

IN EXTREMIS

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The heat from the wood stove was too weak to reach the benches fixed to the walls of the station waiting room. Tereza was left with the choice of standing in the warmth or sitting in the cold, neither an acceptable option. The weight of the unborn child in her belly was enough to drive her to sit on a bench, while the frigid temperature of the outer areas of the station house soon returned her to standing before the stove in the center of the room.

She felt queasiness as she considered her future. It was worse than the nausea that had overtaken her from the start of the pregnancy and never departed. Father Pavlík—no, he was just her Antonín now—had insisted that they leave for New York anyway. The baby would be born on the boat, if not sooner. There was still a night and day’s journey on the train before they even reached Trieste. She shifted her position on the bench and stretched her feet, vainly hoping to reach the edge of the stove’s warmth.

It was just a month previous that they had first arrived at this train station, part of their peripatetic journey leading them farther and farther from Prague. Now they were about to board one last train, this time to the end of the line where they would board the boat to America. Tereza had never cared for travel, and she was certain this trip was going to be the worst of all. Her unborn child was determined to make it so. She dreaded the prospect of the night they would spend on the hard wooden seats of the third-class carriage. And then there was God-knows-how-long they would spend in steerage as they crossed the ocean. When they reached New York, she would insist they stop. No more running. They would go no further. America was a democracy. It wouldn't matter that Antonín was once a priest.

They had been falling deeper and deeper into poverty ever since Antonín had lost his benefice. He had little property of his own. Everything that had made them comfortable when they fell in love belonged to the parish. The priest who had arrived to take over Antonín's parish had made that abundantly clear.

Antonín, for his part, would never have dreamed of taking so much as a fountain pen from the church. Tereza had few such scruples. It was lucky for them that she felt that way: She had managed to transform the rectory silver,

which she had secreted before they left, into a cache of crowns that on more than one occasion kept them from starving. Antonín never asked about the source of this money.

Between the two of them, they had cobbled together a living in each town. Antonín worked as a teacher at the local school or as a tutor for the children of the gentry; Tereza took in washing or mending or anything else she could find. For a time, at least, things would go well. But it seemed that nowhere was far enough from the little parish in Smíchov, where Antonín had been Father Pavlík, as if some avenging angel was trailing them, eager to punish them. It was only a matter of time before the whispers began, and then the questions, never directed to Antonín or Tereza, but asked within their hearing as a way of letting them know that their past had been discovered.

If Antonín was working as a tutor, the gentry would stop inviting him into their homes. Sometimes they sent an apologetic note, claiming changed circumstances. Sometimes the note told the truth. More often, there was never any explanation. He would be fortunate if he received an envelope with a few banknotes inside to settle his account.

If he was teaching at the local school, he would be stopped at the door in the morning, told his services were no longer desired, that they had learned about his disgrace, that he was “morally unfit” to teach the children.

Antonín never had the strength to stand up for himself, not even to demand the money that was owed him. He accepted each dismissal without complaint, telling Tereza to pack up their few belongings. They would move to the next town, a little farther from Prague, a little further from a secure livelihood. Never far enough from Smíchov.

She looked out the window at Antonín. The smoke from his cigarette was indistinguishable from the cold mist of his breath in the winter air. A lace of frost framed him as he hunched over to keep warm. She wished he would come inside and be with her.

Antonín turned and smiled at Tereza through the window. She willed him to enter, but he walked away from the door, not towards it. She understood. He was too full of nervous energy to stand still. Being outside in the cold gave him reason to pace.

She stood up and approached the stove. The warmth felt good on her body, but her ankles ached as soon as she stopped moving. Her back, away from the fire, became colder even as she warmed her front. She silently cursed the

builder of the train station who had bolted the benches so far from the stove. She stood as long as she could then returned to her spot on the bench. The cold of the wooden bench penetrated through her threadbare coat.

Antonín opened the door and let in a blast of cold air, further chilling the room. He stepped inside, leaving the door open.

