

Incendiary Agents
By Jack Karp

10-Page Sample

Scene 12

(The church. PATRICK addresses the audience from his pulpit.)

PATRICK

There was a time, not too long ago, when I truly believed that if only I spoke long enough and eloquently enough and passionately enough I could change anyone's mind about the war. But I realize now that was naive, hubris even. Those of you who already agree with me need no words, and for those of you who don't, no words would be enough. A man wiser than I give him credit for recently pointed out that I can't convince everyone, and he is probably right. But still... every Sunday I stand up here at this pulpit and I look out over this sanctuary and watch all of you file in and sit down in these pews. You leaf through your hymnals, shift in your seats, wait impatiently for the service to begin, all your faces looking up expectantly at me, hopeful, desperate even to hear something that will help you make sense of all of it, the death and destruction, the poverty, all the madness going on outside these walls. I always wait just one moment longer than I have to before I start. It's only a split second really, I doubt any of you have ever even noticed, barely the length of a single human breath. But in that moment, there is a silence, an indescribable silence. I can hear the birds fluttering in the trees outside, I can hear the wood of the church itself settling onto its joists, I can hear all of you lean forward just a touch in your seats, and everything else falls away – my anger over the waste and futility of this war, my outrage over our rotting schools and our children's blasted hopes, my concern over my nephew's uncertain fate, even my own doubts. Before a single syllable is spoken, before any prayers are recited, before any hymns are sung, before any of the words have left my mouth to flutter and fall and fail disappointingly to the ground as all our endeavors are doomed to do, and they are still just thoughts in my own head, perfect and beautiful and round, there is still the possibility, the insane, magic possibility that they will change the world. Inside that one moment is the closest I have ever felt to God.

Scene 13

(The jail cell. PATRICK is sitting or lying on his cot, alone. MARY enters, carrying a covered dish of food.)

MARY

All these kids we're trying to keep out of trouble, I never thought you'd be the one I'd have to come visit in jail.

PATRICK

Hello, Mary.

MARY

Everyone else took the deal and went home.

PATRICK

If you're here to convince me to do the same, you can turn around.

MARY

Oh, I long ago gave up trying to convince you to do anything you don't want to do.

PATRICK

Then what brings you here to my little corner of the Inquisition?

MARY

Can't I just make sure you're okay? Everyone's worried about you.

PATRICK

What's there to be worried about?

MARY

Well, you're in jail for one. You look thin. Have you lost weight?

PATRICK

I'm on a hunger strike.

MARY

Oh. Darn.

(Referring to the plate of food.)

I guess you probably don't want this then. The kids at the center made it for you. I helped them, but they did most of the work.

PATRICK

That's going to be hard to resist. You know how much I love your cooking.

MARY

Don't bullshit me, Patrick. I know you never eat the food I make you. But the kids heard you weren't eating in here and they wanted to do something to help.

PATRICK

And just where would they have heard that, I wonder.

MARY

It's possible I may have mentioned that you were on a hunger strike and they misunderstood me.

PATRICK

And you chose not to correct their misunderstanding.

MARY

It's not easy to explain the concept of a hunger strike to kids who are actually hungry.

PATRICK

Low, Mary, low. As a priest, I applaud your use of guilt.

MARY

You may be a priest, but I'm a mother. You don't eat my food, but I figured you'd have to be pretty cold-hearted not to eat the food those kids made.

PATRICK

Nice try, but I can't.

(Brief pause.)

MARY

Patrick, what exactly do you think you're accomplishing with all this?

PATRICK

I'm proving a point.

MARY

And what point is that exactly? That you're stubborn? All you have to do is sign a piece of paper and you can come home.

PATRICK

I can't come home just so people don't worry about me.

MARY

Then come home because they need you. I've been helping out at the center the last few weeks, but I'm not you. And Father Don had to do the service this past Sunday.

PATRICK

God.

MARY

Exactly. He spent forty-five minutes explaining the philosophical debate over transubstantiation. They had to go through the aisles poking people with the collection baskets to wake them up when it was over.

PATRICK

I'm sorry, Mary, but I have to do what I think is right.

MARY

What's right for other people or what's right for you?

PATRICK

That's not fair.

MARY

Isn't it? Those kids look up to you. How do you think it affects them to see you locked in a cage like this?

PATRICK

They see the adults in their lives locked up all the time.

MARY

So they don't need to see one more. These kids are vulnerable enough as it is. Do you really want to teach them it's okay to break the law?

PATRICK

No, I want to teach them to stand up for their principles.

MARY

They don't need principles. They need clothes, they need schools, they need food.

PATRICK

And they won't get any of that until we stop this war.

MARY

Your going to jail isn't going to stop the war.

PATRICK

I know that, Mary. Don't you think I know it's just some measly little gesture? But I have to do something.

MARY

Why this?

PATRICK

Because it's the only thing left I can think of. Every day I go into the center and I look at those kids and all I see is how a few years from now, they're the ones who are going to be getting drafted.

MARY

And if you abandon them now, in a few years they may not be around to get drafted. God, for such a smart person, you can be such an idiot.

