

The Untimely Death of J. Cristobal

Written in April 1963, this short story was published in respected magazine of the Dominican Order, *The Torch*, Volume XLVIII, Number 2, February 1964.

I. Author's Eyewitness Historical Context written July 25, 2004

II. The short story as published in *The Torch*, Volume XLVIII, Number 2, February 1964

III. Eyewitness Illustrations

I. Author's Eyewitness Historical Context written July 25, 2004

I wrote this story while an innocent boy-seminarian at the Pontifical College Josephinum where from age fourteen to twenty-four I had to listen every day at lunch to gory-detailed readings from *The Roman Martyrology* in which Roman soldiers ripped the nipples off Saint Agnes with red hot iron pincers; during other lunches, Roman soldiers who had converted to Christianity were whipped by pagan Roman soldiers who tied them up naked and laid them out on frozen lakes until they died or recanted as one did, "but died anyway in a bath of tepid water." Why, the nudity alone to a fourteen-year-old boy was hotter than the gladiators and martyrs in the Colosseum in *Quo Vadis*?

Thus impressed, I exited the Josephinum forever on December 15, 1963, as this "J. Cristobal" story was about to go to press. In early 1963, I had designed this S&M noir story as an homage to Hemingway's Spanish stories and to the New Testament reportage of Veronica and her veil (the camera), the death of Christ with his mother as witness, and Judas's betrayal of a man-to-man kiss.

I showed the final typed draft of this story to seminarian David Fellhauer who had recently been my "potty pal" — that was the term — when we had shared the same bathroom connecting our two rooms. We had been friends for ten years since we were fourteen. Alphabetical seating in the classroom had thrown us together as Fellhauer, Fritscher, etc., and I, who had never even heard words such as *queer*, had fixated on the back of his straight neck and the burr of his flattop and his handsome Texas profile, and I hid mash notes in his Latin book signed "The Phantom." Omigod. We were both fourteen; but as freshmen in 1953, he was already

mature, and shaving, and he smoked even though it was against the rules, and he was great pals with our other classmate from Texas, the muscular Carl Poirot who had a tattoo that none of us nicer boys ever spoke about. I had no concept of sex; I only wanted “to be like them.”

So in April 1963, I told him that the “J. Cristobal” story had been sent by a freelance author to *The Josephinum Review*, and that I was supposed to edit it, and what did he think of it. He said he thought the story was written by a homosexual sadist. (I didn’t even know that such a category existed!) He was kind enough not to let on if he thought I was the author, but I was secretly delighted to know I had company out in the big world.

Since 1990, David Fellhauer has been the Catholic bishop of Victoria, Texas, and, while he has otherwise been a magnificent prelate, he has allegedly admitted that he made an administrative mistake in handling the diocesan re-assignment of a priest suspected of molestation of minors. If he pegged me by reading four typed pages of fiction in 1963, how did he, reading massive legal documents, miss what he should have done in Texas in 1993? But then, he did nothing about me.

I was, even as a boy ingenue who played football and basketball and softball, not perceived as homosexual because a queer in our seminary training was defined as “a man who comes up to you in a bus station, and you kick him in the groin.” That is an exact quote (1955) from the Dean of Discipline, the Reverend George Kempker, USMC, who told of his nights keeping watch as chaplain in WWII barracks where young Catholic soldiers slept with both hands outside the blankets, fingers wrapped in their rosaries. Because the mostly farm-boy seminarians had no keyword for an ordinary gay boy, some of the more astute kidded me about being a writer and a bon vivant. Was that code? What kind of popularity was it when high-school boys and then college seminarians invited me to the woods several times a week to struggle in what we called slow-motion movie wrestling in jeans and T-shirts with no sex involved? Once, at seventeen, I noticed one of my favorite wrestling partners had a hardon in his jeans, and without mentioning why, I told him we could never wrestle again. All he said was, “It’s your fault.” I didn’t get it; his hardon was his own doing; his mortal sin came from something unspoken inside him, not from me in my clueless chastity. And then he said, “You’re so pretty you should be a girl.” My fist bloodied his nose.