“Could you close the door, please?” Tereza asked.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he replied. He closed the door, but remained on the far side of the waiting room. “The train is running late; it should be here in fifteen or twenty minutes.” His expression changed, betraying the fact that it had just occurred to him that Tereza might be uncomfortable. “How are you?”

“I’m fine. Come, sit with me.”

“Yes, of course.” He glanced outside., Tereza followed his gaze, noticing for the first time another man standing in the half shadows of the platform, his face obscured by the hat he wore pulled down low. Antonín took a tentative step towards his wife then stopped. “I’ll be there in a little bit.” He walked out the door before she could say anything more.

Antonín huddled with the other man at the end of the platform. This must have been the man who had told Antonín that the train was running late. Clouds of mist and smoke emanated from the two men as they stood together.

Tereza felt a chill settle on her. Something bad was going to happen. It was as certain to her as the cold of the station house. She struggled to her feet and felt her knees begin to buckle. She sat back down before she fell. She couldn't run to his side. If something happened, she would be powerless. She tried to calm herself. What could she be afraid of?

She imagined herself falling. Antonín would rush to her side if that happened, give her the attention that the stranger was usurping. She couldn't fall on purpose. Even if it weren't manipulative, she dreaded the thought of hurting her baby or suffering from the cold of the floor she felt through her shoes.

Tereza watched the two men through the window. The stranger stood with an air of solemnity. She could tell this even without being able to see his face. He did most of the talking while Antonín nodded and occasionally said a word or two to prompt the stranger to talk more. After what seemed an eternity, Antonín made the sign of the cross over the stranger. They spoke a few moments longer, then shook hands before Antonín turned and came back into the station.

He sat next to Tereza. She asked, "What were you talking about for so long out there?" She knew the answer. She had seen enough.

“He wanted to confess.”

“How did he know you were a priest?”

“I don’t know. He just did.” Antonín fell silent and stared at the stove in the center of the station house. There was still something of the priest about him. What exactly it was, she couldn’t say, but it had always been there. When he came to the parish as the new pastor, despite his physical attractiveness, this sacerdotal quality made him unapproachable. In a way, it still did.

Antonín had been a good priest. She had seen that during their time together before they were evicted from the parish, first as priest and housekeeper, then as husband and wife. Antonín had been mediator and counselor, teacher and shepherd. He was always ready to help feuding women reconcile or to direct a wayward youth in mending his ways. The toughest men of the parish entered his office in the rectory, a cloud over their face, and left with tears in their eyes, ready to bring their lives back in line with the laws of God and Church. Perhaps Antonín had wished another priest could have done the same for him.

But it wasn’t the priest that Tereza had fallen in love with; it had been the man. Their first kiss came after Antonín had fallen ill with influenza. She had nursed him day and night through a fever that seemed like it would never end,

until she collapsed from exhaustion in the chair next to his bed. She was asleep when the fever broke and Antonín finally opened his eyes and sat up. Had he considered the consequences when he pressed his lips to hers? Until that moment, their relationship had been chaste, but she knew they had been falling in love before that, even if neither of them could admit it. It was only after that first kiss that they were able to share how they felt with each other. She had been ready to give herself to him right at that moment, body and soul. Her desire had welled up to such a degree. It was Antonín's inculcated chastity that kept him from taking her virginity as soon as she was willing to offer it. Even as they broke so many taboos, he kept from crossing that final line until he performed their secret wedding in the empty church.

Tereza found his scruples charming but didn't share them. Her time as a priest's housekeeper led her to doubt much of what the nuns and priests of her childhood had taught her. She had spent too much time behind the curtain to believe in the magic of the Church any longer. She had listened as Antonín counseled the bereaved many times and realized that he had nothing to offer them. How could any woman believe that her dying husband's suffering could be dedicated to "the succor of the poor souls in purgatory"? How could the God that Antonín preached about allow children to die? But the parishioners

accepted Antonín's words of comfort. They were hearing them for the first, and perhaps the only, time when they came to him; Tereza had heard them repeated and repeated until they lost all meaning. She couldn't understand how God could let these tragedies happen and decided that either God didn't exist or God didn't care. Whichever it was, it seemed odd to her that Antonín was willing to dedicate his life to this nonexistent or indifferent God.

