

# The Rector's Tale

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**PROLOG**

"NO MAN WITH HIS OWN LAWN TO MOW can be a communist," said Bill Plitt. "He has too many other things to do."

Therefore a country had use for a Plittville, for many Plittvilles. Therefore Plittvilles came to be, everywhere. No one disagreed with the Plitts when they made their case, for in those days disagreement of any kind reflected upon one's patriotism. Communists might disagree, but that was expected of them, and anyway, Plittvilles weren't for the bad Americans, the nay-sayers, the no-can-do bunch. Plittvilles were for the rest of us, the good, brave Americans who fought the good fight against Germany and Japan, who loved our government for plunging us into hard times, keelhauling us through a war fierce beyond our imaginings, then bringing us up prosperous, omnipotent, and strangely dry on the nuclear shore.

To the rest of the world we had said: Behold our works, ye unfree masses, and tremble. And to our own: a newer and even better deal than before. And so in June of 1947 the first Plitt home -- 1 George Washington Drive -- went up on the Delaware flats north of Philadelphia. Joseph Kennedy was on hand for the groundbreaking, and the young Nelson Rockefeller, the two of them standing arm in arm for the pictures. And all three Plitts in their shiny suits, admiring their prefab handiwork.

The Plitt home was a kind of miracle. While one crew tacked up a frame, another got to work on chimney and fireplace; both finished at the same instant. Rockboard, a new invention, substituted for the heavier and more conventional insulations. The plitt home was cellarless because -- as Bill Plitt said -- the modern age had no need for cellars. Life, Colliers, Fortune, Look all made pilgrimages to the flats to witness the birth of a new kind of city, and their witnessings extolled a new American artform, housing -- \$7,990 complete, \$90 down and \$58 per month -- and each home came with a brand-new Bendix washer. "The model-T equivalent," as Irwin Plitt, self-taught architect brother of Bill Plitt, put it, "of the rose-colored cottage of every man's dream."

Said Patriarch Isaac Plitt: "Everything in this world of ours changes, and no one appreciates the charm of an older home, with the gingerbread trimmings and inlays, more than me. But we are moving into a utilitarian age, and the new home will be designed strictly from the standpoint of usability."

At the rate of one completed dwelling every 24 hours, Plittville I swarmed across the flats, stopping only at its natural boundaries, the river and the ridge. Work commenced immediately on Plittvilles II and II, on Long Island and outside Baltimore. It was not a sentimental sop to Isaac Plitt that a Plittville Haifa was penciled into the new nation of Israel; it was a deal, and money changed hands.

The spectacle of a building America sped by at newsreel pace. Where Rome took millenia, the Plitts took a weekend, and the occupational forces set up camp. The sense of dispatch, of efficiency, and of strict practicality was entirely American: Come on, boys, let's get these folks under a roof before dark. It was veterans roundup time, and short-cuts were shortened, competition thwarted, and planners thrown into a dither: instant towns needed instant schools, sewers, libraries, churches. More, good, American, government, quick!

The Instant People of the Flats dwelt by a ridge. They had won a war, and their reward was playing the role of Munchkins to the Federal Housing Authority's Kindly Witch Glinda, and the imperial wizardry of television. Every night they sat, electrified, caught up in pagan struggles: McCarthy versus the Army, Nixon versus JFK, the Cartwrights versus the Untamed Land.

And high on the ridgetop burned the fires of the Lord; and the incense of his priests rose heavenward.

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THE WARHOLA MERCURY steamed down Immaculate Conception Drive, passing under arch after Gothic arch of spreading catalpas. The car came to a stop before a wrought-iron gate topped with an inscription in unreadable German Blackletter: St. BERNARD'S BLUFF. And below that, in smaller Blackletter: Preparatory Seminary.

Marty Frye stared at the Blackletter, at the wrought iron, at the endless wall of red brick winding up over the next hillock and on up the ridge. He rested his chin against the front seat; after a long day's travel from one corner of Pennsylvania to the other, he had arrived at the seminary gates. He had seen these letters before somewhere -- and it wasn't in Father Garrity's "literature." And he had seen the iron bars before, too, and most of all he had seen the line of brick wall looping up the ridge. He had seen it in his dreams. He dreamed it often, and every time, the same thing happened. Snorting like a bull, he would stamp his feet and charge at it, believing it would part for him like a matador's cape. In some dreams, the wall did melt away at his charge. In others, it clobbered him. Sometimes he would look up and see Saturns and sheriff's badges whirling around him in a counter-clockwise orbit. There would be his mother, just beyond, saying wake up, wake up, you're having bad dreams, bad dreams.

"It's like the wall is, I don't know, teasing me or something," he would try to explain to his mom, staring into a spoonful of soggy Kix.

"You're thirteen years old," his mother would tell him, pressing down against the ironing board as if she were drowning a rabbit. "Old enough to say no to a wall."

From the front seat, Mr. Warhola spoke over his shoulder. "From the looks of it," he said, "I'd say, 'What a place. '"

Marty was pleased. He had got himself in one day from one corner of Pennsylvania to another. He could feel his past life uncoiling from him like an old suit of snake. And this wall was a portent of great good things happening at St. Bernard's. All that remained was to get rid of the Stroops. Ma and Pa Warhola would weep at leaving George, but it was worth a tearful scene to see them go.

Marty had seen tears before, but he did not deign to cry them himself -- not standing at casket side at his retarded brother's funeral, not returning from vacation to find his father gone, and all the dresser drawers emptied, not coming off a brick-wall carom. Tears, his mother taught him, had special uses, and should be reserved for same. At the funeral he had been tempted, but he was strong. If I have waited this long, I can wait another day, he told himself. And he did not cry. He did not give them that satisfaction. His dry eyes had been a rebuke to The World.

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The Warhola Mercury cruised alongside the brick wall, and Marty carried his rebuke even further. Was the wall to keep the seminarians in, he wondered, or The World out? He blessed the priests. Finally, somebody was putting The World in its place.

The Mercury came to two twin cemeteries, one on each side of the car, each grave marked with an enameled white cross. Priests and brothers on the driver's side, the Petite Sisters riding shotgun.

"Gosh," said George, "priest graves."

Marty looked at him as he would at a crushed tortoise. "Not afraid to die, are you?"

Mrs. Warhola shot him a look of half-reprimand, half-alarm. George swallowed air.

Big George had known Marty all his life but had no idea that Marty hated him. In grade school George had been designated a leader -- he was pleasant and unthreatening for his size. Other kids flocked to him for protection on the playground. It was George who had given Martin his nickname, Marty, and it was Marty who returned the favor by dubbing George Big George, after the cartoon character who was always dragging himself across the desert. George was a completely unobjectionable person -- kind, average intelligence, a joiner. Marty hated him for being normal.

The boys' vocations could not have been more different. For George, the priesthood was a given. His family was Catholic Catholic -- no agonizing over fine points in that household, such as George's stories about him and Father Czestokowa gobbling unconsecrated hosts between Masses. Big George was Father Chesty's favorite altar boy. The family piano sported portraits of about eleven Stroops already at seminary or convent; George was the last of a great brood of Catholics, famous throughout the parish for helping institute the Interfamily Rosary

Plan, in which neighbors met weeknights and went over their Hail Marys together, in their own homes, on their knees. Without being special in any way, the Stroops were almost too Catholic.

Whereas the Fryes were nothing but special. As Elizabeth liked saying, Whomsoever God loves He first kicks the stuffings out of. The Fryes had divine bootprints up and down the lot of them. In Marty's eye, God was crying out to him for propitiation.

First He nailed Jude. Ask anybody -- Jude was a swell kid. But God decided to have him be born retarded, a Mongolian idiot, Down syndrome. So he was nice and everything, except he was all wrong besides. He couldn't think to save his life. His nose ran, his mouth drooled, sundown to sunup. His eyes were kind of Chinese-looking. The soft spot on his head never hardened, and you could spend hours watching it heave and sink like boiling stew. And he talked just like a fool, stupidly, like a cartoon of a person.

And after taking away just about everything from Jude -- good looks, good company, education, career, love life, the delights of an examined life -- God played his trump card. Acting through the neighborhood physician (there was a joke about God thinking he's a doctor), God takes the boy's life at age 15 with a penicillin shot.

So in the end Jude's death had nothing to do with being an idiot. That shot would have felled Isaac Newton, had Newton been allergic and had Newton's doctor blithely ignored the warnings on his charts and sent the poison deep into the heart of the famed 17th century physicist.

Jude Frye, dead idiot. That's the sort of thing that made being a Frye special.

Here's another. Marty's dad, John Abner Frye. Elizabeth met him one day in 1944 pinned under the wheel of his own car. Fixing a flat when the jack slipped and the car came to rest on the dumb hillbilly's chest.

Elizabeth knew just by looking at him that she and he were meant to be. And John Abner, who by and large was better off where he lay, up and married Elizabeth and thereby supplied the family with its Catholicism. It was he (who was incapable of insisting on much) who insisted that the idiot baby be baptized by a priest, and so too with the other son, a few years later.

Aside from taking John Abner into her bed in the first place, this was the only concession Elizabeth's pagan heart ever permitted. As bats hate sunshine, she hated Christmas, and so kept her distance during high holy days while John Abner played "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" on his banjo and polished off his Advent fast with a six-pack of Dukes.

And then one day he was gone too. "Upped and left," was how Elizabeth put it, mocking the way John Abner formed sentences.

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That was what made being a Frye special. Of course, Elizabeth made her contributions. On the weekend John Abner packed up and quit, she took Marty to Devil's Cave down in West Virginia, and while they walked amid the dripping stalactites John was already tooling down Highway 188 to Somewhere in the Southland.

So when they all got home and Marty stared into the emptied drawers his first thought was that a thief had been in the house, and his mother offered no better explanation.

He pictured a scene from the end of every Lone Ranger episode, with the mysterious horseman disappearing into the mesquite. Who was that masked man, his beneficiaries always asked, too late. Had Pop gone of his own free will? Or had he been swept from the chessboard, like Jude was, by the Grand Master Himself?

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MARTY SAT BACK in the back seat of the Mercury as it climbed the ridge road. He glanced at Big George's face, huge, droll and round, and remembered the day Jude lay in a coma back in French Creek, and all the kids on the playground knew that Jude was dying -- the doctor's adrenaline had almost, but not quite, brought him back to life, and now he hung suspended between living and dying. And all Marty could think to do was tell jokes to the kids on the basketball court, to deflect their sympathy, to hold what was happening at arm's length.

And Big George here, who'd known Jude and who was himself in tears at losing a friend, had grabbed Marty by his jacket and ask how he could joke at a time like this.

Marty would hate Big George forever for asking that one question. It was as if George knew how to climb that brick wall, while he had to keep bashing into it. There were times when, dreaming about it, Marty just wanted to take a chance, maybe get on tiptoe and peer over the wall to the other side. Perhaps there were green meadows with clean white lambs bounding through hedges. Or something along those lines.

But he was a Frye, and he was afraid. Afraid he would take a look and it would be the hour Christ died, and the dead would be walking, bad-breathed from their graves.

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ELIZABETH FRYE SAT IN HER NURSE'S UNIFORM for a last smoke before heading back to critical care. From the pinched pocket of her purse she drew the crumpled pamphlet Marty had left with her, explaining why it was a mother's honor to surrender her sons to Christ. She held her cigarette in her affected movie-star way, as if she were blowing a kiss with it, and she frowned. This was typical of Marty's style of communicating -- communication by dropped crumb, and "ME -- A PRIEST?"

was a dropped crumb if anything was. She stubbed out her Newport, projecting her distaste for the the pamphlet's prose into the ashtray.

People in French Creek imagined that Elizabeth was some sort of atheist or other. And while this was true for most people's purposes -- vicious gossip -- it was not true in the strictest sense. Elizabeth knew first-hand that there was a God, and that He resided in Heaven. The problem was that the two of them never saw eye to eye.

From birth the tall woman had suffered from a curvature of the spine, a scoliosis just severe enough to suggest to her father, August Hunter, filling station proprietor of Portage County, the kind of laziness or indifference which he had trouble enduring, so instead of enduring her he beat her up. Gus Hunter was religionless apart from a vague reverence for the principles of internal combustion, and so his wife Eugenia, an inventive woman with a kernel of devotion but no place to plant it, played peacemaker between father and daughter. She did this by smashing gin bottles against the cast-iron stove until Gus let the girl go. Gus did not dare lift a hand against Eugenia -- she was a tree of a woman, with fists like smooth coconuts.

And smart -- it was her idea, once crook-backed Elizabeth turned twelve and required only a beachball to balance on to look exactly like a question-mark, to have Gus take the girl in the Model A down Highway 44 past the crossroads and have The White Man have a look at her back. It was an idea which Gus, knowing the genial string of taverns along that trunk road, was not indisposed to entertain.

Twenty-seven miles later, The White Man's wife met them and ushered them onto the porch. A washed-out little woman with a limp cotton dress, she had a look of exhaustion about her, as if she had a lifelong hankering to be covered up with dirt and done with the world of physicality. She was regarded in the county as a saint of considerable magnitude. Elizabeth thought she looked like a dishrag, however; life with The White Man could not be an easy one.

"Go on up," the woman said, pointing through the swing-door. "He ain't gone nowhere."

What Elizabeth beheld in the little house took her breath away. Inside the screen door she saw the kitchen, one wall of which had been torn out, and a three-sided Airstream trailer parked up against the hole. The air pressure in the trailer tires provided the springiness for the great bed which lay inside, consisting of a foundation of cinderblocks, two immense planks of oak laid side by side over the blocks, and a half dozen mattresses sprawled one over another, and resting atop them all the great man himself.

It was common knowledge that The White Man never left his trailer or, as he called it, his chariotte. It was a convenience to him, inasmuch as he had to preach twice yearly at the county seat in Ravenna anyway, at Pentecost and the Fourth of July, not to have to get into and out of bed all the time. In addition to which, The White Man was not all

that well. Everyone knew he had been dying for upward of nineteen years, and that it was all the great albino and his little woman could do to keep his working weight at 820 pounds, sunup.

His flesh swam everywhere across the giant bed, honoring only the dictates of gravity and a subtler tug, perhaps of the moon. His muscle tone may not have been the best, but his color -- what color an albino can muster in the first place -- was worse, a dreadful chalky white, except for the blue of his lips (which Elizabeth guessed might weigh in at a half-pound apiece), the pink of his right eye and the crimson red of his left. All in all, he looked like a beached whale in bleached bunting.

Unsophisticated people might have thought The White Man was the victim of an awful curse from God Himself, were it not for the remarkable healings The White Man wrought, healings for which modern medicine could offer no cogent explanation. The White Man was a kind of Giant Jesus -- "He saved others, himself he could not save. " [Mark 15. 31] -- troubled within by demons specializing in disorders of the pituitary and thyroid.

When he inhaled, Elizabeth saw, his cheeks shook like shuddering sails, and when he exhaled they filled again, and when he finally took notice of the stooped-over girl, and gestured to her with a finger that was too chubby to completely crook -- more a bulb than a cylinder -- she was not comforted.

"Daughter," The White Man asked in a feeble, high-pitched whine, "are you washed in the blood of the lamb?"

Elizabeth, perplexed, glanced at her father. Gus mouthed something she could not make out.

"How do you mean, exactly?" she finally answered. She knew she lacked training in such matters, and did not want to misspeak.

The crimson eye found her, and it jiggled with passion. "Are you saved?" he squeaked.

Gus had come forward by now, and put his hands on his daughters' shoulders, trying to force her into a kneeling position. This only succeeded in riling up the girl.

"Saved? Pa, what the hell is he talking about? Let me go! "

Gus propitiated The White Man. "Oh, we're believers, Gene, we just ain't goers, leastwise not recently anyhow."

Both the pink and the red eyes closed, like sunset on Saturn. "Why, then," the voice rose out of him like fluted smoke, "do you rage against your infirmities?"

Elizabeth pulled away from her father's kneading insistence, saying, "Listen here, Mr. White Man, this ain't my idea, you know."

"Elizabeth here's just a girl," her father put in. "Help her and I personally would be much obliged. And that'd be a help to you, too."

The suggest of subornation was more than the great teacher could endure. Violating a number of highly-regarded laws of physics, The White Man bolted upright on his bed, the trailer rocked like a boat in a storm, and the great white hand stretched out over the terrified girl.

"The mark! " the excited teacher squealed, "the mark be upon you and your generation, yea, unto seven times seventy times! "

Elizabeth gazed up at the frightful face, the white hair spilling over it like milkweed stuff. Her own jaw tightened irascibly.

"Then! " the teacher pronounced, "and not until shall ye enter the Temple! In the name of Christ Jesus! "And he foundered back into his mattresses like a steamer into the icy waters off the coast of Newfoundland.

The little limp woman rushed to his side, not alarmed but with an air of practiced emergency, taking a two-by-four from under the bed and levering it under his head to prop the mass back up onto the grimy, unwashable pillow, and held it with all her might until she heard wind reenter his form.

Gus Hunter was so caught up in the rescue operation that he did not notice when his daughter, her eyes afire with indignation, thrust out her elbows and held out her fists, and in one swift motion stood straight and uncurled from head to toe. Gus turned only in time to see her stalking out the door and out to the car, upright and defiant.

"Well I'll be," her muttered, scratching his chin, "a goddamn miracle."

Gus stopped off halfway home, explaining to the stern-faced girl beside him that his pals at the Palomino Grill would be as anxious to hear the stunning news as her mother; and he left her in the front seat to go in and sing hymns with the boys, little suspecting that his daughter had changed in ways more fundamental than a simple straightening of the sacroiliac.

Little lights spun round and round in Elizabeth's head. Was the whole world crazy, she wanted to know, or was she alone in believing The White Man was a perfect monster, stupid and ugly and evil and cruel, and if God did the bidding of such as that, then He was not much better. Let God come and take away her sons, she said, stuffing her fists in her pockets. God would work His wonders, she would work hers. And may the better of the two prevail.

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AT THE TIME WHEN MARTY WAS EIGHT and his father had packed up and left and Marty was left staring into the rifled drawers, his first thought was that a thief had been in the house. Over the next few years he

also began to feel the first twinges of religious devotion, the beginnings of his holy vocation.

Somehow Marty never managed to put the two together, that He who had implanted the latter had also supplanted the former, that the thief in the house had been God all along. Better to keep the two lives separate, and secret from one another, for God was God, and unassailable; and unindictable, no matter how many fingerprints remained behind.

Likewise when Marty was eleven and his brother Jude unexpectedly died, and Marty stood frozen-faced at bierside, panicked by all the odd attention of the mothers in the parish, and the fearful silence of his friends. He did not take the matter up then in his prayers. He did not ask why the thing had happened or how he was supposed to manage now or what additional heists The Thief had planned, for God was God, and He had His reasons, and did not need an eleven-year-old boy to prick his conscience. Better to table the thought for future study, when one was older and subtler.

Over the months, as Marty grew more stoical and more silent, and as his friends peeled away from him like sunburnt skin, he took to two solitary practices. Every morning he would rise early and walk the mile through the development to 6 o'clock Mass in the gymnasium St. Mary's used for a church. Always he sat in the back row, far from the half dozen older women up front, and never did he advance to communion, thinking it better to go without. And every afternoon he would head the other way, toward the wooded area by the creek, kicking his soccer ball down the path.

By the time Father Garrity began making his visits to St. Mary's, no one spoke to Marty unless absolutely necessary, and he preferred it that way, so it was no surprise when Garrity, charming and talkative as he was, found himself doing all the talking and Marty doing all the listening during vocation sessions. Sister Leocadia made a note to herself that Marty Frye (of all people) was among the boys being wooed by the Bernardine recruiter, but failed to take Marty's vocation seriously. Neither she nor Father Czystokowa imagined he would try to overcome the

considerable obstacles to a vocation-- divorced parents, non-Catholic mother, and some serious questions of maturity and upbringing. And Sister was right -- a good talking-to might indeed have nipped Marty's vocation in the bud. But she had 250 other souls to watch over as principal at St. Mary's and had no time to quash vocations. And Czystokowa was too busy tending the boiler.

The seminary-bound eighth graders appeared before the Altar and Rosary Society. "So you boys are all going to become priests," the ladies said. And Marty gently corrected them. He would not be returning to act as assistant pastor. He would be leaving forever, to become a

contemplative and live a life of enforced silence. And the ladies blanched -- Marty Frye had out-Catholicked them.

"But won't your mother be proud when you have a church all your own?" they would say. And Marty would grin agreeably, thinking how different his mom was from these moms. They were like rowers on a slave ship, whereas she was a riverboat gambler, with a delicious trump card.

"Read 'em and weep, sisters. My son's a monk and I'm not even Catholic." And she might put her hands on her hips and roar with laughter, eyes shut to savor the weird triumph.

Marty and his mom would have made a great team if they'd been on the same side.

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GARRITY GLITTERED. He was nothing like the usual missionary visiting St. Mary's, those nervous men with the snowy white robes and bamboo crucifixes who were on the road to stay out of their prelate's hair back in Las or the Congo. Those poor men fumbled with their exhortations and showed their filmstrips of priests and brothers stringing barbwire while the villagers looked on, perplexed, brown-eyed urchins grateful for American hand-me-down clamdiggers and Mickey Mouse ears. Then the cup passed, people guiltily contributed, and Brother Clement or Whoever dashed out to his station wagon and was gone.

Garrity was different. He was the real thing -- forceful, dynamic, vigorous, Kennedylike. In Sister Leocadia's class he paused, took a deep breath, and smiled seductively. It was a sportsman's smile, jaw set, ruddy facial muscles flexed. A manly smile, a leer almost. Warhola's eyes widened. Marty's narrowed. Sister Leocadia nearly slid off her metal chair.

Chalk flew across the blackboard. *Aggiornamieto* was the word Garrity wrote. The eighth grade gasped at the word. Beneath it he paraphrased: Everything is new.

"Boys," Garrity addressed a half dozen of them after school in the cafeteria, "it's great you're interested in the priesthood. I've been to bigger schools and found less interest. You should all be proud."

The boys examined the literature, especially a pamphlet with a tiny portrait of Garrity's head asking the title, "ME -- A PRIEST?"

"Last week I was in San Francisco, and before that I took some Medford boys to a Red Sox game at Fenway Park. Eleventh inning homer by Ted Williams. Golly, we just had a ball."

Marty watched from behind the gaggle, and decided Garrity's success stemmed from his use of the word boys. He didn't use it like Father Flanagan used it. He used it the way Ted Williams used it. "What do you say, boys" Father Flanagan wasn't one of his own boys; Father Garrity was.

Marty sat up at night, going over the literature. Garrity's order was called the Society of Bernard, formerly the Brothers of God's Holy Oceans, founded by a Frenchman, Francois Champignon, who foresaw a band of priests and brothers spreading the sacraments across the South Pacific. The order was renamed in 1901 after the murder of Champignon's protege, Bernard de Veaux, eleventh martyr of Oceania, whose canonization followed in 1933. It was after de Veaux that St. Bernard's Bluff, the prep seminary in Plittville, Pennsylvania was named.

