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St. Theresa of the Aliens  
by James Patrick Kelly  
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So now they want to make her a saint. Her cult is spreading. Cures are claimed. The Purgers are taking over the Church; they want one of their own to be the first saint of the new century. The Congregation of Rites in Rome has named an advocate of the cause to prepare a brief for her sanctity. He has already asked me for an interview. I would rather talk to the promoter of the faith. The priest they call the devil's advocate.

Terry Burelli -- Theresa to the mythmakers -- did not have many friends while she was alive. I think it was because she was such a sad person. What I remember most about her is the sigh. She had no need of words to sum up her view of life. The sigh was enough. Even when she smiled it was as if she were expecting a disappointment. I never heard her laugh out loud; maybe she regarded humor as an occasion of sin. When she spoke in her soft, sighing voice people worried she was about to cry. Then she would shock them with her ferocious opinions.

My wife was her first cousin. When I met Nicole, she and Terry were roommates at St. Mary's College. I thought them an unlikely pair; at the time they seemed very different. Although both were attractive, Terry's beauty was cool and sterile; she was about as watchable as a plaster Virgin. Nicole and I would spend hours just looking at each other in wondrous silence. Both women were small-town Catholics, yet while Nicole was fascinated by the great world that the Church never mentioned, Terry was already building psychic walls to protect herself from it. Terry was a politician; she became chairperson of the local right-to-life chapter, forced the administration to blackout all X-rated movies ordered from telelink by the film club, and helped to set up a student-run soup kitchen in South Bend's slum. She dragged Nicole and me out of our apathy on occasion, although we much preferred being alone with each other to promoting her causes.

I wanted Nicole so much that I convinced myself that she was nothing like her dour cousin. We were in love; I thought that was enough to make a successful marriage. After school, we moved to Wynnewood, a suburb of Philadelphia, and each of us found interesting work. I became a staff writer and then an editor for InfoLine, one of the information utilities on telelink. Often as not I worked from my home terminal and had supper ready for Nicole when she came home from her job teaching history at Lower Marion High School. Our world was very small; it included just the two of us. We watched a lot of telelink and smoked hybrid pot that we grew ourselves and planted flower gardens and played pacball and drank daiquiris in video bars; all the soothing

frivolities of life that people like Terry had no use for. It seemed to both of us that we were happy.

But Terry would not leave us alone. Our affluence offended her, although she was not at all shy about asking for money for her causes. Our indifference offended her more. She visited often and insisted on giving us her "reports from the real world," as she called them, tales of hunger and decadence and corruption. I can see her now, sitting on the modular couch in our living room, holding forth with quiet intensity about some misfit whose soul she coveted for the Lord.

"Thirteen years old." She would rub the crucifix hanging around her neck with thumb and forefinger. "She earns two hundred dollars a night and she needs every cent of it to pay for screamers. The only adults she knows are the johns; her only god comes out of a needle. And they call it a victimless crime. Your senator is cosponsoring the bill, Sam. You're in telelink; can't you do anything?"

Somehow, it was always my fault. By this time Nicole would have been spiritually battered into a corner of the couch. She would clutch knees to chest and nod, nod, nod, eyes blank. My best move would be to steer the conversation onto a more cheery topic. "What ever happened to so-and-so?" I would say, or "What should we watch tonight?" or "Where should we go for supper?" I did not mind sounding like a fool; I thought I was protecting Nicole.

Often as not Terry would ignore these gambits and continue on with her condemnations of the monsters who had inflicted modern civilization on the world. Once, though, she turned on me in a fury. "Sam, don't you realize that you could get in your fancy car right now, drive downtown and find people starving? What difference does it make to them if you can't order the Marx Brothers on the goddamned telelink?"

"People are born to die." I should have realized when she took the Lord's name in vain that she was out of control. I should have excused myself and spent a few minutes in the bathroom washing my hands. I did not. "God made them that way," I said.

She sighed. It was a sigh that acknowledged that I was the enemy but because God commanded it she would forgive me.

I did not much care to be condescended to in my own living room. "Everything is so simple, isn't it? If only the immoral louts like me would wake up and see the light. If only we would stop writing news, building cities, designing new computers. If only we would tear it all down and bring back the Middle Ages so that everybody in the world was Catholic and wretched together. Solidarity of misery, that's the ticket! Then maybe we could all pray and God would take care of us like he takes care of the birds of the air or the lilies ..."

"Shut up, Sam." Nicole sounded frightened. "You're drunk."

In fact, I had only had three glasses of wine but she was right. I was intoxicated with bitterness, high on blasphemy. Like many lapsed Catholics I had a kind of philosophical blood lust for the delusions of the faithful. Still, I had only been trying to protect Nicole and for my efforts had earned her rebuke. I was furious.

"Maybe you two would like to get down on your knees and pray for me? You'll excuse me if I don't stick around to watch. I'm afraid I might throw up." I thought I saw a smile tugging at Terry's perpetual frown; I was so mad I wanted to hit her. Instead I grabbed the half-empty bottle of Pocono riesling and retreated to the telelink room.

