

## The Good Reverend

By Timothy Braun

I met the Good Reverend in the fall of 1999 at the Columbia University's School of the Arts. We were graduate students with little to lose. I was a drunk from the desert, attending school to study words and women. He was a drunk from Atlanta, coming to the Big Apple to be a famous actor. We drank to "take away the blues." He would tell jokes about oversexed vultures and chickens crossing roads. I would tell him my favorite words. Chrysanthemum. Auspicious. The prettiest words I know. Our nights of drinking would usually end with me gabbing to a bartender about a band I liked, while a girl would write her phone number on the Good Reverend's forearm. It was all fun and innocent.

The Good Reverend is tall and easy on the eyes, often mistaken for George Clooney or Brad Pitt, depending on who is doing the mistaking. He has a wardrobe constructed of free bar t-shirts won at happy hours across America: "The Gin Mill," "Le Bar Bat," "The Slaughtered Lamb." The Good Reverend smokes Camels, reads Faulkner, and once owned a ferret we called Gus. He can recite any line from *As I Lay Dying*, and can belch "Sweet Home Alabama" with enough Budweiser. He became a "reverend" through an ad in the back

of a pornographic magazine, which he's used to marry several of our amigos. And, just like his favorite Faulkner characters, he has stories. A story about the time he was tossed in jail for stealing a Mexican puppet. A story about smuggling Gus across the California border. A story about hitching through Stockholm in a fur coat. His stories were like Faulkner's: broad and rambling and almost bizarre if anyone else told them. But unlike Faulkner, the hero to these stories, the Good Reverend himself, always came out on top.

Although the Good Reverend is a stage actor, he pays rent by selling tickets to off-Broadway musicals over the phone, or tending bar on Bleecker Street, or selling himself to lonely housewives on the Upper Westside in the back of the Village Voice. For \$50 dollars an hour, he'll trip to a woman's residence and dance topless to Chris Isaac songs, but give nothing else. He's never had intercourse with his clients no matter how much they beg. He told me of one lady who asked if he would take her to the Cloisters, as her husband neglected her. The Good Reverend told the woman he couldn't mix bliss with business and showed himself the door as she cried. Much of this would weigh on my friend, and nights of "taking away the blues" became ordinary after Columbia let us go in 2002.

On Halloween—I will say it was 2004 because my mind won't let me find the honest date—the Good Reverend was to meet me in SoHo at a squat theatre joint called HERE Arts Center, wedged between an alley and a brick-covered park. We would joke, "You can be HERE, but you are never there." I was a manager for this establishment, which, at the time, featured three stages, a café, an art gallery filled with fake dinosaur bones, and was the headquarters of the infamous Greenwich Village Halloween Parade. Every ghoul and goblin, Dorothy and Toto, Tom, Dick and Harry, and every Devil came for the parade. HERE would dish out puppets of all sizes, shapes, and flavors—penguins, bats, and skulls-on-a-stick—to whoever popped up. Most of the puppets grew legs and never came home. Halloween was always hot and crazy, and just a little bit creepy.

On this night The Good Reverend came as a Scottish rogue. We swapped shots of stolen gin I snuck from the café, and he snagged a Day of the Dead puppet for his amusement. Using the prop as an extension of himself, he flirted with girls, and taunted men. Most people took his jabs as jokes. He was dumb and silly, and just a little bit racist that Halloween. But most people are dumb and silly, and just a little bit racist, so the Good Reverend fit

right in. We joined the parade and stumbled towards MacDougall to catch Colin Quinn at the Olive Tree.

And then things went bad.

The Good Reverend was known for holding his booze. I'd seen him drink a gallon of rum and skateboard down the stairs of Columbia without a fault. But, when we got to the club he dropped to his knees, holding on to the "Dead" puppet for dear life. He was sloppy and stuttering and we were asked to leave as he mocked the owner with his puppet. My friend could no longer hold his liquor. He lost control. We were getting older.

I got us some Philly cheesesteaks from a 4<sup>th</sup> Street greasy spoon and told him we'd catch a movie about a haunted boat. We walked north to Washington Square Park, just south of a Cineplex, and sat on the curb to eat, but the Good Reverend wasn't hungry. He was restless. He pinballed away from me carrying the Dead puppet, and started a conversation with a group of young men. These men wore gold chains and fancy shoes, and weren't impressed by my friend or his puppet. The air shifted and things were going bad. I left the sandwiches on the curb. I don't know what was said between him and the young men and it didn't matter. The Good Reverend got punched to the ground.

The puppet lay wet in a rain puddle. My friend was looking at the night sky with a blank glare in his eyes. I thought he was dead. The young men ran for their lives as I called for the authorities. If I'd been younger, I would have thrown a punch back.

When an ambulance arrived, the paramedics asked the Good Reverend his location. "Chicago" he replied and recited his childhood address. We drove to St. Vincent's. The Good Reverend caused a scene. He yelled at an orderly, punched a door, and stormed from the ER. I found him on the side of the road, pacing back and fourth, mumbling. "Get back inside," I told him. He refused and mumbled his childhood address once again. "Get. Back. Inside." He refused. His brain was on the moon. And then he asked me what happened.

"A nigger hit you."

Everything stopped. He looked me in the face as if I were the Devil. He had heard many words come out of my mouth, but never that one.

"What did you say?"

"You heard me. Now get inside and have your goddamned head looked at."

And the innocence was gone. I knew one word could bring the Good Reverend back to earth. The ugliest word I

knew. A word he would not even say in his jokes, no matter how racist.

"John, a nigger hit you."

The Good Reverend slipped into the hospital and waited quietly for his turn to see the physician. We said nothing to each other. Later, his doctor asked me what happened as she looked in his eyes with a penlight. "I got hit" John said quickly, saving me. "Have you been drinking?" "Just enough to ask for your phone number" he replied. She smiled. I laughed. But I blame myself for getting him drunk. I blame myself for everything in this story.

We caught a cab and went to Ground Zero. His apartment was across the street, across from the giant hole in the ground, far from the stairs of Columbia. I helped John out of the car and tipped the cabby. And, as the Good Reverend lifted his head to the moon and lit a cigarette, I dropped to my knees and vomited. I threw-up my lunch and my sandwich and all the gin I stole from the café. And I threw-up my brains. All of my brains, and all of my words on that curb. I think of that night and The Good Reverend every Halloween.

We have never been back to the Halloween parade. And I never will. I've since moved to another state, far away from the Good Reverend, although he continues to figure in

many of the plays I write. I wonder what he does on  
Halloween to "take away the blues." I wonder how he tells  
this story.