**From the Amen Corner**

**December 24, 2017**

I tend to see what others don’t. Take my word for it. Since I was a kid, really since I have been old enough to remember, I see things.

It’s not creepy, if you’re thinking that. These other things I see are just part of what’s there. You don’t get too excited about noticing elm trees as the limbs hang down after an ice storm, or spotting a dust devil in a plowed field during summer. So I don’t get all that excited when I see old granny Gooch who lived down the block and died on the 24th last, as she wanders down the block. And besides, it’s not like she’s there all of the time, usually just on Thursdays, and she doesn’t much seem to be interested in the rest of us. To tell you the truth, she seems to be looking for something she hasn’t quite found yet. But she’s there, just as regular as my old girlfriend’s mother, who also shows up, but on most days only at three. There they are. What can a guy say about them?

And I’m not all that free to talk about what I see. I found out a long time ago not to say much about my regular visitors, or even the strange ones. Most people are not really that curious about what you see that they don’t. And if they are, they treat it as something exotic and weird, not as just the particular ability I have. But as far as I can tell, you either see these things or you don’t. What can I do about it? Nothing I know of.

Now, the people I see are not all that easy to communicate with, if that’s what you might be thinking. I’m not some sort of medium, most of them are frauds by the way, nor am I deep into the sin of necromancy; I don’t call up the dead, or even call out to them. It wouldn’t do any good, they’re dead you know; they stay on their side of things and I stay on mine. But that’s the rub; they don’t say much. Sometimes it looks like granny wants to tell me something but she seems wise enough not to try to talk. She just looks, and points. I’m left figuring out what she means. Frank told me one time, that made her about as useful as a hound dog out hunting, but I think Frank doesn’t much believe in what I see anyway. It’s OK; you see what you see.

But from time to time I get into jams. Seeing the dead makes life complicated, first because there are many of them and, second, because they can be so persistent; they don’t have much else to do. What am I going to say: ‘Hey, go get a life’? But I’ve begun to think they’re a part of what I’m supposed to be doing with myself. It was said Mozart could hear a whole symphony in his head; to compose all he had to do was write down what he was hearing. He never had to worry about the individual parts or the harmonies and arrangements. If he hadn’t written music, what would the gift have been for? If I see so many things, what else should I do except pay attention? It’s just that, silent company is sometimes not as good as even no company would be. There’s not a lot you can do with a silent, distracted companion. They are steady though.

Which is why this holiday was shaping up to be something a little tougher than most. Beginning about the first of December one of the neighbors had begun to accompany me. This was Tim; he had lived down the street from me when I was growing up. There had always been something sad about Timmy as a kid; his mom and dad were nervous around everyone and seemed to be nervous around him too. I never much went around their house although they were just four down from us. Timmy wasn’t one of the kids I hung around with although he was part of the swarm of us when the neighborhood was together.

You know how it is; you have those whom you knew as part of your environment, even if they weren’t really friends. He was one of those guys. And when we were in high school we kind of went our separate ways, as much as you could in a small school where you mostly shared teachers and classes. After graduation Tim floated around at college a bit and then in and out of a marriage or two. Just a year or so ago I read in the papers he had been found in his pickup; they suspected an overdose. Now it was past the middle of December and Tim had been hanging around for a while. Maybe he wanted to relive the old days. As much as I could see, he had inherited the nervous look from his parents; he seemed to be nervous even around me.

I work as a janitor at the church. It is the perfect job. I mop the hallways and set up the chairs and tables five days a week. It isn’t strenuous and most of the time there are those who are good for conversation; live conversation I might add. What it gives me is a chance to observe. That’s because janitors are mostly invisible. We sweep and vacuum and move about but no one really notices; we blend into the fixtures of the classrooms and tables and coat-racks. In fact, people will often carry on their conversations with one another as if I’m not there; as if they don’t see me at all. I wonder if they could communicate better with me if I just pointed?

But it was my invisibility that caused the concerns I had about Christmas this year. I was setting up the parish hall for the Christmas Program for the grade school and I spotted Tim in the corner near two of the moms who were talking. He looked up at me with a kind of grimace and motioned for me to come over to where he was as these two moms were deep into their parlay. So I made my way over, straightening chairs in the rows as my made my stealthy way over to them.

That’s when I heard: “And Father doesn’t seem to care about it at all. I’m sure he’s known she’s been so mad at him she won’t even greet him anymore but as far as I can tell, he’s not willing to say he’s sorry. Until he does, things aren’t going to get any better around here.”

The other mom said: “It’s sad, really. He started off so well with the school parents and now we all feel like we’re left out of everything. If he’d only just come down from his tower and be there for us, things would be better.”

