

## *John 20:27*

by Rob Secundus

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Tommy, the Bride's son, didn't recognize his cousin Carter. They hadn't met in the flesh for over a decade, and though Tommy religiously watched his cousin's pay-per-views, Carter Stimble, out of makeup and out of costume, did not much resemble his character Conan Curbstomper, one of the more fantastical individuals currently performing on the independent wrestling circuit.

Tommy was also drunk.

*Then*

He had, against his better judgment, refrained throughout the ceremony. With a tremendous effort of will, he had not touched his flask once during the homily ("Peter, Marge, what is love? God is, and being nice to others, and also, you both right here! You are love. We are love. He is love. Love. Forever. You will love each other eternally. Let us go forth in love."), not during the exchange of vows (during which his mother sobbed uncontrollably), nor even during the unity sand/candle rituals (which were vile, Protestant innovations that had no place in a Catholic mass). With even greater will he kept silent, never laughing, not even when his teenage stepbrother unwittingly dedicated the whole ordeal to Satan (concluding his reading by shouting, "The Lord of the World"). Tommy had even, when his grandmother tried to muffle her blaring phone beneath the pew, quietly reached over and turned it off without a single glare or word of rebuke.

God had granted him heroic virtue that day.

Unfortunately, that grace failed in the face of the real trial, which began immediately after the liturgy's conclusion. Fr. Abelard announced that the entire crowd was to remain seated; all guests would soon come to the altar to participate in the holy and joyful marital photo shoot.

One of Tommy's new aunts had then lurched to the pulpit, seized the microphone, and begun to growl a series of alternatively incomprehensible and oxymoronic commands. When a person or persons failed to enter the frame or leave it as she desired, she devoted several minutes to castigating not only their characters, but the qualities of their mothers and their mothers' mothers in a righteous fury. Not once did a single person successfully interpret whether they were to appear on the altar or in the choir loft or right outside the open window, gazing in amidst stained glass. The shoot lasted two hours.

After the first ten pictures, Tommy readied his flask and e-cigarette. After the first hundred, both were empty.

At the reception, he was seated with his sister Lily, Lily's husband, and their new stepbrother. The unwitting Satanist devoted the first half hour of the affair to describing the activities of his junior high furry club as well as the particulars of his fursona. (He was attempting to decide between a silver lion or a silver panther—or perhaps, he had just thought, a silver wolf). At the phrase “Philadelphia YipCon,” Tommy fled. There was an empty corner near the bar; he unpocketed the book he had fortuitously brought, grabbed a triple gin, and hunkered down to wait out the evening.

By canto 5 of the *Inferno*, the DJ had faded into a background fuzz; by canto 10, Tommy had found some measure of peace. At canto 13, his mother's voice pierced the veil.

“I have been [sniffle] through such DARKNESS [sob] and such [gulp] HORROR, and one thing has kept me going [sob]”—here she took out a plain silver cross that had been hidden in her cleavage—“Peter gave me this three years ago [several sobs], and that's how I knew he was The One. Thank [sniffle] you [sniffle] all [sniffle] for [sniffle] coming [sniffle] and thank [sniffle] God [sniffle] for bringing my man and I together. CHEERS!”

Both she and her son drained their glasses. He had seized another, returned to his corner, and made it to canto 15 when a mountainous shadow fell across him.

Now

“Hey,” the shade rumbled.

“Why hello sir!” Tommy hoped that he wouldn’t need to fain friendliness for too long. Usually, when he cranked up this particular personality, he was able to drive the other away in very short time. “I’m Thomas. Marge’s son! How ARE you this fine evening? Lovely ceremony! So moving! The bit with the candles! Oh, I cried. Yes sir.”

The hulking mass paused, shifted awkwardly, and said, “Tommy, it’s me. Carter. It’s your cousin Carter.”

“Oh.” Tommy began to sigh but caught himself and perked up again. “Carter old chum! It’s been a minute or two since I saw you, hasn’t it! Well, rather, since you saw me. I caught your ladder match with Ogre Jones on Saturday, and, let me tell you, that last plunge was mighty impressive.” He paused, made a show of glancing around conspiratorially, and continued, “Sorry, Coz, we can keep things *kayfabe*, if you’d rather.”

Carter, as Tommy had hoped, did not know how to respond. Unfortunately, rather than leave, he paused, collected himself, and tried again. “Tommy, I didn’t know you watched ... I would have reached out, got you to a show, caught up with you ... it’s been so long ... when we were kids we were so ... I just thought now you—”

“Were a pretentious prick? An ac-a-dem-iac ass? Got his fancy college degree and now he’s too good for a pay-per-view? Too good for his family? I know what the Aunts all say. Lily keeps me informed.” He took a long drink. “And it’s all true, almost. But catch-as-catch-can is all the rage in the Ivory Tower. My first publication was on *lucha* and liminality.”

