


**BY T.J. ELLIOTT
& JOE QUEENAN**

**DIRECTED BY
JOHN CLAY**

**WITH
KATHLEEN HUBER*
JACK FARRELL
AARON LONG**



ALMS

ALMS

A Play in One Act

By

T.J. Elliott and Joe Queenan

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*Knowledge Workings Theater first
produced Alms in May of 2019 at
TheaterLab in New York City*

John Clay -- Director

*Marjorie Phillips Elliott -- Executive
Producer*

Cast

Brian McKenzie - Aaron Long

*Sister Catherine Imelda - Kathleen
Huber*

Martin Mahoney - Jack Farrell

CHARACTERS

Brian McKenzie, an enthusiastic Midnight Run volunteer in his thirties

Sister Catherine Imelda, a seventy-seven-year-old nun in charge of the Midnight Run

Martin Mahoney, a 'retired' sportswriter in his sixties

[NOTE: dialogue ending with this symbol '...//' indicates that the next character speaking overlaps that line in their reply.]

A church basement with two tables and entrances both stage right and stage left. The former leads to the stairs to the church proper. The latter leads to its parking lot. Some janitorial tool—a broom, a bucket, some rags—lean against the wall stage left.

Early April, 9pm, the day before Palm Sunday

BRIAN, in his mid-30s, dressed in well-appointed business-casual attire, stands stage right at a table assembling toiletry bags. He is a model of assembly-line efficiency, lining up the different types of small bottles, and then moving them into plastic baggies. He meticulously Ziplocs each bag prior to placing it carefully in the box on the floor.
SISTER CATHERINE IMELDA enters from stage right, tall and erect despite being in her mid-to-late 70s, wearing severe eyeglasses and a modern habit.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

Are we forsaken tonight?
Utterly forsaken?

BRIAN

Sometimes they come late,
Sister.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

(Nodding) The Good Lord
will provide. He always
does.

She exits, and BRIAN continues his efficient operation. MARTIN, in his sixties, dressed in faded jeans and a sweatshirt, enters from stage left with a well-stuffed black garbage bag filled with unsorted toiletries of the type provided by hotel chains.

MARTIN

Hey.

BRIAN

(Overly enthusiastic) Good evening!

MARTIN

Is this where this goes?

BRIAN

Toiletries or food?

MARTIN

Toiletries. Tons of them. My wife collects them when she's on the road.

BRIAN

Nice! We sure can use them.

MARTIN

So, where do you want them?

BRIAN

In the baggies. Like this.

Holds up one of the Ziploc bags.

MARTIN

Rita said it was just in and out.

BRIAN

Right. But the bottles still need to be sorted into individual kits.

With one hand, he points to a poster behind him that shows the various steps comprising the kit assembly, and with the other holds up a baggie.

You know—for the Midnight Run.

MARTIN looks confused.

The Mission of Mercy for the Homeless?

Back to bagging while MARTIN watches.

MARTIN

That looks pretty complicated.

BRIAN

It's easier to hand out as an individualized packet.

MARTIN

Individualized.

Nods his head.

And where do they go
before someone puts them
in the baggies, according to
the official Catholic Boy
Scout manual up there?

BRIAN

That table is fine.

*Goes back to his assembling. MARTIN
observes him for a moment.*

MARTIN

Are you the only one
packing?

BRIAN

There's Sister, but she's
mostly supervising.

Looks at his watch.

Oh, boy. Running out of
time.

Points to MARTIN's bag.

Oh, I should get your name.

*Grabs a pen and a clipboard and moves over
to shake MARTIN's hand.*

I'm Brian McKenzie.

Warily, MARTIN shakes his hand.

MARTIN

Martin. Martin Mahoney.

BRIAN writes this down.

My wife is really the donor.
Rita. Make sure she gets the
credit. She's saving up for a
plenary indulgence. This
delivery might put her over
the top.

BRIAN

A what?

MARTIN

A plenary indulgence.

BRIAN

Is that some kind of tax
deduction thing?

MARTIN

A plenary indulgence. Come
on.

Rattles off the definition rapidly.

A remission before God of
the temporal punishment
due to sins whose guilt has
already been forgiven.

BRIAN

(Suddenly recognizing the term.) Oh, right. Indulgences. Martin Luther. John Tetzel.
(Grimaces.) I'm studying that in church history but
(Gestures.) I didn't make the connection. *(Beat.)* You were joking.

MARTIN

Don't tell my wife that.

BRIAN

Puzzled and smiling.

Over my head. Sorry, we're driving down to the South Bronx tonight.

Enthusiastic.

Sister says the Bronx is the poorest part of New York.

MARTIN

I grew up there. The blight at the end of the tunnel.

BRIAN

Really? You lived in the Bronx?

MARTIN

Somebody had to...

BRIAN

Sister taught there! She retired here but keeps on going back with the "Run". I think it's because The Bronx has the most homeless.

MARTIN

Everyone's good at something. Even da Bronx.

