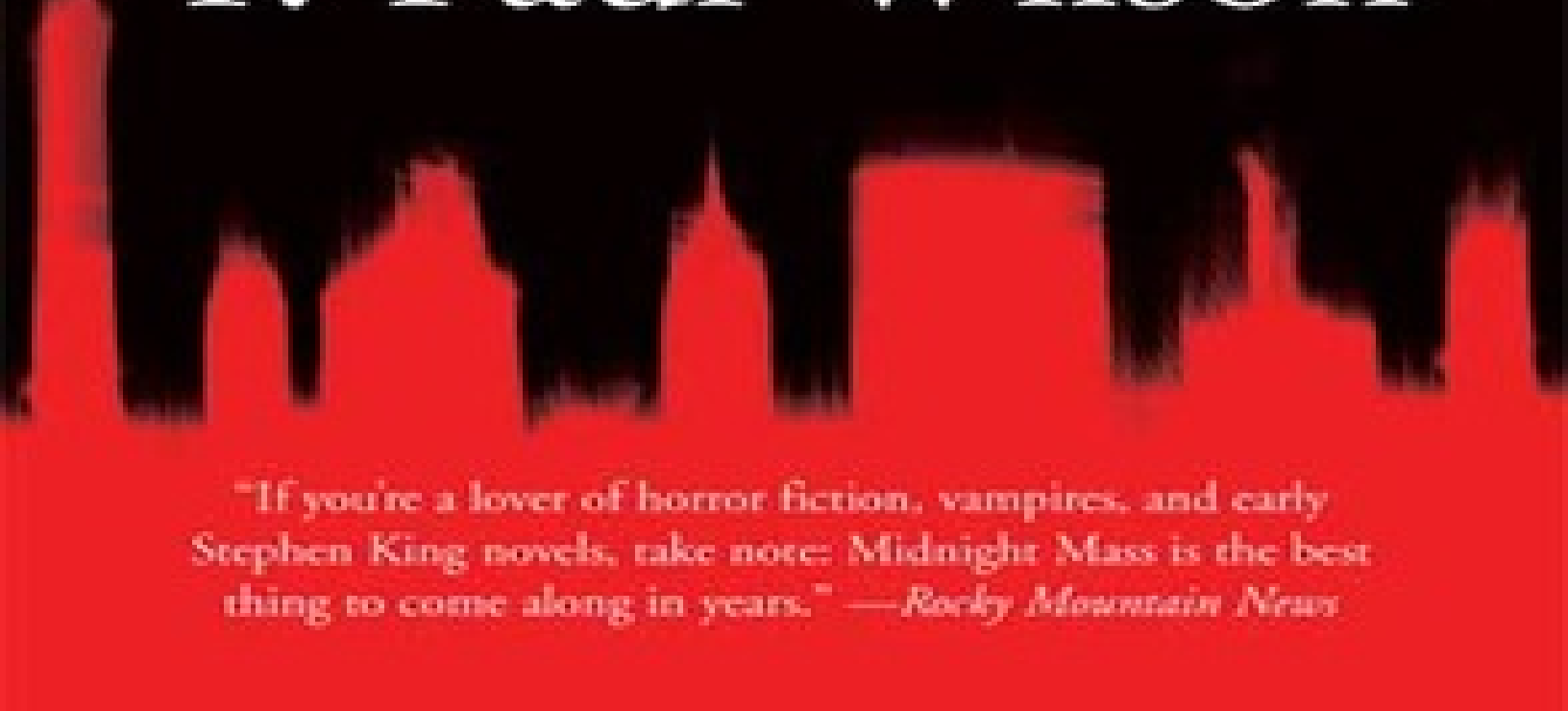




# MIDNIGHT MASS

F. Paul Wilson

"If you're a lover of horror fiction, vampires, and early Stephen King novels, take note: *Midnight Mass* is the best thing to come along in years." —*Rocky Mountain News*



## **MIDNIGHT MASS**

F. Paul Wilson

It had been almost a full minute since he'd slammed the brass

knocker against the heavy oak door. That should have been proof

enough. After all, wasn't the knocker in the shape of a cross? But

no, they had to squint through their peephole and peer through the sidelights that framed the door.

Rabbi Zev Wolpin sighed and resigned himself to the scrutiny. He couldn't

blame people for being cautious, but this seemed a bit overly so. The sun was in

the west and shining full on his back; he was all but silhouetted in it. What

more did they want?

I should maybe take off my clothes and dance naked?

He gave a mental shrug and savored the damp sea air. At least it was cool here.

He'd bicycled from Lakewood, which was only ten miles inland from this same

ocean but at least twenty degrees warmer. The bulk of the huge Tudor retreat

house stood between him and the Atlantic, but the ocean's briny scent and

rhythmic rumble were everywhere.

Spring Lake. An Irish Catholic seaside resort since before the turn of the

century. He looked around at its carefully restored Victorian houses, the huge

mansions arrayed here along the beach front, the smaller homes set in neat rows

running straight back from the ocean. Many of them were still occupied. Not like

Lakewood. Lakewood was an empty shell. Not such a bad place for a retreat, he

thought. He wondered how many houses like this the Catholic Church owned.

A series of clicks and clacks drew his attention back to the door as

numerous bolts were pulled in rapid succession. The door swung inward

revealing a nervous-looking young man in a long black cassock. As he looked at

Zev his mouth twisted and he rubbed the back of his wrist across it to hide a smile.

"And what should be so funny?" Zev asked.

"I'm sorry. It's just-"

"I know," Zev said, waving off any explanation as he glanced down at the wooden cross slung on a cord around his neck. "I know."

A bearded Jew in a baggy black serge suit wearing a yarmulke and a cross. Hilarious, no?

So, nu? This was what the times demanded, this was what it had come to if he wanted to survive.

And Zev did want to survive. Someone had to live to carry on the

traditions of the Talmud and the Torah, even if there were hardly any Jews left alive in the world.

Zev stood on the sunny porch, waiting. The priest watched him in silence.

Finally Zev said, "Well, may a wandering Jew come in?"

"I won't stop you," the priest said, "but surely you don't expect me to invite you."

Ah, yes. Another precaution. The vampire couldn't cross the threshold of a home unless he was invited in, so don't invite. A good habit to cultivate, he supposed.

He stepped inside and the priest immediately closed the door behind him, relatching all the locks one by one. When he turned around Zev held out his hand.

"Rabbi Zev Wolpin, Father. I thank you for allowing me in."

"Brother Christopher, sir," he said, smiling and shaking Zev's hand. His

suspensions seemed to have been completely allayed. "I'm not a priest yet. We can't offer you much here, but-2"

"Oh, I won't be staying long. I just came to talk to Father Joseph Cahill."

Brother Christopher frowned. "Father Cahill isn't here at the moment." "When will he be back?"

"I-I'm not sure. You see-"

"Father Cahill is on another bender," said a stentorian voice behind Zev. He

turned to see an elderly priest facing him from the far end of the foyer. White-

haired, heavy set, wearing a black cassock.

"I'm Rabbi Wolpin."

"Father Adams," the priest said, stepping forward and extending his hand. As

they shook Zev said, "Did you say he was on `another' bender? I never knew

Father Cahill to be much of a drinker."

"Apparently there was a lot we never knew about Father Cahill," the priest said

stiffly. "If you're referring to that nastiness last year," Zev said, feeling

the old anger rise in him, "I for one never believed it for a minute. I'm

surprised anyone gave it the slightest credence." "The veracity of the

accusation was irrelevant in the final analysis. The damage to Father Cahill's

reputation was a fait accompli. Father Palmeri was forced to request his removal

for the good of St. Anthony's parish." Zev was sure that sort of attitude had

something to do with Father Joe being on "another bender."

"Where can I find Father Cahill?" "He's in town somewhere, I suppose, making a

spectacle of himself. If there's any way you can talk some sense into him,

please do. Not only is he killing himself with drink but he's become quite an

embarrassment to the priesthood and to the Church." Which bothers you more? Zev

wanted to ask but held his tongue.

"f 11 try." He waited for Brother Christopher to undo all the locks, then

stepped toward the sunlight.

"Try Morton's down on Seventy-one," the younger man whispered as Zev

passed.

Zev rode his bicycle south on Route 71. It was almost strange to see people on

the streets. Not many, but more than he'd ever see in Lakewood again. Yet he

knew that as the vampires consolidated their grip on the world and infiltrated

the Catholic communities, there'd be fewer and fewer day people here as well.

He thought he remembered passing a place named Morton's on his way to

Spring Lake. And then up ahead he saw it, by the railroad track crossing, a

white stucco one-story box of a building with "Morton's Liquors" painted in big

black letters along the side.

Father Adams' words echoed back to him: . . . on another bender . . .

Zev pushed his bicycle to the front door and tried the knob. Locked up

tight. A look inside showed a litter of trash and empty shelves. The windows

were barred; the back door was steel and locked as securely as the front. So

where was Father Joe?

Then he spotted the basement window at ground level by the over

flowing trash dumpster. It wasn't latched. Zev went down on his knees and pushed

it open. Cool, damp, musty air wafted against his face as he peered into the

Stygian blackness. It occurred to him that he might be asking for trouble

sticking his head inside, but he had to give it a try. If Father Cahill wasn't

here, Zev would begin the return trek to Lakewood and write this whole trip off

as wasted effort.

"Father Joe?" he called. "Father Cahill?"

"That you again, Chris?" said a slightly slurred voice. "Go home, will you? I'll

be all right. I'll be back later." "It's me, Joe. Zev. From Lakewood." He heard

shoes scraping on the floor and then a familiar face appeared in the shaft of light from the window.

"Well I'll be damned. It is you! Thought you were Brother Chris come to

drag me back to the retreat house. Gets scared I'm gonna get stuck out after

dark. So how ya doin', Reb? Glad to see you're still alive. Come on in!" Zev saw

that Father Cahill's eyes were glassy and he swayed ever so slightly, like a

skyscraper in the wind. He wore faded jeans and a black, Bruce Springsteen

Tunnel of Love Tour sweatshirt.

Zev's heart twisted at the sight of his friend in such condition. Such a mensch

like Father Joe shouldn't be acting like a shikker. Maybe it was a mistake

coming here. Zev didn't like seeing him like this.

"I don't have that much time, Joe. I came to tell you-"

"Get your bearded ass down here and have a drink or I'll come up and drag you

down." "All right," Zev said. "I'll come in but I won't have a drink." He hid

his bike behind the dumpster, then squeezed through the window. Father Joe

helped him to the floor. They embraced, slapping each other on the back. Father

Joe was a taller man, a giant from Zev's perspective. At six-four he was ten

inches taller, at thirty-five he was a quarter-century younger; he had a

muscular frame, thick brown hair, and-on better days-clear blue eyes. "You're grayer, Zev, and you've lost weight." "Kosher food is not so easily come by these days."  
"All kinds of food is getting scarce." He touched the cross slung from Zev's neck and smiled. "Nice touch. Goes well with your zizith."

Zev fingered the fringe protruding from under his shirt. Old habits didn't die easily. "Actually, I've grown rather fond of it."  
"So what can I pour you?" the priest said, waving an arm at the crates of liquor stacked around him. "My own private reserve. Name your poison. "I don't want a drink." "Come on, Reb. I've got some nice hundred-proof Stoly here. You've got to have at least one drink-"  
"Why? Because you think maybe you shouldn't drink alone?"

Father Joe winced. "Ouch!" "All right," Zev said. "Bissel. I'll have one drink on the condition that you don't have one. Because I wish to talk to you." The priest considered that a moment, then reached for the vodka bottle. "Deal." He poured a generous amount into a paper cup and handed it over. Zev took a sip. He was not a drinker and when he did imbibe he preferred his vodka ice cold from a freezer. But this was tasty. Father Cahill sat back on a crate of Jack Daniel's and folded his arms. "Nu?" the priest said with a Jackie Mason shrug.



Zev had to laugh. "Joe, I still say that somewhere in your family tree is Jewish blood."

