



The Holy Bones

By Jimi Meirose

[Home](#)

[Winter-Fall 2012-2013](#)

[Summer-Fall 2012](#)

[Spring-Summer 2012](#)

[Winter-Spring 2012](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011-12](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

Lucas sat at the table with some small black bones. Walter asked where he got them.

Never mind, said Lucas. Thing is, they're going to bring us luck. They're lucky bones.

Lucky bones? said Walter, picking one up. He turned it over in his hands.

Lucas—this looks like a human fingertip bone. These are human bones—where did you get them? It's against the law to have human bones—

I got them from that big church downtown. There's a glass box there with bones—

You stole them from the cathedral? They're relics, Lucas.

I know—but there was a dozen of them there—they won't miss two—I always wanted to have a holy bone from a saint. It said the saint's name on the box but I can't remember it now—

Did you break into the box?

No. It wasn't locked. There was a candle on top, and a cloth. The top just opened right up. I'm keeping them Walter. They will bring us luck.

Well, I don't want anything to do with them—keep them away from me.

Oh—I didn't tell you—I'm up for promotion at the plant.

Promotion?

Right. They want to make me foreman. And they never even noticed me before I brought home those bones. They brought me luck.

That's ridiculous, said Walter shakily. You got to take them back.

No, said Lucas. They're good to have.

Lucas got the promotion and with the extra money he made he went down to Solly's bar several times a week. One morning at breakfast, there came a heavy knock on the door.

Police, said a large voice. Police! We got a warrant!

Walter opened the door. Two wide tall policemen came in, one with extremely bloodshot eyes and the other with a nervous tic at the corner of his mouth.

Where are the relics, said the red-eyed policeman. We've got a warrant

—
Relics? said Walter, glancing at Lucas. We don't have any relics—

The nervous policeman thrust a copy of the warrant into Walter's hands and headed down the hall. They could hear him going from room to room, opening drawers and cabinets. Walter and Lucas stood stunned—at last the nervous policemen came up with the bones in his hands.

These yours?

Well, said Lucas—yes they are—I—

You two are under arrest! For stealing relics from the cathedral! Turn around, put your hands behind your backs! You're coming with us—

Two hours later after they were processed Lucas and Walter were sharing a holding cell at the county jail.

What the hell happened, said Walter. How did they know?

Lucas looked at the floor and scuffed a foot across.

I don't know, he said, without looking Walter in the eye.

Lucas!

What?

Did you brag about having the bones down at Solly's?

I—

You what?

I might have told a few people about it—but Walter, they had brought me such luck—how could I not tell people about it—

God damn you Lucas! I should throttle you—

They sat looking at the walls all day and into the evening until a guard came and opened the door and spoke loudly.

All right, you two—you're free to go.

What? said Walter.

The Monsignor down at the cathedral said not to press charges. Said you're troubled men.

Troubled? said Walter—what does he mean troubled—

I don't know, go ask him.

They left the jail. Outside, Lucas said He's got a lot of nerve calling us troubled. I'm not troubled—

The next day, both Walter and Lucas were fired from their jobs.

You were arrested yesterday, said Lucas' boss. You were in jail yesterday.

But how do you know all this?

The police came by with warrants, to search your work area. They told us you were in jail—

But you can't do this, said Lucas—charges weren't pressed—

You're not union. We can do what we want. Leave now—before we call a cop.

Walter was treated similarly and at home they sat across from each other at the kitchen table, sick to their stomachs, full of regret. They sat in silence until Walter spoke.

Things could be worse, Lucas.

How?

We could still be locked up—say listen—let's go see the priest. He's the one who let us off. We should thank him. And you should say you're sorry for taking his bones.

Okay.

Having little money, they walked across town to the cathedral. They knocked on the door of the red brick rectory next to the church. A middle-aged woman in an apron answered.

Yes?

We need to see the priest, said Walter.

Come in.

The woman ushered them down a dark hall lined with portraits of priests with grim faces. She showed them into a black-paneled office and motioned for them to sit down before the desk. They sat down, and the woman left, and before long a short portly man came in in an ecclesiastical collar and black shirt and black pants and shoes. He sat behind the desk. His right eye drooped noticeably. It was impossible to tell his age until he spoke.

What can I do for you, he said in a weary weak old man's voice.

After introducing themselves, they said We're the men that you let off about stealing the relics. We're here to tell you how sorry we are and to thank you for not pressing charges.

I try to be as merciful and forgiving as our savior would be, said the Monsignor. But tell me—why did you steal the relics?

Tell him, said Walter—why did you steal the relics?

My mother gave me a book with pictures of old rotten saints' bodies in it —

Lucas! exclaimed Walter. Now stop it—he can't help it father—

The monsignor raised a hand and smiled.

I've seen books like that with pictures like that in it too, he said. So you were fascinated with relics?

Old bones. Old bodies. I read the book. It talked about boxes they kept bunches of old bones in in churches—the book said how these old bones were holy and sometimes there were miracles—I wanted miracles to happen to me and Walter. So that's why I took the bones. I wanted miracles.

The Monsignor sat back with his hands folded on the desk.

Do you boys have jobs, asked the Monsignor.

No—we just lost our jobs because we went to jail—

Now that doesn't seem right, said the Monsignor. I'll tell you what. I'll give you jobs here—cleaning the church. The jobs are part time and won't pay much—but they should keep your heads above water. The fact you came to see me tells me you're good men. The jobs should get you by until you can find something better. All right? You start tomorrow. Every weekday morning from eight to twelve, you'll be cleaning up the church. Pay will be a hundred forty five dollars a week for each of you. So it's a deal?

A deal, said Walter.

They all rose and shook hands. As they were leaving the office, Lucas turned.