BRIAN

(Rambling) Sister has us go under the bridges, out into the pocket parks. People come out like some sort of zombie movie. Not that they are zombies; the poor are *definitely* still human beings. *(Looks at watch again)* Oh boy, gotta pick up the pace here. Sister will...//

MARTIN

Wallop you with the steel ruler?

BRIAN looks very puzzled.

BRIAN

No. When I said—I just meant Sister will be disappointed if we're late. She runs a tight ship around here.

MARTIN

And you're the sole swabbie?

BRIAN

(Talking while filling bags)
Well, so far tonight. But generally, we get a good little group in here. The Devlins. Frank DeLuis brings his son Michael.

Blank-faced, MARTIN does not recognize these names.

He's a deacon. Tom and Eileen Landers? They're all Run regulars. You know them?

MARTIN

I'm more of a Dawn Patrol kind of guy.

BRIAN

Do you belong to Saint Aquinas?

MARTIN

Nah, I'm more of an episodic Catholic. Binge at Christmas and Easter. Hit the ashes on Ash Wednesday, Holy Hour on Good Friday. Midnight mass, at least through the Carols. And then I dry out until my next spiritual bender.

BRIAN looks attentive, like he is trying to understand all of this, but is very puzzled and it shows.

MARTIN stays deadpan as BRIAN studies his face.

BRIAN

I should really get back to this. (*Overly solicitous*) Sister tells people to drop off the stuff in packets. Gave out the flyer after all the masses last week. (*With emphasis*) By herself. Standing there from seven AM until one PM. She's amazing. But it's all good. I get it, you didn't see the flyer.

MARTIN

(*Looks at his watch*) I'm pretty sure that it's not all good right now and that it is rarely, if ever, all good. But I'll give you a hand.

He grabs a box of baggies from BRIAN's table and walks back over to the other table, where he dumps out the contents of his large black plastic garbage bag.

BRIAN

You are a godsend. Thanks so much, Martin. The rules are up there.

Again, points to the poster.

MARTIN

The rules. Canon law even extends to this? *(Reads)* Shampoo, conditioner, soap, toothpaste, toothbrush. Hang on a second—no night cream? No clay mask? No exfoliating lotion?

BRIAN

(Confused for a moment) Ha. No. Just the basics. But sorted, like it says. *(Points to the poster)* And we do snack packs too.

MARTIN

Anything tasty?

BRIAN

(Laughing) If you like peanut butter and crackers, cheddar cheese and crackers, cream cheese, chives, and crackers. Not very nourishing, but better than nothing. That's what Father said at mass last Sunday. He compared the sacred host to these sandwich crackers. It was deep. Deep. You might not have heard that sermon.

MARTIN

No problem; Rita probably taped it.

BRIAN

So, Rita is the practicing Catholic in the family?

MARTIN

All Catholics are practicing Catholics. So yes, I'm Catholic. Irish Catholic, in fact. The New York Yankees of the One True Church. Also based in The Bronx. (They keep working on the bags. Martin is determined to keep up with Brian but does so sloppily)

BRIAN

I'm just curious, because I haven't met a Catholic like you. No offense.

MARTIN

But I've met Catholics like you. No offense.

BRIAN

(Laughs) Just trying to reconcile what you say with what our teachers teach. I mean last week, what was it? "You must eat the flesh of the God and drink the wine... "//

MARTIN

“Truly, truly, I say to you,
unless you eat the flesh of
the Son of Man and drink
His blood, you have no life in
you.” *(Pause)* The Gospel
According to John.

BRIAN

Yes, that’s it exactly. How
did you know that if you
didn’t go to mass?

MARTIN

My wife takes notes.

BRIAN

What a good person!

MARTIN

(Nodding) And don’t think
she doesn’t know it. The
doctors call it pathological
altruism.

BRIAN

You really don’t go with her
to mass on Sunday?

MARTIN

No. My wife and I have a basic procedural disagreement on the subject of worship. At the Last Supper, Jesus tells the disciples: "Do this in memory of me." But He doesn't say how often. Remember, this is God talking here. God's looking at infinity. And He apparently has a very long memory. From that perspective, one mass is not too few, a million are not too many. So, you might say that I'm just milking the clock.

BRIAN

That sounds like Buddhism to me.

MARTIN

Milking the clock? I don't think so.

BRIAN

No, the thing about one
mass not being too few, a
million not being too many.
That's like Nichiren Shosū
Buddhism. (*Dreamily*) One
Daimoku is not too few, one
million Daimoku is not too
many. (*Sees that Martin is
now the puzzled one*) *Nam
myōhō renge kyōho.*
Chanting? Lotus sutra?

MARTIN

How do you know all this
stuff? George Harrison get to
you as a kid?

BRIAN

I studied Buddhism. (*Big
smile*) Made the rounds of
the world's great religions
before finally settling upon
Holy Mother Church.
Nothing else ever clicked. No
passion. And then...
(*Gestures to the church
above*) this. And you? Ever
experiment with other
faiths?

MARTIN

(Seeking to keep up filling bags while they talk) Nah, I swore off experiments after that deadly batch of LSD I cooked up in chemistry lab in high school. I've been a Catholic – and only a Catholic — since the moment I was conceived as a result of my mother's catastrophic misreading of a rhythm-method pamphlet.

