

## Faith-Based Initiative

By: Kieran Shea

Every Monday at a quarter past five, Father Mike Hogan takes a corner stool at The Raised Jar.

Mondays are Father Mike's days off from the bleak, celibate trade of the doomed at Sacred Heart down in Asbury Park. Shepherding the indigent, the guilty, the infirm and more and more these days, the totally fucked.

Typically, Father Mike settles in at the end of the mahogany, tucks into a recycled stack of Sunday papers I save for him, maybe orders a thrifty special off of the menu. Curried stuffed potato skins and Manhattan clam chowder are keen with Father Mike. Never more than two pints at a sitting lest it get back to the fretful diocese brass.

The Raised Jar's owners, Ed and Eleanor Campbell, love the old man to pieces. Hell, everybody does. What with his coaching the summer hoops league and the shore homeless shelter, the man is a local saint. The Campbells comp Father Mike too, because he hooked them up with Ethan and Luke, their two adopted Korean sons.

There's no TV in the bar, so Mondays are a dead shift behind the sticks, and because of this I've gotten to know Father Mike pretty well.

He reads thick, political biographies and both of us think James Gandolfini is totally overrated. I'm lapsed, but what the hell. Father Mike keeps trying.

"A seltzer, Gabe."

I arch an eyebrow, "No Guinness tonight, Father?"

Father pats his pockets like he's forgotten something.

"No," he says, "My stomach's been acting funny. Just the soda, please, Gabe. No straw."

"Fruit in it?"

Father Mike shakes his head no and rakes his scalp-cut with his fingernails. I smile and gun him a large soda, tapping it down on a coaster in front of him. His skin is scarlet from the cold walk up to Long Branch. February low off the New Jersey coastline makes the sea air slash like a razor. From where I stand I can smell the stale smoke drifting off his faded blue Knights of Columbus windbreaker like an old attic sheet.

What can I say? The priest likes his Winstons.

I stick a black plastic swizzle stick in my mouth and switch it back and forth with my tongue as Father Mike slugs back some of his seltzer. Setting his drink down, his eyes bore into the space on the bar between his scabbed hands. And then Father makes a noise that sounds almost like a child stifling a hiccup.

Father can't hold it. He starts crying.

I reach for his forearm.

"Hey, Father. Hey, now. Hey."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. "

"Hey, nothing to be sorry about."

He backhands some tears, "It's been...it's been hard."

"I know, Father."

"Hard for me, Gabe. Hard for the other priests, but they're younger. Ethiopia. Sierra Leone. They've seen worse where they come from."

“I know, Father. It breaks my heart.”

“Horrible things.”

“It’ll get better soon, you’ll see.”

With fractured grief, Father Mike stares into my eyes and starts to cough, a heavy smoker’s jag.

Two other patrons at a lone two top across the room look up from their burgers and I shoot them a look. They go back to their specials while Wendy, our sole waitress on Mondays, refills their water glasses.

I let go of Father’s forearm and go old school.

I pour Father a double of Tullamore Dew.

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After closing, our grill cook, Miguel Morales, sits near the back door of the kitchen. He’s peeled out of his checks, apron, chef’s jacket, and changed into his street clothes—some ratty sweats with a black zipped hoodie, swollen dirty sneakers and a red Fila truckers cap. Miguel kind of leans and sits on a short of stack of four green milk crates, arms resting on his thighs like a whipped prize fighter.

After I called Father Mike a cab, we had about dozen other bar and dinner customers. Ed came by to cash out the register with a security escort about a half-hour ago, and he gave Wendy a lift home. It’s part of my job to turn out the lights and set the alarms. Because it’s a light night, I gave Miguel a hand breaking down the kitchen and running the dry mop over the mud-colored tiles. Eight dinner tickets all night long. Clean up was a breeze.

Miguel and I are drinking our second shift beers before heading home. The scent of bleach and lemon cleanser from the floor is stifling. I pull on my brown Carhartt jacket and shake my keys.

“Light night, huh?”

Miguel looks up.

“Mondays at The Jar...” I go on, taking a slurp from my beer. “Macking.”

Miguel mutters something I can’t hear.

“What’s that?”

“S’not right, yo.”

“What’s not right?”

“Father Mike.”

