

Father Rhyno

By
John Hillis

5516 Stairs Place
Halifax, Nova Scotia
Canada B3K 2C8
(902) 422-7226
truefauxfilms@gmail.com

FATHER RHYNO

"Funerals for the livin. Mamma o'ways says that. Psalms, prayer. Singing. No body never rose outta that coffin from none a that. Didn't change no dead person, but I don't know 'bout Mamma, 'cause don't seem to change no livin person neither."

Sweet Alice - 87

The discussion was hockey rules. It passed the time. They were already playing cards. Passing time while passing time. Hands moved. Time was full. Something about hands moving. Father Rhyno didn't want to double his time. No point in passing it twice. Like driving in circles. Passing time twice just pissed him off.

Collared men are known to be gentle. Father Rhyno liked that. Thought it was crap but liked it. Sure the molesters and sycophants, bureaucrats and manipulators sometimes made the papers but that just elevated those out of the limelight. He was so far outta the limelight he was fucken holy.

He dropped the three of hearts and the jack of clubs. Holding two fives and an ace he was hoping to fill something in. He held up two fingers for the cards he wanted. He had a bottle and a glass beside him. Drank neat, saved getting up. Didn't listen to the conversation. Knew what it was about because he read the sports page today. Knew he didn't have to listen 'cause he'd already read it.

Got a seven and a Queen. Folded 'cause Whalen had three of a kind. Some thought he had divine sight. Read everyone's cards. God talked to him. His poker increased his piety in their eyes. They were just shit at hiding from people who were looking.

Father Rhyno bagged his coins, folded the bills, swallowed the scotch in the glass, left the remainder of the bottle for a house tip and walked out the door. He didn't say good-bye. He hadn't said hello. For the past four hours he hadn't said anything. He hadn't anything to say. It was quicker that way.

He was in the back room taking his shirt off. If he got it off quickly enough after the service he could wear it Wednesday before washing it. He paused when the knock came at the door. If he answered he'd have to do laundry. Opening the door he realized laundry might be a blessing.

"Nice service" said the Bishop.

Rhyno wasn't sure about the title, hierarchy wasn't his strong suit. He just knew shit came down hill an' he was the only one gonna smell after this encounter.

"Preachin to the converted"

Just somewhere to go for most. Pews were wide enough to sleep on and he never yelled. He always figured you needed some hook to draw them in. That was his one-two punch, wide benches and soft speaking.

"Our Church is branching out then."

Father Rhyno always loved to hear this. Wondered where the Church started if these folks were the branches. Motivation, they kept saying to him. Need to get out, build in the community. Anything built here burns soon enough.

Knew he shoulda taken his shirt off. Lilly would laugh this afternoon. Laughed every time he came in on a Sunday afternoon. She knew he'd been cornered, some way or other. Dying soul, broken marriage, lonely senior. One of them got through that door before he could change. Thursday was laundry day. He could put the load in and walk across the street for groceries. Fresh produce delivered for the weekend but no cheques in that neighbourhood were handed out until Friday. He got all the best of the crap sent into the store and no lines. Washing on Sunday he couldn't go anywhere. Might as well just leave the church open all day.

Lilly would be handing out change, smiling her big shit eating grin, clinging on to her top which was clinging on to those wastrel tits, her boney ass tucked into those Sally Ann jeans. She was eight months on from doing the chicken walk outta alleys each morning and only ever two steps away from going back. Lilly would laugh.

"Yeah, whole new demographic in this week."

He decided he'd change. That was gonna piss the Bishop off, he was a formal man. Wanted full attention, proper decorum. This was not going to go over well but it wasn't off on a good foot anyway. Hell the Bishop was here. Rhyno didn't see the Bishop if things were going well. Rhyno decided to change. He still hoped the shirt would be fine for Wednesday.

The lights hummed louder than in the day. They fell out the windows, not pushed back by sunshine. He liked eating at this time. No bustle, no attention. Everyone in here knew everyone else, but no one paid any attention. If you ate in a diner at 2 am you either wanted to be alone or didn't want to hear anyone else's story.