BRIAN

So, you're a cradle catholic.

MARTIN

I'm a what? *(Even sloppier bag-filling)*

BRIAN

Someone who was born into the faith and therefore didn't actually have to choose his faith.

MARTIN

A cradle catholic? Catchy. Who came up with that one?

BRIAN

I don't know. It just means that you didn't have to find the Church; the Church found you. Not that I'm making a value judgment here. (*Laughs self-consciously*)

MARTIN

Right.

BRIAN

But, if you love the Lord our God with all your heart, mind, and strength, wouldn't you want to spend that tiny amount of time each week at Mass?

MARTIN

Kind of a trick question there, Brian. Only God is Lord over the consciences of men. Saint Augustine said that, I think.

BRIAN

(*Aghast at the way MARTIN is filling the bags*) That's wrong. Completely wrong. (*MARTIN looks confused.*)

MARTIN

I'm pretty sure it was Saint Augustine.

BRIAN

Not that, the way you're filling the bags. (*Points to the poster*)

MARTIN

(*Looks at the poster, then back at the bags then back at the poster, back at the bags*)
Hey, I'm doing my best here.

BRIAN

(*Keeps pointing to poster*)
Sister Catherine wants the moisturizing conditioner to go with the moisturizing shampoo and the oily hair conditioner to go with the oily hair shampoo. (*MARTIN looks at BRIAN with a mixture of pity and amusement*) Those are the rules.

MARTIN

These are for the homeless, right? (*BRIAN nods*) Living under bridges, sleeping in rat-infested squats?

BRIAN

I know, I know. Sister is
pretty strict.

MARTIN

So, just to recap: Someone
living in a cardboard box,
begging twelve hours a day
with the most horrible
people in the history of the
world stepping over him.
Worse: pretending that he's
not even there. Suffers from
bug bites, rashes, open head
wounds. Dirt caked from his
ankles to his eyes,
hallucinates that he's still in
the mosh pit at an April 23,
1971 Grateful Dead concert.
With New Riders of the
Purple Sage as the opening
act. No, Poco. And this
dainty little sack is
bestowed upon him, he
takes it, and examines it
carefully and then he says:
"Excuse me; point of order,
Your Worship. I think you've
given me the wrong
conditioner. I'm the guy
with the terribly dry hair."

BRIAN

We don't just *give* it to them.
Sister Catherine Imelda
insists that we let them
choose.

MARTIN

Sister Catherine Imelda?
(*Pondering the name*)

BRIAN

She says that humans have
free will. We need to
empower them by letting
them know that they have
all sorts of choices.

MARTIN

Conditioner is empowering?
(*Strokes his hair*) If only I'd
known sooner.

BRIAN

Sister Catherine does this
with everything. All of us are
free to make good or bad
choices.

MARTIN

Sister Catherine Imelda says
that?

BRIAN

All the time. And then right after it she says, "But there was only one perfect man, and they crucified him."

MARTIN

(Stunned) Only one perfect man and they crucified him. Good material. Old school. What does she look like?

BRIAN

Sister? Very old: Late seventies, but sharp.

MARTIN

So, like fifteen years older than me? Completely Paleolithic?

BRIAN

(Nodding and continuing)
No, I didn't mean it that way. I meant, well, she's still really active for someone... who's not so young anymore. But she's strong. If I don't stop Sister, she'd load the car all by herself.

MARTIN

Strong? Death ray stare?
Like the sadistic prison
guard in a 1930s black-and-
white movie?

BRIAN

No! (*Horried*) Sister is a
saint. She's just serious, very
intense. Super-focused, like
Mother Teresa even.

MARTIN

"From silly devotions, and
sour-faced saints, good Lord,
deliver us." (*BRIAN looks
puzzled and more than a
little concerned.*) That's from
a real saint. Saint Teresa of
Avila.

BRIAN

You certainly know your
stuff: the indulgences, the
saints. Impressive.

MARTIN

Not bad for a cradle catholic,
right? Catholic college. Back
when you still had to take
Theology, not the *I Ching*.

BRIAN

I love the saints. Love them.
Which saint were you
named after? (*Now it's
MARTIN who looks confused*)
Saint Martin of Tours?
Martin De Poor-hez?

MARTIN

(*Pronouncing correctly*) It's
De Porres. Then, of course,
there was Saint Martin, the
patron saint of not shutting
the fuck up.

BRIAN

Whoa! They have a saint for
that?

MARTIN

Saint Martin. Elected Pope in
649. Persecuted.
Imprisoned. Tortured.
Couldn't stop running at the
mouth. Ticked people off.
Martyred in 655 AD. Cradle
catholic.

BRIAN

I was a little disappointed
that there's no Saint Brian.
Well, not exactly. There is
one: Bryan of Arrowsmith,

MARTIN

Aerosmith? Dude like a lady?

BRIAN

Arrowsmith. And it was Bryan with a "Y."

MARTIN

Leaves a nice opening for you to be that first Saint Brian. With an "I."

