

We Don't Just Fade Away

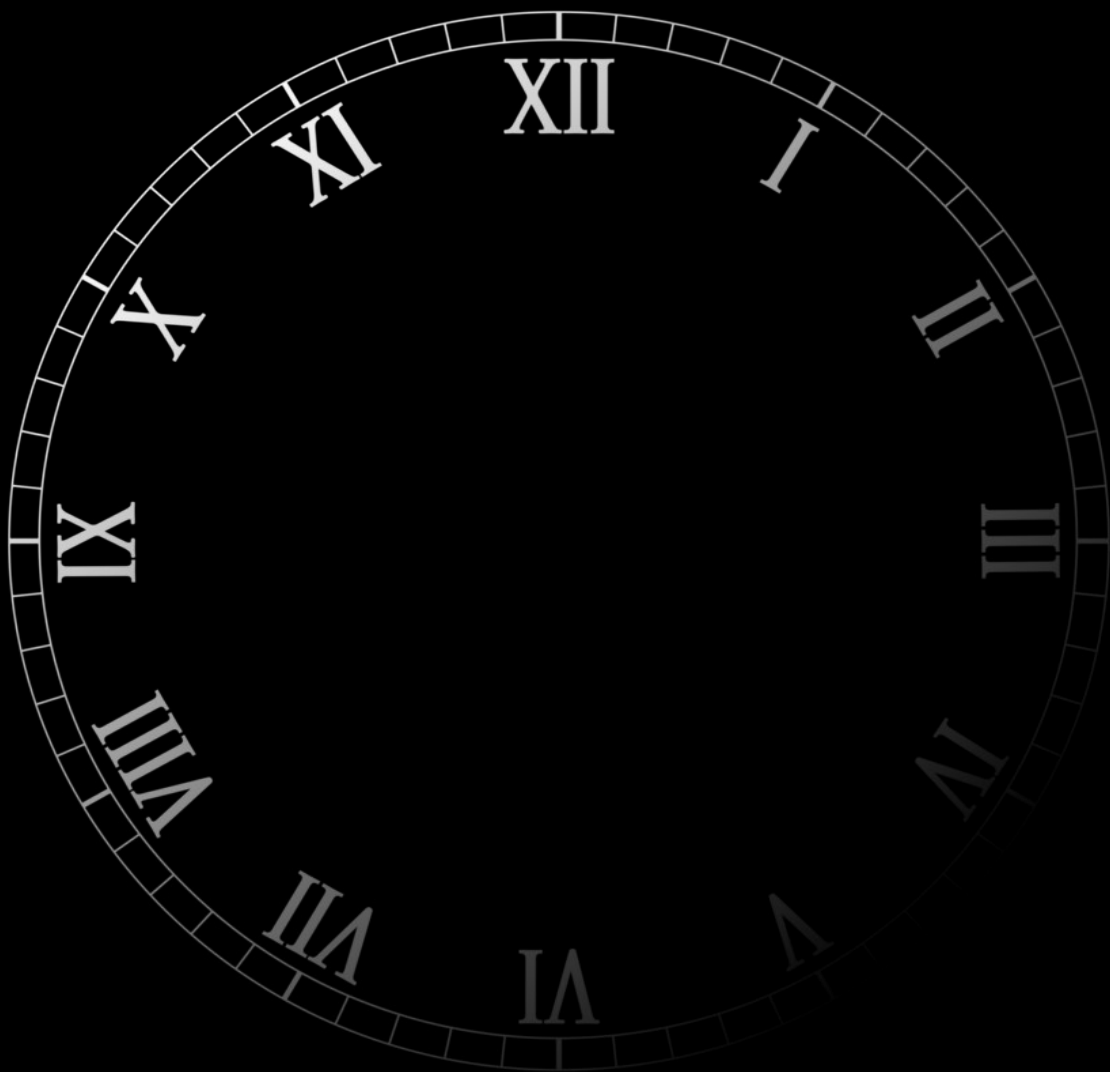


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Okay, folks. Here's a major note before we get started. This is a story that deals with religious themes. And pretty directly. If that's not your thing – or you're easily offended by such – please *do not* read. My main series will resume once this is out of the way.

“God? Yeah, I met him. Nice guy, does what he can. But I wouldn't rely on him too much though.”

Chapter 7

Seth reached to a switch beside him a moment later, banishing the darkness from the room as the overhead lights came on.

I glanced back towards the old man. He had looked aged and worn before, but now, in the light, he was little more than a skeleton, looking like he was over a hundred years old.

He looked good for his age.

"And now, Robert," He glared pointedly at me, "I think it's time you and your friends left. I'm an old man and I've had a trying night. I need my sleep."

"But..."

I never even got the word out before he rolled over on his bed and made a point of ignoring us.

I almost jumped when Alice laid a hand on my shoulder.

"Perhaps we'd best," she whispered, "I can't do anything against his power."

