

His Brother

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Alvy fought the feverish blankets that bound him to his bed. Then he was awake. His throat had hardened, dried. He tried to ask for water. His sister was there. As she gave him slow careful sips, one dribbled down his chin to the silver hairs on his humid chest, where it was lost.

"The priest is coming out this afternoon," his sister said.

Priest. Alvy tried to say it but his tongue was tired and heavy. He shut his eyes and thought. The priest was coming. Why? He didn't know who the priest was. He didn't care.

Old yellow pictures brought back the memory. His parents had been in the kitchen when he had gotten home. They had stopped talking when he entered. His father should have been in the field.

"You ran away from school today, son. Why?" His father said.

He hung his head. He did not care to look into his mother's frightened face. She was always afraid when he got in trouble at school. She feared the holy power of the solemn wrinkled nuns.

"Sister Domicine says you run right out of church while Father was talking to you. Is that right?"

Alvy tried to answer, but his mouth would not operate; his tongue was dead.

"She says you wouldn't learn your servin' prayers. That you threw off your robes and ran out. Why'd you do it, son?"

He looked into his mother's face. He would rather be damned than help that priest with his dead ceremony. Watch as each day the ritual again frightened people.

Watch each Sunday as his mother sacrificed her precious egg money. He refused to become the servant of a fearsome God's will. He refused to serve the God of Fear. He wouldn't go back there again, and he never did.

Alvy opened his eyes again. It wasn't as bright as it had been before. The priest was out there. He was young, like Saint Francis. Pious around the eyes, sad and pious. Eyes holy as hell, but oddly devoid of pity. Alvy tried to tell that priest to go to hell, but his tongue was just lying there, unconnected. He thought he could spit it out.

He was rubbing Alvy's forehead with oil, then his feet. Alvy tried to roll away but the blankets held him, heavy and hot. God were they hot! He couldn't throw them off. "Last Rites." The words echoed in the emptying chambers of his brain. That priest is giving me last rites. They must think I'm dying.

He was laughing to himself in his mind, because the nerves to his arms and legs were gone. After all these years of dodging, he was trapped, helpless, as the priest prepared him for sacrifice. He had never been to church since the day he ran away. He had never been back, never regretted it.

That priest didn't know how lucky he was. He had turned more than one clergyman red in his time with his own sermons on churches and religion. He had been a god-damn heathen in his time. Yes sir, a god-damn heathen.

"He's smiling, Father. Does he see the Savior calling?"

"I think so. He was a good, hard-working man."

Alvy heard them talking. He was glad his sister thought he was going to heaven. He knew the priest would tell her that. That was why the priest was here. He wondered how much his funeral would cost. He wished he had written a will. Eighty-six years and he still wasn't ready to go.

Something was happening. A cold tightness was entering his chest. He felt the first rush of fright. Odd, he hadn't thought he was afraid to die. The tightness had

nearly stopped his breathing. He hoped he would die before he suffocated. He didn't want to be afraid.

He was very lonely. He contemplated eternity before him. He would be alone for a long time. Forever. He was going to be alone for an eternity. He had been alone most of his life. But forever? He was scared. He tried to open his eyes. To see the couple standing beside him, to salvage one last moment of humanity forever.

Loneliness. That was the worst. Man was created to be with others. He was going to die. The empty vortex of time spun meaninglessly before him. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

But at last, Alvy cried, at last, I'll know . . . I'll know . . . Alvy smiled, but he was dead.