The Catholic Church has no answer to the problem of evil, therefore I cannot possibly ... Oh, screw the problem of evil. Screw all the dusty ideas, the dry arguments for and against. There is no single moment when you lose your faith; it crumbles under a series of little shocks. An alcoholic priest preaches the "just war" doctrine from the Sunday pulpit. Your friend dies of leukemia and God pays no attention. A well-meaning nun tells you that thinking about sex is a sin. You realize the unspeakable cruelty of an eternal

Hell. You read the Bible and then you look at the Church men have made from it. I lost my faith when I no longer needed ideas to comfort me. I had Nicole.

I remember that Nicole and I made love that night. Afterward, I tried to apologize for losing my temper. She hushed me. "It's all right, Sam," she said. "I understand. She scares me too."

\* \* \* \*

That was just about the time that the aliens landed in Sverdlovsk.

It is hard now, after all that has happened, to remember how we all felt when we first heard the news. For years popular culture had prophesied the coming of aliens. Despite all the dark visions of monsters and cruel galactic empires, I think for the most part we longed to meet another intelligent species. We hoped they would answer all our questions, solve all our problems. As Nicole said, we were looking for a shortcut to paradise. We were the new Israelites, waiting for messiahs from space.

None of us expected that the messiahs would be communists. That was, I think, the hardest thing of all to accept. Not only had the aliens chosen to land in the U.S.S.R., but they actually called themselves communists. It was, they said, the best translation of their own name for themselves. Of course, the name has never really caught on in this country; we are still calling them "the aliens." A barely civil name. A name that neatly summarizes our attitude toward them.

Despite what you hear, the aliens do not think much of Marx and Engels and they are only mildly sympathetic to Lenin. Yes, they hold all property in common, their economy is planned, they live in collectives. They do not expect their world state to wither away however, and they are by no means revolutionaries. You have only to look at their record since landing to see that they mean to change us by example, not by force. But still the preachers rail and the politicians lecture and the people do not understand.

It was six months after Sverdlovsk before they even bothered to visit the United States. I had the honor, if you can call it that, of representing InfoLine at the first English-language press conference ever given by an alien. Of course, no one has ever really seen an alien since they never come out of their bullet-shaped jump ships. The squat hairless monkeys that they call their "bodies" are in fact remotely-controlled mechanisms. The aliens fear the the hostility of the earth's environment and its inhabitants. I have seen and even talked to these "bodies"; like most people I accept the mechanism and rarely think about the mysterious and distant alien controlling it.

As an historic disaster, that press conference has been studied and restudied. Yet to this day I have difficulty remembering it, no doubt because it was so closely linked with a personal disaster. I could not sleep the night before; I was trying to find some middle ground between awe of the aliens and patriotic suspicion of their motives. Sometime after midnight I got out of bed. I must have woken Nicole as I prowled around the house; she came out into the kitchen to fix us both some hot cocoa. I was sorry to have disturbed her but glad for the company.

"Nervous?" she said.

I shrugged. If I admitted it to her I would have to admit it to myself.

She set a steaming cup in front of me. "I heard someone on the telelink saying today that it's going to take more than a press conference to make up for what they've done wrong already. He said that we shouldn't be listening to them, they should be listening to us."

"Morris. He's an asshole."

"Still, most people act as if they know everything just because they have starships. What if they don't? Maybe what you should do is get up and ask them who's buried in Grant's Tomb? They'd never figure it out." She chuckled. "You'd go down as the man who stumped the aliens."

"Go down, all right." Still, it was worth a smile at three o'clock in the morning. "Let's talk about something else."

She sipped her cocoa. "Terry called today. She's been asked to join the central council of the Brides of Christ. She doesn't know whether she wants to take the vows or not."

"That idiot. What she needs is a real man to sleep with, not a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus."

Nicole stiffened. "That's your prescription, Doctor? Get yourself some nice warm sex and call in the morning?"

All the warning signs were up but I refused to see them. "Never failed yet," I said with a leer. "Let's not talk about Terry. We always end up fighting."

"O.K. Let's talk about us." She considered. "I missed my period. I wasn't going to tell you until after the press conference but ..."

"You're pregnant? But I've been taking my pills."

"I don't know yet. I have a doctor's appointment Wednesday."

"Nicole, those pills are ninety-nine and nine tenths."

"I know. Do you believe in miracles?"

I think I must have laughed at that. "Are you going to have it?"

"What do you mean, have it?" In that moment she was the only alien in the world. Her voice made me shiver.

"I mean that ... I mean there's a choice."

"What would you do?"

"I'll do what you want," I said.

"You mean you'll go along with what I want. Even if you don't really want a baby?"

"I didn't say that."

"You don't have to. Your face says it for you."

It was one of the few times I wished that Nicole was the kind of woman you read about in books, the kind who run out of rooms crying. Nicole never turned away from trouble. "Look, honey, it's late and you've just sprung a hell of a surprise on me. I love you. I can't help it if my face looks like oatmeal. Let's go back to bed and give it a rest until morning. We'll both be thinking clearer then." I offered her my hand.

She did not take it. "All right, Sam. But there's no choice involved, do you understand? No choice at all."

The argument flared for a week and was never satisfactorily extinguished, only left alone by mutual consent to smoulder. I know she thought I did not want the child; maybe she was right.

