

This story contains mature themes and situations. I guess this is where I say no one under 18 admitted without parent or guardian.

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## The Worst Christian: Installment IV

### The Post War Years

Morning was crisp. Above a few dreary crows squawked unpleasantly through the gray winter sky. As I lay there in some strangers ivy the stench of frozen bile and vomit came to me. When I began righting myself to stand up; sharp pain jammed from my left wrist to my shoulder nearly causing me to scream. The forgotten gash on my hand had crusted with blood and dirt in a very nasty looking way. Witnessing my movements the crows squawked again, spread there night like wings and flew slowly off to look for carrion that was not walking. I could just tell today was going to be fun.

My car sat alone in the driveway when I arrived home. Salt and road dirt kicked up in rooster tails over her polished black flanks. As I walked past I admired her sleek, low slung fuselage. The fat tires that seemed to hurl her along even at low speeds. Zero, a dying breed of car. I traced my finger along her hood and felt a bit of pride swell within me. I made a mental note to have her cleaned as soon as I returned to DC.

My parents home is an old three floor English Tudor house built sometime before the Second World War. The last house on a quiet, dead end residential street, it is flanked on three sides by light woods and small, but carefully landscaped, side yards. This is where I was born and had grown up; this was the castle of my childhood. Over the years very little of the outside had changed, only the occasional addition of new trees and flowers to the yard. Inside, however, the house had been remodeled room by room, until every room had been fashioned into my parents ideals. With that accomplished they started over again. First gutting and remodeling the kitchen, as they had done some thirty years ago when they first moved in.

The back door opened into the kitchen, where I was more than a bit surprised to find Poppy. Sitting at the large kitchen table drinking coffee from a black mug with red brush script proudly proclaiming her to be the "World's Sexiest Man."

Poppy still wore the same black dress she had the night before. While she had obviously washed her face her eyes still seemed deep set and kohl ringed against her pale face. Probably just remnants of all the eyeliner from last night. Yet seeing her sit there with her hair pulled back in a ponytail clasping the mug with both hands as she drank I got the impression of something deeper.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. She set down her coffee with a start.

"So where have you been?" Her demure reply intending to put me off.

"That is a very good question." My mother seconded Poppy as she strolled into the kitchen, dressed for work at this obscenely

early hour. "Where were you all night?" She prodded playfully.

"Oh, I ran into Mark up by Frie's Cafe. Since he lives right there I decided to crash rather than dealing with the rest of the walk in the cold." My lie in place I circled around the table, kissing my mother on the cheek as I made a beeline towards the cupboard where my parents kept the mugs. Coffee would be my savior, helping me shake off the remnants of the previous night.

"Whether or not that's the case, you know the rules: 'Call if you're not going to make it home.'" I cringed a bit at the line I had heard so many often before being drilled into my siblings and I. "Just because you're a world weary veteran doesn't mean you have stopped being my baby."

"Yes mom." I tried to put as much sarcasm as possible into voice. As embarrassed to be chastised by my mother in front of Poppy as by being treated as if I was still in high school. I supposed since she was one of the few to ever see me at my worst, and lowest she was entitled to her worry.

She put on her coat and picked up her purse. "I'm going to the office. The babies are still sleeping so DON'T wake up your sister. She needs her rest." She turned and headed out to the garage.

I fixed my coffee, heaping in three large spoonfuls of sugar. It took a bit of stirring before the sugar could not be scraped of the bottom of the mug, like I had been able to do with bowls of Cheerios as a kid. I heard the garage door closing and looked up in time to wave good-bye to my mother through the kitchen window. I set the coffee on the table next to Poppy and began gingerly shaking my leather off over my left hand. The wound pulsed dully causing me to wince more than once while getting my hand through the sleeve.

"I don't think your mom believed you." Poppy grinned as I hung my jacket on the back of the chair. Her smile flickered, then disappeared as soon as she caught sight of my left arm. Dried blood ran in a flaking rust colored rivulet from palm to elbow. "So what's the story Jack." Her voice lost it's playful edge growing thick with concern.

