

Let Us Pray

by

Jon Harley

© Jon Harley 2019

author@jonharley.is

FADE IN:

INT. CHURCH - DAY

It is a sunny day, and the tiled floor is dappled in a rainbow of colours from the stained glass windows. We follow the shoes of Father SAM BRASHER walking before we see the rest of her. As a man, she looks handsome but not in a masculine way: prominent cheekbones but not chin, and no hint of stubble. Hair is as long as she can get away with, but held firmly with gel. Sam walks the length of the empty church.

EXT. CHURCH - CONTINUOUS

Sam walks down the steps outside the church. A private little smile plays on her lips for a moment. She walks off at the same steady pace down the suburban road.

EXT. BOARDING HOUSE - DAY

Sam walks up to a large Victorian house, the front garden wildly overgrown. Opens the front door with a Yale key.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Sam hesitates a moment in the front hall.

SAM
Mrs. MacMahon?

There is no reply. Sam goes on up the stairs.

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Sam enters, pulling the old-fashioned key from the lock. She closes the door but doesn't lock it. She begins to undress, tossing clothes aside.

As Sam continues to undress, our point of view shifts away to look out of the window. In the back yard below, we see (but Sam doesn't) MRS. MACMAHON the housekeeper emptying a vacuum cleaner into the bin.

We follow Sam's bare feet walking through to the tiled floor of the en-suite bathroom, and the door closes.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Sam is carefully and quietly shaving her legs on the edge of the bath, which is beaded with water.

She finishes, rinses the razor, and puts it into a bag containing lipstick and other cosmetics. She selects a lipstick, and goes to the mirror, brushing long hair away from her cheek. Without gel, her hair falls in a bob-cut.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Mrs. MacMahon enters. The bathroom door is closed but there is no sound. She hesitates, and begins to make the bed.

She works her way round the bed, tucking it in.

She is in the corner of the room when the bathroom door opens and Sam enters, dressed in a loudly patterned knee-length dress. She is wearing lipstick. She is halfway across the room before she notices Mrs. MacMahon - much too late. They both freeze. They both gape at each other, speechless.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

It is a dull day, so the light on the floor of the church is flat. Sam, dressed as a priest once more, is walking up the aisle. There is less of a spring in her step.

Sam reaches a discreet door at the far end. She enters a code on the keypad. The lock clicks and she goes through.

INT. VESTRY CORRIDOR - DAY

Sam walks along a carpeted corridor. At the far end hangs a large portrait of SAINT THÉRÈSE, with an armful of flowers. As Sam reaches it, Thérèse moves, looking straight at him.

THÉRÈSE

Sam Brasher! You'll never be a nun looking like that. Where's your wimple?

SAM

I'm not a nun, I'm a priest. I hear confessions. I give out the eucharist. I'm here to help people.

THÉRÈSE

Help me by holding these for a minute.

Saint Thérèse hands Sam her flowers as though through a doorway. She busies herself with some secateurs.

SAM
(protesting)
I have to go see the bishop.
About... the cross-dressing.

THÉRÈSE
Ah yes. A priest by day and a
party girl by night. You're far
from the first.

SAM
It was in the privacy of my own
room. It's the only time I can
feel myself... feel normal.

THÉRÈSE
Being a priest isn't normal.

SAM
Well, I am one.

THÉRÈSE
One of them... or one of us? One
of the girls?

SAM
Can't I be both?

THÉRÈSE
(wistfully)
I'd better take these. Your bishop
might get the wrong idea!

She takes the armful of flowers back from Sam, and the
next moment, the picture frame is back how it was, and
the portrait is unmoving again.

Sam goes on round the corner of the corridor.

INT. OUTSIDE BISHOP'S OFFICE - DAY

A sign on the door says MONSEIGNEUR RICHARD PARKER.

Sam knocks. A long beat.

BISHOP
(opening the door)
Ah, Samuel.

SAM
Sam.

BISHOP
(warmly)
I'm sorry I haven't seen much of
you recently.
(MORE)

BISHOP (CONT'D)
I do try to keep up with all my
priests on a regular basis. Walk
with me, will you?