Marty read on, his brain abuzz with calculation.

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GARRITY TOOK ALL THE St. Mary's recruits out o the ball game. Sandy Koufax won and the Pirates lost, but Garrity charmed his charges to the quick when he explained that it's no disgrace to lose to an opponent of quality. Marty saw Big George nod as if he were in the front row at the Sermon on the Mount, taking notes. Garrity seemed to take the loss with such style, neglecting to

remind the boys he was from Philadelphia, another league entirely. But Garrity was pitching a no-hitter of his own, and one by one his boys went down, dazzled, swinging. He was the first clever man Marty had ever seen.

Marty's obstacle was family. Getting a pass from his mom -- who was making a habit of losing people lately-- to what would seem to her the basest sort of religious drivel required finesse. What would Garrity recommend? Alternating flattery and sincerity. Which Marty knew would fail with Elizabeth Frye.

It had to be something good. For days he brooded on the correct approach. The Casual Stab: "Oh mother, I neglected to mention. I've been thinking of wintering with those Catholic chaps on the coast."

There was a certain charm to that, but it wasn't him. Was the Deadly Serious Approach him: "Mother, I have decided to offer up my life to the glory of God"?

Powerful stuff, but thick, very thick. Above all, Marty could not seem like what he suspected he really was, a rat requesting leave from a ship going down.

Oh, to have been born a Warhola among Stroops! Then this declaration would not stumble in so violently from the void, like a trapper slamming the blizzard behind him. What caused Marty so much heartache in his own household would be, in the Warhola home, cause for celebration. It was so unfair.

He had two weeks to get a parents' permission form signed for Garrity, which he promptly took to his mother, with memorized apologia, on the thirteenth day.

Elizabeth knew something was coming. Even if Marty hadn't been leaving insipid pamphlets strategically around the house the past month, the thing had long ago passed out of the ignorable stage. The other LPNs knew about it, for Christ's sake, kidding her (none too wisely) about getting religion now that her son was going to be a a priest. She was ready for him.

Marty girded his loins all the way up to his ribs. When Elizabeth got home from work he greeted her at the door and handed her her nightly Manhattan highball, and chatted pleasantly but with effort about the day's events. When the highball was eclipsed he followed her up one stair after another -- she

turning at the landing to frown down upon him -- and waited outside and listened for the bracelet-noise on her vanity top and the sinking sound of her long, straight, bone-tired body into the propped up pillows. Like a ship's purser he tapped lightly on the door.

"Who is it?"

"Martin, your son."

He entered and sat on a wicker hamper, addressing his mother via her reflection in the vanity mirror.

"I got an A in spelling," he said, looking away when her reflection bore down upon him.

"You spell well," Elizabeth said.

Marty shrugged as if spelling were breathing. "Sister says I can maybe represent the school in the district bee. I mean, with Carolyn Mauk getting rheumatic fever."

"A sign," his mother said, steering the talk in a helpful direction.

Marty looked up at her and glanced away again.

"Perhaps that's your vocation in life," Elizabeth said. "To spell."

Marty fumbled the opening. "Actually, I've been hanging around with that Father Garrity a lot lately."

"We spoke on the phone Thursday."

Marty frowned. More surprises. "So anyway, I've been thinking, and, uh -- "his words tumbled like smelt from a trashcan, " -- I thought I might become a member of the Society of Bernard."

He heard himself as if over transoceanic cable. The Society of Bernard? God, Catholics chose bad names for things. Mutual of Omaha sounded better than Society of Bernard.

Elizabeth upped the ante. "Why?" She looked him right in his reflected eye -- this was the acme of Frye confrontiveness.

Why? Marty asked himself. Good question. He looked at his hands for answers.

"Wait here," he said, and dashed downstairs and fetched the Garrity pamphlet.

"This says it far better than I ever could," he said, and read aloud:

WHEN A VOCATION MAKES ITSELF FELT IN A FAMILY IT IS CAUSE FOR A SPECIAL SORT OF JOY, FOR WHAT GREATER OBJECTIVE CAN CATHOLIC YOUTH ASPIRE TO THAN A LIFE OF DEVOTION TO THE CHURCH? THE CALL TO RELIGIOUS LIFE IS NOTHING SHORT OF A MIRACLE WITHIN THE FAMILY. THE CALL TO CHRIST'S PRIESTHOOD IS THE FINGER OF GOD, BECKONING TO US, AND WHAT IT SAYS IS, I WANT YOU.

As Marty read he felt he was chewing on a full box of Kleenex. He wished he had read from the Erie phone directory instead.

"Martin," his mother asked him, "doesn't that strike you as a bit trite?"

Marty shook his head sorrowfully. "They have to say it like that, Mom. They're all that way."

Elizabeth stared at her feet sticking up under the sheet. "Promise me," she said, wiggling her toes, "promise me you'll do better."

Referring to the prose.

Marty's jaw dropped. He nodded furiously. He promised he would. He wished her good night. He backed out of the room.

In his own room he considered his gains. He had come up with the necessary courage, and his wits had failed him only a half dozen times or so. Not only had he survived the encounter but he had actually prevailed, he had gotten the thing he wanted -- a free pass out. Soon he would be en route to Plittville, to St. Bernard's Bluff. For \$550 a year he would be fed by French nuns and taught by priests of God. What a deal.

In her room Elizabeth stared emptily into the mirror. She hadn't wanted to let Marty go. She hated to be all alone. But at last he would be with priests in Plittville, and priests were men, sort of, and a boy needed that.

But God don't take him forever, she prayed. Or I'll hound you till your dying day.

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AT FIRST, MARTY LIKED EVERYTHING at The Bluff, even work detail. Prefect Provolini liked saying that if you didn't work at St. Bernard's you didn't eat, but that wasn't exactly true. And Father Tichenor likened the work-crew system to "the military model," but that didn't explain its appeal, either. Marty liked crew work because it was so darned hearty.

Seminaries without heartiness must be terrible places. Without this essential element to community life, everything slipped into sissy-boy

pieties. He was glad that being on housekeeping crew meant lugging gigantic bags full of dust up and down several flights of stairs, and swabbing out priests' toilets and mopping the endless hallways and sweeping the elegant staircases on one's knees -- it was manly work, and it didn't involve a bitsy apron or feather duster. Sometimes, he thought, the more difficult a thing was the easier it was. In this case it was also the heartier.

At the bottom of the last flight of stairs Marty opened the door out into The Tombs, the basement corridor of House Major. Whereas the rest of the old hotel had been reasonably kept up, The Tombs had been allowed to slide some, and were now in such poor condition as to be turned over to the boys in the name of recreation. The boys didn't care if a basement had come down in the world -- if, indeed, such a thing were possible -- and had swarmed in to occupy.

Dragging his leaking dustbag down the splintered floor, Marty hummed to a tune coming from the record room. In the reading room he saw Ralph Diener thumbing through his breviary, a birthday present from his mom. Diener looked up from a psalm and smiled. Marty shuddered slightly and returned it.

Marty could not quite deal with the fact that Diener liked him. He sometimes reflected on the frustrating irony that one never wound up with the friends one wanted. He wouldn't mind if Tito Francona, for instance, took him under his wing. Handsome, charming, pleasant sense of humor -- Francona was OK. Whereas Ralph was such a ladybird. with his ladybird face and ladybird smile, and always saying queer things like, "I'm no Milton Berle but I enjoy a good joke."

If Ralph Diener had only been Torquemada. Marty imagined unspeakable howls issuing from the dungeon where Ralph, as Inquisitor, tortured heretics with his squareness.

He fetched broom and dustpan from closet and became caught in the crossfire of two musics. From the record room came "If You Want to Be Happy for the Rest of Your Life Don't Make a Pretty Woman Your Wife," which could have been more or less a theme for St. Bernard's, and from the other end of The Tombs came something else, a foreign, pounding, primitive tune on piano.

Marty kept his eyes to the floor as he swept past the weight room. Usually, Hal Dodge was inside, wearing sweatpants and that usual worried expression. Sure enough, he saw from the corner of his eye that Dodge was in there, holding a ton or two of barbell overhead, his brow knit tight as a drum.

Marty's theory was that Dodge looked that way on purpose because he thought he looked more intelligent, even though he didn't really. Marty might not be built like a bank vault, he told himself, but at least his brow was nice and loose.

He dragged the dustbag past Victor Van Eyck's workroom, and saluted Vic inside, doing something to the back of a radio. Van Eyck wasn't a student or a priest. He was -- no one knew exactly, except that he ran errands in his jeep or the seminary Chevy and did handyman sorts of things. All this made Victor very popular at The Bluff, but what made him especially popular was that he was a Negro. Priests and boys alike always said cheerful things to Vic, hoping it would take his mind off being colored.

Marty hoisted the bag onto a wheelbarrow and toted it past a storage room where the priests kept all their old statues and crucifixes and things, and stopped at the doorway to the piano room. Inside was that skinny boy, with his back to Marty, that Marty thought he'd seen the first night at St. Bernard's, dancing among the hedgerows down by the walking pond.

His name was Eugene Dubois -- "That's Doo-bwah, the proper French," he told Father Cooke the first day in theology, "not Da-boy, the corrupted form" -- and he was banging out that curious tune in stiff-fingered triplets.

"What's that called?" Marty asked.

Dubois lifted his hands from the keyboard as if doing so took all his strength.

"A piano," he said.

"Actually," he said, "it's a song called 'Bringing in the Sheaves. 'Protestants sing it.'"

"Then why are you playing it?"

Dubois folded his squidlike hands in prayer. "All songs are God's," he said sweetly.

Feeling bested by a better, Marty backed out the door. As he turned to leave he heard an anguished sob, and rushed back in.

But it was only Dubois blowing his nose into a very large and very stiff hankie. His eyes drooped like a basset's as he looked up at Marty.

"You've never heard 'Bringing in the Sheaves,' have you?"

"No." Marty turned to leave.

"Wait," Dubois rose from the piano bench. "I'm coming with you."

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IT DID NOT TAKE ALL WEEK for the two boys to become best friends. Casting about at the alternatives, each sensed the advantages of the other. For Marty, Dubois was a sign of what was possible, a pathway through the desolation. Dubois seemed to know everything, to have read every book, studied every language, made every word in the dictionary his own. Free of the usual Catholic prejudices, he had fashioned a

secure fortress for himself inside his skull, and had cultivated traits of intellectual pride, self-sufficiency and independence of thought which Marty came to regard as Virtue itself, and to imitate.

And to Dubois, Marty was the thing he never had, the childhood friend to whom all things are entrusted, the cherished colleague, the intimate. Marty saw Dubois as an example of how unhurttable a person could be, and Dubois saw Marty as an opportunity, finally, to shed some of his armor, for the boy of stone to be made flesh. Both chose the other to help break from the past, to come closer to the "truth" in his life. Each celebrated finding the other by telling lies.

"I see Mrs. Miswitz' MG is parked at House Major again," Dubois would say as they leaned on the dock rail.

"Discussing the building fund again," Marty would nod.

"She and Father Lewis discuss the fund a great deal," Dubois said.

"In his cramped and cozy apartment."

"What fund," Dubois concluded the series, and the two of them convulsed in a lofty sort of sniggering.

"Cheezit," Marty hissed, drawing himself up. "Here come the prefects." Quickly the two fabricated a scandal for the prefects' benefit.

"So you think there might be something to this Donatist Heresy after all," Dubois said loudly.

"You bet I do," said Marty. "Sometimes I think we condemn new ideas out of hand, like this one here about the doughnuts. There's got to be something to it, I figure."

Prefects Nicholson and Provolini glanced over at them with expressions of concern and then alarm. When they turned away, Marty and Dubois stared cruelly after them.

"Provo is wondering if he should put this in his report," said Dubois.

"And Nicholson just filled his pants," said Marty.

It was humor of a very grand order. Dubois hewed to the high road, lifting Frye up with him into the verdant treetops of thought. Marty brought up the rear, undercutting Dubois' sublimity with crude bits of nonsense. Dubois liked wordplay and erudite allusions; Marty liked inking Hitler mustaches onto magazine pictures of the Pope.

"Hold you nose," Marty said. "Here comes Sludge." The two sucked in air until Sludge -- their name for Nelson Ledges, who early on made a reputation for himself by passing gas on purpose in study hall -- shambled by, a hangdog look around his eyes.

"Coast clear?" Marty asked, reddening.

Dubois licked a finger and held it into the air. His finger shriveled to the second knuckle. "Keep going," he said.

"How do you like Father Lewis' play?"

Dubois scowled. "Shakespeare's Julivs Caesar translated into Latin. It's an abomination of the Bard's work. What an execrable notion."

"That's what I think, too," Marty nodded, thinking to himself that bard and execrable sounded like what Nelson Ledges did in study hall.

Ahead of them on the path, dropping breadcrusts to the carp, was the bent-double figure of Brother Ivo, the oldest living member of the Society of Bernard. Upperclassmen regarded the old brother with affection, but underclassmen saw him as an old fool. Ivo's job at The Bluff was teaching Greek and French to juniors and seniors, which was made difficult by the fact that, having lost all his teeth years ago, he had steadfastly refused to be fitted for dentures. As a consequence it mattered little whether at a given moment he were teaching Greek or French -- without teeth it all came out Greek, making Brother Ivo a kind of cipher to be nodded and smiled at a lot but never understood.

Some suspected that, at age 96, he might be experiencing senility, but without a common language it was hard to tell. The Rector liked saying Ivo was "full of life, always adding condescendingly that he "was getting on." For some odd reason the Rector always managed to get a dig in on the old man, which puzzled the other priests. Ivo was a sweet old fellow, after all, charming everyone when his shaky hand drew out the laminated membership card from his breviary, and pointing at his name, Ivo, Frater, SOB, and the red number stamped in the corner, 26, indicating he was the 26th brother to take vows in the order. Ever.

Brother Ivo had actually known Francois Champignon personally. Father Grassins of the red neck-tie had been his confessor. And he hailed from a village eighteen kilometers from the birthplace of Bernard de Veaux, in the province of Puy de Dome. Brother Ivo was living history, practically a scriptural figure. So what did the Rector have against him?

"Comment allez-vous, mon pere?" Dubois asked him.

"Wuffa wuffa wuff," the old brother answered pleasantly.

The boys bowed and passed him by. Kind-heartedly, they walked twenty paces before they burst into sniggering.

They passed Hal Dodge, bathed in sweat and worried-looking as usual. And not far behind was Francona, the handsome boy everyone called Tito after the Cleveland Indian. Tito was sweating, too, but he took time to nod at the boys and grin. No one ever grinned at Frye and Dubois. They looked at one another nervously.

Some of the boys gave Marty a hard time about his new friend, especially table prefect Mieczniewicz and the sophomores Vole and

Cleghorn. Vole and Cleghorn were at least direct about it, mocking Dubois' virility. Marty conceded nothing, turning the remarks back on them. What good was manhood if you had no plans to implement it anyway? And what orphanages were filling up with their offspring, anyway?

Vole and Cleghorn backed off. Mieczniewicz didn't. It was a hobby for him, like pulling live insects apart.

But Marty wasn't opaque, he knew what the kidding was about. Dubois was a sissy; Marty conceded the point. But he and Dubois were -- without having formalized a pact -- allies. And the first task for allies, eying the hostile forces encircling them, was amnesty.

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AS ROGER MIECZNIEWICZ PUT IT, Father Tichenor was titched, meaning tetched, meaning touched, meaning mad as a fig. You could see it in his eyes, which were twice too big for his head, too big for his tiny eyelids to cover, and gave him an overly excited, hydrophobic mien.

But it was even more obvious from his hands. When Father Francis Tichenor stepped before English class or in front of his choir, heatlines practically radiated from them. Always, he seemed to be rubbing them together, back and forth like a demented surgeon, like Lady MacBeth, like a man on the lookout to devour the first quadruped he saw.

A stranger might at first describe his hand-rubbing as brisk, or as purposeful. Those who knew him better, however, knew it was more than a whim or affectation with him, knew that his hands were more like an obsession for him. With them he directed the choir, and they flew like separate souls with wills of their own, hovering and swooping and gliding like happy otters among the punctums and clivises. With those hands he could take on as formidable an opponent as the Hairy Beast in raquetball or squash and hope to prevail. With those hands he blessed people in nomine patris, et filii et spiritu sancti. With those two hands he lifted the consecrated body of the Living God in communion. They weren't simply the best part of the tiny priest -- it was more as if the rest of him existed to serve the hands.

Upperclassmen called him the Runty Marine, but never to his face. At 5'5" he was not a big man, but his intensity made him fearsome to men twice his size. It was not true that he had been an officer in the Marine Corps, or that the Jesuits had turned him down on account of his height -- though he could have been either, to great effect, for he had the gleam in his eyes and he had the hands. He loved to rave about Thomas Dooley and Bannister Tabb, about Chesterton, Merton, Hopkins and Eliot, and rave he did and at length. On balance, it was good he was a man of God -- with other loyalties he would have been a menace.

Marty liked everything and everybody at St. Bernard's, but he liked Titch especially, despite the obvious fact that Tichenor could not abide the sight of him.

"Frye! " the reprimands came stiletto sharp and fast. "Frye! Wipe that egregious simper off your face! "

With mental fingers Marty would search his face for signs of egregious simpering and, not finding any, shrug; and Tichenor would come at him again, this time for shrugging. There was violence in his manner and a horrific amount of zeal, but Marty never sensed unkindness and was thus never hurt by all the upbraidings. It was as if Tichenor wanted to toughen Marty up for the true brutes out there in The World.

"Yes! " the Runt would clap hands and resume rubbing, keeping rhythm with his speech. "John Kennedy is an American and a Catholic and so are we all! Whether we like him or hate him, he carries our banner in The World."

Or he would close his eyes and recite with growing intensity his favorite passage from Eliot's "Choruses from the Rock," about mankind's legacy being a wilderness of lost golf balls.

"Yes! " he would insist, as if some benighted fool in the back rows held reservations, "yes! The Church stands outside history as our passage way to the Kingdom of Heaven, yet it swims within the stream of Time as well. Witness the Revolution begun in our own time by John XXIII, witness the courage of the bishops in Rome, standing up to the Inquisitors and Ultramontanists! Of the breath of God is hot upon us! "

And the boys nodded like toy rabbits, learning more theology, politics and history from Tichenor's digressions that they did from everyone else combined.

Choir never lost its sense of paramilitary urgency. "Lifers at the ready," Titch would order, and every boy would lift his Usable Book at the ordained page, and listen and watch as Titch sang the piece the first time through. He had a mediocre voice, a wheezy tenor with more than a suggestion of Brooklyn still in it. But with training, discipline, and above all, diaphragmatic breathing, Titch managed to impart a kind of manly perfection to every piece.

Roger Mieczniewicz said at table that "Tichenor would be a good singer if he only sang well."

But that remark said more about Mieczniewicz than Titch. As Titch put it, "When we sing our joy in praising God, the very least we can do is sing it con brio. Or," he added drily, "as the Italians say, 'with vivacity. '"

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ON SUNDAY THE RECTOR, Monsignor MacConacht, celebrated Solemn High Mass, and Mort saw what The Bluff was like with all its stops pulled -

day students' families, Catholic families from the Plittville area, a core of SOBs from around the Philadelphia-Baltimore area arrived to bend the knee. The chapel was packed for the Rector's Mass.

Every preacher has a style -- the Rector's was silence. He was very good with pauses, and usually had people hanging anxiously onto their Amens and Et cum spiritu tuos. He had a knack, also, for obtaining maximum eye contact with each member of the congregation, aping a trick of Victorian portraitists by crossing the eyes ever so slightly. Mort saw this and admired it -- they didn't teach this at Catholic University, he knew.

Titch led the choir through an especially endless Gloria, the final syllable bringing the group to deoxygenation three separate times. Even Tichenor himself seemed undone by the piece, and toward the conclusion his hands, which usually flew energetically in every direction, wilted at his sides like steamed dandelions.

Mort was an early dropout. His thin tenor, which every so often got stuck in soprano, was no vehicle for this rough a trip. But he didn't care -- like a character in an old Black Forest tale, he followed the other singers at a distance, making his way in silence up and down the staircases of little black cubes.

Asperges me, went the antiphons. Only, among themselves, the boys called it the Asparagus. There was a slough of sacred puns at St. Bernard's. The cognate for Liberamus domine was Liver-on-a-stormy-day. Ora 2Eo nobis, pray for us, became Oh-wrap-you-nose-up.

It was a hallowed tradition extending back into parish life, where the kids used to pray Hail-Maryfull-of-grapes, Oh-my-God-I-am-hardly-sorry and Father-Son-and-Mickey-Mouse. Somewhere there was an injunction against profaning the Holy Ghost under pain of eternal damnation -- it was the one sin God could never forgive, according to Jesus -- but the boys didn't think that applied to them. They weren't profaning, they were just kidding around. And that sort of familiarity came with the territory.

THE HOLY-BOYS DIDN'T KID, though. Not Godbey. Not Ralph Diener. Yesterday, Diener had "just stopped by" and "just happened to mention" that he'd "just had a little talk" with George Stroop. Turns out, Stroop can't figure why Mort doesn't like him anymore. Stroop told Ralph all about little Jude.

Mort narrowed his eyes. Yes. he'd had a brother, but he was murdered by hid doctor.

Murdered? Diener's moles dimmed to ashes.

"Yes, murdered. Shot him up with a drug he was allergic to. Even though it said on his chart not to do that. But I guess it doesn't

make much difference. Jude was a Mongolian idiot. He didn't have any plans to speak of."

Mort gazed on as Diener digested the full horror of the story. He wanted to see Diener writhe in Christian sympathy.

Diener writhed hardly at all. "My goodness," he said, "that must have been dreadful for you. But at least it must be nice to know someone is in heaven to put in a good word for you."

THE THOUGHT APPALLED MORT. Jude in heaven? Possibly. Possible he did have chitchats with God on a regular basis. Possibly he wasn't retarded anymore. Possibly in heaven the dumb become smart.

Mort hated heaven.

The sweet bye and bye always struck him as a Protestant sort of idea. Catholics had keener intuitions about such things. They could tell when a story was too pat, too satisfactory to be satisfactory. The Ascension also seemed like a bit of a postRedemptive fundamentalist curtain-raiser, likewise all those visits Christ made after Easter.

For a good Catholic, the empty tomb was sufficient. For a really good Catholic, Good Friday was plenty.

Jude was in heaven if anyone was, but no matter what Diener said, Mort didn't need a go-between with God. He didnt want any special treatment at all, something he'd made quite clear when Judie had died, that he wanted to continue as he was, unmarked, undamaged. He had this idea that once people experienced grief they were always subject to relapse, bursting into tears at inappropriate moments, like at Thanksgiving Dinner. He didn't need that. He didn't need Jude up there in the clouds to look out for him. Not that he believed in a heaven in the clouds, mind you.

