“Miracle: 50 Cents”

**JOHN REGNIER[[1]](#footnote-1)**

The sign read: “See a Miracle: 50 Cents.” That was it. It didn’t specify what kind of miracle. It didn’t say when. It just said “Miracle,” and that was enough to draw a crowd.

The owner of the sign, a boy of about six or seven, waited next to it, grinning a crooked smile and waiting expectantly. His shirt had enough rips in it to let in most of the cold, with a color that was no longer identifiable, and his hat was a crumpled piece of cloth perched atop his head. His stance looked almost like he was about to run off, and it wouldn’t have been to lie to say that it came from practicing just that, but the striking part was the look in his eye.

There’s a sort of shifty look easily identified in the eyes of most urchins, and as the people began to gather, it shook a few of their hearts to see that look in the eyes of a six-year-old. With barely a word spoken among them, people started to form a line behind the sign. The butcher left his venison and waiting customers to take a place in line. The florist put down her roses and eagerly made her way over. A young girl with blond pigtails stopped her skipping when she saw the sign. She quickly claimed a place behind the florist, and her harried parents joined her.

The line soon wound all the way around the square, starting on the bottom step of the old cathedral where the sign was, and ending at the corner of South Street. Some in the line talked to one another, excitedly speculating what the miracle might be, while others stood waiting quietly. But everyone was hoping that the promised miracle would be better than another monotonous day.

The sun reached its apex and slowly started to descend, bathing the cathedral’s cracked steeple in the gold of evening. The lower it dipped, the more impatient the line became. Feet began tapping the street. Watches were checked and re-checked. An infant let out a wail, and half the line turned to glare at the mother who was trying desperately to sooth her baby.

“Waste of time.”

“C’mon kid.”

“How much longer?”

At last, the boy gathered up the sign, tucked it away safely under his right arm, and enthusiastically beckoned the crowd forward saying, “Alrighty folks! Is this way.” He turned and scampered up the cathedral steps. With a grand flourish, the urchin pulled open one of the massive doors halfway open and stepped to the side to let the crowd enter the church. As each person passed, the boy held out his misshaped hat upside down and nodded to the “50 Cents” portion of the sign under his arm. Some people gave their two quarters reluctantly, but others pitied the boy and gave him a dollar. With each addition to his hat, the boy’s crooked smile stretched wider and wider.

Once the last person of the line stepped through the door, the boy slipped into the cathedral himself, letting the door slam behind him. A few people started, and everyone looked expectantly at the grinning six-year-old. With unsettling confidence, the boy faced the crowd of about thirty people and stuck his hands in his pockets, seemingly unconcerned that everyone’s attention was on him.

Everyone stood silently, waiting for a signal from the boy. When it became clear that he had no intention of moving, the butcher asked, “Well, where’s the miracle?”

The boy seemed to snap out of his thoughts, blushed a little, and stammered “Right, right. This way.”

As he led them past two side altars, many in the crowd read the inscriptions carved into them: *Sanctus Benedictus et Sancta Scholastica, orate pro nobis!* Statues of the twin saints stood above the altars, and many in the crowd wondered if the miracle would come through their town’s two patrons.

As more and more people passed the altars, excited murmuring brought out all along the line. Everyone speculated what wonder they were all about to witness, and someone even exclaimed, “Maybe the saints will finally save their city’s economy!” But this guess was received unfavorably by most of the crowd, and more than a few glares were turned on the banker, the origin of the guess. The young man colored and quickly ducked his head.

However, despite the crowds’ hopes, the little urchin marched right past both altars without looking at them and continued to make his way up to the pews closest to the high altar. A traveling priest was in the middle of saying Mass, although most of the crowd ignored the fact, and it was this man who held the urchin’s attention. Dropping on to one knee and quickly springing up, the leader of the miracle watchers entered the first pew, walked all the way to the far end, and sat down contentedly.

With impatience bordering on anger, the crowd began to get restless.

“What’s going on?”

“Where’s the miracle?”

“He said there would be a miracle.”

“Good fer nothing little urchin!”

The priest intoned, “Credo in Deum, Patrem ominpotentem, Creatorem caeli et terrae…” but cut off when he noticed the sudden increase of his congregation. The banker, casting in eye at the rest of the crowd to make sure they were looking, climbed the steps to the priest.

The priest, struggling to contain his bewilderment, composed himself and asked, “Can I help you?”

“Well, um, reverend, father, sir,” the banker stammered, “We were all promised that we would see a miracle here today.”

The priest’s brows furrowed, “Is that so? And who, may I ask, made you such an extraordinary promise?”

The banker turned and pointed to the little boy in the front pew, who, apparently bored with the conversation, had started amusing himself by swinging his dangling legs back and forth.

“Ah, Charlie,” the priest said, his face breaking into a smile, “He’s a wonderful boy. He comes in here almost every day for Mass. Looks like he’s still up to his business.” Leaving the perplexed banker standing in front of the pulpit, the priest resumed his prayer, “Et in Iesum Christum, Filius eius unicum, Dominum nostrum,” speaking directly to the boy, Charlie, in the pew.

Now fully upset, every person in the crowd began to demand their money back from Charlie.

“Little thief!”

“There’s no miracle here.”

“Waste of time.”

The boy turned to them with a look of alarm in his gray eyes. “Shh,” he cautioned, holding a finger to his lips, “Just wait. Miracle will happen.”

By now, the priest had finished the creed and was preparing for the consecration. Some people in the crowd had given up on getting their money back and stormed out of the cathedral. The rest of the line shouted louder and louder at the boy to return their dollars and quarters. Just as a few of the men were advancing to forcibly take Charlie’s hat full of coins, the boy whispered, “There it is. There is miracle.”

Charlie’s face broke into a bright smile and his eyes, fixed intently on the altar, shined with happiness. The priest had just raised the host, saying the words, “This is My Body, which will be given up for you. Do this in memory of Me.”

At once, the people went silent. Most in the crowd had never stepped foot in a church before, a few were weekly attendees, but all of them knew the significance of the moment, even if some of them didn’t believe it.

The silence in cathedral continued as the people in the crowd internally battled with shock, shame, indignation, and confusion. The boy continued to gaze happily at the priest on the altar, and the priest continued with the consecration.

The crowd began to disperse.

Two people bowed their heads in shame and quickly knelt next to Charlie. The rest of the crowd slowly walked towards the cathedral doors. No one asked for their money back, and many people felt that the hollow sound of the doors slamming echoed the sound in their heart.

The priest extended his hands in blessing, smiled at the little boy in the front pew, and concluded the Mass. With the words, “Go in peace,” Charlie jumped to his feet, dropped his right knee and quickly sprang up, then scampered to the far side of the sanctuary where a statue of Mary watched over the box marked “Donations.” The two people who had stayed for the remainder of the Mass watched attentively.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, the boy took out his money and began to divide the coins. He took one of the small piles and poured it into the box, smiling at the tinkling sound the coins made as they dropped into the metal box. Glancing at the crucifix hanging over the altar, Charlie said, “My Partner deserves His share.” Then, pocketing the rest of the coins, the little boy made his way out of the cathedral, letting the door slam behind him.

1. John Regnier, a student at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, won honorable mention in the Delta Epsilon Sigma annual short fiction undergraduate national writing competition. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)