

Over the Back Fence
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Approx 635 words

The WaterSlate tapes
By Alva Wood

Reverend Sid Carter was standing at the door of the church, getting ready to lock up, when a wispy sort of man approached her hesitantly.

“Is the sin box open?” he asks.

“The what?” asks Sid.

“The sin box,” he says again. “You know, the confessional.”

The light dawns. “We don’t actually have a confessional booth,” Sid explains. “But if there’s something you need to talk about?”

The man nods.

Sid lets him in, and they go sit down in a front pew.

“How can I help you?” Sid asks.

“I need a priest,” says the man.

“I am a priest,” says Sid.

He stares at her for a while. “Is this still confidential?”

“Absolutely,” Sid assures him.

Then he says, “You’ll have to do. But you’re not supposed to know who I am.”

He sits in the second pew, behind her back, and starts, “Forgive me, father...”

Sid manages to stifle a snort.

As near as Sid can tell from his ramblings, he acts as local representative for a company that’s building a big housing development called WaterSlate. He used to respect their business practices, but as bosses kept twisting the rules, he has grown increasingly skeptical.

Being ordained in the United Church, Sid believes everything can be resolved with dialogue. “So,” she asks, “are you seeking forgiveness for what you’ve done, or for what your company has done?”

“You haven’t been listening,” snaps the man, with unusual vigor. “I don’t need forgiveness for what I’ve done. It’s what I’m going to do!”

And he gets up and walks out. But when Sid checks, she finds he has left behind some audiotapes.

She takes them home. Her curiosity overcomes her scruples. She tries playing the tapes.

One voice clearly belongs to the wispy man. He’s telling someone about his dealings with the village council.

The other voice is more authoritative. Sid guesses it’s the man’s boss.

“Forget re-zoning,” says the boss. “That outfit takes forever just to handle rezoning a single lot.”

“Then what do I do?” wispy asks.

“Suggest a new zoning for the whole development. Call it a Direct Control Zone. Let the councillors think they’re making the decisions.”

Sid fast-forwards to another session.

“They want a what?” the boss demands. “A (expletive deleted) Master Plan? Do they think they can dictate what to build?”

“It is their community, after all,” wispy suggests.

“So what?” says boss. “It’s our money!”

Fast forward again.

“Let’em put anything they want into the Master Plan,” snorts the boss. “We can change it later! By next year, they’ll have a different batch of councilors anyway.”

Fast forward. Now the boss is issuing orders: “You go there and tell them that unless we get some changes to the Master Plan, we’ll have to pull out of the whole project. Use any (expletive deleted) excuse you want. Rising labor costs, construction materials, whatever... But if they don’t agree, they can sing bye-bye to all those Development Cost Charges they were hoping to collect!”

Fast forward once more.

“They refused to renegotiate? Who do those (expletive deleted) hicks think they are, anyway? We have a right to make a profit!”

The wispy man mumbles something inaudible.

“Doesn’t matter anyway,” retorts the boss. “We’ll make our profit by flipping the (expletive deleted) project to some other bunch of investors.”

“Is that ethical?”

“Ethical schmethical!” says the boss. “If they’re stupid enough to buy out our contract, they’re stupid enough to believe they can twist a bunch of elected councilors around their little finger. That’s their problem.”

Now Reverend Sid has her own ethical problem. If the wispy little man’s confession was confidential, can she release the tapes to the mayor and council? Or does she have to keep what she knows about the developer’s plans secret?