

The Good Thief

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*If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make
a better mousetrap than his neighbor, though he build his house
in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

PART 1

CHAPTER ONE

THE MAN ARRIVED after morning prayers. Word spread quickly that someone had come, and the boys of Saint Anthony's Orphanage elbowed each other and strained to catch a glimpse as he unhitched his horse and led it to the trough for drinking. The man's face was hard to make out, his hat pulled so far down that the brim nearly touched his nose. He tied the reins to a post and then stood there, patting the horse's neck as it drank. The man waited, and the boys watched, and when the mare finally lifted her head, they saw the man lean forward, stroke the animal's nose, and kiss her. Then he wiped his lips with the back of his hand, removed his hat, and made his way across the yard to the monastery.

Men often came for children. Sometimes it was for cheap labor, sometimes for a sense of doing good. The brothers of Saint Anthony's would stand the orphans in a line, and the men would walk back and forth, inspecting. It was easy to tell what they were looking for by where their eyes went. Usually it was to boys almost fourteen, the taller ones, the loudest, the strongest. Then their eyes went down to the barely crawling, the stumbling two year olds – still untainted and fresh. This left the

in-betweens – those who had lost their baby fat and curls but were not yet old enough to be helpful. These children were usually ill-tempered, and had little to offer but empty stomachs and a bad case of lice. Ren was one of them.

He had no memory of a beginning – of a mother or father, sister or brother. His life was simply there, at Saint Anthony's, and what he remembered began in the middle of things – the smell of boiled sheets and lye; the taste of watery oatmeal; the feel of dropping a brick onto a piece of stone, watching the red pieces split off, then using those broken shards to write on the wall of the monastery, and being slapped for this, and being forced to wash the dust away with a cold, wet rag.

Ren's name had been sewn into the collar of his nightshirt: three letters embroidered in dark blue thread. The cloth was made of good linen, and he had worn it until he was nearly two. After that it was taken away and given to a smaller child to wear. Ren learned to keep an eye on Edward, then James, then Nicholas – and corner them in the yard. He would pin the squirming child to the ground and examine the fading letters closely, wondering what kind of hand had worked them. The R and E were sewn boldly in a cross-stitch, but the N was thinner, slanting to the right, as if the person working the thread had rushed to complete the job. When the shirt wore thin, it was cut into bandages. Brother Joseph gave Ren the piece of collar with the letters, and the boy kept it underneath his pillow at night.

Ren watched now as the visitor waited on the steps of the priory. The man passed his hat back and forth in his hands, leaving damp marks along the felt. The door opened and he stepped inside. A few minutes later Brother Joseph came to gather the children, and said, 'Get to the statue.'

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The statue of Saint Anthony sat in the center of the yard. It was carved from marble, dressed in the robes of the Franciscan friars. The dome of Saint Anthony's head was bald, with a halo circling his brow. In one hand he held a lily and in the other a small child wearing a crown. The child was holding out one palm in supplication and using the other to touch the saint's cheek. There were times, when the sun receded in the afternoon and shadows played across the stone, that the touch looked more like a slap. This child was Jesus Christ, and the pairing was proof of Saint Anthony's ability to carry messages to God. When a loaf of bread went missing from the kitchen, or Father John couldn't find the keys to the chapel, the children were sent to the statue. *Saint Anthony, Saint Anthony, come bring what I've lost back to me.*

Catholics were rare in this part of New England. A local Irishman who'd made a fortune pressing cheap grapes into strong port had left his vineyard to the church in a desperate bid for heaven before he died. The brothers of Saint Anthony were sent to claim the land and build the monastery. They found themselves surrounded by Protestants, who, in the first month of their arrival, burned down the barn, fouled the well, and caught two brothers after dark on the road and sent them home tarred and feathered.

After praying for guidance, the brothers turned to the Irishman's wine press, which was still intact and on the grounds. Plants were sent from Italy, and after some trial and error the brothers matched the right vine with their stony New England soil. Before long Saint Anthony's became well-known for their particular vintage, which they aged in old wooden casks and used for their morning and evening masses. The unconsecrated wine was sold to the local taverns and also to individual land

owners, who sent their servants to collect the bottles in the night so that their neighbors would not see them doing business with Catholics.