It was the first real fight we had ever had.

\* \* \* \*

Needless to say, I was not at my best for the press conference. It was held in a bubble tent set up on a runway at Andrews Air Force Base. Nearby was the jump ship, which looked to me like a silo. A translucent dome atop a rotating red cylinder, perched on a fence of duraplas pickets. They say that the orbiting mother ship carries thirty in its hold; most of those had already landed in the U.S.S.R. Aliens can control their external bodies only at short distances, so most of our meetings have taken place on runways or other large open spaces.

The alien's name was Twisted Logic. Nicole believed that the aliens were twitting us in their use of the English language. That may well be, but the joke was the same in Russian, Spanish and Chinese. Twisted Logic stood on a specially-built platform; he was less than a meter tall. The President sat beside the alien looking like a man who has just gotten a pink slip in his pay envelope. Twisted Logic was red and shiny like a new plastic firetruck. He was not wearing any clothes but then he did not need any, not having any sex. He requested, however, that we not refer to him as an "it." His tail wagged when he talked. The tail was a wonderful touch; how can you distrust a creature with a wagging tail?

You can still view the tape of that first press conference on Infoline.

Most of the early questions had to do with why the aliens chose to land in Russia. Twisted Logic explained the similarities between alien political philosophy and communism. He cited the Leonov space station and the two Mars expeditions as evidence that the Soviet space program was far more advanced than ours. He said that the aliens were worried about security here. When he mentioned the bombing of the U.N. there was a low chorus of groans and even some hisses. Although he spoke in a high-pitched cartoon voice and giggled a lot and was as cute as a puppy, talking about the destruction of the U.N. was unforgiveable. You could feel the press corps turning against him.

"Mr. Logic," said one conservative pundit with heavy sarcasm, "Mr. Logic, isn't your avowed bias toward the Soviet Union a tacit endorsement of the suppression of human rights there? What conclusions would you expect the American people to draw from the current situation, sir?"

Twisted Logic giggled. "The rights of the one versus the rights of the many. We have resolved this conflict to our satisfaction. You have not. Infer only that we await your enlightenment and will instruct if asked."

"Why have you come to earth?" called another.

He nodded. "Because you could not come to us."

"What's that supposed to mean?" someone shouted. The room filled with cries of derision.

"My response lacks content?" Twisted Logic looked for help to the President, who looked away. "Pardon. We bring ourselves to you because we are impatient for friends."

He might have made some friends had he continued in that vein. I tried to help him along. "Sir, we all recognize that your science is very advanced. Can we expect you to share your knowledge and technology with us? In particular, will you teach us to build star ships of our own?"

"Exactly." He pointed at me and nodded again. "Exactly. The universe is very large and we are very small. Intelligence must coalesce to grow."

"Coalesce?" whispered the woman sitting next to me. "Coalesce?"

"Sir!" Father Estragon from the Logos channel waved at the alien. He was Terry Burelli's favorite telelink commentator. "Sir, as you may know, many of our most difficult problems on this planet arise out of religious factionalism. Would you comment please on your own religious beliefs."

"I hold no such beliefs."

Estragon turned as white as his Roman collar. "You don't believe in God?"

"When there is no evidence," said Twisted Logic, tail wagging, "the theory is discarded."

In a bar afterwards Joe Perkins from the Times nicely summed up the play that the press conference was going to get. "Godless commies from outer space," he said.

There were no more press conferences. Access to Twisted Logic and the other aliens who eventually came to this country had to be approved by the State Department. Congress passed the Alien Secrets Act which allowed instant classification of any alien remark deemed "controversial." It proved unenforceable once Twisted Logic took his space silo on a so-called "Goodwill Tour" of the world, a tour which was haunted by demonstrations, riots and misunderstanding.

All things considered, the reaction from the Vatican was circumspect. They insisted on the eternal truth of Divine Revelation and announced that the Pope would begin saying a special Mass on the first Sunday of each month for the souls of the aliens. For the most part the East did not care. The Buddhists regarded the aliens as part of the general anitya of the universe; they too would pass and so no action was indicated. Most Hindus were willing to tolerate the alien heresy as long as it did not lead to social upheavals. The reaction from Islam was less tempered. There was talk of spiritual jihad, although how this might be accomplished was not immediately clear. The Shiite imams had a more concrete program: expel the aliens. The First National Baptists and the Moonies and the Brides of Christ agreed.

If the Brides of Christ ruled the world, there would be two classes of citizens: Roman Catholics and the damned. Their battle plan in the war for souls is an abrupt about-face and a forced march into the past. Do away with Vatican II, the Protestant Reconciliation, secularized clergy. It seems that they are everywhere these days, working even the smallest crowds in their severe black uniforms, an affectation of the habits formerly worn by nuns and priests. Yes, men join too, although the symbolism of a man marrying Christ is jarring. Fanatics do not worry about these things. The Pope does not yet recognize their activities but neither can he afford to interdict them. Millions have left the faith; groups like the Brides dominate the remainder of his dwindling flock. He is already a prisoner of their politics; soon they will be the Church. As Terry Burelli marched through their ranks they came to the center of the anti-alien coalition known as the Purgers.