I could just make out Seth's chuckling.

With a sigh, I turned and walked from the room, Alice and Ophois trailing.

Well, that had been useful.

I'd encountered a lot of gods over the years who'd sought their own destruction, and even more who searched in vain for a way to destroy their opponents, but never one who supported a culling.

I still couldn't wrap my head around it.

You can't kill a god. You just *can't*. I'd seen just about everything happen to a god, and experienced more of said things than I'd care to have. We always came back. You could hit us with an atomic warhead and we'd still come back. All it took was a will and a god could return from anything.

We headed back out of the hospital the same way we'd come in. Half of the stretchers from the car crash were still there. The less serious cases were now being looked at.

The stretcher in the corner had a sheet draped over it now. No one had come by to take it down to the morgue yet.

I paused for a moment to feel if any of the others were set to leave this world. None were. That was a relief, I really didn't feel like guiding anymore innocent souls on tonight.

One of the things that always rubbed on me when I was at a hospital was the feeling that someone was always dying. That was just the matter of the fact, people tended to come here to die, and I could feel it. It always left a sour taste in my mouth.

Death tasted like mouldy lemon. It took everything I had not to spit.

I took a deep breath once we got out into the comparably fresh air of the night. It was still tainted with exhaust and pollution of New York, but that was something I'd gotten used to.

Leaping four lanes of traffic, we made it across to New Hudson park. I seemed to be spending a lot of time in parks tonight.

It was clean and quiet over here. The three of us began walking the edge of the green space, searching for a bus that was heading back towards Mott Haven.

There was the never ending hum of traffic beside us, but it was still too quiet. The place was almost empty, just like Central Park had been.

There were no homeless beggars here, no muggers lurking in the shadows to catch the lone stroller unawares. I'd spent a century in New York and I'd never seen it this... empty.

It was like someone had come by with a dust pan and swept away all the dirt, all the collected garbage that made human civilization what it was.

I glanced into a garbage pail as we walked past. Stopping for just a moment I fished out yesterday's newspaper.

It had all the usual headlines about sports and film, but there was a small slug near the bottom of the page that caught my eye.

'Recent survey concludes New York crime rate down 66% in the last six months and falling.'

And they were reporting this under the latest sports scores, like it was nothing of note.

Alice glanced over at me while I read the soggy paper.

"What is it?" She tried to make out the writing in the dim moonlight.

I pointed at the headline, but she missed it and began reading a story about a cat getting rescued from the top of an office block.

"No," I forced her to the only story of note on the page, "This."

She shrugged. "What? It's another change in the crime rate. It goes up and down all the time."

I had to hold back my temper. "By sixty-six percent? Seriously? You think this isn't related? There's less than half the crime on the streets than there was a few months ago and you don't think that's odd?"

She rolled her eyes. "What, you think this has to do with the gods? Come on, Robert. I thought you said the gods didn't do anything. How could fewer gods reduce the crime rate? Shouldn't having fewer of you guys around *increase* it?"

I sighed. "It's a bit more complex than that, it's... never mind."

She shrugged and reached down to scratch Ophois between the ears. "Sure, whatever."

The night was getting long in tooth now, it had to be at least four in the morning. There was still no sign of the sun, but I could feel the night's hold slowly weakening.

The bus stop was up ahead. An old lady waited there in a prim dress that looked like it had been made back during the Great Depression. The thing was old as dirt and looked about as colourful. She glanced at us over her horn rimmed glasses as we stepped up beside her but otherwise ignored us.

We didn't really rate high on the interesting scale. On her other side were a half-dozen punks that looked like they were fresh out of a horror flick.

There were a lot of different kinds of punks. I'd lived through the seventies when the movement had first really come about, most of them these days were more the wannabes. These one's were real, or at least real enough.

Punk had its roots in anarchism and nihilism. Well, to be honest it had its roots in almost everything, but those two were the ones most seen. Unlike the posers these days, this bunch seemed not to have fallen too far from the tree.

Their black jackets and spiked hair seemed real, this is to say not pre-manufactured. I can't tell you how many 'edgy' and 'unique' people I'd met through time who had just gone down to the store and bought a costume, put it on and thought themselves changed.

I suppose in time the mask and the man can become one, but I've always had more respect for those who show their real face rather than try to make themselves fit a mass produced mask.

These guys were definite originals.

They spoke in rough grunts on the other side of the old lady while puffing away on their cigarettes – among other things. There was enough hair gel and safety-pins between them to patch up a person back in the ER.

Unlike the stereotype you might expect, they were pleasant and polite enough to the odd person who walked down the street. They even apologized to the old lady when one of them bumped her.

This was closer to the original punk than I'd seen in over a decade.

The bus to Mott Haven came in due time and, unsurprisingly, we all got on.

Most of the seats were empty. The punks sat at the back, the old lady nattered away with the driver at the front, and Alice, Ophois, and I had a nice empty space in the middle.

