

# The Sin Eater

*by* Dominic Preziosi

It was Merrick; there was no doubt of that. She recognized him from the shape and tilt of his head, never mind the way he listed in his wheelchair, like a scuttled tug on an ebbing tide. He had been a big man, and was a big man still, even in what one might call this diminished state. He didn't recognize her, not if the vacancy of his watery blue eyes was any indication.

"You don't remember me, Father? It's Ellen. Andrew Egan's wife."

He gazed at her, the ghost of a smile on his lips. His teeth were yellowed, but he appeared to have held on to all of them. There'd been a long period of smoking, and his struggles to kick the habit had been very public, played for jokes from the pulpit. He eventually managed to do it, something that several families of the parish had celebrated by throwing him a surprise party at the rectory.

"I do, dear, I do. Ellen." He lifted his hand and traced the sign of the cross in the air, to bless her. She knew that he didn't.

"Are you ready to go in to mass?"

He shifted his body, a resigned shrug that she took to be affirmative. It had seemed to require a lot of effort.

"All right then." She grasped the handles of the chair—still unfamiliar in her hands; it was just her third day volunteering—and spun him slowly, turning him in the direction of the bright corridor connecting the common room to the chapel. A nun appeared from nowhere, her black bat wings brushing Ellen as she flitted past. It startled her, and then she was gone without so much as a "good morning."

The celebrant was young, half her age at most, with clear, disk-shaped lenses set in wireless frames. The glasses gave him the appearance of an owl, but he didn't strike Ellen as wise; rather, his

childlike piety showed through seriousness that he wore like a coat sneaked from his father's closet.

There'd been a different celebrant for each of the daily masses so far, and she understood it to be the routine, this rotation of priests from surrounding parishes. The chapel was a small, grotto-like space, with a low, stippled ceiling and painted statues hiding in the shadowy recesses. But the padded chairs were a pleasant, and comfortable, surprise. She'd parked Merrick at the end of the short row she sat in; now, he seemed to be dozing. A handful of other retired clerics were scattered around her, some of whom she'd begun to recognize. They'd all entered under their own power, although a few were aided by canes. Merrick was the only one in a wheelchair.

It was nothing she'd expected, coming into the common room that morning and seeing him there. She hadn't thought of him in years. Well, that wasn't true exactly, but she had long since lost any word of his whereabouts. Really, she never had a clue as to where he went after being replaced; no one did. And now here he was at the residence, in retirement, to be spiritually and physically attended to by the sisters of the abbey—and any lay volunteers they could find—until he was called home.

Ellen leaned over to fasten the top button of his black cardigan. His eyes flew open, which startled her, and after a moment in which she felt trapped in his gaze, the lids lowered themselves slowly. If he were to say later that he'd seen into her soul, she would have no reason to doubt him.

There was a convenience to her life now that she almost felt guilty for having. Her sons had not wanted her to sell the house when Andrew died, but she did, and they had made her feel like an outcast. She told them there was no way she could remain there, looking out over the wintry hills. It had been hard enough all of those years, even when the place was alive with their presence. Miles from nowhere, in a place too large to be alone in. The

isolation: Couldn't they understand? They said they could, but she knew from their voices they didn't.

She came back to that part of New Jersey she'd grown up in, to one of the numerous towns strung along the rail lines, where she took a one-bedroom apartment in a brick building close to the supermarket and the church. Ellen had never liked driving, and now she didn't have to do any; everything she wanted was within walking distance—even the abbey, a solid amassing of sandstone and mullioned glass set behind tall trees on a meandering side-street. There was activity on the sidewalks: children, couples, seniors like herself. Every other Tuesday night, the library hosted a poetry reading; on Saturdays, in the summer, there was a band concert in the park. She took a watercolor class.

She didn't have illusions about the source of the material comforts she had enjoyed, or that had allowed her to start what she sometimes thought of as her new life. The money hadn't come without compromises along the way, without nagging moral constraints consciously sidestepped.

"That's the business," Andrew had explained one night, as they sat on the deck behind their home and watched the boys—yes, they were still boys then; that's how long ago it had been—do back-flip after back-flip into the swimming pool. Something had been happening at work, something that could cause trouble if it were made public, and he was confiding in her about his involvement. "No sense in being a saint, since no one else is. No sense in standing on ethics, whatever that means. You only hurt yourself. And your family."

Nine o'clock on a Friday night, and he was still in his suit and tie. He might have been on his third drink. She'd picked at his uneaten meal, not wanting it to go to waste. The boys looked like angels to her, flying through the steaming glow of the swimming pool's submerged light. "You're a good provider," she eventually told him, wanting to absolve him, to receive the burden of his despair.

But when she took his hand, he pulled it away. A smile creased his face, an ugly grin she would come to recognize in the

months ahead. "Listen to you," he said. "Do you know how you sound? Like easy prey. Another lamb to the slaughter."

Leaving the chapel, Ellen introduced herself to the young priest.

"Will we be seeing more of you?" He had a voice like an Irish tenor's. The bright light in the corridor glinted off the disks that covered his eyes.

"As long as my services are wanted," she answered.

"I have no doubt of that." And now, as Merrick had blessed her earlier, the young priest did the same to Merrick.

She pushed him in his chair down the corridor, away from the shadows of the chapel. The narrow rubber tires gripped the hard waxed tiles. High above, cloistered on the top floor, were the drinkers and the addicts and the psychologically impaired. One level down from them were the gravely ill, those whose time was short, tied to machines and fed through tubes. She would never be permitted to see any of these on the upper stories; her status relegated her to working with the general population, as it had been described to her—the merely aged, or the aging, who for the most part retained their faculties and who lived at ground level, taking their meals with others, attending mass, conversing in the common areas.

Priests didn't just disappear, not without a reason, so there hadn't been any doubt when Merrick was suddenly replaced. No one had said it, but they didn't have to. And her boys, thank God—at least he'd done nothing to them. But they'd been friends with two of the three who had been... touched. The third was a suicide; no one ever linked it to anything, at least not publicly—that he had taken his life some years after the fact, that he had always had problems of one kind or another anyway, freed them from having to make that connection.

Outside she discovered a small, patio-like space covered in shade, and she positioned his chair near a low marble bench she could sit on. She was close enough to reach out her hand. Merrick's fingers

were thick and calloused, which she hadn't expected. He blinked, but she couldn't say if it was in response to her touch. His large head turned, as slow as a statue's. She readied herself, in case he wanted to speak.

Was she a fool, for taking it on herself? And who would take his sin off her, when her time came?

