

“A Stolen Cup”

A Short Story

By T.D. Smith

For Mom, Mother’s Day 2019

1.

I decided to take it. I *did* take it.

They were not happy with me.

I am surrounded now, by all sorts of men, from all over. Some are wearing dark uniforms, bullet-proof vests, the acronyms in bold yellow “CIA,” “NSA,” and others burning brightly in my parents’ living room. Other men are wearing long red robes with little red caps. Others still are wearing long, black ones, while their compatriots are adorned in black button-down shirts with white clerical collars tucked neatly under their shirts’ pointed black neck flaps.

They are all surrounding me, either interrogating me with their words, or giving me looks, offended, staring unapprovingly. Soon they will take me and it, away. It is too late, though. I have already achieved my end with that illustrious artifact.

I wanted it, *needed* it, for my purpose. I didn’t even know if it was real, if it *worked*, or if this crazy, inane, scheme of mine hatched in the depths of my brain in a moment of the most severe desperation would or even could work.

But I was committed to the cause. I was convinced I had to try.

Convincing my brother and Dad was far more difficult.

They wouldn't do it. It was stupid, unrealistic, far-fetched, dangerous, and required far more reckless abandon and gumption than your average, run-of-the-mill lower middle-class American citizen had to take them outside their comfort zone to even attempt such an act. No matter what I said, did, or how furiously and furtively I argued for it, they would not join me under any circumstances. No amount of convincing was going to make them change their minds.

Then it happened.

We knew it was coming, but none of us were quite sure when it would. It seemed distant, far off, imaginary. An eventual ending of the world as we knew it, an impending apocalypse, that, while we knew it would inevitably happen and the sky would come crashing down on that veritable day of family Ragnarok, still seemed surreal and strange and unreal when it was finally there.

Mom had been diagnosed with the tumor long before this point. The doctors gave her two years. She had lived, up to now, for two years and two months. The sweetest, most loving, and nurturing mother that ever lived was at once tough as nails and determined to fight viciously until the bitter end. She had managed to outlive her prognosis by two months. Now, however, her condition had deteriorated. No treatments were working anymore. The doctors had recommended hospice; enjoying what little time she had left and doing less harm

outweighed continuing a rigorous schedule of futile, painful, and ultimately ineffective treatments at this point.

That had been a month (a very *fortunate* month, which we cherished, with a diagnosis as aggressive as hers) ago. Now, mom was bedridden entirely, and could hardly move at all, needing the assistance of a nurse with even the most basic things such as eating, drinking, and defecating. It was miserable for the entire family, and jerked tears from my soul which eventually matriculated and trickled down from my eyes, but most of all for Mom. The end was quite near now, we all knew, and soon she would be leaving this earthly realm and simultaneously taking her permanent leave from us, too.

I remember standing in my parents living room the day when all the nurses, clerics, friends, and well-wishers were gathered around her in her bed, and I stood in the living room, all by myself at that time, staring out the window. It was very, very nearly time, now, closer than it had ever been. It would not have surprised me one bit had I seen a dark angel, or a man in a dark cloak with a sickle walking down the gray cement sidewalk beside my parents' grayish brown brick house with its orange awnings, knocking on the door and entering to take her soul to the next realm.

But what if I could *do* something about it?

I closed my eyes and remembered the image again from the 2014 news article. An ancient, withered, wooden cup, gilded in gold. It didn't look special, or magical, or mystical at all. In fact, it didn't even rest upright properly! It was slanted on its odd-shaped, warped base,

so old it was, and would hardly be able to hold an entire cup's worth of liquid. Yet it had been one of the most sought-after relics in the world for centuries.

I showed my dad my phone screen. He read its contents, and it took him a few seconds to fully comprehend the already-purchased plane tickets it displayed. I could see the dilemma in his eyes. 19 hours there? And back? And everything and anything that happens in between? What if she's gone when we get back and we miss her passing? What if she goes the minute we leave? Take off? Land? Touch the coveted cup? He closed his eyes tightly, squeezing away tears. Finally, he solemnly nodded.

"We're going to lose her if we stay. We *may* save her if we leave, maybe not. Either way, we stand to lose her. We have already had precious time with her and have been able to slowly say our goodbyes. This is crazy and risky, but we have very little to lose, when you think about what's hanging over us here. We may as well go!"