Alice kept glancing nervously back towards the punks every few seconds.

"Do you think we should take another bus?" she whispered.

I snorted. "Didn't we just get through talking about the crime rate? Weren't you even listening?"

"But... I just don't like being around people like that."

"Like what? Alive, mortal? Normal? They're nowhere near as strange as the things I've seen some people do." I couldn't help making a face. "Fashion is the least of your worries. I thought you were alive back at the turn of the century? This is no stranger than what they had back then."

Her glare could have cut glass. "I don't remember anything from back then." She turned and firmly fixed her eyes on the floor. "If you like them so much then why don't you distract me."

"Distract you?" I laughed. "What are you, a six year old? I'm not your father, I don't have to do anything."

She sighed and snuggled down into her seat. "Fine. Could you at least tell me what was up with the walking underwater? You owe me that much."

"Yeah, I guess I do." I cleared my throat, "Are you sure you want to hear? It's a long story."

She turned to look out the window beside her. "Yeah, why not. It's not like we've got anything better to do. NYC isn't exactly known for it's super fast bus service."

"Fine." I glanced down to Ophois where he'd taken a seat on the floor beside my feet. He was looking up at me like it was story time.

I cleared my throat.

I was born in Ireland in seventeen-oh-five. In a small town named Largy, south of Clifden, out on the east cost. Looking back at it today, the place was a cesspit.

It wasn't that it was bad, at least not for the day, but we were a fishing village, one of thousands, with no more than a hundred people at the best of times.

And it was rarely the best of times.

Everyone likes to imagine the potato famine when they think of Ireland, but there's more to it than that. Largy wasn't all that bad, but it was... let's just say unpretentious.

Anyway, I was born the third of seven children. I wasn't the smartest, fastest, or strongest. I was just another child. My parents loved me as they did all of us, and they did everything they could to provide for us, but I was just another kid.

That was pretty much the story of my life. I was born and grew up as any other Irishman would. I was sixteen when my life took a turn.

I'd lived by the sea my entire life you understand. We all spent time in the boats, but you didn't really tend to swim all that much. The sea around town was cold and rough. Some knew how to swim, but it wasn't common.

Anyway, it was just another morning when I made a stupid mistake. The storms had come in last night and they were still clinging to the shore, kicking up waves and blasting us with sprays of surf.

I was working as a dock hand back then. It wasn't a great job, but it made a few dollars. I was trudging boxes of fish from the ships into market.

Children were playing on the pier, they always did. It wasn't something that you'd see so much today with the whole OCHA thing, but it was normal back then.

I didn't even think of it. I just kept trudging back and forth, lifting box after box of fish.

I'd just returned from the market when I heard someone screaming.

There had been three children on the pier last I'd walked by. Now there were only two.

They'd all been young, perhaps eight at most. I'd known them all from the day they'd been born.

John and Paul were still here, jumping up and down and screaming to high heaven. Liam wasn't.

Didn't take long to figure out what had happened. Liam had snuck aboard one of the ships moored to the pier. I never did find out what he was doing there. Then he fell overboard.

The harbour in Largy was deep and sure. Liam had been wearing his winter coat and stockings. There was no way he could swim.

I couldn't even see him through the churning waves.

John and Paul were still shrieking, the others of the town were running our way, but they were still a distance off.

And that was it then.

I'd never called myself a brave one, never thought myself much of a man of action. Hell, I was hardly even a man myself at that age.

But I pulled free my coat and boots and dove into the water after the child whose dim outline I could just make out.

The chill of the autumn waves hit me like a slap to the face as I broke the surface. I'd been ready for it, but it still sent a shudder down my spine.

Liam had begun to sink the moment he hit the waves. He thrashed frantically in the water, but the weight of all his thick clothing pulled him down just as sure as if his toes were tied to lead weights.

I almost couldn't reach him. He sunk nearly as fast as I could dive.

The air in my lungs was just short of pulling me up when my outstretched hand caught a hold of his collar.

It felt like I was Atlas lifting the weight of the world as I forced us to the surface again.

I was seeing stars as I broke the waves, but we made it none the less.

The rest of the rescue was child's play. It was only a short paddle to the pier, then there were more than enough friendly hands to lift him from me.

The only things I remember from the next few minutes was the press of people around me and the cold. The horrible, soul sapping, bone chilling cold.

We were all eventually hustled into a nearby home. It was warmer in there, but my teeth still chattered.

I was useless from that point on. Doctors and family huddled around the child, trying to revive him. Half of the things they did were useless, the other half harmful, but in the end he came through.

I never did find out how long he'd been under, but it didn't seem to be long enough to do any true damage.

I escaped the crowd soon after, trudging back home to warm by my own fire and change into a dry set of clothing.

All in all I'd only been underwater, doing any good, for less than a minute.