When David Fellhauer wrote to me in the 1960s, he addressed me as “Dear Worldly Jack.” At the same post-seminary time—say, 11/6/68, a certain wonderful Jim Pogue in Chicago was writing me thank-you letters addressed: “Beloved Catamite! Glorious Ganymede! Voluptuous Whore!”

The polarity was perfect for this Gemini.

For biographical purposes, the two quotes following, may be useful expository sketches at the beginning of this series of books.

My college graduation yearbook (1961) characterized “John Fritscher” with the artsy profile:

This young knave about campus has been involved in muchly [*sic*, current slang] as co-author of Glee Club Show 1959...Choir 3 and 4. *Josephinum Review* staff, stage crew...likes stereo soundtracks, Georges Rouault, horrible puns, and has a secret ambition to live in Greenwich Village...often seen hatching new “insanities” for public consumption....has a Puritan conscience but the will of a Nietzsche; would dive off the 30-story bell tower into a damp hankie for a laugh.

Sixteen years before, my kindergarten teacher inked in on my report card (1944-1945):

Jackie...converses well.... has definite ideas and is not afraid to express them... Very expressive... Tells experiences very fluently.... Good balance in giving and taking and can be assertive.... Shows ability to solve problems.... Does good art work.... skips well.... shows interest in trying to sing a tune which is an improvement. Also loves stories.... In spontaneity, he is independent.... Stands up for his rights.... Is inclined to tattle..... He should do well in first grade.

In the on-going tattling department, some other bishops and one cardinal who were my schoolmates include Bishop William Skylstad (current president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops), Bishop X [my good straight friend whose name is deleted], and Bernard Cardinal Law who was infamous for his molestation cover-ups in Boston. After Bernie Law gave his sworn deposition in Massachusetts, playwright Michael Murphy adapted Law’s words to expose the nature of “sins of omission” in *Sin: A Cardinal Deposed* which, as a drama, was positively reviewed in *Variety*, June 28-July 11, 2004. As for Bernie Law, the Pope swiftly swept him off to Rome and installed him in a palace as a protected Prince of the Church, safe from future testimony in the US.

That back story said, my S&M-y noir tale of “J. Cristobal” had to be approved by papal censors before I was allowed to mail it to an assortment of editors in the Catholic press. Perhaps they enjoyed it.

II. The short story as published in *The Torch*, Volume XLVIII,
Number 2, February 1964

The Untimely Death of J. Cristobal

by Jack Fritscher writing as John J. Fritscher

"You did not read about it in the North American papers, *señor*. What is such a man in such a little country that you should read about him? To you it is all the same. And to us. But this time to me it was different, *señor*. *Si, muy diferente.*"

In the Rio bar, the dark little man with the rheumy eyes sat across from me, elbows and eager arms on the table, gesturing, never resting. His gabardine shirt was wrinkled from the heat and beads of sweat diffracted the hotel light across his low forehead. He did not quite fill the slack folds of his dirty Panama suit.

"It was in the Spring of last year the revolution failed. He had not wanted to lead us, but his father had the promise of him. That was his first mistake—that he did not have it to heart in him. But we did not know it then. And many do not know it even now.

"When we took and gave him the republic and the former *Presidente*, he accepted the one and exiled the other. His second mistake. He should have had him lawfully tried and shot him then, even as a year later the evil one returned and killed him. But he could kill nothing needlessly. He had not really the *cojones* even for the bull ring.

"In that year life was good but everyone wanted it better. How much can a man do in a few months? He was a *General* not a god." His shoulders shrugged in disbelief at what he was to say and the wine glass trembled before his lips. "And then, one night the *Presidente* came back across the frontier and down the mountains to the Capital. Before dawn the main regiments were his and the fighting and rioting was over by lunch. In the evening they danced in the streets. Their feet paid no more mind to what had come to pass than did their heads. Who is the strongest, he should rule them. Until his strength begins to pinch their feet.

"The next day, *señor*, there was a grand trial in the sports arena and there he was condemned to die as befitted a traitor who was part-Indian from the hills. While the fiesta went on above, he was delivered to the common soldiers' quarters in the locker rooms below. And they did not treat him kindly. After he was dead I saw close up the marks on his body. But he was not so fortunate as to die from their beating.

"I am not so sure what happened to him the rest of the day. I think, perhaps, he was interrogated much the same as we all were."