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Top management at InfoLine quickly discovered that the public's interest in the aliens was insatiable and so they spun off a special interest channel, AlienLine. I was put in charge of the start-up. Although the assignment was a career coup, I could no longer work from my home terminal or even from InfoLine's headquarters in Philadelphia. I was often away from Nicole two or three nights a week. It was a difficult time for both of us because her pregnancy was not going well. For weeks it seemed as if all she could keep down were unsalted crackers and water. I tried as best I could do be the doting husband and proudly expectant father but there was the subscription rate for AlienLine to worry about and plane reservations to Washington and the problem of finding staff who could tell an adjective from an adverb. Sometimes I felt as if I had been split into two people, neither of which liked the other very much.

Nicole and I had never really fought before she got pregnant; now we seemed to be making up for lost time. We argued about money, about politics, about the aliens, even about what to watch on telelink. We never shouted or slammed doors or cried; we just sniped at each other and then were horrified afterward.

"Wallace?" said Nicole. "Wallace?" She lay on the couch with her feet raised on a pile of pillows; she was having circulation problems. "Wallace is a fat man with suspenders smoking a cigar. Our son isn't going to wear suspenders, is he, Sam? And you're not fat."

"Walter?" I read from Name Your Baby. "Ward? Warren?"

"Wally." She chuckled. "What a lousy nickname." She shifted her weight restlessly; she could never seem to get comfortable. "I was thinking that Terry should be the godmother."

"What?" I closed the book.

"I know you don't like her that much but ..."

"Back up. Who said our kid was going to be baptised?"

She rolled over. "Sam, it couldn't hurt."

I tried to stay in control. "Damn it, Nicole, that's hypocrisy. I haven't been near a church for years and neither have you. We're not Catholics anymore -- at least, I'm not. When the aliens say there is no God, I believe them. I don't understand you. Why are you so hot to jump back into a religion that most thinking people are scrambling to get out of?"

"Pregnancy does that to you. Makes you think about what makes a life. Makes you think about dying. Luckily you don't have to worry, Sam. The aliens have already done all your thinking for you." She sat up. "Name the kid after yourself for all I care. Except that she's going to be girl."

I sat beside her. "I'm sorry, Nicole." I kissed her. "I don't know what I can do but I'm sorry."

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Perhaps if the aliens had given us the cure for cancer or a wonder grain to end hunger or the secret of immortality, they might have won people like Nicole and Terry over. I think what we wanted most from them was freedom from all the biological traps the earth had set for us. The aliens were not from

earth; they did not understand our biology nor were they particularly interested in it. A new physics was their principal gift, an arcane and rigorous discipline that ran counter to common intuition. Who cared that they had a detailed mathematical model for the first three minutes of the universe? Or that they had developed from that a theory which linked weak and strong atomic forces, the electromagnetic spectrum and gravitation?

Of course, there was interstellar flight. Everyone expected a joyride to the stars. But the aliens could not just toss us the keys to a starship and wave goodbye. First we had to learn to control gravitrons and squeeze through the interstices in space-time. Then there was the difficult problem of life-support. It soon became clear that it would be years, perhaps decades, before the first ships would be ready. By the anniversary of the Sverdlorsk landing many Americans were disillusioned and bitter. Which was exactly what the rapidly-growing Purge movement wanted.

Purge. Sometimes a word will distort under close scrutiny, and its various meanings will twist back upon themselves. There are spiritual purges, purifications of the soul. Dangerously high pressures can be relieved by purging. Certainly there were some in the Purge movement whose goals were positive. Yet the word also has a bloody legacy of intellectual and religious intolerance. Purge trials. Popes urging crusades to purge the Holy Lands. Hitler's unspeakable purge. I think these dark connotations come closer to the essence of the Purge movement. And it was as a Purger that Terry Burelli came to the attention of the world.

Assassins stalked the aliens. Someone threw a bomb into the presidential reviewing stand during a parade in Buenos Aires. Twisted Logic got a new body and Argentina got a new dictator. A splinter group from the Purge Movement took credit.

Terry had the bad judgement to make one of her weekly telelink calls just after the news broke.

"Nicole's taking a nap," I said. "She's having a bad day and I don't want to wake her up."

"Is she all right?" The old black-and-white camera at her terminal made Terry look as if she had not slept in days. "What does the doctor say?"

"She's pregnant, Terry. It's hard work. Call back later."

"What's the matter, Sam?" She did her imitation of a smile. "Are you angry at me again?"

"At you and at all the other goddamned Purgers. Where in the Bible does Christ say you can go around blowing up your enemies?"

"We have nothing to do with those people, Sam. Sister Laura denounced them; I wrote the press release myself."

"Yeah, sure. And how much will the Brides be giving to their legal defense?"

"We deplore their tactics, not their cause. Certainly they made a mistake. We don't believe in violence, Sam. There has to be a better way to purge the world of ..."

"Goodbye, Terry." I was too disgusted to bother with the niceties; I had to cut her off.

Whatever the tactical disagreements within the Purge movement, all could agree that getting at the aliens to expel them was the major problem. They could intimidate the aliens' human collaborators. But the true enemies of the faith were safe within their well-guarded silos. How could they achieve their goal of purging the world of aliens? Terrorism and prayer proved equally unsatisfactory. Politics remained.