For a moment he felt light, almost happy. When was the last time he had

laughed? Probably more than a year now, probably at their table near the back of

Horovitz's deli, shortly before the St. Anthony's nastiness began, well before

the vampires came. Zev thought of the day they'd met. He'd been standing at the

counter at Horovitz's waiting for Yussel to wrap up the stuffed derma he had

ordered when this young giant walked in. He towered over the other rabbis in the place,

looked as Irish as Paddy's pig, and wore a Roman collar. He said he'd heard this

was the only place on the whole Jersey Shore where you could get a decent corned

beef sandwich. He ordered one and cheerfully warned that it better be good.

Yussel asked him what could he know about good corned beef and the priest

replied that he grew up in Bensonhurst. Well, about half the people in

Horovitz's on that day-and on any other day for that matter-grew up in

Bensonhurst and before you knew it they were all asking him if he knew such-and-

such a store and so-and-so's deli. Zev then informed the priest-with all due

respect to Yussel Horovitz behind the counter-that the best corned beef sandwich

in the world was to be had at Shmuel Rosenberg's Jerusalem Deli in Bensonhurst.

Father Cahill said he'd been there and agreed one hundred per cent.

Yussel served him his sandwich then. As he took a huge bite out of the

corned beef on rye, the normal tummel of a deli at lunchtime died away until

Horovitz's was as quiet as a shoul on Sunday morning. Everyone watched him chew,

watched him swallow. Then they waited. Suddenly his face broke into this big

Irish grin.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to change my vote," he said. "Horovitz's of

Lakewood makes the best corned beef sandwich in the world."

Amid cheers and warm laughter, Zev led Father Cahill to the rear table that

would become theirs and sat with this canny and charming gentile who had so

easily won over a roomful of strangers and provided such a mechaieh for Yussel.

He learned that the young priest was the new assistant to Father Palmeri, the

pastor at St. Anthony's Catholic church at the northern end of Lakewood. Father

Palmeri had been there for years but Zev had never so much as seen his face. He

asked Father Cahill-who wanted to be called Joe-about life in Brooklyn

these days and they talked fox an hour. During the following months they would

run into each other so often at Horovitz's that they decided to meet regularly

for lunch, on Mondays and Thursdays. They did so for years, discussing religion-

Oy, the religious discussions!-politics, economics, philosophy, life in general.

During those lunchtimes they solved most of the world's problems. Zev was sure

they'd have solved them all if the scandal at St. Anthony's hadn't resulted in

Father

Joe's removal from the parish.

But that was in another time, another world. The world before the vampires took

over. Zev shook his head as he considered the current state of Father Joe in the

dusty basement of Morton's Liquors.

"It's about the vampires, Joe," he said, taking another sip of the Stoly.

"They've taken over St. Anthony's." Father Joe snorted and shrugged. "They're in

the majority now, Zev, remember? They've taken over everything. Why should St.

Anthony's be different from any other parish in the world?"

"I didn't mean the parish. I meant the church."

The priest's eyes widened slightly. "The church? They've taken over the

building itself?" "Every night," Zev said. "Every night they are there." "That's

a holy place. How do they manage that?"

"They've desecrated the altar, destroyed all the crosses. St. Anthony's is no

longer a holy place." "Too bad," Father Joe said, looking down and shaking his

head sadly. "It was a fine old church." He looked up again, at Zev. "How do you

know about what's going on at St. Anthony's? It's not exactly in your

neighborhood." "A neighborhood I don't exactly have any more." Father Joe reached over and gripped his shoulder with a huge hand. "f m sorry, Zev. I heard how your people got hit pretty hard over there. Sitting ducks, huh? I'm really sorry."

Sitting ducks. An appropriate description. Oh, they'd been smart, those bloodsuckers. They knew their easiest targets. Whenever they swooped into an area they singled out Jews as their first victims, and among Jews they picked the Orthodox first of the first. Smart. Where else would they be less likely to run up against a cross? It worked for them in Brooklyn, and so when they came south into New Jersey, spreading like a plague, they headed straight for the town with one of the largest collections of yeshivas in North America.

But after the Bensonhurst holocaust the people in the Lakewood communities did not take quite so long to figure out what was happening. The

Reformed and Conservative synagogues started handing out crosses at Shabbes-too

late for many but it saved a few. Did the Orthodox congregations follow suit?

No. They hid in their homes and shules and yeshivas and read and prayed. And were liquidated.

A cross, a crucifix-they held power over the vampires,  
drove them away. His  
fellow rabbis did not want to accept that simple fact  
because they could not  
face its devastating ramifications. To hold up a cross was  
to negate two thousand years of Jewish history, it was to  
say that the Messiah  
had come and they had missed him. Did it say that? Zev  
didn't know. Argue about  
it later. Right now, people were dying. But the rabbis had  
to argue it now. And  
as they argued, their people were slaughtered like cattle.  
How Zev railed at  
them, how he pleaded with them! Blind, stubborn fools!  
If a fire was consuming your house, would you refuse to  
throw water on it just  
because you'd always been taught not to believe in  
water? Zev had arrived at the  
rabbinical council wearing a cross and had been thrown  
out-literally sent  
hurtling through the front door. But at least he had  
managed to save a few of  
his own people. Too few.  
He remembered his fellow Orthodox rabbis, though. All  
the ones who had  
refused to face the reality of the vampires' fear of crosses,  
who had forbidden  
their students and their congregations to wear crosses,  
who had watched those  
same students and congregations die en masse only to  
rise again and come for  
them. And soon those very same rabbis were roaming  
their own community, hunting  
the survivors, preying on other yeshivas, other  
congregations, until the entire

community was liquidated and incorporated into the brotherhood of the vampire. The great fear had come to pass: they'd been assimilated.

The rabbis could have saved themselves, could have saved their people, but they would not bend to the reality of what was happening around them. Which, when Zev thought about it, was not at all out of character. Hadn't they spent generations learning to turn away from the rest of the world? Those early days of anarchic slaughter were over. Now that the vampires held the ruling hand, the bloodletting had become more organized. But the damage to Zev's people had been done-and it was irreparable. Hitler would have been proud. His Nazi "final solution" was an afternoon picnic compared to the work of the vampires. They did in months what Hitler's Reich could not do in all the years of the Second World War. There's only a few of us now. So few and so scattered. A final Diaspora.

For a moment Zev was almost overwhelmed by grief, but he pushed it down, locked it back into that place where he kept his sorrows and thought of how fortunate it was for his wife Chana that she died of natural causes before the horror began. Her soul had been too gentle to weather what had happened to their community.

"Not as sorry as I, Joe," Zev said, dragging himself back to the present. "But

since my neighborhood is gone, and since I have hardly any friends left, I use

the daylight hours to wander. So call me the Wandering Jew. And in my wanderings

I meet some of your old parishioners." The priest's face hardened. His voice became acid.

"Do you now? And how fares the remnant of my devoted flock?"

"They've lost all hope, Joe. They wish you were back."

He laughed. "Sure they do! Just like they rallied behind me when my name and

honor were being dragged through the muck last year. Yeah, they want me back.

I'll bet!"

"Such anger, Joe. It doesn't become you."

"Bullshit. That was the old Joe Cahill, the naive turkey who believed all his

faithful parishioners would back him up. But no. Palmeri tells the bishop the

heat is getting too much for him, the bishop removes me, and the people I

dedicated my life to all stand by in silence as I'm railroaded out of my parish."

"It's hard for the common folk to buck a bishop."

"Maybe. But I can't forget how they stood quietly by while I was stripped of my

position, my dignity, my integrity, of everything I wanted to be..." Zev thought

Joe's voice was going to break. He was about to reach out to him when the priest

coughed and squared his shoulders. "Meanwhile, I'm a pariah over here in the

retreat house, a god dam leper. Some of them actually believe-" He broke off in

a growl. "Ah, what's the use? It's over and done. Most of the parish is dead

anyway, I suppose. And if I'd stayed there I'd probably be dead too. So maybe it

worked out for the best. And who gives a shit anyway."

He reached for the bottle of Glenlivet next to him.

"No-no!" Zev said. "You promised!"

Father Joe drew his hand back and crossed his arms across his chest.

"Talk on, O bearded one. I'm listening."

Father Joe had certainly changed for the worse. Morose, bitter, apathetic, self-

pitying. Zev was beginning to wonder how he could have called this man a friend.

"They've taken over your church, desecrated it. Each night they further

defile it with butchery and blasphemy. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"It's Palmeri's parish. I've been benched. Let him take care of it."

"Father Palmeri is their leader." "He should be. He's their pastor."

"No. He leads the vampires in the obscenities they perform in the church."

Father Joe stiffened and the glassiness cleared from his eyes.

"Palmeri? He's one of them?"

Zev nodded. "More than that. He's the local leader. He orchestrates their

rituals." Zev saw rage flare in the priest's eyes, saw his hands ball into

fists, and for a moment he thought the old Father Joe was going to burst

through. Come on, Joe. Show me that old fire.



But then he slumped back onto the crate. "Is that all you came to tell me?" Zev

hid his disappointment and nodded. "Yes."

"Good." He grabbed the scotch bottle. "Because I need a drink."

Zev wanted to leave, yet he had to stay, had to probe a little bit deeper and

see how much of his old friend was left, and how much had been replaced by this

new, bitter, alien Joe Cahill. Maybe there was still hope. So they talked on.

Suddenly he noticed it was dark.

"Gevalt!" Zev said. "I didn't notice the time!"

Father Joe seemed surprised too. He ran to the window and peered out.

"Damn! Sun's gone down!" He turned to Zev. "Lakewood's out of the

question for you, Reb. Even the retreat house is too far to risk now. Looks like

we're stuck here for the night." "We'll be safe?"

He shrugged. "Why not? As far as I can tell I'm the only one who's been in here

for months, and only in the daytime. Be pretty odd if one of those human leeches

should decide to wander in here tonight."

"I hope so." "Don't worry. We're okay if we don't attract attention. I've got a

flashlight if we need it, but we're better off sitting here in the dark and

shooting the breeze till sunrise." Father Joe smiled and picked up a huge silver

cross, at least a foot in length, from atop one of the crates. "Besides, we're

armed. And frankly, I can think of worse places to spend the night."

He stepped over to the case of Glenlivet and opened a fresh bottle. His

capacity for alcohol was enormous.

Zev could think of worse places too. In fact he had spent a number of

nights in much worse places since the holocaust. He decided to put the time to

good use. "So, Joe. Maybe I should tell you some more about what's happening in

Lakewood."

After a few hours their talk died of fatigue. Father Joe gave Zev the flashlight

to hold and stretched out across a couple of crates to sleep. Zev tried to get

comfortable enough to doze but found sleep impossible. So he listened to his

friend snore in the pitch darkness of the cellar. Poor Joe. Such anger in the

man. But more than that-hurt. He felt betrayed, wronged. And with good reason.

But with everything falling apart as it was, the wrong done to him would never

be righted. He should forget about it already and go on with his life, but

apparently he couldn't. Such a shame. He needed something to pull him out of his

funk. Zev had thought news of what had happened to his old parish might rouse

him, but it seemed only to make him want to drink more. Father Joe Cahill, he

feared, was a hopeless case. Zev closed his eyes and tried to rest. It was hard

to get comfortable with the

cross dangling in front of him so he took it off but laid it within easy reach.

He was drifting toward a doze when he heard a noise outside. By the dumpster.

Metal on metal. My bicycle!

He slipped to the floor and tiptoed over to where Father Joe slept. He

shook his shoulder and whispered. "Someone's found my bicycle!"

The priest snorted but remained sleeping. A louder clatter outside made Zev

turn, and as he moved his elbow struck a bottle. He grabbed for it in the

darkness but missed. The sound of smashing glass echoed through the basement

like a cannon shot. As the odor of scotch whiskey replaced the musty ambiance,

Zev listened for further sounds from outside. None came. Maybe it had been an

animal. He remembered how raccoons used to raid his garbage at home . . . , when he'd had a home . . . when he'd had garbage

. . .