A twinge of remorse. What if, he worried. What if thinking a thing made it so? What if, by imagining his brother not to be in heaven, he'd just gotten him kicked out? He imagined celestial sergeants at arms escorting Jude out of the Garden, the droop returning to his eyes, a new thread of drool already starting to form in the corner of his mouth.

Hey, Mort would explain to them, banging on the gilded gates, I was just kidding.

"I KNOW ABOUT YOUR FAMILY," Dubois had told him one day as they sat dangling their legs from the seminary hayloft. "About your brother and everything."

Mort stared vacantly at the straw below them.

"Did I ever tell you I committed suicide?"

Dubois said.

Mort turned to him. "Really?"

Dubois nodded excitedly. "Lots of times. Cut my wrist, swallowed aspirin, the works. Always botched it.

"That's neat," Mort said.

"My mother didn't want to have me. She took a pill to give her an abortion. It didn't work."

"What happened?"

Dubois swept one hand from head to waist. "Look at me."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at what I look like. My parents are both equestrians. I am -- this. I'm sure it was the pill."

"Gosh, Doob, why'd she do it?"

"To get back at my father. He was having an affair with his junior vice president. That, plus my mother was running for office and didn't need the distractions."

Mort laughed. "What is she, a politicians?"

"Exactly. She won, too. A seat on the library board. Now she's the mayor."

"Your mother the mayor."

"Oak Park, Illinois. And here's something else. I'm the only family member who can say the family name correctly. The rest all say da-boy, to rhyme with Illinois. Politics. I am the lone du-bwah of my clan."

Dubois closed his eyes in the afternoon light and hoisted himself to a standing position in the loft. He lifted his limp arms until hands met in prayerful formation.

"She wants to be a member of the House of Representatives," he said. "Which is why I'm here, because consultants say I'm bad for the campaign."

"What does your dad say?"

"He runs a warehouse full of lawnmowers. He is somewhat superficial."

"I hate lawnmowers," Mort said.

Dubois lowered his foot from the window barre and twirled. His reedy form turned in the dusty beam as if he were fileted, as if he were a

dead man staring at a footstool, a forlorn smile slanting across his face.

"GLORIA TIBI, DOMINE." The Rector's Mass. Mort looked 5 up from his daydreams. Monsignor MacConacht was reading from the book of Luke, the story of Jesus' visit to the town named Naim, where he came upon a funeral procession, and he touched the stretcher the dead man was borne on.

"Young man, I say to you, Arise."

And the dead boy sat up and spoke.

MORT IMAGINED A FUNERAL MOTORCADE winding out of French Creek along the quarry road, light rain falling, his mother sitting tall and teary on one side, his father a ghostly greaser on the other.

What if, that day, a man had climbed up from the roadbed and flagged their limousine down?

And what if the man claimed supernatural powers, and insisted upon laying hands on Judie's coffin?

And what if he did so, and the shocked family heard Jude's fists beating against the coffin lid, and the sound of him bawling inside?

Would Father Czeskowska have pushed to the front and demanded to know what was the meaning of all this?

Would his parents have fallen on their knees on the rain-slick road and thanked and promised God they would live henceforth as man and wife were bound to do?

And would Mort himself have come forward and undone the coffin door that closed his living brother in, and pulled him out and hugged him on the spot?

Or was all this just imagination? Wouldn't it all have been cut short at the start, wouldn't the limo driver have sneered and cursed the Mysterious Stranger, waving furiously in the rear-view mirror?

"LAUS TIBI, CRISTE."

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THE BOAT SLID THROUGH THE WATERS between the reef and the island whose name no bomber crew knew. The engines, which had been chuffing through the still channel waters, switched off. The only sound Ensign Frye, radar boy, could hear as he sat at his screen, hands tucked under his legs, was the lap of the waves against the steel prow.

The word from headquarters in Malaita was clear enough: there were Japs somewhere out there in that dark -- not many maybe, but enough to do a number on any reconnaissance boat dumb enough to wander between them in their sub and the crackling barrier reef. Just being where they were, under cloudless sky and beacon moon, was a mistake, and the young lieutenant on the bridge had had to go to each crewmember, making, in his best school manner -- the manner the men despised -- a formal apology.

Torpedo Technician O'Donnell had put it to the others this way: "An officer don't apologize to his men. It ain't seemly." And O'Donnell had grimaced and spat.

"Maybe so," the radar boy spoke up, "but you fellows know this is the skipper's first command. I mean, gol, give the guy a chance."

That was dinner, before the tension onboard began to sing. Now was now -- midnight -- and the lieutenant was up walking the tin bridge with clenched fists, and cursing himself for his inexperience.

"Blast," he cursed.

Ensign Frye, radar boy, saw all, and attempted to console his superior. "You oughtn't to take things so hard," he said. "It weren't your fault we got lost. The Straits of Solomon are easy to get lost in even in broad daylight. And these maps of ours are terrible old -- they date back to the days of the early missionaries. Any seaman worth his salt could of got us this lost. Easy."

The young officer smiled, Groton-tight.

"I appreciate your efforts, Ensign. I just wished to holy hell I knew a way out of these narrows. And I pray our men show a little patience tonight. Between the mortar fire from land and the submarine movement below us, and the reef, which is God knows where -- we'll need to show a bit of nerve, I'm afraid."

Marty Frye nodded. What a leader the skipper was! The men might criticize his short hitch at the helm, but this Boston-Irishman was the real McCoy, born to command.

"Tell me, Ensign, I have been meaning to ask you something. I realize the War Department has been upping its entry quotas, but you still seem quite young to me. What are you, fifteen?"

"Seventeen, sir," the 13-year-old lied. "But my Ma signed a letter, said it was OK." His lip trembled. "And once Pa died at Pearl, I couldn't stay away no more."

The air was shattered by a crash from the galley. Marty hissed at the cook to be quiet. "Ssst! " he told her. He wished sometimes his mother had not come along with him to war. There she knelt, surrounded by mess-kits and steel bowls down in the hold. She never was much good in a kitchen.

"Go home, Ma."

"There's a job to be done."

"Aw, Ma."

The lieutenant peered down the stairwell. "What's this?"

"Just a bit of squawking from the scullery," said Ensign Frye, mortified.

The lieutenant stared as the kneeling woman collected the dropped mess-kits. "You know, Frye, that's quite a woman we have down there."

"Yes, sir."

"What do you think, Ensign -- could she go for a guy like me?"

Marty looked at his superior in alarm. "Begging your pardon, sir, but isn't there a war on?"

Far away they heard the pocketa pocketa of airfire. "Of course," the skipper said. "Ensign, man the radar screen. I'm going to get us out of this mess."

"Aye, sir! " the boy said, tears welling in his eyes, as he watch his commanding officer bound up the steel steps, two at a time.

Hrrang! Hrang! Hrang!

Attack! Marty thought, and bolted upright in his bed. He grabbed for his slippers and fell backward off his bunk.

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Father Lewis was stymied, and wondered if he were having that nervous breakdown he'd long ago promised himself. No wonder he couldn't write his book, what with his wild mood swings, periods of listlessness, depression, bouts of insomnia that sometimes kept him up past eleven o'clock -- classic symptoms, all of them. In addition to which he was jumpy, nervous, fidgety and tense. Only one final stage lay ahead of him, the hair-tearing and yelling. Pray God it would be brief!

Oh, his future seemed so clear to him sometimes. The day would come when The Rector, seeing what a fit of conniptions Father Lewis had got himself into, would ship him off to Lackawanna for a few months of rest and reflection. Lewis wanted to be prepared for that day, he wanted to be able to help his therapist, to show that he, -too, knew a thing or two about the vagaries of the human psyche,,

When those men in their little white coats showed up with his name an their carbons\* he would show -them how a priest of God went off to the nut-hatch, calmly, like Christ holding out his palm to the spike. When The Rector bound him over to them, Father Leonard Lewis -- the former Lenny Lewis of Canton, Ohio, home of the Football Hall of Fame - would astound them all by being helpful and courteous even in the depths of his malaise.

And when he was better again and headed back to Philadelphia and waving from the back window of the Greyhound, one of his attendants would turn to the other and say, "You know, Lennie's a hell of a guy, even if he doesn't know beans about the Buffalo Bills."

He didn't mind losing his mind if he could lose it on his own terms. His nightmare was that it would be an ugly affair. Elaine Mieczniewiecz would drive him mad, the building fund would drive him mad, t,he Church would drive him mad, the Latin language would drive him mad, the blank faces of those boys in class would most certainly drive him very stark and very raving mad.

He rolled another sheet into his typewriter. Perhaps a fresh start would

un-stymie him:

Seminary Diary: A Modern Priest Confronts the Issues Confronting Today's Church. Chapter VI. "Comrades in Catholicism."

"Seminary boys aren't like boys going to school in The World. Missing from their natured in that vile competitiveness which boys on the outside use to rank the strong above the weak. At St. Bernard's all the boys are equal in the eyes of Christ, because each has agreed to be 'taken in' by God."

Hey, he thought., admiring his handiwork. Not bad.

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After morning Mass, the ten groups of boys split up and headed -their separate ways\* Most of them headed directly toward the Plittville Plaza to spend the day wallowing in juke-box music and hot-fudge sundaes. Mar-tin's group - led by Ferret and including Clancey, Stroop, and Walter Godbey - veered away from the main body of boys and headed higher up onto the ridge. Several hundred yards above the old seminary orchards, Ferret polled his delegation on how to spend the day.

Clancey, who was thick as a thief with Ferret if not actually a thief himself, spoke first.

"I say let's head for the mill," the West Virginian said and crossed his arms.

"What about you, Stroop?"

Stroop looked over at Martin, hoping he was saying the right thing. "Yeah, that's probably a good idea," he said absently.

"Cooley?"

"OK by me."

"Stork?"

Walter Godbey ignored the insult,, "Well, fellows," he said - and not "fellas," but "fel-lows" - "I believe we should pop over to St. Andrew's by the shopping centers. A lot of day students' families worship there, and I'm sure a courtesy visit would be warmly received."

Afterward, he continued, there was an exhibit of Continental Army memorabilia downstairs from the War Memorial Library. "We boys could better our understanding of our nation's history by taking a quick look," he said

Ferret and Clancey looked at Godbey as if he had just tumbled out of a shark's stomach. Once again it was time for democracy, and Ferret called for a vote.

The motion to head uphill passed by a 3-1 margin, with Stroop abstaining out of uncertainty. The motion to tour selected sites of interest in the diocese was recommended tabled for further study by a similar vote of 1-3. Walter Godbey was named to head the further-study subcommittee, with George Stroop.

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"Perhaps," Lewis wrote, "the thing that most closely binds the community together is the shared language, the language of Jerome and Aquinas. I speak, of course, in the vernacular, of Latin.

"There are voices of doom today as there have always been -- who say that Latin is a dead and arcane tongue, that it somehow 'gets in the way' of the faithful's proper worship. There are even some -- in the distinct minority I am sure -- who are agitating at the council of Cardinals for a return to every Catholic's native tongue. One need only remember the legend of Babel to silence such criticism. If we all spoke in the language only we understood, how would we understand one another?"

Lewis thought about that last sentence. Above all else he wanted his book to make good sound sense. The truth was that he wished his ] profession hadn't cast him an the derriere-garde of a dying tongue.

But Latin was what he had been good at in school - the only thing, in fact,, And so he fought for it, even to the desperate move of acquiring Latin as a Living Language for his class, sight unseen. And now he saw it, and its deficiencies glared right back at him. No glossary, no tables, no grammar. A boy couldn't learn French that way, much less Latin. Not even Dubois could get the hang of it, and Dubois was some kind of mental freak, I.Q. of about 300 or something. Neither could Cooley or Crawford or Godbey, who were at least in the 3-digit range\*

The other priests were beginning to notice that his boys didn't know Latin. he Beast poked fun. Father Tichenor gave him that scary look of his. The Rector would nod sleepily at him - *always* a dangerous sign.

The men who put LAALL together turned out to be part-time instructors at Villanova. Lewis tried writing them - -to find out about teaching aides, appendices, errata sheets,, anything - but his letters came back stamped NO FORWARDING ADERESS. Lewis hoped there were a special circle in Hell for those three.

Come to think of it, hell was too good for them. He wished he could sic

Elaine Mieczniewicz on them.

The old mill atop the ridge was in ruins, but it was not just a ruin now; even in its heyday it had been a ruin. Father Grassins had commissioned its structure, along the lines of the mills in his native Clermoult of stacked stone and louvered fins. Why, he had asked himself could not the wind on the heights be used to grind seminary wheat?

The idea was beautiful in its symmetry but skewed by its impracticality. In the first place, the wind an the heights was fine in the months of spring and early summer, but typically died away after that -- wheat-grinding season, say. And in the second place, Grassins didn't understand American agriculture. In Clermont a terraced ridge would have been competitively farmed, but not in Pennsylvania, not next to the fertile Delaware plain.

Thus the ruin was begun -- but never finished. What was to have been a symbol for the Society of Bernard's enduring French roots became exactly what the Society did not need, a symbol for its half-assedness,, Photos of the old mill did not appear in the vocational literature. It was nevertheless a favorite hangout of the boys.

Ferret and Clancey took their positions at the base of the stone stairway, bands on hips and an air of territoriality about them.

Martin kept a respectful distance behind them on the path, and Stroop and Godbey meandered behind, deep into the Freshmen Squinch.

"Welcome to Fortress Bernard!-" Ferret proclaimed to the rest and bade them ascend. Jamming into the darkened room at the top of the stairs, all five of them gazed down upon the Plain of Plitt. Mile upon mile of tract houses swirled in a maze of suburb, a whorl of development: houses, houses, houses! Except for color there was little to distinguish one from another. Here and there a schoolyard or modern steeple broke up the pattern, but even they were surrounded, not by green

grass but by black top and red roof.

Clancey lifted one engineer's boot. up over the ledge and pulled on his sock. He set his foot down and stood next to Martin.

"About makes you want to puke, don't it?" he asked.

Martin nodded. It was bad enough for him, whose home back in French Creek gave up acre after acre to the developers there - what must it seem like to the West Virginian? Maybe there was something to what that fellow on the GE commercials, Ronald Reagan, always said: "Progress Is Our Most Important Product."

But Martin doubted it. It was time for another poll.

"Hey," Martin said, "does any of us live like that down there back home?"

And all of them shook 'their heads even Godbey'

"Just what I thought" Martin said. so who were those people down there? And was it their fault that they were so modern, so - feeble? It wasn't, and yet it was. What was it anyway -- a well-fed cat down there, spiraled cozily into sleep? Or a coiled serpent, drawing the sun into its cold tissues?

Was that what progress was all about? Martin imagined the history of history,

the progress of progress: God creating the universe of matter, the heavens to warm the earth and the sun to illumine it, the oceans to stir its hydrocarbons to life; the passage of eons, the increasing complexity; and then one day man opens his eyes for the first time and looks about him and finds himself in Plittville, with two cars in the garage and a lawn to mow. And that's progress.

Just like that poem of Eliot's that Tichenor lathered up about, the one

about the lost golf balls.

Galileo, was right:

It was not a Catholic universe.

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"Of course," wrote Father Lewis, "the great advantage of Latin is not its universality, but the fact that that's the way it's always been done. I do not wish to sound like a stick in the mud, but what is as dangerous, really, as change merely for the sake of change? We must not lose sight of the fact that, once we make a decision to worship our God one way, we put a name on the Almighty. Change the method of worship and you have changed the name of God, an impertinence beyond even the hell-raisers at the convocation of Bishops,"

The other night at dinner Lewis had got the scare of his life when Father Tichenor stormed toward him in a dreadful dither, waving a copy of L'Osservatore Romanita. The Council had just concluded its Second Session, on the subject of liturgy, and the new Constitution had, for all practical purposes, jettisoned Latin "at the discretion of the territorial apostolates" which, in America, where Cardinal Spellman was boss and where Latin fell trippingly from the tongue indeed, meant So long, Caesar.

So, Lewis thought: The Church immutable after all. So: if it could change, maybe it could change back again. Seminary Diary would be his forum.

"Whatever actions the bishops decide to take, they must not do what may

not be done. The Church is the most enduring institution made by man, because its roots are not in this life but in the next,, How sad it will be if the mighty tree is toppled, if the fortress is brought down, if the doors of the kingdom close forever because we decided to try another flavor of toothpaste!"

That'll get 'em, Father Lewis thought, and rapped on his desktop.

As they made their way down the ridge and on-to the plain, Clancey pulled a pack of Old Golds from his pocket and lit up. Martin was aghast. And impressed. And alert enough to step forward and take one and tamp it in his palm before lighting.

"So," Ferret said, "pleased to discover Martin was corruptible -- what's

your brand?"

Martin let the smoke seethe through his nostrils, channeling his entire

will into the task of not coughing. "Whatever I can come up with," he said inhaling.

"Luckies, Chesterfields, Raleighs."

"Raleighs?" Raleighs evidently were not in fashion at that moment.

"Yeah, " Martin said, remembering an old joke, "I'm saving the coupons to get an iron lung."

"Iron lung, eh? You're full of shit, Cooley," Ferret said, slapping him on the back. All the boys except Godbey understood that that was the highest possible compliment.

"Hey Marty." Stroop said,, trying to buy into Martin's new popularity, "remember that time we went hitch-hiking and got a ride?"

As a hail-fellow sort of remark it fell flat. Ferret sneered. "That's what's supposed to happen.," he said, giving Stroop a contemptuous look. Stroop appealed to Martin for help. Martin looked away.

Clancey's turn. "You guys keep your ears peeled." he said, "because these tracks are dangerous. Electric trains, they come up so fast you can't hardly hear -them,, there's just this whiny noise, and if you don't hear it you're a goner. I heard about these guys I used to know who were out just like we are now, and a train wiped out the whole bunch of them,"

"How many were there?" Ferret asked.

"About eleven, I think. And the train didn't even have to whistle because there's no law against running people down if they're on the tracks."

"Hey, Stork," Ferret called back. "You get hit, man, you scream, OK? 'We don't want any surprises up here.'"

Martin exhaled his smoke. Ferret and Clancey were kind of rotten, he decided. He also decided he kind of liked them.

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Gather Lewis gnawed on his pencil. "There is no greater joy for a teaching priest than that moment when he finally gets through to a student who was lost to God, Let me tell you the story of young Tito Francona, and how, with the grace of God, I helped get him back on the track with his vocation."

Father Lewis shook his head and scratched out the boy's name, substituting a made-up name: Vito Marconi. No point in getting sued, he told himself.

"Vito was a ruggedly handsome boy of Italian ancestry in my first class

at St. Bernard's, so handsome in fact that it was a Puzzle to those of us in House Major why he intended to withdraw from the world to the monastic system at Lackawanna. For some," he wrote wistfully, "Lackawanna is just the place to be, but not for a boy with Vito's good looks and ability. One day, after confession, I asked him why he wanted to be a monk and not go into pastoral work, where he would be a natural.

"And do you know, Vito looked up at me with those brown eyes and it all spilled out of him. 'Because I don't trust myself with women,' he sobbed. 'They all want to do things with me, and, God forgive me, I have the same feelings about them!'

"Poor Vito! I consoled him as best I could, saying that that was one price for laboring among the worldly, and that he should pray to God to give him fortitude,

and all would be well.

"And do you know, Vito did change his mind about the cloister. It is a wonderful thing to see him this year, finally confident of himself and willing to tackle any assignment for God! I take no credit for the wonderful changes I was but an instrument of the Almighty. Still and all, I do take strength in witnessing such changes.

"God raises us all up, from the lowliest serf to the mightiest prince. Armed in His righteousness, we withstand the gale winds of hell itself."

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By the time Ferret and his company pulled up to the Sugar Shack - which was the new name taken by the Plittville Pastures dairy - the joint was jumping, The juke box was blaring the place's theme song, an annoying record wedding espresso bohemianism and saccharine phillistinism, and seminarians sat at every table gorging themselves on whipped cream and nuts.

No one was happier in the place than Walter Godbey, who had had enough

of cigarettes and unchristian remarks and looked about anxiously for another group to join. He noticed Ralph Diener, who like him was a member in the Ambrosian Fasters, and sat down across from him uninvited. Ralph looked up and greeted him kindly and Walter blushed, doglike in his gratitude.

Meanwhile Ferret and Clancey went in together and ordered the Sugar Shack's legendary uneatable dish, the Maraschino Madness. Martin ordered a chocolate sundae

and Stroop a banana split.

It was Surfing Seminary time, and dime after dime sank into the jukebox, and song after song by the Beach Boys rose up out of it.

Ferret and Clancey vowed that some day they would hop a freight train to California and become major influences on the surfing scene, hodos or kahoonas or mojos or something. Stroop lingered over his caramel sauce. Martin pondered surf music. He was not a foaming Beach Boys fan - they always seemed a bit too True to Their School to be Rock and Roll - but they beat "Puff the Magic Dragon" hands down.

"What we should do," Clancey was saying, "is all of us get Cadillacs and

go to Mexico."

It was a sensible idea, Ferret conceded.

"Marty and I hitchhiked once and got picked up by a milk truck," Stroop put in. Martin looked over at him, plunging imaginary ice-picks into his face.

"Of course it was my Uncle Dave," Stroop added, chastened.

The next song an the juke box was "Long Tall Sally" by Little Richard. Little

Richard had always had a good grip on the imagination, even back in French Creek. Who was this man,, Martin wondered, and who was this Long Tall Sally, and what was it about her that prompted Little Richard to behave that way? Was it because she was so long and tall and he so little?

Listening to that fitful screeching, he wondered too whether Little Richard were still alive, or whether he perished in the studio. The image swam into Martin's ken of Little Richard flinging the microphone away, gazing teary-eyed into the air around him, putting hand to breast and sagging to the floor, just like Little Roland in that other chanson! *Sally* was the death of him, just like he'd predicted. And the stonecarver worked three days and nights to chisel this onto his monument:

We're gonna have some fun tonight.

Have some fun tonight.

Everything's all right.

Have some fun tonight.

Have some fun, Some fun tonight.

Over by the cash register Tito Francona was having some fun. He and some long-lashed blonde girl were squashed in a phone booth, and he was raising her up to him and laughing.

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"At the heart of the seminary regimen is the edict of Christ Jesus,"

wrote Father Lewis. "'Love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, thy whole mind, and thy whole soul. And its counterpart, 'Thou shall love they neighbor as thyself.'" "The boys at St. Bernard's are no different from boys anywhere else in this world of ours," he continued, "except for one thing, that they have taken their savior at his word. There is none of the cliquishness here that you find elsewhere, and none of the cruel unkindness so common in The World."

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Martin watched fascinatedly as The Evil clouded Ferret's bugged eyeballs. First the sparkle in them dimmed, and a sadistic dullness took its place. Then, as if it were a lit fuse, a dark fire shot up in them. Ferret was about to do something vile.

"Excuse me," he said vacantly, and rose from the booth. Clancey, Stroop, and Martin followed him with their eyes as he crossed the room toward Diener and Godbey. Ferret stopped by them, and could be seen laughing and patting Walter on the back-

"Look," he suddenly said, "the Goodyear blimp!"

