

ASH WEDNESDAY

by C J Nolan
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As he coerces the last piece of hair into place, Jimmy turns his back on the mirror. He feels good. He is ready. He has on his heavy, navy blue t-shirt - no pocket, no crap on it - and his grey jeans and his black Cons. No support in these damn things, but they are comfortable. Close to the ground and ready to roll. Jimmy looks around him. The bed is made. The laundry away. Even the floor is swept, spotless. Mom would be pleased. Good. He is always neat, but this little extra effort makes all the difference. Next, Jimmy straps on his shoulder holster.

In his top bureau drawer, Jimmy searches for the holster's companion. The drawer is filled with socks, underwear, pins and papers. But what gives it its weight is a nine millimeter automatic. The gun feels awkward until he shoves a clip into the butt end. Perfect. Jimmy moved the gun to his bedroom more than a month ago, right before his mom and dad's last big fight. Dad is a "gun enthusiast", like they say in the papers, and had given Jimmy the automatic for his last birthday. "Target shooting only", he said with a wink. "Finest kind". Dad has his own plus an assortment of other hand guns, two shot guns, hunting knives and a standard U. S. Army rifle. He had a line on an AK 47 until they were banned. "Fucking politicians", he said.

As the late day sun sifts into Jimmy's room, the weapon took on a luster. Almost smiles at him, makes him feel whole. Jimmy even loves the sound it makes. At the target range, even with the mufflers on, he could hear the certainty of the gun. This is no clanking, metallic noise maker. The sound of a 9mm automatic is precise. Even articulate. It is a steady, brutish burst of air from a cold, steel cannon. He is very good, too. At thirty feet, Jimmy has no problem filling three consecutive shots into the black mass at the top of the target. Only three, though. Why waste it?

Jimmy checks the safety, then lays the gun to rest in the holster. He zips his leather jacket and looks once more into the mirror. O.K. He leaves the bedroom, locks the front door behind him

and walks out into the afternoon.

Bending down, he grabs the garage door handle and steadily raises the door. No electronic gizmos for such simple work. Muscle and bone will do. Electronics are for pussies, his Dad says. No video games, microwave ovens, leaf blowers, dishwashers, or VCR's. The only way to see a flick is in a goddamn movie theater, though the screens keep getting smaller and it sure is expensive. But anything pure costs.

His bike is a Cannondale 2.8. Top of the line American. This baby can run a Honda Civic off the fucking road. Jimmy walked around it - once, slowly. This is his vehicle. His freedom. The bike is immaculate right down to the chain. Even the deeply treaded tires were free from mud and gravel. Dirt impedes precision. Precision is everything. He strokes the handle bars. The chrome is cool and firm against his skin. The leather seat shines like sweat. Anything pure costs, but worth every penny.

He closes the garage door and mounts the bike in the driveway. Jimmy stops and looks back at the house. Locked and empty. Dad never did fix those shingles. Mom's flowers won't come up, despite her best efforts. And the cat is buried somewhere in the back yard. Why get sentimental? There are things to do. He rolls down the driveway and off toward the church.

Jimmy turns the corner on Peckman Lane, totally forgetting the Henderson's dog. The Henderson's are miserable people. Their house is ugly. Their yard is ugly. Their two miserable kids are ugly. They are a sore spot in the neighborhood. He doesn't know whether they are German or Polish, but Jimmy could understand why his dad despises them. But nothing - nothing - is as ugly and miserable as that damn dog. Ask anyone. It's face is pushed in and lumpy. Ears chewed. Body a shit yellow/brown with chunks missing. All shoulders and gargoyle feet. It is a beast - half-bred three times over and pissed as hell. And here it comes,

snarling and spitting as it launches itself through the fence as if it's ass is on fire. Jimmy takes off but that dog is fucking fast. The mutt twice gouged the back of Jimmy's heels - once wasting a pair of new Cons. Someday, he thinks, someday I should bust that bitch up like a ripe watermelon. Splash it's guts all over the pavement and leave tread marks in it's skull. Someday.