“I. Um. OK. I thought you were ashamed of me, or something. I mean, we were kind of like brothers.”

“Of course not! My coz, living his dream? Shame? I’m proud, Cart. Damned proud. I brag about you all the time.”

“Well ... so ... Why haven't you been in touch? You didn't even ... not even to Aunt Lil's funeral.”

“Well, I did make it. Sort of. Spat on her grave after you all left.”

“What?”

Tommy had prepared this bit beforehand in case he needed to send away a too-persistent member of the family. “Sister Hag spent my childhood telling my parents I was severely disabled and my adult life telling them that I was a depraved hedonist. That nun's in hell for sure, if you believe in that sort of thing. Tongues of flame, boiling pitch, the whole deal. Ugh. Our family. Her whole generation in particular ...” he gestured to his mother, now awkwardly gyrating on the dance floor with her newest husband. “The last time I appeared at a family function, I was inundated with emails, texts, calls, all complaining about my conduct. I'm done with all of them. Maybe now that she's settled down I can resign from the immediate family too. Still need to set up my dad, though.”

Carter eagerly latched onto what he hoped would be steadier ground. “Oh, how's your dad doing? Is he holding up? I know it's only been a few months since the divorce.”

“Well, we just buried his parents.”

“Oh! Ah! Wow! That's!” he staggered. “Oh! I'm sorry! That' must've been hard.”

“It was DELIGHTFUL. The funeral was cowboy themed.”

“Delightful, Oh, OK! OK, great.”

“Wagon wheels, rodeo clowns, a baptismal trough—the works. Pastor told us that the congregation looked back to a time when men were men, and virtue and respect weren't dirty words. Never took off his ten-gallon hat, though, in the church. Lot of talk about the end times. Mostly the four horsemen. Again, the whole thing was incredible.”

“Well ... great ... I'm sorry ... for your loss?” He began to back away. “It was ... good seeing you? Maybe I'll run into you again soon.”

“Probably not! Goodnight!”

Tommy settled in again and flipped to Ugolino, his favorite scene in the entire *Commedia*.

## *Then*

At the funeral, Tommy had not been so amused. It had, for a very brief moment, brought him guilt and regret. He hadn't known his father's parents. He thought that, last year, once the divorce had been finalized, he'd finally have the opportunity—but even then, he'd put it off. Now they were dead.

These feelings were quickly replaced by disgust. He felt first disgust for his mother, who'd loathed his father's family and cut off contact with them decades before. This shifted into disgust for the cowboy church. At the start of the service, a series of moderately overweight, Old West cosplaying, guitar-wielding, middle-aged men had ascended the stage and blared out a series of vaguely Christian country numbers until, by means inscrutable, the lead guitarist determined that their god had been satisfied by this offering. He then wrapped up the ritual with a lecture on the end times, noting the aforementioned, thematically appropriate horsemen, but also giving a bit of time to the superhuman Resurrection Bodies that the deceased would be receiving any day now, now that the president had moved the country's embassy to Jerusalem and kick-started Christ's return. These bodies would be capable of flight, intangibility, camouflage, and many other wondrous feats. Most importantly, they would be beautiful, without blemish.

At the end of this sermon, the good Rev. Holiday had informed the crowd that Tommy's grandfather had a revelation on his deathbed. One person would not be receiving these superpowers. Someone in the room was damned. Now was the time for he or she to come forth and repent, to be born again in Jesus. None stirred. Eventually, with a sad sigh, the preacher moved on and concluded the ceremony. On the long drive back, Lily and Tommy had argued about which of them must have been meant, as they were the only ones in the room with no Personal Protestant Relationship with Republican Jesus.

## *Now*

"What this??" growled something over the DJ singing along to a line dance.

Tommy made a silent plea and waited—but his prayers went unanswered. The creature was not driven away. After an uncomfortable

“E V E R Y B O D Y CLAP YOUR HANDS,” Tommy sighed and looked up. It was the Veteran. “Why, hello! This would be *The Divine Comedy*, a fifteenth-century poem exploring medieval conceptions of history, aesthetics, ethics, philosophy, theology, and, most importantly, eschatology.”

“It’s a BOOK,” she rumbled.

“Yes, very perceptive of you. *The Divine Comedy* is a book.”

“At a WEDDING! RECEPTION!”

“And what a lovely venue it is!”

“Shame!”

“No,” he pointed to the book. “They’re all pretty shameless. That’s why they’re in hell.”

