

The Sentencing of Madrigal Orpic

By Tom Sheehan

It all came back to him in a maddening rush, the face in the window and the lady with the frail arms. At the moment his body felt hollow, his head light.

Bartholomew Bagnalupus pushed a leafy limb aside and looked up at the window in the minister's house. My God, the face was there at the highest window as if it had never gone away. It was gaunt and pale and tortured in a sense. Somehow, though, it was pulling at him in a weird sort of way, magnetic.

The eyes of that face, he swore, were hollow, set so far back Hell could have sat there more than a visitor. If he had run across the street to tell his father the first time he had seen the face, there would have been an instant knock at the side of his head. In the pantry or the kitchen, at a distance, his mother at pie or pasta would have tushed him into silence. Her hands would have said such apparitions do not count, have no place in daily converse, are less than legitimate. Her fingers would have waved him off, the flour like a mist of snow falling from the work of those hands, from the gestures.

Hell, ghostly tales brought with them only mock consideration, if any consideration at all.

"But I saw him, Momma. With big eyes and a scary look in them." Her tush, child returned to him this night as clear as a night cry of his daughter might come to him. And he saw again the back of his mother's wrist wiping her brow. He could remember the flour mixing with her sweat, the back of her wrist as if checking her temperature.

"Such a kid, he is, poppa. Such a kid!" her head turned, her voice moving across her shoulders to another room; and he could remember the clarity of such far off occasions.

But for now the face was real again. It had always been for him as real as the window, round, high in the peak of the minister's house, looking like a porthole on the side of a tall ship. He could not count the nights growing up he had slipped into the brush, parted the leaves, looked up at that face. His heart would be beating; and it was like his face was making noises of its own.

And always that face was looking back at him, as if the two of them were night's companions, night's strange company in silent acknowledgment. Once he had thought they belonged together; that one could not be without the other. Never was any name known or any other engagement articulated. It was not Minister Orpic's face. It was not the face of his wife Madrigal. It was not the face belonging to any person he had ever seen around the minister's house.

Apparently there was nobody else, nobody to put that face on.

Now, twenty-five years had gone by the boards for Bart. His own father was gone and his mother sat sullenly in a nursing home, counting his visits. A late Master's degree had come to hand, a family had been started, and a full life was just around the corner for him. Yet, bidden on this night, he had come silently and darkly once again to the shrub line near the minister's house, seeking that face. The unsaid articles of a compulsion had impelled him, their strange magnetic forces at work.

As if old October had its way.

Shadows thick as malts surrounded him. The remaining leaves on bush and tree, starlit and burnished, were crisp yet light with moisture. He could smell the acute but passing sweetness of them. Now he knew the slicing distinction of maple leaves and stain-bearing oak leaves, how the mahogany of them traced a pattern in his eyes. Dew, like a late sap, made the sod slippery. The sole distant star was rebroadcast from the filmy grass at last gone brown. The star was a blip on a radar screen. Behind him, at the corners of the old barn and in the late leaves themselves, the breeze talked out to him. The darkness was cool at his feet, carried a bit of dread from his childhood. Cool October wore its touch of midnight confusion.

And the lady of the house, Madrigal Orpic, was no longer a ready tune at the back of his head. There were no quick notes, nothing near the rhymes and ditties that once were quick to tongue. She was now at her worldly and worthy rest, buried just one week earlier.

God, if Melanie knew he was out here after midnight, she'd look at him in that odd way she could ask a question, like, 'Are you insane?' the one arm on her hip bent like the question mark, her eyes in other mute declarations.

Or if the police saw him there would be hell to pay.

Life, he suddenly realized, had rushed him with all its energy this quarter century.

But the face had haunted him since his childhood.

It did so every time he thought of the house across the street from his own house. Every time he woke from a deep sleep all the intervening years the house had been present. A child's midnight cry could do it. Or some contrived timepiece setting him awake. An edge of sadness or discouragement or plain tiredness could do it. It happened every time he thought of the face in the upper window or had seen Reverend Chambers Orpic or his thin, worn-out wife Madrigal Orpic hanging clothes on a line from the second floor porch. The clothesline ran out to a tree in the same shadows and secret darkness he now hid in.

Bart quickly remembered a number of other assessments he had made watching her hanging clothes:

She looks like her arms will snap off hanging up a pair of dungarees or a jacket heavy with water. How does a woman so thin and so weak-looking manage to get anything done at all? Will she not break? Why has she not broken? And with such a music to her name? The old pictures came back to him, reruns of his peek-a-boo life. One of the constant images was Madrigal Orpic at the clothesline sitting down to rest after hanging the slightest and lightest of wet haberdashery or lingerie, socks, underpants, undershirts. Even the span of a half dozen white handkerchiefs, easier in the breeze than in her hands, made her sit. Often he thought that her life could be capitulated in brief seconds, her body so brief, and there'd be little left for ashes.