Pride was the key to their plan. Throughout the twentieth century Americans had believed themselves to be the most advanced people in the universe. Suddenly we were no longer first; that place was reserved for the aliens. Worse, we were not even second; with the aliens' help the Soviets had surpassed us. Wounded pride is intangible; you cannot build guns out of it. But with the proper manipulation of the facts, you can turn wounded pride into votes. The strategy was to purge the United States, then the other industrial

states, the Third World, and then ... Then a Purger will smile with the confidence of one who is fighting the Lord's fight. It is not hard to see behind that smile to the inevitability of a Third World War with the Soviets.

AlienLine had to cover the Purge Movement. I wanted to expose them for what they were, but I was overruled. The Demographics Department was able to demonstrate that forty percent of our subscribers were either Purgers or sympathizers. Know thy enemy and all that. Since I was unable to match their propaganda with some of my own, I decided to let them indict themselves with their own words. God help me.

My idea was to stage a debate between an alien and a leader of the Purge movement. I fought for weeks to sell it to my own people at AlienLine, and then to top management at InfoLine. Finally I won permission to approach the State Department with the plan. I thought it might take several months to work out an agreement but State acted as if we were negotiating a nuclear disarmament treaty. I found out later that the Purgers in government were holding the project up for their own purposes.

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Nicole had a disastrous miscarriage her second trimester while I was covering the aliens' first visit to South Africa. I did not know until I found Terry waiting for me when I got home instead of Nicole.

"I want to see her."

"She's asleep. Let her rest."

I poured three fingers of Scotch and drank it neat. Terry watched me, her eyes alight with disapproval. I did not want to see her; I wanted to be with Nicole, to hold her and tell her how sorry I was. If Terry had had one milligram of the compassion that saints are reputed to have, she would have gone away to leave me alone with my guilt and sorrow.

"It doesn't matter that you don't like me, Sam." She worried the rosary beads that hung from the belt of her black habit. "I had to come; she had no one else."

I said nothing.

"She told me everything, you know."

I poured myself another drink.

"I hope you're satisfied." I would have expected a malicious grin. Instead there were tears.

"What do you want from me?" I cried, resisting the impulse to throw my drink in her face. "You want me to slit my wrists?"

"That's the kind of penance a godless man does, Sam. I want you to make your peace with Jesus, not with me. Stop leading my best friend into sin."

I set my glass on the wet bar very carefully, as if it might explode if I jostled it. "I'm home now," I said. "Nicole won't be needing you anymore." I left her and went upstairs. I opened the door the bedroom and slipped onto the chair by the bed. Nicole did not wake up. I spent the night staring at her through the darkness. Terry was gone when we came down together the next morning.

It would have been better for both of us, I think, had Nicole been angry. If she had asked me to quit AlienLine, I would have. I owed her. Instead she bore her misfortune with the quiet grace of a saint. She had lost not only the baby but one of her Fallopian tubes and part of her uterus; her gynecologist warned that another pregnancy might kill her. Yet she never complained. She returned to her job. I tried to get home more often. Our lives settled back into the comforting rhythm of work and play. With one exception. Nicole started to go to church.

Not only Sunday Mass but every morning. St. Mark's was on her way to school, she said, it was no problem. Yet for me it was a terrible problem. In my guilt I thought at first that this was the punishment she had chosen for me; I had no choice but to accept it. In time I came to realize that her churchgoing had nothing to do with me and this was even harder to accept. She was building a wall in our marriage, staking out private territory where I



could not go. She knew I would never be reconciled with the Church, especially a Church run by Purgers. And yet she was no alien-hating fanatic; except for the fact that she disappeared from my world for a few hours every week she was still my love, my Nicole. We reached an uneasy compromise about religion.

"I don't want to argue, Sam." I could hear a hint of Terry Burelli's sadness in her voice.

"I don't either, I want to understand."

"I believe in God. You don't. I'm not going to convert you so please don't try to convert me." She would smile and touch my hand and I would shut up. Most of the time. But because I worked so closely with the aliens I had to ask her.

"What does it matter if we gain the stars, but lose our immortal souls?" she said. "Do we have to accept everything the aliens tell us, do everything their way, and forget about all the things that make us human? Have you ever asked yourself what they are really offering? They want to make us over in their image. We'll be reasonable, regulated, technologically-advanced -- and aliens on our own world. And even if we get to the stars we'll be second class citizens, the ones that had to be helped. I don't need any of it, Sam. All I need is what God offers."

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It was summer before State finally let me approach the aliens with the idea of the debate. Maybe all the fourth of July demonstrations organized by the Purgers had convinced them that something needed to be done. Twisted Logic referred me to his superiors in Sverdlovsk; it took me several tries before I could convince an unenthusiastic alien named Final Authority. I had the impression that he did not much care about American public opinion. "If your people truly want it, we will leave your country. We do not need to be understood; it is you who need to understand."