And both Diener and Godbey craned their necks out -the window.

Ferret slapped Godbey on the back again. He was only kidding about the blimp. Walter smiled back., blinking with each slap.

Ferret sat back down again to what remained of the Maraschino Madness. He

and Clancey chattered about world travel.

"Trains go everywhere," Clancey said. "And they don't cost you a cent."

"We could take a freight train to Mexico," Ferret mid soberly.

"In the sun, we'll have fun, in the sun," the juke box roared.

"All you'd need is food," Ferret added.

And Walter Godbey, just noticing the cigarette butt at the bottom of his glass of water, suddenly stood and vomited pineapple sundae with nuts all over Ralph Diener's black blazer.

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Lewis' pencil dropped to the floor. Stooping to retrieve it, he saw, underneath his desk, a bit of tissue paper, which he reached under and grabbed, bumping his head against the underside of his desk.

Once again in his chair, he examined the bit of paper sleeve.

"Regular Tampax Tampon," it said, "Open this end." He crumpled the sleeve in his fingers. Here was a thing which would not make it into Seminary Diary, Imagine, he thought: tampon wrappers in a priest's

apartment. And why? Because Len Lewis had to find two million dollars, that's why.

Two million dollars had been the sum at the bottom of Column B on the architect's proposal, and that was the goal The Rector had handed Lewis within a month of his arrival at The Bluff. It seemed at the time to Lewis to be an unfathomable sum as impossible to weigh with the mind as the goal of the little bird trying to move eternity in its beak, moving the mountain of sand, one grain of sand for every century.

And at the end of all those centuries, the little bird - meaning Father Lewis -- having secured the two million somehow, would hand it over to rough men with cranes and huge steel balls, and they would knock St. Bernard's down so that not a stone stood on a stone, and then raise it up again. Was that possible?

He had a head start, it was true - \$240,000 in pledges massed from the seminary's obvious friends - but it was such a small fraction of what was needed. A sad little list of \$1000 gifts from the parents of missionaries here, \$5000 from the estate of a priest's realtor brother there, a miserable score or so of \$500 gifts pulled from the pockets of men and women sworn to poverty, but who had set aside a few dollars for the bad years to come - -tiny potatoes. Tiniest potato of all was the donation of the archdiocese, an insulting pledge of \$50,000. That, from the people who benefited in so many ways from St. Bernard's Bluff! Piddling potatoes indeed, and from a man as connected as Archbishop Croatch! The Hairy Beast had a theory: that Croatch wasn't even Roman Catholic, that Croatch was some kind of Croatian name, and therefore Eastern Orthodox. Lewis doubted that somehow, but could not put forth a better theory.

And every day, as he walked past the big cardboard thermometer in the lobby of House Major, which was designed to display the feverish accumulation of pledges from Friends of The Bluff, but which indicated instead that the building fund was succumbing to winter kill, his sense of desperation grew.

He looked at the tampon wrapper in his waste can. Only Blaine Mieczniewicz was keeping that half-filled-in red ball at the bottom of the cardboard thermometer from being his head.

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Ferret's group made its way back up the ridge, bushwacking their way to the mill and then cutting across a field of potatoes, and entering a wooded area between the mill and the seminary athletic fields. Martin walked behind Clancey, sidestepping the branches Clancey swung in his direction. Finally they came to an area cleared of sumac and briars, a circular campsite perhaps thirty feet across with a single granite stone, flat-surfaced, situated in the near-center. Ferret

looked around him with his trademark sidelong glances, knelt at the stone and felt under it for something, pulling out a plastic bag. Inside were a pair of magazines, a Playboy and an Adam.

Martin, Godbey, and Stroop went into the Squinch.

While Ferret and Clancey sat on the stone and began fumbling through the

pages of the first magazine, the Stork surprised even himself with his outburst.

"What in the name of God are you doing?"

But Ferret was in no mood for catechistics. "Listen, Walter," he said, "you can take a leap as far as I'm concerned. But I'll bet you'd rather look before you leap."

But the Stork, whose lower lip had gotten so adamant it was creeping up

toward his nose now, was in his glory. "The wages of sin," he pointed out, "are death."

"Walter, Walter," Ferret enjoined him, "there's no wages here. We'd do this for nothing, right boys?"

Clancey nodded pleasantly, holding his knee in both hands. Martin and Stroop looked at each other, bug-eyed.

"Tell you what, Walter." Ferret said. "You go organize a rescue party, and we'll see if we're blasted to smithereens by the time you get back, OK?"

"Gee, fellas," Stroop said, his face diagonal with doubt, "he's kind of ruined it for me," they all watched Godbey stride off purposefully. But Ferret spat in his general direction.

"He's been that way ever since he read about Dominic Savio," he said bitterly.

"He thinks he's Maria Goretti" Martin added, without much conviction.

If not for Ferret's leadership the group might have set fire then to the

magazines and returned home, ashes on their brows. But Ferret took charge.

"Come on, you guys," he said, "get a load of these tits!"

Clancey, Martin and Stroop gathered around to judge for themselves. Maybe, each one thought, temptation wasn't temptation unless there was a sin it could lead to. In which case this was merely a mental exercise.

The exercise proved too much for all of them. The centerfold came out of the magazine and stretched out flat on the stone. The boys stood around in black shoes and cardigans, and the centerfold lay bare on a beach of white sand and seamless paper. The caption said her name was Sharyn Rose of Petaluma, California, and her favorite interests were antique cars and classical music, and it was marvelous work, her career as a publisher's assistant at one of San Francisco's leading publishers. From where she lived, the caption said, in her luxury flat overlooking the surf on Stinson Beach, the world looked mighty good.

Things were looking up for Ferret, Clancey, Cooley and Stroop as well, as they read on, hungry for details. Martin wanted to read on to the next page but was voted down as the group paused to mull over what it had read. Sharyn continued to kneel bare on the beach, poised between her paper parasol and a little play shovel and pail. Martin focused on the shovel and pail. He could not bring himself to look directly into Sharyn's brilliance.

"God Aamn," Ferret said.

"Rocket City," said Clancey.

"Be nice," said Martin, mock-parental finger held up. A part of him wanted to protect Sharyn. She wasn't a "slut," it was obvious. She seemed much too candid to be thought immodest; she was shameless in the higher sense of the word, brimming with likable cheer and some obverted kind of innocence. She probably did work in that publishing company in San Francisco, Martin thought; and had no idea how crazed she made the men around her. She was simultaneously the Temple of the Holy Ghost and the Devil's Coney Island, pure yet hungered after. See how John and Carl stared!

"HolyChrist!" said Ferret.

"Bombs" muttered Clancey, "bursting in air."

Honey-blond hair curled and mounted in 'the style of nature, on top, from behind; athletic shoulders and arms, and pretty blonde hairlets glistening in the Kliegs; and on her wrist a charm bracelet.

"Jesus," Ferret ejaculated; "Save us," Clancey responded.

Her pretty knees were folded in the postulant's position. prayerfully; her little white short-shorts snugly pulled around derriere and thigh; an irrational swing of spine toward tail.

Ferret inhaled shakily. Clancey shuddered and let out air.

Fingertips red as a bleeding rose; lips ditto; teeth, myriad.

"Pray for us sinners."

"Now and at the hour of our death, Amen."

And breasts! Bare beyond belief, beyond creed or credulity, barer than bare! Palomino ponies broken free of the corral, playing and prancing and paving the earth!

Orange California orbs, golden nuggets of the Mother Lode, unbruised postcard peaches of the Emerald Valley!

Ferret whimpered; Clancey yipped.

And Martin became romantically attached.

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"'Not my will, Lord, but Thine be done.' That is the prayer every Christian must make daily, and nowhere is it more essential than a place like St. Bernard's." Lewis gnawed on his pencil some more. I can say that again, he thought ruefully. Having to scrape up one million seven hundred and sixty thousand dollars from people he didn't know was the second-last thing in this world he personally wanted to do. The last thing, the very last thing, was having to do it with Mrs. Mieczniewiecz.

Mrs. Mieczniewiecz, or Mrs. Miswitz -- that's what the boys called her son Roger - strengthened Lewis' shaky belief in parthenogenesis. She could not be a human woman, he felt certain. She had to have come from some odd origin, rising from the foam of castrated men, from the blood of her two dead husbands, sprung from the thigh of some exiled pagan god. She was a vampire, that's what she was, and now, husbandless again, she was on the prowl for the blood of new men, virgins, and was fattening The Bluff for her harvest.

Well, he thought, that might be a bit harsh, but the principle was solid. It scared him when she drove up Immaculate Conception every day in her MG sports car, grinning behind the wheel, her scarf trailing in her wake. Such familiarity! Winking at The Rector and poking Brother Ivo in the ribs, almost, knocking the old man down! And there was nothing anyone could say, because she had all the answers tucked in her straw purse, McGillicuddy's Encyclopedia of Catholic Etiquette, backing up her every importunity. What to tip a priest at a wedding, whether to attend the baby shower of a divorcee, correcting non-Catholics who address a priest as "Reverend," the propriety of offering a nun a cocktail - it was all in McGillicuddy, and McGillicuddy was Mrs. Miswitz' bible, nightly committing another passage to memory. When her second husband passed -- untimelily, some said -- McGillicuddy was all she saved from his office, a law firm handling the diocese's financial transactions, and it was with McGillicuddy under her belt that she offered her services to The Rector as fundraising consultant, and this was the kicker - foregoing all commission. All that was before Father Lewis arrived; by the time he first showed up she was already in command, on the phone constantly to neighbors, newspapers, archbishops, and judges.

How her eyes lit up when they were introduced! Father Lewis, apprehensive of most women, winced at this one's pointed teeth, her padded shoulders, her high heels. Years ago, he imagined, she might have been some kind of Slavic beauty, with her rosy cheeks and that ultrabig mouth, bigger than Mona Lisa, even, but with the same hint, of interior amusement. Yes, he thought with some effort, she might have been a striking, sensual-looking woman --

What was he thinking? he corrected himself. This was Mrs, Miswitz, who was always tapping, rapping at his chamber door, sitting on his bed (McGillicuddy to the contrary notwithstanding), coyly straightening the hem of her nylons, or wiggling exaggeratedly when she walked ahead of him, or bending to climb into her tiny MG. Was he imagining things, or was she --

What was he thinking, he re-reproved himself. She was just a lonely widow trying to make herself useful to the Church, and he repaid her with these unworthy thoughts. Perhaps it was just that they were such a mismatch, the pushy woman and the bookish priest. Everyone noticed the contrast. The Beast never failed to wink hairily at him as Mrs. Miswitz dragged him through the lobby by the hand. The Rector, too, enjoyed his misery. That time he went to The Rector to complain that she had patted his thigh during Solemn High Mass, and solemnly high on his thigh to boot, he would not listen. You have your assignment, Lewis was told.

And Mrs. Miswitz had hers. Her dream was to bring House Major, the Grand Hotel, crashing to the ground, felled by huge derricks and massive wrecking balls. And in its place she would build another temple, and her son Roger would be one of its priests. And for her efforts she would accept no reward whatsoever. Except for perhaps a certain gratitude and the favor, late and lonely nights, of a kind word over the phone. Surely no one could begrudge her that?

But Father Lewis hated the women. It was all a terrible misunderstanding, true. But Mrs. Miswitz was a terrible woman.

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Theirs was a love -- Ferret's and Clancey's and Cooley's and Stroop's -- which had nowhere to go, so Ferret folded Sharyn up and carefully replaced her, plastic-sheathed, under her stone, and the four of them headed back to The Bluff.

But Clancey was troubled. "It isn't a sin, is it, unless you actually do a thing, right?"

Right, everyone agreed.

"Well, what does it mean then, when it says, 'Whosoever looketh at a woman with lust hath already committed adultery in his heart'? Are we adulterers or what?"

It was a pretty deep question to be coming from John Clancey, and everyone stopped in his tracks to measure it. Ferret, always up on his loopholes, stepped into the breach.

"'Judge not lest you be judged. Christ said it, and I'll go along with Christ, thanks."

But Clancey wasn't convinced. "'If thine eye offend thee," he murmured ominously, "pluck it out."

Martin looked over at Stroop, who had been silent even for him. Stroop had stood behind everyone else while staring St. Sharyn.

"That's very true, John," Ferret said, "but still, whoever's still got eyes in his head has to cast the first stones, if you know what I mean."

It was a good point Ferret raised and everyone seemed content. Oddly, it, was Ferret himself who countered it. "But maybe the Stork's right, I don't know."

Stroop looked alarmed. "Do you think so?"

"Nah, I guess not. But I'll tell you something about the Stork. He jacks off the same as the rest of us."

Martin looked at the dirt ahead of him. He didn't jack off, to the best

of his knowledge.

"Some people just aren't happy unless they're up on the cross yapping at you," said Ferret wisely.

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When the group finally pulled up to the veranda of the Grand Hotel, Father Lewis greeted them from above.

"Well, boys," he said in his best pastoral voice, "did you enjoy your ice cream?"

"All except Stroop," Ferret called up. "He just wanted to look at dirty pictures."

Stroop was horrified and looked it. If he had only laughed. Or shrugged, or agreed. But instead he vibrated, as if he were about to be launched upward. "No!" he peeped. "It, isn't so!"

Father Lewis looked confused a moment and turned away. Ferret was simply playing the provocateur, he knew.

But Stroop was finished. He hung high On his cross, galled and speared by his own denial. Father Lewis returned to his officer murmuring the Latin and moving his lips. Martin watched the departing figure and nodded. The seminary air was suffused with some funny sweetness and joy leaped inside him like a babe in an old woman's womb,,

He hath filled the hungry with good things, he thought; a line from somewhere in Scripture. And the rich he hath sent empty away.



ENSIGN FRYE AND LIEUTENANT KENNEDY rocked on their heels on the bridge of the PT-109. The night was dark, and the black waters of the Solomon Straits, save for the rhythmic lapping against the bow, were silent.

For several hours the boat had rested upon the waters, its engines dead, its crew alert to the perils nearby: on the one hand, the patrolling Japanese submarine Matthew Calbraith Perry waiting somewhere below the surface, and on the other, out there in the darkness, the cruel castles of the barrier reef.

In the ancient game of cat and mouse, the mice waited -- over the centuries only the instrumentation had changed.

Frye watched his skipper from the corner of an eye, looking to him for reassurance, but finding none in that troubled, intelligent composure.

Radio silence was in effect. What Kennedy might have communicated to headquarters at Malaita he instead dictated to his radar boy:

Situation: disadvantageous. Mission may conclude here, aborted as we make a run for it. Even then, failure is likely. Fuel tanks numbers 1 and 2 are damaged and presumed empty. A pressure leak has been detected in number 4. Laden down with depth charges we cannot drop due to jammed release mechanism. We can only be even partially safe until dawn.

"Ensign," the lieutenant said upon finishing the dispatch, "I welcome your thoughts."

The radar boy swallowed hard. "The men are with you, sir. Honest. I know in the past there were times when -- "

"Times when what? Ah yes, the silent treatment." Kennedy looked away with bitterness. "These men think they can do me in. If they only knew I was hazed at Harvard."

"But sir, it was never anything personal. It was, well, you know."

"My religion?" The young commander winced and made a fist. "I can suffer for my faith. Better men before me have."

"Well, actually, it's your inexperience and your old man's money."

"Oh, that," the skipper shrugged. "Well to hell with them then."

"Yes sir."

All through the tension of this long night the radar boy had waited for such an opening. Reaching into his jacket, he pulled out a dogeared pocket-size New Testament. "Sometimes, sir, the right kind of reading alleviates tension."

The skipper snatched the book from Frye's hand and in one motion flung it overboard.

"Mister Frye, I remind you of the gravity of our situation -- our lives are on the line and your solution is some pulp pornography? I'm disappointed in you."

The ensign stared at the waves into which the Bible had vanished. "But, sir -- "

"When the going gets rocky is not the time to let down one's hair. Are we understood?"

Frye nodded.

"So," said Kennedy. "The men resent the weak little rich boy, is that it? Before the night is up these narrows will determine who is strong."

A seabird flying overhead issued its lonely call. Kennedy squinted into the darkness. Frye sensed another opportunity. From the pocket of his pea-coat he extracted a small flask.

"Sir, I -- "

"Ensign, give me that," the skipper hissed, seizing the bottle. "I'm not getting through to you, am I? And at your age -- I had no idea. Consider yourself on report." And with a look of fierce disgust Kennedy hurled the vial of Lourdes water out into the dark of the Solomon Straits.



WITH A NONNY NONNY HEY, thought Eugene Dubois as he half skipped, half shambled down the seminary walkway, down the myrtle slopes to the walking pond. As the autumn wind whipped at him he drew his raggedy cardigan tighter around his skinny frame. In his head he heard music he was composing for a song from Twelfth Night. When Dodge and Francona, well-oiled from their workouts, bumped past him on the path, he paid them no notice. Him being what he was and their being what they were, being ignored was a kindness.

He pushed his tortoise-shell frames back up his bony nose. Francona and Dodge could never understand the things he thought, the things he felt. But Marty could. Marty Frye wouldn't bump past him

like a hit and run. Marty Frye would look into Eugene Dubois' eyes like they contained all that was seeable in the world, and listen to what he said as if it were an epistle from a friendly, wise planet.

Hey ho the wind and the rain.

Marty's expression, when Dubois showed him his wrists, the shiny white scratchmark from Eugene's brush with death -- admiration, envy, and the open-mouthed question. Why?

"I shouldn't say," Dubois had told him, feigning adherence to the suicide's code, but blushing from the pleasure of being asked. "All right, I'll tell you. It was because I lost my faith."

The answer would have killed any other boy at St. Bernard's. Marty's eyes only narrowed as Dubois told him the story.

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FROM HIS EARLIEST DAYS his greatest love was dance, which threatened neither of his parents in Oak Park, not until he was taking five lessons a week at age ten, when both Carl's and Olive's support switched to a strategy of diversion.

"You don't really like dance," Olive explained to him without looking up from her precinct reports. "Dr. Steinberg has been through that. Dance is the way you've chosen to hurt me. That's why your father signed you up for tennis camp. "

The ten-year-old squinted. "Dr. Steinberg touched me," he said.

Olive folded her arms. "He's a respected professional."

"He stalks the playground," Eugene countered. But the decision had been made. The next day he watched his leotard melt on the hibachi grill as he stood in tennis whites, gripping his racket by the strings. And he somehow knew, as the nylon bubbled, that there was no God. It depressed him to be an atheist in a tennis suit, so he went upstairs, drew a tub, slit his forearms with a Gillette Blue Blade and watched the red striate his sodden shorts.

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"SO THAT'S HOW YOU LOST YOUR FAITH AND KILLED YOURSELF," Marty said.

"That wasn't it," Dubois said, "that was just an eclipse. I lost it during my dream. I dreamed I went to heaven, and when I got to the top of the escalator and came out on the top of the clouds, all I could see for miles and miles was a patchwork of tennis courts.

"My dad found me and called an ambulance, and they put on a bandaid and put me to bed, but the damage was done."

"Jeepers," Marty said bitterly. "And all because a guy's gotta dance."

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DUBOIS PULLED HIS CARDIGAN EVEN TIGHTER around himself and looked out over the pond. He had loved Marty for believing his story, for taking his side. There had been precious few omissions in the telling. What the psychiatrist really thought, for instance. Dr. Steinberg had told his mother that her little boy was a Fairy.

But hey nonny no, no way, that was impossible. I am not, he had told Steinberg, and he had told himself a million times in the months since then. What I am is a Sissy. A subtle distinction, but Eugene clung to it like arkwood.

And even if -- God wherever and if ever he was, forbid -- even if Dubois was like that, well, the hell with it. No one would ever know because the secret would die with him, Eugene Dubois, the king of the wood. He would never destroy himself, or hurt a friend, like Marty, by reaching in that direction.

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"ONE THING I DON'T GET," Marty said. "If you lost your faith, then -- "

"Sshh," eugene said, glancing about. "The trees are Catholic."

Marty laughed. "I've got a secret, too."

Dubois nodded solemnly.

"OK. The last few weeks something really funny has been happening to me at Mass. At Consecration. Just as the priest lifts the host over his head, and they jangle the bells, I get a boner."

"A what?"

"A boner. You know, when your wiener gets hard."

Dubois smiled a thin, frozen smile. If he didn't believe in God before, he certainly didn't now. "A Pavlovian erection."

Marty brightened. "They've got a name?"

"Oh yes. And a very common thing, from what I've read." Dubois' lip quivered uncontrollably.

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DUBOIS SAT BY THE WALKING POND, trembling from the chill wind. He was thinking about Marty. What had he called him one time? Ah, a lamb on the lam. He resolved he would protect his lamb,

come high water or hell. He would protect Marty from the whole vicious tennis-playing world. He would protect Marty from everyone.

He shivered -- from the cold. When he thought of the bad side of things he laughed. How when Olive called next, how different he would sound to her. So how many friends have you made? she would ask him, and the asking would like a dagger of intent slipped between his ribs.

And for once in his life he wouldn't have to squall into the receiver that he didn't have any friends and didn't ever want any anyway.

Instead he would say, Mother, I do have a friend. And he would smile, and his smile would shoot 1500 miles across the country and bite his mother's breast. Bitterness. Hatred. Envy.

Oh well, he shivered, better Olive green than Olive drab.

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"WELL?" Marty asked.

"Well what?"

"Your faith. You never said if you got it back or not."

And Eugene looked into Marty's eyes and gulped. The truth? The truth was, he treasured the talks the two of them had, the walks they took. One thing only could make them better -- to be walking, talking, hand in hand.

"Of course I have," he said.

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THE NIGHT WAS NEARLY EXHAUSTED, and the two stood on the bow of the boat, alone.

"If we can make it to dawn, at least we can navigate by the reef," Kennedy said. "We are still manueverable. We might just zigzag our way home."

He peered through the binoculars into the pre-dawn haze. Ensign Frye stood just behind him, shoulders trembling.

"Try and be brave, Marty. Remember that I need you to be strong. And that your country is counting on you."

"I can't help it," the boy began to sob. "I'm afraid."

"Everyone is afraid, but you must not run from the thing you fear. Can you say what it is you're afraid of?"

"I don't know sir -- I don't know."

"It's OK," the lieutenant told him, and laid a hand on his shoulder. The boy clung to the young officer, weeping into his kapok jacket. Kennedy comforted him with gentle pats until Frye could put himself together again. Snuffling, he daubed his eyes with his shirttail. Marty gazed at his commander with unmilitary intensity.

"We will follow you into the jaws of death," he swore dramatically.

"Do you think that's wise?" Kennedy asked, a twinkle in his eye.

Both looked up as a light hovered above them. Kennedy, believing it to be a Japanese flare, crouched instinctively. But it was a different sort of light -- it was softer and moved in curves and switchbacks, as if it were not a light at all, but a runaway window overlooking some different kind of luminousness entirely.

And a voice came to the light.