“GIVE IT HERE!”

“I’d rather not. If you’d like a copy, several translations are in the public—”

He was no match for her great strength. *The Commedia* was no longer his.

“NOW DANCE!”

“I don’t—”

“AT YOUR MOTHER’S WEDDING. YOU. DANCE! GO! GOGO-GOGOGOGOGO!”

Tommy stumbled up, driven by the blows she dealt with the tome, and eventually reached the dance floor, where he failed to imitate the motions of those around him. As he jerked and flopped, he kept his eyes on the sergeant. Two songs in, while the DJ shouted along to “Gangnam Style,” her guard slipped, and he seized his Dante from her purse, fleeing behind the now vacant bar. He found a bottle and opened the book once again. He would remain there until the event was over. It couldn’t be long now.

*Then*

In 1289, Count Ugolino della Gherardesca and his children were locked into a tower and left to starve. None survived, but Ugolino lasted much longer than expected, as he made a meal of what he had on hand.

In canto 32 of the *Inferno*, near the final pit of the universe, right before Dante encounters Satan himself, the Pilgrim happens upon two men frozen up to their heads in a vast lake of ice. There, Count Ugolino forever gnaws at the scalp of His Eminence Ruggieri degli Ubaldini, Archbishop of Pisa, the man who had thrown away Ugolino's key.

Dante asks Ugolino to tell his story, and before he begins, the Count politely wipes the spittle and gore off of his face and onto Ruggieri's hair. Tommy always chuckled at that part.

*Now*

Tommy was jerked away again from Ugolino's tower. His name was being called over the speakers.

"And now [sniff] my two [sniff] BEAUTIFUL children [snuffle] will read the speeches they have composed in our honor. I am [sob] so blessed to have such grateful kids."

This was a shock. The possibility of speeches had been raised months prior, and Tommy and Lily both, in very strong terms, had rejected the idea.

Tommy slowly rose from behind the bar while people politely clapped. Lily spotted him, walked up, grabbed his arm, and directed him towards the stage.

"Listen," she hissed through a clenched smile. "You're drunk, and we're both pissed, so just stick to a simple script—we love her, we're happy for her, yay Jesus, and get off the stage. Copy what I say, just in your own words, OK?"

"Roger roger."

While Lily gave her toast, Tommy watched the crowd.

There was the sergeant, eyes blazing at the book in his hands. There, Carter, strangely doleful after their excellent conversation. There, his new brother, eyes glazed over, daydreaming of curvaceous opossums. And more faces: middle-aged men and women that had drifted through their lives over the years, scowling boomers now related in law, a horde of children running, screaming, or vibrating in place—

"And, in conclusion, love ya, Mom!"

Then applause, and suddenly, a microphone was in his hands.

Tommy thought of how he must look in front of them. He briefly pictured himself giving the toast in cowboy clothes and giggled. Lily's sharp elbow brought him back. The script. There was a very simple script.

"Hi, my name is Thomas. I'm the bride's son." Something sharply glinted in the corner of his vision. He turned towards it, towards his mother. "Hi, Mom. Um, I love you. Like Lily said, I'm happy for Jesus." He realized it was her cross catching the spotlight. "Today ... love ..." He remembered the last thing he noticed at the funeral—beyond the wagon wheels, on the back wall behind the stage, where a crucifix would be in his own church, the wall had been cut away in a cross' shape.

"Love ..."

He couldn't remember what he was supposed to say. He couldn't stop blinking at the reflected light. So he just began to talk.

"There is no marriage in heaven. Father was wrong to say they'll be together forever. No marriage in heaven. There's love, though. In heaven. So that's nice."

He stopped to take a drink, but he didn't have one. He went on, "You know what else's in heaven? A God with a hole in his gut. Divine intestines spilling out." Lily was pulling at the mic. He jerked away. "Do you know what love looks like? Do you know what you say you believe? Love is nails struck through bone. Marrow starting to seep. Mixing with blood. Paulo and Francesca didn't know love." His mother was starting to shout something. "Do you know that one? No? How about: love is a woman reaching out for the first time in her fucking life while her grandchildren are shot behind her." The microphone was gone, and he was shouting now, shouting over sobs and a great din. "An axe murderer weeping over a horse! Joan's skin peeling away in the fire! Can you smell it? The burning hair? The stink of the mob?"

Only flashes then. His mother's blotted mascara. Huge arms gripping his waist. The world hurtling around him. And then, in the last moment, his cousin's sad face saying something as he moved, maybe some secret from their childhood, an old shared story, or the rules of a game, something he could have remembered if only he had tried, and then the crash, and silence.