Thank you, Father.

Don't thank me. Thank the creator.

The Monsignor showed them to the door and they walked home. Night came. At the rectory, the Monsignor knelt by his bed and prayed the prayer he prayed every night. The monsignor didn't regret for a moment having become a priest—but he asked God each night to deliver him from other regrets he had about his life. He pressed his folded hands to his bowed forehead. And that night, he slept fitfully as always.

The next morning, Walter and Lucas started to work making the church spotless. Lucas stood staring at the bones a long time, leaning on his vacuum cleaner.

Lucas, said Walter.

What—

How about giving me a hand vacuuming here instead of gaping at those bones. Then we'll get the ladder and go around and dust off those stations of the cross—

Walter, I can't stand it. These bones are so beautiful. It was so much better when I had the bones, Walter. I was happy then. I liked my other job better. I told you I was going to get a promotion now look at me here making minimum wage cleaning some old dusty church—

Just learn from what you did. Keep your mouth shut down at Solly's. Now get your hand off that box of bones and get to work vacuuming. There's a whole church to do.

Lucas resumed vacuuming the carpet and they got through the first day having cleaned the pews and the carpet and the stations of the cross. Just before they left at noon, the Monsignor came to see them.

So how is it going boys—how do you like the job—

Oh we like it fine, father, said Walter.

Yes. We like it fine.

I'm glad, said the monsignor. I'm really glad.

They left.

That night the monsignor once more knelt by his bed and prayed the same prayer that he had prayed for years. And along with that prayer, he thanked God for Walter and Lucas. They seemed like sons to him—the sons he never was able to have—one of the things he had always regretted. A warm feeling filled him. He slept like a log for the first time in years.

Walter also slept well that night, feeling good about having done such good work. The next morning at church he got caught up in the work and worked his way dusting the ceiling getting down the cobwebs for a couple of hours and then looked at his cheap watch and saw it was ten o'clock. He got down from the ladder and went to the aisle to go to the vestibule to tell Lucas it was break time, but stopped dead at the sight of Lucas leaning on a broom by the box of bones, staring at it.

Lucas! What are you doing—did you do the vestibule? Did you do the windows like I said?

No Walter, said Lucas, with a dreamy look on his face. But look at them, look—they are so beautiful. He pointed at the bones.

Walter rushed over.

Get on back to the vestibule and start cleaning like I said! I had figured it was breaktime but you don't get a break—you took your damned break with those bones. Get to work.

Yes Walter.

Lucas spent the rest of the morning working in the vestibule and Walter worked there too for the next two hours cleaning the windows.

I got to stay by him, thought Walter. I got to keep an eye on him.

Him and those Goddamned bones.

Once more the monsignor came by before they left.

Good work, he said. The place looks really good.

Walter beamed. The Monsignor smiled and quietly thanked God.

That night Walter slept once more like a log. Lucas seemed distracted until bedtime. The next morning, Walter found Lucas gone. He checked Lucas' room. The small suitcase Lucas had was gone, and so were most of his clothes.

Jesus Christ, what now! exclaimed Walter.

He rushed down to the church. Lucas was not there. He went to the bone box.

The dozen small bones were missing.

Dammit!

Walter went to the rectory and knocked on the door. The monsignor answered with a breviary in his hand.

What, he asked Walter.

Lucas is gone.

What?

I said Lucas is gone! And he took the bones!

They rushed into the church and the monsignor confirmed that yes, the bones were gone.

He went to the rectory and called the police.

Days passed. Walter reported for work each day and as he worked alone in the cavernous space he pictured Lucas as a boy reading the book about relics he got from his mother. On the fourth day he worked wiping out the baptismal.

Walter, said the Monsignor, who had come up silently beside him.

Oh—oh—yes Monsignor—I was just working on this baptismal.

They called, Walter. They found Lucas.

Where?

In California—and he was trying to pawn the bones.

Will they bring him back here?

No. He's in jail out there.

Will you press charges this time?

The monsignor's eyebrows rose.

Well, to tell you the truth—maybe I should. Maybe that's what he needs to wake him up—maybe he needs to learn his lesson—

Monsignor, don't do it—I need to get to California—

The Monsignor folded his arms and stepped back and gravely shook his head.

Walter—no. Stay here. You got a good job. Your nose is clean. Stay here—

But I got to—

The Monsignor softly touched Walter's hand.

No. Please stay here with me Walter. Please stay here.

My son—

The priest's eyes were imploring—his hand pressed Walter's—their eyes locked for a moment—the hand grew hotter—then the Monsignor pulled his hand back and rushed from the church. Walter finished out the day—as he worked thoughts flooded through him. He grew sick to his stomach. Why had the priest touched his hand? And kept it there so long—and looked at him that way? That night in bed, Walter was troubled—he turned from side to side seeking sleep but it would not come. He could not put his finger on what was bothering him, some awful thoughts were roiling within him, eluding him somehow—but then he thought Of course, of course—he was worrying about Lucas. A soft feeling of relief settled on him and all at once he was sleeping like a baby, after deciding what he would finally do. The next morning, he did not go to the church. Instead, he packed, hitchhiked to the airport, and used the last credit he had left on his Visa card to buy a flight to California. He would bring back Lucas. He would bring back the bones. On the plane, he dozed, and dreamed of a man and two boys, their faces and forms in shadow, standing in a circle holding hands like two brothers and a father would do. In his sleep, he smiled, bathed in this vision which had come from God knew where.

Jim Meirose lives in central New Jersey and had had numerous short works published in major literary journals, including having previously had work appear in the SNReview. Two collections of his short work have been published, and he has two novels, "Claire" and "Monkey", available through Amazon.com.

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