

Confession

by Laura C. Alonso

Tomorrow, they'd bury their daughter . . . and still, so many questions. Why would a beautiful fourteen-year-old choose for herself such a horrible, painful death? In life, she appeared the antithesis of suicidal ideation: excellent grades, well-liked in school and community, babysitting neighbors' children, teaching Sunday School to three and four-year-olds (her "tiny ones"), bright-eyed when speaking, frequently, of her thoughtful plans for the future, mature beyond her years.

What burdens did she carry, never missing her weekly confession?

She was a perfectionist, yes, and why hadn't they paid more attention? It all seemed clear to them now: what appeared slight bumps along the path were for her the steepest of hills; she could never pedal fast enough.

They'd teased her about it, too, which now seemed terribly cruel -- turning the mailbox numbers backwards, sideways, upside-down, knowing she'd soon check for mail . . . knowing, just as well, that this slight imperfection would disturb her so that, even expecting an important letter, she wouldn't even peek -- not until she'd reassembled the numbers, all in their proper places, perfectly aligned. This was her address, identifying her home, and, perhaps, for her, her world. Maybe these pranks turned her world inside-out; what they'd assumed mere family playfulness had driven her to the edge . . .

. . . but she didn't leave a note. No confession, explanation, answers -- no *I love you* for them to hold on to. They were left as helpless as she must have felt, approaching the somersaulting numbers distorting the family mailbox.

Another common prank, this of her brother's invention, was to turn her bedroom upside-down: stuffed animals, posters, drawers, (*open them and see what happens!*), her bedding and pillows arranged so the head was the foot and vice-versa. They all laughed at her overreactions; eventually, she laughed along. Aware that it

was silly, she'd tried not to take things to heart. But why had they been so heartless . . . and was this, in fact, the cause?

Did she dream of numbers spinning in her head, or of living in an upside-down world? Had she reached a point in life where all things seemed backwards and wrong? Did she feel, in her desperate perfectionism, she could no longer inhabit such a world?

Questions, questions, questions; they would never know -- left simply to guess and torture themselves with nameless, endless blame. Friends, teachers, neighbors, the congregation -- all as clueless as the family. Everyone recalled the lovely girl they'd always known, cheerful to the day, to the hour, she was found: bloody, pale, lifeless.

Beautiful, even in death.

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Inside the box in the church lay a body -- the body of a young woman, cold and still. Bloodless, then, and quiet. A box filled with answers only God would ever know.

And the man who had taken her blood -- taken it long before it was drained in the undertaker's cold, back room -- that man in the collar, his robe black with guilt, he held up an offering to her family, her friends . . . to himself.

The body of Christ he blessed and then fed to them -- drank with them, too, His blood.

"Amen," he whispered, his sins washed away, and then buried their secret forever.