But what the hell? It is only a dog. A dog doesn't know any better.

Besides, the Henderson's dog never goes beyond the end of the street. Sure enough, as Jimmy turns down Cedar, the beast stops and sits, panting hard. Jimmy keeps going, turns down Lyle Court and stops, panting hard. They look at each other. It was a good run. As he tries to catch his breath, Jimmy brings his hand to his chest. For a minute, he can feel his heart beat through the butt of the gun - as if his blood is pumping through the steel chambers. Cool.

He looks down Lyle Court, still not moving, lungs sucking air. Mom told him they almost bought a house here. Two blocks away and a world apart. To Jimmy, this street is a dream. Clean, lush, comfortable, and every house a home - you can tell. Every house looks like a postcard from TV Land America, no shit. Whenever he rode by, Jimmy played a game of trying to guess which house was rightfully his, then imagining what it would be like to live there. What actually happened was simple enough. Dad insulted the owner, to his face, on their last visit before signing the papers. Later, Dad couldn't understand why the guy was so pissed-off. After all, the guy knew he was a wop. Mom said that was their very first argument. Jimmy figured it was also the first time Dad hit her.

Jimmy rode on. He has about ten minutes to get to mass.

He coasts down to the corner where Ridge meets Lyle in a four-way. Half the block on the left is taken up by the playground. The blacktop where the older boys play hoops lay further

down Lyle. The Ridge side is the kids' play area. Jimmy brings his bike to a stop parallel to the entrance, an opening in the chain link fence. The children are playing. Kids his age are still in school but these little ones get out early. He liked it here. Not that this is a spectacular playground in any way. But it has the requisite charms - a kid could have fun. Simple games. Tommy Burtwell's brother and another boy play in the sandbox. The Demitre twins go up and down the slide, over and over. Kevin Taub's sister is being pushed on the swing by her mom. There are two regular swings, a tire swing and three horse-shaped swings, each a different color. When he came with Mom, he always had to ride each color horse. There is a jungle-gym and something the kids called "the cheese", which is yellowish and triangular in shape with holes for crawling in and out. There are also two plaster replicas - one of a turtle and another of a dolphin. No one knows why. Nearby, three girls jump rope. "Not last night but the night before...."

Not often though. Mom didn't bring him here often. Usually, he was with Dad. On the side, Dad is a mechanic. He can fix any car, any motor. Any piece of machinery. Extra money in it. That's how he pays for stuff like the guns or time on the range. So he would go off in the evenings or on weekends and take Jimmy with him. From the time he was five, Jimmy watched his Dad work. He sat quietly for hours in garages with grease stains and speedy-dry strewn all over the floors. These places smelled of oil, cigarettes and a hand soap called "goop". Fluorescent light bathed trays and trays of tools and Maxwell House cans of washers, screws and nuts stacked to the ceiling. For hours, he would listen to the compressor run and the men swear and smoke and belch and spit. And bitch about women. That's what men do. But they get the job done and they make their money and that's what men do. His dad always said he was proud to have Jimmy there, quiet and helpful. Soon enough, he would say, you'll work. You'll be a man when you have hands like this and he would show Jimmy his callused and cracked fists with

pitch black fingernails. Jimmy was impressed. And no matter how often he washes, the blackness stays on his father's hands. A symbol of hard work done well.

But as he got older, he stopped going. He had more homework. There was baseball practice or something, depending on the season. Besides, as an altar boy, Jimmy could pick up some quick change by doing weddings on the weekends. Dad started going off by himself. Just as well. Jimmy found himself spending more time with his mom, which he liked. He helped her with shopping when he could, worked around the house and waited for Dad together. And, a few times at least, they came here, to this playground. But that was when he was younger, like all these other kids and their moms. He isn't a kid anymore. Jimmy's grown up.