Soon after this the first child was left. Brother Joseph heard cries one morning before sunrise and opened the door to find a baby wrapped in a soiled dress. The second child was left in a bucket near the well. The third in a basket by the outhouse. Girls were collected every few months by the Sisters of Charity, who worked in a hospital some distance away. What happened to them, no one knew, but the boys were left at Saint Anthony's, and before long the monastery had turned into a de facto orphanage for the bastard children of the local townspeople, who still occasionally tried to burn the place to the ground.

To control these attempts at arson, the brothers built a high brick wall around the property, which sloped and towered like a fortress along the road. At the bottom of the wooden gate that served as the entrance they cut a small swinging door, and it was through this tiny opening that the babies were pushed. Ren was told that he, too, had been pushed through this gate and found the following morning, covered in mud in the prior's garden. It had rained the night before, and although Ren had no memory of the storm, he often wondered why he had been left in bad weather. It always led to the same conclusion: that whoever had brought him there could not wait to be rid of him.

The gate was hinged to open one way – in. When Ren pushed at the tiny door with his finger, he could feel the strength of the wooden frame behind it. There was no handle on the children's side, no groove to lift from underneath. The wood was heavy, thick, and old – a fine piece of oak planed years before from the woods beyond the orphanage. Ren liked to

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imagine he felt a pressure in return, a mother reaching back through, changing her mind, groping wildly, a thin white arm.

Underneath Saint Anthony's statue the younger boys fidgeted and pushed, the older ones cleared their throats nervously. Brother Joseph walked down the line and straightened their clothes, or spit on his hand and scrubbed their faces, bumping his large stomach into the children who had fallen out of place. He pushed it now toward a six-year-old who had suddenly sprung a bloody nose from the excitement.

'Hide it quick,' he said, shielding the boy with his body. Across the yard Father John was solemnly approaching, and behind him was the man who had kissed the horse.

He was a farmer. Perhaps forty years old. His shoulders were strong, his fingers thick with calluses, his skin the color of rawhide from the sun. There was a rash of brown spots across his forehead and the backs of his hands. His face was not unkind, and his coat was clean, his shirt pressed white, his collar tight against his neck. A woman had dressed him. So there would be a wife. A mother.

The man began to make his way down the line. He paused before two blond boys, Brom and Ichy. They were also in-betweens, twins left five winters after Ren. Brom's neck was thicker, by about two inches, and Ichy's feet were longer, by about two inches, but beyond those distinguishing characteristics it was hard to tell the boys apart when they were standing still. It was only when they were out in the fields working, or throwing stones at a pine tree, or washing their faces in the morning that the differences became clear. Brom would splash a handful of water over his head and be done with it. Ichy would

fold a handkerchief into fourths, dab it into the basin, then set to work carefully and slowly behind his ears.

It was said that no one would adopt Brom and Ichy because they were twins. One was sure to be unlucky. Second-borns were usually considered changelings and drowned right after birth. But no one knew who came first, Brom or Ichy, so there was no way to tell where the bad luck was coming from. What the brothers needed to do was separate, make themselves look as different as possible. Ren kept this information to himself. They were his only friends, and he did not want to lose them.

Standing together now the twins grinned at the farmer, and then, suddenly, Brom threw his arms around his brother and attempted to lift him off the ground. He had done this once before, as a show of strength in front of two elderly gentlemen, and it had ended badly. Ren watched from the other end of the line as Ichy, taken by surprise, began to recite his multiplication tables, all the while struggling violently against his brother, to the point that one of his boots flew into the air and sailed past the farmer's ear.

Father John kept a small switch up the sleeve of his robe, and he put it to work now on the twins, while Brother Joseph fetched Ichy's boot and the farmer continued down the line. Ren put his arms behind his back and stood at attention. He held his breath as the man stopped in front of him.

'How old are you?'

Ren opened his mouth to answer, but the man spoke for him.

'You look about twelve.'

Ren wanted to say that he could be any age, that he could make himself into anything the man wanted, but instead he

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followed what he had been taught by the brothers, and said nothing.