"I am come to deliver you," it said. And as it spoke it assumed a shape -- a face; no, less than a face, a skull. But not a scary skull. This one was somehow kindly in its expression, its teeth and hollowness suffused with a radiant sweetness. Marty's eyes widened in awe, Kennedy's in apprehension.

"I know these waters," the flayed head went on to say. And a finger of light passed from one eye-socket out over the darkness, out over the boat's bobbing prow, streaming across the weaters like stilled lightning. "The way of passage from this place," the voice said, "is there."

Kennedy scrambled to consult the ship's compass. "South by southeast," he muttered.

"Then go," said the head of lovingkindness. "God calls you from the narrows."

And the light dimmed and was gone.

"I think I know who that was," the radar boy explained. "It was a vision of Saint Bernard de Veaux, the martyred missionary of the Solomons, the eleventh saint of Oceania. Before this century he knew these waters. Now God has sent him to help us escape."

Kennedy stepped to the wheel and switched on the engines. "I pray you are right," he said, as the telltale sputtering echoed loudly over the waters. He set course, SSE. and the patrol boat came to life again, sliding quietly through the strait.

In Marty's ears the sounds of the sputtering and slapping were drumbeats, the ones he used to hear in the evenings, from offshore. And as he listened now to their pulsations he became aware of his own, the

pulse of the blood racing by his ears, the thump of his living heart.

Far ahead he imagined he saw the first limning of dawn, like a knife's edge along the horizon. He paused a moment to pray, and when he looked up he thought he saw the light begin to peel away from the outline of the reef just off the starboard side, revealing the rocks and, farther ahead, the open sea. His heart soared, and he turned to tell the lieutenant the good news.

But the lieutenant was not at the wheel. He was above the cabin, and he was lashed to the mast with a dozen coils of rigging, and he sagged there in the coils, his hat fallen away, and Marty could make out in the reflection from the open cabin door the beads of sweat on the skipper's face, and the red stripes encircling his shoulders.

Ensign Frye swirled to look again at the light on the horizon, as if to ask it a question, to interrogate it, to demand a full account. Sure enough, the darkness was lifting, and the boat, now under its own power, pattered out into the brightening sea.



THE PRIESTS TOOK THE NEWS OF THE PRESIDENT'S ASSASSINATION WORST. The seminarians, aged 13 to 17, saw the blunt, prehistoric form of Father Harris pound his fists together on the plank veranda, and wondered at the depth of the old Lithuanian priest's feelings. They saw Father Lewis, the professor of Latin, weep openly during Vespers. They saw the way the fierce Father Tichenor set his jaw extra-firm throughout the two dark days between assassination and funeral. Classes were canceled, prayer vigils maintained, with many priestly duties relegated to boy prefects to perform.

And the boys were in worse shape than the priests. They stood for hours around the Zenith and the Magnavox, all of them, underclassmen included, bent into the prototypical "freshman squinch." The looks in their eyes spoke of terror and sorrow and a meek animal frustration at a thing being done and gone and unrecallable. They gathered in small groups and circled the seminary's walking-pond, moaning their praise for the fallen leader; they gathered in chapel to pray for the repose of his eternal soul. They prayed for peace for the country, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, which was cut off now from its dreamed-of destiny. And some prayed for forgiveness in their own hearts for the assassin -- and later, for the assassin's assassin -- and for the gift of understanding to put the absurd and impossible events in a Christian light.

Marty, the youngest of them all, noticed the expression on the face of Hal Dodge -- the boy who idolized Kennedy, whose locker and desktop were littered with pictures from magazines, newspapers, the

portrait Marty himself had given him when Hal had been his "big brother." Within minutes of hearing the news out on the playing fields of St. Bernard's Bluff, Dodge -- a distant, glamorous, yet always brooding figure at the Bluff -- found expression for his feelings by dashing up to the first floor, three steps at a bound, pulling the dusty fire-axe from the emergency box, leaping back downstairs and sending the face of the axe deep into the eye of the rec room Magnavox.

The same fate might have befallen the Zenith, shattered into smoke and glass, had Prefect Provolini and maintenance man Van Eyck not grabbed Dodge and hauled him away, sparks and electronic pops issuing from the slain machine.

All the boys who had been watching NBC on the one set switched to CBS on the surviving one, and Dodge, disarmed, hunkered down along the cinderwall and bawled, blubbering over and over again his vague apologies -- to whom he wasn't sure, or for what.

The boys felt doubly cheated, losing Kennedy and Dodge both in one day. All felt cheated, drained. They paced about the rec room, the refectory, the walking-pond like frightened amnesiacs.

It was as if, looking back, they knew that a tree which had seemed dead and bare for years were suddenly struck by lightning, and a thousand white doves rose up out of its hollow.

And now the doves had flown back into the tree, and the tree sealed up again forever.

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EARLIER THAT YEAR, IN THE SUMMER, the seminary's recruiter, Father Garrity, had taken Marty aside and congratulated him on drawing Hal Dodge as his "big brother" for the coming year.

"Dodge's a fine young man," the priest had said, "he runs like a cheetah and he can pull the curve. When God made Hal Dodge he threw away the mold."

But the school year hadn't even begun before Marty and Dodge went separate ways. Hal was stuck in a certain dull, enthusiastic mode, regarding everything at St. Bernard's as "swell," "neat," "super," or "great," yet never with the passion that cried out for an exclamation point; instead, his judgments seemed to tail off at the end, as if he himself suspected their hollowness but was helpless to alter their course.

So when Marty finally arrived at St. Bernard's and the two actually met, what had in correspondence seemed unlikely proved absolutely impossible in practice. The two would never be friends. Dodge struck Marty not only as unoriginal but as a great unthinking colossus of sinew and bone, unable to think, the embodiment of embodiment. What Marty would never know was that beneath the brooding muscularity, underneath the strata of dead adjectives, was a brooding and tormented mind as well.

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ALL HAL DODGE EVER REALLY DEMANDED TO KNOW, he had told himself time and time again, was what was what.

He had always wanted to be a priest. That was never a question back home in Buffalo -- not because, as with other seminarians, like Warhola, his parents insisted he become a priest -- it was because he insisted on it. Even as a little kid the earliest game he played with his sisters was Mass, in which he would wear his mother's paisley housecoat and bless the sacrament -- shards of ice-cream cup -- and distribute it to his "nuns," and to the faithful dog and cats. His progress from boyhood to St. Bernard's followed the straightest and shortest line imaginable, from altar boy to CYO junior high quarterback, his heart always fused to the Eucharist, his fascination rooted in a curiously mechanical way to the miracle that someday he, too, Hal Dodge of the Buffalo Ropers, would work in Christ's name.

That God had endowed him with speed and strength and rugged good looks and an absence of subtlety seemed to Hal to be a kind of sign, one saying that although all other men and all other women might be doomed to doubt, he would be the one remaining that believed. For Hal, when he was younger, faith was not a muscle that might be exercised or left to atrophy, it was more than that; it was innate, unimprovable and undiminshable, a

talent, a pure bequeathal, as absolute a part of him as his split-second reflexes.

One morning when Hal was twelve, at Mass, as he sat enraptured to be assisting at the Blessed Sacrament, it happened -- an unsettling thought swam into his ken.

Granted, he conceded, that the Transubstantiation occurring in the Eucharist was total and indivisible -- that the bread and wine became the body and blood of the Living God -- did it not therefore have to occur withing a specific physical moment in time? And if so, during what specific moment during the Consecration did it occur? Hoc? Est? EnimCorpus? Meum? During which syllable of which word? And during which morpheme of that syllable -- M?

On the one hand, there was his hero, President Kennedy, a Catholic in charge of the conquest of space, a man who would prove to Khrushchev that there were angels but that they were not to be pinpointed in the upper stratosphere, a man who feared and trusted science; and on the other hand, the peculiarities of Church life which no one had ever put to the test of scientific reason.

Granted, again, that at the Day of Judgment the dead rise up, and that in eternity we dwell in new bodies such as Christ walked the road to Emmaus in -- how would the people of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the ones who had been painted as shadows onto the sides of buildings, rise up, and from what? That man who lay buried in the steel and concrete of the Brooklyn Bridge -- how would he rise up?

The Ascension was especially a stickler. In order to leave his disciples, Christ rose up off the ground and kept going. At what point did he stop ascending, look at his watch and decide it was time to pass into the world of spirit? 10,000 feet? 100,000? Or did he just keep on rising, like a button on a thread, through a trillion light years? Was he Ascending still, way out there on the cusp of some distant nebula, with countless cold eons further to go? In short, was Khrushchev right after all?

First there was the speed of light and then there was the Light of the World. What was the Speed of the Light of the World?

Hal had to continually assure himself that these questions of his were not questions of faith, for deep down he entertained not a subatomic particle of doubt. In addition he told himself that it was a new age, and that there was a lesson to the Space Race, headed as it was by a Catholic President, and it was that God expressly condoned this very type of inquiry. Even as it troubled him it retained its innocence, and he his faith.

But as seventh grade wound down and the eighth gradew -- a grade strewn through time immemorial with the wreckage of young souls -- his innocence began to dim, and his faith to glimmer more faintly than before. Hal changed, his body grew, his glands went to work pumping new fluids, his mind went to work pumping strange ideas. This personal transubstantiation showed up in the all-time records for Buffalo's St. Athanasius Elementary School Track and Field Annual Meets, for running the hurdles, the long jump, the broad jump, javelin toss and 1500-meter run. Pastor Bailey in his recommendation to St. Bernard's wrote that there was nothing Hal Dodge couldn't do, that he was a complete athlete, that his body did whatever he told it to.

And there lay his problem, for in this frenzy of development, Dodge left no muscle unexercised -- none. Against the incantory admonition never to touch himself in certain places, Dodge had clung to his odd notion of a special privilege dispensed to athletes, a special permission that made him, in effect, an adolescent indult.

Inwardly he knew his sin as sin, but outwardly he was in a panic. No longer was he the disinterested physicist weighing the molecules and atoms of the universe; now he donned another costume, the black garb of the advocate, of the law, as his quest for truth deteriorated into a lust for loopholes.

Nowhere, for instance, could he find an outright injunction in the Scriptures against masturbation, not in the teachings of Jesus and not in the Epistles -- although it was difficult to picture either Christ or Paul taking up the hobby. There was no commandment among the Ten singling masturbation out, but that was nothing new -- the Decalogue was loaded with catch-alls.

If only it were a one-time offense, he told himself many, many times. He had only intended to do it the one time, as an experiment, but within hours he decided a second experiment would yield more reliable findings. By the time he was 13, and the euphoria of the Glenn orbit had given way to the gnawing anxiety of Soviet missiles stationed a few miles off the Florida coast, Hal's years of probable damnation outnumbered by a horrifying ratio his years of stored-up indulgences. It was a problem.

He knew from family experiences that justice in matters of this sort could be swift, from the time his uncle, known throughout the family as a tax cheater, was struck down while standing in line at the Niagara Savings Bank on Fulbright Avenue just after two in the afternoon on Tax Day, April 15, 1960. Heart attack or terrible swift sword? The Lord deposits and the Lord withdraws.

Frantically, Hal began to make deals. Item: If God saw fit to get him accepted to St. Bernard's, mediocre grades and all, he would cease and desist from his despicable habit forthwith. Item: If God in His infinite mercy granted him a passing mark for his first semester in Latin, Hal would permanently suspend all all self-gratulatory functions. Item: If God in His wisdom helped him pass his second semester Latin he would definitely refrain from the Devil's deed throughout the summer vacation -- especially while in his parents' house, and most particularly while they were still awake in the next room, not counting weekends.

If he could not be like Christ or Paul, perhaps he could at least try to be like his earthly ideal. John F. Kennedy, say what else you might about the man, did not masturbate all the time. He was a hero, a beacon to the Catholic world, a man who thought never of himself or his personal desires but only of the greater good. He even thought about Negroes -- that's the kind of man John Kennedy was.

And so it was that, invoking Kennedy as a standard, Hal Dodge made his final plea to God:

Make me into the kind of man your servant JFK is, Lord, and I will be your faithful priest till death.

In retrospect he might have worded his bargain more carefully. Or perhaps he had no business making it at all -- perhaps he had it in him to discipline himself without calling upon the terrible powers. Perhaps the horror might have been averted. But Hal no longer had any excuses. He had learned a lesson in the bitterest and most grievous fashion: that the Lord sometimes takes us at our word, and that he, Hal Dodge, by touching himself when the Sisters had told him to never, never do that, except at the highest possible cost, had killed the President as sure as that man in the warehouse window.



THOUGH NINE YEARS OUT OF TEN IT FELL within the sorrowful season of Lent, there was still no greater nor more joyfully celebrated feast for the Society of Bernard than that of its namesake, Bernard de Veaux, eleventh martyr of Oceania, the 16th of February. And in the entire history of the holy congregation, not one of the celebrations matched the pomp, splendor, or showmanship of today's.

Already the grand choir was gathering in the rear of the seminary chapel. Visitors from up and down the eastern seaboard milled about beyond the vestibule, where Fund Days were well underway, and children dressed for church dashed from booth to booth, shirttails flying, and adults sipped coffee from styrofoam cups.

Madame Coordinator Mrs. Mieczniewicz, with her new assistant Victor Van Eyck standing alongside, was in her glory, and glanced across the atrium toward her uncomfortable predecessor, Len Lewis. The senior members of the fund-raising committee for the new St. Bernard's Bluff, which was to be raised up upon the site of the current St. Bernard's, might not be speaking any more, but one half of that committee, Mrs. Mieczniewicz thumped herself, had not sold itself short. She and Van Eyck had worked like dogs to get invitations printed and mailed, news releases issued up and down the coast, phone calls placed to the proper personages -- everything from the linen for the Archbishop's breakfast table to the pinning of name-cards (HELLO! My Name is Brother Gaspar) on the countless cassocks floating up and down the plank veranda of House Major. Of course she was proud -- of the big things and the little things, from the mimeographed novena cards to the fifth of Johnny Walker Red in the quarters of the Very Reverend Willard James Croatch, Archbishop of Philadelphia.

Already the big man was moving in the sacristy, gazing contentedly at himself in the full mirror, while acolytes Diener and Dodge assisted him in donning the rose-lilac chasuble of the occasion. It was the latest rage in chasubles, floor-length as opposed to the standard sandwichboard jobs most priests had issued to them. The Archbishop liked the medieval flavor of the vestment. The Fourteenth was his favorite century.

He pirouetted in the mirror, admiring his magnificence. What a fine figure he cut, so tall and so -- so big. He had about him the congratulatory air that came with the knowledge that, should the need arise, he could swallow his enemies whole. The Archbishop was the sort of man who could never love his fellows quite so well as he loved himself.

The first year seminarian Marty, who had never before served as acolyte before, followed the Archbishop's movements from his hiding place behind an opened cabinet door.

"You there," the Archbishop motioned to Marty, "hand me that mirror." And while Marty fetched the

hand-mirror, Croatch peered out at the gathering congregation. He seemed especially to take notice of Mrs. Mieczniewicz, whose teeth seemed visible all the way around her head.

"Here you are, Father," Marty said. Then, catching himself, "I mean, your -- your Highness?"

Croatch eyed Mrs. Mieczniewicz and grunted. "You've got yourself a real corker with that one," he said.

The truth was that the Archbishop wasn't on hand due to Mrs. Mieczniewicz' persistence on the telephone, but in spite of it -- the deal had been worked out months earlier, just between Croatch and St. Bernard's Rector, Monsignor MacConacht. MacConacht and Croatch shared the same wavelength -- Croatch put in his appearance at the St. Bernard fund raiser and MacConacht put in a good word for Croatch with the Mother House in Rome.

The Archbishop smiled benignly and twirled again in the mirror. Rose-lilac was nice, he seemed to be thinking, but his favorite color was cherry-red.

For Marty's part, he was ready. The Archbishop's presence did not daunt him in the least; the great throng gathering outside did not give him pause; the candles, flowers, incense and music -- water off a duck's back. Today he was at the peak of his powers, at peace with himself, and he could feel the natural grace flooding his being and emanating outward again, but with a certain topspin. The World may have come to the door to St. Bernard's for a glimpse of an Archbishop, true; but what they would take back with them the memory of a certain young acolyte who stunned everyone with his perfect altar stylings and his

incredibly Christ-like instincts at the Mass.

The choir launched into the Asperges and the procession began: first Mieczniewicz, with a silver-plated crucifix on a stick; then a half-dozen seminarians in black cassocks and albs, carrying candles; then the censer, Marty, in red and white, smoke spilling from his chained vessel; then Fathers Harris and Tichenor, the concelebrants; then Archbishop Croatch, in pale rose-lilac; then Dodge, Marty's counterpoint, also censuring; then Provolini in black, holding aloft the crucified, gold-plated Christ.

It was a grand parade, and Marty enjoyed his part in it. When they arrived at the sanctuary, the two-by-twos parted and encircled the statue of St. Bernard de Veaux, with his over-rouged cheeks and over-red lips, and both Marty and Dodge stopped to cense the statue. The Archbishop bowed, and the half-dozen boys in black wheeled the statue, which was mounted shakily on a stainless steel refectory cart, back into its alcove on the altar's left-hand side.

By now the choir had concluded the Asperges and had struck up St. Bernard's own theme, "Thank You, Lord (For Sparing Me the Cup)," and Father Lewis, who was filling in for Tichenor, was waving his

hands expansively as his charges scaled the mixolydian heights. The congregation in the pews could be seen to surreptitiously sniff in the sweet smoky air. The Archbishop as putting on a whale of a show.

THE THREE CELEBRANTS advanced to the center of the sanctuary and formed a line symbolizing the Holy Trinity. Dodge and Marty stood below them on the bottom step. The six seminarians in black took seats with the choir, while the torch-carriers stood opposite one another guarding the altar. Deacon Diener backed down the red-carpeted steps and proceeded to the three chairs beside the little washstand, and waited for his big moment, when he would chant the day's Epistle. Marty kept a close eye on Dodge, mimicking his every motion.

The Mass was underway. *Dominus vobiscum*, the three celebrants said, whirling, and then whirled right around again. The congregation chimed right in with the common mispronunciation, *Et cum spiritu tuo*. The rhythm was better that way, Marty nodded. Only the priests and seminarians got it right. Marty stifled himself a yawn -- he could feel his jaw muscles tighten around the yawn. It was all too easy, he thought. He daydreamed, as he had done since he was a little boy, bored with the ritual in front of him. He imagined the priests were the kaleidoscoped dancers on the Jackie Gleason Show. The Willard Croatch Dancers, featuring The Acolettes, he named them. He pictured the Archbishop doing the basic Gleason schtick. And away we god!

At the Kyrie, Marty glanced over and realized he had lost Dodge. Somehow, the older boy had sidled over and backwards about three paces, to make more room for the celebrants to whirl around in. Marty swallowed air -- suddenly the grand symmetry was off. He hoped no one noticed as he inched backward down a step. Father Tichenor, catching the misstep from his periphery, shot Marty a meaningful look.

The choir was going full-blast on the Kyrie, which enabled Marty to get squared off again with Dodge across the room.

"What the hell are you doing?" Dodge hissed through his teeth.

"Lord, have mercy," Marty murmured. Then came time for the Readings, and the torch-boys came out of retirement to escort Diener over to the Lectern, where he opened his big book to the 6th chapter of Revelations, something about lambs and beasts and seals.

*Deo gratias*. And the choir sang the Amen devised from the theme of St. Bernard, and then there it was again. *Dominus vobiscum*.

Marty daydreamed again about all the funny Latin phrases in the Mass. *Asperges* became *asparagus*,

of course. Ora pro nobis was oh wrap your nose up. Liberaamus domine turned into liver on a stormy day.

The same was true for English. Who could forget "oh my God I am hardly sorry" or "Hail Mary, full of grapes"?

Marty and Dodge took their places adjoining the chairs of Father Harris and Archbishop Croatch, while Tichenor spieled off the Gospel about the Clever Steward. When he had finished, the big man rose and advanced to the Lectern to give the homily. With the usual amplified fumbling with his microphone, he launched in to his talk.

"The theme of my discussion today, my friends, is: "Bernard de Veaux, eleventh martyr of Oceania, and patron saint of the little things in life!"

It was the dullest thought which had ever occurred at the Bluff -- no mean feat. For the longest time it appeared that the Archbishop would succeed where the cannibals of the Solomons had failed. "... and so I suggest to you today that perhaps it would do each of us a bit of good to pause from time to time in our own lives, and to ask ourtselves this simple and yet, oh-so-relevant question: What does the life of St. Bernard de Veaux have to do with my life?"

Marty was fantasizing even has he nodded sagely at this thought. He was picturing a latecomer arriving at the chapel, opening the doors, and drowning in the deluge of vomit pouring out onto him. It was that kind of a homily. He scanned the faces in the congregation. There was his friend Dubois, gazing distractedly at a stained-glass window. There was Mrs. Mieczniewicz and her new helper, Victor Van Eyck. And there, in the back row, arms crossed almost defiantly (it seemed to Marty), and with an expression of great irritation on his face.

Odd, Marty thought -- hadn't the Monsignor MacConacht ever heard a bad sermon before? And even so, it was the feast of his own order's one hero, surely a day for all to celebrate. MacConacht almost looked -- and this was quite impossible, more likely he was suffering from indigestion -- as if he bore a grudge of some sort against the beloved martyr!

The Archbishop was brief if not concise, and his sermon managed to further diminish Marty's concentration, so that upon resumption of the Mass he made the mental error of intercepting the three priests and escorting them back up the altar steps, instead of following from a discreet distance, as Dodge was doing. Marty realized with a mortifying backward glance that he now headed the grand procession.

Very well, he vowed, if I am to lead then I will act the part of a leader, and accordingly he thrust his head high and advanced haughtily across the center line, where he bumped into the genuflecting Dodge and nearly tumbled right over him. It was a textbook shoulder-block, perhaps the best Dodge had ever given, including times he had done it on purpose.

Dodge looked up at Marty with a stricken expression. For there, just ahead of the two in the tabernacle, rested Dodge's God, behind the brocade drape; and there, behind him in the congregation, sat his parents and other relatives from Buffalo; and here, standing beside him and serving as his counterpoint in worship, was Jerry Lewis.

Somehow the two managed to maneuver around one another, and Marty and Dodge stood side by side once more. The Archbishop and his helpers were back to their old ways, bobbing and dipping up front. The choir began its Offertory hymn and the two boys, taking that as their cue, lifted their censers again, censed the priests, and set the censers down, Marty setting his down a bit clumsily, the chain not retracting on one side. He made a note to attend to that once he returned from the Lavabo, and rose to traipse after Dodge to the tiny wash-stand. The Archbishop washed his hands and handed Marty the towelette, which Marty took great ceremonial pains to fold, laying one holy corner carefully over the other. When he turned to return to his place beside Dodge, Dodge was gone.

Marty rocked back and forth on one leg, trying to spot Dodge amid the whirling chasubles. No luck -- the sacramental personnel were blocking his view of his partner -- who very simply had gone up front to close the gate to the sanctuary. Marty concluded that Dodge had felt sick or had to visit the lavatory.