I took a deep gulp of the coffee. It seemed to immediately chase the chill out of my bones. The thermo-ceramic mug clacking against the counter as I set it down next to the sink to begin to attend to the damage.

"Not much to tell really. I popped four mini's with my final G&T last night." Poppy had come over to see how bad the cut was, and now simply shook her head in a cordially disapproving manner that I had become very familiar with over the years. A head shake as always loaded with mock disappointment and reproach. She knew me so well.

Every time I came to town we would have coffee together, although never before in my kitchen in the morning. Over a few house cups, or an occasional Irish, at the local e-cafe we would sit and get caught up on each others lives. We had stayed in touch virtually

by e- on a fairly regular basis, but I valued those actual couple of hours of genuine face to face. We would sit and talk about everything and nothing. Jumping from techno gadgetry to gothic poetry. It was over these many pots of joe that she had honed that look of disapproval. It was always there to chastise me for having done something ridiculously stupid, as opposed to my usual casual stupidity. Things like driving one hundred and twenty clicks per hour in a downpour to make it home to catch my favorite show, going home with some girl I barely knew always earned a disbelieving smile and a shake of the head.

How long had it been since we had coffee together anyway? A year? Two?

"Four mini's with all that alcohol," Poppy murmured unbelieving. "Were you even able to see?"

"I was seeing a lot of things, that's why I wanted to walk home. I had hoped to clear the shit and speed out of my brain. The mini's had a different idea. About half way home they turned vicious on me. Cramps, vomiting, and rather unpleasant aural, visual, tactile, hallucinations. Y'know the whole nine monkey yards o' fun. It culminated in me passing out in someone's shrubs." The cut stung harshly as I rinsed the soap and patted it dry. I really hate pain.

We sat back down at the table with our coffee. "This," I held up my wounded hand "came from some broken glass hiding in their ivy. I should sue the bastards." I chuckled bemusedly at the idea. "Your turn."

She was still shaking her head "Here I simply thought you had gone over to Zoe's, which is probably what you should let your mother think." She drank some of her coffee. "As usual my life pales in comparison to yours. Serg and I had another fight after you left. By the time we left I did not want to see him so I was going to ask you if I could crash here. Fortunately," She slipped me a side long glance of derision, "your mother was up working on her books. She said that it was all right for me to stay over, she even made up your bed for me. Said you could sleep on the couch if you showed up. She's really sweet."

"Yeah she is" I confirmed for no reason. Anyone who knew my mother knew she was incredible. Closing in on sixty she looked forty five, and acted half that. She had retired from nursing to raise my siblings and I. She never regretted it for a moment. Since we all left home she busied herself teaching Sunday school, keeping the books for my fathers practice, helping anyone she could, all that and beating girls thirty years younger than her at soccer and tennis. All my friends immediately loved her.

On the other hand most of my friends feared my father. Mistaking his cool professional detachment for indifference and disdain. In truth he a lot like my mother. Just over sixty "The Doctor", as my brother often called him, only entertained the idea of retirement when political or legal vipers reared their ugly hydra heads into his beloved field of expertise. And there was no question as to how expert he was. For a man who spent most of his free time reading quietly in his room he had turned up on a surprising

number of journal covers and newspaper articles.

While enlisted I conned my friend Erin into painting a caduceus on my heavy jacket as a bit of an honor to my father, who had been an army captain at some point before I was ever born. Erin, like most other painters, writers, and artists of any sort, found himself carrying a rifle because he had been too stupid to go to Canada when the draft started, a mental lapse I had also been guilty of. Most of the other grunts thought I was trying to masquerade as a medic to avoid being shot at. That was a bit humorous considering, despite the Geneva Convention rules, everyone knew medics were always the first shot. I suppose it's because the big red cross is just too convenient a target.

The army had been the first thing I had every done that followed in my parents footsteps, and since I was drafted I hardly think that it counts. However I had not taken off like many others when drafted and in the end that did count for something.