I thought that was all there was to it. Sure, a 'thank-you' would have been nice, but in the end it was just what anyone else would have done.

I got a few slaps on the back the next day, but all my work really earned me was a free drink. That was fine with me.

I even met the kid a couple of times over the next few years.

The whole mess was the furthest thing from my mind when I left town at twenty-one.

Emigration was a normal part of life back then. I went inland, seeking my fortune.

It was about twenty years later I received a letter.

I hadn't kept good connections with my family after I left. My parents were dead, and it wasn't like today where you could just pick up a phone or hop a plane.

In my absence the young Liam I'd saved had joined the church.

Doesn't sound like much? Didn't to me either. It wasn't until I read on that I found he'd devoted much of his preaching to espousing my great deeds.

Mine. My deeds, as though I'd done more than a single heroic thing in my whole life.

My brother, who had sent the letter, thought it all great fun. There were few left in the town who remembered me, and it seemed harmless enough to let them have a hero – no matter how misrepresented I may be.

About a year after that I got my first visitor.

He was from Largy. A young man – little more than a boy.

And he was from the church, taking a pilgrimage.

He asked for me by name when he knocked on my door. My wife almost turned him away, thinking him a bill collector.

I finally sat down with him. He told me his name was Brian. He had come all this way to see me... *me*.

Liam had been busy in my absence.

There was little left to Largy now but a church, and Liam was the brother in charge. He had devoted it to me, Robert O'Toole, patron saint – in his mind at least – to those drowning.

I'm sure you've heard of patron saints before. There's a lot of them. Think of just about anything, from mouldy bread to sodomy and I'll bet you there's a saint for it.

I was unofficial, never really accepted by the greater church as a whole, but I seemed to be quite popular back home.

According to Brian the church was thriving while the rest of the town died a slow death. There was over a hundred brothers in the church and perhaps another five hundred people in the surrounding county side who prayed to me.

As I'm sure you can guess, this came as a bit of a surprise.

The strangest part is that Brian wasn't surprised when he saw me. I was working as a stock taker those days. A respectable enough position for who I was, but hardly what one would expect of a saint. And the fact I was living in a landlocked community when I was a saint of drowning didn't even seem to occur to him.

Liam had been doing his homework. He spun my lot in life as an allegory to that of Jesus and his time as a carpenter.

I didn't realize it until much later, but I never want to be compared to Jesus.

I held my tongue and talked to the kid while he was there. All in all it was pleasant enough. I found him a little creepy and all, but he was polite and open.

I sent him off a few hours later thinking that would be the end of it. I wasn't so lucky.

He must have had such a nice time that he sent all his brothers to come see me as well. In single file.

It started slow, perhaps one every few months, but it grew until there was someone on my doorstep almost weekly.

That was quite enough, thank-you.

Maria was getting as fed up as I was, having to host so many people. Times were tough back in Largy, they all came famished and weak. I couldn't turn them away, but they had nothing to offer in return but their wide eyes.

Two years of this and I was done. I'd sent messages back to Liam, but he never seemed to take note. I may be a saint in his eyes, but he wasn't going to stop seeing me through rose coloured glasses even if it killed him.

I moved. Then again. Every time they tracked me down and started coming as if nothing had happened. What I wanted wasn't important. All that mattered to them was what they believed. They could make anything I did fit into their beliefs. I could swear at them, tell them off and slam the door in their face and they'd find some way to twist it around to me still being the kind, gentle saint that Liam had promised them.

It wasn't until Maria died that I finally gave up.

I was getting older now and didn't have any children to carry on my name. I hid.

Retirement for me was a shack in the country, alone and cold.

It wasn't that I really minded it, I got used to the quiet after a while, but they still found me.

This time it was a young initiate named Kevin.

I almost cried when I opened the door to see him standing on the mud path to my cabin.

I'm not ashamed to admit that I regret what I did next. I cursed the kid out for nothing more than having done what he was told, tracking me down.

I still remember the kid. He was short with dirty red hair. I opened the door and he looked up at me like he was seeing his hero. It broke my heart.

I let him come in eventually. I got the feeling that he would have broke down then and there if I hadn't.

The story I got out of him was that Liam hadn't slacked off as he'd got older. The church was having a harder time recruiting brothers. Good Father Liam's solution was to show off an ever more powerful saint. Not only could I now leap down from heaven to save the drowning, I could also walk on water and breathe the very sea itself. Every time Liam needed more brothers he simply dreamed up yet another thing I could do. The masses ate it up.

By the time Kevin had joined I was being thrown around like a cross between Jesus and aquaman.

Unlike the others though, Kevin's rose glasses didn't seem to be quite as firmly affixed. He was new to the order and had yet been indoctrinated into their beliefs as the other brothers who had come to me.

He yet still saw me as a man, not a god. And that suited me just fine, for that was what I was, a man. Nothing more.