Very well, he concluded, he would manage somehow alone. In fact, he thought, this might be his big break. Without Dodge around to force Marty to comply with his bilateral symmetry, Marty was suddenly free to substitute his own symmetries. No more of this mismatched Laurel-and-Hardy genuflection. His spirit soared. What should he essay first?

Since he could no longer flank the three concelebrants, he decided it would be most symmetrical to line up at the end of them, making four. And so he did, trailing his censer -- chain still off-kilter -- behind him, taking his place behind Father Tichenor, splashing frankincense enthusiastically up at the rose-lilac chasubles.

Never mind, now, that the line of three symbolized the three-natured aspect of God. And never mind that the Mass had intensified beyond the period of praise and proclamation, and was now deep into re-enacting the miracle of the Last Supper. Never mind, finally, what in Marty's mind constituted excessive archery of the eyebrows darting his way from the aggrieved Father Tichenor, and from the even more disturbed Father Harris farther up the line. Never mind the disdain of the Archbishop himself, who turned at the conclusion of the Offertory finally to behold -- as a surprised man beholds his vaulting shadow late at night in a bad part of town -- the Fourth Wise Man. And never mind, ever, that the lid on Marty's censer was precariously tipped and threatened to fall apart at any second.

Never mind any of that.

The important thing was that Marty Frye was finally outside himself, blossoming as he never had blossomed -- deep in his spirit, with a joy that rose up out of him like magician's doves, like a glistening meadow of dew-sprinkled Jerusalem artichokes.

Later on he could explain, and everyone would understand.

ACTUALLY, NOT ALL of him was outside himself blossoming. There was still a non-dove, non-Jerusalem artichoke part of him already busy making apologies.

Gentlemen, he would say, you must all bear in mind that your job up there today was to celebrate the Mass. My job, as I saw it, was to cense things. It was my best judgment that you three fellows were the very sort of thing I ought at that time to have been censuring.

He rested his case.

BUT THE REST OF MARTY FRYE was in all its glory. He disdained everything but the sight and scent of smoke rising above the tabernacle roof to the wooden feet of Christ.

He disdained the look on Ralph Diener's face, shaking his head in little compact twists and making No! kisses with his lips. He disdained the blood in Father Harris the Hairy Beast's eyes, and the fire in Father Tichenor the Runty Marine's. He disdained the tittering from the congregation and the choir, the stifled grins of the young torch-boys, the look on his pal Dubois' face, as on a man who has just swallowed a Monopoly board. Oblivious to matters of The World, Marty stumbled after the troika of celebrants, like Dopey after the rest of the dwarfs.

Now was at hand the moment of reckoning, and Marty was now jolted into it -- the Consecration. He was on his feet, he saw, if from a great distance. He was standing during the Consecration! Fathers Harris and Tichenor were already lifting the hem of the Archbishop's chasuble, and the Archbishop was hoisting the large white wafer.

Marty panicked. He looked around him, at Diener, at the torch-boys, he saw Dodge kneeling at the bottom of the steps -- so that's where he was hiding! -- and Marty panicked even worse. His blood turned to cold glue in his veins, he clung to the hope that Dodge would now save him somehow, that Dodge would take him and lead him gently, like the "big brother" he had once been to him, lead him gently down the sanctuary steps.

But Dodge looked at him with vengeance in his eyes, clasped the bell-cluster in his right hand, and as the Archbishop said the magic words *HOC! EST! ENIM! CORPUS! MEUM!* Dodge jangled the bells for

all he was worth.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice. It was consummated. And time stood still for Marty Frye, standing paralyzed at the altar's top stair, back facing the Transubstantiation. He felt a willowy tingling in his thighs. He imagined the curtain in an temple rending inside him. And while the hard bread of men was being transformed behind him into the pliable body of Christ, Marty's pliable little penis rose up in front of him like a blood-streaming rood.

Marty set his censer down loosely and put his hands to his temples. He stared down at his middle. Was it visible, the thing that had grown under his cassock and surplice? Could the whole congregation behold his indignity?

It was. They could. It looked to him as if he were hiding a swiped bottle of muscatel taped against his stomach. It was as plain as the nose on his face, he told himself, his heart kicking its way out of his ribcage, as obvious as a tarantula on an angelfood cake. Every eye was upon him, and upon his peculiar condition, every hands was heaping imaginary faggots at his bound feet, every prayer implored the Almighty to blast the hapless boy on the spot he had blasphemed.

Of course, this was all happening in a dream, he told himself. Every night he had dreams, and this was simply another. Why, there was Dubois in the third row, looking ill -- Dubois was so smart, he knew the word for this whole experience was *deja vu*, where a thing happens and you know it happened before but you can't put your finger on it. That was what this all was, Marty thought, one of those *deja vus*.

That thought comforted Marty as he stood on the altar stair, and he sank to his feet with a tired smile, rolling his eyes to the chapel dome. *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*, he murmured, beating his chest drunkenly.

And when he rose, every eye on the house upon him, his shoe caught at his surplice, the surplice tore off him at the shoulder, slid onto the floor, landed on the censer, tipping it over. The surplice quickly burst into flame, and the loose coals rolled down the three remaining altar steps, spilling unceremoniously all the way to the communion railing, setting several fires in half a dozen smoldering stripes.

MARTY FRYE SAT AFTER THE CONFLAGRATION in a folding chair back in the sacristy, his mind reeling as it tried to weigh the morning's events. All around him the commotion continued to swirl. He could not quite piece it all together -- the chain of events never quite connected. For now he decided to sit calmly and be the unblinking eye on the premises while the hurricane around him spent out its last

energies.

The Archbishop was far from spent out. He leaned against the wardrobe, hands trembling, his breath coming in spastic, smoke-inhaled sputters. From moment to moment he would glance over at the sloe-eyed Frye boy, and then he would bring himself to his full adult height, shake his finger, and then not know

what to say. Fathers Tichenor and Harris, ignoring Marty for the moment, danced frantically around the great man who had nearly fallen in the line of duty, and hoped he would not need nitroglycerine tablets.

Marty was effused with an eerie, inconsolable peace -- something like bliss but also a lot like despair. He saw the mad gestures of the Archbishop when the prelate pointed at him, and he tried to remember where he had seen that gesture before. Finally it came to him -- it was from Dubois' enactment of Dreyfus case. The moment when Emile Zola took the stand. *J'accuse! J'accuse!* It was an interesting time in French history, from Dubois' description. On the whole Marty wished he had been part of it and not this.

As for the Archbishop's true feelings, Marty had no need to worry. Suffering from smoke and third-degree burns along his neck and scalp, the Archbishop could not be held accountable for his feelings at this time. Of course, the entire episode might have been less discomfiting overall had his rose-lilac chasuble not exploded in sudden flame at the altar, singeing his hair and burning his back. Why the big vestment conglomerates couldn't fireproof their chasubles was beyond him.

Marty could only remember the smell, and a curious smell it had been, of hair crackling. He wondered whether that was what St. Lawrence smelled like on the spit in the days of St. Sixtus. "You can turn me over, boys," the madcap saint is supposed to have said. "I'm done on this side." Catholic humor was not without its moments.

Just then Monsignor MacConacht ambled into the sacristy to offer the Archbishop his comfort and condolences. Marty was fascinated. Now the Rector seemed strangely relieved and pleasant, where up until Martin's mishap with the censer he had seemed agitated and unhappy.

"You just sit a moment, your excellency, while I rub some of this stuff onto that neck."

"Ow! Oh!" the Archbishop winced in complaint, but was then seized by another coughing fit.

"There, there," the Rector said gently. MacConacht seemed -- cleansed or something. There was compassion in his voice as he soothed the Archbishop's hacking, a lilt in the way he spoke, and a decided spring in his step. He even seemed to regard Marty with an attitude of -- gratitude?

"Who put him up to this? The Cardinal?" Croatch lapsed into another fit.

The Rector shrugged helplessly, sympathetically. "No one, excellency. We're certain he acted alone."

Marty brightened: the Unbalanced Loner Theory.

"No, the Cardinal was in on this, it has his mark all over it. I'll wager my soul it was the Cardinal."

"Unlikely, excellency. The boy knows nothing of all that."

"What is he, a retard?"

Marty frowned.

"No, excellency." Mutter, mutter... "a discipline problem."

The Archbishop, regaining his composure, pushed MacConacht out of his way and regarded Marty across the room with the utmost vilification. Without taking his eyes off the boy, he spoke to the Rector:

"The kid's a menace."

"Come on, Willard, I'll buy you a drink." The Rector took him by the wrist.

"He's a Goddamn hazard."

MacConacht led the great man away. Fathers Harris and Tichenor were still busying themselves cordoning off the altar area, cleaning up after the disaster. Marty noticed Dubois trying to get through to the sacristy but being pushed away by the Hairy Beast. Marty lacked the energy to have shrugged, but if he could have he would have.

For now it was all over -- everything. Seeing Dubois in the doorway was like getting a postcard from his own life. Great to hear that The World was having a wonderful time out there; he wished he could be there too. But it was not to be.

He gazed dreamily out toward the sanctuary, smoke and steam issuing in equal amounts from the passageway with an incense-like languor. He wished he had daisies by the dozens, so he could tear all the petals off, like Ophelia did. No, not daisies -- Jerusalem artichokes.

That done, he would tangle himself in the wreath he had made and go jump in the duck pond in front of St. Bernard's Bluff. And they would find him like that, floating face-up, a weird, demented smile on his face. And they would bury him outside the seminary grounds, in unblessed soil. And the stone would bear this inscription:

HERE LIES BROTHER MARTY, WHO GOT  
ALL HIS SHAKESPEARE FROM  
CLASSICS ILLUSTRATED

Too late to be sorry, he thought, and too late to make amends. Too late for anything save that single perfect act of contrition, and then -- the duck pond.

Even were he somehow to rehabilitate himself after this heinous crime, his fellows would never suffer his presence among them. Tichenor and Harris had let him know their feelings -- mainly, a sempiternal dragnet of revenge. The boys had likewise hardened against him -- he could tell from the looks on the torch-boys' faces; unconsciously, all had elected him to eternity in Limbo, with no time off for good behavior, no visitors and no between-meal snacks. A stern bunch, his pals.

He was already passing time in Limbo. Already he missed the excitement of The World. He missed even the excitement of his downfall, that sunny Sunday morning of the Feast of St. Bernard de Veaux. What, thinking back, had been the most exciting part?

Many people would say it was when the fire department showed up, with their over-the-shoulder sprayer cans and long rubber boots, tromping down the center aisle and up into the Holy of Holies like Atilla and the Huns. While the storm-troopers clambered in, hoses streaming, the rest of the congregation huddled bug-eyed by the double doors.

Marty, however, welcomed the firemen -- in the tumult surrounding him, they could be neutral witnesses, in case things got really out of hand. As long as they were near, he felt safe. There was even a moment or two when he gave serious thought to joining up with them -- a career consideration which, before this fateful convergence of sacrament, fire, and sex, had never occurred to him, but one which, come to think of it, was damned attractive. Caught up in the excitement, however, he was too slow to collar one of them and ask for literature.

That was a big moment, certainly. Another came earlier, when him, but one which, come to think of it, was damned attractive. Caught up in the excitement, however, he was too slow to collar one of them and ask for literature.

That was a big moment, certainly. Another came earlier, missing word moment you expected a cinder-block to issue from her gullet. The Archbishop, even with his mitre on and his crook flying at high-mast, could have tumbled all the way down her sideways; or Dante pitched his tent between her tonsils.

And what a yowl commenced to come out of her, so piercing and so tremulous, so that even the chapel bells atop the cupola hummed mildly from the vibration; yet so eloquent, so to-the-point:

"FIRE!"

And the entire congregation then rose, unclicked, in the most perfect mass genuflection ever executed. Even people lining up at the Communion rail had second thoughts, and joined the crush at the

double rear doors.

A great, great moment. But the best was still to come. There stood the Archbishop, the host in his hand and the back of his garment beginning to smolder. He was a perfect portrait of mixed emotions, and it was to his eternal credit that he did not then drop the Blessed Sacrament. But when the sparks caught the hem of his alb, the white undergarment, and he instinctively whirled to extinguish the fire -- alas -- the host did fly up out of his hands and over the lectern.

Now two things happened at once, and the eye had to choose whither it was to go: whether to zero in on the remarkable leap Father Tichenor the Runty Marine made, vaulting the prie-dieu and diving down two smoking steps in the nick of time to catch the sailing host in the end-zone; or whether to behold the singular resolve of Harris the Hairy Beast as he advanced up the steps to the burning Archbishop, seized the great one by the nape of his neck, and with one brisk sweep of his hairy hand slit the garment down the middle and stripped it off the Archbishop's body.



THE DIE WAS CAST. Now it was simply a matter of Monsignor MacConacht making two telephone calls.

"That's right, Mrs. Dubois. I'm sorry to disturb you, but -- oh, I'm terribly sorry, I thought it was pronounced Du-bwah. It's Da-boy -- excuse me, please. But never mind that, there's been a problem here. Yes, I'm afraid it does involve Eugene... ."

But the Frye phone in French Creek did not answer. All day long and several times that evening the Rector tried. Unable to make the connection, he put off the matter until the following day.

For Dubois there would be no next day. With his hand weighted down in a plaster cast, he was ushered down the steps of House Minor and into the seminary Chevy, Victor Van Eyck at the wheel. Taking his place in the front seat, the boy in the floppy black blazer gazed out the window at St. Bernard's for the last time. As the car pulled down Immaculate Conception Lane, Dubois was still looking backward -- not the buildings, which were doomed to the wrecking ball, and not at the gardens or the walking pond, which he'd traversed a thousand times, but for Martin, his friend, his companion of the year, who had betrayed him into his mother's arms.

Not until the car passed the cast-iron gate of the old cemetery did Dubois finally see him, leaning against the trunk of a tumorous willow, hands in pockets. For a moment the two locked into one another's eyes. Before the car sped by, Dubois looked away.

Marty watched the Chevy disappear over the first hill, and as he watched it dwindle he felt something

dwindle inside himself as well, a part of him that was sorry, a part that wanted to run after the car and bang on the windows, tell him he was sorry, he'd been acting crazy, something was wrong, he didn't know what, but if they could continue as friends, if Dubois could forgive him, it would never happen again.

The feeling dwindled and popped out of being.

Marty breathed deeply and exhaled, watching the breath tunnel up out of him and frost up in the air. For just a moment his breath was invisible, before it whitened ghostlike in the air.

He walked with a steady, floating gate. He could not quite feel where his feet touched ground, yet he did not stumble. He forgot Dubois. He thought about his breath instead.



MARTY SIGNED OUT AT PREFECT PROVOLINI'S desk at about 7 p. m. and walked, hands in pockets like a sailor, onto the wooden deck overlooking the duck pond. He stopped for a moment to gaze out over the catalpas, wind-bared except for their dangling beans. He knew the Rector expected him immediately, but he did not care to be rushed. Monsignor MacConacht could wait.

It had been a sunny day, and much of the ice which had covered the walking-pond was now melted. Now as Marty looked down the terrace, he could hear the faint crackle of water refreezing. He pulled his coat tighter around him with the chill.

He hadn't eaten anything for two days, not a bite since the fire. He had dropped in on one of the Ambrosians' meetings, to see if he could link up with them, but they were cool to welcoming a chapel-burner into their midst. Walter Godbey, of all people, was a power in the Ambrosians, and it had been the Stork who barred Marty's entry. But then, one did not need a membership card to skip one's meals. Marty enjoyed staring at Table Prefect Mieczniewicz while Mieczniewicz guiltily chewed. The old jokes didn't work any more, Marty seemed to be saying -- none of the old tricks did.

"How's your girlfriend, Marty?"

"What girlfriend?"

"Why, Blanche Dubois," Mieczniewicz smiled brightly, "the parish belle."

Marty would not dignify the remark with response. And the next day, Mieczniewicz again: "I hear you're fasting, Marty darling. And with the Ambrosians. Pretty holy stuff, don't you think?"

Marty nodded. "I'm a holy guy."

He sensed that, so long as he was regarded as desperate and outside the accepted rules of

communication, he could win any argument, just by varying his tone, just by staring dully at his opponent. They were all scared of him now. He despised them. Even Dubois was afraid. Even his one true friend in the world. Everyone was yellow, everyone would die. Too bad.

He hunched his shoulders and twisted his fists in his pockets. Another shiver raced through him, but he liked the chill of it, it felt strong and good. He leaned against the painted pillar and exhaled.

R -- Bless me Father for I have sinned. My last confession was two weeks ago.

P -- And what are your sins, Martin?

R -- I was proud.

P -- That's rather general, don't you think?

R -- But it's true. Sometimes I catch myself thinking, What must God think about this? And then I guess -- I make believe what God thinks. I pass judgment on all the other boys, and even the fathers. It's wrong. I'm no better than them. I'm a hundred times worse, if you want to know the truth. But I can't help that, either.

R -- How are you worse than the others?

P -- Because they're so innocent, so ignorant. So happy. Their families are alive, their parents are married. They don't know how things can be in the world. I do. I've seen things go bad, Father, I know what the warning signs are. But what should I do -- keep my mouth shut and let them figure it out by themselves? It seems more merciful to tell them to their faces that this world isn't for losers like them. It's for the strong, isn't it Father? It's for the strong.

R -- Are you ashamed of these feelings? Are you sorry?

P -- I am.

R -- But still proud.

P -- Yes. What should I do?

R -- Make a perfect Act of Contrition, and say five Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys.

P -- You think that will work in my case?

R -- I don't do the forgiving, Martin. That is for God. But it seems penance enough. Tell me something. How are you? How do you feel about Mass on Sunday?

P -- I didn't think that was a sin.

R -- No, it wasn't. Of course. Do you feel fine about it then?

P -- I felt bad for a while. I set fire to a chapel. But now, I don't feel anything. It happened. Like everything.

R -- I spoke to the Archbishop today and he said to tell you he was fine. If he can laugh about it now, you can too, Martin. He's even offered to help with our building fund. Perhaps, by burning, you were really helping us build!

P -- I would have preferred the usual way.

R -- Good, you can laugh. You know, Frye, you're a good man under all that mask. I can see that now. You've been doing some growing up, haven't you?

P -- Yes Father.

R -- Then there's just one thing left I want to talk with you about.

P -- Father?

R -- It's a philosophical struggle I've been having. Here it is. We live in a community together, all of us. Do you know what that means?

P -- Yes. We share a life together. In Christ.

R -- Excellent, straight from the text. Father Cooke is doing a bang-up job, I can tell. Well then: what in your opinion is the single greatest enemy of peace and wholesome activity within a community like ours?

P -- Pride, Father?

R -- Forget pride for a moment, Martin. I'm referring to a community of young men, and to a danger we face here which threatens always to fracture us. People form -- special relationships. They break off from the others. The community no longer communes. You with me?

P -- I think so.

R -- Very well then. I have noticed that you and Mr. Dubois spend a great deal of time together. Is that fair to say?

P -- We're friends, Father.

R -- You like him, don't you?

P -- Well, you know, friends do --

R -- Beg pardon?

P -- They like each other.

R -- A wonderful thing, friendship.

P -- Yes Father.

R -- It can be a spiritual bonding, a marriage of souls.

P -- Yes.

R -- Or, there is such a thing as a marriage of concubiscence. You know what that is, don't you?

P -- I think so.

R -- Is your friendship with Dubois a marriage of concubiscence?

P -- No. We talk.

R -- And write nasty plays? Listen to me, Martin Frye. There is a word for what boys do when they spend a great deal of time together. It goes beyond wholesome friendship. And it is the bane, the absolute bane of seminary life. It corrupts all that is godly and shared in the community. It is diametrically opposed to the standard Christ set for us, and the vocation she calls some of us to. Do you know that word?

P -- I know ... some words.

R -- That word is cliquishness...

P -- It is? Honest?

R -- ...the breaking away from the whole, the splintering into component parts, until the rule of law ceases to apply, and strife within the body itself breaks out.

P -- It's terrible.

R -- Now you and Eugene have been having a fine time, haven't you? Standing apart, criticizing, writing these foul-minded skits, passing notes in study hall, ballet dancing...

P -- Who told you about the --

R -- ...splitting up your Philly Day Tour. I hate to sound like a "Tyrannosaurus Rex," you know.

P -- Those were only jokes, Father.

R -- Just jokes. And what do we know about humor? Did Christ crack jokes to the Apostles? Was Christ ever sarcastic or flip? What do we know for a fact about Christ's sense of humor?

P -- He didn't have one.

R -- Right. So here's my recommendation. You keep on being Eugene's buddy.

P -- I do? I can?

R -- Of course. We're not here to break up friendships. But you must be more ecumenical. Welcome others in to your little group. Participate more fully, the two of you, in communal projects. Get involved in the life of St. Bernard's instead of standing outside the circle cracking jokes at our expense. Understand?

P -- That's it?

R -- Just one other thing. Don't let's ever see the two of you alone together any more.

P -- Oh.

R -- Understand?

P -- It's just that ... yes, I understand.

R -- Good. You're a good young Catholic man, Frye. We want to keep you pure for the Church.

P -- Thanks Father. Good night.

R -- Wait, here's your little play.

P -- Thanks Father.

R -- Wait, you forgot something else.

P -- Father?

R -- Go in peace.

Marty closed the Rector's door and made his way down the plastic-carpeted hall. His throat constricted. His knees felt wobbly, and the shivers he felt out in the cold had returned to him, inside, where he was very warm.

Up ahead of him in the hall he saw Ralph Diener leave his apartment, wearing a bathrobe and leaning on his cane. Marty stood still on the plastic mat and watched Diener hobble into the jakes. When he was certain the coast was clear, he quickened his pace, strode past the jakes, broke into a gallop as he hit the rear stairwell of House Major, tripped on the top stair, tumbling head over heels to the first landing, his notebook flying up and coming apart in mid-air.



MARTY NEVER LOOKED ONCE over his shoulder, but ran down the steps of the seminary classroom building, burst through the double doors of the gym and headed out across the athletic fields, laughing.

Out of sight of the turrets of House Major, he stopped and fell to his knees panting. All around him the late afternoon air roiled passionately. The day had dwindled -- soon it would be dark. A cold breeze stirred around him and the tops of the fir trees trembled emphatically. Marty rose to his feet again, muttering over and over again his new chorus:

Pharisees ... vipers ... whited sepulchres ...

Stumbling, he made his way along the ridge, picking his way with bare hands up the stony path. When he came to the abandoned mill he ascended the crumbling stairs to the lookout room. He did not

enter but instead collapsed against its outer wall, exulting in the chill air and exulting too in the way he saw himself at that instant -- beaten but not bowed, unlovable to God and incomprehensible to The World.

Shivering, he got to his feet, and looked down from the parapet over the tract houses of Plittville, swarming below like a thousand angled hillocks, every tree seeming twiglike and premature, the burnt leaves poking through the crust of snow.