It was decided.

My brother, father, and I hastily packed up a few provisions and left out the back door, slipping quietly away from my Mom, her nurses, and caretakers.

We had made up our minds. We were going to *steal* the holy grail.

## 2.

As I said before, I had no idea if this was going to work, if the Holy Grail, was, in fact, *the* Holy Grail, or if its miraculous qualities existed and the legends were truths and that it could, in fact, heal my bedridden, sickly, dying mother.

I did not know if it was truly the cup of Jesus, that miracle-working relic of renown. I wasn't even sure exactly where I stood on Jesus, the Church, miracles, and religious beliefs in general. While not dismissing them entirely, and certainly not demeaning or ridiculing anyone who believed in them in any way, I had simply drifted apart from those things in my daily life. Being a man of the world, who, somewhere during college stopped going to church (much to my religious parents' chagrin) I had become more and more your typical secular, skeptical-leaning postmodern millennial man; I didn't really believe in such things, tending to dismiss them as naïve and primitive beliefs left over from an archaic and ancient past that some people still believed in today.

But I remembered the loves of my youth, and I remembered my *dream*.

I was into a lot of things back then, things that I still love and cherish today. King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, Indiana Jones, Lord of the Rings, just to name a few. I absolutely *loved* these things as a child, so much so that in my heart of hearts today perhaps my inner child even now considers them real, and their characters my friends. I loved stories of knightliness, heroics, and the magic, quests, and perils that they all entailed. I still love them, but not with the same intensity and frantically fanatic fever that only a child can display for his favorite franchises and fandoms.

I had a dream one night, when I was maybe 11 or 12 years old, wherein my father, brother, and myself were searching for the Holy Grail. We were way, far away from home (I had that feeling in the dream, anyway) in another, far land, on a golden, sandy beach. I had the sense that we had been on a long, difficult, taxing journey, and had searched far and wide. I don't remember much about the dream, but I do remember that we dug beneath the sandy dunes and uncovered an ancient city made of brick. Traversing pitfalls and crags and chasms, and narrowly avoiding getting killed by booby traps, we eventually fell upon the grail. It was pristine, golden, and its many jewels glittered, beaming like a rainbow in the arid sunlight. Picking it up, the city began to shake. We barely escaped alive, with sands pouring into the city to cover it up again forever. I remember sliding on my bum down a brown, sandy dune, the golden, shining, magnificent chalice in my right hand, and a mix of cheerful accomplishment and excited adrenaline rush from the chase filling my head as my heart throbbed.

I remembered that dream when I concocted the plan, whilst also reflecting on the details from that newspaper article.

I bought those fateful plane tickets to León in Northern Spain, and planned to make our way to the Basilica of San Isidoro, where in 2014 two researchers had concluded that a frail, pitiful looking wooden cup that through the ages had been varnished and gilded in shoddy gold and silver adornments, was likely that of Jesus Christ from the Last Supper.

The plane rides were long, cramped, and uncomfortable. A 19-hour marathon of flights from hell to get across the Atlantic, starting out in our hometown, then consisting of three connecting flights from Charlotte, N.C. to London, then to Barcelona, the first two of which I

won't bother to go into detail here. During the flight across the ocean, my father, wearied from care taking and worrying constantly over the last months, in addition to frequent travel with my mother between hospitals, passed out on the long flight and snored as he dozed. My brother and I rode side by side, myself in the window seat, my brother in the middle seat. We were both quite cramped, pressed into each other's space and the wall of the plane, respectively, due to our other seat-partner: a large olive-skinned man with greasy black hair, who was sweaty and smelled as though he had not bathed in several days. I hardly slept a wink on this flight, being cooped up and seated awkwardly. That was okay. I knew I would not be sleeping much on this journey. A lot was at stake and there was a plethora of details (of which I had given absolutely no thought prior to the whimsical decision of embarking on this quest) and potential scenarios wherein we failed, epically, to worry me for the entire ride.