Sam nods, and they walk out of shot together.

EXT. CLOISTER - DAY

Sam and the Bishop enter the cloister together. They walk
slowly round it throughout the following scene.

SAM
But this isn't about keeping in
touch on a regular basis.

BISHOP
No, Sam, you know what it's about.
Dressing up as a woman. Lipstick
and all, apparently.

SAM
It was in the privacy of my own...
I thought it was in private. I
thought I was alone in the house.

BISHOP
Well, it's not private now. Mrs.
MacMahon knows. And she told me,
so now I know - and more
importantly, she knows I know.

SAM
It's the only time I can feel at
home in my own body.

BISHOP
Is this to do with wanting to have
sex with men, Samuel? Pope Francis
has called homosexuality a fashion
amongst the clergy. And Cardinal
Burke has recently called it a
plague.

SAM
I assure you, I have no problem
staying celibate. I am a priest,
after all, and a virgin. But I am
also... I am a woman.

BISHOP
(gently)
Samuel, you know the church's
teaching on that: God does NOT
make mistakes.

SAM

But it's the only way I can make sense of it. Everything's felt wrong since I started to get hairy. And dangly bits... they're just in the way, frankly, and I -

BISHOP

Samuel, stop. This cannot go any further. You're a good priest, and I don't want to lose you. But you know you can't be both a woman and a priest.

SAM

I don't see why not.

BISHOP

You know perfectly well why not! Saint Paul. Women are not permitted to speak in church; they must be silent and submissive.

SAM

Well, this isn't the cult of Saint Paul.

BISHOP

What a strange thing for a Roman Catholic to say! We have almost nothing recorded of what Jesus must have said about ethics and morality. Instead, God sent us Paul. How much of a religion would we have without Saint Paul?

Sam has no answer. They stop walking, and stand face to face.

BISHOP

You must get rid of your women's clothing and put an end to these thoughts of actually... BEING... a woman. Otherwise, well, you know what happens: dismissal. You can live as a woman, but most likely an unemployed one. Or if you get a job, you won't be paid as much as a man - ten percent less on average for the same work, I read the other day. Do you want to be a second-class citizen?

SAM

I don't think anyone does.

BISHOP
(with a forced smile)
You're a priest. Just... act like
one.

The Bishop walks off, leaving Sam standing alone in the cloister.

INT. SPIRAL STAIRCASE - EVENING

We hear Sam's footsteps on the stone treads. She comes into view. Her hair is longer now, held in a ponytail.

EXT. CHURCH PARAPET - EVENING

An amazing sunset is spread across the sky. The church sits below it, and Sam emerges from the staircase door and looks up briefly. She walks to the edge of the parapet, passing a particularly ugly GARGOYLE, and looks down to the church steps far below.

Slowly, she begins to inch up onto the parapet wall, up to a point where she could fall off. She sits on the top and draws in a deep breath...

GARGOYLE (V.O.)
(rough, smoker's voice)
Seems a shame to smear your body
on the pavement when you were just
starting to like it better.

SAM
(voice pitched higher
than we have heard it
before)
I can't be a priest and a woman.
If I'm neither, how can I help
anyone? The only thing I can be is
dead. Nobody is going to tell me I
can't do that. I'd be great at
that.

The Gargoyle shuffles into view. It looks over the edge, sees how far away the ground is, and winces.

GARGOYLE
I don't think you're going to have
time to repent all your sins on
the way down.

SAM
Maybe I can counsel people in
purgatory.

GARGOYLE

What happened? Have you spent all your savings on hormones and voice coaching?

SAM

And electrolysis.

GARGOYLE

Do those things make you into a woman?

SAM

No, I already am one. As soon as I told the Bishop, I knew it was the truth, God's truth. Hormones and the rest are just bringing my body into line with reality.

GARGOYLE

But you are a priest. It's your vocation, your purpose in life.

SAM

Yes. It's who I am. I know it as surely as I know I'm a woman. (A beat.) Therefore, it's the church that's wrong.

