

Last Week's Prisoners

The altarpiece was placed at a forty-degree angle against the van's back wall, with the stepladder tucked in behind it. The priest had been irritated by this arrangement as he had calculated that the back wall would fit the altarpiece perfectly. However, it transpired that with eight saints filed against each wall (and allowing a gap of a foot between them just in case) the altarpiece was not going to sit flush. So they had pushed the left side into the corner and covered the right with a blanket and before wedging it between two saints. Marcus assured the priest this would be fine.

The priest followed Marcus as he wheeled each saint from the church to the kerb and parked each one briefly in sunlight, operating the electronic loading door with his free hand. Then the priest held the trolley as Marcus transferred each figure to the floor with an expert rocking motion. They slotted large, ragged sheets of polystyrene in between the saints' shoulders and the walls. Looking around, Marcus had gestured that this looked like wings and the priest had looked at the statues as if for the first time.

Marcus passed ratchet straps around each stone waist and neck and the priest pressed blankets around their feet. Lastly, the loading dolly was placed flat on the floor in front of the door and the panel depicting the Assentation of Christ (which had slid gently out of the altarpiece) placed flat on top of that.

Marcus closed the van door without ceremony, vanishing the triangular yellow sunlight and muting the street sounds. The walls glowed dimly, reporting the daylight outside and causing each saint to stand in his own shadow. One saint held a stone book and another a stone cross. One proffered an out-raised arm but the hand had broken off long ago. The stump (the cleanest part of all the statues) glowed luminous in the darkness.

The priest had gone back into the church to make whatever necessary final arrangements there were (probably to contemplate the empty space). Marcus smoked two cigarettes, leaning against the van in the sunshine. At four-ten all was ready. Marcus indicated and the van pulled into the southbound lane of traffic. Slowly, they followed traffic out the city.

They stopped outside Brussels for fuel. Marcus bought chewing gum, orange juice and cigarettes, and the priest bought a chocolate bar he didn't feel like eating as soon as he returned to the van. They travelled quietly, occasionally testing small English words on the scenery or feigning a disapproval of other drivers they couldn't really commit to. At dusk and without comment, Marcus flicked on the radio and the priest relaxed, no longer responsible for the silence. Song after song played. Periodically, the news in French repeated itself and then songs began repeating too. At two in the morning they stopped and ate brightly lit sausage, gravy and mashed potatoes in a spacious roadside restaurant. The priest shivered.

Back on the road, Marcus searched through the radio station, finding German voices. At first, the priest listened attentively to the shapes of the words: hoping to share one the fleeting smiles or head shakes that Marcus supplemented with a word of summery (which didn't clarify anything enough to respond to). Voices complained. Some were eloquent and some were rapid and angry. One woman sounded low and melancholic and the presenter cut her off mid-sentence: quite tenderly, Marcus mimed a drinking gesture.

The priest realised he was staring at the radio and chose to stare at the distance ahead. He had never listened to late-night talk-radio. He tried to imagine this community awake and isolated by the sleep surrounding them. His mind explored reasons Marcus might have for calling the show.

With wide, dry eyes, the priest stared at the road, unforgetting of his passive cargo (which was, since leaving the border, his no longer). The road rhythmically disappearing under the bonnet was road also passing under stone feet. The space between those feet and the tarmac felt more tangible than the cinematically lit road ahead. His sense of failure gnawed at him, and he nurtured it, sheltered by the murmuring radio.

A new voice and Marcus inhaled though his teeth impatiently. He explained in small words and gestures punctuated by jabbing his finger at the radio that a prisoner had written a letter to the show. Prisoners often listened, but were unable to phone so they wrote passionate responses to week-old debates, starting them all over again. The priest listened to the words forming and bleeding out from the radio into the night. He couldn't even pretend to be annoyed. How could he? He understood perfectly.