

# David Gionfriddo

## *JUST PUNISHMENTS*

It was the great day, the anniversary of the founding martyr's burning, and for at least an hour, the church, like the greening world, had begun to revive.

*--It's a symbol, an offering. A climax to a glorious pilgrimage! Senior Prelate Macomber waved his hand grandly, like a conductor, to sweep in all of the new Mother-church's airy interior spaces. And more than all of this, it is our home.*

One could feel the larger-than-average congregation, from the best-dressed members of Needle's Eye, adorned in their crimson and indigo finery, to the Inheritors huddled together in a lively back-bench scrum, squelching a great inner rising, a collective ovation of cheers, wolf-whistles and Tonguespeak. It was beyond dispute that Granite Macomber knew every curse, every whisper, every shaken fist it would take to turn a crowd to his advantage. He could, it was said, charm the pitchfork right out of old Belial's claw, and get it spit-shined, to boot. On good Sundays like this, one could still recall the glory days of jam-packed masses and raw throats.

Macomber's tone reminded Ed Czarnecki-Whaley of the fiery rhetoric that had roiled around the launch of the great Building Mission six years earlier. Old Elder Dignan, in his measured, trembly voice, had quoted from ArchProtector Keane's 2030's epistles warning of waste and ostentation and "the suffocating vainglory of the material." The Savonarolans should, Dignan pleaded, be models of simplicity, piety and thrift, meeting on the web ring, in the storefronts and the mobile tent services, leaving the gaudy display and ceremony to those hangers-on who stuck with the Church of Rome or the wealthy Protestant denominations. But little could stand under the onslaught of Macomber's lacerating broadsides. *Man is a frivolous and concupiscent animal*, he had glowered. *God sees through his pretenses and facades, and shame on us for trying to hide our base nature behind such transparent ploys. Best to accept that men are a communal species who need a meeting place and who draw strength from numbers and rite and*



*fellowship, and to humbly accept the opprobrium that flows from these facts!* Anything else would be an attempt to outsmart the Lord your God, he had warned, and would trigger even harsher consequences. Everyone already knew about Dignan's frailties, and there were rumblings that his relations had fallen hopelessly behind in their district enjoyment taxes. Soon enough they might be classified res-transient. He hardly seemed to be reveling in God's favor. The whispers grew louder and the legal tender flowed by the tens of thousands into Macomber's Building Fund. And stone by stone, his monument rose.

And the end result was The Haven, this marvelous edifice, its translucent quartzite and fiberglass dome a source of the wondrous multicolored light that flowed through Chatelet's angel and archangel panels. Ed was marveling at the way Uriel's wings glittered as he petitioned God to judge mankind, his ears filling with the ragged, soulful notes of Hymn 18, "A Kingdom Lost and Found":

*A paragon of all the Earth  
With holy censure bound  
A fallen race  
We ask God's grace  
A kingdom lost and found*

Ed was so overwhelmed by the sweet terror of contrition every time he walked the Hall of Penitents, past the life-size bronzes of Adam, the wrathful Cain, Herod, and, finally, a downtrodden Judas clutching his pieces of silver, that he didn't even mind when the ushers wheeled the brass urns down the aisle for the Unburdenings. Along the pew, people dug into pockets and purses for folding money, credit vouchers, wristwatches and loose jewelry. With a beatific smile, Ed's daughter Lorra reached below the stone kneeler and produced the ancient oil portrait of Grandfather Czarnecki that had hung in the dining room as long as Ed could remember. In its ornate gold frame, it had the look of a museum piece, and Ed could see the envy tattooed on the faces of the other Rebuilders as they clutched their coins and sparkly baubles. As he passed, Usher Blanton leaned in and whispered:

*--Can you stop by Macomber's office after mass? He wants a word.*

Ed could not help feeling grand and important and necessary as the congregation finished its admissions of unworthiness and Macomber ascended to the pulpit, the spotlight picking out the gold thread that rimmed the flames on the scarlet robe commemorating May 22, the Feast of the Founder. He had heard the traditional Founder's sermon so many times, he could practically recite it by heart:

*Man, wrought to preside over Creation, has been the perpetrator of an endless series of wrongs, betrayals, disappointments, conspiracies, intrigues, backslidings, peccadilloes, dawdlings, ditherings and general failings. Adam and Eve partook of forbidden fruit. Cain slew Abel. Why, the world grew so rotten and tainted that God had to flush it clean with flood. And still, the Lord forgave, sending his only Son to redeem the race. And how, my friends, my cousins, was He repaid? St. Peter denied Him, Judas betrayed Him, the Romans scourged and crucified Him. What father among you could forgive such things? And still, man proceeds along an infinite, unbroken thoroughfare of sin, war, genocide, dispossession, a vast and varied menagerie of smaller, yet equally bitter wrongs. When disaster strikes, when the earth moves, when children suffer, we wring our hands and ask "Why?" I would*