It was this devotion to his unpardonable God that created a chasm that still separated them on occasion. She hated how others would pull him away from her towards his God. She didn't want a priest; she wanted a husband. "You could have told him no, you wouldn't hear his confession. You're not a priest anymore," she said.

A familiar expression formed on Antonín's face. Tereza had lost track of how many times he had told her that he would always be a priest; nothing could change that. Even if he renounced the Church and trampled on the cross, the indelible mark made on his soul by his ordination would remain. She wished he would try to remove it.

Antonín looked at her, but said nothing. He merely shook his head.

"Why did you let him confess to you?" Tereza asked.

"He asked. He needed the grace that comes from the sacrament."

“It’s not a real confession now.”

“It is a real confession. It’s illicit, not invalid. He should only come to me for the sacraments *in extremis*. Perhaps he did. I’m not the one to make that judgment.”

“There aren’t any other priests in Tábor?”

“I don’t know. I’m sure there are. In any event, the confession was valid. He is absolved. On the other hand, it was a sin for me to have heard his confession.”

Tereza looked away and rubbed her eyes with the back of her left hand. How could Antonín, faced with the same reality as Tereza, still believe in the church that had been so eager to cast him away? She remembered the last time she had joined him at mass, he had been unable to prevent himself from mouthing the words of the consecration along with the priest kneeling before the altar with his back to the congregation.

“If it’s a sin,” she asked, “why did you agree to hear him?”

“We’re—I’m already damned. But if my sin can bring someone else into grace, then maybe there’s some—there might be something good that can come from it.” Antonín kept his eyes trained on the floor, sliding his foot on

the wood, rubbing the side of the sole. He would wear out his shoe doing that sort of thing.

Tereza wondered if Antonín was trying to find some way to explain this mysterious faith that drew him away from her when he should be coming closer to her. If he was, she would be surprised if the explanation were satisfying. “What about me?” she asked.

Antonín turned to his wife. “You?”

“Yes, me. Am I damned too, like you? You started to say it, didn’t you? Go ahead, say it.”

He turned away. Tereza knew the answer to her question, the answer that Antonín could never bring himself to say out loud. She *was* damned. Not that she cared. Damned, saved, it was all the same to her. She just wanted Antonín. She wanted things to be like they had been in the beginning. She’d be happy with returning to those days before they first acknowledged their love. Antonín was more willing to let her into his thoughts and feelings in those days. They were partners, even equals. Now, she wondered if he saw her as nothing more than his downfall. He had, after all, told her that he had chosen her over his priesthood when he returned from that summons to see the archbishop. Was he letting himself be pulled back into the priesthood? Did

that mean he would abandon her? As painful as it was to imagine, Tereza couldn't keep these thoughts from her mind.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the train's whistle. The scream of steel wheels sliding to a stop on the iron rails made concentration impossible. Billows of steam from the locomotive momentarily obscured the platform until the clouds parted, revealing the train carriages lit from within.

Antonín took Tereza's arm and helped her to the platform. Nobody disembarked from the train. Tereza grimly thought that nobody would want to stop here if they had a choice. The man who had asked for confession on the platform tipped his hat at Antonín and his wife and gestured for the two of them to enter the train before him.

He was a tall man wearing a black top hat and a fur-lined coat over an elegant suit. His beard, an ambiguous mixture of blond and grey, was neatly trimmed, and his mustache was waxed into a point at each corner of his mouth. Tereza noticed a diamond pin at his neck and wondered if the handle of his cane really was gold. The bags the porter was loading must have been his. Tereza and Antonín's belongings fit into the case her husband carried, along with the basket of food Tereza held.

They entered the third-class carriage, and the stranger gave her a carnivorous grin. Tereza found it unnerving. Why was this man following them into the third-class carriage? He was clearly a first-class passenger.