Zev stepped to the window and looked out. Probably an animal. He pulled

the window open a few inches and felt cool night air wash across his face. He

pulled the flashlight from his coat pocket and aimed it through the opening. Zev

almost dropped the light as the beam illuminated a pale, snarling demonic face,

baring its fangs and hissing. He fell back as the thing's head and shoulders

lunged through the window, its curved fingers clawing at him, missing. Then it

launched itself the rest of the way through, hurtling toward

Zev. He tried to dodge but he was too slow. The impact knocked the flashlight from his grasp and it went rolling across the floor. Zev cried out as he went down under the snarling thing. Its ferocity was overpowering, irresistible. It straddled him and lashed at him, batting his fending arms aside, its clawed fingers tearing at his collar to free his throat, stretching his neck to expose its vulnerable flesh, its foul breath gagging him as it bent its fangs toward him. Zev screamed out his helplessness.

Father Joe awoke to the cries of a terrified voice. He shook his head to clear it and instantly regretted the move. His head weighed at least two hundred pounds, and his mouth was stuffed with foul-tasting cotton. Why did he keep doing this to himself? Not only did it leave him feeling lousy, it gave him bad dreams. Like now. Another terrified shout, only a few feet away. He looked toward the sound. In the faint light from the flashlight rolling across the floor he saw Zev on his back, fighting for his life against Damn! This was no dream! One of those bloodsuckers had got in here! He leaped over to where the creature was lowering its fangs toward Zev's throat. He grabbed it by the back of the neck and lifted it clear of the floor. It was surprisingly heavy but that didn't slow him. Joe could feel the anger rising in him, surging into

his muscles.

"Rotten piece of filth!" He swung the vampire by its neck and let it fly against

the cinderblock wall. It impacted with what should have been bone-crushing force

but bounced off, rolled on the floor, and regained its feet in one motion, ready

to attack again. Strong as he was, Joe knew he was no match for this thing's

power. He turned, grabbed his big silver crucifix, and charged the creature.

"Hungry? Eat this!"

As the creature bared its fangs and hissed at him, Joe shoved the long lower end

of the cross into its open mouth. Blue-white light flickered along the silver

length of the crucifix, reflecting in the creature's startled, agonized eyes as

its flesh sizzled and crackled. The vampire let out a strangled cry and tried to

turn away but Joe wasn't through with it yet. He was literally seeing red as

rage poured out of a hidden well and swirled through him. He rammed the cross

deeper down the thing's gullet. Light flashed deep in its throat, illuminating

the

pale tissues from within. It tried to grab the cross and pull it out but the

flesh of its fingers burned and smoked wherever they came in contact with the

cross.

Finally Joe stepped back and let the thing squirm and scrabble up the wall and

out the window into the night. Then he turned to Zev. If anything had happened

- "Hey, Reb!" he said, kneeling beside the older man. "You all right?"

"Yes," Zev said, struggling to his feet. "Thanks to you."

Joe slumped onto a crate, momentarily weak as his rage dissipated. This is not

what I'm about, he thought. But it had felt so damn good to let it loose on that

vampire. Too good. And that worried him.

I'm falling apart . . . , like everything else in the world.

"That was too close," he said to Zev, giving the older man's shoulder a fond squeeze.

"Too close for that vampire for sure," Zev said, replacing his yarmulke. "And

would you please remind me, Father Joe, that in the future if ever I should

maybe get my blood sucked and become a vampire that I should stay far away from you."

Joe laughed for the first time in too long. It felt good.

They climbed out at first light. Joe stretched his cramped muscles in the fresh

air while Zev checked on his hidden bicycle.

"Oy," Zev said as he pulled it from behind the dumpster. The front wheel had

been bent so far out of shape that half the spokes were broken. "Look what he did. Looks like I'll be walking back to Lakewood." But Joe

was less interested in the bike than in the whereabouts of their visitor from

last night. He knew it couldn't have got far. And it hadn't. They found the

vampire-or rather what was left of it-on the far side of the dumpster: a

rotting, twisted corpse, blackened to a crisp and steaming in the morning

sunlight. The silver crucifix still protruded from between its teeth. Joe

approached and gingerly yanked his cross free of the foul remains.

"Looks like you've sucked your last pint of blood," he said and immediately felt foolish.

Who was he putting on the macho act for? Zev certainly wasn't going to buy it.

Too out of character. But then, what was his character these days? He used to be

a parish priest. Now he was a nothing. A less than nothing. He straightened up and turned to Zev.

"Come on back to the retreat house, Reb. I'll buy you breakfast."

But as Joe turned and began walking away, Zev stayed and stared down at

the corpse. "They say they don't wander far from where they spent their lives,"

Zev said. "Which means it's unlikely this fellow was Jewish if he lived around

here. Probably Catholic. Irish Catholic, I'd imagine."

Joe stopped and turned. He stared at his long shadow. The hazy rising sun at his

back cast a huge hulking shape before him, with a dark cross in one shadow hand

and a smudge of amber light where it poured through the unopened bottle of

Scotch in the other.

"What are you getting at?" he said.

"The Kaddish would probably not be so appropriate so I'm just wondering

if maybe someone should give him the last rites or whatever it is you people do when one of you dies." "He wasn't one of us," Joe said, feeling the bitterness rise in him. "He wasn't even human." "Ah, but he used to be before he was killed and became one of them. So maybe now he could use a little help." Joe didn't like the way this was going. He sensed he was being maneuvered. "He doesn't deserve it," he said and knew in that instant he'd been trapped.

"I thought even the worst sinner deserved it," Zev said. Joe knew when he was beaten. Zev was right. He shoved the cross and bottle into Zev's hands-a bit roughly, perhaps-then went and knelt by the twisted cadaver. He administered a form of the final sacrament. When he was through he returned to Zev and snatched back his belongings. "You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din," he said as he passed. "You act as if they're responsible for what they do after they become vampires," Zev said as he hurried along beside him, panting as he matched Joe's pace. "Aren't they?" No. "You're sure of that?" "Well, not exactly. But they certainly aren't human anymore, so maybe we shouldn't hold them accountable on human terms." Zev's reasoning tone flashed Joe back to the conversations they used to



have in Horovitz's deli. "But Zev, we know there's some of the old personality

left. I mean, they stay in their home towns, usually in the basements of their

old houses. They go after people they knew when they were alive. They're not

just dumb predators, Zev. They've got the old consciousness they had when they

were alive. Why can't they rise above it? Why can't they . . . resist?"

"I don't know. To tell the truth, the question has never occurred to me. A

fascinating concept: an undead refusing to feed. Leave it to Father Joe to come

up with something like that. We should discuss this on the trip back to

Lakewood."

Joe had to smile. So that was what this was all about.

"I'm not going back to Lakewood."

"Fine. Then we'll discuss it now. Maybe the urge to feed is too strong to

overcome."

"Maybe. And maybe they just don't try hard enough."

"This is a hard line you're taking, my friend."

"I'm a hard-line kind of guy."

"Well, you've become one."

Joe gave him a sharp look. "You don't know what I've become."

Zev shrugged. "Maybe true, maybe not. But do you truly think you'd be able to

resist?" "Damn straight."

Joe didn't know whether he was serious or not. Maybe he was just

mentally preparing himself for the day when he might actually find himself in

that situation. "Interesting," Zev said as they climbed the front steps of the

retreat house. "Well, I'd better be going. I've a long walk ahead of me. A long,

lonely walk all the way back to Lakewood. A long, lonely, possibly dangerous walk

back for a poor old man who-" "All right, Zev! All right!" Joe said, biting back

a laugh. "I get the point. You want me to go back to Lakewood. Why?" "I just

want the company," Zev said with pure innocence. "No, really. What's going on in

that Talmudic mind of yours? What are you cooking?" "Nothing, Father Joe.

Nothing at all."

Joe stared at him. Damn it all if his interest wasn't piqued. What was Zev up

to? And what the Hell? Why not go? He had nothing better to do.

"All right, Zev. You win. I'll come back to Lakewood with you. But just

for today. Just to keep you company. And I'm not going anywhere near St.

Anthony's, okay? Understood?"

"Understood, Joe. Perfectly understood."

"Good. Now wipe that smile off your face and we'll get something to eat." Under

the climbing sun they walked south along the deserted beach, barefooting through

the wet sand at the edge of the surf. Zev had never done this. He liked the feel

of the sand between his toes, the coolness of the water as it sloshed over his ankles.

"Know what day it is?" Father Joe said. He had his sneakers slung over his shoulder. "Believe it or not, it's the Fourth of July."  
"Oh, yes. Your Independence Day. We never made much of secular holidays. Too many religious ones to observe. Why should I not believe it's this date?"  
Father Joe shook his head in dismay. "This is Manasquan Beach. You know what this place used to look like on the Fourth before the vampires took over? Wall-to-wall bodies."  
"Really? I guess maybe sun-bathing is not the fad it used to be."

"Ah, Zev! Still the master of the understatement. I'll say one thing, though:  
The beach is cleaner than I've ever seen it. No beer cans or hypodermics." He pointed ahead. "But what's that up there?"  
As they approached the spot, Zev saw a pair of naked bodies stretched out on the sand, one male, one female, both young and short-haired. Their skin was bronzed and glistened in the sun. The man lifted his head and stared at them. A blue crucifix was tattooed in the center of his forehead. He reached into the knapsack beside him and withdrew a huge, gleaming, nickel-plated revolver.  
"Just keep walking," he said. "Will do," Father Joe said. "Just passing through." As they passed the couple, Zev noticed a similar tattoo on the girl's

forehead. He noticed the rest of her too. He felt an almost-forgotten stirring deep inside him.

"A very popular tattoo," he said.

"Clever idea. That's one cross you can't drop or lose. Probably won't help you in the dark, but if there's a light on it might give you an edge." They turned

west and made their way inland, finding Route 70 and following it into Ocean County via the Brielle Bridge.

"I remember nightmare traffic jams right here every summer," Father Joe said as they trod the bridge's empty span. "Never thought I'd miss traffic jams." They cut over to Route 88 and followed it all the way into Lakewood.

Along the way they found a few people out and about in Bricktown and picking berries in Ocean County Park, but in the heart of Lakewood . . . "A real

ghost town," the priest said as they walked Forest Avenue's deserted length.

"Ghosts," Zev said, nodding sadly. It had been a long walk and he was tired.

"Yes. Full of ghosts." In his mind's eye he saw the shades of his fallen brother

rabbis and all the yeshiva students, beards, black suits, black hats,

crisscrossing back and forth at

a determined pace on weekdays, strolling with their wives on Shabbes, their

children trailing behind like ducklings. Gone. All gone. Victims of the

vampires. Vampires themselves now, most of them. It made him sick at heart to

think of those good, gentle men, women, and children  
curled up in their  
basements now to avoid the light of day, venturing out in  
the dark to feed on  
others, spreading the disease . . .

He fingered the cross slung from his neck. If only they had  
listened.

"I know a place near St. Anthony's where we can hide," he  
told the priest.

"You've traveled enough today, Reb. And I told you, I don't  
care about St.

Anthony's."

"Stay the night, Joe," Zev said, gripping the young priest's  
arm. He'd coaxed

him this far; he couldn't let him get away now. "See what  
Father Palmeri's

done." "If he's one of them he's not a priest anymore.  
Don't call him Father."

"They still call him Father." `Who. "The vampires."

Zev watched Father Joe's jaw muscles bunch. Joe said,  
"Maybe I'll just take a

quick trip over to St. Anthony's myself-"

"No. It's different here. The area is thick with them-maybe  
twenty times as many

as in Spring Lake. They'll get you if your timing isn't just  
right. I'll take

you." "You need rest, pal."

Father Joe's expression showed genuine concern. Zev was  
detecting

increasingly softer emotions in the man since their  
reunion last night. A good  
sign perhaps?

"And rest I'll get when we get to where I'm taking you."

