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TERESA TUNALEY 05

# Church of the Stars

*Byron Leavitt*

Opening the intricately carved mahogany door, Lonnie sank into the plush crimson seat of the confessional booth.

"What can I do for you today, my son?" said a quick, gravelly voice.

Looking up at the ornately framed film-screen above his head, Lonnie said, "Bless me, Regis, for I have sinned. It has been two weeks since my last confession."

Regis Philbin's round, cracked face grinned down on Lonnie, his majestic whiskey-lined aura the essence of all things magnificent about prime time TV.

"What do you wish to tell me, my son?" Regis asked.



Lonnie and Harry sloshed down the dimly lit street, their feet dragging, their hands hanging limply by their sides. A smell of alcohol lingered about them, as stubborn to leave as the scent of old cat-pee on a drape.

"You know what really pisses me off about the world?" Harry said, his speech slipping around his mouth like a sumo wrestler pirouetting on one ice skate.

"I don't give a... what's that word?" Lonnie said.

"It's that whole Faith of the Stars thing," Harry said, gesturing sloppily at the old dusty buildings that stood sentry on either side of them. "It's all a big farce, man. A big friggin' farce."

"What're you talking about, Harry?" Lonnie said, an alarmed frown wrinkling his brow. He may have been drunk, but that didn't stop an icy finger from running down his spine. "Don't say things you can't take back."



"Well, first, Regis, I'd, uh, like to confess that I am actually a parishioner for the First Church of John Travolta, except on Wednesdays, when I go to the Assembly of Britney Spears," Lonnie said.

"Ah, yes... that little hussy's always stealing my followers," Regis said, grinning as broadly as ever.

Lonnie looked down at the floor of the confessional booth and grimaced. If anyone besides Regis Philbin had said that about Her Majesty Spears, he or she would have been instantly sent to Reeducation Training at the Faith Enforcement Center.

"Did I disturb you, my son?" Regis said.

"No, no, of course not, Regis," Lonnie said. "I was just, uh, thinking."

"Please continue."

"Well, um, I'm feeling really bad, Regis, because, see, I have this friend. He's a great guy. He loves his wife, he's always nice to be around. . . . But he, uh, said some things he shouldn't have, and I feel that you should know about it."

"What did your friend say, my son?"

"Well. . . he. . . Regis, will you punish him too harshly? Please, tell me! I can't let him be hurt!"

"What did he say?"



"No, no, now, hear me out," Harry said. "I've been thinking about this. We spend all our time worshipping dead movie stars. Now how stupid is that? If you look back, they usually weren't very good people anyways. They lied and cheated and stole, just like common thieves! That Regis Philbin was a game-show host for crying out loud! We worship a dead game-show host!"

Lonnie felt all the blood drain from his face. His breath froze in his lungs. "Harry, be quiet! Someone'll hear you!"

"Ah, screw that!" Harry said. "I don't care if anyone hears me! Regis was a minor Celebrity at best in his time, but now he's a god! What's up with that?"

"Harry, keep talking like that and I won't walk a step further with you," Lonnie said. "You don't know what you're saying!"

"Like hell I don't!"



"... Finally, I just left him there, and I've been feeling horrible ever since. I couldn't make up my mind whether I should protect my friend, or whether I should do the right thing and turn him in. I. . . I think I made the right decision. Didn't I, Regis?"

"Of course, my son! Now what is your friend's name?"

"Harry Kline."

"Is that your... final answer?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then! Your friend has committed a First Degree Transgression Against the Faith, and has been condemned to death. Thanks for stopping by, and have a terrific day!"

"Wait! No, Regis! Please! Wait!"

But it was too late. Regis's holy face had vanished from the pristine display.

"Was I at least forgiven?" Lonnie asked quietly. Burying his face in his sweaty palms, Lonnie moaned. What had he done?

The door of the confessional booth opened silently, the reds and blues and greens of the stained light spilling serenely into the booth, and the bishop of the Philbinic Church, his eyes glazed like hard candy and his smile the mechanical grin of an infomercial salesman, looked in on Lonnie.