I shared what few things I had with him. It wasn't much, but I filled his belly as best I could.

I expected nothing more from him than I had received from the dozens who had come before. Kevin however saw things differently.

The others had looked at my homes over the years and saw them as a vow of poverty. Kevin looked at my small cabin and saw it as a disgrace. He refused to leave.

I think you can guess how well that went over with me.

It didn't seem to matter though. Nothing I said could drive him away, and I was too old of a man by that time to force him back.

I, a man who had never had children, never been wealthy enough to afford a maid, now had my own caretaker.

He worked tirelessly. Fixed the rotting frame that I called a home, trudged into town to do my meagre shopping. Most of all he looked up to me.

That was something that even after all these years I'd never gotten used to.

The pilgrims had come and gone, asked me questions of faith and healing. They had never asked me of the event where I had saved Liam's life.

I found out that they had been strictly ordered never to do so. Kevin didn't follow that order.

I told the young boy whatever he wanted. It cost me nothing.

Apparently, the story that I recalled bared little resemblance to what Father Liam recited to the congregation every night.

By his recollection I truly had swept down from heaven, lifted him free and clear of the water, then dropped him safely on the shore without a single hand from anyone. I had also been the one to put the breath of life back into him.

This didn't annoy me too much. He had been a young child back then, I doubted he even remembered the accident.

What shock me to the core was what he recorded as happening next.

The stories that Liam was shoving down those people's throats were of I becoming his mentor and teaching him of the Lord. Liam claimed that I had helped build the church and that I gave direct instruction on the desires of the Lord.

To say that Kevin was a little let down when I told him the truth would be an understatement.

I knew that Liam had gone a little odd after joining the church, but this was more than odd, the man had gone around the bend never to return.

And the brothers of the church were eating it up.

Kevin stayed with me for some time after that. I was under the impression that his pilgrimage required him to find me and he couldn't return until he had. That would mean that he would have to tell his fellow brothers where I now was. Neither of us wanted that.

I asked him once why he didn't just leave the order. His words were slow in coming. Despite everything, he still believed in Father Liam. He didn't believe in me any more, but he believed in what Liam preached.

Liam's rhetoric was of a kinder, gentler Lord who was working to create a better world for us all. That, according to Liam, was why saints like me were created – to help humanity. It was a nice image, it struck a cord back home where things weren't going so well. People believed because they wanted to believe. It made them feel good that they could trust in the benevolence of the Lord.

All in all, Liam was doing a decent job. He was helping to keep order and raising the people's spirits. Who was I to step in and tell folks that everything he said was a lie?

You may remember that I said I was in my retirement by this time. 'Retirement' meant something a little different back in those days than it does now. Retirement was that short time at the end of your life when you were too old to work, but still not quite dead yet. It rarely lasted more than a couple of years.

The spring of seventeen sixty-eight was not an easy one for me. I had no expectation of seeing the summer.

I likely wouldn't have even made it that far if it hadn't been for Kevin. I relied almost completely upon him now. He did everything short of feed me.

There were somethings that I refused to let him do. I still had my dignity.

If he hadn't let go of his illusions and realized that I was a mere man by this point, it was kind of hard to see me as anything but now.

I'd always been healthy enough, but never strapping. Now my body was wasting away.

The last few weeks of my life were spent in bed, fighting off the ravages of pneumonia.

Long story short, I lost.

I'd love to say that I remember dying, but I don't. I can hardly remember anything from my last few days. The only way I even know the date I finally knocked off is by having looked it up.

I don't recall heaven, or any other place for that matter. The next thing I remember was waking up cold and stiff on a slab of stone.

To say I was disoriented would be an understatement. I was naked, cold, and alone in an unfamiliar dark underground chamber. For a moment I almost wondered if I'd been buried alive.

I crawled out the nearest door I could find and stole a set of robes in an adjoining hallway. It wasn't until I came nose-to-nose with a flickering torch that I realized that there was even more amiss.

Familiar with the old adage, *I know it as well as the back of my hand*? Well, my hands weren't my own. My hands, top and bottom, had always been scarred and stained from a working life. Those I held up before me were not.

This was the point where I stopped creeping around the tight, wet, underground hallways and began to run.

It only took me a few minutes to find a stairway up, then only a few more to find a door to the outside world.

I nearly fell to my knees when I saw the sea line before me. I was in Largs. I was back home.

In a manner of speaking.

I recognized the shoreline, I recognized the basic layout of the buildings that spread out below me from the hill I stood upon, but nothing more than that.

Turning around, I could see the building I had just escaped from. I couldn't read the Latin that was engraved in the stone, but I had a decent enough idea what it said.

It was the church, now an abbey, that had been dedicated to me.

I didn't bother thinking. I ran.

I hadn't the slightest what was going on. The last thing I remembered was being ill, back home in the cabin, now I was strong again, but for all I knew kidnapped by a cult in my honour.