Eventually my brother fell asleep. I watched the rest of the in-flight movie, *Kingdom of Heaven*, which was being broadcast in Spanish with English subtitles. Somewhere in the middle of the third replaying, just after the swords of two crusaders on the screen crashed with a metallic clang, I must have dozed off. It was one of those black, dreamless sleeps, wherein you are unaware you fell asleep, and later only remember being restlessly awake. Whatever the case, it was not a very long sleep, and finally, after so many hours, the landing gear of the plane touched the tarmac with a screech and a puff of burning rubber smoke.

The passengers on the plane all clapped and cheered, applauding the successful landing. My brother and I exchanged a glance.

"Are they used to flights not normally landing?" he asked me, with a hint of dry sarcasm.

We exited the plane wearing our backpacks, which were our carry-on luggage and the only things we brought with us. We called a cab and climbed in. I told the driver our destination: The Basilica of San Isidoro.

### 3.

We entered the Basilica, a father and his two sons, determined and on a quest. We stepped off the curb and away from our cab and crossed its outer courtyard, a marble walkway surrounded on both sides with water that spewed out of the mouth of a statue's head, and walked up the stairs of the building's brick façade. It was grand, ancient, and beautiful. Entering, we crossed the inner open-air narthex, which was a perfectly square, bleached-white brick courtyard surrounded by four arched walls, all topped with reddish-brown terracotta shingles. Together the three of us walked up to a station at the far end of the courtyard, where a stout man with a large book and pen stood. We signed up for a tour of the museum of antiquities and relics inside.

Our tour guide was an elderly, beardless white priest with neatly cut hair, five o' clock shadow, square wire-framed glasses and a quaint, neat red robe. His deep brown, wooden cross hung down on a red and white striped, braided rope and rested gently against his sternum. He spoke English well, with a slight accent. He guided us through the church, showing us all the art painted on the walls, its high, vaulted ceilings and its columns. Every wall, was painted with glorious depictions of New Testament scenes. It was beautiful and pristine, and ancient, dating back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Its altar was immaculate and its golden plating

sparkled and glittered in the sunlight that shone down in beams from the arched porticos above it.

At length, we entered the museum. The tour guide told us all about the history of many an artifact there, lined up on shelves, beautifully adorned trophy cases with elaborate woodcarvings. There were ancient works of ivory and precious metal, chalices of all shapes and sizes and metals, and in the library were scrolls, ancient manuscripts, translations of the Bible in tongues long lost. It was all fascinating and the depth and agedness of the culture that accompanied the art instilled a feeling of awe in my soul. My brother, father and I stood for a few long moments gazing about, taking it all in, giving the vestiges their due reverence.

The moment passed, and our tour guide priest led us on. The trophy cases all seemed to bend at an angle, pointing onward and inward, slanting toward the prize we sought after. I do not know if this was because of our desperation and the adrenaline that kicked up and made my stomach flutter and heartrate increase as we neared it, or if it were an intentional setup, but I felt as though everything in the room, despite each relic's own beauty and radiance, were all pointing toward the central attraction.

And there it was.

In the middle of the high-ceilinged room, on a pillar of pristine marble, sat the Chalice of Doña Urraca, that ancient wooden cup that had been augmented with faded gold and silver, sitting welcomingly, invitingly, out in the open. I stood, dumbfounded for a moment, gazing at it. How was it that so simple a thing, something that was so unremarkable, had been so adored and hunted across so many ages? Could it actually do what my family so desperately wanted it

to? And was the much-coveted cup of Christ that caught his crucified blood really there, unguarded, in the open, mine for the taking? Did my eyes deceive me?

I met my brother's eyes, then my father's, in turn. They nodded. We already had little time, and could not afford to waste any more of that precious delicacy.

"Hey!" my brother shouted, tossing up a t-shirt he had produced from his bag.

The priest, alarmed and caught off guard, looked up at the cloth.

"I'm really sorry about this," my father said, as he punched the priest square in the nose.

The poor cleric's head cocked back and his eyes screwed shut in pain. He hit the deck, rolled, and sprawled prone on the floor of the basilica's museum, a pool of crimson beginning to form under his head from out of his gushing nose. His wooden cross clacked loudly against the stone floor.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could have sworn I saw a bright red light, like an LED, flashing from the center of the priest's cross, but I didn't have time to look and make sure. I took advantage of the diversion, and rushed up to the holy cup, taking it in my hands, unzipping my backpack, slipping it inside, then re-zipping it shut.