Gazing down from such a height he felt like God. Or like Khrushchev. Yes, he was Khrushchev, and he would wait not a second longer to drop the Bomb on these red-roofed homes, the trillions, quadrillions, vigintillions of splinters booming outward in the fireball of his wrath.

For he was suddenly certain that everything everywhere was these people's fault. Every uncelebrated joy was one they failed to celebrate. Every hour of silent suffering was one they failed to keep vigil for. Every solitary death was one they failed to mourn. They, who had all the money, who had all the things, for whom all The World did all the work -- they had no idea

whatsoever what killers they were, or what torturers, or what was the full price the earth demanded to keep them healthy and full, ignorant, innocent and amused.

Spasms and shivers curled up and down his spine like rats with hands. Beads of sweat popped out of his forehead and face, even in the cold of dusk. He peered down upon the valley, waiting for the fireball which was certain to mushroom over it at any moment. When there was a brief fireball delay, he shambled back down the steps of the mill and looked around for something else to assay.

He spotted a granite wall extending from the mill for fifty feet. He turned toward it, scuffed his shoes backwards twice, like a bull pawing the arena sand, and ran headlong into the wall, hitting it head-first like a sack of coal, and crumpling, forehead abraded and bleeding, arms, knees and shoulders scraped and bruised.

Dazed, he stared fascinatedly at his frazzled hands, daubed his wet brow, held his reddened fingers up to the dying light. The wall seemed none the worse for their altercation.

God damn wall, he said.

As he struggled to his feet he felt dizzy, nothing more -- no pain where his head was wounded, none in his scraped hands and knuckles. No feeling at all, except a sped-up momentum to the shivers that tapped through him, a chill. He imagined he were lying in a deep drift somewhere of the softest snow, high in a mountain pass in November, drifting off to a peaceful, pleasant sleep.

He laughed again. Generation of infidels!, he cried.

His language struck him as funny. He wondered if there was anything that wasn't funny anymore. The sun had set now, and only a rose-and-aqua band of light filtered across the darkening firmament. Had he lost consciousness upon hitting the wall? Delicious thought. It was coming clear to him finally that, away from people, wonderful things could happen.

He took off running across the onion pasture toward a stand of pine trees alongside the athletic fields. Pushing past the low branches, he came to a familiar clearing in the wood marked by a flat, smooth granite block. Marty dropped to his knees to brush the snow and ice from the crack until he found what he sought and drew it out -- a plastic sheath with the Playboys inside. In the dim light he took out the magazines and set them on the altar.

Even protected by plastic the magazines had suffered. The covers were sodden and dimpled by moisture and the inside pages, as Marty peeled, parted reluctantly. He found the saddle and opened to unfold the beautiful Sharyn Barnes, who had been waiting for him in the cold along her seamless beach, unbothered by the ice crystals forming along the waterline.

Marty squinted to make her out afresh, bearing down to summon up what lust he could, squinted to make the paper body dance. He fixed his concentration on her coated breasts until Sharyn, who had waited for him so long in the cold and damp, began to warm under his gaze and stir before his eyes, now coy and submissive and alive once more, wavering at the shoulders and hips, wiggling girlishly on the San Francisco sand.

And Marty believed, he felt faith flood back into him, he saw himself and this woman alone at last. She smiled at him, charmed by his inexperience, yet gracious in undertaking to undo it.

He zigzagged from her bare white breasts to her sparkling blue eyes. He put his hands to his trousers, outside them, and felt between his legs for the raw hardness of his penis, filling him with sensations of burning discomfort and anxious pleasure. How fantastic to be this free, to have this orange Venus entirely at one's disposal, to touch and knead and contemplate.

Ignoring the cold and ignoring the dying of the light Marty undid his trousers and slid them down, along with his underpants, over his shoes and ankles. The cold air clasped him and he clasped back. Extraordinary to be naked as a savage, he thought, bare legs prickling, and running your hands up and down yourself.

He felt new sensations, he felt fire and ice, he threw off his black sweater and plaid shirt, bending over the stone and pulling on himself. Deep up inside him he felt something changing, like a gun cocking. His penis seemed the dominant part of him for the first time ever -- it pointed the way, he followed.

It pointed to the warm sands of Stinson Beach beside the giggling girl. He knelt beside her and she

reached for him and felt between his legs to stroke his little pole. She smiled again and rolled over onto him, dangling her lovely breasts over his face, swaying them for him. Then she lowered herself onto him, their faces met, they kissed for the first time and Marty was stunned by the sunny warmth of her.

He felt them joining at the hips and he held onto her for dear life as they rolled and rolled, made angels in the sand, so that when Marty rolled over astride her and sat back to gaze into her lovely face, he flew away in shock.

The face he saw was not the face of a woman. He blinked and blinked again. It was the ovoid face of Charlie Chan, the fisheye face of the idiot.

Marty shuddered. Sharyn was gone now. She had picked up her little red pail and fled.

The only body left on the beach was the waterlogged corpse of Jude Frye, sandy bilge spilling from the side of his mouth.

IT'S GOOD HE'S DEAD.

That's what Marty thought at the funeral as he stood at bierside regarding his brother's oddly restored face.

Jude had always had trouble behaving in large groups. If he were alive today, with his father on hand and all the relatives and friends and schoolmates, all the sisters and Father Czeszokowa, Jude would be going nuts with his silly laugh, handclaps, dumb jokes, kisses, dragging people into the toilet with him. He would have chocolate all over his face and cuffs, and his tie would be all tangled around his neck. He would have a booger in each nostril and a rope of drool strung along one shoulder.

He would be making his own funeral ridiculous. That's why Marty thought it was good he was dead.

In fact, Marty felt terribly proud of his brother. For once in his life people were taking him seriously.

RECOILING FROM THE PIN-UP of his dead brother, Marty backed naked into the trees, banging his head on a low branch. Ruefully, he rubbed the back of his head -- what was one more blow to the head or neck, he thought. It was dark now. He walked, sleepwalker style, hands in front of him, to guard against the errant branch. He stumbled once more on a root or stone, so that when he got to his feet again, he had lost all sense of direction. For a change it was him that was lost, and not Jude.

IN THE OLD DAYS HE USED to take Jude along on his forays into the woods alongside Old Highway Eight, and Marty would boast the entire trip of his feel for woodland lore, making up the names of trees and plants to impress the idiot bringing up the rear. It was goofy to try to impress an idiot, but it gave Marty some poor kind of pleasure, the same kind he got when he would hide from Jude or suddenly jump out and scare the boy out of his wits -- not a great leap for either of them.

But this one time the joke worked in reverse, and Marty turned to find Jude gone. What had their mother said a thousand times -- whatever you do, don't lose the kid? Or it would be Marty's pelt flying over the family flag?

He backtracked, striding rapidly at first but breaking into a run when he failed to find Jude behind the first few trees. Finally he came upon him, mired to his chest in the wet red clay of a sucking-hole, red leaves and slime all over him, and he was still sinking and wearing on his face the most peculiar expression, as resigned as a lamb to what might happen and yet challenged deep inside to understand. He looked up at his smaller brother as if he had solved the riddle of the universe.

"Come on, Jude, get up out of there," Marty had cried disgustedly.

"I can't do it," Jude answered solemnly.

Marty cursed him with a 9-year-old's curse, and taking hold of a young maple, pulled his brother from the muck.

"Look at you," he chided. "You look like you messed yourself."

"I tink I maybe did."

And Marty led Jude home, dripping vermilion.

TWO YEARS LATER JUDE WAS DEAD. That day, Marty remembered, began quite comfortably, following one of those spring nights that start warm but end chilly. And it was a Saturday morning now, the sun was peeking through the venetians, and Marty burrowed deeper into his cocoon of blankets.

As soon as he opened one eye he knew something had happened.

He slid out of bed and made his way to the bathroom. There was a door leading out to a landing there, where his mother shook out rugs. The last few days he had looked out in the morning and seen the car of a woman friend, Delores Carafanza, the babysitter. Now he saw his mother's car. She was home from the hospital.

Marty turned from the window and sat on the toilet, but he couldn't go. He felt his sides hurt as if he'd been struck there with a softball bat. The wind had left him. He knew exactly what was what, and in his fear he said The World's most common and shortest prayer:

God, No.

IN THE SEMINARY WOODS Marty was laughing out loud and rubbing his arms with both hands. He had done it, he thought. He had turned it all around. Because, he figured, when you do it to yourself you're no longer the victim.

Besides all that, here I am. All this stuff is happening and I'm still myself, intact. Perhaps people were way off-base when they thought about situations like this. Perhaps he wasn't in any trouble at all. Perhaps the basic requirements of food and clothing, shelter and companionship, weren't so basic after all.

Perhaps -- his imagination soared -- some people can take it and some people can't. Some die, some don't.

He laughed again as he bumped his head on another branch. Every time something worsened it seemed funnier. He couldn't help it. Everything was funny. He thought he might die laughing.

YOUNG MARTY TIPTOED FROM THE bathroom to his own room, pulled his shirt over his head, fastened his pants and sat on the bed-edge to tie his shoes. He stepped quietly out to the hall -- quietly not because Elizabeth was asleep, for he knew she was not, but for another reason -- because he dared not break the

spell of death.

Doors were important. He closed his, which he never did, and though it would not close completely because of the warp in the frame, he shut it as tight as it could possibly go.

HE WALKED BLINDLY THROUGH THE WOODS, spinning in slow circles, staring at the heavens high above, which were black -- no moon, no stars poked through.

"Surely," Marty murmured aloud, "surely the Lord will provide a sign. The Lord is very good at signs."

He laughed, almost choked. "I've got it," he said. "God sends a sign, and it's on four posts planted fifty feet apart"

LOST IN THE WOODS?

AIN'T GOT A DIME?

GOD'S GOOD GRACE --

A CLOSE SHAVE EVERY TIME!

And another:

The Good Shepherd leaves his sheep to take a leak. One of them sneaks under the barbed wire and escapes from the flock. Naturally the Good Shepherd has to leave the ninety-nine to fetch the one that got away. He finds the lost sheep, but when he returns to the fold finds all ninety-nine slaughtered and dressed and turning on spits, the smell of rosemary thick in the air... .

MARTY STEPPED GINGERLY from stair to stair. At the landing he turned and saw Elizabeth at the dinette. She sat in her nursing assistant's pink uniform, arms crossed, head bowed, ashtray spoked with unbroken ash. She stared at the pattern in the fake mother-of-pearl tabletop.

Marty turned away. He looked around at the rest of the room, at anything to forestall what he knew was coming. He looked at the flag which stood gloomily and dustily alongside the buffet, at the bare cherry branches outside the bay window. He shifted from the tree to a box of Christmas ornaments on the window-seat which had never been put away -- tiny felt Santas with circular rouge-marks dotting each cheek, holding reindeer reins with tiny black cord, Christmas-tree shaped candles the kind no one ever burns, and hand-painted angels of wood, with stapled haloes of ringed cellophane.

Marty thought about the angels. He would have thought about anything to avoid facing his mother. Once he did that, it could never be undone.

"Martin," she murmured from across the room, and he turned, like a figure in a Swiss clock, and looked into her face, into a face all flame and flood. She had never been so beautiful or so terrifying. Flame and flood raged from her eyes; like hair touched by match, he was consumed in an instant. Flame and flood had taken Jude, flame and flood had taken Elizabeth, flame and flood was sweeping Marty out of his life forever. And as he died, and as he felt himself dying, he felt a grievous sadness for his own sake.

BU BU BU BU BU, Marty thought as he strolled like Bing Crosby through the dark woods naked, his hands in imaginary pockets, his cracked lips whistling an imaginary melody.

No signs tonight, he stopped to say. But that's just good sense. Why drop the ninety-nine in the hand

for the crazy naked freezing solitary lost one in the bush? The Lord is nobody's fool.

He slapped himself but could not feel the slaps. No pain. He felt he was an expert now, like Mister Science on Saturday mornings. Pain, says Mr. Science, is all in the mind, and may be easily overcome by a bit of courage, a little daring. Tonight he felt courageous and daring. He liked being in trouble, it gave him an edge. It was like TV -- would Little Marty escape the dogs and make it across the creaking floes? Stay tuned!

Except that this was a more adult drama, it had pathos and grit, like a Bonanza episode. Jude was the big homely one, Hoss, and Marty was Little Joe, and Hoss had fallen in love with a hydrocephalic girl in a covered wagon, but then she died, and Hoss' heart broke in two, and all Little Joe could do was wiggle his dark eyebrows in anguish.

But change the channel and the Reverend Mr. Frye was there with the late-night sermonette:

"Life, brethren, is a little like television. Have you ever sat up so close that all you could see was the little black dots? But when you sit back in a chair with a bowl of popcorn, those little dots make a picture? Isn't life a little like that as well? While we're right in the thick of it it makes little sense. But after it's over, once we take a few steps back, the dots take shape and we see they are stars in some infinite constellation, the galaxy of all our lives... ."

He shivered, and burst into imagined song. Bu bu bu boo. One more time, with feeling.

THE FUNERAL WAS A DISASTER. John Abner showed up and spent the whole morning trying to swallow. Elizabeth avoided him, so that John Abner thought she blamed him. But she only blamed herself. It was she who sat beside the doctor, chatting about the Parents and Teachers Association even as the doctor killed her son. And now she was a raging beast, knocking over glasses and cups with her careening hands and arms.

At the reception she astounded everyone by standing beside the sliced ham and pointing accusingly at Father Czeszkowa and the ladies around him.

You're all murderers, she hissed. All of you had your shots. And she was taken upstairs and her eyes bugged insanely while Dr. Gleason pumped the sedative up her wrist, and then she slumped, her high heels dropping simultaneously to the floor.

MARTY KNEW WHAT HIS MOTHER MEANT. Jude had had a headache around and under his eyes. Elizabeth had not taken Jude to see Dr. Gleason since the incident in the woods, where Jude and

Doris Gleason had frolicked naked in the spillway, and Doris had to be sent back to the Green Lake Home. Dr. Gleason took one look at Jude's face and pronounced him a victim of sinusitis, a common disorder for Down's kids.

And Jude looked the doctor right in the eye and told him. "I dote like dockers do bore."

It was a warm spring day, the first day of the year that the people of French Creek ventured outside in shirtsleeves. Outside the office, where Elizabeth sat wringing her hands around her scarf, the traffic on Main Street jostled and hummed.

"This won't hurt," said Dr. Gleason as he filled his syringe. Jude scowled but held out his arms. Elizabeth inquired about Mrs. Gleason's nasturtiums while the needle slid into Jude's vein and the doctor's thumb descended.

Later, Dr. Gleason called it *The Mistake*. For the two nights that Jude lay in a coma, brought back from the brink with adrenaline by the quick-thinking doctor, he repeated the apology a dozen times, and a dozen times more. No one could be sorrier than he about *The Mistake*, he insisted. He forgot all about Jude's allergy to penicillin.

But he was wrong. And that made two mistakes. Elizabeth was much sorrier than Dr. Gleason, as a matter of fact. And so was Marty.

MARTIN KNELT IN THE SNOW and scratched it with numb fingers, lifting some to his lips to chew. He has stumbled upon another principle: the trick to life in the cold was to be no warmer than the cold itself. Like fighting fire, in reverse. He grabbed handfuls of frozen slush and crumbled it against his chest, abdomen and legs. The crystals hung where he stuck them for a moment before sliding away.

A certain weariness overtook him. He had traveled far today and accomplished much. In the morning he would resume explorations. Now it was time to rest, to put up for the night.

Tonto, he turned to his faithful Indian companion and asked. Tonto, is this a safe place to camp?

Oh yes Kemosabe, this place be plenty safe. Them never find us here.

Very well then old friend, let us say our prayers and turn in.

ELIZABETH FRYE SAT AT THE TABLE, flame and flood. Marty, not knowing what else to do, set off down Candy Cane Lane to Old Highway Eight, following it down to the wooded area along French Creek.

Away from the house he felt lifted up out of its sorrows. He could not remember the woods looking so beautiful. He had expected pathetic fallacy by the truckload -- trees hanging their heads, a sun obscured by troubled clouds, the wind whispering remonstrations of grief -- but instead heard happiness sounds and

saw sunshiny sights: the yak of the blue jay, the green shoots of springtime first showing their heads. He had come to the woods for comfort, and comfort he found. He quickened his pace to a skip-step and bounded down the path to the heart of the woods.

There was good news in the day's events, he thought: he had been spared. He would not even have to grieve. God had some wonderful plan in store for him, that the Angel of Death should pass so close and keep on going. Why had God spared Marty but given Jude the vaudeville hook? Why?

He cast about at the wilderness sprouting everywhere. I am a Voice crying in the wilderness. That would have been Jude. Which made him, Marty... .

The idiot was only the precursor, he decided. All those years, everyone had doted on Jude -- who in all fairness had had many sterling qualities -- when the true saint of the family had been young Marty, ignored by his family and by the priests and nuns at school.

God was going door-to-door, a glass slipper in his velvet case. And only one trim foot in all the kingdom would fit. Me, Lord? You want me to be your holy priest?

He stopped along the hillside, looking down the gully at the fallen log known as Fenstermacher Bridge. Being a priest, he thought, means I probably won't ever be President. He had sort of been counting on the Presidency. It was an idea Sister Leocadia gave him when he won the Erie Daily News spelling bee. "Abraham Lincoln was a good speller, you know, Martin."

But now he had a new vocation. "Father Martin, the Spelling Priest. "It had a certain ring to it.

On the other hand, there was "Father Martin, first priest elected President of the United States." The spelling president priest. That had even more of a ring.

Sure, JFK would still go down in history -- he got the Catholic foot in the White House door. But President Frye -- President Father Frye -- he was the fellow who made things stick, who got the job done, for a record five terms. The "Father" of his country, canonized while still alive for his successes in securing a meaningful peace. The President-Priest-Saint-That-Could-Spell, whose vision and virtue

rent the Iron Curtain stem to stern. Whose stubborn insistence led to the celebrated cure for cancer, and later to the revolutionary new longevity drug.

And at his fifth inaugural, still looking extremely fit, he would allow in his address to the nation that

he remembered Someone from the old days, when The World was still in the grip of a cold war and limited by bad medicine to short and tragic lives. And that Someone was a boy who never himself grew up to be President, but to whom he, President Father Saint Martin, owed everything -- a retarded kid by the name of Jude. Whom God chose to die in my stead... .

Marty leaned against a birch trunk and the breath left him. The daydream died. He would never be President, he suddenly saw, precisely because Jude had died. Because now Marty was marked for life by death. It showed in his face, in the corners of his eyes, it would show on every campaign poster. Everyone would see it and see the death in those eyes, the shadow of sorrow that pierced the iris and erased the sparkle of life.

In the history of democratic elections, no country had ever elected death.

Marty kept to the path until he came to the slate-slides. An uncertain feeling crept over him. Maybe he could still turn things around back home. Maybe a miracle of some sort. Maybe Jude was not dead forever. He had to act fast, though -- three days was the traditional limit on resurrections.

First he would contact God. State his case, then work out the details. Then, this very afternoon, he would return home. He would enter the house and take the phone from Elizabeth's hand and set the receiver gently back on its cradle.

And he would say to her: Mother, there's someone in the kitchen I want you to see.

And Elizabeth would look at Marty with tilted, perplexed eyes, like a spaniel's. And he would boom out, in a biblical voice that made the windows clatter in their frames:

"JUDE, COME FORTH!"

And there he would stand, awakened from coma, awakened from death, refreshed from his rest and restored in every way. No longer retarded, no longer deformed, but clear and calm and full of a quiet and gentle light. His ordeal called off. The embalmer downtown hospitalized and suffering from an heinous shock.

"He just got up off the table and looked at me," the embalmer cried to the nurses. "Then he smiled and walked out the door!"

And all the hospital buzzed with reports about the amazing child who passed through the corridors, a blinding aura emanating from his frame, everyone following him out the revolving doors and down Main Street and out to Candy Cane Lane, to the old house in the middle of the orchard, where they gathered around Marty and asked of him:

"How is it that this has come to be? Never have we witnessed the like before!"

And Marty, his eyes brimming with sweet sorrow, would ignore them and turn instead to his mother, and say to her, "Woman, this is how I loved you."

And he would collapse, the life gone from him.

It would be in all the papers. A boy in northwest Pennsylvania had made a pact with Jesus Christ to take the place of his dear departed retarded brother and had gone to the vestibule of Limbo itself to fetch the dead boy back to life, at the cost of his own.

And that what he did he had done out of an unearthly, unprecedented love.

MARTY ROLLED ONTO HIS BACK IN THE SNOW and crossed his feet at the ankles, stretching out his hands. A classic pose, he thought. Either he was relaxing at poolside on a chaise lounge at the Fountainsbleu or he was assisting his executioners with the nails.

Though he no longer shivered, his flesh was still goosebumps everywhere. He imagined drifting off to sleep here, naked in the snow, waking in the morning and making his way far from this place -- a thousand adventures lay ahead of him, and danger and laughter and romance.

One day he would return to these parts and go to St. Bernard's and visit his old colleagues, who would not have advanced an inch closer to the priesthood, even after all those years. He would tell them how it was, that while they were conjugating and declining and fingering their beads he had traversed the world of men, a target for all they could throw in his way.

And all the boys would crowd around him -- Dodge and Diener and Mieczniewicz the traitor -- and they would touch his wounds and gasp. And he would tell his story. How he left them one night and walked raving, starving, naked, frozen, exhausted and lost through the seminary woods.

And one of them -- Hal Dodge -- would ask, "But Marty, how did you survive that night in the woods?"

And Marty would look at Dodge and burst into tears. "I didn't," he would sob, covering his hands with his eyes. "I died that night in my sleep, I dreamed away those last cold hours of life."

Marty lay on his back and blinked up at the sky. If only God had given me the sign I asked for, he thought. All I asked was a single lousy sign. He inhaled, coughed.

Just as he was about to close his eyes for the night, it came. A twinkle at first, and soon a sliver, and then the full moon, finally stepping out from behind a bank of clouds. The light fell and pierced the treetops, lighting up Marty's frost-torn face.

He was in a clearing, and he could see from the silvery reflections that he was on the southern edge of the seminary woods. Through to the east he could discern, even lying on his back, the lights in the first gables of House Major.

It was like the song about money. The best things in life really were free.

Martin got to his knees and rose and walked across the snowy field.

THE WOODS SEEMED SUDDENLY STILL, and a cloud came between them and the sun, and Marty, who had gone into the woods to escape the flame and flood that poured from his mother's eyes, came to a halt on the treadworn path.

He was in a clearing of great oaks and sycamores. The spring smells of the sycamore rose up out of the ground and affected him with the penetrating scent of root and earth. In the center of the clearing was a giant cask, a hogshead ten feet tall, its staves rotted, its metal bands collapsed around its body.

The giant barrel had always been a mystery. What use was such an enormous thing and how had it come to stand there so far from any road or house? On one of their trips to the woods, he had played a trick on Jude, and lowered his brother down into the thing to fetch a quarter only Marty could see. And once Jude was down inside, Marty had laughed and run away, and laughed all the more when the idiot's wailing echoed through the trees.