It didn't take me long to make it to the woods on the outskirts of the abbey. My bare feet were quickly cut to shreds by the undergrowth but I ran on none the less.

I ran north-east until I got to Errisburg. It had been a long time since I'd been here, since I'd been anywhere near back home, but I wasn't ready for what I saw.

I don't think I'd ever heard the story, but I swear to god that I felt like Rip Van-wrinkle. I was in Errisburg, but it was nothing like I'd ever seen it.

The town was larger than I remembered, by at least four times. And the people... you know when you look back to the fashions of the sixties and the seventies and wonder 'how could anyone ever wear that?' Well, take that and multiply it by ten.

I didn't know it yet, but I'd been out for a long time.

I'm not proud about it, but it took me a little thieving to make up the money I needed to get myself a fresh set of clothes and a room at the local inn.

I felt like I'd just been sucked into a fairytale.

The next few weeks were the hardest I've ever experienced since being made.

Heh. I didn't even know the term 'made' back then. All I knew for sure was that I wasn't the same any more. Every part of me bore some vague resemblance to who I'd been, but nothing was right.

My hair was darker now, my skin ruddier. I was a half a foot taller and had a good few pounds more muscle than I had normally carried.

It was like my body had been put back together by someone who had never met me, but only heard third-hand stories of what I'd looked like. Basically, that was exactly what happened – though I wasn't to find that out for quite some time.

I didn't know anyone or anything of this new world I had been dropped in. I could hardly even speak the language. You would think that it wouldn't be so hard, I hadn't been out of the fold for *that* long – it was about a hundred and fifty years – but you'd be wrong.

It felt like a good half of the words people used in an average conversation were foreign to me. I had to play a mute for a two weeks before I felt confident in opening my mouth. Even then I had an accent that slurred my words near to incomprehensibility.

Everyone's looking for ditch diggers though, and I found a job in this new world easily enough.

It was almost six months before I screwed up my courage and returned to the abbey where I had awoken.

I'd never seen it in life, but it was a suitably grand place now. There was a good five hundred souls that walked its halls. Many of the surrounding country folk, even so far away as Errisbrg went there to worship.

And it was all in my name. Well, mine and the Lord's. The abbey was part of the greater church, but it was devoted to me.

And I'll admit that the idea was more than a little humbling.

I walked in one Sunday morning to attend service. It was easy enough to hide myself in plain sight among all those who thronged along beside me.

I'd at first been worried that they were looking for me, that my rebirth had been some kind of plan on their part. No. They didn't, for all I could tell, even know I existed.

The day I'd been made was just another Sunday to them. They'd had record numbers of worshippers and faithful come to the service that day, but that was all.

I sat through service that morning. It was about the same as any other you could find in the churches across Europe. Liam was long dead now and the sermon was given by a man who hadn't even been born while I was alive.

He praised the Lord, gave thanks and read from the bible, all the things that one would expect. My name was brought up none to infrequently, but it was the same as any saint that was preached to the

masses. You could have cut my name from his sermon and replaced it with any other saint and it would have sounded the same.

The worship ended soon after and we all filled out.

There were brothers on either side of the door as we left, holding out baskets to accept donations.

I left a handful of coins with them.

I stayed near the church for some years after that, searching for something, anything, that would tell me what had happened to bring me here, to give me some meaning or purpose.

There was nothing. No great rituals had been performed, the abbey was in no particular need of a saviour. I even searched for evidence of satanic worship that might have brought me forth.

Nothing.

Ten years of searching and I knew nothing more than I had when I'd first woken up on the slab.

I knew I was going to regret this, but I scheduled a meeting with the head of the abbey.

His name was Father Marcus and he looked as old as I felt. The man had to be near eighty.

He received me politely, but was understandably perplexed when I at first refused to tell him why I had come.

I quizzed him gently on the abbey and its saint. He answered me openly and honestly.

He hardly even skipped a beat when I told him my name.

His only response was to remark how fortuitous my luck was that I'd received the same name as the great saint. Though he did also remark on my passing resemblance.

I told him what I knew and who I was. He smiled kindly at me and patted my hand. He suggested that I might wish to lie down for a while as it was obvious the journey to the abbey had been hard on me and that I was not sounding well.

I told him of my life, of my memories. I told him of Liam and Kevin, of waking up on the slab.

He sat quietly the whole time, listening intently.

And then he asked me what it was I told to Liam on the forth day after I'd saved him.

Bugger it all, what!? I'd only spoken to Liam a half dozen times after I pulled him from the water. I hadn't said anything of note to him four days after I saved him. I hadn't even seen him.

Apparently I was wrong. The good Father went on to lecture me at length about all the wonderful secrets I'd relieved to Liam on that day, and how I'd converted him to the church.

To say I was annoyed would be putting it mildly.

The next two hours, as best I can remember, were spent being lectured about the great and grand things it appeared I'd done while still alive. I'd still yet to even come to terms with becoming a god, and this did not go over well.