"Regis has spoken," he said in a lilting voice. "Thank you for choosing to make your confession at Saint Buster's Church of Philbin. Goodbye."

"Was I at least forgiven?" Lonnie repeated.

"There are others wishing to use the booth, my son. Please leave."

Sighing, Lonnie climbed to his feet and dragged himself from the immaculate confessional booth. He smelled the soft smell of incense, and looked up to the front of the church where a marble statue of Philbin grinned roguishly down at him. Had he really turned in Harry for that? Had he really just condemned his best friend to death for that?

No longer able to stand the church, Lonnie fled.



Flinging the door to his apartment open, Lonnie shuffled somberly through the entryway and sank somberly into his recliner. Lonnie smelled the sickly scent of rotting fruit, but was too depressed to care. Turning on his TV, the beaming face of Drew Barrymore, her image fresh from the Official Homepage of the Drewan Church, appeared.

"Hello, Lonnie," Drew's face said. "You have two messages waiting."

"Play them, please," Lonnie said, listless.

"First message," Drew said."

"Mr. Pollun," the gruff voice of Lonnie's landlord rumbled, "your rent's late again. Pay up or get out."

"Second message," Drew said.

"Lonnie?"

Lonnie inhaled sharply. It was Harry's wife, Charlene.

"Lonnie, it's me. Something terrible has happened. They. . . they took Harry, Lonnie. The Faith Enforcers, they took him. They said he had been convicted of a First Degree Transgression Against the Faith. They said he was going to be executed! Lonnie, is that true? I'm so terrified! Are they really going to execute him? Lonnie, please, call me!"

Lonnie wasn't a crying man, but suddenly he found tears edging forth over the lips of his eyelids. He tried to console himself, tried to convince himself that he hadn't known turning in Harry would get him killed. But hadn't he? Hadn't he known, in his heart of hearts? Then why had he done it? To save his own skin? To somehow purify Harry? But killing someone wasn't really the best way to get him back on the right road, now was it? No, it must have been the first, wrapped tastefully in self-righteous lies. Was he really that big of a coward?

"What would you like to watch, Lonnie?" Drew asked.

"News," Lonnie said weakly.

"Now, Lonnie!" Drew said, scowling. "That's no way to talk to a goddess! What do you say?"

"Please."

"That's better."

Drew's cherubic face disappeared, and a happy anchorwoman's replaced her.

"In local news, two more religious heretics were purged today for First Degree Transgressions Against the Faith. The heretics, Mr. Harry Kline and Ms. Anna Welms, will be cremated shortly at the Saint Eastwood Crematorium, and their ashes will be disposed of in the proper fashion. Family members have already been notified of the shame --"

"Please turn the TV off, Ms. Barrymore," Lonnie managed, running his hand through his sweaty hair.

"Of course, Lonnie," Drew said before disappearing.

The stench of rotting oranges permeating the room and the crushing guilt that pressed in upon him harder and harder every second became too much for Lonnie to bear. He needed to get out of there. Quickly. But first he would get drunker than a crazed Irishman on Saint Patrick's Day. Lonnie shuffled over to a cabinet in his kitchenette, pulled out a bottle of whiskey, and took a deep burning swig. Sinking back into his recliner with his bottle, Lonnie reflected on the news report he had seen, along with Charlene's tearful message.

Oh, what had he done?



Stumbling out onto the street, Lonnie looked up at the rain. It poured down unmercifully from the malicious clouds above, trying desperately to pound his face into hamburger. Where were his majestic gods now? Where were they when he needed them? Oh, wait. He already had the answer to that one. They were executing his friends.

"I curse you, you filthy Celebrities!" he shouted at the black cesspool sky. "I curse your stupid names! Go get legitimate jobs! Go... go do infomercials!"

Lonnie heard a gasp behind him and turned in time to see a short middle-aged woman (Was she his neighbor? What was her name, Levson something? Something Levson?) turn and run off down the cracked, disheveled street, in the direction of the nearest Faith Enforcement office. Lonnie could have stopped her. Instead he laughed and held out his hands to grasp the raindrops. Let them come. Just let them! Closing his eyes, he let the rain stream down his face, through the ridges and valleys of his neck, down to his shirt. The cloth adhered to his skin, sending chills radiating through to his bones, but that didn't bother him.

