

Content note: explicit sexual content and mentions of homophobia

Avik the Beloved

Avik was a good boy. A righteous one. His hands, hands that lacked the calluses of a life lived, only knew prayer and work. Avik studied hard and prayed harder, never had time for friends, never had time for relationships. Avik studied, he prayed. Avik kept his hands busy.

Avik learned that virtues get dull when prayers go unanswered. Avik studied hard and went to university, and Avik explored. He explored tastes; the bitterness of tobacco and the sweet burn of brandy were especially enticing. They kept his hands busy, brain occupied. He felt like he had to keep busy. He didn't know why he had to, but he did. Avik explored sensations: the prick of a tattoo needle, the sting of a piercing gun, and the kiss of a girl on New Year's Eve. That last one was rather anticlimactic, just as dull as prayers and studies, so he resigned himself to those instead. Maybe relationships weren't for him, and sex wasn't as satisfying as his other vices. One less thing to repent at the altar for, he thought.

At the end of his first year, Avik saw his pastor almost every day. He would fill the hours with long diatribes about his drinking and smoking and partying and beg the Lord to forgive him. The pastor was patient for the first five days.

On the sixth, the pastor asked, firmly, "Is there something else you're not confessing to?"

Avik went silent before hurrying out of the confessional, muttering that he would be back. He returned on the seventh day and, though the pastor could not see his face, he could see the skittishness had now transformed into an intense despair.

“Forgive me Father, for I have sinned.” He starts, “Yes, I have been drinking and smoking and defiling my body and taking the Lord’s name is vain. But I have also lied to you, for these are not the only things I seek your forgiveness for. I made a friend, Will. He was sitting alone at a party nursing a glass of wine, rhythmically tapping the countertop of the bar. It wasn’t the song that was playing on the speakers — he was out of sync, anyone could tell — so I went to ask him what he was doing. He smiled and said he’d tell me if I let him buy us a round of drinks, some more wine. ‘I don’t like wine,’ I tried to tell him, but he insisted I hadn’t tried *this* wine. He bet me \$20 that I would. I don’t know how he pegged me for a betting man so quickly, but he did. There was this spark he had in his eyes that pierced clean through me. I’d never seen anything like it, it made me breathless. So, I agreed. I hate to admit he was right; it was damn good wine. Oh sh- darn. Sorry, Father.”

The apology disrupted the flow of Avik’s thoughts, and he went silent as deep shaky breaths filled the space where his words used to be. The pastor was quick to speak, fearing that if he didn’t, only silence would remain.

“It’s alright. So, was this your sin? That you lied to your friend about the wine?”

It was an out, a denial of the reality barreling towards them. For a moment, Avik contemplated taking that out, but his jaw clenched at the thought. If the truth of his situation was going to crash into him no matter what he did, he might as well confront it head on.

“No, I didn’t lie to him. Even if I did, I don’t think I could’ve fooled him. Will was able to see me in a way I hated... But I also loved it, Father. I think *that’s* what kept me at that table, listening to him ramble about music in ways that flew entirely over my head, yet captivated me. The song he was tapping was a song he was writing; he was in college out of obligation, but his

passion was in music. We talked for hours about any small thing that crossed our minds: music, politics, film, our days, our years, our whole *lives*. I told him things I had never told anyone before or since.”

Avik let out a laugh, the absurdity of the situation registering finally. His eyes squeezed shut as he covered his mouth, letting his mind catch up with the words.

“Maybe it was the wine that compelled me; maybe this is why I don’t drink wine.”

The words were said with the firmness of prayer, as if that would make them true. It wouldn’t, Avik realized, faltering in his conviction on the last word as it tripped over his trembling lip. He dug his nails into his palms, focusing his mind on the sharp pain to steady his shaking body.

“We talked for so long the party was about to end, so we went back to his place for a nightcap. Despite the hours that had passed, I didn’t want our time together to end. I’d never had a friend like this, someone who made me feel *alive* instead of exhausted by the time we were done talking. When I woke up on his couch the next morning, I asked if we could do this again. He told me he’d love to, so we met every Friday night at his place. One night, our conversation turned to romance.”