"You get along great with your folks, I have always admired that." Poppy said. I nodded ascent, not speaking as I was swallowing a mouthful of deliciously warm and sweet coffee. "Why didn't you come stay with them for a while after you got out of the army? I mean this is the first time I have seen you in town since before you shipped out."

"That's an easy one to answer, I guess. I did."

The braggart coffee mug almost slipped from between her hands. "You what?! For how long?" A sharp inflection of surprise edged her words, her eyes growing wide, half surprised half angry.

"I was here for a couple months before I e'd you from DC." I found it a bit hard to look her straight in the eyes. "I never went out while I was here so nobody knew I had been discharged."

"But why didn't... " her voice trailed off a bit. She had caught something strange in my story and was trying to grasp it's wriggling slippery body to identify it. She grasped it by the gills and looked at me, her brow furrowed with new puzzlement. "That means you were discharged early, doesn't it?"

How I hate smart people sometimes.

"Basically it's a really long story that I really prefer not to retell right now. However I'll give you the punch line." She leaned in towards me, tightly gripping the shiny black mug. "On what would be my last combat op I took four rounds into my left leg." Involuntarily I looked down at the reconstructed and rehabilitated limb. "The army showed what was probably the only sign of intelligence I saw during my brief, but exciting, tour and sent me home. I suppose a foot soldier that can't walk is not of that much use."

"Wow" Poppy exhaled softly. That graduate student mind of hers began processing the story, she fixed herself another cup and drank from it distractedly. "You seem to walk pretty well now though." While not really a question her comment intoned a certain amount of disbelief; she was still not satisfied.

"A few months of rehab with good Doctor Dad, and Nurse Mom did me wonders. I don't even have a noticeable limp." I smiled at her, covering up the memory of how painful the entire process had been. She still looked shocked, still thinking. "Don't tell the army though, they might try and drag me back to the front." I smiled again, hoping that she play along with the joke. She did.

She began again, this time with a smile covering her disappointment in me. "You're still a right bastard for not calling me. Why didn't you call?"

"I didn't want anyone to see me all gimped up like that." I half lied. "You know how vain I have always been. Geez, remember what I was like when we were dating? Once I was about ready to start telling people I was back the job in DC came through, so I made my announcements from there."

"Maybe, but I bet you called-"

"Don't bring her I up." I cut in coolly, a wry guilty smirk on my face. "I've decided since it's over, it's over and that's it."

"Oh you think it's that easy?" I said it was. "Sure, sure. It'll be just like the time with... "

Poppy drifted in to a fairly humorous reminiscence about a girl I had been in lust with some four years previous. That is how we spent the rest of the morning, just talking about stupid things we, or usually I, had done over the years. Through it all we sat drinking coffee. Just like old times.

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The road disappeared hungrily beneath Zero's broad Power PerForm tires. I had shut off the EuroKrash I had been listening to some seventy miles back . By trying to stick with the pulse beat variety of music I hoped to keep the thoughts from invading my thick skull. It worked for the first few hours of the drive but gradually things began surfacing. Poppy's questions, events around the dinner table, the hallucination in the ivy, all bubbled up from the black of my subconscious nagging for attention demanding to be addressed.

When I felt them coming on I shut the music off, listening instead to the crying song of the road. The constant wail of the different surfaces as I sped towards the capitol, and my apartment. Each surface has a different and unique song, concrete, Plus Fer, blacktop. The music would fill the cabin of the car and drive out the nagging doubts, lingering pain, thoughts of her. I relished the scream of grooved concrete that lay out like a pinstriped stretch of highway in the next town. I had never figured out the point of grooved pavement, but it just beat out the smooth rolling lull of the metal grated suspension bridge as my favorite road song.

The road song had sent me into a delicious sort of alpha wave fueled drive. For the past twenty or thirty minutes it seemed as if nothing had meant anything. I could not think of a conscious

thought that I might have had, or a conscious decision I should have made. Yet here I was miles and on and off ramps away from where I had been, unscathed and doing the speed limit. I checked the display to see if perhaps I was giving myself too much credit. Maybe I had reached the smart-way without realizing it. The small square read 'manual', I had done it all on my own, only without me.