According to my agreement with State, the debate was to be taped and the tapes submitted for editing by government censors. I soothed my conscience by vowing that if they butchered the debate AlienLine would not run it. To ensure security all human participants were to board a transport at Andrews Air Force Base and fly to a secret rendezvous with the aliens. There would be a live audience of fifteen, five guests of AlienLine, five Purgers and five alien sympathizers -- scientists all as it turned out. They would be subjected to personal searches and liable to fine and imprisonment for disorderly conduct. It was not perfect but it was the best I could do.

I had not seen Terry since the miscarriage and had managed to avoid most of her telelink calls to Nicole. Nevertheless I had followed her career as Sister Theresa, a superior of the Brides of Christ and one of the more rational advocates of the Purge. She had introduced the idea of non-violent prayer marches to disrupt public appearances by the aliens. It seemed that every other week AlienLine was forced to run footage of some sweet little grandmother saying Hail Marys while being dragged away by stony-faced policemen. Terry had all the qualities that telelink loves in its newsmakers. She was attractive, she sounded sincere and she spoke in a kind of sloganese that was easy to understand. She was a master of the fifteen-second quote yet I was sure that if forced to speak at length she would stumble. For that -- and other reasons -- I wanted her to take the Purge side in my debate. Terry did not seem surprised when I asked her but then I supposed that State had leaked the idea.

"What format?" She was taking notes.

"Opening statement, five minutes. Twenty minutes of question, response, rebuttal, each side alternating. A three minute closing."

She sighed. "Not much time."

"If the ratings are good enough you can go at it again."

"You're a cynical man, Sam Crimmins. I pray for you sometimes."

Once such an admission would have thrown me into a rage. Now I found the futility of her prayers for my soul touching. It struck me at that moment that many of her prayers probably went unanswered. It was an austere life

that she had made for herself; I wondered if she were disappointed with it. She looked weary. I could see that her telelink image was largely a product of makeup and acting.

"Moderator?" she said.

"Me."

She shook her head.

"All I do is keep the time," I said. "It's your show."

"I have to talk it over with the Council. They'll say yes." She pushed the notes to one side. "Why are you doing this, Sam?"

"Have you ever met an alien?"

She frowned. "No."

"I just thought that you should."

I was surprised when Nicole asked to go. My first inclination was to say no; after all, her sympathies were clear. I said yes because I still believed her to be a reasonable person who would be intellectually honest enough to give both sides a fair hearing. I realize now something that I only half understood then. I did not stage the debate for the world; I staged it for my wife. I wanted her to see that her newly-reaffirmed faith was a mistake. I wanted her to doubt because I could never believe. Although on the surface our marriage continued as before, there was an underlying friction that was slowly abrading the base of love and trust between us.

\* \* \* \*

In addition to Nicole, the guests from AlienLine included Janet Trumbell, the President of InfoLine, her husband Geoff, and two of InfoLine's corporate lawyers. The rest of the party that boarded the plane at Andrews included three edgy bureaucrats from State, our camera crew and the pro and anti factions. The group had been kept to a minimum in the hope that if the debate proved too controversial it would be that much easier to suppress. Once in the air we were told that we were heading north to Hanscom Defense Force Base, west of Boston.

Had I known the location ahead of time, I might have suspected a trap. There are both civilian and Defense Force runways at Hanscom. The guests remained on the plane while a squad of soldiers escorted the camera crew and me to the bubbletent on the runway where the debate was to be staged. I did not realize at the time that these soldiers were not the troops of the United States Defense Force I had expected; they were members of the Massachusetts Guard. We had landed at the civilian airport, not the military base. I had a telelink show to produce; all I noticed were the guns and riot helmets and the green uniforms. Two of the scientists have claimed that the soldiers who escorted them wore Defense Force uniforms. It is a clear violation of law for state militiamen to pose as federal troops. The Governor of Massachusetts denied that his men switched uniforms. The Governor claimed that they never identified themselves to us at all and therefore broke no laws. The Governor, who took personal charge of the Massachusetts Guard that day, was a Purger.

All we had asked for was one alien. But when the airlock of the red alien silo opened two bodies came out. One identified himself as Twisted Logic. He introduced a banana yellow alien called Awful Truth who was to argue the alien side. All the Purgers except Terry were apoplectic. "How can she debate someone named Truth?" one cried. "It's not that thing's real name, I tell you!" another thundered. "They make their names up to suit the occasion." Terry just sighed her all-purpose sigh. "The Lord will speak today, not me," she said, and managed to make that outrageous statement sound humble. "He knows all the tricks of the devil." That shut them up.

It was about four in the afternoon when the tape started to roll. I introduced them as Sister Theresa of the Brides of Christ and Awful Truth the communist. The opening statements were predictable. Awful Truth gave the digest version of the big bang, planetary formation, organic soup, life, evolution, intelligence. He was more impressive than Twisted Logic, perhaps because he did not giggle so much. I got the impression that he was the alien version of a humorless fanatic, in which case he was well-matched with Terry.

She spoke first of Jesus then of the Judeo-Christian tradition and then as a seeming afterthought the other religions of the world. You could tell that Islam was not her favorite word and she did not even distinguish between Hinduism and Buddhism, lumping them together as the "faiths of the East." It sounded as if she were improvising. Round One to the alien.

Terry asked the first question. "Who caused the Big Bang?"

