

Chris Cleary
Morning Glory

He was sole possessor of the Good News that his flock eagerly anticipated. All he had to do was utter the Word and everything below him would begin to turn like massive iron cogwheels, prodigious teeth prying open floodgates. He took a moment—several moments—to savor the suspense. They stood with breaths held, leaning forward in the pews. Expectation dazzled them to such silence that he could discern even the faint whirring in the organ pipes. The mounted lights were so dimmed in these last seconds before Resurrection that only the candles' flames flickered gold upon the crucifix. He fingered the stray crease ironed into the starched altar cloth. Human fallibility, he thought, yet it was but to raise his arms and intone for all to be forgiven, for they had meant well and had done their best. The Reverend Micah Buchanan smiled and sucked his teeth with the assurance that all good things come to those who wait.

He glanced to his left and caught sight of the wall clock through the sacristy door. Suddenly he was somewhere else. It was about that time. The last of them were just now being loaded in. Secret Covenant. He would be saved. The locked strongbox hidden in the back of the cabinet below the clock would, by this time next week, be more than full, running over with divine blessing. He heard the bell ring and the steel clash of mechanical gates miles and miles away as his sturdy tenor intoned, "The Lord is risen today. Alleluia!"

"The Lord is risen today! Alleluia!" was their collective response, as predictable as a reflection in the mirror. Suddenly the mounted lights blared with full intensity. The organ pipes resonated and shot glorious chords through their various flues. Tufts of hair on the heads of the choir's back row protested perceptibly.

Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!
Our triumphant holy day, Alleluia!
Who did once upon the Cross, Alleluia,
Suffer to redeem our loss, Alleluia!

He watched the crucifer, curly-headed Kevin, attuned to his cue, beetle over to lift the latch that released the cross. Would he remember how heavy it would become carried the length of the church and back? Yes, his hands were far apart, bottom and top to keep the balance, especially important when he bowed, and there'd be no need to hurry, for Mrs. Perkins could give him as many verses as he needed for the procession. Next, the thurifer, Jack Sims, cocky as teens were wont to be when they knew younger kids admired them. He must have had his boat boy stoke it for the long march, for he trailed glorious clouds of incense, and he too was off. Now the servers, the Crandalls' girl and boy, Cliff stealthily peeking over to Alyssa for confidence, his eyes like twin searchlights just below the blond mop pressed to his forehead. He would hang back out of fear of being hit when Jack swung the thurible round the world. Now the choir be-

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gan their exodus, just as Kevin approached the base of the pulpit's stairs. The clubhouse turn. It had been post time in the sacristy, so they had to be running now.

We're just about ready for the start of the first here on a beautiful Sunday at Clements Fields...the last horse is in the gate...and they're off! Copernican Twist had a little bit of an awkward start...everything broke well...The long shot Secret Covenant is up and on the pace with a brilliant beginning... Mirrorman is on second...Friend Darkness third to the outside...and Oriana's Ricardo is fourth as they move for the first turn...on the far outside, Copernican Twist is moving up after that tardy start to battle with the leaders...Butters His Hay is next...then Foal's Gold, Madeleine de Commercy, Believeense, and Little Carnival are in the back of the field....

Kevin's holding it nice and high. How well he listened! When children were attentive, they always knew their roles and carried out their assignments bravely. Conscientious Kevin, awake to the secret language, would succeed at interpreting what the Lord has laid before him, those subtle signs that others would pass by. He too had the eye, the instantaneous translation of the mundane, as when his father passed him the slate and urged him to pick the one he liked best. He perused the funny names bracketed in groups of ten, and then turned his eye to the field where stretched the oval track, the track upon which his divination would be tested, letting his gaze search the pavilion tents, yellow and white islands in the green sea, and the agitated souls in anticipation of bounty filing past him to congregate in the grandstands. At first he chose at random, this or that curious name standing out for him before the rest, which his father repeated to the man behind the window, his tone solemn and reverential as he slid the money across the counter and accepted the ticket. After the horses pursued one another in their frenzy, his father for some reason had to return to the window to receive back his offering plus a little bit more, and he fanned the bills before his face and beamed, "Look at that, Mikey! You're blessed!" A reinforced love that suffused his small soul. "Let's have another go at it!" And so as the occasional became a pattern and the pattern intensified, he began to view the act of his choosing with increased consequence, asking to pilgrimage to the paddock where he could wander amongst the stalls, inhaling the heady aroma of dung and horseflesh, pricking his ears to sift out a message hidden in the various whinnies and snorts and nickers, a divine communiqué lost to common folk, even the trainers and jockeys, for although they could speak (or so it seemed) the language of the horses, the language of the horses had for him the inflection of some grander thing that he didn't quite understand. But what did that matter when much more often than not it made his father hug him close and swirling swing his feet about, and placing him back on land, he whispered, "This is still our secret, you know your Mom wouldn't understand and would worry too much, but that's okay, 'cause it's all for the good." And though they were not a particularly church-going family, just religious enough in their own quiet way for him to have been given his name from a random page in the Bible, he fixed upon the ministry as his profession, for God had already ordained it, His blessings flowing directly to him through a doxology of the scratch sheet.

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Hymns of praise then let us sing, Alleluia,
Unto Christ, our Heavenly king, Alleluia,
Who endured the cross and grave, Alleluia,
Sinners to redeem and save, Alleluia!

Secret Covenant leads the way into the back stretch...with Friend Darkness now second two lengths back...through a quarter of 24²/₅ seconds...Mirrorman third at the rail...and then come Copernican Twist and Oriana's Ricardo...followed by Foal's Gold, five off the lead...then Butters His Hay on the inside...two and a half to Believeense to the outside...Madeleine de Commercy along the rail...and Little Carnival is last...the half was in 48 and 3....

