

The Forgotten Lamp

He had, by his own quiet estimation, everything in order.

HNot arrogantly. He would have been the first to say so. He simply had a gift for clarity — for seeing through the fog of sentiment that obscured so much of parish life and getting to what actually needed doing. His professors had noted it. His rector had noted it. He had been assigned the inventory precisely because he could be trusted to see through sentiment to what actually mattered.

The side chapel lay beyond a narrow arch off the north transept — a place that had once been carefully kept and was now abandoned to the cobwebs. Plaster cracked in long, branching lines. Dust blanketed the floor. The niche at the center stood empty, marked only by a cleaner patch of stone where something had stood for years and then been taken away.

He stepped in, glanced once around — and stopped.

A small red lamp was burning in the corner.

Not brightly. Not enough to light the room. Just a steady, contained glow, as though it belonged to another order of light altogether.

The lamp hung from a simple bracket beside the empty niche — the sort of sanctuary lamp one might expect before a reserved sacrament. But there was no altar, no font, no sign the chapel had served any liturgical purpose in years. He reached up and turned the glass gently. The flame did not flicker. There was no flask beneath it, no feed line, no hidden reservoir.

He made a note — then paused, pencil still touching the page.

If the rector heard about this before he had a sensible account ready, it could become something. A *sign*. The chapel would fill with people lighting candles and leaving flowers, and the whole business of clearing it out before Pentecost would dissolve into precisely the kind of muddle he had been sent to prevent.

He closed the notebook. He would handle it quietly.

He asked around that afternoon — carefully, sideways, the way he had learned to ask things without planting ideas. The sacristan shook his head. No oil had been ordered for that chapel in a long time. Perhaps before Father Martin, rest his soul. Maybe even before that. Two older parish women he consulted looked at him with mild surprise. Neither hinted at a secret.

That evening he returned and looked more closely — checking for a flask, a feed line, anything obvious. The flame did not flicker when he leaned near it. The housing was closed and ordinary.

He went to bed telling himself someone would turn up. A pious parishioner. A forgotten arrangement. Something accountable.

The next evening he checked again. It was still burning.

On the fourth day he brought his toolbox.

He worked the bracket loose, lifted the lamp carefully from the wall, and carried it to the window where the light was better. The base was smooth — no orifice, no fitting, no sign of any feed mechanism. He opened the housing and examined the interior. Empty. No reservoir, no wick beyond the one that had no business burning. The wall behind was smooth too, except for the two bracket holes.

He stood there a moment, the lamp in his hands.

Then he remounted it, deliberately left it unlit, and opened his notebook.

Lamp examined. No fuel source. Remounted. Extinguished.

Clean. Accountable. He closed the notebook and left.

He slept poorly.

Before dawn he was awake, and — without quite deciding to — he was dressed, then walking, then inside.

The nave was still dark. Early Mass would not begin for another hour. He walked directly to the north transept, passed beneath the narrow arch, and entered the side chapel.

The lamp was burning.

Exactly where he had left it. Exactly as it had always been.

He felt no rush of certainty. No revelation. No triumphant collapse into belief. Only the quiet failure of all the explanations he had been so eager to produce — and beneath that, something older and less comfortable: the recognition that the world did not, in fact, feel any need to conform to his understanding.

He approached slowly. He reached toward the glass — then stopped.

There was nothing left to test. Nothing to expose. Nothing to correct.

He let his hand fall.

The first gray light of morning had begun to touch the upper windows. The dust lay as before. The cracked plaster, the empty niche, the broken kneeler. Nothing had changed.

Only the light.

For the first time in years, he knelt.

— *William Zeitler*

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