I filled his glass again, looking the while into those dark eyes that pleaded for me to see their secrets without his telling me. But I wanted to hear him out, even at the late hour. He sighed and sank back into his chair. For a long while he did not speak.

"The next day was declared another fiesta and early in the morning a bull was let loose in the streets. The brave young men tried to hang their ladies' scarves on his horns. Three of them were gored and one the devil crushed to death against a wall. Nothing was low-key that day and blood-lust ran high.

"The bull was killed, *señor*, torn apart by the mob, in front of the police garrison. And the timing was perfect. Before they could even think on what they had done, the *prisonero* was dragged into the street with two of his cabinet ministers. The one did not look half-alive even then. They were hitched like stupid oxen to the former *General's* official car and made to drag it through the jammed streets.

"There were words on the car that should have made the women turn away in shame. But they did not. Wherever they passed, on their descent to the plain outside the city there was music and laughter and young men spitting and shouting *General! General!* And when the procession had gone, they turned back to their women. It was not every day such a greedy one meets the peoples' justice they said.

But one there was one who did not spit at him. She stood behind the mob lining the streets. The *General* did not see her, but I heard she was there. It was from her that he drew his Indian blood that excused all this. She was alone because, as I said, the *General's* father had been killed by the *Presidente* and the *General* himself had never married. He did not even keep a woman. And many held even this against him.

"Halfway to the edge of the Capital, the cabinet minister, the one I thought to be dying, fell into the street. Lying there, he was missing, anyone could see, the fingers from his left hand. He must have died while they kicked him because they threw his body into the car...I can tell no more."

He stood up to leave and his chair fell backwards to the floor. "I am sorry," he said. "I should tell you this not at all. *Por favor*, excuse me."

"Please," I asked, "I must know the rest."

"No, *señor*."

"You can't expect to lead me on for a whole evening, then tell me nothing."

"I promised you nothing, *amigo*, but to share your bottle of wine. The wine is gone and it is late."

"You mean you made the story up?"

"*Ojala!* That do I wish." He held his hand to his head.

"Let me drive you to your place. My car's outside."

"*Si, señor amigo.* You take me home." He started out the door taking a bottle from the counter. I dropped a bill and followed him. Outside he had propped his knees up against the car's dash and was nursing the bottle like a playing child who already had his fill. I got in.

"You want to know quickly what happened next, *señor*? Finally, they killed him, you know, but not without the sideshow. Every circus must have its sideshow. Three blocks from where they killed his friend and left the Indian lady standing, a crazy woman with a camera stood out in the crowd, not four feet from him and took his dirty little picture. The *policia* could not catch her in the crowd and she got away in the side streets. She'll have a pretty time of it, I think, looking. She can put it on her bureau and dream dreams of him at night—if she likes bruises and blood and the rope burning around his neck and shoulders. The crowd, they laughed at her, but mostly at the stupid running police.

"But then, not laughing, out on the plain below the city, while it was still morning, they shot the other cabinet minister and threw his body down from the cliff. But the *General* was not to be so lucky.

"Out there on the plain in our summertime, nothing grows because of the wind and the burning sun. It grows so hot the very stones dry and crack into dust. To this place had they made them drag the car. And it was here they tied the *General* to the black Packard roof, with his arms outstretched to the side windows.

"No one but the police came close to the execution because of the heat. And even they left long before the man was dead."

"It is not a good story," I said.

"It is not finished," he answered. "That evening the *policia* returned and found him dead as they had planned. The car was set afire and plunged over the gorge. They hoped to destroy completely all trace of him. But in the fall, his body was wrenched loose and thrown clear of the car. Later some of his people found it and buried him. They say there was not so much as a drop of blood left in his body, the sun had dried it so horribly.

I was driving slowly now through the wreckage of the Rio slums.

"I will walk from here," he said.

I pulled over. "It must have been terrible for you, his friend," I said.

He got out, closed the door, and bent back through the window. "It is terrible, *señor*, but I was not his friend."

"How do you mean?"

"The *General* spent much on 'his people' as he called them. The Minister of the Treasury could not watch money wasted like so many melons at a fiesta. *Por favor*, I am quite drunk."

