

Tongues

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On Tuesday they called the priest. He picked up after two rings. His voice was steady, quiet, and stern.

“This is Father Maholm, to whom am I speaking?”

Terry spoke for both of them. He introduced himself. Asked if Fr. Maholm remembered the Wyatt family. Would Fr. Maholm be able to come and pray over their son? He would. Is he dying? No, but he has cancer. He’s 12. Very well, what day works best? They set the date for Thursday, lunchtime. Hopefully Reggie would be awake.

On Thursday, Terry and Monica sat in the hospital room. The four walls were painted a light blue, with stars and dancing animals painted in reds and yellows and oranges. The TV was on mute. A Mythbusters marathon. Reggie was asleep. He seemed enveloped, lost beneath the swirl and bluster of the white sheets. Terry and Monica could never keep track of the names of the medicine. At one point they had even put the names on flashcards,

in a vain attempt at memorization. Methotrexate, doxorubicin, cisplatin. Letters tumbling like dice. Even when the nurses said the names of the chemotherapies they seemed to be speaking of something mysterious, worthy of reverent fear.

They heard a knock on the door. Terry looked away from the muted television. Monica looked up from her Magnificat. They stood up together, moving slowly towards the door. They had known Fr. Maholm at their old parish, before Reggie had been born. He, in those days, was quiet and taciturn, but also handsome with blue eyes and a perfectly trimmed beard that was a golden brown mixed with shades of soft blonde. They hadn't seen him in years. But they had heard through a mutual friend that the diocese had transferred him to the downtown parish, St. Thomas', which was ten minutes downtown from the Children's Hospital.

As Terry reached for the door handle, he hesitated. It had been Monica's idea for Fr. Maholm to come pray over Reggie. Terry had resisted. The argument had flown across the kitchen table.

“We don’t know him anymore. Did we ever even see him around kids?”

“What does that mean?”

“It just means that I’m not even sure he understands how to relate to them. Some priests are great with kids, others aren’t. That’s just reality.”

“We’re not asking him to hold a conversation with him, we’re just asking him to say a few prayers. Abigail said that sometimes he speaks in tongues.”

“What will that do for us?”

“You don’t want him to pray for Reggie?”

“Of course I do. But I don’t want him scaring him. I’m worried about how awkward this is going to be.”

“It’s only awkward if you allow it to be, if you focus on it.”

“This priest doesn’t remember us.”

“We want Reggie to be better.”

“But does he? He doesn’t even know us anymore. Reggie wasn’t even born the last time we saw him.”

Monica’s stare was rigid. “What are you suggesting?”

Terry ran his hands over his face and exhaled through his fingers.

“Forget it. I’ll call him tomorrow.” He walked towards the living room.

Monica stood up and followed him.

“No, explain what you mean. Just because he doesn’t know our son doesn’t mean he can’t pray for him, and it doesn’t mean he doesn’t want him to be better.”

Terry turned around and faced Monica. For a brief second, it seemed he only saw Monica in the far distance, and even beyond her was the image of Reggie, through an ice-like lens, like a frosted window. It sent a chill through his body.

“You know what I did yesterday?” he said quietly, looking through and beyond her, shuddering. “I did what you told me to do, last month, when he was diagnosed. I asked God to heal him. I said, ‘God, I have lived, up till now, every moment for you. Done everything you have ever asked, as far as I can tell. And now, you owe me this. So I will only ask you once, because that’s all it should take. You must heal my son. You must.’ And you know

what happened?”

“Terry, stop.”

“Nothing,” he said, spitting the word out with unintended venom. “Nothing happened. And I realized Reggie wouldn’t be cured. He’s going to have to get through this. There’s no magic door leading out of this.”

Monica crossed her arms. The myth of the strong husband, the stalwart captain of the ship, had been rapidly dissolving in her mind. Her conviction was that Reggie’s salvation, and his optimism, now rested with her. It was a conviction that was being routinely reaffirmed.

“You did not just call it magic.”

“I said ‘magic door.’”

The conversation had ended with an icy, silent agreement of silence. Of separation. Of untended sorrow.

Terry turned the handle and opened the hospital door. He braced himself to smile and shake hands with a man he had once only barely known. Behind

him, Monica adjusted her blouse and steeled herself to balance out her husband's forced enthusiasm with genuine concern. The door swung open and they both looked into the painted eyes of a clown, the frenzied, curled loops of his red wig springing off and away in comic mania.

"Hey, is this Reggie's room? Room 113?" the clown asked.

Terry and Monica stood in unified, unbelieving silence. The clown looked down at a chart he was holding.

"Is this a bad time? I can come back later, it's just my schedule has me here at 12:30 for a Reggie Wyatt, room 113. But like I said I can come back."

"I think our son might be, uh, a bit old for a clown," Terry said.

"He's 12," Monica added quickly, looking past the clown and down the hospital hall.

"No shit. You're kidding me," the clown said, shaking his head as he flipped the paper and checked the backside of his chart. Beneath the makeup, he had young, slim features. "This thing says he's 8. Most 8 year-olds still dig it. But I agree, 12 might be a little, you know—"

“Too old,” Monica said.

“Geez, wow, I am so sorry.” The clown put his hands on his hip and smiled, chagrin spreading on his face. “You would not believe how many times this happens to me. They always mess something up on this schedule.”