The carriage was almost completely empty. An old man slept in one seat, his head resting against a window fogged by his breath. Towards the back of the car, a skinny boy in dirty clothes sat by himself, his eyes fixed on Tereza and Antonín. Another couple huddled together two seats behind the old man, their heads bent close in private conversation.

Antonín ushered his wife into a pair of seats near the front of the car, giving her the window and taking the aisle for himself. The stranger took the seat across the aisle from Antonín and asked, “How far are you going?”

“Trieste, and then we sail to New York.”

The stranger nodded thoughtfully. “Ah, I see. It’s a pity; Bohemia could use men like you. But our loss shall be the New World’s gain.”

“I suppose so.” Tereza heard her husband’s thoughts in his voice. He didn’t see his presence anywhere as a gain for anyone. She clutched at his arm. She didn’t want him to forget that she was at his side—or for the stranger to forget. “And you,” Antonín asked. “To where are you going?”

“Only as far as Vienna. I have business with the government.”

Tereza squeezed her husband's arm. She wanted him to give less of his attention to this man. Something about him frightened her, as if he were responsible for their travails.

"I have a minor post in the agriculture ministry," the stranger continued. "It requires me to meet with other cabinet ministers from time to time, as much as I'd prefer to remain on my estate. My oldest son is about to be appointed to a far more important position than mine once we resolve a minor misunderstanding. I plan to retire from government affairs once that happens. Meanwhile, my younger son is studying to become a priest, like my brother. Like you."

Tereza could keep quiet no longer. "You want him to end up a ruined priest, forced to move from city to town to village as his past pursues him?"

"I only meant—"

"You know nothing about my husband, about us."

"I can see a man who loves his wife, who has a clear vocation to the priesthood, who should be allowed to have both."

Antonín shook his head.

"Even Saint Peter was married," the stranger said. "If the first pope could marry, then why not any ordinary priest today?"

“It’s the law of the Church,” Antonín said. “Saint Paul was explicit that chastity was preferable to marriage.”

“For those who could accept it.”

Tereza shuddered. This stranger could not have come to them by coincidence.

“I can help you,” the stranger said as if he were answering her unspoken question. “I can make things happen so you can be a priest and keep your wife as well.”

“It wouldn’t be real,” Antonín said. He pressed closer to Tereza on the wooden bench.

“It would. The Orthodox—”

“No, it wouldn’t be *Catholic*,” Antonín interrupted. “I knew the commitment that I made, and I broke that commitment. Now I must leave that part of my life behind.”

“My brother—”

Tereza could hold her tongue no more. “Your brother? Did you encourage *him* to take a wife? Or just a mistress? Whatever he does, he has you to protect him, to let him continue putting on a good show for all the holy believers in his church.”

The stranger said nothing.

“Please,” Tereza said, “leave us.”

The stranger gave a look of appeal to Antonín but found no support from Tereza’s husband. He rose to his feet, offered his hand to Antonín and left. He knew better than to offer any gesture of courtesy to Tereza. He left the carriage, walking towards his compartment in the first-class carriages.

“What did he tell you on the platform?” Tereza asked Antonín as the door slammed closed behind the stranger.

“You know I can’t answer that. The seal of the confession is always sacred.”

“Did he bring up any of this about continuing as a priest even though you’re married?”

“No.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t take him up on his offer.”

“He wasn’t offering anything real, just the appearance of something real.”

“I don’t think God would care what church you ministered in. I don’t think God cares anything about you or me at all, if He even exists. Otherwise how could He let us suffer everything that we have?”

Antonín looked past her at their reflection in the window. After what seemed an eternity, he broke his silence. “I know God cares about us. He brought us together.”

“Even if that means you can’t be a priest?”

“Even then. Being your husband is more important to me than anything, even the priesthood.”

Tereza leaned her head on Antonín’s shoulder. She wasn’t certain whether she believed him, but the words were good to hear. In her belly the baby rolled and she smiled for the life growing inside of her.

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