Sirens shattered the air behind Lonnie. *Ah. Here at last.* Turning, he watched the sleek cruiser pull up to the curb. Two burly Faith Enforcers climbed out of it. "Here I am, couch potatoes!" he said, his whiskey breath erupting in plumes of steam. "Come and get me!"

The Faith Enforcers paid him no heed. Instead they turned and rushed for the ramshackle front door of the apartment building nestled beside his: a bruised, battered structure where only a few forlorn lights dared to peak through the dirty windows. They kicked the door in, and Lonnie heard yelling, followed by sounds of a tussle. Furniture cracking. A baby crying. A gun firing. If his mind hadn't been so fried by alcohol, perhaps he would have realized sooner what was going on. It wasn't, however, until the two Enforcers emerged with a middle-aged woman clamped tightly between them that he did.

They muscled her through the downpour, her expression one of quiet valor and a resigned determination. The Faith Enforcer on her right opened the back door of the cruiser, and they shoved her into the back seat. Lonnie's eyes grew wide. No! Not another one! He wouldn't let them!

Letting out a feral scream, Lonnie thrust away the alcoholic fog and rushed the Faith Enforcers before they could shut the door. They turned towards him, surprise etching across their half-shielded faces. Lonnie punched one of them in the mouth, sending him reeling back into the side of his cruiser. The other one pulled out a shock club and slammed it against Lonnie's head. Lonnie collapsed to the ground, white light flashing before his eyes.

"Stupid drunk!" the Enforcer Lonnie had punched said. "You'll pay for that!" He, too, pulled a shock club, and the two Enforcers began to mercilessly pummel Lonnie.

The woman climbed out of the cruiser, tensing to jump into the fray. "Run!" Lonnie said to her. The woman took a tentative step towards him, but he shook his head. "GO! Don't let 'em get us both!"

"Jesus bless you!" the woman said, turning and running off down the street. The two Enforcers looked behind them as the woman ran off and shrugged.

"We'll catch her later," one Enforcer said. They turned back to Lonnie.

Lonnie cried and laughed at once as fresh strikes from the shock clubs burned through his body. The world had turned white around him like an electric blizzard. It dawned on Lonnie he was going to die. He laughed even harder.

"Am I forgiven, Regis?" he shouted gleefully. "Am I forgiven?"



"I've been doing some looking," Harry said, "and I think I've found the real thing. It's a father-son duo. I read the dad created the universe, and the son became a human so he could die to save our souls. Souls, man! I didn't even know we had souls! But get this. He didn't stay dead! He came

back to life! I mean, how cool is that? You point out one Celebrity who did that."

"Harry, keep talking like this and, and, I'll have to report you!" Lonnie said. "For your own good!"

"Ah, the Faith Enforcers can't touch me anymore!" Harry said. "Once I'm dead I'll be bigger than any of those stupid Celebrities! It's all up from here!"

"Uh, I'm gonna go," Lonnie said, slinking off down a side-road. "Goo... goodnight, Harry."

"Think about what I've said, would ya?" Harry said. "It might save your soul!" He giggled as if he had made a terribly funny joke and mumbled "Souls!" under his breath.

Shivering from the hail of blasphemies raining from his friend's mouth, Lonnie hurried off down the empty side street, vanishing into the ebony night.

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Byron lives near Tacoma, Washington with what many have termed a poor-man's zoo. During his time there as self-appointed assistant caretaker, he has helped to oversee a bald robin, a translucent crayfish, nine Egyptian spiny mice, a number of free-range squirrels, a cat with three ovaries, and the cat's daughter (who has opposable thumbs). His stories have been published in *Gateway S-F*, *Anotherealm*, *Fools Motley* and *Camp Horror*, and his poetry has appeared in a number of prestigious hardcover and softbound anthologies, including a "Best of 2003" collection. Of all the things he has been called in his life, a marmot is not one of them.

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