Now that I realized what I was doing I was out of the state. Once again I found myself checking the display to make sure I was on course, and check the distance to the next exit I needed. The next turn would take me onto 78. It was a smart road and as such it meant I was cursed to being trapped alone with myself and little or no distraction until I got home. The idea of sticking to byways and back roads seemed briefly attractive, but I had done the math before and the added three hours did not seem in the least amusing.

I powered through a turn and felt the tires imperceptibly change form and return to normal. Worth every penny I remember thinking and upped my speed to seven miles over the speed limit. The smart-way would be just ahead and I figured the sooner I got there the sooner I could try something to quell my own voice.

I toyed around with some threads of ideas. Some little bits of filler stories I might work with when I got home. I tried different scenarios and interest points that would be good no matter what was actually going on in the news. I had long hoped to figure out some great scheme or plot that could be used again and again during the course of writing for the paper. Something that I could just type up as a template and fill in the blanks with the fluff of the day whenever I found myself called up on short notice for something. I was beginning to get some of the threads of it together, a man, a woman, and either a baby or a puppy. Stupid human crap that greeting card companies turned into millions of dollars. If I could just manage to get the damn thing to coalesce everything would be great.

A slight bump in the road shifted my notoriously short attention span and I found myself starting to think about Europe. My parents had told me a few stories about there time in Europe when they were young. When my father was in the army and stationed abroad. They had driven an old sportster around the continent when they had free time. Mostly they told stories about the way things were different over in Germany, and how quaint they had found towns in Austria. I never heard them talk about France, though I know they had gone. I have heard stories that the French used to hate Americans, but hat was then, this is now. My parents had loved Europe, even though much of it they saw from army bases.

Yeah, they had loved Europe. I hated it, everything about it. I suppose the big difference is they never had any European's shoot at them.

The ramp snuck up on me. If Zero had not alerted me I would have missed it altogether. As is I tore into the turn at more than twice the posted speed. I shouldered against the gravity and held the wheel tight. When I passed the first Smart Post Zero slowed down and took over. The turn was executed in a boringly flawless

manner. Sleepily Zero merged into the light traffic and in an equally un-interestingly manner, began to slowly accelerate up to a pack of cars. The highways computers and sensors would nestle her quietly in the back of the pack to join the draft. That is all there was to it.

I nervously set my seat into it's relaxed position and switched on the chip player to something soothing. I would not go back to Europe now. No Lord I will not.

Dear Lord it's me again. I realize it has been a little bit, and that the last couple of times have been somewhat odd, but I hope you are still listening and taking me seriously. I need your help. I have always felt that you have helped me through all the difficult times in my life. You have saved me time and time again from perils as viscous as love and innocuous as death, and every time I wonder why. Why me?

I've killed people. But then I was just following orders wasn't I? So I suppose that might not count. How about the way I have treated people. Why not help them? Why not help Zoe? I will never understand what I did to make her fall for me. Hell, I could never wish that upon anyone, well almost no one.

And what about K- Lord? WHY THE FUCK WON'T SHE LEAVE MY MIND!

Sorry, fuck I'm sorry. Fuck. I shouldn't yell at you. I didn't want to go away, didn't want to leave her. I suppose I don't blame her for leaving me. How long can you wait for some one anyway. Especially some one who never told you how they feel? And what about Zoe? She never did anything to me, and I have just fucked with her again and again. THAT is NOT how I meant it to sound and you know it! Ah fuck. Fuck.

I dug into my jacket for the small zip-lock bag of the salmon colored pills mixed in with the white octagonal minis. Zero's alarm was set to wake me half an hour before the end of the smart way. I would need the time to shake off the drowsiness of the drugs, even though it would only be five minutes from the Smart to my parking space. I dry swallowed one of the largish salmon pill and it went down all lumpy and painful; I snorted extra phlegm to help it down. All that was left was to ratcheted back the seat a touch further into the sleeping position. Once set I gratefully turned myself over to the dreamless black embrace the pill would bring.