It had seemed like second nature to rely upon it once more, even after his mother found out and forced his father to quit, even after his time in college and seminary, for his first year of assignment at Olive Street Church of Christ was not an easy one. The community was so insistent upon the particular expectations they had of how they were to be led that his self-doubt magnified the relationships he was forging into an imagined web of hostilities, veiled demands upon his stewardship, their having become accustomed to the ways of his predecessor. Although he prayed nightly for God to send him a strength of resolve, he missed the quantifiable validation of the secret covenant of his childhood. And so little by little, like his father, he began setting small sums aside especially devoted, more convenient now, indeed more discreet to do it online even though much was missing from the personal experience, the mysterious tang of the stables, the excitement of his fellow supplicants in the grandstand, the consecration afterwards at the betting window, the physical sensation of all these rituals now gone. But what remained, hearing his choice proclaimed first across the finish line, was evidence enough. Or should have been. His divinations now kept missing the mark no matter how he played it, exacta or across the board, and no matter how he chose the names, gut instinct or byzantine forays into bibliomancy using books pulled at random from the rectory shelves, the losses kept mounting, losses of supplemental income from weddings and funerals, losses he kept hidden from his wife. He had learned by now quite a lot about the art itself, the structuring of wagers, handicapping, even a smattering of equine management, and gnawing away in the pit of his stomach was the worry that he was after all merely a morning glory, a horse that performs well in workouts but falls short when comes the time that really matters. The fear of being forsaken raised the stakes, enough for him to begin shaving off the top of the offertory. That was not so wrong, for it was really in the name of the greater glory of God, was it not, and He would never allow His servant to part with His money, as long as he kept six (later four, then two) months of operating expenses in the cash reserves. But inexplicably God remained deaf to this logic and kept damming the flow of his blessings, and in desperation, under the guise of a charity mission to the meaner side of the city, sought out an alternative source of funding, and the man with the buck teeth, face like a malevolent jack rabbit, made sure he knew exactly what he was getting into, repayment to his boss in full plus interest by a certain time, or else it meant the choir invisible.

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But the pains which he endured, Alleluia,
Our salvation have procured, Alleluia!
Now above the sky he's King, Alleluia,
Where the angels ever sing, Alleluia!

Past the half-mile pole, Secret Covenant by a length and a half...Copernican Twist is in second...after that Friend Darkness in third...at the rail, Mirrorman is moving up and is now fourth, right alongside Friend Darkness...Friend Darkness and Mirrorman are moving together on the far turn...past Copernican Twist...and they're coming after Secret Covenant approaching the quarter pole....

So he was in a curious place. Since the first year of his tenure, he had ascended in the world of mortals, commandeering the respect of his flock and bolstering his ego as the model of altruism the elite Middletown faithful took him to be. However, in these past several months before the Easter service, his position in the world of God was far from certain, for the heavenly anthem that was supposed to drown out all music but its own seemed to have given straightaway to a celestial hem and hum and haw for all eternity. What was God up to? And then it came, like a bolt of Good News on the road to Damascus. God had many facets to His personality, but indecision was not one of them, for there it was, revealed to him in all its sudden glory, in the first race of the day at Clements Fields, post position #3 (for the Trinity), Secret Covenant. God's voice at last calling after months of stubborn silence, and though it was a long shot, such a long shot that reasonable people would shy away from, that was part of His plan, for him to recoup enough to refill the reserves, more than enough to repay the shark and send him on his way. And so he took everything, everything that would not be missed for a few days, and placed the straight bet to win.

And here they were at last advancing up the aisle toward their finish line, little Kevin with his curls courageously toting the Cross of Victory, then boastful Jack Sims hanging back to propel the thurible around the world before stopping short of the carpeted step on which he stood to receive the proper thrice three blessings, after which he bowed and took the thurible from Jack. He briefly glimpsed in its polished gold through the incense smoke his own face contorted as in a funhouse reflection, and then dropping it to its chain's length, unleashed blessings upon the congregation. With each extravagant oscillation, he felt the reach of God's arm and the clasp of his ordination about him as Mrs. Perkins repeated the verse one more time

Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!
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Secret Covenant in front...but here come Mirrorman and Friend Darkness both making their move...they're into the stretch...Secret Covenant center of

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the track, his lead down to one length...Mirrorman on the inside, Friend Darkness outside...into the final furlong...Secret Covenant weakening...he's passed on both sides...it's Mirrorman and Friend Darkness neck and neck as they surge to the front...Secret Covenant fighting back, trying to deny it...and Secret Covenant, one final acceleration as they approach the finish...and it's Secret Covenant by a nose! Followed closely by Friend Darkness, and Mirrorman in third, Copernican Twist flagging into fourth...a real nail-biter, ladies and gentlemen...a lot of us didn't think he'd make it....

His sermon that day was on the power of faith, and those who heard it were of two different camps. The younger members swore he was on fire, really on fire, like he was up there battling Satan for his own soul, and that was pretty cool to hear Father Micah preach like that. Their grandparents deemed his sermon uncharacteristically fanatical, a bit too charismatic for their tastes, but well-meaning and sincere nonetheless.

His usual practice after leaving the altar was to dash to the front doors and greet the congregation as they left. This time he detoured into the bathroom off the hallway and retrieved his phone from beneath his cassock. If anyone asked, but nobody would, he would pat his stomach and swear it was just a minor complaint. He knew the results would already be posted, and the good souls of his flock could sit tight for a minute or two.

He shuddered with relief when he read the results and peered beyond the fluorescent ceiling light into eternal mystery. He gave thanks unto the Lord, and also His special instrument, the red chestnut colt, for it was meet and right so to do. He then flushed the toilet before he revealed himself, just to lend some credence to his fiction.