With Jude, there was no risk. Do something to him, a minute later all is forgiven, all forgotten. He hadn't the memory to hold a grudge, nor the subtlety to savor a cruel joke.

Marty felt his heart pounding in the clearing, staring again at the cask he had imprisoned his brother in. All that was over now. Starting today Jude was dead and gone to heaven, restored like Jesus on Easter Sunday, that fat, dull head now flooded with understanding. Jude knew more than Marty did now, saw through the thousand cruelties and mean tricks, the million insults his brother had heaped on him all those years.

Marty's breath came faster just thinking about Jude. Jude could have his way with him now. A crow bounded from a nearby branch.

A wave of anxiety washed over him. He scarcely breathed. He imagined death and the moment of death and then the moment after that, all silent, all cold.

He had dreamed this. For almost a year the dreams had come, frightening dreams of houses burning,

the charred beams collapsing on the roasted family that never awoke but slept themselves out of this life.

He had dreamt of quicksand, a world of quicksand, everything swallowed, the frantic clawing gestures of those who had just gone under.

He had dreamt of highways lined with crucifixions, children nailed to every phone pole.

Always in these dreams was the certainty that all he saw would come to pass. And he would awaken in a sweat, semi-conscious, and stagger through the house weeping and mumbling, over and over, It's going to happen, it's going to happen.

It happened.

Marty stared at the fallen cask in the woods and felt the fear spread across him again, thick and physical, like an enormous fist clenching him around the middle. He felt the pressing, he felt the chill. Even the cloud overhead had its eye on him.

And what else? What else did he remember? One night, a year earlier. The dreams came again. There was a fire in a hotel. He had just managed to escape, to hear from back inside the roaring building the cries of women. Help me, every one of them was crying. Help me. And Marty burst into tears because he knew he would die in the fire now. And weeping, dashed back in.

He had awakened and gotten out of bed, and walked down the hall to the bathroom. Jude also woke up, and hearing his younger brother followed him and switched on the light, and saw Marty sitting naked and shivering and holding himself on the cold porcelain lip of the tub.

And Jude had taken Marty by the hand and raised him up. It's going to happen, Marty said, his face a whorl of fear. Jude said nothing, but led Marty back to bed, and tucked him in, and kissed him on the forehead.

Marty couldn't breathe. The trees were crowding him, trying to push him from the path. The low-hanging branches tried to grab at him and lift him from his feet and dangle him high above the ground.

All the greenery, all the life, all the living things of the wood reached out to seize him, and he saw blood, red blood, rise up from the muck of decaying leaves. He saw lichens gone red, blood red, pressed hard against their stones. Marty felt his throat to clear his breath. He gasped for air and began to run.

He's running now, he's running down the path. He hears the voices calling after him. The clouds join in the chase, the crows dive down and peck his hair. He runs, he runs, he sees the steely glint of the bridge up ahead, and he runs, he runs, he must get out of these woods at once or die. He must never come to these woods again. These evil trees will never be the same.



MARTY CREPT INTO THE SEMINARY COURTYARD, glancing about like a toothless dog. The yard was deserted. All the lights in House Minor were out except for a lone bulb in Father Cooke's apartment. As Marty edged along the stone wall of House Major, feeling for the entry to The Tombs, even that one light went out. Inside his head he heard the voice:

WHAT? COULD YE NOT WATCH WITH ME ANOTHER HOUR?

Marty slapped himself above the ear -- we'll have no more of that, he thought and cautiously entered the pitch-dark hallway. Taking small steps, he counted the doorways with one hand until he came to a doorway blocked by chain linking attached at the four corners with nails. Marty unhooked one corner and bent the linking high enough to squeeze through.

Once through, he re-fastened the linking and felt around for a light switch. There was none. He flailed his arms about in the center of the room for a light-string. There was none of those, either. Finally he felt for the chest of drawers nearer the doorway and found a pack of altar boy matches. Fumbling with frostburnt fingers, he managed to light one.

In the brief flicker of light he saw he was not alone in the room. All about him a dozen figures stood poised in the dark. And the match went out.

Marty hurriedly struck up another match and held it out over the silent figures. There was a Blue Virgin and Child, a Joseph, an Anthony of Padua, Francis of Assisi, numerous ill-painted Bernard de Veaux and a half dozen Christs -- Christ the King, scepter in hand; the Sacred Heart, displayed outside Christ's body; the Easter Christ, with Alleluia pennant; and the Good Shepherd, lamb in arms.

Marty squinted. "There are too many Jesuses in this room," he muttered.

Finding a taper atop the dresser he lit it and undertook to explore his new quarters. The room was elbow-shaped, the first half being full of rejected statuary and the dogleg occupied by chests and wardrobes. He went to the far end and took a candelabra from a chest and lit all seven candles, setting it upon the floor. Then he made a heap of old altarcloths and surplus surplices on the floor. Finally he slipped his bruised

body into an old black soutane, topping it with a purple sandwich-board chasuble.

And he extracted one last item from the dresser, a silver-plated hand mirror, with the legend VANITAS inscribed below, and mounted above the glass a silver crucified Christ. Marty spun the mirror in his hands before sitting down in the heap of vestments.

He regarded himself in the mirror. Until he saw his face there, he'd had no idea how tired he was, or

how beaten-up. Everything that had happened to him showed -- the hundred scratches, the half-dozen bumps, the ice-red burn from head to toe, the blood caked along his scalpline and flecks of the same drawn down toward his right eye. The eyes were a horror, glazed, dulled-out things that looked older and more wizened than the most ascetic desert hermit. All in all, he thought he looked pretty neat. Then he heard the voice again, inside him:

EVEN THE FOX HAS A HOLE IN THE GROUND.

But Marty didn't care. He was ready to rest from his sojourn in the woods, and would have closed his eyes right then had not the crucifix caught his attention.

He had to laugh, because the Christ on the plated cross and he were both so tarnished-looking. What funny things crucifixes are, he thought, hard to look at and hard to think about. But this one he cradled and hugged against him, rocking it as he would a child, to sleep.

WHOSOEVER KILLS YOU WILL THINK HE DOES GOD A SERVICE.

THESE THINGS THEY WILL DO FOR MY NAME'S SAKE.

The figure on the cross, if looked at a certain way, seemed to move. Marty studied its movements, the twists of its head and neck, the flexing of the tiny fingers, the little mouth opening to gasp for air.

Lassie was trying to tell them something, he thought. He held the figure to his ear, hearing nothing.

"I'd like to help, but you and your cross are soldered together."

A LITTLE WHILE AND YE SHALL NOT SEE ME.

AND AGAIN A LITTLE WHILE, AND YE SHALL SEE ME.

"I get it," said Marty. "Now you see me, now you don't."

He rubbed the figure from face to feet with the soft of his thumb, to massage away the agony. But as he did so he felt the metal softening, reforming. With each downward stroke the figure became rounder, puffier, not Christ but Jude, with Jude's cropped hair and broad face, now stylized in silver plate. Unlike the Christ, the Jude figure no longer squirmed. It had already been consummated. Jude was dead.

WHO IS MY MOTHER? WHO ARE MY BROTHERS?

I HAVE MANY THINGS TO TELL YOU

BUT YOU CANNOT BEAR THEM NOW.

Marty wept. Jude truly was dead, he would never see him again. The tears he had not been unable to offer up before came to him now unasked. Oh Jude. He missed him. Jude. He loved him. The tricks, the names, the fights meant nothing. Tears ran down his cheeks and dropped against his hands. Oh my brother. My Jude.

He wiped at his face to see through the tears. The cross had gotten turned around in his hand. Now there was no face in the mirror, no body on the cross.

They had taken him down and laid him in his mother's arms.

Marty lifted the empty cross toward the flickering candles, his arms outstretched, and held it there a moment, until he felt the tears drying along his cheeks, the weight growing in his arms, his last strength leaving him.

Then he lowered the cross to his lips, kissed the tarnished metal, and lay back on the altar cloths to a deep sleep.

PEACE I LEAVE YOU,  
MY PEACE I GIVE YOU.  
BE OF GOOD CHEER,  
I HAVE OVERCOME THE WORLD.



MARTY SLEPT HARD AND LONG on the heap of vestments on the cement floor, and his dreams were full of the adventures he and Jude had shared in the woods near home. In his dreams he still took Jude by the hand, with one difference -- now neither of them led the other.

And when, toward morning, it was time to arise, Marty sat up and found that his nightmares had come to an end. Gone were the rows of incriminating statuary, gone were the clothes of priests which he would never wear. He found himself sitting instead on a plain wooden bench, and all around him he saw fields of sparse tall grass growing on dunes. The grass complied with every wish

of a shifting breeze, and high overhead the clouds bunched up like combs of ginned cotton.

Marty stared at a small cloud for several moments, to see if it would disintegrate. It didn't. And when he looked around he saw, extending for miles in either direction of him, a wall of red brick, with a cap of gray cement.

Marty rose from the bench and walked toward the wall. So hard, so high -- seeing it in its entirety, he felt the old feelings rise up in him, the familiar distresses. He wished it were a picture from his schooldays, and he could paint kamikaze fighters overhead, that would swoop down and make holes where brick and mortar joined together. He felt a quickening in his calves, a pulse at his temple, as if he were a runner, crouched for the pistol-shot. Any moment he would break.

He couldn't help himself. He stepped back twenty or so paces, gritted his teeth, balled his fists, snorted and charged. At ten paces he picked up speed, and at three, just before crashing into the wall like a ripe tomato, he vaulted, levering himself upward and somersaulting crazily end over end, landing with a thump on his back on the other side of the wall.

"Nnnn," he grunted, gasping for air.

"You OK?" a kid his own age was asking. He was sitting on a slab of limestone beside a flashing brook. Marty looked quickly around, saw oak trees and sycamores, bushes, heard birds and the buzz of a single bee.

"I'm OK," he wheezed, sizing the other boy up. "Who are you?"

"I'm Jesus," the boy said. "Jesus Christ."

Marty joined the boy in a frown. This boy Jesus was the same age as himself, slight build, immature mustache, buttery complexion with a single red pimple over his upper lip. Could the Christ have been so callow a youth?

"I know what you're thinking," Jesus said.

"I know that," Marty cut him off.

"Just because you're a kid doesn't mean you're not the messiah," Jesus said.

"Tell me about it," said Marty. He knelt beside the strange boy. "Any bites?"

Jesus shook his head dismally. "And I'm starving."

"Well, you don't have to starve. Just command the fish to flop in the pan, why don't you?"

"Get thee behind me, Satan."

"That mean you can't do it?"

"I can do it," Jesus said, a bit irritably. "But why waste it on a damn fish?"

"You said damn?"

"Here," Jesus said, gesturing toward an extra rod. "You'll swear, too." The Christ yawned and smacked his lips.

Marty hunkered down and baited his hook, dropping it a few feet from Jesus'. From the corner of his eye he watched Jesus sit calmly, the line between his fingers, a pleasant look of a dissolute life about him.

"There's a can of Pepsi down there," he said. "Feel free." But before Marty could open the can he felt

a tug on the line.

"That's it," said Jesus, suddenly vibrant. "Hold onto him, yeah! Now give him some slack. All right, now drop him into my hat."

Marty reeled the fish up into the air, tail thrashing. It was a healthy specimen, a foot long plus a couple inches. Marty picked him out of Christ's straw hat and held him up until it stopped thrashing. All Marty could see was the beating heart of a paralyzed animal. He marveled at the spots on its flanks, splashed up and down like a galaxy expanding.

"Good work," Jesus grinned.

"I never caught a fish before. Pretty big, don't you think? Think I should have him mounted?"

"Are you crazy?"

"Oh, what am I thinking? We'll let him go, of course. Free, back to his home in the brook."

"The hell with that," said Jesus, "let's eat him."

Jesus and Marty divided up the work of preparing lunch, Jesus scaling and gutting their catch and Marty gathering kindling for a small fire. Marty heated the pan, Jesus spooned in the margarine, and laid the fish down end on end, its tail flopping over the side. The two boys watched it cook, first one side, then the other, and when it was done they dished it out onto a single paper plate, and took turns poking it with one fork and tasting.

"Mm, good," Marty said, looking into his new friend's eyes.

"Better than home cooking," Jesus agreed.

"Yeah, but it must be great, with a mom like yours."

Jesus stopped chewing his trout. "My mom's driving me crazy," he said.

"How?"

"She's a religious fanatic. Always telling me what God's will is. As if I didn't know. It's spooky."

"What does she want from you?"

"I should stay home more, and pray more, and prepare myself to save mankind. The usual."

"And you?"

"I want to meet some girls before time runs out."

"But that's so selfish," Marty said. "The World needs you." He wrapped the folded plate around the fry-pan and dipped it in the stream, hissing.

"But look at it my way," Jesus said. "The World needs me, but what do I get from it? An early death and an empty grave. I'd say it stinks."

Marty looked at him with rebuke in his eyes. "How about the satisfaction of a job well done? I'll tell you one thing -- if I were in your shoes, you wouldn't see me crybabying about girls and bellyaching about pain, no sir, I'd take my place on the cross and keep my mouth shut."

Marty ceased scrubbing the fry-pan and the water below him cleared, and he saw the two boys' faces reflected. Funny, he thought. The two had the same height, same build, same hair color, eyes -- their voices even sounded similar.

"Jesus," he said, "you want a normal life, I want to suffer for The World. This is your big chance. Let's switch. No one will ever know."

But Jesus was no longer at his side. Marty glanced back to see him standing by the wall, his hands stretched out along the cement caps.

"No sale," he said, and he smiled. "It wouldn't work."

Marty sighed. "It isn't fair."

"Tell me about it," Jesus said. "Don't feel bad, Marty. Some fish get eaten, some go free." He began to fade. "So long, kid."

Marty screamed after the fading Christ. "But that's stupid! Tell me something important!"

Only the hands and eyes of Jesus remained. "OK," he said, "your barn door's open."

By the time Marty glanced back up, he was gone from sight. And behind him, the red brick wall began also to fade, and within seconds the wall Marty had battered himself against all his life dissolved into a kind of film which hung in the air a moment or two, then wafted away.

Marty stepped slowly across the field, running his hands through his hair, bewildered. He had no notion which way was home, but he was in no hurry now.



AN HOUR BEFORE DAWN, Ralph Diener, asleep in the infirmary apartment on the second floor of House Major, stirred and sat up in bed, puzzled by the evocative odor coming from the laundry chute. Finally he placed it -- it was the odor of a snuffed candle.

Unable to explain the phenomenon, he finally slid out of bed, slipped on a robe, and limped down the servants' staircase to The Tombs, where he came upon the doorway to Marty's alcove and noticed the glimmer within of the last two stubs of Marty's candelabra.

Marty awoke to the oddly symmetrical face of Ralph Diener, now creased with concern. He helped Marty remove the Passiontide chasuble and remarked on the faded embroidery and moth-eaten cloth. Together the two helped one another up the staircase to Diener's room, where Marty seared himself in a brown leather armchair and glanced vacantly about. Watching Diener shave, he fingered the misbuttoned front of the old soutane.

Everyone has been looking everywhere for you, Ralph was saying. And yet he did the kindest thing -- he made Marty a cup of hotplate Lipton onion soup, and sat beside Marty till it was all eaten, and ran him a bath in the great porcelain tub before limping off to tell the priests the news.

Ralph had taken everything upon himself and Marty, warmed inside by the meal -- his first in a fortnight -- and outside by the soapy hot water, was grateful. And when the water began to cool, he pulled himself out of the tub and crawled wet as a newborn into the sinking double-comfortered brass-post bed, and curled himself into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Diener made his rounds. Father Cooke, as dean of boys, was first to be told that Marty was safe, and it was Cooke who placed the call to French Creek, where the phone finally answered, and Elizabeth Frye said she understood, and would make the house ready for the boy's return.

Diener went next to meet with the Rector, and Monsignor MacConacht expressed great relief at the boy's recovery. He had never lost a boy at St. Bernard's Bluff, and did not want Marty Frye to be the exception to that rule, especially if doing so resulted in litigation against the Society.

From there word spread to the boys, for whom Marty had become in a very short time the sort of larger-than-life figure he had always wanted to be. He had gone from lead to gold, from clod to comet, and this moment was his perihelion, and his arc lighted the seminary sky. Nearly every boy at The Bluff had had a hand in the search, and hour by hour his legend grew. By the time Mieczniewicz and Donatelli came upon his sweater snagged on a pricker-bush not far from the mill, it had earned status as a relic *ante facto*.

The gossip mill ground out his hagiography. Francona chuckled over his courage on the soccer field. Dodge bragged of having been his "big brother," and recalled the episode of the blue tongue, and Crowley told everyone how he stood up to Father Harris in history class. All the boys shook heads nostalgically. Marty, in retrospect, had a certain All-American air about him which had until now gone unnoticed. Many remembered liking him even before he killed himself.

Diener conferred with MacConacht and Cooke, requesting that he absent himself for two weeks to undergo neurological tests at a clinic in Pittsburgh. At the same time, he said, he could get Marty back to his home in French Creek, and perhaps ease the transition for him and his mother. Father Cooke agreed to the plan without even checking with the Rector.

Late in the afternoon Marty awoke from his sleep and spoke with Ralph at length about the events of the past two weeks, apologizing for causing the community so much worry. In the evening Father Cooke joined them in a meal sent up by the Lasarettes -- roast beef, asparagus and Hollandaise, baking soda biscuits, a pitcher of cold onion milk and instructions in a cramped French hand that Marty should eat heartily and add muscle to his tinkling ribs. Diener and Cooke looked on as Marty attacked the offering.

When the meal was over, the priest informed Marty of his dismissal. Marty nodded, said he understood, and thanked both men for their friendship.



## Epilog

*And the incense of his priests rose heavenward.*

MONSIGNOR PATRICK MacCONACHT, S.O.B. rolled his eyes heavenward. Lately all his prayers had been jokes. *Take me now, Lord, I am ready.*

The digital reader on his formica desktop told him he had ten minutes to bide before closing up shop. The shopping center ladies were already queuing up in the chapel next-door for the folk-novena. What was the point, Father MacConacht asked himself, asked God -- if these blue-haired hags aren't saved yet, one more three-chord Mass wouldn't put them over the top.

He tallied it up. Nineteen-seventy-five was turning out to be one God-damned hell of a year. January: attended funeral services for Father Diener in Pittsburgh. February: Len Lewis (the former Father Len Lewis) and his lovely bride Vera Mieczniewicz (the former Mrs. Miswitz) tied the knot and invited him down to Atlanta to bless their ecumenical bookstore. April: word comes from Rome granting Les Soeurs Petites their return to autonomy, undoing the grand agony of Blessed Champignon school on the premises of a New Mexican swami's ashram, and already reporting a profit for the first quarter. June: MacConacht's authorized biography -- six year's labor -- of St. Bernard de Veaux came back with a note from his agent ("Sorry Mac, 20 rejections is my limit -- Try me again with your next shot, OK? Best wishes, Alex").

Somehow or other, Patrick MacConacht had grown old. It was a clean 40 years since the day Brothers Ivo and Reuben annihilated him in the docket in Rome. Twelve since the order removed him from his

post as Rector of St. Bernard's Bluff. Three since the new seminary (built by special arrangement with the Plitt Brothers) had gone on the market, and its priests dispersed to the remaining Bernardine outposts in the country.

And today, a reprint had arrived in the mail, an article cut out from *Architecture Pennsylvania*, and sent him by Father Cooke. It was a crippling blow:

## GOD IS ALIVE & WELL

### IN BUCKS COUNTY :

### **Only the Collar Has Changed**

It was a sad day for the Society of Bernard, an obscure order of priests named after an even obscurer South Seas missionary of the last century. Their only seminary in the western hemisphere -- into which they had just poured over \$2 million in a rebuilding effort -- had just been sold.

But for the Fear of God Bible Society, which had just purchased the brand-new complex, it was a day to "PTL" -- that's "Praise the Lord" to non-Feargoddors, joked Clement Chance, dean of the new Bible College.

"Some of us were afraid," Dean Chance said, "that it would be impossible to praise the Lord upon the former site of Roman worship. But it hasn't worked out that way at all. Since they held that Council of theirs, the people in Rome haven't seemed half as un-Christian as they used to."

At the prompting of this reporter, Chance hastened to add that his remarks were not prejudicial. "Perish forbid," he said. "But they have their architecture and we have ours. We would not have been interested in the old buildings they tore down, what with all the Gothic windows and Papal what-not. That stuff looks mighty suspicious to a Feargodder."

Fortunately though, the new complex, erected in the belief that Vatican II would see a great boom in vocations to the priesthood, suited the Feargoddors to a T. The rectangular, blonde-brick buildings followed the style most favored in contemporary Christian architecture. The nunnery was transformed into a broadcast center, the chapel equipped with a full-immersion baptism chamber.

"Some things did tickle us," Chance recalled. "Like when all those priests marched back in to -- now what did they call it? -- desanctify the place. And how they went to work, too, with their incense, beads, and holy liquids. My wife

Lorelei and me, we like to split a gut, especially when they dug up all their dead and had them carted off to Lackawanna in a U-Haul!

"But I guess in this wonderful world the Lord has fashioned, that it takes all kinds."

All that remained for the Feargoddess was to rip out the permanent pews and replace them with folding chairs. And to dismantle the altar, including the great oval stone.

"Now where did we put that thing?" Chance said. "Some closet somewhere, I guess. You know it was the darnedest piece of paraphernalia I ever saw, too, some weird Catholic whatchamacallit -- thank you, a mosaic. With a funny-looking bird on the front of it, pecking his chest, and some baby chicks sucking up the drops of blood. Storks I think they were... ."

Patrick MacConacht re-rolled his eyes, and carefully slid the magazine article off his desktop and into the wastepaper basket. He rose from his desk and walked to the front part of the store, hoisted the blinds and looked out over the parking lot of Plitt Mart, over the tops of the shiny new cars and up the base of the hill across the highway, leading up, up to the ridgetop where the seminary -- if it could still be called that -- now stood, blonde brick gleaming in the late afternoon haze. He leaned one shoulder against the Lourdes travel poster, and stood stamped in the shadows of the window lettering:

PLITTVILLE CATHOLIC  
INFORMATION CENTER &  
SHOPPER'S CHAPEL

No, that was no stork on the altar-stone, he thought. It was a pelican. Lots of things he had forgotten -- the names of all the boys who had been in his care at The Bluff, their faces, their ambitions, their problems. But he was God double damned if he would forget the ridiculous bird which had shed its blood for the many. He would not forget the heavy stone tablet somewhere in a closet up on the hill.

He knew what he would do. One weekend he would rent a trailer, hook it up to the information center's station wagon, pay some rosy-cheeked lad from the parish a couple of bucks to go with him up the hill, like Abraham and Isaac on a mission from God. There he would make discreet inquiries. And somehow or other, he would roll back the stone.

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