It was good to see Lilly eating something solid. Looked like she was even enjoying it. She was laughing, but it must have been a memory or the food 'cause no one was in her booth. Lilly liked to laugh.

Chelsea sat in Rhyno's booth. It was that or talk with Jules who was cooking tonight. Not many orders. Rhyno could see why she sat in his booth. Jules was a good cook. You could stop there if you had a mind to find anything else to say about him. The rest would be bad at best. Rhyno did like it when he cooked. Little extra of everything. Fond memories of church or something. They'd never said two words between 'em.

"When religion bite you?"

Hadn't expected that. First time Chelsea asked anything beyond more coffee or if he was finished. Even when they'd slept together.

"Excuse me?"

He'd tried keeping it to one night but after a few weeks they would wind up in bed again. Never knew when. He'd have his meal at 2 am and just go home most nights. Chelsea didn't press.

"Just wondering, you been god fearing from childhood or drive to it later?"

She had slipped in for a smoke. That had been finished about ten minutes ago. Now she was just staring at him. From another woman Rhyno mighta started to worry. A few times in bed, not much contact in-between. This was the conversation that was going to end it. In Rhyno's experience conversation never led to anything but a break up. But Chelsea wasn't going there.

"Why you ask?"

It always came to this. Sooner with most. It was the collar. One of those professions that made people ask. Once someone got to know Rhyno they'd usually ask again. He didn't mind the question. What bothered him was the answer.

"Don't need to tell me"

A warm feeling of satisfaction passed through him. It wasn't just the body that took him home. He began to wonder where he'd sleep tonight. Chelsea didn't get off until 4. The baker came in then and not much food was ordered until breakfast. Jules served the coffee until the morning shift showed up.

Whalen sat down at the counter. Just out from the Sunday game. Rhyno never played the Sunday game. He had services, rounds, and parishioners. Hated entering a game part way through. Took too long to get a read on the rhythm. Sunday was his day off. Whalen just wanted coffee. Jules waved Chelsea off and poured the cup.

"What did you want to know?"

Two hours. He wasn't sure if the coffee was that good but she'd peaked his interest. Never anticipated it this soon. He just usually found himself still sitting there when she got off. Stuck in the booth with yesterday's paper or a book he'd brought.

"What brought you to religion?"

He paused for a second. Wasn't sure about this anticipation. Never thought about where he'd wake up. Shit. Didn't want to wait until 4 but knew he was gonna.

"That's where most people go wrong, it's not about religion."

Silence. Chelsea looked at her smokes. Toyed with the pack but didn't light up. Whalen drank his coffee while Lilly laughed and ate. Jules just hung by the kitchen door.

"No work here so I bus. 2 hours and change 'fore I get there. Same back. Looking for another job."

Celia - 23

He sat in the chair. They gave him the one with upholstery. Man of the cloth, make him comfortable. Farthest thing from him right now. Chair wasn't making any inroads. Mom brought him a glass of water. Helped as much as the chair. They we're gonna have this discussion. He'd be there, but didn't matter. The mom would talk, that wouldn't matter either. Was the folks with ties that mattered. They didn't always wear them, least not as clothing. Just like a preacher, collar was never off. Didn't have to be wearing it.

"Thank you, I was feeling thirsty"

Rhyno hated leaving a game. Come in late couldn't find the rhythm, leave early couldn't switch it off. He was still running on the inside. Counting cards, sizing up the table. This was still poker but the cards were stacked. No one walking outta this room with a smile that wasn't winning coming in.

"We feel that things have reached a point were a new approach is warranted."

Oh she went on. Rhyno never knew if it was for anyone's benefit or was just part of the training. She had her brief case beside her. Soft leather, she was no corporate type. There were folders on her knees. Pulled together just below her skirt. Matching jacket with a white blouse. No corporate type. Hell, corporations were going friendly these days.

He didn't like the lady. Didn't like her the first time. Not the fifth time nor before, nor after. She had a job to do; they just disagreed on how to do it. Most of the time it got done her way, but Rhyno was learnin'.