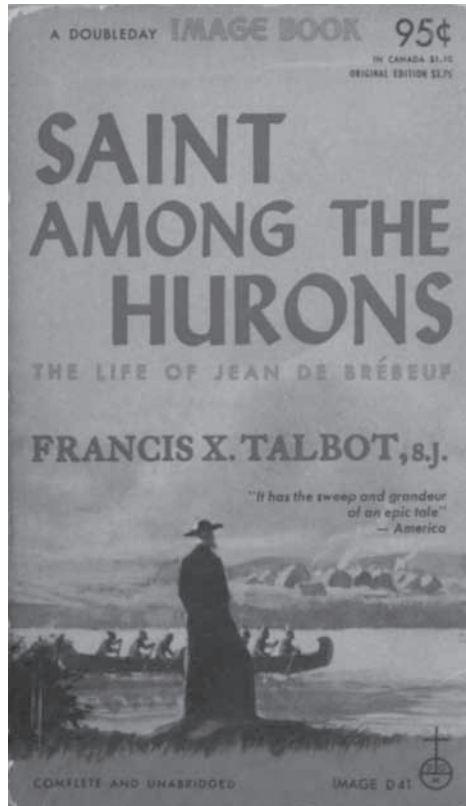
He started away from the car.

"You said about the Minister of the Treasury?" I asked through the window.

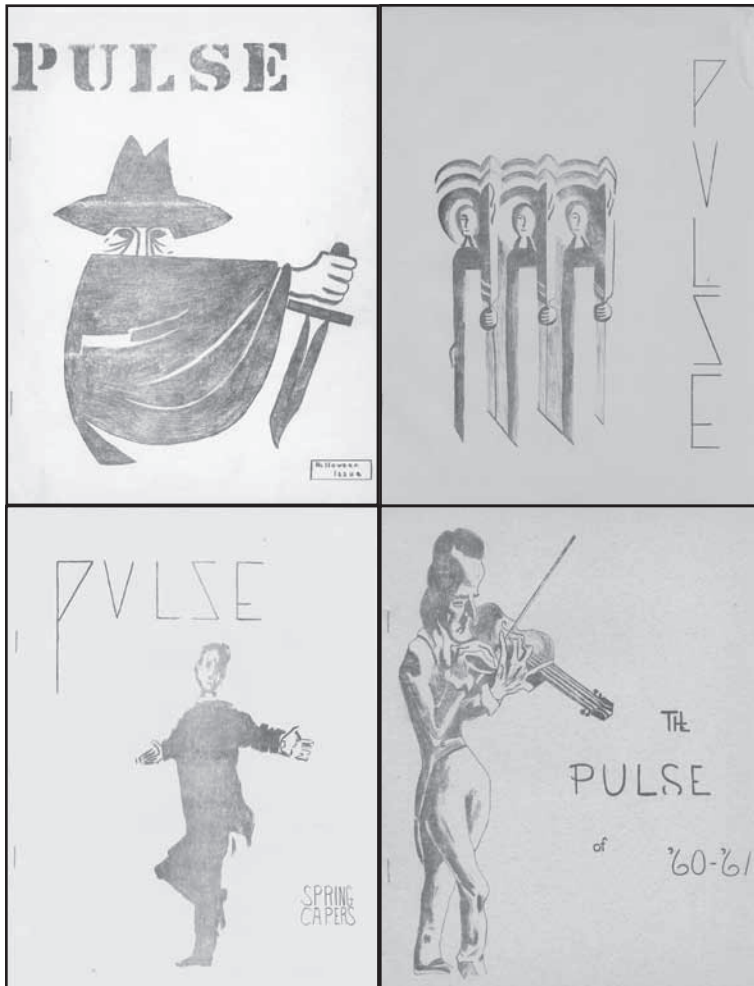
"*Si!*" he called back. "You must know by now, *señor*. It was I, I who told the *Presidente* what night to cross back down the mountains."

The swinging glass bottle glistened, moving away, catching small flashes of the lights of the tumbled down world. And I sat there till long after he disappeared through the twisted alleys of darkness.