I chew my lip, “Yeah, well. Hey, what’re you going to do? Scumbag kids.”

“Still. S’not right.”

I zipper up my jacket and adjust my watch cap in the shine of the glassed doors of the standup convection oven behind the line. I rent a garage apartment a stiff ten minute walk from the bar, and if I get a move on I can probably catch a shower and maybe ESPN SportsCenter before midnight and dreams. In ten hours I’ve got class over at a Rutgers satellite. Economics.

“Somboddy should do somethin’, yo.”

I turn and tilt my head. Miguel is looking at me now, his brown eyes dead on and hard. I wait a beat.

“Do something?”

Miguel's head bobs.

"Yeah."

I eye him up and down.

"What? You?"

"No. Me and you."

I bark a short laugh, but Miguel's face stays stony.

"You're serious?"

"Sí. I totally serious."

"Get the fuck out of here, Miguel."

Miguel throws up his hands, "But Father Mike, he does so much, man. My cousin? Enrique? Fuck. His little girl got sick and Father Mike was, like, paying for her meds an' shit. Does it all the time. Father, he give when no one care. Old Italian ladies yell: Latinos ruining their *parroquia* and I's like, fuck them. But Father Mike sticks up for us. You don't know what that's like, G."

Miguel is right. I have no idea what it's like.

I grew up middle-class with broken family roots one county over. I attend college on my own dime because I can't pour beer forever, and I'm dating a cherry-haired, Irish bombshell with great tits who adores anything I do. I have prospects. Young guys like Miguel, from the battered carved up houses in the trashed, flagged parts of all these Jersey beach towns, the cheap apartments and forgotten residential tracts, it's got to suck. All feared and shunned. Clawed their ways out of the brutal guts of one country into another's just to be squashed in the slack and scapegoated. It was Father Mike who talked to the Campbells into hiring Miguel on the line at The Jar in the first place.

I try to talk sense into him.

"Miguel, come on, man. Think about it. What're you going to do? Like in a perfect world I'm sure there'd be some justice out there and those sickos who trashed Father Mike's church would get theirs."

"Yeah."

"But I'm sure the cops are doing everything they can. Just forget about it, dude. It's their problem."

"*Ellos saben la mierda.*"

I finish my beer.

"Yeah well, they may know shit, amigo, but sooner or later they'll figure it out."

Miguel sulks, "Been like three weeks, man."

"So?"

"So? *So?* Someone like me, I do somethin' like that? Like...*bang*, jail. Throw away the key."

And I think, maybe Miguel just needs another beer. Fuck, I know I do. I saunter into the dining room and reach over the bar to pour us a couple more Harp Lagers from the tap. I walk back gingerly and hand him his. We drink our third beers pretty much in silence until Miguel leaps up punches a hole in the drywall.

"*Hey!*" I shout.

Miguel is up now, pacing, "Like I know, man! Like I know who did it, G!"

"You? You know who trashed Sacred Heart?"

"Sí."

"No shit?"

“Yeah. No shit. Enrique knows too.”

“Enrique?”

“My cousin. Says last month Father sees this homeboy hitting some girl bad, so he stop to help. Fucked Father all up. Bryant. That’s the guy. Bryant guy say he gonna get even, fuck Father Mike for good. And, yo, people, man...they saw it. Everybody saw it! Him say all this shit, but nobody say nothin’ to police. Nothin’. Word is, homeboy brags about what he did. Proud.”

“What’s this Bryant dude’s first name?”

“*No se. Pinche puta.*”

“Where does he live? Up here? Does this piece of shit live down in Asbury proper or what?”

“Nah. Down Neptune.”

“Neptune?”

“Yeah.”

I remember Father Mike weeping at the bar and slowly I begin to feel my shoulders tighten.

I can not imagine the humiliation, the suppressed rage Father Mike feels. A real boot in the face. Paint and garbage and broken stained glass everywhere. Graffiti describing acts of pedophilia. Dog shit stuffed in the chalice. Sacred Heart’s statue of the Virgin Mary had her eyes blacked out and her hands chopped off.

“We need a lookout, yo.”

“What? Wait. Who? Me?”

“Yeah. Jus’ a lookout.”

“I don’t know, man.”

Miguel paces, “Enrique an’ me we teach this *maricón* respect, yo. You don’t have to do nothin’.”