“It’s okay, really, he’s sleeping besides—”

“Like the other day, I went into this little girl’s room, she couldn’t have been older than six, and I kept calling her Bella. Because that’s what it said on my schedule. Bella this, Bella that. And all of a sudden her father says, ‘Her name is Brianna.’ I thought I was going to shit my pants.”

“Excuse me. I believe you’re Terry and Monica?”

Terry, Monica, and the clown turned and saw Fr. Maholm standing in the hallway, holding a leather-bound book and a small bottle of holy water. His beard was a stark, almost shining gray, like platinum, and his face, once youthfully handsome, had aged into the icy sharpness of priestly middle age. He wore a full-length cassock. His eyes darted from Terry to Monica to the clown, where they rested a brief, confused second before darting again.

“Father Maholm!” Monica exclaimed and stepped forward, hand extended. Fr. Maholm shook her hand. Monica turned and grabbed Terry’s elbow pulling him forward. “You remember my husband Terry?”

Terry smiled and stretched out his hand. Fr. Maholm nodded as he shook his hand.

“I’m Derek,” the clown said. He extended his gloved hand. “The hospital clown. Or, technically just one of the hospital clowns, but you get the idea.”

Fr. Maholm lightly took the clown’s hand in his and shook it. Suddenly a loud squeak sounded and bright blue silly string exploded onto Fr. Maholm’s cassock.

“Oh my god, dude, I am so sorry! I mean Father. I totally forgot, I usually always remember to shake with my left hand after I load that thing. You see, it’s a silly string apparatus, you’re supposed to shake the kid’s hand—”

Monica desperately began pulling the silly string off of the cassock as Fr. Maholm’s eyes wildly darted across the hospital hall in a panic. Terry smiled and tried to help remove the string, but Monica was a flurry of concerned

energy, balling the string in one hand and pulling it off of Fr. Maholm with the other.

“Oh no,” she whispered. “Oh no.”

“Mom? Dad?”

They all froze. They could hear the rustle of Reggie moving in his hospital bed. His voice was like that of a boy trapped in a well, distant and hollow but fiercely piercing and urgent.

“Reggie, baby, one second!” Monica called.

“Give us a second, man!” Terry said.

“Is now a bad time? Am I early?” Fr. Maholm asked as he picked silly string from inside his cassock sleeve.

“Hey buddy! You’re awake!” Derek stepped past Terry and Monica and walked into the room. Monica rushed into the room behind him, grabbing his shoulder.

“No! No!” she said, her voice leaking hysteria.

“It’s alright mom, I’m sure Reggie wants a whoopee cushion, you’re never

too old for that.”

Reggie, awash in white sheets, looked on with wide eyes. Derek searched his massive pockets for the whoopee cushion. Monica tried to pull him away. Terry walked into the room, followed by Fr. Maholm, who went immediately to the chair next to Reggie’s bed. He sat down and opened his book.

“If you don’t mind,” Fr. Maholm said, “I’d like to begin. I have other appointments in this hospital, unfortunately.”

“Absolutely, Father, I’ll just show Derek out,” Monica said.

“Just give me one second, I know I have that whoopee cushion in here somewhere, I don’t want this to be a waste of time for all of us.”

“What’s going on?” Reggie asked.

“I’d like to begin *now*, and it needs to be silent,” Fr. Maholm said in a voice tinged with heaven-sent severity. The room stood still. Reggie looked at the priest with a confused, sleepy-eyed terror. Monica was frozen, her arms latched onto the clown’s red and yellow sleeve. Terry stood in the background.

The priest smoothed the page of his small book and opened the bottle of

holy water. Derek's eyes widened with wonder. Fr. Maholm splashed a few drops of the water onto the sheets. He sighed and closed his eyes. The room seemed to lock in place. Terry felt a tightening in his chest. He looked on as the priest raised his hand above his head, extended in blessing, and he could see a single blue strand of silly string dangle from his sleeve, like an innocent worm on some black, starched hook.

Fr. Maholm remained silent for a few more seconds, and then opened his mouth and out flowed a river of sound. The words flew and collided, sounds formed and then unformed, were heard and then unheard. Some words sounded like Latin, but most were unintelligible. Any coherence would evaporate almost immediately into manic disaster, as more sounds and tones came crashing out of the white-whiskered lips of the priest. Reggie's face was a mask of sharp confusion. His worried eyes seemed to follow each word as it exploded out of the priest's mouth and raced around the room, echoing off the walls with sacred bombast.

Then, suddenly, it was silent. The priest, sweat collecting on his face, hung

his head and lowered his arm. The room was silent except for the slow beeps of the machines, pumping medicine with mechanical determination. Fr. Maholm closed his book, and stood up.

“That was amazing, Father.” Monica said. “Do those words ever translate? I’m sorry if that’s inappropriate to ask.”

“They’re from God,” he said in between ragged breaths. “That is their meaning.”

He shook hands with Terry and Monica, and left the hand Derek had pulled out of his pocket hanging in the air. He left without another word. The room was suddenly, sharply silent.

“Who was that priest, mom?” Reggie asked after a silent minute. “What was he saying?”

“He was speaking in tongues,” she said quietly.

“What does that mean, though? It sounded angry.”

The sharp, hissing noise of a deflating whoopee cushion erupted in the room. Monica shrieked in surprise. Everyone turned and looked at the clown,

whose eyes were wide with a mixture of giddiness and terror. He withdrew his other hand from his pocket and revealed the deflated noisemaker.

“Found it,” he said, in a voice barely heard over the loud, bright laughter coming from the hospital bed.