Mom shifted. Deer in the headlights, though there weren't any deer 'round here. Raccoons, stray dogs and rats, Bambie had left just behind the Indians. The Indians came back, Bambie knew better.

Rhyno had to hold her hand. She kept wanting to get people something. She knew what cards she was holding. Couldn't fold, only round being played. Couldn't bet, nothing to wager. Couldn't win, not even holding a pair.

"So you see the position we're in."

There was no question in her. People with that much certainty didn't ask questions. Rhyno got cold when people didn't ask questions. He looked at mom. She knew what was coming. Came before, it would come again if she gave it the chance. They'd just walk out. She was beat before they'd shown up. Beat at birth without having played a round.

"Can we take a moment?"

That would slow her down. Need to check the protocol. He got up. Looked around. He wondered why the lady asked him here at dusk. He already knew the electricity was off. Looked around. Wondered how many rooms a person needed. Cooking, shitting, sleeping. How much living needed to happen in four walls? How much of the world you trying to keep out?

Rhyno stepped to the sink. Faucet dripped a steady drum. A cupboard door was open. Hiding less than if it was closed. He figured there was no need of power, nothing rotting in the fridge.

He walked over to a door. A bed and a mattress in the room. No dresser. He came and sat down on the upholstered chair. She was looking at him. He thought it was the first time she wasn't talking but he wasn't sure. There mighta been more folders on her knee. Mom stared at him. When did someone forget their own value?

"Seems there's a problem here."

That satisfied the lady. She launched into more protocol. Shit that woman could talk. Father Rhyno reached over to Mom. She wasn't crying. She wasn't angry. She hadn't eaten enough to be angry, anger took energy. He placed his other hand in with Mom's too.

"Where is she now?"

Lady stopped in mid sentence. She had been on a roll, leafing through papers. She had a pen out. She looked at Rhyno without understanding.

"Where is she now?"

He found he repeated things to Suits. They needed a script to know their lines. He often made up his own. That threw a tie. He was patient, for a while. Some could improv better than others. He figured it was harder for those types to follow the lines but he wasn't in their skin. Time was he mighta chosen to do the same. He'd made choices that prevented that now.

"She's in a temporary placement."

Father Rhyno looked at Mom. The first signs of independent life stirred in her. It was a spasm, then nothing more. Between beat at birth and lack of food, that's all anyone would see. Lady missed it. She was leafing through some papers, hauling out a few forms.

"Fine, I'll pick her up in the morning. Ten alright? At your office, I'm busy 'til then."

Lady seemed to miss that. Rhyno wasn't repeating this time. He got outta the upholstered chair and walked to the front door. He waited for a full minute with the door open before Lady realized it was for her. For another half minute she didn't move. Not much at improv this one. It was gonna be a little longer. That was alright, he'd left the game anyway.

Rhyno sat across the street from Loos'. It wasn't much in a wasn't much neighbourhood. Rhyno rarely spent time looking at it from the outside. It's where he played poker. At least where he played most of his poker. He could be led astray. Place wasn't material with Rhyno, just the cards.

Loos was Chinese. Rhyno never did have an ear for languages or accents so the two of them settled on Loos. Chinaman thought it was funny, Rhyno playing poker at his place and all. Rhyno wasn't superstitious, it was just about the cards.

He wasn't going in. Never walk in on a poker game when you got something else on your mind. It would just fuck you up. You can't follow the cards and sort through life. One's gonna get the short end. If it's the cards you go home broke, at best. If it's life well then your winnings ain't gonna fix a thing.

It was quiet. After the rush of drinkers and before the trouble came out. Only thing standing were street lights and chain link fences. Rhyno saw a few people leave. If they saw him they didn't show it. Knew to just keep walking. Best not to bother Father Rhyno when he's sitting quietly.

It was 3am when Rhyno saw who he was looking for. He stood up slowly. At the car the door was just being unlocked. He put a gentle hand on the shoulder. No point in scaring anyone. Not here, not at this time of night.

It was five minutes in before anyone spoke. He'd got off light tonight. Rhyno'd seen him without a watch by this time in the morning. Learned not to bring the ones his wife gave him. They cost a lot. Buy a car in this neighbourhood. Still had his watch tonight. He was quiet.