BRIAN

(Embarrassed) No, thanks. For the record, that Bryan was hanged, drawn and quartered for the faith.

MARTIN

And your mother knew all this? When she named you Brian? Must have been one tough pregnancy.

BRIAN

Oh, no! She named me after
some character named Brian
in a movie she saw. She
wasn't religious. More of a
film club person. (*Shrugs*)
Died young. But when I
started to think about
converting, I wanted to find
some sort of saintly
connection. I mean... (*Quite
enthusiastic*) Saints!!! Sister
chose her saint when she
went into the convent:
Catherine of Alexandria.
Martyr.

MARTIN

Natch.

BRIAN

And Imelda was a medieval Italian saint who one day gets this incredible vision of the host coming to her, and then she dies in this spectacular ecstasy of pure spiritual love and passion. (Sees that Martin is still just shoving the little bottles helter-skelter into the baggies.) Oh, you have to fix those. Sister isn't going to let us take them that way.

MARTIN

I'm kind of immersed in my own spectacularly intense baggie-filling ecstasy right now. "The conditioner you shall always have with you."

*Door behind MARTIN opens:
SISTER enters; she looks at
Brian, then Martin and goes over
to examine his pile of bags.*

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

This is wrong. All wrong.
*(Holds up a baggie and spills
its contents in front of Martin
and then holds up another
one for inspection)* Wrong.
*(Again, she spills its contents
before picking up another
one to examine)* This one is
right. *(Now looking intently
at Martin)* One for three
might get you a spot on the
Yankees, but it doesn't get
the job done here.

MARTIN

*(Picks up his other bags and
puts them into a box on the
table)* Actually, *(Staring at
her)* I'm a Mets fan.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

(Winces) Well, we can't make errors around here at the rate the New York Mets do. *(Gestures toward the poster with the instructions)* Follow the rules.

BRIAN

Sister, that's my fault. This is his first time. He brought this huge stash of little bottles his wife collects. And then he volunteered to help.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

Everyone always means well when they come here. But the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, We leave in under an hour. Let's pick up the pace.

She and MARTIN both look each other over very carefully. SISTER exits with a box through the door to the outside

MARTIN

Jesus, it's her.

BRIAN

Who?

MARTIN

My eighth-grade
schoolteacher.

BRIAN

No! Are you sure? She
recognized you?

MARTIN

We had a moment.

BRIAN

This is amazing.

MARTIN

Well, I'm certainly amazed,
Brian-o.

BRIAN

You should be! It's a kind of grace. You wander in and decide to stay to do good works and then you're reunited with your old teacher. It's like a personal miracle. (He moves a completed box over to exit area where other boxes are stacked)

MARTIN

Yeah, a miracle, like when a Nazi hunter just happens to run into an SS *einsatzgruppen oberkommandant* while walking down the street in Buenos Aires. (*BRIAN recoils at this comment. MARTIN stuffs the toiletries back into the baggies with even less precision*) I almost didn't recognize her without the (*Gestures*) wimple and the habit and the cape. It's like seeing Eichmann out of uniform. But those eyes, that voice. I'd know them anywhere. It's her.

BRIAN

You and Sister didn't get
along?

MARTIN

People like me didn't get
along with nuns. But back
then, the church was
different — at least for us
cradle Catholics.

BRIAN

I didn't mean to offend you
with that term. It's just
something they say in class
to distinguish between those
of us who are converting
and those ...//

MARTIN

Who take our faith for
granted? That's okay. The
people teaching you... I
know the type...//

BRIAN

The number of things we
have to learn is phenomenal.

MARTIN

And how are you doing? Top
of the class, I bet?

BRIAN

I think I'm ready for the next step.

MARTIN

What are they teaching you?

BRIAN

The catechesis — the teachings. I'm past the catechumen's stage, did my rite of election. Almost done with the scrutinies. And then... God willing...

MARTIN

(Ignoring him) What did they give you to study? Baltimore Catechism? The Acts of the Apostles? *The One True Faith for Dummies?*

BRIAN

(Taking a slightly superior tone) I'm pretty sure the Baltimore Catechism is out of date. We get books, PDFs, so we can read the material online. All about the Trinity, the sacraments, Church law.

MARTIN

Seven deadly sins? Seven dwarfs? Seven sacraments? Come on: out with them.

BRIAN

(Starts to recite) Baptism,
Confirmation, Eucharist,
Penance, Anointing of the
Sick. Matrimony...//

MARTIN

(Interrupting) Anointing of
the Sick? Anointing of the
Sick? They're not sick;
they're dying. What kind of
New Age bunkum is that?
Are you talking about
Extreme Unction? Well,
don't water it down. It's
Extreme Unction, not
Intermediary Unction. Real
Catholicism, Brian, is an
extreme sport and real
Catholics call it Extreme
Unction. We are the X games
of religion: original sin,
celibacy, hair shirts,
drinking of blood, martyrs.
No other religion is even
close to us when it comes to
martyrs. Gory to God in the
highest.

BRIAN

Isn't that supposed to be
glory to God? (*Catching on*)
Oh, right. Well, since you
ask, our classes are all about
the profession of faith,
celebration of the Christian
mystery, living our lives in
Christ, prayer. And the rules
of the Church: Those are
super-important.