Father Joe Cahill watched the moon rise over his old  
church and wondered at the

wisdom of coming back. The casual decision made this morning in the full light of day seemed reckless and foolhardy now at the approach of midnight. But there was no turning back. He'd followed Zev to the second floor of this two-story office building across the street from St. Anthony's, and here they'd waited for dark. Must have been a law office once. The place had been vandalized, the windows broken, the furniture trashed, but there was an old Temple University Law School degree on the wall, and the couch was still in one piece. So while Zev caught some Z's, Joe sat and sipped a little of his scotch and did some heavy thinking.

Mostly he thought about his drinking. He'd done too much of that lately, he knew; so much so that he was afraid to stop cold. So he was taking just a touch now, barely enough to take the edge off. He'd finish the rest later, after he came back from that church over there. He'd stared at St. Anthony's since they'd arrived. It too had been extensively vandalized. Once it had been a beautiful little stone church, a miniature cathedral, really; very Gothic with all its pointed arches, steep roofs, crocketed spires, and multifoil stained glass windows. Now the windows were smashed, the crosses which had topped the steeple and each gable were gone, and anything resembling a cross in its granite exterior had been defaced beyond

recognition.

As he'd known it would, the sight of St. Anthony's brought back memories of

Gloria Sullivan, the young, pretty church volunteer whose husband worked for

United Chemical International in New York, commuting in every day and trekking

off overseas a little too often. Joe and Gloria had seen a lot of each other

around the church offices and had become good friends. But Gloria had somehow

got the idea that what they had went beyond friendship, so she showed up at the

rectory one night when Joe was there alone. He tried to explain that as

attractive as she was, she was not for him. He had taken certain vows and meant

to stick by them. He did his best to let her down easy but she'd been hurt. And

angry. That might have been that, but then her six-year-old son Kevin had come

home from altar boy practice with a story about a priest making him pull down

his pants and touching him. Kevin was never clear on who the priest had been,

but Gloria Sullivan was. Obviously it had been Father Cahill-any man who could

turn down the heartfelt offer of her love and her body had to be either a queer

or worse. And a child molester was worse.

She took it to the police and to the papers.

Joe groaned softly at the memory of how swiftly his life had become Hell. But he

had been determined to weather the storm, sure that the real culprit eventually

would be revealed. He had no proof-still didn't-but if one of the priests at St.

Anthony's was a pederast, he knew it wasn't him. That left Father Alberto

Palmeri, St. Anthony's fifty-five-year-old pastor. Before Joe could get to the

truth, however, Father Palmeri requested that Father Cahill be removed from the

parish, and the bishop complied. Joe had left under a cloud that had followed

him to the retreat house in the next county and hovered over him till this day.

The only place he'd found even brief respite from the impotent anger and

bitterness that roiled under his skin and soured his gut every minute of every

day was in the bottle-and that was sure as Hell a dead end.

So why had he agreed to come back here? To torture himself? Or to get a

look at Palmeri and see how low he had sunk?

Maybe that was it. Maybe seeing Palmeri wallowing in his true element

would give him the impetus to put the whole St. Anthony's incident behind him

and rejoin what was left of the human race-which needed him now more than ever.

And maybe it wouldn't.

Getting back on track was a nice thought, but over the past few months Joe had

found it increasingly difficult to give much of a damn about anyone or anything.

Except maybe Zev. He'd stuck by him through the worst of it, defending him to

anyone who would listen. But an endorsement from an Orthodox rabbi had meant



diddly in St. Anthony's. And yesterday Zev had biked all the way to Spring Lake to see him. Old Zev was all right. And he'd been right about the number of vampires here too. Lakewood was crawling with the things. Fascinated and repelled, Joe had watched the streets fill with them shortly after sundown. But what had disturbed him more were the creatures who'd come out before sundown. The humans. Live ones. The collaborators. If there was anything lower, anything that deserved true death more than the vampires themselves, it was the still-living humans who worked for them. Someone touched his shoulder and he jumped. It was Zev. He was holding something out to him. Joe took it and held it up in the moonlight: a tiny crescent moon dangling from a chain on a ring. "What's this?" "An earring. The local Vichy wear them." " Vichy? Like the Vichy French?" "Yes. Very good. I'm glad to see that you're not as culturally illiterate as the rest of your generation. Vichy humans-that's what I call the collaborators. These earrings identify them to the local nest of vampires. They are spared." "Where'd you get them?" Zev's face was hidden in the shadows. "Their previous owners . . . lost them. Put it on." "My ear's not pierced."

A gnarled hand moved into the moonlight. Joe saw a long  
needle clasped  
between the thumb and index finger.  
"That I can fix," Zev said.

"Maybe you shouldn't see this," Zev whispered as they  
crouched in the  
deep shadows on St. Anthony's western flank.  
Joe squinted at him in the darkness, puzzled.

"You lay a guilt trip on me to get me here, now you're  
having second  
thoughts?"

"It is horrible like I can't tell you."

Joe thought about that. There was enough horror in the  
world outside St.

Anthony's. What purpose did it serve to see what was  
going inside?

Because it used to be my church.

Even though he'd only been an associate pastor, never  
fully in charge,

and even though he'd been unceremoniously yanked from  
the post, St.

Anthony's had been his first parish. He was here. He might  
as well know

what they were doing inside.

"Show me." Zev led him to a pile of rubble under a  
smashed stained glass window.

He pointed up to where faint light flickered from inside.

"Look in there."

"You're not coming?"

"Once was enough, thank you."

Joe climbed as carefully, as quietly as he could, all the  
while becoming

increasingly aware of a growing stench like putrid, rotting  
meat. It was coming

from inside, wafting through the broken window. Steeling himself, he  
straightened up and peered over the sill.  
For a moment he was disoriented, like someone peering out the window  
of a city apartment and seeing the rolling hills of a Kansas farm. This could  
not be the interior of St. Anthony's.

In the flickering light of hundreds of sacramental candles he saw that the walls  
were bare, stripped of all their ornaments, of the plaques for the stations of

the cross; the dark wood along the wall was scarred and gouged wherever there

had been anything remotely resembling a cross. The floor too was mostly bare,

the pews ripped from their neat rows and hacked to pieces, their splintered

remains piled high at the rear under the choir balcony.

And the giant crucifix that had dominated the space behind the altar-only a

portion of it remained. The cross-pieces on each side had been sawed off and so

now an armless, life-size Christ hung upside down against the rear wall of the

sanctuary.

Joe took in all that in a flash, then his attention was drawn to the unholy

congregation that peopled St. Anthony's this night. The collaborators-the Vichy

humans, as Zev called them-made up the periphery of the group. They looked like

normal, everyday people but each was wearing a crescent moon earring.

But the others, the group gathered in the sanctuary Joe felt his hackles

rise at the sight of them. They surrounded the altar in a tight knot. Their

pale, bestial faces, bereft of the slightest trace of human warmth, compassion,

or decency, were turned upward. His gorge rose when he saw the object of their rapt attention.

A naked teenage boy, his hands tied behind his back, was suspended over

the altar by his ankles. He was sobbing and choking, his eyes wide and vacant

with shock, his mind all but gone. The skin had been flayed from his forehead-

apparently the Vichy had found an expedient solution to the cross tattoo-and

blood ran in a slow stream across his abdomen and chest from his freshly

truncated genitals. And beside him, standing atop the altar, a bloody-mouthed

creature dressed in a long cassock.

Joe recognized the thin shoulders, the graying hair trailing from the balding

crown, but was shocked at the crimson vulpine grin he flashed to the things

clustered below him.

"Now," said the creature in a lightly accented voice Joe had heard hundreds of

times from St. Anthony's pulpit.

Father Alberto Palmeri.

And from the group a hand reached up with a straight razor and drew it

across the boy's throat. As the blood flowed down over his face, those

below squeezed and struggled forward like hatchling  
vultures to catch the  
falling drops and scarlet trickles in their open mouths.  
Joe fell away from the window and vomited. He felt Zev  
grab his arm and  
lead him away. He was vaguely aware of crossing the  
street and heading toward  
the ruined legal office.

"Why in God's name did you want me to see that?"  
Zev looked across the office toward the source of the  
word. He could see a vague  
outline where Father Joe sat on the floor, his back against  
the wall, the open  
bottle of scotch in his hand. The priest<sup>1</sup> had taken one  
drink since their return,  
no more.

"I thought you should know what they were doing to your  
church."

"So you've said. But what's the reason behind that one?"  
Zev shrugged in the darkness. "I'd heard you weren't  
doing well, that even  
before everything else began falling apart, you had  
already fallen apart. So  
when I felt it safe to get away, I came to see you. Just as I  
expected, I found  
a man who was angry at everything and letting it eat up  
his guderim. I thought  
maybe it would be good to give that man something very  
specific to be angry at."

"You bastard!" Father Joe whispered. "Who gave you the  
right?"

"Friendship gave me the right, Joe. I should hear that you  
are rotting away and  
do nothing? I have no congregation of my own anymore so  
I turned my attention on

you. Always I was a somewhat meddlesome rabbi."

"Still are. Out to save my soul, ay?"

"We rabbis don't save souls. Guide them maybe, hopefully give them

direction. But only you can save your soul, Joe:"

Silence hung in the air for awhile. Suddenly, the crescent-moon earring Zev had

given Father Joe landed in the puddle of moonlight on the floor between them.

"Why do they do it?" the priest said. "The Vichy-why do they collaborate?"

"The first were quite unwilling, believe me. They cooperated because their wives

and children were held hostage by the vampires. But before too long the dregs of

humanity began to slither out from under their rocks and offer their services in

exchange for the immortality of vampirism.

"Why bother working for them? Why not just bare your throat to the

nearest bloodsucker?"

"That's what I thought at first," Zev said. "But as I witnessed the Lakewood

holocaust I detected the vampires' pattern. They can choose who joins their

ranks, so after they've fully infiltrated a population, they change their

tactics.

You see, they don't want too many of their kind concentrated in one area. It's

like too many carnivores in one forest when the herds of prey are wiped out, the

predators starve. So they start to employ a different style of killing. For only

when the vampire draws the life's blood from the throat with its fangs does the

victim become one of them. Anyone drained as in the manner of that boy in the

church tonight dies a true death. He's as dead now as someone run over by a

truck. He will not rise tomorrow night."

"I get it," Father Joe said. "The Vichy trade their daylight services and dirty

work to the vampires now for immortality later on."

"Correct."

There was no humor in the soft laugh the echoed across the room from

Father Joe.

"Swell. I never cease to be amazed at our fellow human beings. Their

capacity for good is exceeded only by their ability to debase themselves."

"Hopelessness does strange things, Joe. The vampires know that. So they rob us

of hope. That's how they beat us. They transform our friends and neighbors and

leaders into their own, leaving us feeling alone, completely cut off. Some of us

can't take the despair and kill themselves."

"Hopelessness," Joe said. "A potent weapon."

After a long silence, Zev said, "So what are you going to do now, Father Joe?"

Another bitter laugh from across the room.

"I suppose this is the place where I declare that I've found new purpose in life

and will now go forth into the world as a fearless vampire killer."

"Such a thing would be nice."

"Well screw that. I'm only going as far as across the street."

"To St. Anthony's?"

Zev saw Father Joe take a swig from the scotch bottle and then screw the cap on tight.

"Yeah. To see if there's anything I can do over there."

"Father Palmeri and his nest might not like that."

"I told you, don't call him Father. And screw him. Nobody can do what he's

done and get away with it. I'm taking my church back."

In the dark, behind his beard, Zev smiled.

Joe stayed up the rest of the night and let Zev sleep. The old guy needed his

rest. Sleep would have been impossible for Joe anyway. He was too wired. He sat

up and watched St. Anthony's.

They left before first light, dark shapes drifting out the front doors and down

the stone steps like parishioners leaving a predawn service. Joe felt his back

teeth grind as he scanned the group for Palmeri, but he couldn't make him out in

the dimness. By the time the sun began to peek over the rooftops and through the

trees to the east, the street outside was deserted. He woke Zev and together

they approached the church. The heavy oak and iron front doors, each forming

half of a pointed arch, were closed. He pulled them open and fastened the hooks

to keep them open. Then he walked through the vestibule and into the nave.