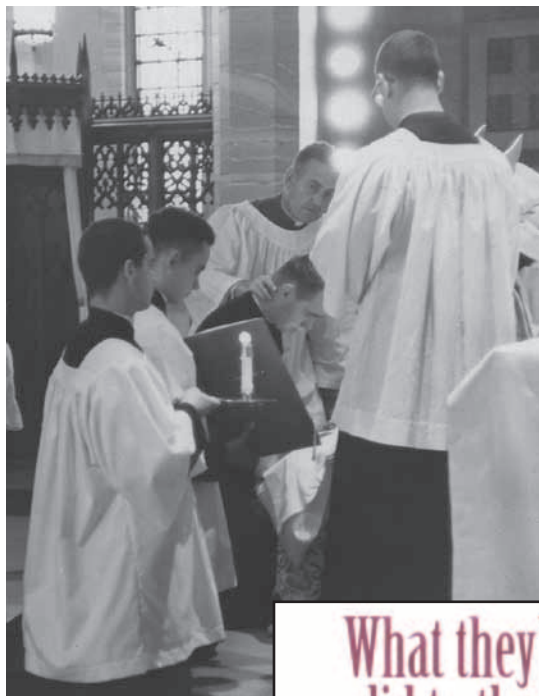
III. Eyewitness Illustrations



The weird DNA of leather culture. Under the Sign of the Cross dominating Western Civilization for two thousand years, the book of daily readings, *The Catholic Martyrology*, and other titles of saintly suffering, including the kidnap, whipping, and crucifixion of the nearly naked and muscular bearded Christ by uniformed soldiers of Fascist Rome, inspired generations of Catholic youth with vivid impressions of nudity, bondage, and sadomasochism. *Saint Among the Hurons* was a morose delectation about Native Americans torturing handsome French Jesuit priests naked in bondage. What a boy reads when he is fourteen marks him forever.

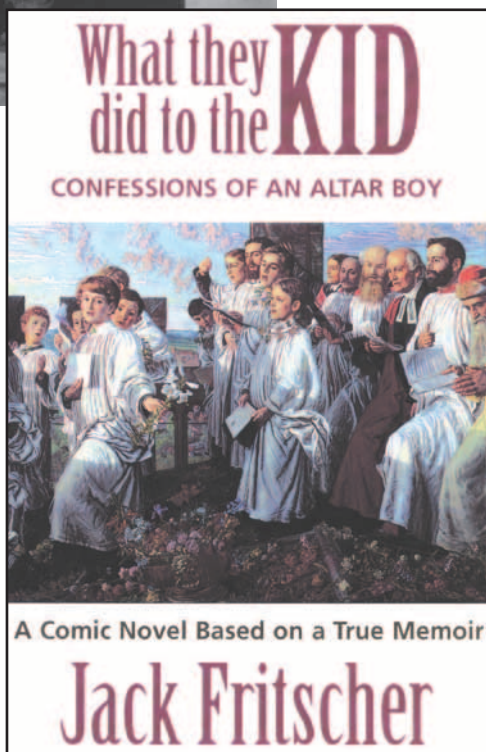


Editor Jack Fritscher, 20, started up the college magazine he dubbed *Pulse* at the Pontifical College Josephinum in 1960. The covers he designed, pre-dating Susan Sontag's definition of *camp* and Gilles Deleuze's *subtext*, almost outed themselves as screaming Rorschachs of the closeted life in the Catholic seminary. He was the only editor in chief of *Drummer* who also shot photographs for *Drummer* covers. *Pulse* covers ©Jack Fritscher.



Top: “Jack Fritscher, Seminarian,” (second from left), ordained an exorcist by the Catholic Church, assists with the book in an ordination ritual conducted by the Pope’s personal emissary, the Apostolic Delegate, Egidio Cardinal Vagnozzi, on the high altar at the Pontifical College Josephinum, 1962.

Bottom: *What They Did to the Kid: Confessions of an Altar Boy* (1965). One of Jack Fritscher’s schoolmates for six years became Bernard Cardinal Law, infamous in Boston for his cover-up of the priest molestation scandals. The cover shown is the 2000 edition chosen by CNN among “The Top 100 You Are Reading.”



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EXCERPT FROM HIS LATEST NOVEL,
"THE CASE OF THE SEVERED HEAD"



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