"Four years in office already."

Leather seats, quiet ride, tinted windows, black paint and a long wheelbase. It was smooth. Couldn't feel the bumps and just floated 'round corners. Leapt away from stoplights, if it ever stopped. Rides like that don't linger at corners in his neighbourhood. Rhyno played with the seat controls. Electric buttons by his right hand. Slide the seat back and forth, changed the angle. They drove, till it was safe to stop for lights.

"How does it work, they recognize you at the gate or you show a badge to get into your neighbourhood?"

The night was warm. He could tell by the temperature readout on the dashboard. Late night mellow tunes rolled outta the speakers. Cigarette smoke found his throat. Wasn't offered, didn't ask.

"How's the kids?"

Silence was good. If a suit wasn't talkin' they might finally be listening. Rhyno knew how to get attention. Wasn't always by powers of persuasion. Not the debating kind anyway. They drove and the suit smoked. Twenty minutes. Thirty. Sights changed. Few more trees, few more lawns beside the sidewalks, few less bars on store windows.

Rhyno got out beside a flowerpot and a bench. It was gonna be a long walk home. Sky was turning bright, morning twilight. He could hear some birds, crickets even. The first bus went by. He didn't flag it. He'd catch one but needed to walk right now. Going for breakfast, then downtown. Bed was still a long way off.

"I don't like those calls."

Lady didn't look much different than last evening. Dressed the same, just a different outfit. She had all her world around her in that office. Files, faxes, phones, memos. She had agendas and meetings, hell there was even a water cooler. But she didn't look at ease right then. Rhyno figured the phone call

came at her home. He smiled, admired the touch. He'd throw a hand or two on Friday.

Rhyno crouched down to look Shanti in the eye. She just stared back. One generation in and a lot more ready for what's ahead. They don't know what was coming. Filing cabinets, memos, agendas and meetings. Just look up. Just gotta look up and see it.

"Just look up."

He took Shanti's hand. Sun was coming in the windows, air conditioning was beginning to blow. Phones were ringing. Computers hummed on the desks. The lady wasn't letting go.

"It's not a home for a child."

He could never tell whether she made statements or challenges. Still never asked any questions. Rhyno went cold. Just look up. Every now and then.

Rhyno had changed. There was a time he woulda hurt that lady. Shit, there was a time he wouldn't be in that office, wouldn't hold that girls hand. If he'd gotten in that car last night that driver woulda never gotten out.

He took Shanti's hand and left.

"Wasn't much you can do. Only part about timing was sooner. God had later covered."

Johnson Phillips - 76

Lincoln Thomas didn't give a shit. Had no reason to. Diabetic, blind, and black. Fact that he was seventy-two didn't add anything positive. He swung at you. With his cane. His words. His life. Had nuthin to lose. Already lost it. Wasn't waiting to die. Wasn't waiting for anything. Just mad. Take it out on you 'cause you were there.

Rhyno wore his collar on Wednesdays. Not much use with Lincoln Thomas. But Sweet Alice and the others could see. Made some feel safe. Some feel important. Some could just let him in 'cause of it. Let him in the door. Let him in their world. Not much down there in that neighbourhood. Not much for anyone. Little less when you're getting old. Rhyno went by those on Wednesday. Took a look in. Listened a lot. Ate stale cookies. Drank bad tea. Listened a lot.

"Marking points for your fuckin pension?"

Lincoln Thomas didn't give a shit. Didn't have too. Not why Rhyno was there. Didn't mind being sworn at. Got worse from the kids. Lincoln Thomas

couldn't see him. Didn't know what colour he was. How tall he was. Whether his clothes fit or not. He was gonna take his life out on every son of a bitch that came through that door. Family, friend, nurse, everyone had to have a piece cut out. Black, diabetic, and blind. He had his reasons.

Rhyno would sit by the window. Wasn't worried about the glare. He could look out of the third floor rooming house onto the back lot of nothing. Asphalt and weeds. If it had a use it was long gone. Held broken bottle glass and used condoms. Rhyno figured wasn't the original intent.

