

**TRUE NAILS**  
**a theological noir**

by Chris Van Strander

chrisvanstrander@gmail.com  
484-995-0483  
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### CHARACTERS

FATHER MITCH      A hardboiled Catholic priest

MARY                A virginal "good girl"

MAGDALENA        A femme fatale

### SETTING

Now, kid.

Some fleabag motel in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico.

*(Actors enter, each with some final costume piece they'll don to get into character.)*

ACTOR PLAYING MAGDALENA  
Picture this play in black and white.

*(A timpani roll.)*

ACTOR PLAYING FATHER MITCH  
Catholic Charities USA, in association with [name of theater company presenting play] and Rose Brand, America's leading theatrical fabric company, present: *Father Mitch—Man of God!*

*(Music up: a film noir theme.)*

ACTOR PLAYING FATHER MITCH  
Starring yours truly as Father Mitch, that two-fisted priest from the asphalt alleys of the Lower South Side. A former mean streeter himself, Mitch underwent a religious conversion while serving a three-to-six bit in Sing Sing, got his Holy marching Orders, and now spreads the Gospel Truth to anyone who'll listen... even youse mugs who won't. Tonight: *The Case of the Purloined Nails—Part Deux*. Previously, in *Part One*:

*(The actor playing FATHER MITCH dons his costume as the actors playing MARY and MAGDALENA read from newspapers:)*

ACTOR PLAYING MARY and ACTOR PLAYING MAGDALENA  
"HEIST!

ACTOR PLAYING MAGDALENA  
Brash Rash of Relic Robberies!

ACTOR PLAYING MARY  
Dateline: Europe. Bandits have nabbed some a' the most priceless dinguses in Christendom, Vatican and Interpol revealed today: the Holy Nails.

ACTOR PLAYING MAGDALENA  
Yes, those selfsame spikes with which Christ got Himself croaked on that cross. The Church refuses to divulge specific details as to the scope of these thefts, other than to say they occurred across Europe sharing the same *modus operandi*:

ACTOR PLAYING MARY  
Thieves slipped in with the crowds of faithful—hid—silently bound the night guard—nicked each Nail—then ever so calmly copped the sneak. A billion—yes B as in beatification—buck reward's on offer to the Good Samaritan who hunts these treasures down."

FATHER MITCH

Ah: my cue. I tracked 'em. Like God's own bloodhound. Where? Where else? Some fleabag motel. 'Cause really—ain't it always some fleabag motel? Hundred-twenny miles north a' El Paso, smack dab in the ass crack a' Hell. Population? Seven thousand... *(ominously)* and two.

*(Venetian blinds fall, cast menacing shadows. The actors playing MARY and MAGDALENA don their costumes as:)*

FATHER MITCH

Odd goons. First one? Real pro skirt. Painted up thicker than Jezebel at an Avon party. I didn't peep her luggage, but I'd betcha the tags said Babylon. Her pal? What a tomato. Looked pure as a lily's hymen. They didn't quite welcome my welcome.

*(The women jump him. Tableau! Music swells! Lights fall; rise again. Tonight's episode begins.)*

FATHER MITCH

Not for nothin', but you birds ever heard a' Christian kindness? Ain't even been introduced.

MARY

Mary.

MAGDALENA

Magdalena.

FATHER MITCH

I'm deducin' those ain't your real handles.

MAGDALENA

I'm deducin' you're deducin' right.

MARY

I can't crab it, Father—how'dja find us so lickety-split like?

FATHER MITCH

M.O. Your thefts were in Europe, yetcha never condescended to utter a peep a' the local language. Bingo: Americans. Ya stayed freakishly calm... like ya'd spent time relaxin' in some sunny desert spa town. Ya always slipped into these joints with the faithful—'cause that's how youse two hide: in plain sight... amongst Catholics. What state west a' the Pecos got the most Catholics? Right here: New Me-hee-co. Only one big spa town in New Me-hee-co: Truth or Consequences. Motel nearest the airport—

totin' 'round a bindle a' nails, don't wanna keep on the street long, do ya? All that suspicious clinkin'? Slip the desk a fiver: "Two dames. Room?"

MAGDALENA

How'dja know we was dames?

FATHER MITCH

*(chuckles)* Kitten, if I can't tell that by now...

MARY

Gadzooks you're accomplished.

FATHER MITCH

Accomplished nothin'. If a two-bit whiskey priest could figure that? Bet your life the European fuzz is right behind. And if there's one thing you don't want on your behind? It's European fuzz.

MAGDALENA

Looks like we got the bulge at the moment though, Padre.

MARY

And given that, everyone, here's how I recommend we comport ourselves. Gold star, Father. We've got your nails: left paw, right paw, feetsies. And we'll return 'em. To your safekeeping. On one condition.

FATHER MITCH

Ransom?

MARY

Silly. *Merit*. Just hafta prove Mother Church is worthy of having them back.

MAGDALENA

We got a beef or three with your Vatican, see.

FATHER MITCH

Huh, stop the press. And if I come up short?

MAGDALENA

We'll lay a Broderick on you make the Passion look like a pedicure.

FATHER MITCH

Eggs in coffee, doll. Close your heads and start spillin'.

MAGDALENA

*(produces a nail)* This here Nail? Pierced Big Man's right hand. Lifted it from the Imperial Treasury, Vienna. *(beat)* Galileo.

FATHER MITCH  
The Eye-talian?

MAGDALENA  
1633. Dragged before the Inquisition. Crime? Holdin' false doctrine. What false doctrine? That Earth goes 'round the sun.

MARY  
Which last we checked...

MAGDALENA  
All the same, Church calls it heresy. Forced to recant. Sentence? House arrest. For life!

FATHER MITCH  
Yeah—in his *villa*. In *Florence*. If that's house arrest? Sign me up! But even *if*—and that's one alpha-omega if—even *if* the crew runnin' the show back then got a little too gashouse with him? They squared that account: asked forgiveness.

MARY  
Three hundred fifty years later!

FATHER MITCH  
Ain't no statute a' limitations on God's infinite Mercy, babe! Ask for pardon? You're pardoned. So looks this beef? Got shakier legs than a leper in a snowstorm.

*(MARY and MAGDALENA look to each other. MAGDALENA hands him the nail. He smirks.)*

FATHER MITCH  
They all go down this easy?

MAGDALENA  
Hold tight, Padre. That's just the *amuse-bouche*.

FATHER MITCH  
*(crosses himself; gazes upon the nail)* And by the time this touches Him? He's already been tortured all day. Lead-tipped whips 'cross His Keister; crown stabbin' His Noodle; luggin' that log around. Soldiers strip Him, toss Him on the crossbeam. One a' Rome's Finest wrenches open His Palm. 'Nother fumbles this from a basket, hoists a hammer. Drives it into His Hand. The Hand that healed Malchus. Hand a' God's Mercy. Thieves hurl curses, but our Savior? Silent. He bears His suffering, teachin' me even now, two thousand years later, how to bear mine. All He says? What I'll say to you: I forgive you mutts. You ain't got the foggiest what you're doin'.

MARY

*(produces a second nail)* This most sacred Nail pierced Jesus' left paw. Pinched it from *(to MAGDALENA)* shucks wasn't that just the loveliest lil' tabernacle? *(to FATHER MITCH)* Milan.

FATHER MITCH

Just spill your beef.

**To read the rest of this play, please contact me at:  
[chrisvanstrander@gmail.com](mailto:chrisvanstrander@gmail.com).**