Even though he was ready for it, the stench backed him up a few steps.

When his stomach settled, he forced himself ahead, treading a path between the



two piles of shattered and splintered pews. Zev walked beside him, a

handkerchief pressed over his mouth.

Last night he had thought the place a shambles. He saw now that it was

worse. The light of day poked into all the corners, revealing everything that

had been hidden by the warm glow of the candles. Half a dozen rotting corpses

hung from the ceiling-he hadn't noticed them last night-and others were sprawled

on the floor against the walls. Some of the bodies were in pieces. Behind the

chancel rail a headless female torso was draped over the front of the pulpit. To

the left stood the statue of Mary. Someone had fitted her with foam rubber

breasts and a huge dildo. And at the rear of the sanctuary was the armless

Christ hanging head down on the upright of his cross.

"My church," he whispered as he moved along the path that had once been

the center aisle, the aisle that brides used to walk down with their fathers.

"Look what they've done to my church!"

Joe approached the huge block of the altar. Once it had been backed

against the far wall of the sanctuary, but he'd had it moved to the front so

that he could celebrate Mass facing his parishioners. Solid Carrara marble, but

you'd never know it now. So caked with dried blood, semen, and feces it could

have been made of Styrofoam.

His revulsion was fading, melting away in the growing heat of his rage,

drawing the nausea with it. He had intended to clean up the place but there was so much to be done, too much for two men. It was hopeless.

"Fadda Joe?"

He spun at the sound of the strange voice. A thin figure stood uncertainly in the open doorway. A man of about fifty edged forward timidly.

"Fadda Joe, izat you?"

Joe recognized him now. Carl Edwards. A twitchy little man who used to

help pass the collection basket at 10:30 Mass on Sundays. A transplantee from

Jersey City-hardly anyone around here was originally from around here. His face

was sunken, his eyes feverish as he stared at Joe.

"Yes, Carl. It's me."

"Oh, tank God!" He ran forward and dropped to his knees before Joe. He

began to sob. "You come back! Tank God, you come back!"

Joe pulled him to his feet.

"Come on now, Carl. Get a grip."

"You come back to save us, ain'tcha? God sent ya here to punish him, dint

He?"

"Punish whom?"

"Fadda Palmeri! He's one a dem! He's da woist a alla dem! He-"

"I know," Joe said. "I know."

"Oh, it's so good to have ya back, Fadda Joe! We ain't knowed what to do since

da suckers took ova. We been prayin' fa someone like youse an now ya here. It's

a freakin' miracle!"

Joe wanted to ask Carl where he and all these people who seemed to think they

needed him now had been when he was being railroaded out of the parish. But that was ancient history.

"Not a miracle, Carl," Joe said, glancing back at Zev.

"Rabbi Wolpin

brought me back." As Carl and Zev shook hands, Joe said,

"And I'm just

passing through."

"Passing trough? No. Dat can't be! Ya gotta stay!"

Joe saw the light of hope fading in the little man's eyes.

Something twisted

within him, tugging him.

"What can I do here, Carl? I'm just one man."

"I'll help! I'll do whatever ya want! Jes tell me!"

"Will you help me clean up?"

Carl looked around and seemed to see the cadavers for the first time. He cringed

and turned a few shades paler.

"Yeah . . . sure. Anyting."

Joe looked at Zev. "Well? What do you think?"

Zev shrugged. "I should tell you what to do? My parish it's not."

"Not mine either."

Zev jutted his beard at Carl. "I think maybe he'd tell you differently."

Joe did a slow turn. The vaulted nave was utterly silent except for the

buzzing of the flies around the cadavers. A massive clean-up job. But if they

worked all day they could make a decent dent in it. And then

. And then what?

Joe didn't know. He was playing this by ear. He'd wait and see what the night brought.

"Can you get us some food, Carl? I'd sell my soul for a cup of coffee."

Carl gave him a strange look.

"Just a figure of speech, Carl. We'll need some food if we're going to keep working."

The man's eyes lit again.

"Dat means ya staying?"

"For a while."

"I'll getcha some food," he said excitedly as he ran for the door. "An'

coffee. I know someone who's still got coffee. She'll part wit' some of it for

Fadda Joe." He stopped at the door and turned. "Ay, an' Fadda, I neva believed any a dem tings dat was said aboutcha. Neva."

Joe tried but he couldn't hold it back.

"It would have meant a lot to have heard that from you last year, Carl."

The man lowered his eyes. "Yeah. I guess it woulda. But I'll make it up

ya, Fadda. I will. You ca1n take dat to da bank."

Then he was out the door and gone. Joe turned to Zev and saw the old

man rolling up his sleeves.

"Nu?" Zev said. "The bodies. Before we do anything else, I think maybe

we should move the bodies."

By early afternoon, Zev was exhausted. The heat and the heavy work had

taken their toll. He had to stop and rest. He sat on the chancel rail

and looked around. Nearly eight hours work and they'd barely scratched the surface. But the place did look and smell better. Removing the flyblown corpses and scattered body parts had been the worst of it. A foul, gut-roiling task that had taken most of the morning.

They'd carried the corpses out to the small graveyard behind the church and left them there. Those people deserved a decent burial but there was no time for it today.

Once the corpses were gone, Father Joe had torn the defilements from the statue of Mary and then they'd turned their attention to the huge crucifix. It took a while but they finally found Christ's plaster arms in the pile of ruined pews. They'd been still nailed to the sawn-off cross piece of the crucifix.

While Zev and Father Joe worked at jury-rigging a series of braces to reattach the arms, Carl found a mop and bucket and F began the long, slow process of washing the fouled floor of the nave.

Now the crucifix was intact again-the life-size plaster Jesus had his arms reattached and was once again nailed to his refurbished cross.

Father Joe and Carl had restored him to his former position of dominance. The poor man was upright again, hanging over the center of the sanctuary in all his tortured splendor.

A grisly sight. Zev could never understand the Catholic attachment

to these gruesome statues. But if the vampires loathed them, then Zev

was for them all the way.

His stomach rumbled with hunger. At least they'd had a good break

fast. Carl had returned from his food run this morning with bread,

cheese, and two thermoses of hot coffee. He wished now they'd saved

some. Maybe there was a crust of bread left in the sack. He headed back

to the vestibule to check and found an aluminum pot and a paper bag

sitting by the door. The pot was full of beef stew and the sack contained

three cans of Pepsi.

He poked his head out the doors but no one was in sight on the street

outside. It had been that way all day-he'd spy a figure or two peeking in the

front doors; they'd hover there for a moment as if to confirm that what they had

heard was true, then they'd scurry away. He looked at the meal that had been

left. A group of the locals must have donated from their hoard of canned stew

and precious soft drinks to fix this. Zev was touched. He called Father Joe

and Carl.

"Tastes like Dinty Moore," Father Joe said around a mouthful of the stew.

"It is," Carl said. "I recognize da little potatoes. Da ladies of the parish

must really be excited about youse comin' back to break inta deir canned goods

like dis."

They were feasting in the sacristy, the small room off the sanctuary where the priests had kept their vestments-a clerical Green Room, so to speak. Zev found the stew palatable but much too salty. He wasn't about to complain, though.

"I don't believe I've ever had anything like this before."

"I'd be real surprised if you had," said Father Joe. "I doubt very much that

something that calls itself Dinty Moore is kosher."

Zev smiled but inside he was suddenly filled with a great sadness. Kosher . . .

how meaningless now seemed all the observances which he had allowed to

rule and circumscribe his life. Such a fierce proponent of strict dietary laws

he'd been in the days before the Lakewood holocaust.

But those days were gone, just as the Lakewood community was gone. And

Zev was a changed man. If he hadn't changed, if he were still observing, he

couldn't sit here and sup with these two men. He'd have to be elsewhere, eating

special classes of specially prepared foods off separate sets of dishes. But

really, wasn't division what holding to the dietary laws in modern times was all

about? They served a purpose beyond mere observance of tradition. They placed

another wall between observant Jews and outsiders, keeping them separate even

from other Jews who didn't observe. Zev forced himself to take a big bite of the

stew. Time to break down all the walls between people . . . while there was

still enough time and people left alive to make it matter.  
"You okay, Zev?" Father Joe asked. Zev nodded silently,  
afraid to speak for fear  
of sobbing. Despite all its anachronisms, he missed his life  
in the good old  
days of last year. Gone. It was all gone. The rich traditions,  
the culture, the  
friends, the prayers. He felt  
adrift-in time and in space. Nowhere was home. "You  
sure?" The young priest  
seemed genuinely concerned. "Yes, I'm okay. As okay as  
you could expect me to  
feel after spending the better part of the day repairi1ng a  
crucifix and eating  
non-kosher food. And let me tell you, that's not so okay."  
He put his bowl aside and straightened from his chair.  
"Come on, already. Let's get back to work. There's much  
yet to do."  
"Sun's almost down," Carl said.  
Joe straightened from scrubbing the altar and stared west  
through one of the  
smashed windows. The sun was out of sight behind the  
houses there.  
"You can go now, Carl," he said to the little man. "Thanks  
for your help."  
"Where youse gonna go, Fadda?"  
"I'll be staying right here."  
Carl's prominent Adam's apple bobbed convulsively as he  
swallowed.  
"Yeah? Well den, I'm staying too. I tol' ya I'd make it up to  
ya, din't I? An  
besides, I don't tink the suckas'll like da new, improved St.  
Ant'ny's too much  
when dey come back tonight, d'you? I don't even tink  
dey'll get t'rough da  
doors."



Joe smiled at the man and looked around. Luckily it was July and the days were

long. They'd had time to make a difference here. The floors were clean, the

crucifix was restored and back in its proper position, as were most of the

Stations of the Cross plaques. Zev had found them under the pews and had taken

the ones not shattered beyond recognition and rehung them on the walls.

Lots of new crosses littered those walls. Carl had found a hammer and nails and

had made dozens of them from the remains of the pews.

"No. I don't think they'll like the new decor one bit. But there's something you

can get us if you can, Carl. Guns. Pistols, rifles, shotguns, anything that shoots."

Carl nodded slowly. "I know a few guys who can help in dat department."

"And some wine. A little red wine if anybody's saved some."

"You got it."

He hurried off.

"You're planning Custer's last stand, maybe?" Zev said from where he was tacking

the last of Carl's crude crosses to the east wall.

"More like the Alamo."

"Same result," Zev said with one of his shrugs.

Joe turned back to scrubbing the altar. He'd been at it for over an hour now.

He was drenched with sweat and knew he smelled like a bear, but he couldn't stop until it was clean.

An hour later he was forced to give up. No use. It wouldn't come clean. The

vampires must have done something to the blood and foulness to make the mixture

seep into the surface of the marble like it had.

He sat on the floor with his back against the altar and rested. He didn't like

resting because it gave him time to think. And when he started to think he

realized that the odds were pretty high against his seeing tomorrow morning.

At least he'd die well fed. Their secret supplier had left them a dinner of

fresh fried chicken by the front doors. Even the memory of it made his mouth

water. Apparently someone was really glad he was back.

To tell the truth, though, as miserable as he'd been, he wasn't ready to die.

Not tonight, not any night. He wasn't looking for an Alamo or a Little Big Horn.

All he wanted to do was hold off the vampires till dawn. Keep them out of St.

Anthony's for one night. That was all. That would be a statement-his statement.

If he found an opportunity to ram a stake through Palmeri's rotten heart, so

much the better, but he wasn't counting on that. One night. Just to let them

know they couldn't have their way everywhere with everybody whenever they felt

like it. He had surprise on his side tonight, so maybe it would work. One night.

Then he'd be on his way.

"What the fuck have you done?"

Joe looked up at the shout. A burly, long-haired man in jeans and a flannel

shirt stood in the vestibule staring at the partially restored nave. As he

approached, Joe noticed his crescent moon earring.

A Vichy. Joe balled his fists but didn't move.

"Hey, I'm talking to you, mister. Are you responsible for this?"

When all he got from Joe was a cold stare, he turned to Zev.

