Confession

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I was awakened by my mother, snapping up the shades on the windows and cheerfully chanting, “Time to get up now. Come on. It's 8:30. Time to get up.” I groaned and rolled over, opened my eyes and squinted against the glare of the sun pouring through the windows. “Come on, get up. I'll go down and make your breakfast.” I lay there in the sunshine and silence until my mind fully awakened to the realization that today was Saturday, confession day.

Every Saturday, after catechism class, I had to go to confession, I hated it; I dreaded it. My stomach started doing flip-flops. I opened my secret box and dragged out the piece of paper which I had folded into halves again and again until it was only two inches square. I slowly opened it up, added up the columns, and proceeded to memorize the numbers. It was my sin list. Each night, before I went to bed, I would go over the day’s activities in my mind and put a check (or checks) next to the appropriate sin. In this way, I could keep track of my wrong-doings more accurately and, therefore, avoid having to guess at or, horrors, lie to the priest in the confessional box. I memorized as I got dressed . . . Disobeyed Mommy and Daddy, seven times . . . Fought with my sister and friends, thirteen times (My sister was getting extremely difficult to live with lately.) . . . Cheated at school, four times . . . Lied, ten times (My lying had been reduced tremendously when I discovered half-truths. For instance, on school mornings when my mother yelled at me, “Cindy, are you up yet?” I would sit up in bed and, therefore, could honestly say, “Yes, Mom, I'm up.” Then I could snuggle back down into my pillow and blankets for another couple of minutes until she hollered again, confident that I had committed no sin.) After I figured that I had everything down pat, I folded the list again and stuffed it into my pocket, I’d need to look at it one more time after catechism class.

I wasn't worried about catechism class; I had my question of the day memorized. I was, however, concerned about which
animal I would receive on my paper. Whenever we answered
the question-of-the-day correctly, we received a sticker of an
adorable baby animal. I already had a squirrel and a deer and
a rabbit and a chipmunk. What I wanted was a raccoon. But
you never asked for what you really wanted. You took what
you got and smiled and said thank you and hoped that some­
day, maybe, you’d get a raccoon. I got a skunk.

I trudged over to the church after class and sat with the
other kids waiting in the pews. I hated the wait. My stomach
was churning, my armpits were wet, and my fingers were
freezing. I thought about my first confession when I was a sev­
en-year-old dummy. They had started to prepare us for it
weeks in advance, prompting and threatening, coaxing and
deluding us. Finally, the big day arrived; my mother even
came with me. I slipped into the confessional, wondered why
they thought it was easier to confess your sins in the dark, and
started my carefully memorized speech. Right in the middle of
it, I heard the screen slide open and the faceless voice tell me
that it wasn’t my turn yet, that he was still hearing the other
child’s confession, and to please wait patiently until he came
back to tell me to go ahead, please and thank you. The screen
slid shut. I was so embarrassed; the only thing that saved me
from running out of there, red-faced and teary-eyed, was that
the only ones who really knew who the dummy was who sat in
the dark alone, reciting her first confession, were the dummy
and her God, and He was in no position to tell anyone down
here. I waited until the priest slid open the screen and sighed,
“All right, child, you may start now.” “Bless me, Father, for I
have sinned. This is my first confession, and I ask forgiveness
for all of my past sins, and I promise to try to sin no more in
the days to come. Please forgive me and bless me, Father.”
“Good. By the power invested me by God, the Father, I ab­
solve you of your sins. Now, make a good act of contrition and
say five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys. I bless you in the
name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”
“Amen,” I reverently spoke the word. They were right! I felt
clean, good, holy, pure, lily-white. I was saved! I rushed out of
the box and started skipping up to the altar, before I
remembered I was in church and skipping was not allowed. I
knelt down in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary. She was
beautiful, radiant, so proud of me. Her smile and her eyes told
me that, even though she knew I was just a dumb little kid, she
still loved me so much. I grinned all the while I said my good
act of contrition and my five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys. And with one more glance at Mary's loving smile, I skipped all the way down the center aisle and out of the church.

