

SANT'IVO
by David Foley

“The sacraments are holy if you believe they’re holy. If you don’t, of course, they’re not holy at all.” He smiled, and Bill recognized the smile as signaling another paradox, and both the smile and the paradoxes had begun, after only half an hour, to grate on him. “But understand: this does not mean that holiness is a matter of perception. Still less is it a delusion. Holiness is an actuality which requires your complicity. It exists if you call it into existence.”

Half an hour of this stuff, which is not what he’d come to hear. It was as if Thomas had been waiting for him, or someone, to show up so he could start spilling it. He met his eyes and saw that the smile had changed a bit. Now it was more tentative, postulant, like a boy with a ball asking a strange kid to play.

“You don’t believe me,” said Thomas.

“It doesn’t interest me,” Bill told him.

And now a third smile, a secret, inward smirk as if Bill had just confirmed a private theory.

The sun was at a painful angle. It flared against Bill’s sunglasses and added to his irritation. It slanted across the Roman rooftops and fractured among the bougainvillea on the balcony. He tilted his head and squinted at the teacup in his hands. An eighteenth century shepherd boy piped to his flock with cherry lips. Inside tiny ripples of tea lapped against a cobalt glaze. It must have cost a lot. Bill wondered what would happen if he let it slip, as if by accident, from his fingers. To quell the impulse he took another sip.

“When did you...” he began, then stopped because he couldn’t think of a way to

say it that wouldn't sound mocking. He went on anyway: "... acquire all this religion?"

"I've always been religious."

"No you haven't."

"Well, I've always been spiritual."

Bill put the teacup out of harm's way. "No you haven't," he said. The tea left a bitter taste, perhaps because he'd expected and hadn't been offered a real drink. Instead there'd been this ridiculous ceremony with the teapot, and the five-minutes' steeping, and the tongs angled in the lumped sugar, and the click of shepherd-boy teacups against shepherd-boy saucers.

"How's Mark?" Thomas asked.

"He's fine."

"I heard he got married."

"He did. In Connecticut."

"And the man is...?"

"An architect."

"They're always architects, aren't they? The ones they marry. I imagine that's what architects are for."

This was more the old Thomas, with that sly, self-conscious smile which used to give charm to his lazy epigrams.

"Who do the architects marry?" Bill asked.

"Lawyers."

They laughed, and Bill felt more at ease, which allowed him to ask, "Hey, I'm dying for a drink. Do you have anything?"

Thomas's gaze dropped to the tea service, sadly, as if Bill had suggested selling it. "Well..." he said slowly, "we do, of course. Perhaps you'd like..." He seemed to search for an acceptable compromise. "A Campari soda."

"Yes, please."

Thomas stepped into the apartment. Bill stood up. He had an impulse to prowl around for clues, but Mark hadn't asked him to go that far. And what clues was he likely to find on the balcony, besides that "we" that Thomas had just dropped? He leaned against the railing. The sun was dipping low now, hovering just above the rooftops. Across the piazza a woman in a rooftop garden was a gauzy shadow. She crouched to pick a flower or pluck a weed and the sun swelled around her like an open furnace.

"I defy anyone," said Thomas as he came back out, "to live in Rome for any length of time and not become a Catholic."

"People do," said Bill.

"Only the natives. They're a godless lot."

He was joking about it. Perhaps it wasn't serious after all.

"Hold these," he said and gave the drinks to Bill. He went back in and came out again with two silver coasters which he placed among the tea things.

But they didn't sit down. Thomas lifted his glass from Bill's hand and raised it to him with a naughty smile, this smile, too, more or less familiar from the old days. Bill touched his glass to Thomas's and took a sip. The sweet sting of the Campari wiped the bitterness from his tongue.

"And you're publishing?" said Thomas.

Nothing he'd said so far had had quite such a nineteenth-century ring.

“I write articles.”

“On what?”

“My specialty.”

“What’s that?”

“Joyce.”

“Oh.” This stopped him as if he hadn’t heard of or didn’t approve of Joyce. But considering it further he asked, “Was he mad?”

“Mad crazy or mad angry?”

Thomas shrugged and let it go. The sun was gone, leaving an ochre band above the houses. The woman across the way had settled into a deck chair and was reading. Without the glare of the sun behind her you could almost make out her features. A grey ponytail, a camisole top, reading glasses.

“How is Mark?” Thomas asked again.

“Quite happy.” It sounded aggressive the way he said it, too swift and too definite. “I mean, he seems to like the guy.”

“I’m sorry about Mark,” said Thomas.

“Well, obviously he’s gotten over it.”

“No, I mean...”

Bill wanted to hit him. Thomas was gazing at him, overflowing with a kind of mournful sincerity, like a saint cataloguing his own sins.

“Oh, that doesn’t matter,” Bill said quickly, then wished he’d caught himself before he added, “now.”

He took an irascible gulp of his drink. Time to get this business out of the way.

“He asked me to look in on you,” he said.

“Why?”

“He was concerned.”

“He’d heard about my mid-life conversion.”

“No. Nobody knew about that.”

“You’ll have something to tell them.”

It was said coldly, though not without a shade of his old pride in being talked about. Still Bill felt the futility of pursuing it. If the kid wasn’t going to make an appearance, he realized, he wouldn’t be able to ask. Back in New York they’d discussed the ways in which the kid could be dreadful. Straight and street and thieving. Or fawning and effeminate. Too young anyway. Too poor and too local.

“I think,” Bill went on awkwardly, “he just wanted to make sure you’re happy.”

“Happy? Why should I be happy? Are *you* happy?”

He made a joke of it: “Who’s happy?”

“Didn’t you just say Mark is?” Thomas sat down and sipped his drink, as if he needed a moment to construct what he’d say next. “I don’t require happiness. What I ask for, as I tried to tell you, is holiness. I believe that if you invite it in, holiness appears. So I sit and I invite.”

An evening breeze shook loose a blossom from the bougainvillea, floated it, dropped it to the cement.

Somewhere inside the house a TV came on. Thomas looked up. Bill thought at first that he caught a shiver of distaste at the intrusion of something so not-nineteenth-century, not-twentieth-century even, since it sounded like an Xbox game. But it wasn’t

that, he realized. It was the way your attention can get hung up on the slightest movement of another.

“Look,” said Bill with a compassionate impulse, “let me take you out to dinner. I’m all alone here.”

Thomas shook his head. “I never go out to eat. They cheat you at the restaurants. I’d invite you here, but we...” He trailed off as if he couldn’t think of an excuse or didn’t think he needed one.

Bill shook his ice to loosen the last dregs of his drink. He drained it and wanted another, but he could think of a hundred better places to have one. “I should be on my way.”

They stepped inside. Inside the apartment the sound of the TV was clearer. Some kind of car chase. Squealing tires. Gunshots.

The sounds came from a behind a closed door just off the sitting room. Thomas stood with his back to the door as if interposing himself between Bill and the noise. He touched Bill’s shoulder and guided him out.

“Try to visit Sant’Ivo before you go,” he said. “In the morning the light is extraordinary.”