MARTIN

Rules? That's not faith.
That's membership. Faith is
believing when you have no
reason to believe.

BRIAN

That doesn't make sense.
(*Doubting himself*) Does it?
(*Resumes packing*)

MARTIN

Who said being Catholic
should make sense?
*(Stuffing the bags so that
they form a precarious pile
on the table)* I'm just saying
that being Catholic — really
Catholic — it's not for the
queasy, me bucko. Real
Catholics can stomach St.
Matthew being blinded by
drills into his eyes, Isaac
Jogues getting his fingers
gnawed off by the Iroquois,
and Saint Barnabas being
stoned and burned and
dismembered — although
not necessarily in that order
— with bones and entrails
strewn about everywhere.

BRIAN

This is pretty different from
the Catholicism I've been
learning. Our focus is more...
cerebral....//

MARTIN

By the way, a professional,
well-handled stoning
provides an excellent source
of collectible souvenir relics.
Case in point: St.
Bartholomew. Flayed alive
by the Armenians?
Armenians, what can I tell
you? Things always get out
of hand with those guys. No,
real Catholics don't flinch
looking at those paintings of
him, in the Sistine Chapel,
holding strands of his own
skin before the heathens
behead him. (*Beat*) Patron
saint of tanners, by the way.

*The door to the outside opens
again and SISTER CATHERINE
IMELDA returns. She looks more
carefully at MARTIN this time.*

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

There seems to be more talk
than work going on in here.

MARTIN

Brian and I were discussing
Church history, Sister.

*BRIAN busily grabs filled boxes
to stack at exit.*

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

Am I supposed to know you?

MARTIN

Do you know me, Sister?
Sister CATHERINE IMELDA

(Shrugs) St. Anthony's.
Richardson Avenue.

MARTIN

Right borough, wrong
corner. St. Jerome's.
Graduated. 1965.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

Doesn't ring a bell.

MARTIN

Give it time, Sister.

She looks at him for a long moment and then exits again, taking a box outside.

BRIAN

That's too bad. I was really hoping that Sister would remember you.

MARTIN

It'll come to her. Trust me.

BRIAN

There weren't a lot of active Catholics where I grew up. There wasn't much religion at all outside of the temple

SISTER returns, striding briskly to where MARTIN is leaning up against the table and puts her nose right into his face.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

Altar boy.

MARTIN

*(Folds his hands in prayer
and then genuflects)* Introibo
ad altare Dei: I go to the
altar of God. *Ad Deum qui
laetificat juventutem meam:*
To God, the joy of my youth.
(Smiles) Got a dime for an
old Altar boy, Sister?

BRIAN

How did you learn to speak
Latin like that?

MARTIN

Cradle catholic thing, kiddo.
(Extends his hand to Sister)
My feelings were getting
hurt wondering if you were
going to remember me,
Sister. *(She takes his hand
and shakes it warily)*

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

I am seventy-seven ears old.
Seventy-seven. I'm lucky to
remember my own name.
(Looks at MARTIN again)
1965. St. Jerome's.
Alexander Avenue. The
Bronx. The Mass was still in
Latin?

MARTIN

It changed after you kicked
me off the altar boys.
Though the events were
probably not directly
related.

*SISTER does not react, but moves
to the stack of boxes. BRIAN is
confused by what was said.*

BRIAN

Must feel quite special to
meet someone you taught
over fifty years ago.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

Special? (*Eyes MARTIN*) Oh,
there were so many
students. Too many. Besides,
I didn't stick with the
teaching. (*She starts to pick
up a box*)

MARTIN

No memory at all? Just my
pride making me think I had
some special quality, I guess.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

Pride goeth before a fall.

BRIAN

I know that one. Old
Testament. Right?

MARTIN

"Pride goeth before
destruction, and a haughty
spirit before a fall." Proverbs
16:18. To be absolutely
precise.

BRIAN

For a Catholic, you sure can nail those Old Testament quotes. (*Seeks to explain*) One of our teachers said that quoting Scripture is usually kind of a fundamentalist thing.

MARTIN

(*Ignoring BRIAN and following SISTER, while resuming stuffing bags*) Did he? Well, now. Just for the record, Brian, pride is one of the seven deadly sins. Learned that in Sister's class. "Lucifer Glares, Grandma Slowly Writes Endless Prayers" Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy, Pride. (*To BRIAN*) And pride includes presumption, hypocrisy, hardheartedness. See what a good teacher Sister was?

BRIAN

I do.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

If you're the proof of my
superb teaching, God forgive
me. Do you still live in the
parish?

MARTIN

(Shaking head) Eventually,
my mother got us out of The
Bronx. You remember my
mother: Maeve Mahoney?
(SISTER shakes her head) I
graduated college — English
major. Managed to miss out
on both Vietnam and
Woodstock. Stayed out of
jail, too.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

That says more about the
goodness of your mother.
And father. *(MARTIN stares
harder at her)* And now?