"Hey, you! Jew! What the Hell do you think you're doing?"  
He started

toward Zev. "You get those fucking crosses off-"

"Touch him and I'll break you in half," Joe said in a low voice.

The Vichy skidded to a halt and stared at him.

"Hey, asshole! Are you crazy? Do you know what Father Palmeri will do to you when he arrives?"

"Father Palmeri? Why do you still call him that?"

"It's what he wants to be called. And he's going to call you dog meat when he gets here!"

Joe pulled himself to his feet and looked down at the Vichy. The man took two steps back. Suddenly he didn't seem so sure of himself.

"Tell him I'll be waiting. Tell him Father Cahill is back."

"You're a priest? You don't look like one."

"Shut up and listen. Tell him Father Joe Cahill is back-and he's pissed. Tell

him that. Now get out of here while you still can."

The man turned and hurried out into the growing darkness. Joe turned to

Zev and found him grinning through his beard.

"`Father Joe Cahill is back-and he's pissed.' I like that."

"We'll make it into a bumper sticker. Meanwhile let's close those doors. The

criminal element is starting to wander in. I'll see if we can find some more

candles. It's getting dark in here."

He wore the night like a tuxedo.

Dressed in a fresh cassock, Father Alberto Palmeri turned off County Line Road

and strolled toward St. Anthony's. The night was lovely, especially when you

owned it. And he owned the night in this area of Lakewood now. He loved the

night. He felt at one with it, attuned to its harmonies and its discords. The

darkness made him feel so alive. Strange to have to lose your life before you

could really feel alive. But this was it. He'd found his niche, his metier.

Such a shame it had taken him so long. All those years trying to deny his

appetites, trying to be a member of the other side, cursing himself when he

allowed his appetites to win, as he had with increasing frequency toward the end

of his mortal life. He should have given in to them completely long ago.

It had taken undeath to free him.

And to think he had been afraid of undeath, had cowered in fear each night in

the cellar of the church, surrounded by crosses.

Fortunately he had not been as

safe as he'd thought and one of the beings he now called brother was able to

slip in on him in the dark while he dozed. He saw now that he had lost nothing

but his blood by that encounter.

And in trade he'd gained a world.

For now it was his world, at least this little corner of it, one in which he was

completely free to indulge himself in any way he wished.  
Except for the blood.

He had no choice about the blood. That was a new  
appetite, stronger than all the  
rest, one that would not be denied. But he did not mind  
the new appetite in the  
least. He'd found interesting ways to sate it. Up ahead he  
spotted dear,  
defiled St. Anthony's. He wondered what his servants had  
prepared for him  
tonight. They were quite imaginative. They'd yet to bore  
him.

But as he drew nearer the church, Palmeri slowed. His skin  
prickled. The  
building had changed. Something was very wrong there,  
wrong inside.

Something amiss with the light that beamed from the  
windows. This wasn't the old  
familiar candlelight, this was something else, something  
more. Something that  
made his insides tremble.

Figures raced up the street toward him. Live ones. His  
night vision picked out  
the earrings and familiar faces of some of his servants. As  
they neared he

sensed the warmth of the blood coursing just beneath  
their skins. The hunger  
rose in him and he fought the urge to rip into one of their  
throats. He couldn't  
allow himself that pleasure. He had to keep the servants  
dangling, keep them  
working for him and the nest. They needed the services of  
the indentured living  
to remove whatever obstacles the cattle might put in their  
way.

"Father! Father!" they cried.

He loved it when they called him Father, loved being one of the undead

and dressing like one of the enemy.

"Yes, my children. What sort of victim do you have for us tonight?"

"No victim, father-trouble!"

The edges of Palmeri's vision darkened with rage as he heard of the young priest

and the Jew who had dared to try to turn St. Anthony's into a holy place again.

When he heard the name of the priest, he nearly exploded. "Cahill?

Joseph Cahill is back in my church?"

"He was cleaning the altar!" one of the servants said.

Palmeri strode toward the church with the servants trailing behind. He knew that

neither Cahill nor the Pope himself could clean that altar. Palmeri had

desecrated it himself; he had learned how to do that when he became nest leader.

But what else had the young pup dared to do?

Whatever it was, it would be undone. Now!

Palmeri strode up the steps and pulled the right door open-and

screamed in agony.

The light! The light! The LIGHT! White agony lanced through Palmeri's

eyes and seared his brain like two hot pokers. He retched and threw his arms

across his face as he staggered back into the cool, comforting darkness. It took

a few minutes for the pain to drain off, for the nausea to pass, for vision to return.

He'd never understand it. He'd spent his entire life in the presence of

crosses and crucifixes, surrounded by them. And yet as soon as he'd become

undead, he was unable to bear the sight of one. As a matter of fact, since he'd

become undead, he'd never even seen one. A cross was no longer an object. It was

a light, a light so excruciatingly bright, so blazingly white that it was sheer

agony to look at it. As a child in Naples he'd been told by his mother not to

look at the sun, but when there'd been talk of an eclipse, he'd stared directly

into its eye. The pain of looking at a cross was a hundred, no, a thousand times

worse than that. And the bigger the cross or crucifix, the worse the pain.

He'd experienced monumental pain upon looking into St. Anthony's

tonight. That could only mean that Joseph, that young bastard, had

refurbished the giant crucifix. It was the only possible explanation.

He swung on his servants.

"Get in there! Get that crucifix down!"

"They've got guns!"

"Then get help. But get it down!"

"We'll get guns too! We can-"

"No! I want him! I want that priest alive! I want him for myself! Anyone

who kills him will suffer a very painful, very long and lingering true death!

Is that clear?"

It was clear. They scurried away without answering.

Palmeri went to gather the other members of the nest.

Dressed in a cassock and a surplice, Joe came out of the sacristy and

approached the altar. He noticed Zev keeping watch at one of the windows.

He didn't tell him how ridiculous he looked carrying the shotgun Carl had

brought back. He held it so gingerly, like it was full of nitroglycerine and

would explode if he jiggled it.

Zev turned, and smiled when he saw him.

"Now you look like the old Father Joe we all used to know."

Joe gave him a little bow and proceeded toward the altar.

All right: He had everything he needed. He had the Missal they'd found in among

the pew debris earlier today. He had the wine; Carl had brought back about four

ounces of sour red babarone. He'd found a smudged surplice and a dusty cassock

on the floor of one of the closets in the sacristy, and he wore them now. No

hosts, though. A crust of bread left over from breakfast would have to do. No

chalice, either. If he'd known he was going to be saying Mass he'd have come

prepared. As a last resort he'd used the can opener in the rectory to remove the

top from one of the Pepsi cans from lunch. Quite a stretch from the gold chalice

he'd used since his ordination, but probably more

in line with what Jesus had used at that first Mass-the Last Supper.

He was uncomfortable with the idea of weapons in St. Anthony's but



- he saw no alternative. He and Zev knew nothing about guns, and Carl knew

little more; they'd probably do more damage to themselves than to the Vichy if

they tried to use them. But maybe the sight of them would make the Vichy

hesitate, slow them down. All he needed was a little time here, enough to get to the consecration.

This is going to be the most unusual Mass in history, he thought.

But he was going to get through it if it killed him. And that was a real

possibility. This might well be his last Mass. But he wasn't afraid. He was too

excited to be afraid. He'd had a slug of the scotch-just enough to ward off the

DTs-but it had done nothing to quell the buzz of the adrenalin humming along every nerve in his body.

He spread everything out on the white tablecloth he'd taken from the

rectory and used to cover the filthy altar. He looked at Carl.

"Ready?"

Carl nodded and stuck the .38 caliber pistol he'd been examining into his belt.

"Been a while, Fadda. We did it in Latin when I was a kid, but I tink I can swing it."

"Just do your best and don't worry about any mistakes."

Some Mass. A defiled altar, a crust for a host, a Pepsi can for a chalice, a

fifty-year-old, pistol-packing altar boy, and a congregation consisting of a

lone, shotgun-carrying Orthodox Jew. Joe looked heavenward.

You do understand, don't you, Lord, that this was arranged on short notice?

Time to begin.

He read the Gospel but dispensed with the homily. He tried to

remember the Mass as it used to be said, to fit in better with Carl's

outdated responses. As he was starting the Offertory the front doors flew open

and a group of men entered-ten of them, all with crescent moons dangling from

their ears. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Zev move away from the window

toward the altar, pointing his shotgun at them.

As soon as they entered the nave and got past the broken pews, the Vichy fanned

out toward the sides. They began pulling down the Stations of the Cross, ripping

Carl's makeshift crosses from the walls and tearing them apart.

Carl looked up at Joe from where he knelt, his eyes questioning, his hand

reaching for the pistol in his belt.

Joe shook his head and kept up with the Offertory.

When all the little crosses were down, the Vichy swarmed behind the

altar. Joe chanced a quick glance over his shoulder and saw them begin

their attack on the newly repaired crucifix.

"Zev!" Carl said in a low voice, cocking his head toward the Vichy. "Stop

'em!"

Zev worked the pump on the shotgun. The sound echoed through the

church. Joe heard the activity behind him come to a sudden halt. He braced

himself for the shot ....

But it never came..

He looked at Zev. The old man met his gaze and sadly shook his head. He

couldn't do it. To the accompaniment of the sound of renewed activity and

derisive laughter behind him, Joe gave Zev a tiny nod of reassurance and

understanding, then hurried the Mass toward the Consecration. As he held the

crust of bread aloft, he started at the sound of the life-sized

crucifix crashing to the floor, cringed as he heard the freshly buttressed arms

and crosspiece being torn away again.

As he held the wine aloft in the Pepsi can, the swaggering, grinning Vichy

surrounded the altar and brazenly tore the cross from around his neck. Zev and

Carl put up a struggle to keep theirs but were overpowered. And then Joe's skin

began to crawl as a new group entered the nave. There had to be at least forty

of them, all of them vampires.

And Palmeri was leading them.

Palmeri hid his hesitancy as he approached the altar. The crucifix and its

intolerable whiteness were gone, yet something was not right. Something

repellent here, something that urged him to flee. What?

Perhaps it was just the residual effect of the crucifix and all the crosses they had used to line the walls. That had to be it. The unsettling aftertaste would fade as the night wore on. Oh, yes. His nightbrothers and sisters from the nest would see to that. He focused his attention on the man behind the altar and laughed when he realized what he held in his hands. "Pepsi, Joseph? You're trying to consecrate Pepsi?" He turned to his nest siblings. "Do you see this, my brothers and sisters? Is this the man we are to fear? And look who he has with him! An old Jew and a parish hanger-on!" He heard their hissing laughter as they fanned out around him, sweeping toward the altar in a wide phalanx. The Jew and Carl—he recognized Carl and wondered how he'd avoided capture for so long—retreated to the other side of the altar where they flanked Joseph. And Joseph . . . Joseph's handsome Irish face so pale and drawn, his mouth drawn into such a tight, grim line. He looked scared to death. And well he should be. Palmeri put down his rage at Joseph's audacity. He was glad he had returned. He'd always hated the young priest for his easy manner with people, for the way the parishioners had flocked to him with their problems despite the fact that he had nowhere near the experience of their older and wiser pastor. But that was over now. That world was gone, replaced by a

nightworld-Palmeri's world. And no one would be flocking to Father Joe for

anything when Palmeri was through with him. "Father Joe"-how he'd hated it when

the parishioners had started calling him that. Well, their Father Joe would

provide superior entertainment tonight. This was going to be fun.

"Joseph, Joseph, Joseph," he said as he stopped and smiled at the young

priest across the altar. "This futile gesture is so typical of your arrogance.

But Joseph only stared back at him, his expression a mixture of defiance and

repugnance. And that only fueled Palmeri's rage.

"Do I repel you, Joseph? Does my new form offend your precious

shanty-Irish sensibilities? Does my undeath disgust you?"

"You managed to do all that while you were still alive, Alberto."

Palmeri allowed himself to smile. Joseph probably thought he was

putting on a brave front, but the tremor in his voice betrayed his fear.