We all turned and fled, out of the museum, through the corridors, and out into the walled-in courtyard again, making haste to escape with our prize while we could still do so unnoticed before the grail was missed, like children walk-running their opponent's fabric in a frenzied game of backyard capture the flag.

No sooner had we made it to the front gate of the basilica, then several cardinals clad in crimson robes, and armed Spanish soldiers came bursting through.

“GET ON YOUR KNEES!” they shouted, in both English and Spanish.

The three of us kneeled. Looking up, I noticed the same blinking LED lights on the pectoral crosses of the priests, just like our tour guide’s had. That very same old man, blood still gushing from his nose, which he had plugged with tissue paper and was holding cautiously, limped up.

“That’s them!” the red-robed tour guide spoke.

The soldiers trained their guns on us. On our knees, thousands of miles across the ocean away from home, my dear mother on her deathbed, my father, brother, and I sat crouched in front of them, the cardinals and their minions. We would surely be arrested as thieves of holy relics, and treated harshly in Spanish prison. We would never accomplish our goal of getting the grail to my mother. My brother began to cry. Dad hung his head and closed his eyes in defeat.

The desperation of the situation began to sink into my heart, dawning on my conscious mind as the soldiers neared me to take my backpack away. When they did, all hope would be lost. Mom would surely die while the three of us rotted in prison. I would never see her again, and she would pass, lonely, scared, and wondering where the men in her life were and why they had abandoned her in the end, in her hour of need. Tears began to flood in my eyes. What had I done? It really was a fool’s quest that had been destined to fail, no matter what. I held back a couple of sobs, that made their way out of my nose in several whimpering sniffs. The soldiers, cold and uncaring for our predicament, approached.

I looked upward, at the golden, bright sun shining brightly down on us in the open air of the courtyard. I thought upward, turned my spirit upward, and called out in despondency upon the divine, whom I had not conversed with in years, and did not even know if I believed in. It did not matter, I needed Him then. If he were real, and my belief was weak, then help my belief, I *do* believe, I thought to myself!

“Please, help us, Lord.” I said aloud, staring upward and past my earthly opponents. Both my dad and brother’s heads jerked and their stares darted over to me when I said it.

At that moment, the ground and the very walls of the basilica began to shake. The shaking grew more and more violent, until the soldiers were thrown off balance off their feet, knocking into and flinging the priests to the ground, too. I arose, and helped my family to their feet, and together, gripping and leaning into each other for support, we managed to make our way around the fallen foes, out the door of the basilica, and over the walkway across the water to the street.

Glancing back, I saw the priests rising to their feet along with the soldiers in the arched entryway, the gate still open and rattling in the sudden earthquake. They had begun to come our way, taking up the chase again, when the entire front wall of the church collapsed, turning into rubble and sand.

I stood there gawking in stunned silence for a moment, before I felt a tug on my arm. My brother pulled me into the cab my father had called. As we raced away from there, I contemplated, still in shock and a feeling of *déjà vu* hanging over me, flashbacks to my dream

as a child coming back to me as I relived the sands of the Basilica of San Isidoro flowing down and outward from its front façade in my mind.

We took the cab to the airport and exited the cab in a hurry, entering the airport and looking all around us anxiously to see if we were being followed.

#### 4.

Miracles happen every day.

Every breath we take is a miracle. The fact that any of us ever make it past childbirth, infancy, youth, adolescence and on into adulthood is a miracle. Modern medical science and its advances are, in a manner of speaking, miracles. Living and loving and moving and not dying each day or living reeling in pain, each blessed day we are privileged to wake up, each morning that the bright and rising sun shines upon us, is a miracle.

Sometimes, every so often, in special circumstances, giant miracles occur. Several such ones occurred to my father, brother, and I that day.

We miraculously made it through airport security, with no alarms going off, the grail not raising any suspicion, and none of the airport officials any the wiser about who we were, our whereabouts, activities, or what we were carrying. We boarded our plane and made our 19-hour flight back to the United States and two other connecting flights just as uneventfully as before, by some miracle. And we got off our plane, out of our small city's airport, into our car, and onto the highway to head home by some miracle.