MARTIN

I'm an involuntarily retired sportswriter with three grown children who generally seem to tolerate me. None of them ever missed a meal. All of them graduated from college, (*SISTER indicates she seeks more information*) And I've been married for almost forty years. (*Emphatically*) Without the help of any marriage counseling. Professional or otherwise.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

That says more about the goodness of your wife. So, are you a good man? (*Taps her chest hard*) In here?

MARTIN

Now there's a trick question
if there ever was one. No
one is good but God alone,
right, Sister? (*To BRIAN*)
Mark, 10:18. (*To SISTER*
again) There was only one
perfect man, Sister. And look
what happened to Him.

BRIAN

You are like a walking
Google Books Bible. (*To*
SISTER) Martin is amazing,
isn't he, Sister? We should
get him to help teach the
Rite of Christian Initiation
classes. (*Keeps filling*
baggies, automatically)

SISTER

CATHERINE

IMELDA

(*Ignoring BRIAN and*
regarding MARTIN carefully)
No, no, no. Those bags are all
wrong. (*MARTIN sweeps*
them into one of the empty
cardboard boxes)

MARTIN

“Kill them all, Let God sort them out!” The conditioner, I mean.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

Oh, I see, Mr. Clever Quotes is in the room! Well, if you're going to be spouting sayings from some obscure 12th century French monk, at least get it right. “Kill them all. God will recognize his own.”

MARTIN

That's not the way the Hell's Angels print it on their t-shirts. And it's thirteenth century.

BRIAN

(Perplexed) I can fix them, Sister. *(Makes a move to do so, but SISTER slightly flustered, puts up her hand to stop him)*

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

We have enough of those anyway. Let's do some more of the crackers. (*Starts to kick a box to the side, but BRIAN hustles it off to the car*) So, you came to give alms to the poor? (*BRIAN reenters immediately and then repeats his quick exit*)

MARTIN

No, just to drop off toiletries. But Brian looked like he needed a little help. And miracle of miracles, we are reunited. Amazing grace, isn't it, Sister? Like Matthew 18:12-14 — the Lost Sheep?

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

Why not the Prodigal Son?
Luke 15:11-32

MARTIN

Or Saint Paul: "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." (*Claps his hands*) Sudden destruction.

BRIAN

(Returning again) This is like a Roman Catholic quiz show! How do you two have all this scripture memorized?

MARTIN

Catholic indoctrination from kindergarten all the way through college — even summer school. Then so many seasons on the road covering losing teams in dreary hotel rooms with nothing but a Bible to distract me. Well, that and Fox News. A head for obscure stats didn't hurt.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

Were you always (Gestures, searching for words) this way?

MARTIN

Forced retirement added the finishing touches to the masterpiece. But you're still about the Lord's business, right?

BRIAN

(Returning to the tables with the new supplies of crackers, carrots, etc.) It's a blessing to have you, Martin. *(Both MARTIN and SISTER give him a long look)*

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

(Pointing to BRIAN) He's a millionaire, this one. An honest-to-goodness millionaire.

BRIAN

I don't think Martin cares about that. *(Goes downstage briefly to bring more water bottles to the tables)*

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

And he comes down here to help me. Volunteers out of the goodness of his own heart. Not because his wife sent him.

MARTIN

You said he was *a*
millionaire. Just one?

BRIAN

(Embarrassed) I've been
Super-Blessed.

MARTIN

Oh. A multi-millionaire?

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

Is that any of your business?

MARTIN

Just making conversation to
help us pass the time. Or we
could sing instead.
Remember this golden oldie,
Sister? *(Begins to sing in a
rousing voice. BRIAN quite
enjoys this surprising display,
but SISTER becomes
increasingly agitated by the
singing)* *Tantum ergo
Sacramentum Veneremur
cernui: Et antiquum
documentum Novo cedat
ritui: Praestet fides
supplementum Sensuum
defectui. (Gathers his breath
to continue)*

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

For the love of God... It's
sacrilege to sing that as a
joke.

MARTIN

Sacrilege! That's what you
said when I sang it that way
in eighth grade. Remember?
You threw me out of religion
class. But I went to the
library and found a book
explaining exactly how Saint
Thomas Aquinas, who wrote
it, wanted it sung out. And
when I informed the whole
class, you were so happy.
Ecstatic. Coming back now?
(*No reaction*) Being here
with you and Brian is
bringing back that old-time
religion for me. *Laus et
jubilatio. Adeste fidelis. Dies
irae.* (to an increasingly
baffled Brian, while moving
some crackers and carrots
to his table so that he can
bag them) So, Brian, what
did you do to earn your
millions?

BRIAN

I created a predictive algorithm for a shopping network. (He is back at his table)

MARTIN

A predictive algorithm! Was it a mystical algorithm?

BRIAN

(Dismissive) There's no such thing. Algorithms are just sets of rules that do their logical operations the way you write them. There's nothing mystical about it.

MARTIN

But lucrative.

BRIAN

(Reluctantly) Yes, for which I now thank God, because in a way it led me here. Sister says: God writes straight... *(Waiting with a smile for her to finish it)*

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

... in crooked lines.