"Always good with the quick retort, weren't you, Joseph. Always think-

ing you were better than me, always putting yourself above me."

"Not much of a climb where a child molester is concerned."

Palmeri's anger mounted.

"So superior. So self-righteous. What about your appetites, Joseph? The

secret ones? What are they? Do you always hold them in check? Are you so far

above the rest of us that you never give in to an improper impulse? I'll bet you

think that even if we made you one of us you could resist the blood hunger."

He saw by the startled look in Joseph's face that he had struck a nerve. He

stepped closer, almost touching the altar.

"You do, don't you? You really think you could resist it!

Well, we shall see

about that, Joseph. By dawn you'll be drained-we'll each take a turn at you-and

when the sun rises you'll have to hide from its light. When the night comes

you'll be one of us. And then all the rules will be off. The night will be

yours. You'll be able to do anything and everything you've ever wanted. But the

blood hunger will be on you too. You won't be sipping your god's blood, as

you've done so often, but human blood. You'll thirst for hot, human blood,

Joseph. And you'll have to sate that thirst. There'll be no choice. And I want

to be there when you do, Joseph. I want to be there to laugh in your face as you

suck up the crimson nectar, and keep on laughing every night as the red hunger

lures you into infinity."

And it would happen. Palmeri knew it as sure as he felt his own thirst.

He hungered for the moment when he could rub dear Joseph's face in the

muck of his own despair. "I was about to finish saying Mass," Joseph said

coolly. "Do you mind if I finish?"

Palmeri couldn't help laughing this time.

"Did you really think this charade would work? Did you really think you

could celebrate Mass on this?"

He reached out and snatched the tablecloth from the altar, sending the

Missal and the piece of bread to the floor and exposing the fouled surface of the marble.

"Did you really think you could effect the Transubstantiation here? Do

you really believe any of that garbage? That the bread and wine actually take on

the substance of-" He tried to say the name but it wouldn't form, "-the Son's body and blood?"

One of nest brothers, Frederick, stepped forward and leaned over the altar, smiling.

"Transubstantiation?" he said in his most unctuous voice, pulling the

Pepsi can from Joseph's hands. "Does that mean that this is the blood of the Son?"

A whisper of warning slithered through Palmeri's mind. Something

about the can, something about the way he found it difficult to bring its outline into focus . . .

"Brother Frederick, maybe you should-"

Frederick's grin broadened. "I've always wanted to sup on the blood of a deity."

The nest members hissed their laughter as Frederick raised the can and drank.

Palmeri was jolted by the explosion of intolerable  
brightness that burst from

Frederick's mouth. The inside of his skull glowed beneath  
his scalp and shafts

of pure white light shot from his ears, nose, eyes-every  
orifice in his head.

The glow spread as it flowed down through his throat and  
chest and into his

abdominal cavity, silhouetting his ribs before melting  
through his skin.

Frederick was liquefying where he stood, his flesh  
steaming, softening, running

like glowing molten lava.

No! This couldn't be happening! Not now when he -had  
Joseph in his  
grasp!

Then the can fell from Frederick's dissolving fingers and  
landed on the

altar top. Its contents splashed across the fouled surface  
releasing another

detonation of brilliance, this one more devastating than  
the first. The glare

spread rapidly, extending over the upper surface and  
running down the sides,

moving like a living thing, engulfing the entire altar,  
making it glow like a

corpuscle of fire torn from the heart of the sun itself.

And with the light came blast-furnace heat that drove  
Palmeri back,

back, back until he had to turn and follow the rest of his  
nest in a mad,

headlong rush from St. Anthony's into the cool, welcoming  
safety of the outer

darkness.



As the vampires fled into the night, their Vichy toadies behind them, Zev stared in horrid fascination at the puddle of putrescence that was all that remained of the vampire Palmeri had called Frederick. He glanced at Carl and caught the look of dazed wonderment on his face. Zev touched the top of the altar--clean, shiny, every whorl of the marble surface clearly visible. There was fearsome power here. Incalculable power. But instead of elating him, the realization only depressed him. How long had this been going on? Did it happen at every Mass? Why had he spent his entire life ignorant of this? He turned to Father Joe. "What happened?" "I-I don't know." "A miracle!" Carl said, running his palm over the altar top. "A miracle and a meltdown," Father Joe said. He picked up the empty Pepsi can and looked into it. "You know, you go through the seminary, through your ordination, through countless Masses believing in the Transubstantiation. But after all these years . . . , to actually know. . . ." Zev saw him rub his finger along the inside of the can and taste it. He grimaced. "What's wrong?" Zev asked. "Still tastes like sour barbarone . . . with a hint of Pepsi." "Doesn't matter what it tastes like. As far as Palmeri and his friends are concerned, it's the real thing."

"No," said the priest with a small smile. "That's Coke."  
And then they started laughing. It wasn't that funny, but Zev found himself roaring along with the other two. It was more a release of tension than anything else. His sides hurt. He had to lean against the altar to support himself.  
It took the return of the Vichy to cure the laughter. They charged in carrying a heavy fire blanket. This time Father Joe did not stand by passively as they invaded his church. He stepped around the altar and met them head on. He was great and terrible as he confronted them. His giant stature and raised fists cowed them for a few heartbeats. But then they must have remembered that they outnumbered him twelve to one and charged him. He swung a massive fist and caught the lead Vichy square on the jaw. The blow lifted him off his feet and he landed against another. Both went down.  
Zev dropped to one knee and reached for the shotgun. He would use it this time, he would shoot these vermin, he swore it!  
But then someone landed on his back and drove him to the floor. As he tried to get up he saw Father Joe, surrounded, swinging his fists, laying the Vichy out every time he connected. But there were too many. As the priest went down under the press of them, a heavy boot thudded against the side of Zev's head. He sank into darkness.

A throbbing in his head, stinging pain in his cheek, and a voice, sibilant yet harsh . . .

". . . now, Joseph. Come on. Wake up. I don't want you to miss this!"

Palmeri's sallow features swam into view, hovering over him, grinning

like a skull. Joe tried to move but found his wrists and arms tied. His right

hand throbbed, felt twice its normal size; he must have broken it on a Vichy

jaw. He lifted his head and saw that he was tied spread-eagle on the altar, and

that the altar had been covered with the fire blanket.

"Melodramatic, I admit," Palmeri said, "but fitting, don't you think? I

mean, you and I used to sacrifice our god symbolically here every weekday and

multiple times on Sundays, so why shouldn't this serve as your sacrificial

altar?"

Joe shut his eyes against a wave of nausea. This couldn't be

happening.

"Thought you'd won, didn't you?" When Joe wouldn't answer him,

Palmeri went on. "And even if you'd chased me out of here for good, what would

you have accomplished? The world is ours now, Joseph. Feeders and cattle-that is

the hierarchy. We are the feeders. And tonight you'll join us.

But he won't. Yoihi!"

He stepped aside and made a gesture toward the balcony. Joe searched

the dim, candlelit space of the nave, not sure what he was supposed to see.

Then he picked out Zev's form and he groaned. The old man's feet were

lashed to the balcony rail; he hung upside down, his reddened face and

frightened eyes turned his way. Joe fell back and strained at the ropes but they wouldn't budge.

"Let him go!"

"What? And let all that good rich Jewish blood go to waste? Why, these

people are the Chosen of God! They're a delicacy!"

"Bastard!"

If he could just get his hands on Palmeri, just for a minute.

"Tut-tut, Joseph. Not in the house of the Lord. The Jew should have been smart and run away like Carl."

Carl got away? Good. The poor guy would probably hate himself, call

himself a coward the rest of his life, but he'd done what he could. Better to

live on than get strung up like Zev.

We're even, Carl.

"But don't worry about your rabbi. None of us will lay a fang on him. He hasn't

earned the right to join us. We'll use the razor to bleed him. And when he's

dead, he'll be dead for keeps. But not you, Joseph. Oh no, not you." His smile

broadened. "You're mine."

Joe wanted to spit in Palmeri's face-not so much as an act of defiance as to

hide the waves of terror surging through him-but there was no saliva to be had

in his parched mouth. The thought of being undead made him weak. To spend eternity like . . . he looked at the rapt faces of Palmeri's fellow vampires as they clustered under Zev's suspended form . . . like them?

He wouldn't be like them! He would not allow it!

But what if there was no choice? What if becoming undead toppled a

lifetime's worth of moral constraints, cut all the tethers on his human hungers,

negated all his mortal concepts of how a life should be lived? Honor, justice,

integrity, truth, decency, fairness, love-what if they became meaningless words

instead of the footings for his life?

A thought struck him.

"A deal, Alberto," he said.

"You're hardly in a bargaining position, Joseph."

"I'm not? Answer me this: Do the undead ever kill each other? I mean, has one of

them ever driven a stake through another's heart?"

"No. Of course not."

"Are you sure? You'd better be sure before you go through with your plans

tonight. Because if I'm forced to become one of you, I'll be crossing over with

just one thought in mind: To find you. And when I do I won't stake your heart,

I'll stake your arms and legs to the pilings of the Point Pleasant boardwalk

where you can watch the sun rise and feel it slowly crisp your skin to

charcoal."

Palmeri's smile wavered. "Impossible. You'll be different. You'll want to thank me. You'll wonder why you ever resisted."

"You'd better sure of that, Alberto . . . for your sake. Because I'll have all eternity to track you down. And I'll find you, Alberto. I swear it on my own grave. Think on that."

"Do you think an empty threat is going to cow me?"

"We'll find out how empty it is, won't we? But here's the deal: Let Zev go and I'll let you be."

"You care that much for an old Jew?"

"He's something you never knew in life, and never will know: He's a friend." And he gave me back my souk Palmeri leaned closer. His foul, nauseous breath wafted against Joe's face.

"A friend? How can you be friends with a dead man?" With that he straightened and turned toward the balcony. "Do him! Mow!"

As Joe shouted out frantic pleas and protests, one of the vampires climbed up the rubble toward Zev. Zev did not struggle. Joe saw him close his eyes,

waiting. As the vampire reached out with the straight razor, Joe bit back a sob

of grief and rage and helplessness. He was about to squeeze his own eyes shut

when he saw a flame arc through the air from one of the windows. It struck the

floor with a crash of glass and a woomp! of exploding flame.

Joe had only heard of such things, but he immediately realized that he had just

seen his first Molotov cocktail in action. The splattering gasoline caught the clothes of a nearby vampire who began running in circles, screaming as it beat at its flaming clothes.

But its cries were drowned by the roar of other voices, a hundred or more. Joe looked around and saw people-men, women, teenagers-climbing in the windows, charging through the front doors.

The women held crosses on high while the men wielded long wooden pikes-broom, rake, and shovel handles whittled to sharp points. Joe recognized most of the faces from the Sunday Masses he had said here for years.

St. Anthony's parishioners were back to reclaim their church.

"Yes!" he shouted, not sure whether to laugh or cry. But when he saw the rage in

Palmeri's face, he laughed. "Too bad, Alberto!"

Palmeri made a lunge at his throat but cringed away as a woman with

an upheld crucifix and a man with a pike charged the altar-Carl and a woman Joe recognized as Mary O'Hare.

"Told ya I wun't letcha down, din't I, Fadda?" Carl said, grinning and pulling

out a red Swiss Army knife. He began sawing at the rope around Joe's right wrist. "Din't I?"

"That you did, Carl. I don't think I've ever been so glad to see anyone in my entire life. But how-?"

"I told 'em. I run t'rough da parish, goin' house to house. I told 'em dat Fadda

Joe was in trouble an' dat we let him down before but we shoun't let him down

again. He come back fa us, now we gotta go back fa him. Simple as dat. And den

dey started runnin' house to house, an' afore ya knowed it, we had ourselfs a

little army. We come to kick ass, Fadda, if you'll excuse da expression."

"Kick all the ass you can, Carl."

Joe glanced at Mary O'Hare's terror-glazed eyes as she swiveled around,

looking this way and that;, he saw how the crucifix trembled in her hand. She

wasn't going to kick too much ass in her state, but she was here, dear God, she

was here for him and for St. Anthony's despite the terror that so obviously

filled her. His heart swelled with love for the these people and pride in their courage.