“Fuck. What the fuck, Miguel?”

Miguel rolls his shoulders, “Back in an hour, G.”

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Three more beers and Miguel makes a call from the kitchen’s phone. Ten minutes later a dented, tan Toyota minivan picks us up half a block down from bar. We climb in and I slide the side door closed.

“*Enrique, este es Gabriel.*”

Enrique is slightly taller than Miguel and bigger across the shoulders. He has a closely shaved head, full goatee and wears a heavy lined black and tan flannel shirt over a gray sweatshirt. From where I sit in the back, I can see a dark green shadow of an ornate tattoo creeping up from below his collar to the base of his skull.

Enrique pulls into traffic and doesn’t acknowledge me at all.

The radio plays some Latin talk show, real low, the DJ’s rapid-fire prattle sounding like he’s trapped in an oil drum. A minty air freshener with a Salvadoran flag on it swings from the rearview mirror and there are kids toys all over the back seat. I adjust my legs. There’s easily a half a dozen empty McDonald’s and White Castle sacks on the floor.

Enrique points below the glove compartment and turns the wheel.

“*Compruebe el bolso...*”

Miguel unzips a duffel at his feet, rummages, and zips it back up.

“*Galán.*”

Via the side streets we pick our way over to Route 71 and head south towards Neptune. I’m more than half drunk but I’m thinking how bad this all is, about how I’m about to royally fuck up my life and maybe after a few beers this isn’t the best idea to go vigilante, but fuck it.

Miguel gestures to me without looking back and the two of them in the front seat speak so much rapid fire Salvadoran *caliche* slang that I can’t keep up with my restaurant Spanglish. They laugh and Enrique catches my eyes in the rearview mirror.

“*¿Tu es un amigo de Padre?*”

I steel myself. I look back and nod.

And I am. I am Father Mike’s friend. Beery drums pound the courage and I think: *fuck this guy Bryant, this lowlife motherfucker*. Father Mike is a stand-up guy doing real things to help real people and this Bryant piece of shit deserves some kind of payback for destroying the church. The fucking coward. A good ass-kicking sounds dead fine with me. But then I think, ah...fucking hell.

I should have just gone home.

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We troll by Bryant’s butt-ugly, aqua-colored ranch house and pull around the block and park just off an access alley. Enrique and Miguel tell me to follow their lead and we move fast across the backyards. Apparently Bryant sleeps in the basement of his Mom’s split-level. It’s a rec room arrangement with a sliding glass door exiting onto a cheap red flagstone patio all Chemoed with weeds of neglect. I guess Enrique and Miguel just figured the back door would be unlocked because Bryant is a lazy ass kid or maybe if it was locked they’d just smash it in. Regardless, somewhere several houses away, a chained up dog catches our scent and goes positively apeshit. We wear latex gloves from the restaurant and black ski masks.

From the sliding glass door, I see Bryant passed out on a plaid couch in the blue glow of a DVD player’s cue. Skinny guy, maybe twenty, with a whisper of beard and short dreadlocked hair. There’s a low, cruddy coffee table in front of the couch with a veritable skyline of spent Steel Reserve 211 malt liquor cans on it, the towering jewel of this city being a huge, red, translucent bong. A short stack of porno DVD cases are also on the coffee table. One case is flipped open and the cover is propped up in our direction like a greeting card. Even in the ghostly blue glow from the television, I can read the title from outside on the patio: *Big Wet Hiney-Hos #7*. Bryant’s right hand is shoved down the front of his boxers. Guess he passed out mid-stroke.

I feel like I’m having a heart attack as I watch Miguel unzip the duffel and take out a youth-sized Rawlings aluminum baseball bat. He tracks the door open, crosses the room quickly, and chops fast before Bryant can focus out of his ganja coma as to what is happening. The bat catches Bryant at the top of his forehead with a hollow *thwok* and he flops back down on the couch. Miguel pops him again just to be sure he’s out cold and Enrique slips further into the basement, taking up a position on the stairs leading to the top half of the house, in case Bryant’s mother comes padding down mid-assault.

Miguel steps back across the room and slides the door almost closed. Behind his ski mask, his eyes lock with mine and he quickly makes hand signals with a latexed forefinger. He taps his ear. *Listen*. He points in several directions from behind the glass and touches just below his eye. *Keep an eye out*.