Once, he recalled, he had designated her as a survivor, and for nothing other than her endless work at the clothesline, as slow and as dismal as it appeared, as weak. He'd recall the heavy sense of wet clothes as they hung almost listless even in a breeze, and see the thin arms that had set them in place. Somehow he had known that those thin bones would work until her last breath.

Chance, this night he reasoned, had brought him again under cover of darkness. Chance and the flannel-mouth outpouring of Richie Dunbar who worked, as he had since his junior year in high school, for Knobby Calum the plumber. Richie talked like he worked, slow, steady, without knowing what halt was. That was why Knobby Calum kept him on the payroll for so long. And everyone knew Richie to be the neighborhood blabbermouth bar none.

"Take those Orpics up at the parish house," Richie said one night at Rico's Blue Moon Café, three old classmates happening to fall against each other one rainy end of the day, "now that was an odd pair for having God on your side, if I do say so myself." He had added, "Church never bearing much weight for me, you mind. Her gone and now they tell me the old minister's got himself real sick. He's in Time's hands now from what I hear."

Richie could put away the Guinness as if he had come from Galway or Kinsale or Elphin or even little old Ballyspittle itself. "One time the old parson had me put in a goddamn toilet in a closet in the goddamn attic, three floors up. Weird set-up if I do say so. Had to run a service line and a waste line down through those three damn floors, took me two-three days to get it done. Then I suspect they had to get a carpenter to finish off what I had knocked out of place. Took a few liberties, I did, knocking some of those old walls asunder." He swigged again. "Yes sir, some days labor's not the worst of occupations, no bout adoubt it."

"Was there an apartment up there, on the third floor, in the attic?" Bart had leaned over at his flannel-mouthed pal of long years still working his Guinness. "How many rooms? Was the place furnished?" He could see the face in the window again, never knowing the age of the face, never having

seen the body that belonged to the face.

“I did think that kinda odd,” Richie said, nodding at the barkeep for another round. “Not in the room I worked, though there was a door into another room, but it had a big old lock on it. Knobby’d have my ass if I ever went prowling through a customer’s house without due cause. And I had no reason to look in that room except for my own curiosity.”

All the stuff Richie had said came back to Bart standing in the darkness. Obviously someone was living up there on the third floor. Someone never outside the house. Someone never let outside the house. Someone ashamed of or who would be a point of curiosity. Bart could not imagine what that person could be like. But he had seen him at the window twenty-five years earlier.

He looked again this night. The single star froze itself in a blade of damp brown grass. He saw it on a leaf moving near his eyes.

Then, as if he had beckoned that unknown person, he saw the face at the window. Bart was afraid to breathe. He was afraid to give his place away. But the face was looking right at him.

Bart, in the clutch of minor darkness, lifted a hand, in a questioning salute. He felt foolish, but drawn by time, and his innate curiosity.

A hand waved back.

It froze him in the October crispness.

He hurried home, unsure of what he had seen, of what he knew. He moved cautiously out of the kitchen and into the bedroom. Melanie only half shrugged as he slipped into bed beside her. At length he went to sleep after seeing the star on a leaf, the face in the window.

Melanie was pushing him awake. “Bart! Bart!” she yelled. “There’s a fire across the street. The minister’s house is on fire.”

The face came at him and Madrigal Orpic’s thin arms, the Cracker Jax arms, came at him. His breath was short. A vision came and went. The smell of smoke was ripe and alive. He leaped out of bed and put on a pair of pants and shoes. His jacket was in the kitchen, on the back of a chair. He grabbed it and rushed outside.

Fire engines were there. The flames were licking at the backside of the house. The minister, Reverend Chambers Orpic, was sitting on the running board of a fire engine. He was rubbing the back of his head, looking like Death itself, yellow, comical or caricatured at once. His eyes leaped with the redness of the fire. His cheeks were sucked in, his breath held deep. Bart heard him say, “I don’t know what happened. It just went boom! Boom!” He waved his hands around. “Boom it went! Boom, that’s all.” It was like he was

giving a sermon about the final day, the end of everything.

Fire and brimstone and hell all at once.

And retribution. The word popped into Bart's mind. He didn't hear it; he felt it.

The chief was standing beside Reverend Orpic. "At least we got you out okay, Reverend. That's the important part. Now there's nothing more to do but save what we can of the house." He patted the reverend on the shoulder and walked away, his boots rubbing, making noises, the flames calling him.

Bart waited for Reverend Orpic to say something. The reverend only looked at the fiery house, and then he looked up at the high window and down at his hands. He did not say anything to the chief walking away from him, back to the fire. He did not say anything to Bart standing near him, and Bart must have thought he was looking down into his soul. Bart wondered about the music lady, Madrigal Orpic, the lady of the thin arms, the twigs of arms, the slivers of arms, who had evoked lifelong energy for an unknown cause, for a cause too difficult for the reverend to mention, and surely to maintain.

Bart hustled after the fire chief, calling his name, waving at him.

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