GARGOYLE

Perhaps someone should stand up and say so?

SAM

(looking at the Gargoyle for the first time)
You want me to take the hard path? Why do you care, anyway?

GARGOYLE

Maybe I'm your guardian angel.

SAM

Aren't you a bit... grotesque... to be an angel?

GARGOYLE

Only one of us needs to be pretty.

INT. CHAPEL - DAY

It is a sunny day again, filling the small side chapel with rainbow colours. Sam is kneeling in prayer, dressed in full clerical costume.

INT. CHURCH - CONTINUOUS

There are a few people in the pews, and several more entering. Sounds of whispered conversations.

INT. CHAPEL - CONTINUOUS

Sam has stood up. She is next to a statue of St. Mary. She looks at it intently, but it does not move or speak. Sam touches it with her fingertips, showing her carefully painted nails. The colour matches her clerical gown.

SAM

Now would be a great time for some
sisterly advice. Or warning me off
doing what I'm about to do.

The statue is still motionless.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

The service is in progress. The church is less than a quarter full. Sam and a SECOND PRIEST are leading the congregation in a hymn. At the very back of the church, helping an OLD LADY to stand for the hymn, is Monseigneur Parker, wearing dog-collar but not robes and surplice.

Sam is singing in a contralto voice, and doing it well. Close up, we can see that she is sweating.

The hymn ends, and the congregation sits. Sam waits a few moments and then ascends to the pulpit, pulling off her pony band as she climbs, releasing her hair. She surveys the small audience, and brushes long hair away from her cheek.

SAM

"There is neither Jew nor Greek,
there is neither slave nor free,
there is neither male nor female;
for you are all one in Christ
Jesus". That is how Saint Paul
told the Galatians how silly they
were to be drawing distinctions
between people. Nowadays, we
follow his advice and say that
Greeks and Jews and men and women
are all equal, and any of them can
do any job. Except - apparently -
my job.

The Second Priest looks alarmed.

SAM (V.O.)

But I am here to tell you that I
am a woman, and I have been
performing the job of a priest,
and doing it quite well, I have
been told.

The Second Priest makes wide-eyed eye contact with the
Bishop, at the back.

SAM (V.O.)

If we are all one in Christ, then
all women ask is, let us pray.

The Bishop looks furious, but gives a tiny shake of the
head.

EXT. OUTSIDE CHURCH - DAY

The congregation flows out of the church and down the
steps into the sunshine, buzzing with conversation. The
steps and pavement are wet - it has rained during the
service.

INT. VESTRY CORRIDOR - DAY

Two pairs of feet walking very briskly along the
corridor. Monseigneur Parker is hurrying, face like
thunder. Sam is almost jogging to keep up.

BISHOP

Come on, come on.

SAM

What are we doing?

BISHOP

We are placing a call to the
cardinal. He will most likely fire
you on the spot.

SAM

Why the cardinal?

BISHOP

(pausing to face Sam)

Because the issue of women priests
goes right to the top. Do you want
to see a woman pope?

Sam pauses next to the portrait of Saint Thérèse. Looking
at her, he shrugs: why not? Parker does not notice.

INT. BISHOP'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

They remain standing. Parker is dialling. He presses the button so that we hear the ringing tones over the speaker.

CARDINAL (V.O.)

Hello?

BISHOP

Hello cardinal, it's Richard Parker. I'm so sorry to bother you.

CARDINAL (V.O.)

What can I do for you, Richard?

BISHOP

I have Father Brasher here with me and he needs to hear the answer to a quick theological question: does God make mistakes?

CARDINAL (V.O.)

Of course God makes mistakes! Do you think he makes childhood leukaemia on purpose, for instance? It's incurable, but it's just a little genetic malformation. Biology is squishy and messy. God doesn't bother with that stuff at all. It's only how we turn out that counts.

Sam says nothing but nods soberly.

BISHOP

I... uh... thank you, father.

He presses the button and ends the call.

Looking up, he meets Sam's steady gaze.

A change of viewpoint reveals that in the sky outside the window there is a rainbow.

FADE OUT.