‘I want a boy,’ said the farmer. ‘Old enough to help me work and young enough for my wife to feel she has a child. Someone who’s honest and willing to learn. Someone who can be a son to us.’ He leaned forward and lowered his voice so that only Ren could hear him. ‘Do you think you could do that?’

Father John came up behind them. ‘You don’t want that one.’

The farmer stepped back. He looked confused, then angry at being interrupted. ‘Why not?’

Father John pointed to Ren’s arm. ‘Show him.’

Now the other children leaned forward. The priest and the farmer stood waiting. Ren did not move, as if somehow he could wait this moment out until it transformed into something else. He stared past the farmer at a maple tree just beyond the stone wall, its fall leaves beginning to turn. Soon those leaves would be a different color, and then the wind would come, and the tree would look like something else completely. Father John’s hand disappeared into the sleeve of his robe, and then the switch came down, leaving a thin red line that smarted enough to make the boy give up his secret.

He was missing a hand. Ren’s left arm simply ended, a piece of skin pulled neatly over the bone and sewn crookedly in the shape of a V – the scar tissue raised but healed. The skin was white in places, the stitching like the legs of a centipede, fanned out, frozen and fossilized.

Somewhere between his entry into the world and his delivery through the door of Saint Anthony’s, Ren had lost it. He wondered where the hand was now. He closed his eyes and saw it clearly, palm open, the fingers slightly curled. He imagined

it behind a dustbin, inside a wooden box, hidden in the grasses of a field. He did not consider size. He did not think that it would no longer fit him. Ren simply looked at his right hand and thought about its match waiting patiently somewhere in the world for him to retrieve it.

The farmer tried not to react, but Ren could see the disgust hidden in his face as he turned away and moved down the line. When he chose a boy from the other end, named William, with red hair and a bad habit of chewing his fingers, the man acted as though it was the only decision he'd made.

Ren watched as the farmer lifted his new son into the wagon. The man patted William on the head, then turned and counted out some money and handed it to Father John, who quickly slipped it into the sleeve of his robe. The farmer climbed up onto the driver's seat and made ready to leave, but at the last moment lowered the reins and glanced back at the statue of Saint Anthony.

'What happens to the ones no one takes?'

'They are conscripted,' said Father John, 'into the army.'

'Not an easy life.'

'It's the will of God,' said Father John. 'We do not question His ways.'

The farmer looked down at the priest, then at his new son, nervously biting the skin on his thumb. He released the brake on the wagon. 'I do,' he said, and then called to his horse and started off down the road.

CHAPTER TWO

IN THE BARN Brother Joseph poured himself a mug of wine and settled into his seat. Underneath his robe was a foot warmer – a small tin box full of coals from the kitchen fireplace. He put one sandal on it and then the other as he supervised the children working. Occasionally he would fall asleep and his robe would catch on fire. Somehow he always woke in time to douse the flames with his sampling cup.

Around him the boys de-stemmed, pressed and strained the grapes. It was fall, and the harvest was nearly over. Brother Joseph supervised as they added the sugar and yeast to the collected juice, covered the pails with cheesecloth and set them aside. Later they would skim off the sediment, pour the liquid into the wooden casks, add a bit of finished wine and leave the batch to ferment. The final step was to siphon the wine into bottles and cork them. Three months later it would be ready to drink.

Brother Joseph did not excuse Ren from any of this work, but he did find ways to help him. He tied a basket to Ren's waist when the boy was picking in the fields; he showed Ren how to steady the skimmer using the crook of his arm; he placed the

funnel between Ren's fingers and the empty stub of the boy's wrist. Sometimes it took Ren twice as long as the other boys to accomplish the tasks, but Brother Joseph offered small words to encourage him, and this usually gave Ren the heart to finish.

Now the monk peered into his mug and inspected the dark residue collecting at the bottom. Then he looked at the children, going about in the silent way they always did after one of their group had been chosen, their faces somber and resentful. Brother Joseph set his cup on the floor and pushed the foot warmer aside. 'I think we should all say a prayer for William,' he said.

'He doesn't need one,' said Ichy.

'We all need prayers,' said Brother Joseph. 'Especially when something good happens to us.' He sighed. 'Bad luck follows anything that's good. And bad things always happen in threes.'