BRIAN

But that's all behind me
now.

MARTIN

Why? You could be the
patron saint of predictive
algorithms. (*SISTER snorts
derisively and crosses over to
stack of boxes*) So, how many
millions?

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

Stop badgering him.

MARTIN

(*To BRIAN*) Oh, come on,
how many? Sorry, being a
journalist for so many years,
I simply can't stop asking
questions.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

Journalist? Journalist?
(*Carrying two boxes, she
starts to leave shooing
BRIAN away as he attempts
to take them away from her*)
You weren't a journalist; you
were a sportswriter. (Exits.)

BRIAN

Hey, Martin, go easy on
Sister, please?

MARTIN

Sure. (*Pause in bagging*)
Moving right along then,
how many millions?

BRIAN

Look, Martin...

MARTIN

Fess up. Come on.

BRIAN

Okay. Okay. (*Pause, then in a
low voice*) Fifty. (*MARTIN
whistles and reacts wildly*)
But it's not important
because I'm giving it all
away.

MARTIN

Fifty? (*Draws in the air*) Fifty
million? And you're giving it
all away? Not to her, I hope?

BRIAN

Sister? No. I mean she
suggested some of the
charities, but it's basically
going to the poor.

MARTIN

(Silence and then softly)
Alms to the poor.

BRIAN

(Enthusiastic) That's what Sister called it. Alms to the poor. *(Smiling, as if waiting for another expected question)* Don't you want to know why?

MARTIN

(Shakes his head) Maybe later. *(He contemplates the items to be inserted into the snack bags. Then, while BRIAN has his head down bagging, he pitches one of the food packets at him, who eliciting a shocked reaction)*

MARTIN

Fifty million! Now turn the other cheek so I can get a shot at that one. *(Aims while BRIAN defends himself)*

BRIAN

Hey, Sister is going to come in here.

MARTIN

Sister! She's out there laughing hysterically. Juggling little bottles of goo in here in the middle of the night because I felt sorry for you. And then it turns out that you're worth fifty million bucks. Trust me, St. Brian of Briarcliff, the meter is running. You're getting a bill for my services in the morning (*Looking more directly at Brian, who is smiling widely*) Just for the record, are you enjoying this?

BRIAN

(*Resuming bagging*) In a way. To have someone working alongside you makes everything go faster. And for all your joking around, I get you. Only a good person would stay to help at this hour.

MARTIN

You get me? (*Sorting his items into piles but distractedly*) I think consorting with your fellow algorithmaniacs all day long has warped your mind. You sound like my mom, another cheerfully delusional introvert.

BRIAN

This is not about reality. It's about charity, Mister Cradle Catholic. And you should know that. (*Intoning while pausing work*) "So faith, hope, charity abide, these three. But the greatest of these is charity."

MARTIN

(*Resuming his bagging, but hesitantly*) Personal question: Have you been scanned for a brain tumor? Any history of premature dementia in your family? Honest, Brian, I think you need to get this thing checked out.

BRIAN

(Patiently but still amusedly)

That last quote was from St. Paul. See, I knew one! I even put it on my Facebook page.

(Reciting but eagerly)

“Charity is patient and kind,

(MARTIN pitches another packet but BRIAN catches this one) charity is not

jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. *(Another packet thrown, and BRIAN recites more quickly)* Charity

does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; *(MARTIN pitches another packet; again, a nice catch)* it does not rejoice at

wrong but rejoices in the right. Charity bears all things, *(MARTIN makes as if to pitch another packet but stops; BRIAN finishes strongly)* Believes all things,

hopes all things, endures all things.”

MARTIN

You forgot the part about “Charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.” I think that was Ben and Jerry’s original motto. (*Looking confusedly at his piles and bags*) No, Tom’s of Maine. Anyway, what are we actually doing here?

BRIAN

(*Smiling, he indicates another instructional illustration poster*) More of those different rules you like so much. (*Smiles*) Yes, coders do sarcasm. (*Demonstrating*) Packages of crackers, small bags of baby carrots, and small bottles of water. And Sister’s rules on organization. (*MARTIN regards a package of peanut butter crackers and then starts to open it. BRIAN looks at him in alarm*)

MARTIN

Sister's rules. Organization.
*(With a cracker in his mouth,
he begins to assemble these
packets throughout BRIAN's
instructions with even less
caution than the previous
batch)*

BRIAN

*(Frowning at what MARTIN
is doing)* It's pretty simple.
Peanut butter crackers, a
bag of baby carrots, one
bottle of water in one
baggie. Cheese and crackers.
The same thing. And if you
come across these little
packages of salami? Just put
them in a baggie with a
bottle of water and carrots.

MARTIN

What's so special about the
carrots? *(Takes a bite and
then spits it across the floor)*
I bet these are a big hit.
*(Assembling these bags just
as quickly and haphazardly
as the previous batches)*

BRIAN

We try to promote healthy eating. (*Summoning his nerve*) Those are only supposed to be for...

MARTIN

(*Continuing to open the package*) Poor people?

BRIAN

Our recipients.

