

Grade 10 Winner

Calvin Chen

Father's Last Temptation

The church stood tall as an ancient relic in an evolving city. Its fragile stonework and artisan stained-glass windows were enough evidence that the church was built before the city's infancy. It seemed the only new features included the heating system, installed to keep up with the winters. Inside the church were signs that further proved its old age. The carpet that once was a strong red had long lost its colour and rusty nails would stick out of worsening walls. Even the pews exhibited wear and chipping.

"Please try to feel sympathy towards the less fortunate," Father Owen announced during the liturgy. Father Owen was the only priest of the church and did his masses accordingly without help. He didn't have a house of his own, but lived inside the church. The public loved him for his selflessness and greeted him on his evening walks. His lifestyle was the inspiration to many and no one ever slandered his reputation. He was a prophetic speaker and never failed to emphasize the need of donating money when it came to collecting offertories.

"Dig deeper into your pockets, children of God."

The people in the liturgy would do exactly that and gave whatever they could. They assumed all of the money went towards helping the poor because clearly, none of it was being used to renovate the frail church.

Before ending a liturgy, Father Owen always included the Ten Commandments and emphasized that they were the most important parts of the Bible.

"... And finally, thou shalt not steal. Go in peace."

As the people exited the church, Father Owen checked around to verify everyone had left and then locked the entrance. He let out a sigh of exhaustion, hunched his shoulders and walked to his room to unwind. It was hidden away in case anyone came upon it.

Once inside, there were noticeable differences. The floors were lined with red velvet carpet and the walls were furnished with mahogany wood. Everything in the room inferred a comfortable and lavish lifestyle. His bed and chairs were no exception.

Contrary to what people believed, Father Owen used the offertories to live in luxury. Little of the money actually reached the struggling needy after it passed through his hands.

His throat was dry. He reached for the bottle of red wine when he heard footsteps coming from the hall. *Clop. Clop.* He paused to see if it was his imagination playing tricks. *Clop ... Clop ...* The footsteps came closer. They sounded like hooves striking the ground.

A man appeared at the door. He dressed in a black tailored suit, with a dark red tie and matching cufflinks. The priest took note of his feet. He wore leather shoes, but no heel of any shoe could have produced the sound he heard.

"Good afternoon Father," he said casually. "That was a lovely mass." The man paid no attention to the room he was in and the fortunes it was worth.

"T-thank you," Owen sheepishly said, placing the bottle down. "What can I do for you today?" He recalled that everyone left when he finished his liturgy. How did this gentleman find the room?

"I've been told that you are the holiest man in this town. Is this true?" the visitor asked.

"Yes, that's true. I'm the only man in the city that runs a humble church," the priest confirmed.

"If you are truly the holiest man, why are you drinking such a subpar wine? Surely, the holiest man deserves better." A bottle of the finest wine materialized into the stranger's hand. The action was so sudden; Owen wasn't certain whether he was always holding it or not. "Go on, let us have a drink."

Owen was shaken, but the businessman had a charismatic allure to him. He also wasn't about to give up the opportunity to taste a supreme wine. Owen disregarded his suspicions and eagerly brought out two chalices while the man sat down.

"Oh, that won't be needed." The man took cups from the inside of his suit. "I brought my own."

He poured wine into the priest's glass and his before placing the bottle on the table between them. "These chairs are very comfortable," the man said.

"Thank you," Owen grinned. "They're made with silk."

Each man took sips. Owen's eyes widened, "This wine is absolutely delightful!" He greedily indulged the rest and started pouring more.

The man simply stared at the priest while he enjoyed the wine. Owen became uncomfortable and spoke, "I apologize, but I don't know your name."

"You may call me Lucius," he said. "I do not believe you are the holiest man. The holiest man deserves more than this church. He should own the largest building."

"Yes. You're right," Owen agreed. "But I can assure you that I am the holiest man. You may ask anyone that attends my mass."

"Very well, but would the holiest man allow himself to be deceived into drinking with the Man of Sin?" Lucius said with an emerging grin.

Owen tilted his head in confusion, taking in what he heard. He blinked twice and Lucius instantly changed his physical form. No longer was there a businessman sitting and enjoying wine, but instead, a twisted figure took his place. The new body had a face that loosely resembled Lucius's facial structure, but the rest of his arrangement conjured up the likes of nightmares. He had hairy legs of a goat and an upper half of a man with red leather skin. He presented developed muscles and hooves that would've been able to pummel anything that opposed him. On his back were two large wings similar to mythical dragons described in age-old fables. His head featured sharp horns and malicious snake-like eyes more threatening than any variation of Medusa. A wicked being now stood in front of Owen and was staring at him.

The priest immediately jumped out of his seat and dropped his glass, spilling the contents. He gripped the wall behind him, stumbling in fear.

"I know what you are," Owen gasped.

"Oh, but you know so little," he whispered, revealing his python teeth and a serpent's tongue.

"D-don't hurt me please," the priest stammered. His hands were shaking and gripping the wall.

"I didn't come to inflict pain," he echoed. "I came to make an offer."

The priest loosened his grip and his muscles relaxed. "What offer?"

"I know what you desire. The same thing all men want: money. This entire church can be made of gold, if you'd like." The walls then glimmered with a metal sheen. "All I need is your name on this parchment."

"No," the priest declined. "I don't want your gold." Father Owen was educated enough to know never to make deals with demons. He felt a vial of holy water in his back pocket.

"Very well," the Devil was not yet finished with the priest. "I shall offer you the opportunity to experience much more than fortune."

Their surroundings changed. They were at a palace the size of two mansions. Its walls were made out of polished marble. Goddesses stood beside fountains flowing with champagne.

"This is a kingdom with everything you will ever need. There are beautiful women and enough wine to keep you satisfied until you are drunk!"

The Devil had outdone himself this time. Owen was enjoying the scenery that he almost cried "yes". His mind and body ached to be in this paradise and Owen almost forgot he was dealing with the Devil. He felt the vial again in his back pocket. The priest knew holy water was the demon's bane and if he struck him with it, the Devil would be diminished. Then he could stay forever in luxury.

"Do you have an answer for me?" He asked.

"Yes! Please, let me remain in this kingdom of yours!" Owen exclaimed while concealing his grin.

"I knew you were a wise man. Here is the parchment. Just sign there."

Owen took the parchment with the pen in his hand. Without hesitation, he grabbed the vial and threw it. It smashed into the Devil's chest, but barely phased his expression. The shards from the impact backfired and punctured the priest's skin.

The demon laughed. "Silly human, did you really think that work?"

Owen was in shock. Why didn't it have any effect?

Satan grinned. "Your efforts are trivial. What good is holy water if it is blessed by a sinful man?"

The cuts were deep and Owen's skin dripped blood over the paper.

"That'll be fine," Satan said, taking the tainted parchment. "Pleasure doing business with you."

Within seconds, the demon lit on fire and disappeared.

Thump. Owen dropped to the floor. He was left lying on his side in the church. The walls were restored its fragile state and no longer gleamed of gold. His eyes were wide-open, but his heart was still beating. His body was alive and well, yet he remained motionless.

The Devil had claimed another soul for his collection.