Bourne toWrite...
creative writing workshops

Confession

by Stuart Finegan

Peter Stonecrest stepped down from the train with a suitcase in his hand. His sixty-seven-year-old body ached from the hard seats. The station was deserted. A light rain was all that welcomed him home. For a moment, he simply stood on the platform.

The station was smaller than he remembered—or had he merely outgrown his old town? The same iron roof curved above the platform. The same broken clock hung above the ticket office, its hands unmoved since his childhood. Beyond the station, the town spread up the valley, its distinctive slate-grey roofs washed clean by the rain.

Peter took a long, deep breath.

Peat smoke. Rain. Damp stone. Home.

He had promised himself he would never return.

Yet here he was.

He started walking. The town had not changed much. The bakery was still on the corner, although its painted sign had sadly faded. The butcher's shop had become a pharmacy. The old cinema was now a furniture store.

A few faces stirred memories, but he could not quite remember their names. Then someone stopped and stared. An old woman outside the post office narrowed her eyes. Peter nodded politely. She continued staring. A man carrying a newspaper looked twice. Peter smiled but carried on.

In a small town, strangers were noticed. But Peter was not entirely a stranger. Something about his face had survived the years: his father's eyes, his mother's mouth, that distinctive red hair.

The family house stood on the hill above the town. He could see its chimney through the bare trees, its grey stone walls unchanged. It had been more than forty years since he had climbed that road.

He was not ready.

Instead, he crossed the square towards St Michael's Church. The bell tower rose above him, black against the afternoon sky. Peter pushed open the heavy wooden door. The hands of guilt gripped his shoulders.

The church smelled exactly as it had when he was a boy: candle wax, old wood, damp stone and incense. He almost laughed. He had spent half his life trying to forget that smell.

But now it remembered him.

The church was empty except for a young priest arranging hymn books near the altar. Peter had expected an old man, someone who might remember his family. Instead, the priest looked scarcely older than his youngest grandson.

"Excuse me, Father."

The priest turned to face him.

"Can I help you?"

Peter looked towards the confessional box.

"I think so."

Inside the narrow wooden box, Peter knelt. He had not knelt in a church for decades. For several moments, he said nothing.

Then the priest's voice came softly through the screen.

"When was your last confession?"

Peter closed his eyes.

"Forty, fifty years ago, Father."

A long pause followed.

"That is a long time."

"It is, Father. Yes."

Peter's hands trembled.

"Father, you see, I stopped believing when I was fourteen."

The priest remained silent.

"My parents were good Catholics, Father. They believed in God. They believed in the Church. They believed in sin, punishment and forgiveness."

Without warning, Peter's tone changed.

"But they didn't believe me, Father. They didn't."

The priest said nothing.

Peter told him about the night he had finally spoken out. About the man he had accused. About the questions his parents had asked—not because they wanted the truth, but because they wanted him to take back his words. Hide his shame. His lies. Protect them.

He told the priest how his father had beaten him. Then beaten him again, until the brush handle broke. How his mother had cried in the corner of the kitchen. How, the next morning, Peter had put some clothes into a bag and walked down the hill.

He never came back.

Peter shut his eyes, buried his head in his hands and whispered, "I hated them, Father. But they left me with hate. Hate, Father—that's some word to describe your long-dead parents, isn't it? What do you think?"

"Do you still?"

"What?"

"Feel that way about them?"

"No."

Father Collins leaned back against the hard wooden seat.

"My parents are dead, Father. They have been dead for years. Whatever forgiveness I wanted from them died with them. I'm not here for them."

"Then why have you returned?"

Peter stared at the wooden screen.

"My brother, Father."

The priest allowed him to continue.

"Daniel is dying."

Peter had received the letter three weeks earlier. His younger brother—the boy who had once followed him everywhere—was lying in the family house on the hill. Peter had not seen him since the day he ran away.

"Father, I don't know if he'll remember me."

"I think he will."

Peter's eyes filled with tears.

"I need his forgiveness, Father. I need it."

The priest spoke softly.

"Forgiveness for what?"

Peter's head sank towards his chest.

Then he revealed the secret.

Not the secret of the abuse. Something worse. Something he had held on to for decades. Something that had begun the night he ran away.

When he finished confessing, the young priest remained silent for a long time.

Outside, a church bell began to ring.

Once.

Then twice.

And finally, three times.

Peter rose slowly from the kneeler.

“Father?”

The young priest replied, but now his tone was different.

“What you have told me…”

“I know, Father. I know.”

“You understand what it means?”

Peter opened the confessional door.

“Yes, Father, I do.”

Peter stepped into the church. For the first time in over fifty years, he looked directly at the crucifix above the altar.

“I don’t expect forgiveness from him, Father. Nor from you.”

The priest looked at him.

“Perhaps forgiveness is not something we are entitled to expect.”

“Thanks, Father. Then I’ll ask for it anyway.”

Peter walked out into the cold, damp afternoon. The rain had stopped.

The hill waited.

So did the house.

Upstairs, in a room where the curtains had not been opened for days, his dying brother lay awake.

Peter began climbing Burgoo Hill. Halfway up, he stopped and looked back at the town. A few lights had appeared in the windows. People were beginning to notice him.

They would know soon enough. Not this evening, perhaps, but soon.

Peter knew that secrets, like sins, had a way of following you home.

He looked up towards the house. He could sense a new beginning waiting for him inside, but it felt very much like an ending.

He carried on up the hill.