I got a poke in the side from the kid next to me to get me to move over. Two more kids to go . . . One more . . . I knelt in the dark confessional and waited. I heard the murmuring on the other side of the box, but intentionally tried not to make out the words. It was a sin to listen to someone else's confession and that would be just one more sin to confess. I started humming softly to myself. The priest pushed open the screen and told me to begin. “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been one week since my last confession, and these are my sins . . . I am sorry for these sins and all the sins of my past life.” “Good. By the power invested me by God, the Father, I absolve you of all your sins. Now, make a good act of contrition and say five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys. I bless you in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” “Amen,” I murmured. The screen slid shut, and it was over in less than a minute. Clean and pure, but for how long? I shuffled up to the altar and knelt under the Virgin Mary. I looked up at her. She wasn't smiling; she was frowning. I marveled at the fact that she and I were both having a rotten day. I said an act of contrition and the five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys. I looked up at Mary; she was still frowning. I know how you feel, Mary. See you next Saturday. I blessed myself, stood up, and slipped out the side door.

It was another Saturday afternoon at the church, and I was waiting in another confessional line. I had come early to sit and think about what I was going to say. I felt guilty, worried, troubled. Four days earlier, I had gone shopping for my mother. After I had picked up her things, I ended up at the cosmetic department and found the nail polishes. The tremendous variety of colors dazzled me. I loved to finger them all, imagining the bright colors on long, meticulously-shaped nails. I lined them up according to shades. I was mesmerized by all the slight variances. I picked up my favorite, Dusky Rose. God, I wanted it. I counted my mother's money, added up what her things would cost, including tax; there was only 17¢ left over. Not enough for that Dusky Rose. I thought about telling Mom that they didn't have the toothpaste or the hand cream, but I knew she really wanted them because she had sent me out on a special trip. No, I couldn't
lie to my mother. Besides, she couldn't approve of Dusky Rose; she always wore Pale Natural. My mind wandered, but never had I wanted anything as badly as I wanted that nail polish. I glanced around quickly, and, in an instant, it was done. I had slipped the bottle into my pocket, paid for my mother's things, and left the store. There were no sirens, no lights, no one charging after me with threats of arrest and dire consequences. I had stolen something. I hurried home and locked myself in my room, staring at that bottle of Dusky Rose nail polish. The next day I threw it into a trash can at school. But my guilt feelings couldn't be disposed of as easily. And here I was, wondering what to say to the priest and what he would say to me. I would confess, tell him how very, very sorry I was, promise never again to steal anything. Would he tell me to make restitution? Would I be forgiven? Would I ever get rid of that horrible guilty and criminal feeling? It was my turn, and I sneaked into the box and waited. The screen opened, and I began. “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been four weeks since my last confession, and these are my sins.” I blurted it all out, what had happened, why, how, when, how I felt afterwards, what I did with the polish. I asked for forgiveness once, twice, three times. Finally, I was empty, and it was quiet. I became aware of the hot, wine-stinking breath. It was Father Walsh, and he was drunk again. It was common knowledge that, instead of sipping the wine during Mass, he drank the whole chaliceful. And I was sure that he brought the bottle (or two) with him into the confessional. Silence. Had he passed out? Was he sleeping? Had he heard a word I said? “Mmmmmm.” Was that a moan or a snore? Or was he actually capable of thinking? “Good. By the power invested me by God, the Father, I absolve you of your sins. Now, make a good act of contrition and say five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys. I bless you in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” Five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys? Had he heard what I said? I skipped the “amen” and trudged up to the altar and Mary. I glared at her. She was neither smiling nor frowning. Her face was a blank, and she wouldn’t look at me. Five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys! Well, I’ll say it. “Five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys.” There, I said it. I was still staring at Mary's face. So long, Mary. It’s been good knowing you. She pretended I wasn’t there. I turned around, strode quickly down the center aisle, looking straight ahead, and stepped out of the church.