I was by all accounts a doctor, a teacher, and above all an ardent founder and supporter of the church.

Every so often I heard something I recognized. They had a whole chapter in one of their books about the first pilgrim to come visit me, Brian. It appeared he had risen to replace Liam upon the man's death.

What they got right was far overshadowed by what they got wrong. They'd even changed my wife's name, Maria, to Marry. It took everything I had not to cry at that simple error.

In the end Father loaded me up with copies of some of their most holy texts and ushered me from his office.

He must have thought me soft in the head, nothing more. As far as he was concerned I was a sick, harmless man who saw himself as the reincarnation of a saint. I hadn't even done the proper homework to convince anyone that I might be real.

And, for a time, I believed him.

Not right away of course. I kept my wits about me for some months, but there is only so long one can believe when everyone around you sees what is so obviously to them the truth.

I studied the books, noted each and every discrepancy between my memories and the words on those holy pages.

Frankly, their version was more entertaining.

Two years later I came to the conclusion that I was wrong. I didn't know who I was, I didn't know where I came from. The only thing I now believed was that I wasn't Robert O'Toole.

I kept the name though, I'd no better one to replace it with.

I moved north and wandered until I'd damn well worn my feet to the bone.

There was a problem with my new belief.

I'd wandered now for twenty years, walked the width and breadth of Ireland. Those around me aged, but I didn't.

I'd looped back around south and wandered into Dublin by now. If by chance you ever end up in Dublin I do recommend their pubs. That's where I stopped in for a drink.

The majority of people there were exactly those you would expect to see on a Tuesday night, but one person in particular drew my attention.

She sat alone in the back corner, nursing her drink. She had curly brown hair and dressed in travelling clothes like mine.

But most of all I could feel a presence about her. It was like there was just the slightest force pushing me away. It was hardly perceptible, but it was the first time I'd ever felt it and I couldn't get it out of my mind.

I took my drink from the bar and walked up bold as day to her table.

I like to think I'm smooth enough around women, but this one caught me off guard the moment she raised her eyes to me.

Her name was Dara, that much I asked of her before I lost the words in my throat.

Her eyes were clear and grey, and they looked to be a thousand years old.

Funny enough, I was just about right. She was a little over nine-hundred.

She knew what I was well enough, and much to my fortune she was willing to share that information with me.

We adjourned for the night to a room above the pub. All we did, all night, was talk.

Well, she did most of the talking. I just kept picking my jaw off the floor.

She was one of the endless number of nature goddesses who walked the world. Dara wasn't her real name, but it was close enough. The word translated into 'oak tree'.

I'd like to say that our relationship blossomed into something more than simple acquaintance, but it would be a lie.

Dara was far and above me. She'd seen almost a thousand years and I'd been through less than a hundred winters. She saw me as little more than a boy.

And in any event, she frightened me.

I, at the time still had several hundred believers, more than enough to sustain myself. She did not.

There was an empty quality to her, a shadow behind her eyes that made her look like a puppet who's strings had been cut but yet had still to fall to the floor.

She was pretty, of that there was no doubt, but she was a vastly different creature than I.

She warned me of faith, and how fickle the power of believers could be. She was the only reason I was able to survive my own downfall a century later.

I saw what the loss of believers had done to her, how she had been forced to push through it and survive, keep her mind. It chilled me to the bone. It was that day, the day I learned what a god was, that I became determined to survive.

When I woke the next morning Dara was gone. I've never seen her since.

She did leave me with one piece of parting advice though. To find the gods one must seek out the centres of humanity.

That was all I needed. Back in those days London was still the centre of the English speaking world. Well, truth be told, London was the centre of the world to me, though I'd never been.

I packed my meagre belongings and jumped ship across the Irish Sea to make landfall at Trearddur. This was the first time I'd ever been off the green jewel. I didn't know it at the time, but I've never returned.

To be honest, England wasn't all that different. I worked odd jobs as I trudged my way south-east. London was a long way away, further than I'd ever travelled in a straight line, and dare I say I had a few mishaps along the way. Take it from me that it's a bad idea to try and outrun the coppers and their dogs by going cross country... but that's a story for another time.

I did, in the end, make it to the big smoke. It wasn't quite as picturesque as I'd hoped. London in these days is a nice enough place, but back then it was one thing. Industry.

There were days you couldn't see your hand in front of your face for the smoke bellowing from the factory chimneys. Smoke and soot alone are bad enough, combine them with the famous London fog and you've got a mixture that I'd just as soon not partake of again.

In any event, I jumped into the mix and did my best to hide my accent. I didn't need to worry too much, there were enough of us immigrants about that I didn't raise any eyebrows.

It took me over a year to find my first fellow god among the million souls in that dismal place.

And I wasn't even looking for him at the time.