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*challenge them and say “Why not?” Why should He not wash his hands of man, turn his attention to other societies, other worlds? For I tell you today that it is our duty, our sacred travail, to atone, to expunge, to reclaim with our suffering the holy favor of the Lord.*

All around him, female parishioners pricked themselves with their golden Penitence Pins, and the men sandpapered arms or ran their hand over flames snaking from crimson-colored lighters, the tang of seared skin mingling with wood-smoke from the burning Gauntlet of Flame that linked the church gate and the Sander Street parking lot. Soon, they were all chanting the recessional apologies, and marching out to the great pipe organ blaring “How Sweet The Lash.” As Lorra and her friends from the ecumenical school squealed with gleeful fright beneath a rain of embers from the canopy of fire, Ed squeezed his wife’s hand and stroked the bristly fur on the inside of his vestment.

*--Why don’t you catch a ride with the Fletchers, babe? I have to see the Prelate on...church business.*

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*--Ah, enter and harken, Gatherer Willing!*

At times like this, Ed would reflect on the mad, serpentine course his adult life had taken. For most of his 20s, he had knocked around the education mills of West Puissant, doing distance- and sleep-learning classes in a variety of disciplines -- Sexwork Management, Information Retrieval, Parapsych Services. He had been lured in by the holodeck ads of all the biggest and wealthiest ed companies, and was sure he was onto a winner with CareerStar Megaversity’s Synthetic Real Estate Creation Certificate Program, but ran out of tuitionfunds before the final exams. He had been reduced to street crime and cell donation when he wandered into the Maxie Park Lost Cause Center and prostrated himself to the Savs. From day one, the other Inheritors had called him *cousin*, and included him in the neighborhood lashings. Buzz Joy from the roundball league had even squared the wheels on his old ice-blue Remora free of charge. The church took him off the street and found him a fourth-floor walk-up in the Rubber District, paid for with his wages from the Kurlin Street Reclamation Center. And it was at one of the Savonarolans’ starvation suppers that he first locked eyes with Carmen, smiling nervously in her mold-flecked sackcloth at the too-loud rumblings in her precious tummy. Her little pout was like a flaming arrow

through Ed's heaving ventricles. They were joined as Fellow-Travelers after a whirlwind six weeks, their foreswearing attended by the whole Puissant assembly. Kazzie came two years later, little Lorra a year after that. The Center made him an assistant manager, and then, just last year, he realized the greatest triumph of all. In a small, private investiture ceremony, the Prelate conveyed unto him his church-name, Dirrt Willing, and elevated him to the rank of Seed-Gatherer. He was substantial. He had assignment and purpose.

The Prelate's sanctuary was dark and warm and filled with the smells of things old and neglected. Once there had been a Croatian girl who would come in and flick a feather duster at the spare furnishings, but Macomber had cashiered her after some of the Trustees complained of the expense. Ed ran a finger over the arm of a sofa and exposed a line of dark wood. He wondered if this was some sort of passive aggression, a way of punishing the church for its pettiness by letting things go to pot.

*--Don't be put off by dust, Gatherer. It's your beginning and your end.*

*--The very same, Ed agreed. What service can I do for you and our church? Are we having another door-to-door vanity purge?*



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Macomber silently looked down at his clasped hands.

*--It has been months. And, just between us, I know where we can find a pair of obsidian earrings and a lynx stole.*

Macomber looked up and smiled a smile that was fond and stern, gently twisting the ring that was his only outward ornament: a silver signet bearing the order's motto: *Patentia Dei Lassus Est*. The old man had let him hold it once and read it under the light and, without being asked, had patted Ed on the small of his spine and offered a translation: *God is getting peeved...* It was a small moment of intimacy that made Ed feel like a biblical titan.

*--Good son, there is a matter I mean to discuss with you. Macomber blew a wisp of dust from the cover of an old volume of philosophy. It's the monthly *Plaints of the Forsaken*. I'm afraid I am sensing of late a certain lack of intensity...*

The *Plaints*! Ed's sacred and particular trust! From the minute one stepped into a sanctuary, the Pillars of the Orthodoxy were drilled into you, and principal among them was the Blessedness of the Forsaken. Because the suffering of the sick, the poor, the anguished, the damaged, purged their innate corruption, they were always closer to God. And because they were so sanctified, they had God's ear. Their petitions and intercessions flew past the muffled prayers of the fit and prosperous, and commanded the immediate attention of the Creator. It was Ed's charge to harvest for the congregation lost, forgotten, and broken demi-saints and willworkers to pray for the church's needs at the monthly Feasts of the Forsaken. There was no more sacred duty entrusted to the Savs. And with a wife who was a hospital volunteer, a brother in Residential Displacement and a niece who served as a dispensary aide on the mobile mental health caravan, he was in a rosy position to locate new *sanctus paupers* for the Savs' unworthy. He had been admitted into the Society of the Abject after securing for Macomber an armless expeditionary ranger who claimed to be possessed by six discrete, identifiable demoniac figures. The church had been packed to the rafters that memorable day, and three days later, Caretaker Yazback had uncovered a cache of 21<sup>st</sup> century gold ingots while reinforcing the anti-wildlife moat. The trove had funded that season's entire Flagellants' Progress – the longest and best-attended ever -- with enough left over to reglaze Borowski's famous Holocaust Window. But it was no secret that two years of peace, coupled with recent advances in nanorobotics and neuroscience, had really made it slim pickings out there, and the last twelve months of club feet and

