second he was going to kiss me. *Not in church*, I was ready to tell him.

“I know. One other thing before we head Upstairs,” he whispered. “You heard none of this from me. I learned that in the end everybody makes it. Some it takes nearly all the powers of Heaven to rescue, but everyone squeaks through.”

“Thank God,” I said. “This sinner feels a little less like a fraud now.”

We followed his casket out of the church, but did not descend the steps after the pallbearers.

It was getting so bright I could barely see where I was going. I reached for Antonio’s hand.