

# Brother

by Emma Uriarte

I never quite understood Father Mark. He lived in my hall at Catholic boarding school as the dorm's resident minister. He had this sort of confusing look about him, the kind of appearance that tricked a person. No one knew his real age. His graying hair suggested something close to fifty, even sixty years, but the way his bright blue eyes sparkled behind his wire-rimmed glasses and the youthful way he bounced around on the balls of his feet when he talked to you made it impossible to guess at his true age. He would walk around in his black button-up and white collar no matter the weather, rain or shine, smiling at students whenever they passed him by. He had the most peculiar habit of stroking his beard, pulling on the coarse peppered hair a bit at the end when he mulled over some particularly perplexing thought. I imagined that if dressed in red, Father Mark would resemble St. Nick.

He taught a class on religion called "Studies in Catholic Tradition." Everyone who took the class said it was an easy A; they said Father Mark was so batty he would forget he was teaching the class. I took the class, of course, half because I wanted an easy semester but half because I was just curious about the man. During lectures he would sometimes get to talking about something that had nothing to do with the class. He would get so passionate about it that he would pace the room, waving his hands about at certain intervals. He'd tug on his beard and run his hands through his short gray hair so that it stuck up in multiple directions at once. It's like he forgot we were all in there, just sitting, stunned, as he ranted about some story in the bible or something in the news he could relate back to scripture. He went into a trance—I used to think of

the “prophetic state” people would go into in the Old Testament—when he would get into one of those moods. Scripture got him excited, I guess.

I felt almost bad for him. He wanted us all to understand the profoundness of what he was saying; he wanted us to love religion as much as he did. Back then none of us cared enough about anything. Every day before class he would write reminders on the blackboard, telling us not to forget to sign up for the missionary trip to the Indian reservation or to come by the soup kitchen on Saturday to serve the homeless. No one ever went, but he wrote those reminders every day.

I joined Father Mark’s Bible study group. He held it every Thursday evening in his apartment down the hall. The whole group ran almost independently of Father Mark. A junior named Janice, a smiling, bubbly girl with a good Christian background, planned each reading and discussion. Occasionally Father Mark would chime in on whatever we were talking about. His signature phrase went, “You know, my only complaint is that there just isn’t enough time in the day.” Other than those few words, Father Mark just sat there on his brown leather couch, hands folded on his lap, smiling peacefully with eyes closed. Bible study would go on without him; He just provided the room and fresh pumpkin bread.

During the entirety of my career at that school, I don’t recall ever seeing Father Mark in conversation with another teacher. It’s not that he was antisocial. Oh, I’m sure he went to conferences and said a few words in passing to his colleagues, but I never saw him in a deep conversation. He seemed one step removed from the present.

Years later, I had an encounter with Father Mark that I’ll never forget. It was after boarding school, about two years after graduating from university. I drove back to my apartment one afternoon after leaving my office early. I had taken the long way due to some construction

on my regular route. Driving through the poorer area, I saw the strangest thing. There was Father Mark sitting on a bench and sharing a sandwich with a homeless man. I wondered what he was doing here; it wasn't exactly a stone's throw from the school. When I turned my gaze back to the road I slammed on the brakes, narrowly avoiding the car in front of me. I glanced back again for a second when the car behind me honked. I was holding up traffic.

I swung around the block again just to make sure. I parked a few cars down and watched the two men from a distance. Father Mark wore a plaid button-up and blue jeans; I had hardly recognized him without his black shirt and white collar. The man next to Father Mark was clearly homeless. His unkempt hair stuck out long and shaggy around his head, and his untrimmed beard covered his face from the nose down. He wore baggy jeans and two jackets, and he had a grocery cart filled with all sorts of things next to him. His appearance just looked unwashed. Compared to Father Mark's pristine cleanliness, the two men could have been polar opposites.

The way the two sat in contented silence eating their sandwiches told me they had known each other for quite some time. The whole scene felt comfortable. They took bites of the sandwiches, looking at their surroundings. One would point at something across the street and say something, full mouth and all. The other would look up, say something back, and then the two men would go back to eating. I became entranced watching them, like the whole thing happened from the inside of a television set.

When Father Mark stood up to go, the enchantment broke. He took out a sandwich from his briefcase, handed it to the man as a goodbye, then walked down the sidewalk in my direction. Before I knew what I was doing, I got out of my car. He had passed me and I called after him, striding fast to catch up. He turned around to face me.

“Richard!” the man smiled warmly. “How are you doing, son? It’s been a long while since you lived in my hall.”

I shook his outstretched hand.

“Yes, too long. I’m doing well. How are you, Father?”

“Oh, you know. I’m doing very well also. Not enough time in the day, though, I suppose,” he laughed good-heartedly. “Are you off to anywhere right now? Have time to catch up with an old man like me?”

“Of course,” I smile at him, even though I had plans to get some stuff done around the apartment this afternoon. Somehow, I couldn’t find it in me to refuse Father Mark.

“Excellent!” He patted me on the shoulder and we continued to meander down the sidewalk.

He asked me about my studies at university and my job. He told me school was the same as ever. He still loved to teach. Finally, I asked the question that had been bothering me ever since I saw Father Mark sitting on the bench with that homeless man.

“How often do you come down here? I couldn’t help but see you sharing lunch with that man on the bench.”

Father Mark nodded his head and strolled down the street with hands in his pocket, smiling absentmindedly at nothing in particular. “Oh, I’ve been coming here for quite a while now. I think it’s so nice to visit different areas, really get to know your community. I enjoy having lunch down here every so often.”

“Do you know that man well?” I ask.

“Oh, him? He’s my brother,” Father Mark responded nonchalantly.

My mouth went dry, and words slipped my mind. Somehow, the idea that Father Mark was related to someone, let alone someone homeless, seemed impossible. Then I remembered that brother could mean many things to Father Mark. Were those men related by blood or faith?

Finally, I asked him.

Father Mark slowed to a standstill and looked up at the sky contemplatively, characteristically tugging his beard. Then he looked down at me and responded, simply, “Would it matter?”

At that moment a hurried passer-by bumped into me, knocking me off balance. Father Mark held out his hand and I regained my footing.

“Would you like some coffee?” Father Mark asked me, pointing to the small shop in front of us.

“Only if you let me pay,” I follow him inside.