dermatitis and Lagos Belly had really let the air out of the penitential balloon. The last fest, which featured the mom of an Intermittent Anger Syndrome (IAS) toddler, found the church barely a quarter full, with a 64% plunge in the Unburdening take. If Tabulator Breitling hadn't thrown in an antique railroad watch and a 1920s sapphire Freemasons tie pin, they would have barely made enough to publish the monthly *Transgressions*.

*--The Northeast is getting fat and lazy, Macomber said. Everybody is working, eating. The borders are quiet. It's the Devil's Peace. The Happy Lie.*

Ed hid his face and nervously fingered some broken glass he kept in his coat pocket for moments like this.

*--The blame is all mine, Prelate, he said. I've been working longer hours. And we took a family vacation to the Aliquippa Coal Fire. I can dig deeper. Try my contacts.*

Macomber smiled and put his hands on Ed's shoulders. Ed could feel Macomber's poisonous contempt at his failings, and the sting of self-reproof made him tingle with pain and the joyful expectation of pain. It was no wonder, he thought, that his herd would follow Macomber anywhere. He already felt brighter and cleaner.

*--No matter, acolyte, he said, reaching in his pocket for a handkerchief. Here, clean up your hand before you bleed on the Kleiber. Let us pray together for diligence and resourcefulness.*

*Needles of pain  
Scarrings of fire  
Keep our throats parched  
Our hearts drowned with desire  
Make us pure in the flame  
Pull us free from the mire!*

*--Gatherer, we must collect our seed for the coming famine. I shall trust none more than thee to find us a clear channel to the shriving heart. I confide that things are at something of a tipping point. We cannot fail in our revival.* He clasped Ed's raw hand in a firm grip, and Ed could feel the powerful smarting of the sea salt his mentor had hidden in his palm.

*--So shall it be.* Ed's brain screamed in wild, sweet insult. He would

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surmount any obstacle to please his holy warder and to strengthen Mother-church.

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Carmen, as always, had come through like a champ and proven her worth as a helpmeet. Together, they had inventoried all the new patients at the Longevity Centre and separated out the best candidates. From the great undifferentiated mass of recharging prosthetics, cerebral stimulus realignments, and nanophylactic device insertions – cases too routine to win the church significant favor – they had settled on three: a child born with Remar's Palsy, an older woman severed at the hip in an AquaRay accident, and a recent tourist in Caucasia who had returned with the beginnings of hemo-phagic fever. Ed's eyes had widened over that one. A plasma-drinker was serious – methane-shroud serious, continental-shelf-eruption serious – and this one, a certain Denys Landesmann from one of the outlying favelas, was, according to Carm, strong enough to hang on for a while and no longer contagious. And since the paralytic boy was having trouble forming words and the accident lady was unable to properly kneel as the rites required, it looked like Denys was their guy. Dirrt would make a pastoral visit tomorrow. The administrators didn't like it, but the Supreme Court had upheld the Savs' solicitation rights, "in furtherance of paramount spiritual objectives." They made Ed wear that embarrassing identifying collar, and restricted him to two hours in the morning, when most of the patients were still a little foggy, but they could never keep him entirely out.

Ed made sure to put on a good front the next morning. He trimmed and waxed his Vandyke to a razor point, pulled back his hair with some styling cream and dusted off his black Nehru duster. He was every inch the holy man as he walked through the virtual door of the St. Eponymous Longevity Center. A small mob jostled for position at the Diagnostikon™ self-serve kiosk, scrambling for the various medicinal lichens and mosses, Omnium poultices and shock stix it doled out for their tokens. He felt like he knew these people, the long-haired merlins, the unshaven down-siders, the bespectacled university types, who felt sure enough about their alternative fixes they could no longer justify expensive, time-consuming professional treatment. He caught a few condescending glances and a sharpish shoulder to the sternum, but he kept his bearings and pointed toward the elevators. A tall woman with stylish periwinkle hair, factory-perfect breasts shrink-wrapped in the folds of a tiger-striped jumpsuit, handed out sample infusion packs of the new sex drugs – Fervistat, Propulsia – and slipped Ed a glance he read as embarrassed. On the third floor, at General Registration, he approached an officious-looking nurse who scanned his clothes up-and-down



with sort of distaste a Border Conflict veteran might have for an Unfit-to-Serve. It was all right. He was accustomed, and had learned to relax and enjoy the scorn.