"By cause you mean a sequence of events in time. Time does not exist prior to the Big Bang, therefore no causation is possible."

"Time did not exist!" Terry gave the camera a sly, play-act grin and nodded to the millions of scientific illiterates who might one day be watching. "What may I ask did exist?"

I was not going to allow her to violate the ground rules on the first question, but Awful Truth replied anyway. "As creatures of time, we can never know."

"Then even in your science there are some things you must take on faith?" she said.

"Excuse me," I said firmly, "but you have spoken out of turn, Sister Teresa. Awful Truth, you may now ask a question."

"Her beliefs are invalid. Asking questions in this context equates her unsupportable opinions with theories which can be verified empirically. Therefore there are no questions. I am content to respond."

I was as dumbfounded as the audience. I wondered if I should stop the cameras and explain the debate to the alien again. I wondered if I should just stop the camera, period. While I wondered, Terry spoke up.

"Thank you, Mr. Truth. Many of those who believe in God wonder how you aliens are able to tell the difference between good and evil. Some, in fact, claim that you do not care. Do you?"

"We do not recognize such absolutes in the universe. Good and evil are emotional attitudes; they have no truth value."

"Is that why you were attracted to Russia? Without God, there is no reason to be concerned with human rights. You don't have to recognize such minor problems as repression, torture, political murder ..."

"Sister!" I had to interrupt. "Is this a speech or a question?"

She sighed. "A question, Mr. Crimmins."

"Our anthropologists," said Awful Truth, "are most interested in this aspect of religion. Some believe that you have invented your gods to generate an ethics. We do not understand why you should need such an elaborate machinery. We recognize ethical concerns but we do not deceive ourselves into believing that they are woven into the fabric of space-time. Ethics cannot pre-exist intelligence. They must be created by each thinking species using the tools of logic. To pretend otherwise is to license such acts of intolerance as you have mentioned."

Most of this last speech I have reproduced from tape. Just as Awful Truth started to speak, Laszlo, down in our telelink truck, whispered through my earphone. "Sam, I've got a general on the satellite line. Claims he's Defense Force. Wants to know what the fuck we're doing. Something stinks about this setup; you smell it up there?"

I held up my hands to both debaters. "Excuse me. I'm sorry but I've just heard from my production crew. Tape problems. If you'll just be patient for a moment I'm sure it won't take long to fix. Thank you."

Actually the tape was still rolling. On it you can see Terry glare at her side of the audience and shake her head. I had to step away to get any privacy. "Okay, Laszlo, what is it?"

"You tell me. Guy claims he's in charge of alien security. Says he's been getting bad information from State and he's got three of his own staff kneeling in his office saying Our Fathers. He thinks we must be on the civilian side of Hanscom; doesn't know who our soldiers are but they're not taking orders from him. He's talking major-league conspiracy, Sam; he says to get the aliens the hell out. This is Purge country."

Twisted Logic waddled to my side almost before I could wave him over.

He had plenty of experience with terrorism. "Something is wrong?" He was not giggling.

"The debate's over. Get back to your ship; there may be danger."

As the two aliens conferred the audience stirred uneasily. When Awful Truth climbed down from his high chair, someone cried, "Take them!" The Purgers surrounded the aliens and began to pray. Guardsmen appeared at the exits. "Stop this, stop!" I shouted at Terry. Their escape seemingly cut off, the aliens tucked their heads close to their squat bodies and sliced through the crowd with a nightmarish agility. The soldiers raised their guns and sighted but did not fire. With a whoosh the aliens punched through the walls. There was an eerie second of silence as we all rushed to the plastic windows of the sagging bubbletent to see what had happened. The aliens had bounced, once, twice and come up bounding like frightened kangaroos. Awful Truth jumped clear over the telelink truck on his way to the red silo down the runway.

"To the ship," called a Purger.

"Go, go!"

The tent emptied. As Terry brushed past me I grabbed her and spun her around. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to unmask the devil."

"What?"

"We're boarding the ship."

I shook her, probably too hard. "Stop them, do you hear me. For God's sake, stop them now!"

She turned her sad face up toward mine and sighed as if this were all my fault. "For God's sake," she said, "I can't."

I could have hit her then. Her treachery had stripped away the veneer of fair-minded reason; I was a raging fanatic. We were two of a kind, I saw at last, and neither of us were saints.

"Let her go, Sam."

I turned to Nicole and saw something in her then that I had tried for months not to see. She was, like Terry and I, a zealot. But while the fire that burned in Terry's soul made her sad, while mine made me angry, Nicole's burned with joy. Perhaps that was why I had missed it. I realized that I had lost her.

Shaken, I let Terry go. For a moment we three stood looking at each other in the now-empty room. We had known each other for fifteen years and we were strangers.

"Let's go, Nicole," Terry said.

"Don't," said I, knowing better.

"Come," Nicole said to me as Terry steered her toward the door. I sagged into a folding chair.

"Wake up, Crimmins, God damn it! Sam!" Laszlo's voice had been buzzing in my ear for some time.

"Yeah?"

"What the hell is going on?"

Instincts took over. "The aliens have bolted for the ship. Get a camera on it. I'm on my way."

