

A Man and His Church

He speaks the same language the priest speaks, but he can not understand a goddamn thing.

The priest's eyes glow like miniature forest fires. He speaks and orates and speaks and his mouth twists this way and that way never pausing for a breath and a little bit of foam collects at his mouth and drips into his beard. He is concise and verbose, he is quick to the point and long winded.

The words sound alien and confusing to the man, and very fascinating. They form a beautiful symphony and guide his eyes around the eclectic collection of art that is littered around the crevices of the church. The art is simple and evocative and melodious. Jesus on a cross. Jesus on a fiery cross. Jesus in swaddling baby clothes. Jesus preaching. Jesus walking on water...

His eyes flit back and forth, soaking in everything with a desperate hunger. He misses every opportunity to cross himself, the rest of the crowd around him following the priest's lead. He is not sure whether the misses are intentional or not.

The service is followed by a delicious meal of sausages and bell peppers and tiny tomatoes and bread rolls and cheese and wine and pressed pastries. He takes a quick seat and hunches over his meal, eating with his mouth closed and chewing every careful bite a half dozen to a dozen times. His neighbors come and go, friendly talkative faces and friendly quiet faces. He is responsive and easy with either kind, introducing himself and entertaining any questions. Sometimes he lies and sometimes he doesn't. There is no discernable pattern to his truth-telling.

The food is delicious, yes, but it tastes like ashes compared to the exquisite elegant visuals of this sanctimonious sanctuary. The only man-made sources of light are the two sets of candles placed in opposite nooks, each one burning under cream-colored placards, one titled "The Dead" and the other "The Live." Otherwise the sunlight filters through the mosaic ceiling and windows and chases away the shadows and lights up the thick watercolor paintings. Thick brushes look thinner and thin brushes look thicker. The interplay of light animates the carved features of Jesus and Joseph and the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist and the Three Wise Men and a litany of saints the man can not place names to. Jesus is frowning, Jesus is smiling, Jesus is bemused, Jesus is knowing. The man looks and looks and smiles and thinks to himself that there are very few things in the world that are more beautiful than what he is gazing upon. No, not even a few; perhaps just one.

Later, at nighttime, the man watches the flames lick up the paintings and smiles again for he is right. Was right. This *is* more beautiful. The wood creaks and shudders and falls, the raftings collapsing around the dancing man. He leans back and cackles as Jesus's image is consumed by the fire and spat into smoke, the gray matter siphoning up into the atmosphere.

He will never again be as happy as he is now. He knows it and cherishes it.