You might think this was about as exciting as watching concrete set up. And I suppose it might be, to the uninformed. What could be more boring, and more expected, than the small irritations that mark parish life? But this simple exchange signaled something much larger, it was a tremor before an earthquake. It could have set off the warning bells, if you had one of those machines reading the seismic waves. Mere words have the power to point; these were pointing down.

In the things I see, I have a sense of the world not available to others. When there is anger and accusation haunting a place, I can see it; it’s a brown haze. And when there’s plotting and revenge, don’t laugh, I see purple. It’s not like people’s faces turn colors, it’s that there’s a kind of tinge to things. But the most intriguing color to see is a kind of turquoise; that’s when real evil is among us. And I was seeing more turquoise that day than at a convention of Santa Fe realtors. Evil was afoot; it seemed to hang in the air in the parish hall.

I had a sense the pastor knew about what they were talking about. Priests are not usually endowed with extraordinary spiritual perceptions. Most of them spend their full time working to solve problems and keep the parish on the right track. Sleuthing out the workings of evil in the world is not usually the first item on their job description. But even the dullest pastor has an antenna for the powers of disorder. It doesn’t take long before the tinge of disagreement and discord begins to touch everything; and that was happening in the parish. I was pretty sure Fr. Barkey knew something was going on.

You know, in the gospels at least a third of the miracles stories record Jesus driving demons out of those who were possessed. This is very much out of style in our day and age because we figure we’re so much more sophisticated and clever than the yokels who walked around Palestine in the First Century. But evil was a problem among the people of his time; I don’t know why we can’t imagine it is a problem in our time.

I made a pantomime of adjusting a few more chairs when the pastor came in and the conversation stopped. He saw the moms and me and walked over to talk to us.

“Ladies,” he said. “I’m glad I caught you here. Do either of you know where the crib set we put in front of the altar is? Have you seen it?”

“I haven’t looked since we put it in the old closet in the bus barn last year” one of the moms said.

Fr. said: “Well normally the president of the altar society has a committee to set things up. I haven’t heard what they’re up to yet. I wonder if they’ve gotten out there to look at it and clean it off. We’re getting close enough to Christmas we have to be sure we have time to get everything arranged. If you have a minute, we can go and get it out of the closet and take a look at it. If there’s anything we need to fix, we’ll at least know what we need to do.”

Tim was cast down, shaking his head. He grimaced as he looked at me. They weren’t going to like what they saw.

“I’ll go with you,” I said. “I’m all done here.”

No one turns down the janitor’s help, so our little posse made it out across the parking lot to the barn. We opened the main doors and went to the back where the closets were. I got the key out to open the door. That’s when I noticed the lock; it had been drilled out so that even the latch didn’t catch and the door was ajar. Tim was looking away. I opened the door and saw someone had gotten there ahead of us. The boxes were open and the manger scene had been taken out.

Whoever it was had not been content with his hammer. The statues were painted plaster and were in pretty good shape for their age. But whoever had taken an interest in them had decided to have a good time with them: the faces were bashed in. But whoever had done it hadn’t just broken the plaster; he had hit the eyes on each statue so they were just holes. And where the genitalia would have been, the ball peen had been directed there. It was careful destruction, not just a random act of meanness. And after the hammer, the holes had been sprayed with red paint.

Actually, it was done artfully enough for the paint to run down like teardrops, or as if it were blood running from the ‘wound.’ It was gross, and thorough. Every statue had been broken. The statue of the Bambino Jesu had a pocket knife run through the eyes, the blade lodged in the right eye after the left had been holed. It looked like some serious anger there. Whoever had been there had left his mark. Tim was shaking his head. Even the dead have their standards.

I didn’t see much color. But I think I did detect bit of brown haze breaking over Fr. Barkey’s head.

“Who would have done that? It’s a lot of energy poured out for a menagerie of chipped, old statues. Whatever he wanted to do, there’s some serious anger going on here.” I could be wrong: Fr. seemed more perplexed than annoyed.

“Well I guess we’ll have to rethink what we put at the altar this year,” Fr. said. Let’s see about getting this mess cleaned up.

That was my cue. “I’ll get the shovel and the wheelbarrow and put the pieces in the dumpster” I said.

The moms were nonplussed. Honestly, I couldn’t read them very well. They tsked, tsked together when they saw what had happened but I didn’t hear them say anything else. I got busy with the closet and had just about made my first trip to the trash when Tim came out of the parish hall and waved for me to come back in. I ambled back through the side door. The moms were each on the phone; Tim was standing between them. I grabbed the mop I had left leaning against the stage and made my way over to them. They had a lot to say.