MARTIN

Our recipients? Nice touch. I guess Starbucks was already using "Guests." (*Eats one of the crackers*) Piquant.

BRIAN

But now there's less to share with the poor.

MARTIN

Don't worry. (*Takes out his wallet and extracts some singles*) For each one of these packets I eat I'm going to put a dollar bill in a bag. In fact, I'm going to put a dollar bill in a bag for every packet you eat as well. Hey! Why don't you stick a dollar bill inside fifty million individual baggies, Brian? With a little bottle of conditioner. For dry hair.

BRIAN

We don't give them money.

MARTIN

Them? You mean our recipients?

BRIAN

Sister says it's not a good idea.

MARTIN

(*Opening another package and putting another dollar into one of the food bags*) Then this will be our little secret. 49,999,999 to go.

BRIAN

When you hear the words “fifty million dollars,” it’s a shock. I understand that. That’s a lot of money for an algorithm.

MARTIN

Predictive algorithm, Brian.

BRIAN

Whatever. (*Resumes bagging*) Then the company got bought and it went public and all of a sudden, my stock was worth fifty million bucks.

MARTIN

Oh, like a gigantic sack of cash dropped out of the sky and landed on your head. Stop with the false modesty. You invented something worth fifty million dollars. Don’t you think that makes you a very unusual person?

BRIAN

For today. But tomorrow
someone will come along
and create a better
algorithm. (*Sees that
MARTIN is puzzled and
pauses bagging*) See all this
stuff: bottles, crackers,
toothbrushes. To an
algorithm, it's data. All a
predictive algorithm does is
spit out what the people
associated with this
mishmash of barcodes might
purchase. Algorithms are
just gossips. Tattle-tales.
Snitches. Dumpster-diving
reporters. (*Puts his hands up
defensively*)

MARTIN

Now we're getting personal.

BRIAN

My algorithm just analyzes “clicks” and “likes.” Then it predicts what everyone will want to see, even if they would swear to you they don’t want to see it. The algorithm calculates exactly when there’ll be a warming of the skin, a micro-smile, a little more blood rushing to the brain, when they think they’re happy. It’s not important. It’s a tool. That’s all.

MARTIN

Yeah, but a tool that... //

BRIAN

It’s code; it’s not a cure for cancer. And it won’t save anybody’s soul. And the money is just fifty million things getting in the way of what I really desire. It’s a distraction.

MARTIN

A distraction? Is that understatement or irony?

BRIAN

Coders don't do irony and we don't do understatement. But we are good at getting things done. (*Holds up a baggie*) The bags? Okay?

MARTIN

All right. (*Back to work mode, but agitated*) She really has you...

BRIAN

(*Reacting to MARTIN's look of disbelief*) I know that all this seems silly, but it's the way Sister organizes things. She's a super-good guide for me. In fact, I hope to take the vows as soon as I can. When she says that I'm ready.

MARTIN

You need a guide to take your baptismal vows?

BRIAN

The Baptismal vows are just the beginning. I have a calling to become... //

MARTIN

I can baptize you right here
and now. We have water.
*(Opens one of the water
bottles and holds it in one
hand)* So, we're good to go.
*(MARTIN places his hand on
BRIAN's shoulder, which
stops him from moving
away)* This whole operation
will only take about thirty
seconds. *(Goes into his
Baltimore Catechism voice)*
"Who can administer
baptism? The priest is the
usual minister of baptism,
but, if there is danger that
someone will die without
baptism, anyone else may
and should baptize." You *are*
driving to The Bronx
tonight, right? Talk about
risking your life for Christ!
Therefore, *(Sprinkles water
on BRIAN, who dances back)*
"I baptize thee in the name
of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost."

BRIAN

(Behind them, quietly, SISTER has reentered the room in response to the commotion and observes them) Hey, I don't have a change of clothes.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

So now Mr. Furloughed Sportswriter is John the Baptist. *(They whirl around and see her)* Well, he doesn't need your help. Brian already has Baptism of Desire: When someone loves God above all things and desires to do all that is necessary for salvation. *(To MARTIN, while pointing at BRIAN)* Anyone determined to take the other vows has that desire.

MARTIN

What other vows?

BRIAN

Obedience, chastity, and poverty.

MARTIN

Poverty, chastity, and
obedience. Get them in the
right order.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

He's joining the monastery.
Becoming a monk.

MARTIN

No way.

BRIAN

The Brothers of Mercy. A
partly cloistered order. If
they'll have me. But I have to
wait a year after being
baptized.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

At least a year.

MARTIN

Jesus. You kept on spinning
the religious roulette wheel
until you hit "Give away all
your money and become a
semi-cloistered monk"?

BRIAN

Sometimes I feel like I'm
dreaming all of this.

MARTIN

This is unlike any dream I
ever had. And I used to
smoke Lebanese Hash. (*To
SISTER*) That was long after
our relationship ended,
Sister.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

We never had a relationship.

BRIAN

You do have a wicked sense
of humor, Martin.

SISTER
CATHERINE
IMELDA

Wicked.

MARTIN

Why become a monk?
Because you're flat broke
after giving away fifty
million dollars?