Avik’s voice cracked on the word romance; he felt the pastor wince. The bubble of plausible deniability had shattered, the words pouring out of Avik faster and faster.

“He asked about my first kiss and I told him there was nothing to tell because, well, it was nothing. I felt nothing. He might as well have been asking about my breakfast that morning. ‘Maybe it wasn’t the right girl?’ he said, and I told him I’d kissed other girls after the first and

still nothing. It just wasn't for me. He then got this awkward look on his face, unsure if he should speak his mind. I pushed him to tell me, and he asked, 'What if you're just not into girls?' I went silent, then I laughed. 'No... no, I'm not into men either.' Maybe I laughed too hard or too quickly or maybe it was me specifying men without his prompting, because he didn't drop it. He asked if I ever wanted to kiss a man. I laughed again and said I don't even know any gay men, let alone one who would want to kiss me. 'I'm queer.' he told me, 'Bi, if you want to get into specifics.'"

The barrage of words began to slow and soften as Avik fell into the memory, the coarseness that had previously cracked his voice now giving his words a melodic rumbling on each harsh consonant.

"The room was so silent after that, the sudden heat flushing my cheeks made me dizzy. After a moment of studying my expression, he smiled sweetly and said, 'I would be okay with kissing you, if you want to try it just once.' I couldn't speak — it felt like I didn't need to, like he was hearing each of my thoughts as they came to me. I just nodded, and he leaned in. His lips were soft, and he smelled like lilac and cedar. It's such an odd combination, but it made sense — I can't imagine him smelling like anything else. He tasted like the wine he was drinking; it made me wonder if he could taste the brandy on me. If he could, I wondered why he didn't recoil at the taste. I know he hates brandy. Maybe... maybe he didn't because I kissed back."

Avik let out a choked cry at that admission, the words burning into his skin like a branding iron. He lurched forward in pain and clung to the gates of the confessional as he wept.

"When he pulled back, he just smiled sweetly, asking if I actually enjoyed that or if I was just putting on a show for his sake. All I could think about is how his eyes are the colour of

brandy — a deep amber, with a softness that pulls you in and a fire that warms your soul. I thought, how fitting since that wasn't the only way Will and brandy were alike. They both left an electric tingle on my lips, ignited a fire in my stomach that spread across my body, and clouded my mind making my thoughts incomprehensible in my drunken stupor. I couldn't speak, couldn't answer him — so I just did what I knew I wanted most. I kissed him again. And again. And again. With tobacco and brandy, you gain a tolerance, each cigarette or drink having a weaker punch than that first time. This, however, was different. Each kiss with him felt stronger. Maybe it was the little things; the way he pulled me in, how soft his hair felt, how his unshaved stubble grazed my skin. I just kept kissing him, to the point where *he* had to stop *me* from taking it further. Saying that, as much as he enjoyed this, he wanted to take things slow because he really likes me and doesn't want to rush me. Reality finally set in, Father, and I panicked. I rushed out of that apartment with some half-baked excuse about studying and came here. To amend.”

“For kissing another man?”

“For *liking* it. For wanting more. I haven't stopped thinking about him. I want to see him so badly my bones ache. I've never felt so... I can't even describe it. I've never felt this before.”

The bars of the gate shook as Avik's trembling body pushed into them, tears dripping onto their polished wood only to slide down and pool in the divot between his knees and the wall.

“I've also never felt so terrified of myself. Please help me, Father. I don't want to feel like this.”

Maybe it was luck that it was this pastor on this day. Maybe he recognized the nauseating shame of this realization and felt a pang of pity, of regret. Or maybe this pastor always knew there was something going on with the boy who held his head lowest when the altar boys passed him. Whatever it was, rather than the usual speech of total disavowal he was meant to give, the pastor asked a question.

“Do you feel guilty?”

There was a tenderness in the question, one that stopped Avik from instinctively saying yes. A tenderness that made Avik think back to that kiss, that moment where what was expected of him fell away. A tenderness let him admit that, even when he had remembered the scrutiny of God, he still wanted to kiss Will again. If he were to choose between Hell or never having kissed Will, to never kiss him again, he would choose Hell in a heartbeat.

