

Empty Churches
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Empty Churches

The church is silent as you enter. It's only a couple of hours after the service, but the sanctuary is deserted. It seems disrespectful for even the sounds of your breath to disturb the perfect quiet. You used to love the church when it was this way, blanketed in shadow and completely empty, except for you. You've always been a solitary person, so having such a massive space all to your lonesome is magical.

Or it used to be.

Perhaps it's the nature of your visit that makes the beautiful church feel stifling. You feel a bit like Luke Skywalker in that scene in Star Wars when the walls of the trash compactor close in on him and Leia and Han and it seems like nothing will stop their rapidly approaching death. Except, in your version, there is no happy ending. The walls keep crushing and crushing until you flatten into a shadow of yourself, and then into nothing at all.

Usually, sneaking into church after hours is an aimless activity, almost unintentional. Today, though, you enter with a purpose, steps quick and eyes fixed right on your target.

You slow a little as you near it, your conviction fading and your steps becoming bogged down by doubt as you stop several yards away. You are afraid, afraid that if you continue, you will never be able to turn back, one way or another.

But you need to be able to say it out loud. You need to sit in your secret for just a moment, letting it surround you and envelop you.

What better place to tell a secret than an empty church?

Your feet take you to an icon, the one that has always been your favorite. It's of Saint Panteleimon, the healer saint. It's fitting, in a way, because you've always wanted to be a doctor. The saint in the painting also seems so much more welcoming than any of the other blank visages around you, his eyes soft and understanding, even in the face of your secret.

Your church is full of those icons, beautiful paintings of saints and apostles that stare down at you from every corner. They already know your secret, you suppose. They know everything, every wrong you have ever committed. They know about how you crumpled up Sophie Curran's homework in the third grade because she called you stupid during lunch. They know how you teased Daniel Henderson mercilessly during capture the flag in sixth grade, how you made him so mad that he hit you and you didn't get into any trouble.

They know the worse things too though, the things that you have buried so deeply in your mind that you didn't even know what they meant for a long, long time. How you liked the ways that other boys in your school acted, carefree and brash, not because you wanted to kiss them, but because you wanted to be like them. How the skirts that you wore to church always made you feel kind of itchy under your skin, as if your very soul were covered in mosquito bites that would never go away. How the words 'daughter' and 'sister' and 'girl' made you feel the same way, like you wanted to turn your skin inside out.

It used to be cute. You were called 'tomboy' and 'spitfire'. You were rowdy but harmless.

It's not harmless anymore. Now, it's concerning.

Your parents definitely know, or at least they suspect. Most parents know that their kids are what they are before they tell them. Most parents probably know before their kids, because they know that such things exist. Parents know words like ‘gay’ or ‘trans’.

Parents know other words too.

Words that are a little meaner, words that chip away at you until there’s nothing left of you, girl or boy.

There’s no way that your mom doesn’t know, especially not after you called her and cried when you got your period for the first time. You couldn’t even explain why you were crying, but you can now. Your period meant that God got it wrong, that he made a mistake. That *you* are a mistake. A living, breathing celestial error. Or some kind of cruel joke by some uncaring deity. Some omnipotent immortal that thought it would be funny to give you a secret that you can never tell and watch as you get destroyed.

It truly is a terrible secret. An awful, eat-away-at-you-from-the-inside-out secret. The kind of secret that is so powerful, it can obliterate a life if it is spoken aloud.

Everyone has a secret like that. At least one desperate secret that can never be told, for fear that it will tear apart the very fabric of the universe. This is not a secret that you will ever tell anyone if you can help it. You feel a little like a spy, so deep undercover that even the slightest misstep could get you killed. Sometimes it all becomes too much, so much that you are afraid that you will blurt it out, that you cannot hold it in any longer. That is why you are here. To say your secret out loud and hope that it relieves some of the pressure, instead of creating a crack in the dam you have built around the rush of thought in your mind.

You stare down at your feet, the kindness in the pictured saint's face becoming too much for you to bear. You feel like you might vomit into one of the metal garbage cans in the corner that the churchgoers use to discard the butts of candles, the ones that have burned all the way out. Sometimes, you feel like one of those candles when you're in church. Like a stub of wax, too short to be of any use, like you have fulfilled your purpose and are only waiting for someone to throw you away. Like every good Christian thing you've ever done turns to candle smoke in the air when scorched by the fire of your sins and your furtive desires.

Without looking at the icon, you whisper the words, not wanting them to sound too loud in the church. They ring out anyway, cracking the holy silence down the middle. Your blood rushes in your ears as you say them again, looking at Saint Panteleimon this time and half expecting him to start frowning at you disapprovingly.

He doesn't, of course. Your sole confidant stays stoic in his wooden frame, his face not holding a touch of malice or disgust.

You can't bear to look at it any longer, so you leave.