PATRICK

I'm pretty sure it's a sin to call a priest an idiot.

MARY

Then stop being such an idiot! I know you have a hard time believing this, but there are more important things than principles. They're called people. *Real* people who rely on you. People made of flesh and blood and not principles. Break one law, break ten laws, break a hundred, it's not going to help those kids.

PATRICK

You don't think it was right for us to break the law?

MARY

No, I don't. Call me old-fashioned, but there have to be other ways to go about making your point.

PATRICK

We tried those ways. They don't work.

MARY

Then you *keep* trying. Since when do you give up so easy? You're no better than all these rioters in the street tearing up our city. What are they accomplishing by breaking windows and setting fire to cars? I think what you did was destructive, that's all. There are rules. If you don't like the way things are, protest and shout all you want, but you follow the rules.

PATRICK

Like Ryan followed the rules?

(MARY slaps PATRICK. Pause.)

MARY

You know what I think? I think you're angry. I get why you're angry, we all certainly have a right to be angry. But you wanted an excuse to act on that anger, to lash out and still feel righteous about it. And you got caught so now you're just being a spoiled child sulking in your room and refusing to come out because you didn't get your way.

PATRICK

I can't take the deal! Don't you get it? If I take the deal, she died for nothing! Her death only means anything if I stay!

MARY

Are you even listening to yourself? You're going to sacrifice everything including those kids to keep doing something stupid you already know doesn't work just so Nancy's death has meaning? You know who you sound like?

PATRICK

Who?

MARY

Them. Martyring yourself isn't brave, Patrick, it's easy. All it takes is one moment of pigheadedness and then you get to sit in your cell and feel smug and self-righteous. But the rest of us have to clean up your mess and keep going. You want to go to jail for the next twenty years, fine. But own up to what it really is – a cop-out. The really hard work is in choosing not to go to jail so you can stick around and help out.

(Pause.)

PATRICK

I tried everything I could to keep her out of that building.

MARY

You were in love with her.

PATRICK

Was it that obvious?

MARY

Don't worry, it wasn't. But I have an eighteen-year-old son, so I know what that first time a boy falls for a girl looks like.

PATRICK

I should have been able to save her.

MARY

But you weren't. So stop punishing yourself and come home.

PATRICK

Is that why you think I'm staying in here?

MARY

Isn't it?

(Brief pause.)

PATRICK

Oh, God, Mary, I don't know what to do.

MARY

Sure you do.

(She puts the plate down on the cot.)

I'll leave the food.

(She kisses PATRICK on the top of the head and starts to leave.)

PATRICK

Why do you keep cooking for me?

(She stops.)

If you knew all this time I don't eat it, why keep making me food?

MARY

Just like you don't need to actually go to prison to make your gesture, I don't need you to actually eat the food to make mine.

(She exits. Pause. Then PATRICK picks up the plate of food, looks at it, and starts eating.)

Scene 14

(JIMMY and MARY'S kitchen. MARY is sitting at the table smoking a cigarette, the pack she took from NANCY and some cooking ingredients on the table in front of her. After a moment, she hears JIMMY approaching from off and quickly puts out the cigarette and waves the smoke away. Then she gets up and starts cooking. JIMMY enters in a bathrobe or pajamas.)

JIMMY

Oh, hey. You're up.

MARY

What else is new?

JIMMY

Couldn't sleep?

MARY

Looks like that makes two of us.

(JIMMY goes to MARY and kisses her. He smells the cigarette smoke on her, which she notices, and she moves away.)

I made some coffee.

JIMMY

Sure.

(MARY goes to pour him a cup of coffee while he sits down at the table. JIMMY sees the pack of cigarettes on the table and picks it up.)

Watchu been doing?

MARY

Just making a casserole for Shirley up the street. I figure she has enough to worry about right now without having to cook.

(JIMMY nods. MARY brings the cup of coffee to him and he quickly puts the cigarettes back down.)

JIMMY

You look tired. Why don't you leave it for later?

MARY

I told Pat I'd help out at the kids' center later.

(MARY returns to cooking.)

JIMMY

What time?

MARY

Seven.

JIMMY

It's three-thirty.

MARY

And I have to do the laundry, and make you breakfast before you go to work.

JIMMY

I can make my own breakfast.

MARY

Last time you made your own breakfast, you burned a pot trying to boil water. You cannot make your own breakfast.

JIMMY

(Referring to her cooking.)

So do this tonight.

MARY

I have a women's committee meeting tonight. And there's a bake sale tomorrow so I have to get ready for that. And this place is a mess.

JIMMY

Mary, why don't you just take a pill?

MARY

I don't like the way the pills make me feel.

JIMMY

Asleep?

MARY

Groggy, like I'm trying to swim through Jell-O. I take one and the whole next day is shot.

JIMMY

And you don't take one, you don't get any sleep and the whole next day is shot.

MARY

Everything's a trade-off, I guess.

(Brief pause.)

JIMMY

Just because Shirley's son... it doesn't mean anything's happened to Ryan.