As soon as his arms were free, Joe sat up and took the knife from Carl. As he

sawed at his leg ropes, he looked around the church.

The oldest and youngest members of the parishioner army were stationed at the

windows and doors where they held crosses aloft, cutting off the vampires'

escape, while all across the nave-chaos. Screams, cries, and an occasional shot

echoed through St. Anthony's. The vampires were outnumbered three to one and

seemed blinded and confused by all the crosses around them. Despite their

superhuman strength, it appeared that some were indeed getting their asses



kicked. A number were already writhing on the floor, impaled on pikes. As Joe watched, he saw a pair of the women, crucifixes held before them, backing a vampire into a corner. As it cowered there with its arms across its face, one of the men charged in with a sharpened rake handle held like a lance and ran it through.

But a number of parishioners lay in inert, bloody heaps on the floor, proof that the vampires and the Vichy were claiming their share of victims too.

Joe freed his feet and hopped off the altar. He looked around for Palmeri-he wanted Palmeri-but the vampire priest had lost himself in the melee. Joe glanced up at the balcony and saw that Zev was still hanging there, struggling to free himself. He started across the nave to help him. Zev hated that he should be hung up here like a salami in a deli window. He tried again to pull his upper body up far enough to reach his leg ropes but he couldn't get close. He had never been one for exercise; doing a sit-up flat on the floor would have been difficult, so what made him think he could do the equivalent maneuver hanging upside down by his feet? He dropped back, exhausted, and felt the blood rush to his head again. His vision swam, his ears pounded, he felt like his skin of his face was going to

burst open. Much more of this and he'd have a stroke or worse maybe. He watched the upside-down battle below and was glad to see the vampires getting the worst of it. These people-seeing Carl among them, Zev assumed they were part of St.

Anthony's parish-were ferocious, almost savage in their attacks on the vampires.

Months' worth of pent-up rage and fear was being released upon their tormentors in a single burst. It was almost frightening.

Suddenly he felt a hand on his foot. Someone was untying his knots. Thank you,

Lord. Soon he would be on his feet again. As the cords came loose he decided he

should at least attempt to participate in his own rescue. Once more Zev thought.

Once more I'll try.

With a grunt he levered himself up, straining, stretching to grasp something,

anything. A hand came out of the darkness and he reached for it. But Zev's

relief turned to horror when he felt the cold clamminess of the thing that

clutched him, that pulled him up and over the balcony rail with inhuman

strength. His bowels threatened to evacuate when Palmeri's grinning face loomed

not six inches from his own.

"It's not over yet, Jew," he said softly, his foul breath clogging Zev's nose

and throat. "Not by along shot!"

He felt Palmeri's free hand ram into his belly and grip his belt at the buckle,

then the other hand grab a handful of his shirt at the neck.

Before he could struggle or cry out, he was lifted free of the floor and hoisted over the balcony rail.

And the demon's voice was in his ear.

"Joseph called you a friend, Jew. Let's see if he really meant it."

Joe was half way across the floor of the nave when he heard Palmeri's voice echo above the madness.

"Stop them, Joseph! Stop them now or I drop your friend!"

Joe looked up and froze.

Palmeri stood at the balcony rail, leaning over it, his eyes averted from the

nave and all its newly arrived crosses. At the end of his outstretched arms was

Zev, suspended in mid-air over the splintered remains of the pews, over a

particularly large and ragged spire of wood that pointed directly at the middle

of Zev's back. Zev's frightened eyes were flashing between Joe and the giant spike below.

Around him Joe heard the sounds of the melee drop a notch, then drop

another as all eyes were drawn to the tableau on the balcony.

"A human can die impaled on a wooden stake just as well as a vampire!"

Palmeri cried. "And just as quickly if it goes through his heart. But it can

take hours of agony if it rips through his gut:"

St. Anthony's grew silent as the fighting stopped and each faction backed away

to a different side of the church, leaving Joe alone in the middle.

"What do you want, Alberto?"

"First I want all those crosses put away so that I can see!"

Joe looked to his right where his parishioners stood.

"Put them away," he told them. When a murmur of dissent arose, he added, "Don't

put them down, just out of sight. Please."

Slowly, one by one at first, then in groups, the crosses and crucifixes were

placed behind backs or tucked out of sight within coats.

To his left, the vampires hissed their relief and the Vichy cheered. The sound

was like hot needles being forced under Joe's fingernails.

Above, Palmeri turned

his face to Joe and smiled.

"That's better."

"What do you want?" Joe asked, knowing with a sick crawling in his gut

exactly what the answer would be.

"A trade," Palmeri said.

"Me for him, I suppose?" Joe said.

Palmeri's smile widened. "Of course."

"No, Joe!" Zev cried.

Palmeri shook the old man roughly. Joe heard him say, "Quiet, Jew, or I'll snap

your spine!" Then he looked down at Joe again. "The other thing is to tell your

rabble to let my people go." He laughed and shook Zev again. "Hear that, Jew? A

Biblical reference-Old Testament, no less!" "All right," Joe said without hesitation.

The parishioners on his right gasped as one and cries of "No!" and "You

can't!" filled St. Anthony's. A particularly loud voice nearby shouted, "He's only a lousy kike!"

Joe wheeled on the man and recognized Gene Harrington, a carpenter. He

jerked a thumb back over his shoulder at the vampires and their servants. "You

sound like you'd be more at home with them, Gene."

Harrington backed up a step and looked at his feet.

"Sorry, Father," he said in a voice that hovered on the verge of a sob.

"But we just got you back!"

"I'll be all right," Joe said softly.

And he meant it. Deep inside he had a feeling that he would come through this,

that if he could trade himself for Zev and face Palmeri one-on-one, he could

come out the victor, or at least battle him to a draw. Now that he was no longer

tied up like some sacrificial lamb, now that he was free, with full use of his

arms and legs again, he could not imagine dying at the hands of the likes of

Palmeri.

Besides, one of the parishioners had given him a tiny crucifix. He had it closed

in the palm of his hand.

But he had to get Zev out of danger first. That above all else. He looked up at

Palmeri.

"All right, Alberto. I'm on my way up."

"Wait!" Palmeri said. "Someone search him."

Joe gritted his teeth as one of the Vichy, a blubbery, unwashed slob, came

forward and searched his pockets. Joe thought he might get away with the

crucifix but at the last moment he was made to open his hands. The Vichy grinned

in Joe's face as he snatched the tiny cross from his palm and shoved it into his pocket.

"He's clean now!" the slob said and gave Joe a shove toward the vestibule. Joe

hesitated. He was walking into the snake pit unarmed. A glance at his

parishioners told him he couldn't very well turn back now. He continued on his

way, clenching and unclenching his tense, sweaty fists as he walked. He still

had a chance of coming out of this alive. He was too angry to die. He prayed

that when he got within reach of the ex-priest the smoldering rage at how he had

framed him when he'd been pastor, at what he'd done to St. Anthony's since then

would explode and give him the strength to tear Palmeri to pieces.

"No!" Zev shouted from above. "Forget about me! You've started

something here and you've got to see it through!"

Joe ignored his friend.

"Coming, Alberto."

FatherJoe's coming Alberto. And he's pissed. Royally pissed.

Zev craned his neck around, watching Father Joe disappear beneath the balcony.

"Joe! Come back!"

Palmeri shook him again.

"Give it up, old Jew. Joseph never listened to anyone and he's not listening to

you. He still believes in faith and virtue and honesty, in the power of goodness

and truth over what he perceives as evil. He'll come up here ready to sacrifice himself for you, yet sure in his heart that he's going to win in the end.

But he's wrong."

"No!" Zev said.

But in his heart he knew that Palmeri was right. How could Joe stand up

against a creature with Palmeri's strength, who could hold Zev in the air like

this for so long? Didn't his arms ever tire?

"Yes!" Palmeri hissed. "He's going to lose and we're going to win. We'll win for

the same reason we'll always win. We don't let anything as silly and transient

as sentiment stand in our way. If we'd been winning below and situations were

reversed-if Joseph were holding one of my nest brothers over that wooden spike

below-do you think I'd pause for a moment? For a second? Never! That's why this

whole exercise by Joseph and these people is futile."

Futile . . . Zev thought. Like much of his life, it seemed. Like all of his

future. Joe would die tonight and Zev would live on, a cross-wearing Jew, with

the traditions of his past sacked and in flames, and nothing in his future but a

vast, empty, limitless plain to wander alone. There was a sound on the balcony

stairs, and Palmeri turned his head. "Ah, Joseph," he said.

Zev couldn't see the priest but he shouted anyway.

"Go back Joe! Don't let him trick you!"

"Speaking of tricks," Palmeri said, leaning further over the balcony rail as an

extra warning to Joe, "I hope you're not going to try anything foolish." "No,"

said Joe's tired voice from somewhere behind Palmeri. "No tricks.

Pull him in and let him go."

Zev could not let this happen. And suddenly he knew what he had to do.

He twisted his body and grabbed the front of Palmeri's cassock while

bringing his legs up and bracing his feet against one of the uprights of the brass balcony rail.

As Palmeri turned his startled face toward him, Zev put all of his strength into

his legs for one convulsive backwards push against the railing, pulling Palmeri

with him. The vampire priest was overbalanced. Even his enormous strength could

not help him once his feet came free of the floor. Zev saw his undead eyes widen

with terror as his lower body slipped over the railing.

As they fell free, Zev wrapped his arms around Palmeri and clutched his

cold and surprisingly thin body tight against him.

"What goes through this old Jew goes through you!" he shouted into the

vampire's ear. For an instant he saw Joe's horrified face appear over the

balcony's receding edge, heard Joe's faraway shout of "No!" mingle with

Palmeri's nearer scream of the same word, then there was a spine-cracking jar

and a tearing, wrenching pain beyond all comprehension in his chest. In an

eyeblick he felt the sharp spire of wood rip through him and into Palmeri.



And then he felt no more.  
As roaring blackness closed in he wondered if he'd done it,  
if this last  
desperate, foolish act had succeeded.  
He didn't want to die without finding out.  
He wanted to know  
But then he knew no more.

Joe shouted incoherently as he hung over the rail and  
watched Zev's fall, gagged  
as he saw the bloody point of the pew remnant burst  
through the back of  
Palmeri's cassock directly below him. He saw Palmeri  
squirm and flop around like  
a speared fish, then go limp atop Zev's already inert form.  
As cheers mixed with  
cries of horror and the sounds of renewed battle rose from  
the nave, Joe turned  
away from the balcony rail and dropped to his knees.  
"Zev!" he cried aloud. "Good God, Zev!"  
Forcing himself to his feet, he stumbled down the back  
stairs, through the  
vestibule, and into the nave. The vampires and the Vichy  
were on the run, as  
cowed and demoralized by their leader's death as the  
parishioners were buoyed by  
it.  
Slowly, steadily, they were falling before the relentless  
onslaught. But Joe  
paid them scant attention.  
He fought his way to where Zev lay impaled beneath  
Palmeri's already  
rotting corpse.  
He looked for a sign of life in his old friend's glazing eyes,  
a hint of a pulse  
in his throat under his beard, but there was nothing.

"Oh, Zev, you shouldn't have. You shouldn't have."

Suddenly he was surrounded by a cheering throng of St. Anthony's parishioners.

"We did it, Fadda Joe!" Carl cried, his face and hands splattered with blood.

"We killed 'em all! We got our church back!"

"Thanks to this man here," Joe said, pointing to Zev.

"No!" someone shouted. "Thanks to you!"

Amid the cheers, Joe shook his head and said nothing.

Let them celebrate.

They deserved it.

They'd reclaimed a small piece of the planet as their own, a toehold and nothing more.

A small victory of minimal significance in the war, but a victory

nonetheless. They had their church back, at least for tonight. And they intended

to keep it. Good. But there would be one change. If they wanted their Father Joe

to stick around they were going to have to agree to rename the church. St.

Zev's. Joe liked the sound of that.