No tea. No stale cookies. Didn't matter. He was here for a while anyway. He kinda liked the assault. Didn't hurt. Least not him. Shit, he'd lead the charge if he'd half the crap Lincoln Thomas bore. Liked to sift through the anger. Sift through the barrage. Piece it together. How many children? Which ones were still alive? Who killed his wife? Which prison sentence did he get the limp from?

"Your church ain't getting my savings 'cause I got none."

Only time he'd ever been anywhere that was somewhere was courthouse and prison. State and Federal. As worldly as it got for a man down here. He was blind, black with diabetes. Too many strikes. Enough for a whole game.

Wasn't long before you got a smile. Half a second after opening the door. Didn't matter who you were. Sweet Alice gave it out to everyone. She'd let you in. She'd sit you down. She'd look you over. Felt like a grandchild on a yearly visit. Happened to Rhyno every week. She always liked what he brought. Just a little conversation.

"Don't be spending your money on an old woman. I hear you need it for that lovely young one at the diner."

She didn't miss much. Not much except food. Rhyno helped with tea once. Only once. First, and last time he saw Sweet Alice angry. Water was out of a rubber basin. Teabag was used and there was nothing in the cupboards. Never seen an angrier woman than when he walked in to help.

Next time he brought a bag of groceries. She told him to keep his charity for the needy and not to come again. The following week he brought a single tin of sardines. They shared it. She smiled. Sweet Alice had a grin for everyone.

It was a hike, even for Rhyno. Four flights. But they were broken, worn, some missing and no light. In the back, off the landing. Cigarette butts stained your shoes, urine stained your lungs. Only security was an absent padlock. After awhile Rhyno knew he could go right in. Shit, Duarte didn't care. Not gonna fuck him up. No radio, no watch, hadn't seen a TV in years.

You could steal his wheelchair if you wanted to haul it down those stairs. At night you'd have to dodge the bodies with needles in their arms. Dark places like bad scenes.

Rhyno tried to come when the groceries were delivered. Government program paid for the food to get in to Duarte. Nothin paid to get him out. Rhyno would check the food and check the bill. It only matched if the delivery boy was still there when Rhyno was.

It was getting slower. Harder. Can't go chasing it if your wheels can't roll. Helped to have no light in the stairwell. Brought in his kinda crowd. Once he had it, had to find a vein. Nothin in his arms. They'd given out years ago. There was bone and skin. Enough tendon to move the joints. Between heroin, the chair, and all those stairs the muscles had turned to dust, leaving a grey pallor over Duarte's body.

He'd be naked, on the floor most times. Swearing up a storm. Asking Rhyno to find some place. Pleading and looking scared. The needle was prepped but couldn't find a receptive vein. Rhyno could find a vein.

Duarte would drift into Spanish. The heroin sent him home. Musical soft words. Rich colours. Passion. Didn't mean much at first. Rhyno just sat and listened. Between Duarte and the streets he started to pick it up. Cheapest schooling he had. Junkie teacher and four flights of stairs. Rhyno knew junkies. Didn't like junkies. Figured a sixty-five year-old junkie deserved some respect. Thought there'd be a woman, but never was. Beautiful words. Passion.

"Sobre el mar, sol ardiente. Rodar las olas he visto. Sobre el mar."

Rhyno would look for places behind the knees. Between the toes. Sometimes places would work that hadn't the week before. He'd bring new needles. Some juice. No use bringing much else. He'd sit on the floor with Duarte. No need to talk. Could if he wanted, just wouldn't be an audience for a while. Duarte. He'd go on.

"Sobre el mar, sol ardiente. Rodar las olas he visto. Sobre el mar."

Rhyno would listen. Once he got to understand a bit, he'd try to follow. Try to find the beach, the ocean. Try to see the sun. A blazing sun that had welcoming warmth. Try to find the sky. The water. Maybe a cool breeze. The water, blue, cold, rolling. Sometimes people were there. Sometimes no one. Blue, cold, rolling.