*--Landesmann, she mumbled, flipping virtual pages in the register, that's Epidemiology, Room 1224. Please observe the posted time limits.*

Of all the various departments, Ed found Epi the most dispiriting, with its calming sea-foam green walls, its pervasive odor of disinfectant, the constant whine of the glove and gown shredder. It all made him feel unclean. 1224 was a double, the mod near the door covered with an iso-tent inside which curled a small, elderly person of indeterminate gender. Ed peeked behind the sani-mesh curtain at the far mod and tapped on the safety rail in lieu of knocking. In these matters, he had learned, refined manners always made things easier.

He was shocked by what he saw. There, before him, lay a youngish woman – Denyse, not Denys – black-haired, broad-shouldered as an ex-athlete, hollow cheeks bracketing piercing turquoise eyes that hunger had pulled gently back into dark orbital shadows. Her hand floated in the air as if remembering something it had once clung to. Most unnerving of all, she had an inquisitive expression, as if she had been waiting for him with prepared questions.

*--A visitor. And a tall, dark stranger to boot. I would have liked to look a little more...together...*

Ed hated being put in a position to dispense compliments. Saying led to feeling and feeling to believing, and then, to wanting.

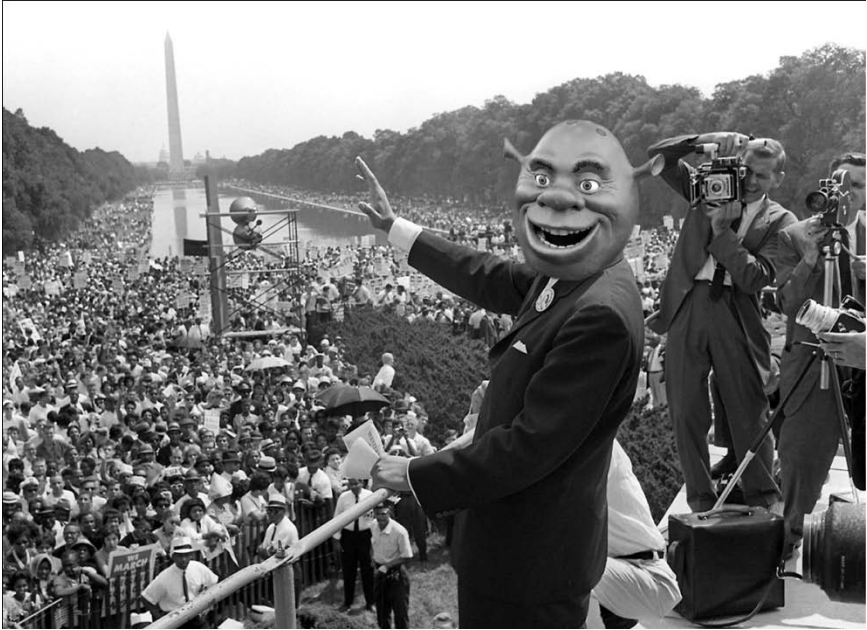
*--Oh, you look wonderful. Fact is, I was expecting to see some sickly little man. It was a little startling.*

*--Bennie of having a man's name. The boys are always pleasantly surprised. Mother's way of giving the raw-boned child a leg up.*

So there would be a little extra tonight, Ed thought. Maybe some penalty stones under his side of the mattress. Denys had nervous, fluid features that changed with tricks of the shifting sunlight. Ed imagined that her moment of perfection had been fleeting, and when she stared thoughtfully out at the starlings on Reconciliation Square, he imagined she was trying to recreate in her imagination that transient moment, before care and illness had begun to weather her. Against every instinct, Ed found himself shaken,

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moved.



--Ms. Landesmann, he sputtered, *I guess it's fairly clear from the...*, he showily fingered the crimson religious visitors' yoke, *that I am here in a...representative capacity.*

--*Here to save my soul?* Denys smiled in a way that was not altogether friendly.

--*Uh, well, no,* Ed sputtered, *we were rather hoping you would deign to help us with ours.* The farther he got into his pitch, the more momentum he gathered, the more welcoming the terrain became. He explained the nature of Man as Holy Experiment, the series of miscues that began at Eden (a tale he softened to avoid misogynistic overtones) and continued through all the wars, crimes and unconsummated schemes of the race. Denys seemed to be searching for interstices in his exegesis as he described the great obstacle course of the world, dotted with beauty and harmony and pleasure on which sojourners could stumble on the way from trial to trial, and how history's most pious and godly men (*people*, he corrected) were