Suddenly he notices a little girl watching him from the fence. It is Kevin's sister. She knows him. She waves shyly at him with a tiny, delicate hand. She smiles her bright smile. Her mom comes over and scoops her up. Seeing Jimmy, she too waves "hello". Jimmy sort of nods in their direction. He tries to smile (doesn't work) and raises his hand half-heartedly. If he raised it any higher they might see the gun. He lets the picture of them set in - a laughing baby in her mother's arms - then wheels himself down the street.

Jimmy looks around him. In a few hours, different sounds will fill this street. Cars will roll into driveways. Doors will open. Fathers and mothers will step out and walk together with greetings and kisses. The kids, too. The whole "honey - I'm-home" bit, just like The Brady Bunch or Please Don't Eat The Daisies. He has seen it happen. Each house on his route now becomes an obstacle. Jimmy drops a gear and pedals furiously.

A feeling begins to twist and claw in the pit of his stomach and he knows this feeling. He has got to control it. Now. But all he can think about are the pork chops. Mom had made Dad's favorite meal - pork chops and sauerkraut, applesauce on the side. He seems to remember Mom

wearing perfume - that sweet, sticky smell he noticed every time his parents went out to a movie. At 6:00 dinner was ready. The table was set. Nothing happened. 6:30 - Dad usually comes home to shower. 7:00. Now 7:30. Mom told Jimmy to go ahead and eat. She would wait. Jimmy said no, he would wait too. They sat in the closing darkness, sharing a vigil silence. 8:00. 8:30 - Jimmy was too hungry to wait anymore. He went into the kitchen, re-heated a portion and sat down at the table. Not ten minutes later, he heard it. This sound. One like he had never heard before. Like a wild animal in pain. Like at night and a dog gets hit by a car and screams and the sound carries for blocks and you hear it in your sleep. Only this was coming from the living room. It was his mom - sobbing hysterically. She couldn't stop, couldn't even catch her breath. Even now, just thinking about that sound seems to peel the skin off the back of his neck.

That sound. It was despair.

Jimmy pushed back his plate and ran upstairs. He crashed through the bathroom door and vomited violently. He spewed his guts into the toilet and then sat on the tiles until morning. Now, he pedals harder and harder, the knots in his stomach growing tighter. Quickly, he runs the bike off the road, falls headlong into someone's bushes and begins to gag. His body viciously tries to pull his balls up through his throat. But - nothing. He's empty and nothing happens.

After a moment or two, Jimmy wipes his mouth and straightens himself out. Checks the time. Time is a factor. Jimmy has thirty minutes to get in and get out. He mounts his bike again and pulls away.

Jimmy coasts past St. Agnes, around the corner. He locks his bike at the stop sign. Shitty lock, but what the hell? He's near a church, right? Bad things don't happen in this neighborhood. He has been an altar boy for so long he still isn't used to walking in the front doors. There they

are - those wide wooden doors with the inset stained glass. They look like they were built to keep something out, which gives the church a strange appearance. The long concrete staircase up, up to those doors made for quite an entrance. Dad used to slink in the side door - when he came at all.

Jimmy goes up to those doors and walks inside.

Murmuring. Whispers of voices. In prayer and otherwise. Shuffling of feet. And good old Mrs. Phalen on the organ playing "Faith Of Our Fathers". He dips his fingers in the holy water at the door and crosses himself. Jimmy begins to walk into the church proper when there is a tug on his arm.

"Oh, Jimmy! How are you, dear boy?", an old woman whispers loudly. He relaxes. It is Mrs. Givens and Miss Martin, stalwarts of St. Agnes. Never missed a morning mass and organized every bake sale and raffle. "I'm fine, Mrs. Givens", he says. "Hello, Miss Martin."

Miss Martin - "I was very sad to hear of your mother's passing. It was a tragic thing, poor dear."

Mrs. Givens - "We all thought very well of your mom, Jimmy. A lovely woman."

Miss Martin - "A fine woman. Always quiet and helpful. You never know how these things happen, you know? An accident, was it? It's a mystery, poor dear."

