Confession (excerpt)

by David Ackley

I.
Mea Culpa

Early one Sunday morning, Wilfred LaFleur tenderly raised his head from the pillow and sat up, hoping his wife would see who was at the front door until it came back to him that she'd left with a conductor on the B.& O. and moved to Baltimore six months before. His head felt large and puffy as if the beer from the previous night had backed-up between his scalp and skull.

“Belle,” he called. “Go see.”

“It's the friggin cops,” his daughter said instantly, as if she could tell from the knock.

“Don't curse.”

“Frig isn't cursing. Fuck is cursing.”

He was having a hard time with his daughter, who laughed at his discipline, and when he'd lifted his hand to her, said, “Go ahead.”

“I mean it.” He leaned over to the window and pulled the curtain aside: puffs of smoke came from the exhaust of the black car in the driveway; across both doors it said SALEM POLICE DEPT. He wondered if someone had reported him for last night, but all he'd done was stagger the few blocks home from Rocky's after last call. In Salem, if that was a crime, they couldn't build a jail big enough. He let the curtain fall closed and picked his pants off the floor, hooking his suspenders over his undershirt as he walked to the door and opened it. Two cops in blue uniforms, one large, one medium, faced him, inches away.

“What's…?” he said.

“You LaFleur?”

“One of ‘em,” he said.

“Which?”

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“Wilfred.”

“That's it,” the medium said; the large grabbed his shoulder, briskly spun him around and held his face against the door while they cuffed his hands behind his back. They started to walk him across the frost-coated porch and he began to hop from the cold. “Wait,” he said. “Shoes.”

“Jesus.” One of them went inside and came out in a few seconds to drop the shoes in front of his bare feet. He slid his feet in and asked if they could tie them. “Tie this,” the large one said, and jabbed him in the solar plexus with his elbow, just hard enough to drive all the air from his lungs. “Unh-unh-unh,” he said while they half-dragged him down the walk and threw him into the back of the car. “Wait here,” the medium one said. He crouched over until his wind came back, then sat up and began to breathe. The two cops had gone back to talk to Belle, who stood in the doorway in her slip, smoking one of his cigarettes. She didn't seem too upset, waving her cigarette in his general direction as she smiled at the smaller cop.

When they got back in the car, they both turned to look at him for a second. Putting the car in gear, the large one said. “I could see it, sort of.”

“Not if it was *your* daughter.”

“That's a fuckin' Frenchman for you.”

At the station, they sat him beside a desk with a typewriter and a fat guy in shirtsleeves and a loosened tie. There was a dead cigar butt in an ashtray. He looked at it longingly. “Anybody got a smoke?”

“Sure,” the fat guy said, without moving.

He started to type, asking questions, followed by bursts from the keys across which two of his fat fingers moved with incredible speed. “Full Name.”

“Wilfred Ronald LaFleur.”

“Address?”

“243 Mather.”

“Occupation?”

“Journeyman Plumber.”

“Date of birth?”

“One December Nineteen Thirteen.”

“U.S. citizen?”

“Yeah.”

“Veteran?”

“Yeah.”

“What branch?”

“Army.”

The fat man addressed the two uniforms. “What's he up for?”

“Violation of R.S.A. One Twenty Two.”

The fat man's eyebrows raised as he typed, and he looked at LaFleur the way they did in the car, with a kind of wonder and something else he couldn't name but saw in their eyes.

“Who's bringing the charge?”

“The daughter that called…”

“Name?” The two uniforms looked at each other and shrugged; the morons had forgot to ask.

LaFleur's sockless feet were suddenly icy. “Belle,” he said.

They put him in a cell by himself and the next morning took him to the courtroom in handcuffs, where some young kid in a suit with a briefcase came running in at the last minute to stand beside him in front of the judge, a very small man in a black robe and white collar, who stared beadily at LaFleur from his tall desk like a crow on a rooftop.

The clerk read the charge: *Violation of Commonwealth of Massachusetts R. S. A. 122: Incest by Carnal Knowing of a Minor Child.* They still hadn't given him his socks, and his feet felt icy again.

Judge Crow had a voice to match. “Okay, junior, how does your client plead?”

His lawyer leaned toward LaFleur and whispered, “How would you like to plead, Mr.… um.” He glanced at a paper in his hand. “Laffler.”

“LaFleur,” his client corrected. “Take a guess.”

“Not guilty?”

LaFleur nodded. The lawyer said, “Not guilty, your honor.”

LaFleur looked at him sideways. “They pay you for this?... Beats plumbing.”