I'd been foolish in my searches. I had, in my naivety, expected to find gods in the seats of power, or at least close by. I'd searched the Houses of Parliament, the finest clubs. I'd damn well cased every building on Whitehall.

And there hadn't been a single god to be found.

The one I did finally encounter found me.

I was in East London at the time, not the greatest of districts, just making my way home from work when a beggar came to bother me.

I thought nothing of him until he stepped closer.

There was no way I could mistake the aura about him. He pressed at my mind in a way I'd felt only once before, in the presence of Dara.

The man was just short of incoherent. I had to press a five spot into his hand before he would even speak to me. When he did it hardly got any better.

The man, even to this day I can hardly call him a god, spoke a fractured mix of Latin, English, and old Spanish. I could only understand perhaps one word in five, but he was definitely a god.

I got him liquored up that evening at did my best to attend to his needs, clothing him, feeding him, and whatnot.

It was perhaps a week before I was able to get anything understandable out of him.

His name, I could never pronounce it properly, was something akin to Lytnus. He was an old man, a *very* old man. He'd first been made when the Greek still straddled the earth with their mighty empire.

He was the mirror opposite of Dara. Where the goddess had forged through her downfall with grace and dignity, this man had fallen to the most base.

He was of little use to me, remembering almost nothing, but he was able to point me towards the standing gods that made their homes in London. And there were many.

I woke up one morning shortly thereafter and Lytnus was gone. I do remember seeing him once on the street, he had reverted to his wild-eyed beggar ways. I didn't bother to speak with him again.

"But, what happened next?" Alice looked over to me as our bus bumped onto the George Washington bridge. Even Ophois glanced my way curiously from where he lay on the floor.

I shrugged. "Exactly what you'd expect. I contacted the gods in London, made a place for myself and did what I could to settle down."

"But what about the abbey? How did you get to New York?"

I snorted. "The abbey? God himself knows. I told you, I haven't been back to Ireland, likely so much Largy. As for New York, haven't a clue. A bunch of us decided to get out of London after the Blitz. NYC seemed like a decent place to go, so we went. It wasn't like there was a lot of thought put into it. We could have gone to Paris or Toronto, but New York was as good as the next place and there were lots of boats headed this way."

"That's it? You came here just because? All these gods in one place because of the steamboat schedules?"

I glanced over to her. "Of course. What, you thought this place was special or something? New York isn't special, it's just where we ended up. Just like Jerusalem isn't special, it's just where James was born. The world doesn't have to make sense." I snorted, "Sometimes it seems like it goes out of its way to avoid it."

"Okay," She settled back into her seat and turned to watch the river flash past under us, "But I've still a question for you."

I shrugged. "Shoot."

"What are you? Physically, I mean. You don't grow old and you don't die."

"I could ask you the same thing," I replied with a chuckle. "Thankfully, I know the answer, to your question at least. I'm soul, pure and simple."

She turned to me, "What?"

I reached out, taking one of her hands in mine, feeling the familiar zap.

"That's one of the few things I've learned unquestionably. I had the same thoughts, long ago. Don't ask me how they figured it out, but we're soul. Soul has weight, volume, and that's what I'm made of. I read somewhere that the human soul weighs about twenty grams. When you worship something you give it a measure of your soul. It took hundreds of people worshipping me before I was made."

She snorted. "Somehow, Robert, I think you'd need a lot of worshippers to make you at twenty grams a piece."

I rolled my eyes. "Doesn't quite work that way." I couldn't hold back a laugh, "If it did, James would weigh a ton. Anyway, I might pick up one or two grams from each worshipper. After I get enough, a kilo or so, the process becomes self-sustaining. Kinda like the birth of a star, after you get enough mass in one place the reaction can keep itself going. That's what I am. The more soul I have the more power I wield, but the brighter I burn the more fuel I use."

She looked at me critically, studying the lines of my face. "So who are you? You're dead, right? Doesn't that mean that you're living on other people souls? Are you really Robert O'Toole? And what happens to the soul you have when your faithful die?"

I glanced away, unable to hold her gaze. "Like I told you, I'm dead. I died, I know it. I'm not the same person I used to be, I'm not even really much like him – only a halfway decent impersonator."

As for the soul, I don't know. No ones really put much thought into it. As far as I know we gods run on soul. That's why so many of us take a dive when the last of our faithful disappear. I'm just kind of like an overly efficient engine. I'll likely go the same way as the other gods when the last of my supporters convert, but I hope to be ready for it."

That damn minor god had to be around here somewhere.

I'd found his address in the belongings of one of the other gods I'd moved on. Robert O'Toole was his name. I had his address and I still couldn't find his damn apartment. All these project buildings looked the same.

How could people live like this, boxed up in cages like animals? How things had changed since my day.

Well, there was nothing to it but to fix the problem. Once I got rid of this god that would be one less on my list.

Damn. Another dead end. There had to be a stairwell around here someplace.