Mrs. Givens - "Yes, God's will. It's a mystery to us all. But we must bear up."

Miss Martin - "It's best that you're here. She would want that, if I know her. The church will be a great comfort."

Mrs. Givens - "Yes, yes. Stay close to the church in your time of trouble. The church helped me when I lost Mr. Givens a few years back, God rest his soul."

Miss Martin - "God bless him. A lovely man."

Mrs. Givens - "If you need anything, Jimmy, anything at all. You just call."

Miss Martin - "That's right. My door is open as well to you. If you feel the need to . . . talk or whatever."

Mrs. Givens - "Well, we'll let you go. Take care, dear, and remember what I said."

Miss Martin - "Take care, poor dear."

Thank you, Jimmy says. They go. He walks to the center of the aisle, genuflects and moves forward.

Father Donovan's monotone hovers above him. Jimmy stops at a pew and kneels down.

"name of the father son an' holy spirit our father who art in heaven hollowed be thy name thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us an' lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil amen."

His hands clench in a fist. The congregation, a thin crowd, file past him with the mark of ash on their foreheads. They look like holes. The organ wavers balefully. As he stands to join the line, the holster strap bites into his skin.

Mom spent a lot of time here, Jimmy thinks as he walks toward the altar. She volunteered, taught catechism and sold cookies next to all these women. She was one with them in faith. He wonders if anyone noticed the bruises. How could you not notice? He saw them all the time. Mom said it was nothing. He was too young and wouldn't understand, she said - this at a point where she could no longer manufacture lame excuses for him. But all these people? Couldn't they see what was happening? Or maybe they didn't care enough to say something. And, of course, God would comfort her anyway.

His palms are cold and wet as he approaches the altar.

Dressed only in his white tunic and purple stole to signify penance, Father Donovan looks wasted. And he is probably fasting. This is Father Donovan's least favorite time of the pastoral calendar (though collections do increase). Father doesn't like to be dour. He's a great kidder, at least with Jimmy and the other altar boys. That is probably why he seemed so uncomfortable when he said the funeral mass. He was out of sync, stumbling over his words or losing his place altogether. And the two new kids on the altar just kept bumping into each other. Usually it can be pretty funny to watch two novices flub their cues. But not then. At that particular funeral, the mistakes were irritating. One kid had a stain on his surplice. The other wore a cassock two sizes too small. They missed a bell. When they couldn't even light the incense, Jimmy almost lost it. He wanted everything perfect for his mom. And Father Donovan was no help. Afterwards, he stared at his feet and told Jimmy "it's a tragic thing. Very, very tragic." Jimmy wasn't sure what he was referring to.

As the priest's eyes meet the penetrating gaze of the boy kneeling before him, he seems to flinch involuntarily. Then he places his thumb in a dish and presses it to the boy's forehead saying, "Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return." "Amen", says Jimmy, focusing even harder on the priest's face for a moment as he stands. The priest takes a half-step back.

Then Jimmy turns away, leaving Father Donovan to flub the words on the next member of the congregation. He goes out the side and exits through the back of the Sacristy. He has to get downtown quickly. This way takes him right to his bike. The route also takes him past the cemetery.

The best looking trees and the richest, greenest grass in the whole town are surrounded by a tall, forbidding wrought-iron fence. She often talked about being buried here. "If you're going to

rest in peace, then this must surely be the place." In the summer, when they were able, they would often walk here and eat their picnic lunch on the grass just inside the fence. It was their place, sketched out under a loving sun. Just Mom and Jimmy and the clover and the blue sky.

That is why the thought of her not being allowed in was too much to bear. If anyone had known what really happened, especially those good church people, they would have shunned her like a leper. Tossed her into the gutter and turned their backs. All those good, Christian souls. Luckily, Jimmy found her first. He had just walked in from baseball practice. A quick look in the kitchen showed that Dad had not been home. Again. He actually hadn't seen his father in five days. The kitchen was in disarray - morning dishes floated in the sink, the coffee grounds still in the pot and crumbs on the counter. Dad would have been pissed. A glass had shattered on the floor. A frequent occurrence of late. Jimmy grabbed the dust pan and swept up the fragments. The house not only looked, but also felt disordered. It was very quiet. Not even sobs. Jimmy went upstairs.