Now, weary, tired, and coming back home from Mom was still alive, we found, when the nurse answered both the home phone and our inquiries, before badgering us with questions about our whereabouts and where we had been. That was when we ran into trouble.

Police cars, unmarked cars, and a variety of other vehicles, some sleek, black, and official-looking, others military make, followed us in a low speed chase the rest of the way home. We screeched into the driveway, and my dad bellowed at me to get out of the car and run inside. I did so. The mass of cars, vans, and other assorted vehicles burst onto our property, surrounding our car and the house. Soldiers, government agents, police officers, as well as various priests and clergy poured out of them. They formed a barricade around my parents' house and began yelling at me through a microphone. I ignored every last word, running onward, as of yet undeterred.

I sprinted down the gray sidewalk, busted through the front door, and swung it shut and locked it, just barely outrunning the three burly, bulletproof-vest-clad officers who chased after me. They beat their hands, and then threw their entire weight, against the oak door, which buckled and shook with each hit.

I rushed up the stairs into the living room space of my parents' split-level home, ignoring the imploring pleas of the nurse to tell me what was going on. I dodged doctor and hospice worker, and deftly dashed into the kitchen. At that moment, the officers knocked down the front door, and ran inside, clambering up the stairs pursuing me along with a throng of other various officials, detectives, officers, and clergymen.

It was too late. The final miracle could not be stopped by any earthly force.

\*\*\*

I stand now in my parents' dining room, having been led there in handcuffs to join my brother, father, and the sheriff, FBI, CIA, NSA, lead investigator of our case, and a slew of church representatives, some coming representing the Pope himself.

They frisked me, and ripped the holy cup out of my hands. It is returned into the clutches of an indignant Spanish priest. I look at the smug expressions of the various officers. Their mission is complete, the case resolved. Whatever we lunatics were up to, it has been thwarted. Our mischievous, frivolous feat has been foiled.

"So let me get this straight," the lead investigator asks, addressing my dad, "your plan was to *steal* the Holy Grail, to heal your wife's cancer?"

"That is correct." my father replies, solemnly.

Sniggers from the rest, the priests and clerics included.

The investigator then turns to me.

"And this was all *your* idea?"

I say nothing. I merely nod.

"And you actually thought this cockamamie scheme would *work*?"

I remain silent. All I do is grin. A deep, profound warmth, a happiness in the depth of my soul wells up. Fearlessly, I hold my head high, facing the crowd, smiling.

I think.

I remember the events right before and after my pursuers broke into my parents' home in flashes. I remember turning on the faucet and filling the chalice to the brim with water. No sort of special water, only meager, lowly tap water from the kitchen spigot. Racing up the final stairs and into mom's bedroom. Pushing past the doctors and nurses. Holding her head up to help her drink.

Gulp.

Gulp.

Gulp.

Just three sips.

Then, the officials tackling me, and the water going everywhere, covering my mom, getting her sopping wet. My face pushed hard into the carpet as I am handcuffed and dragged down into the living room by my assailants.

I stand now in the dining room, smiling at the uninvited guests sitting at my parents' table. In this moment, the sun shines through the sliding glass door that serves as the bay window of the dining room, illuminating me and my brother and my dad, and casting everyone else in shadow. The sudden burst of sunlight from outside makes us so bright that the officials have to squint to continue looking at us, even the ones wearing shades.

And in this moment, a female voice pipes up from behind us, stepping into the dining room, having walked through the kitchen. My dad's head turns, his eyes widen, he sees what he can't believe his eyes are showing him, and with a loving, excited look, his eyes begin to water

as he beholds his bride's flowing brown hair, vibrancy and life where once there was only chemically-induced baldness, and the smell of death. My brother's eyes widen in joyous delight, and he gasps.

The jaws of every last cop, soldier, officer, and priest drop all at once.

"Boys," that soft-spoken, sweet voice, the very first one I ever heard, that belongs to the gentlest, most caring person on earth, who is also the strongest and toughest fighter the world has ever known, speaks, "what is all this ruckus? Who are all these people and what are they doing here?"

It is in this moment, that she walks in.

The End