“I know he’s always hated those statues. I noticed more than anything else that he didn’t seem to be too surprised. It makes you wonder.”

The first mom was intent as she talked. Curious conversation. The other was turned slightly away as she talked, they could still make eye contact but were having separate conversations.

“I know; it’s easy to see how suspicious it all is. I wouldn’t be surprised . . .”

She stopped as she looked around and saw me with my mop. She turned and made her way to the door of the hall. The other walked toward the door as well, partners, in movement if not in speech.

“So Tim, what does all this mean?” I asked.

I don’t usually talk so much to my companions; they don’t talk back and their gestures aren’t that helpful to me. I really didn’t have much more to do in the hall so I went back out and finished cleaning up the statues; it took about an hour more.

When I got back it was time to start on the hallway in front of the church so I gathered up the mop and went there. That’s when I saw the haze again: it was definitely turquoise this time. A church is a sacred space, set off from the world for prayer and sacrifice. But it can just as easily gather evil around it as it can spread graces from it. Evil lies in the hearts of those who give themselves to it; evil could just as easily be at the open doorway as any other place. I wondered what would happen.

I found out the next day. Since we were getting on toward Christmas we really did have to decide what kind of decorations we were going to put at the altar. Most years we had the usual things but each year had its own variation so it was always more than simply putting up the same old stuff. And as I got to the church in the morning Tim smiled at me and cocked his head to just inside the door. I could hear the conversation.

“Can you believe it? He said we should just put a cardboard box at the altar and fill it with straw; that would be the manger. Oh my God, what will visitors say when they come to midnight?” That was the president of the altar society talking to someone on the Christmas Committee.

“And he said, ‘just prop two signs next to it that say ‘will work for food’ and then put an empty dog food bag on the other side.’ That’s supposed to do for Mary, Joseph and the animals. I can’t believe it. I hate it. It’s just a plot you know. We all know.”

You don’t need ESP to know the acrid taste of resentment in the air.

And that’s where Tim proved to be the perfect companion. He was rolling this eyes and acting like he was throwing up as he stood just on the other side of the door from the conversation when he suddenly looked up and pointed. I looked over to where he was and saw Fr. Barkey coming up toward the entrance. That’s when I pushed my mop right up to where they were standing so they’d look up and notice the pastor was just about there. Priests have enough to deal with at Christmas without unpacking the pathology of accusation and invention.

“Morning ladies,” he said in his breezy voice.

“Oh father, are you really serious about what you want for Christmas?”

“You don’t like it?” he asked in a kind of faux surprise.

“Short of using the tiny statues I have for my manger scene in the house, I’m not sure we have an alternative. What would you like to do?”

There’s nothing like good sense to enrage an argument gone off the rails.

“I think you love to make us uncomfortable. You take every chance you can get to make things hard here. I don’t know why I even try anymore, every year it seems to be more and more difficult to just hang in here. You’re so, so, mean! We just want a nice Christmas to come to. That’s all.”

Fr. Barkey smiled. He’s a thoughtful one and doesn’t seem put off by other’s anger. I like that about him. Tim was nodding his head; he liked him too.

“Oh, you don’t have to do those things I suggested, if it’s going to be unbearable for you. We just have to figure out a way to make Christmas the time we find Christ come into the world. I’m afraid we may have forgotten the first message of Jesus: God is content with discomfort as long as we know it’s where He first finds us.”

“But honestly, Father, a manger scene that looks like a nest for the homeless? You don’t really think anyone will think of the Christ child there, do you?” She wasn’t giving up easily.

Fr. said: “No, probably not. But I imagine we may have seen Christ a time or two as we pull up to the intersections where they stand. No reason not to remind everyone he may have already come and we’ve missed him, again. I think we might remember: seeing isn’t easy when the whole world looks like . . . turquoise.”

Then he walked away.

Tim was almost bowled over. He laughed at me and then pointed at Fr. I couldn’t hear the laughter but I did see the haze lift. Seeing really is believing.

You see, Christmas is all about seeing. It’s not just about gifts and trees and mangers; it’s about God finding us, and we’re all strange enough to hide just when God comes for us. It takes something to get us to see: God is looking for us, not stalking us.

And so evil departed. It wasn’t horror and murder, shootings or screaming, just the ordinary teeth-grinding we often get used to until we just don’t notice any more. But it is evil enough to build and grow until it turns into something awful. But not this Christmas and not right here. Here, it’s Bethlehem. At least that’s what I think Tim said.