In his mother's bedroom, there was a walk-in closet. Not that Mom had many clothes. It was mostly used for storage. Through the open door, he saw a piece of clothesline was attached to an exposed hot water pipe in the ceiling. At the other end was his mother. Jimmy shuddered. It felt like every emotion he possessed stood up sharp, crowded around him and then, suddenly, sat back down. Purpose quickly replaced them. He wasn't about to let this be the end. People. Ignorant people, think you're crazy if you commit suicide. Catholics believe you have died in mortal sin and can not be forgiven. No funeral mass is said for a suicide and no sanctified grave. Mom deserved better and Jimmy would see to it.

They live in an older two-story and the ceilings are high. He was surprised Mom managed to get the ladder inside the closet and then kick it away. He cut her down gently and carried her

limp body to the bed. She was not a big woman, so the jerk of the rope snapped her slender neck. Good. Jimmy would first elevate her feet to send some blood back to her face. He then removed the line from her throat and went into the bathroom for the things he would need. He took hand lotion and rubbed it gingerly around his Mom's neck. He then dusted the area with her flesh-colored powder. He even added some color to her cheeks - but not too much. She was so pretty once. He kissed her forehead.

Jimmy had to hurry. He lifted her off the bed. She seemed almost weightless. He carried her out of the bedroom with great care. Then he walked to the stairs. Then he stood her upright. Then he held her in his arms, cradling her head. Then he let her fall.

The ladder went back into the garage and he buried the clothesline. He also buried the unopened letter he found on his pillow. Why read it? He couldn't feel any worse. He wouldn't feel any better. He called the police.

"Hate fucking Dench". As Jimmy tools up to Miller's Pond he sees Dench and his friends Dork-Boy and the Squid. His "sidekicks", like they say in the comics. Jimmy stops. They are throwing stones at Waldo, a favorite pastime of the brain-damaged. Miller's Pond is a big, green, swamp-like mass with more ooze than water. Legend has it that a humongous snapping turtle with a mean temper resides in the ooze. Some claim to have seen it, but mainly, if you poke around long enough with a branch or pole or something, the creature will grab hold and take a chunk out of it. Supposedly. The turtle is called Waldo. You know, like, "Where's Waldo?" Dench spots Jimmy immediately. "Hey, faggot! Get over here!"

"What's your problem?" Jimmy's not sure why, but he gets off the bike and starts walking toward them. Now he sees Elsbeth off to one side, in the grass. "Hey", he says, hands in his

pockets. She plays with her straight black hair, sucking on it like she always does. “Hey”, she says, sort of looking at him. They used to go out. Jimmy’s not even sure when or if they stopped. Now she’s with Dench.

He comes right up to Jimmy. “I’m talking to you, faggot! Tell your old man to keep his greasy fingers off my Mom.” He smirks. The sidekicks smirk. Bad teeth all around. “He always hanging around.”

“He’s fixing her car.”

Now he’s poking his chest. “I don’t care what he’s fixing! Tell him - if he’s hard up, that’s why he’s got a right hand, huh?” Dench laughs. The sidekicks laugh. “I mean, who knows where this guy’s been!”

Every muscle in Jimmy’s body is clenched. It’s coming. “Shut your fucking mouth, you shitbag.”

“Yeah? Who’s gonna make me?” Squid and Dork-boy grab Jimmy’s arms as Dench swings to give him a kidney punch.

He hits the gun instead. Jimmy winces - but not as much as Dench.