The boys contemplated this as they continued with their work. And more than a few were secretly glad.

'What kind of bad luck do you think William will get?' Ichy asked.

'That's hard to say,' said Brother Joseph. 'It could be anything.'

'I'll bet they get robbed on the way home,' said Ichy.

'And when they get there,' said Brom, 'their house is on fire.'

The other boys joined in, each with his own vision of bad luck for William and his new father. They were caught in swarms of bees and chased by packs of wolves. They were given the gout, the chickenpox, the plague.

'That's enough!' said Brother Joseph. 'It's only supposed to happen three times.' But the boys kept at it, imagining worse things, giddy with their own meanness.

Ren tried to think of his own bad fate for William, but he

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could not get past the image of the farmer lifting the boy into the cart. He wondered if William would write, once he was settled. Some of the boys who were adopted sent letters, detailing their new lives, the warm beds and clean clothes and special meals their mothers prepared for them. These letters were cherished and passed from boy to boy until the pages were torn and the ink had faded.

Ren pictured the supper waiting for William at home. The farmer's wife would have taken out the good plates, if they had good plates. Yes, Ren decided, they would have good plates. Plates of white porcelain. And there would be a small bowl of wildflowers, picked from behind the kitchen door, pink and blue with tiny yellow buttercups. There would be bread, still warm, sliced and covered with a napkin in a basket. There would be stew of some kind, hot and full of meat that had been rubbed with herbs, tender and soft to chew. And a mountain of potatoes. And corn scraped from the cob. And glasses of fresh milk. And cooling on a windowsill, just behind the farmer's wife, who was standing in the door frame now looking for her husband's wagon, would be a blackberry pie. Just for the three of them.

She would not have minded his hand. She would not have minded at all.

Ren sat on the floor of the distillery and sorted grapes, pulling leaves and bits of vine from the flesh, tossing the damaged and unripe fruit to the side. There were always spiders in the baskets from the fields, and clouds of gnats, and sometimes thin black snakes. Ren's fingers were stained with red. It would be days before the color faded from his skin.

When he was through, he dumped the grapes over the top

of the wine press, an enormous contraption that held court in the center of the barn. The children huddled by the chutes at the bottom, holding buckets, collecting the juice, while others pushed the crank, which was set in the middle of the press like a windmill on its side. It was heavy work. The oldest boys were assigned to the crank, one on each arm, walking in circles. In another year, Ren would be one of them.

Only a few boys had grown old enough and been passed over enough at Saint Anthony's to be sent into the army. One was named Frederick, a stout child who had trouble breathing and would often faint, crumpling to the floor with barely a sound. The soldiers came in the night and took him. From the window of the small boys' room, Ren had seen the men drag Frederick across the yard and through the wooden gate, his body limp, his feet bouncing off the cobblestones. He was not heard from again.

Another was named Sebastian, a boy remarkably pale and thin. Six months after he'd left with the soldiers he appeared at the gate of the orphanage, and he was so changed that the children did not recognize him. His face was haggard, and both eyes had been blackened. His lip was split in two and his leg appeared to be broken. Sebastian pushed open the little wooden door in the gate, the same one he had been passed through as a child, and begged the brothers to take him back. Father John approached, murmured a prayer, and threw the extra bolt. The boy stayed out there for three days, crying first, then pleading, then shouting, then praying, then cursing, until he fell silent, and a wagon came, driven by three soldiers, and they put Sebastian in the back of it and carried him away.

It was rumored that Father John accepted payment from the soldiers, and also signed a contract of some kind, giving over

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ownership of the boys. A day did not go by that Ren did not think of this, and whenever he did, the scar on his arm began to itch. Every time he was passed over in the line of children, every time he watched another boy taken, and every year he grew older, it itched more.

To make up for this, Ren stole things. It began with small items of food. He'd stand in front of the cook after cleaning out the fireplace, and the man would glance at the boy's scar, and then turn and study a pile of cabbages while shouting for someone to wash the beans, and it was just enough time for Ren to slip one of the pieces of bread left out on the counter into his pocket.