I nod sharply at Miguel, and he turns and takes a fat roll of silver duct tape from the duffle and proceeds to wrap Bryant mouth shut, wrapping the tape around his head several times like a mummy. Miguel binds Bryant hands and feet as well.

Finished, Miguel steps back and gestures to Enrique. As instructed, I do a quick survey of the backyard, right then left, and then look back at the scene within. Through the cracked sliding glass door, I see that Enrique now has the bat and I hear two quick *whooving* sounds as he sails it through the air. Each swing ends with grotesque, wet crunch as Bryant's kneecaps explode. Bryant rockets awake like a bucking animal. The screams against the duct tape are awful.

Lights pop on. I blink away the blur.

A voice upstairs cries out.

*"Jeremy?"*

Holy shit. Bryant's mom. Holy shit. Oh shit. Ohholyfuckingshit.

I can see Bryant's mom up in the foyer. In a pink bathrobe, she is enormous...and she is fumbling with what looks like a shotgun. She shrieks something indecipherable and Miguel charges up the short stairs to the foyer to take her out. He snatches the shotgun from her hands, flips it, and jabs the stock square in the woman's wide forehead. Bryant's mom crumples to the floor with a thud, hammy arms and legs out akimbo.

Enrique doesn't appear rattled by the interruption. Leisurely he takes a can of red spray paint from the duffle bag and gang tags the basement paneling above Bryant's heaving body. When he finishes, Enrique kicks Bryant in the shoulder and points at the wall.

Behind the tape, Bryant screams again, bug-eyed. The paint drips down the wall like a diagram drawn in blood.

Bryant's face shines with tears and snot. The veins in his neck are wires.

*"¿Padre Mike?"*

Bryant whines as Miguel turns out the lights in the foyer upstairs. Enrique whispers.

*"¿La próxima vez?"*

My mind tumbles the translation: Next time?

Bryant freaks.

Enrique hisses, *"Machete."*

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A month and a half goes by and I keep waiting for the police to come a tapping on my apartment door, or strolling into The Raised Jar's kitchen, or finding me in class, wrenching the handcuffs on me in front of room full of slack-jawed peers. But no. Nothing. Not a peep. No aggravated assault charges or attempted murder charges or anything. The cops eventually link Bryant to the desecration of Sacred Heart but there's nothing in the papers about him or his mom or the attack.

Miguel doesn't speak of that night, until one Friday we're both in the walk-in refrigerator together.

I'm shouldering a case of Amstel and I have the necks of a couple bottles of the house white in my right hand. Crossing his arms, Miguel blocks the heavy, pebbled metal door.

"Hey, Miguel."

"S'up?"

"Can I get by?"

Miguel squints, "Father Mike...right thing, G."

I shrug. "You hear anything?"

Miguel shakes his head.

"Me either," I say.

Miguel laughs, "*Somos fantasmas.*"

"Huh?"

"Boo!" He points at his chest then at me.

"Ghosts?"

"Sí. Ghosts. We ghosts. And Enrique and me, we owe you, G."

I look away. "No you don't."

"No. We do. "

I catch his eyes. "OK."

Miguel's face goes flat, hard.

"But Enrique, yo, he has doubts."

"Doubts?"

"Sí."

"What do you mean fucking doubts?"

"Doubts, yo. You...*no familia...entiendes?* We cool and all, but I tell him and I tell him, but he's like..." Miguel shrugs. "*¿Quién sabe?*"

I puff out an incredulous snort.

"D'fuck, dude?"

"Hey, amigo. I jus' tellin' like it is."

I shove past him.

I step out of the walk-in into the heat and clattering chaos of the kitchen and I look back at Miguel standing in the walk-in's doorway. He flashes me a crooked upside "M" with his fingers and winks and starts laughing. Howling actually.

*Mara Salvatrucha. MS 13.*

And I remember the sound of Bryant's breaking knees and I head to the bar.

The bar, the bar, the motherfucking bar.

*New Jersey born Kieran Shea's fiction has appeared in Thuglit #16, Word Riot and recently in Anthony Neil Smith's resurrection of the online crime bellwether, Plots With Guns. He has upcoming stories in Demolition and PulpPusher.*