I ran out of the building but did not stop at the truck. I could see two knots of people near the aliens' ship. The larger stood off about fifty yards, the smaller directly underneath the ship's exhaust port. They gathered around a fire truck with a raised hydraulic ladder. In the bucket a soldier with a laser torch was attacking the jump ship's hatch. As I approached Twisted Logic's amplified voice boomed across the field.

"WE REGRET YOUR PROBLEMS. NOW WE ASK THAT YOU CLEAR THE AREA SO THAT WE MAY REMOVE OURSELVES. PLEASE CLEAR THE AREA."

Those beneath the jump ship took the announcement as a cue to sit down. I was stunned to see that their number included not only Terry and the Purgers but also the three liaison men from State, both of InfoLine's lawyers and even one of the scientists.

And Nicole.

I went first to the soldiers standing off to one side who were guarding the rest of my audience. "Listen," I said to a bemused captain, "you've got to move those people out of there. If that ship lifts off, they'll be incinerated."

His eyes glittered in the shadow of his helmet. "Orders are to leave 'em alone."

"That's my wife under there! Whose orders?"

"Orders."

"SCANNING SHOWS SIXTEEN HUMANS BENEATH THIS SHIP. WE WARN YOU TO MOVE IMMEDIATELY. CLEAR THE AREA TO A DISTANCE OF THIRTY METERS. MOVE IMMEDIATELY."

I broke away from the Guardsmen and sprinted to the ship. Two soldiers pursued me at a dogtrot. "Following you with the zoom, Sam," said Laszlo. "Is that what you want? General says his Defense Force boys are on the way. Should be great footage."

The Purgers seemed as calm as if they were on picnic. Maybe they thought the aliens were bluffing but I know at least one was perfectly prepared for martyrdom. "Get out." I could hardly breathe. "You think they'll just sit here while you cut your way in? Get out of here! Nicole!"

The soldiers grabbed me. "Let go, God damn it. She's my wife. Nicole!"

"Wait," she said and the soldiers obeyed. "Do you believe, Sam? If you believe you can stay." Terry glared at her.

"I believe in you. But you can't stay here, Nicole."

"It's not enough." She smiled but shook her head. "I love you."

"Sam," said Laszlo as the soldiers dragged me away, "get your ass out of there. The General has given the aliens permission to lift ..."

The two soldiers and I were flattened by the ignition of the jump ship's drive.

In the aliens' lightweight jump ships, lasers heat liquid hydrogen. As the vaporized fuel is exhausted in one direction, the ship moves in the other. Supposed to be very efficient. The takeoffs are not so spectacular as those of our clumsy old chemical propellant rockets. Which is why I am alive today.

As it was I suffered second and some third degree burns from the blast. I was bloodied by flying grit. I was deafened and I was very nearly suffocated. Still I was not so stunned that I did not struggle up as soon as the ship's roar faded to see what had happened to Nicole. Although I knew nothing could have survived the direct force of the blast. Although I knew ...

I was wrong. Something stirred amidst the broken chunks of glazed concrete. A pale something shook itself in that charred black circle. It stood and staggered in my direction.

For a moment I thought it was Nicole.

Terry was naked. Every hair on her body had been scorched down to the follicle. Her skin was so white that it seemed to glow. Yes, even on the telelink tapes -- you can see it for yourself. I doubt she could see me. Her eyes were covered with a milky film. I do not know how she could walk. As she came closer I tried to stand but could not. So I dragged myself. Away from her, do you understand? The fire truck had been reduced to slag.

She should have been dead.

She was less than ten yards away when she stumbled and dropped to her knees. She raised her ruined eyes to heaven and cried out. I was there. I heard her -- just barely. I saw her face. It was not a cry of triumph, as most will tell you. It was a cry of horror. "I have seen the face of God," she said. "The terrible face of the Lord."

She collapsed onto the runway. By the time the soldiers got to her, she was dead. I believe she died knowing that she was damned for the sin of pride. If there is a God, He chooses His martyrs; they may not choose themselves.

Dead. If this were just a memoir, I would end it here. But the story

must go on even though the main characters are dead. Even though those that are left do not much care to continue. Although the Purgers intended to win the debate and use it as propoganda, it was primarily a way for them to capture a jump ship. Once their ruse was discovered, they were prepared to act instantly. They now claim that the break-in was intended to be non-violent, although I do not know how they could have entered the aliens' environment without doing some harm to someone. They wanted to unmask the aliens' true form in the hope that it would prove to be monstrously grotesque, and that world opinion would then rally in horror to the Purge. They also wanted to capture and dismantle one of the aliens' artificial bodies. It is less clear whether they planned their martyrdom. Obviously they were prepared for it; I think that Terry wanted it.

When the tape of that afternoon was released, as it had to be, Terry had her victory. It is a moot point now, but even if we could convince the aliens to trust us again, the Purgers probably have the votes to expel them. America has got religion again. Anyone with any brains has already started to learn Russian. Is that bad? The aliens say there are no such things as good and bad. The goddamned aliens who incinerated Nicole and my life.

I know I must tell all this to the priests from Rome. I know it will probably make no difference. Dear God, hear my prayer! Do we really deserve Blessed Theresa of the Aliens?

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