He never took anything that couldn't be easily hidden away. He stole socks and shoelaces, combs and prayer cards, buttons, keys, and crucifixes. Whatever crossed his path. Sometimes he would keep the items, sometimes he would return them, sometimes he would toss them down the well. In this way Ren was responsible for most of the lost things being prayed for at the statue of Saint Anthony.

The items he kept were stashed inside a small crack about a foot from the edge of the well. Leaning over the stone wall, Ren could fit his hand inside the hiding place, his breath echoing back to him from the water far below. There was a broken piece of blue and white pottery, a snake skin he'd found in the woods, a set of rosary beads he'd stolen from Father John, made from real roses, and, most important of all, his rocks.

Every boy at Saint Anthony's collected rocks. They hoarded stones as if they were precious objects, as if the accumulation of feldspar and shale would pave their way to a new life. If they dug in the right places, they found rarer things – pieces of quartz, or

mica, or arrowheads. These stones were kept and traded and loved, and sometimes, when the children were adopted, they were left behind.

That afternoon, when Brother Joseph had fallen asleep, William's rocks were spread out across the floor of the barn, and the boys began to argue over how to divide them. There were perhaps thirty or forty pieces. Rocks that gleamed like metal, or had brown and black stripes, or reds and oranges the color of the sunset. But the best of the collection was a wishing stone, a soft gray rock with an unbroken circling band of white. Good for one wish to come true.

Ren had seen only one before – it had belonged to Sebastian. He'd shown it to Ren once, but he wouldn't let anyone hold it. He was afraid of losing the wish. He was saving it, he said, for a time when he was in trouble, and he'd taken it with him when he left for the army. Later, outside the brick wall that surrounded the orphanage, his lips cracked from the sun, Sebastian told Ren through the swinging door in the gate that someone had stolen the wishing stone while he slept. 'I shouldn't have held on to it,' he wept. 'I should have used it as soon as it came into my hands.'

The rafters of the barn caught the boys' voices and sent them back, louder and more forceful as they bargained over William's collection. A few had already noticed the wishing stone. Once the rocks were divided, Ren was sure to lose his chance. He edged closer to where it lay on the ground, rolling up his sleeve as he went. Then he pretended that someone had shoved him from behind, and threw his body into the center of the group, scrambling on the floor, the stub of his left arm covering his right. The group elbowed him to the side.

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‘Shove off.’

‘Leper.’

‘Get out of the way.’

Ren moved to the back of the room as the boys continued to argue, the stone safe in his fingers. He opened his palm and glanced down. The wishing stone was the color of rain. The edges smooth. He felt the indentation where the ring of white began and thought of all the things he was going to ask for.

Brom and Ichy whispered to each other, then left the group and followed Ren. They knew he had taken something. They were his friends but they wanted their share.

‘What’s that in your hand?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Give it here.’

The rest of the children began to notice. First Edward, with his runny nose, then Luke and Marcus. Ren knew he had only a moment before they would all be upon him. He punched Brom, the weight of his friend’s chin hard against his knuckles. Then he ducked under Ichy’s arm and burst out of the barn, running as fast as he could to the well, hoping he could reach it in time to hide the stone, praying all the while that the boys wouldn’t come after him. But they did – they were close behind, Brom in the lead and nearly grabbing Ren’s shoulder, and then he did, and they both fell to the ground.

Ichy sat on Ren’s chest and Brom twisted his arm until his fingers opened. Ren tried to kick them off, biting and scratching, but he knew in his heart that he was going to lose, and he felt the stone slip out of his hand. The boys left him panting in the dirt and clustered around what they had taken.

‘I want to wish for an arrowhead,’ said Ichy.

‘That’s not good enough,’ said Brom.

‘For candy then.’

‘For Father John to break his neck.’

‘For toys!’

‘To get picked from the line.’

‘For a hundred wishes instead of one.’

Ren listened to his friends. He had never hated anyone more. He thrust himself forward and snatched the stone back. If he couldn’t use the wish, then no one would. The twins grabbed hold of his shirt and he pulled desperately away, the hate inside giving him strength, more than he’d ever had before, and he leaned over and threw the rock down into the well. There was no sound as it descended, just the echo of Ren’s own breathing in the dark, and then the smallest splash that told him it had hit water.