He could walk up any time. He knew they didn't need Wednesday visits. He came anyway. Keep it part of a routine. They sat on the stoop together. Always together. Lodgers pass in and out. Kept to themselves. Didn't bring

home bottles or drugs. Least not outside the body. Most were on loan from Correctional Facilities. Just out. Going back. Bed wouldn't be warm long. Paid up front for the week. Up front every week after that. Best to get it up front. Doesn't matter if its empty if it's up front.

Rhyno'd sit on the stoop with them. Lemonade from a jug. Sweet. Sweet sticky. Made him more thirsty than before. They sat and drank and watched the street. Nice couple. Knew everyone. Talked to all.

"How's Candice?", "Back still givin trouble?", "Not since last Tuesday, looking to be here by tomorrow."

Stell and Aaron knew them all. Gave you a good story when they're gone. Kept count of what colour moved in and what moved out. No one was away workin, less it was a state farm with chains. They'd figured out where the Chink kept the money he brought over on the boat, and why he ran the convenience store instead of movin out. Knew which nigger was sleeping with a white woman behind his own wife's back.

"Just a matter of time. You know."

They fed their lodgers well. Looked after their place. Had it for forty years running now. Would hire local kids to paint it now and then. Put up a small fence. Nothin to keep anyone out mind you. Not their way. Folks of the community. Happy to lend a hand. Tried to get a lunch plan going for the school.

"Enough people wanting it, too many foreigners to make it work."

Stell and Aaron had been 'round for a while. They loved this neighbourhood. He'd sit. They'd talk. Keep him up to date on his little parish. Let him know where to put a little more effort.

Wasn't sure what they thought of him. Never 'round when it came up. Still it was a chance to sit.

"Life will bite you. Sure on the ass, but don't protect that and leave other parts open. It'll bite where ever it can."

Franklin – age undetermined

Had always used a straight razor. Rhyno learned on one and kept it up. Didn't shave for the whole time they took it away. Liked the feel. Liked the rhythm. Liked the weapon. Kept it sharp. Had the leather belt tacked up beside the sink. Used the razor, sharpened it, wipe it off, put it away. He'd had this one seventeen years. No rust. Never let him down. Not anywhere.

He'd stare in the mirror. Mug was on the left. Had the soap down pat. Didn't need to look. Liked the feel. Routine. Things had a place. A timing. Routine. He could stare at the mirror and reach out without knocking it over. A little water. Just on the brush. Point the hairs down. Let the water run through. Stare at the mirror.

Rhyno wasn't one to take in sun. Still, he had a weathered face, not scars or accidents. Those were hidden by shirt and pants. Rhyno was lucky. Most of that life hadn't found his face. But a lot of things could make a face. Didn't need to be sharp, hard, or fired outta a gun. Count the meals you missed, on a face. Know who left you, who stayed. Figure out quick which rung of the ladder you stood on most of your life.

A lather took a while to work up. Didn't just need volume. Had to be thick. Like cream. Spread. Had to stick. Like your past. Stay there for all time. Could work against it. Hide it. Never get away from it. Never change it. If you killed a man, he stayed dead. Killed two, they both did. You ain't going out tomorrow, put 'em on their feet an' walk away. Wasn't gonna happen. If you didn't kill another man for another fifty years, the ones you had stayed dead.

He wouldn't look down. Just bring the brush up. Start on the right cheek. Small circles. Feel the hairs of the brush. Softened by the water and the soap. The lather was cool. Felt good. Relaxing. The brush moved slowly across his cheek. He'd dip it back in the mug again, creating a bit more lather and then pull it up and cover a little more. A few more memories. A bit more of his past. Each small little swirl finding another crevice from years ago.

His eyes stared back, held his own gaze. Let the razor feel its own way. Down the cheek. Across the chin. The eyes held their gaze. Didn't back down. The blade crossed his face. Kept the lather and laid bare his life. His eyes stared back. Each action. Each past action. Uncovered to the sound of scraped hair and skin. His eyes held their gaze.

Rhyno watched. Looked at those eyes. Felt the razor work across his face. Studied how he held his gaze.