“No. I want to. I feel guilty for *not* feeling guilty that I did what I did.”

“What do you feel?”

“Shame.”

“That it felt good?”

“Yes.”

“Then, give that shame to God and let him carry it for you.”

Avik almost laughed at that, thinking the pastor was joking. But the intensity of the pastor’s voice was unmistakable; it wasn’t a suggestion but a demand. A plea. It was then, Avik realized, that the tenderness that had eased the truth out of him was born not from pity but an

understanding. He stared at the tear stain trails on the gate, his fingers absentmindedly tracing the lines, wondering if the pastor had taken the same path.

“But if I don’t feel that shame for myself, how will I know if it is sin? What’s to stop me from doing that again?”

“It’s not sin to feel happy or loved.”

“But what about—”

“You’ve confessed. Any transgressions you’ve made have been washed free, and that can be done over and over again.”

The pastor’s voice was hushed yet stern, a mix of conviction and secrecy colouring his words.

“This pleasure you feel for this act isn’t solipsism, and you’ve been lacking it for as long as I’ve known you, so I think it is a sign you should pursue this. To... understand yourself, explore this.”

Avik tried to imitate the pastor’s tone, as if that would be enough to mask the precarious excitement that bubbled beneath his words.

“Even if it means sinning again? Indulging in that – in him – again?”

“Yes. You can always come back and confess that sin. God will love you just the same, just as long as you repent.”

That was enough for Avik, he could tell the pastor had said all he could, so he thanked him and wrapped up their session. He left the booth lighter; he could have both worlds. He would call Will, tell him he had decided he wanted to try being with him. He just had to pray for his transgressions, confess to make amends.

Every day, after any interaction with Will or thoughts about Will, Avik would pray and pray. But those prayers turned acrid on his tongue, the taste growing fouler with each passing day. The self-imposed guilt over the only thing in his life that felt right to him began to fill him with a growing frustration rather than that familiar sadness.

The last time Avik prayed was Easter. Instead of going to church that night, as he'd always done, Avik went to Will's. Will, who had been so careful with touching Avik since that night. Will, who let Avik take a whole two weeks to work up to a simple cuddle. Will, who Avik kissed for the first time since that fateful night the moment he opened the door.

Prayers always made Avik feel worse. The self pity of Christianity weighed heavier and heavier after every session. Avik always thought he just hated being on his knees, the ache it gave his legs from hours on the hardwood floor. But it must've been the prayer, because here Avik was before Will, on his knees. He's the happiest he's ever been and he's on his knees.

Avik was never one for art, but he finally understood the artists of those church murals when he took off Will's shirt, imagining his hands as the strokes of a paintbrush as he traced the curves and divots of Will's body. He understood why someone would want to preserve one moment, one person, for eternity. Will made him feel everything church had promised and failed to invoke devotion as Will's hands held his face, humility as Will pinned him down as to train his body with kisses and bites, and worship as he got down on his knees and sucked Will's dick,

watching him get flushed and breathless with each stroke. The taste of his skin, the salt of his sweat, the sweetness of his saliva – this was Avik’s new communion, his holy salvation. That night, Avik was meant to behold God, and instead all he saw was Will. It was the closest he’d ever felt to spiritual bliss, to Heaven, as he let himself cum underneath Will.

After it was all done, Avik wouldn’t pray for forgiveness. He would feel that familiar twinge of shame as he held his lover in his arms, but he didn’t try to pray it away. He held onto it, resenting it, and buried it as deep as he could reach. Then, he would kiss Will's forehead, falling asleep soundly and deeply by his side. Avik couldn’t remember the last time he rested this easily. He shouldn’t have; he still hadn’t found the redemption he so desperately craved.

Avik knew, as he rested his head on Will’s chest and heard the rhythmic thumping of his heart, that he no longer needed it.

Avik is not a good man. He is a sinner; he sometimes drinks too much and speaks too bluntly. He loves harder, indulges more. Avik’s hands are no longer accustomed to prayer, hands clasped not with himself but with Will. By all accounts, Avik is a sinner — he chases the thrill of a vice, seeks no repentance, and feels no shame. Avik is not a good man, but he is happy.