“OW! Christ! What the hell is going on?” He opens up Jimmy jacket and reveals the blue steel. “Holy shit!” The three of them just stare for a second. Enough time. Jimmy swings Squid into Dench, pushes the pathetic Dork-boy away and unholsters the gun. The sidekicks are up and out like a shot, probably pissing themselves along the way. Dench is scrambling, muttering something and backing up toward the pond. Jimmy starts following him, moving slow at first, then a little faster as Dench starts pleading. “Oh fuck. Oh shit. I’m sorry I’m sorry. I’m sorry! Don’t kill me, man!!”

Now, gun drawn and screaming, he runs right at Dench, who turns his back. Totally freaked.

Good. Jimmy lowers his shoulder and slams into him, sending him flying face first into the pond. The pond has no bank. It's just a straight drop. Jimmy catches his breath as Dench sputters and splashes in the ooze which, of course, sucks him down.

“Help! Shit, help! Someone! Get me out! God dammit!”

Jimmy holsters the gun - never even unclicked the safety - and zips his jacket. “Say hi to Waldo for me.” Dench's eyes bug out and he starts flapping and shrieking as Jimmy walks away. Hate fucking Dench.

Elsbeth is standing by the road with sort of a dazed expression, twirling her hair. She looks at Jimmy as he gets on his bike. “See ya”, he says as he heads toward the center of town.

During the preparations for the funeral, and after a thorough interrogation by the cops, his Dad spent time trying to “reach out” to Jimmy. Get-to-know-him-better. He asked Jimmy about school and baseball and girls. He told him how “confused” he had been lately. How he had “come to grips” with some things, how he was “learning about himself” and how he was planning to be “more of a father” to him. He also told Jimmy about the “new friend” he had met and that Jimmy would like her.

His leather jacket is so cool. The zipper moves like a whisper, smooth and accurate. Fine quality. American craftsmanship. Straddling his bike, he hangs in the alley across from the courthouse. The center of civic life murmurs quietly as people file out the backs of buildings and hurry home. It is just after five. Jimmy reaches into his jacket, unsnaps the holster and flips off the gun's safety. There is no more sound - only the beating of his heart through the cold metal chambers.

They come down the front stairs like two stupid teenagers. When they hit bottom, Jimmy calls out. He waves at them. His father waves back. So does the woman. Jimmy stands on the

pedals and, with one thrust, hurtles across the street toward the couple.

The sun has been down for half an hour and the grass is cool under his fingers. Dusk's half-light still allows him to trace the landscape of small stone markers and spare trees. God, it is peaceful here. But that is the whole idea and a very worthy idea indeed. Funny, Jimmy thinks. His father probably saw the gun under his jacket as he swung towards them. Must have assumed he was carrying the weapon for show. To show his manhood. Jimmy's first target had been his father's "manhood". But that would have been too messy and possibly ineffective. Always go for the head. Besides - he was smiling. He actually seemed happy. That's not fair. And he wasn't even wearing ashes.

Sitting on the cool earth, Jimmy traces the iron fence with his eyes. He takes off his jacket and pulls out his gun. He turns it over and over in front of him - watching - his breathe slow and deliberate. The flickering streetlights begin to shine on the barrel. Jimmy gives it a look as if to say, "so long pal" . . . and flips on the safety. He tosses the gun about ten yards from where he sits, into the darkness. Mom never liked guns. Off next with the holster, which he balls up and lays snug against the headstone. He lies down on his makeshift pillow and covers himself with the jacket. Eyes closed in the shadows, he takes a deep breath . . . and his lungs fill with warm June air! Another breath and he hears summer sounds and happy laughter in his head. A taste is on his tongue. Long, delicate fingers gently - so gently - brush the hair from his forehead. It is all better now. His muscles let go and traces of a young boy returns to his face. He feels enveloped by the tranquility and the stillness of this moment. The illumination of memories stirred in him softens his features and brushes aside a severe February night. He opens his eyes. The sky is wonderful! Stars and light dance and sing for the boy and he smiles back. It's all

done. As the weight he has carried melts away, Jimmy closes his eyes.