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June 1939

Falling into the liquid of time, born, he worked his way into reason. All about him he remembered leaving the darkness, finding first his fingers, his hands, his feet, the faces of his parents, and a great dangling bird twirling above his crib. The bird caught every draft that swept his room and circled the timeless days when twilight became light only to fade to twilight again. Screaming in the darkness, he could not make them understand the sounds he formed on his uncontrollable mouth which could not speak words. In limitless wrath he screamed, crying and relieving himself in frustration.

The faces smiled down at his squalling formless words, washing and patting him with oil and powder, pointing and pulling at him, taking him one day, after he first could walk, to a white room with a doctor who pulled back the skin that was so tight he had to hold himself. He cried, hurting every day since he could walk. The doctors rolled him down a tiled hall, through doors that thumped when hit by his gurney, swinging open to a nightmare room echoing with his wordless screams. Down and back they pushed him, with gas and masks back into the unmade darkness from where he had crawled and scratched his way to a demi-consciousness. Down and back they pushed him, weak and unformed, no chance against them, frustrated, without even having found the words for anything, overcome finally, crying for being pushed untimely back into the darkness before the time that time had begun.

To be lost too soon with everything gone, taken and pushed back, to fall down the wordless black void and hang there endlessly swirling no place, out of time, like the huge red and green and yellow bird floating obscurely, at the edge of vision, once over his bed. In all the summers forever after, sitting in the darkness on his porch, he could not believe he had survived to find the words, though in the finding he exorcized nothing of the formless sensible time of terror and fear that seemed his alone even during the years of the shortages and rationing and blackouts of the great war when he first came to consciousness, and all the adults were brave but afraid.

Christmas 1942

Christmas Eve taught me time. Clock. Calendar. Anticipation. Three nights before Christmas, Charley-Pop carried me out to the dark street where my mother sat with the neighbors in a one-horse open sleigh. He bundled me into her lap and two little girls looked at me and sang, "What Child Is This?" and laughed and sang the words again.

My father climbed up next to Mr. Higgins and the horse clopped off with everyone singing and laughing. We glided down the street, dark with night, dark with war, dark with ice.

A boy skated by us, waving, then waiting, grabbing hold of the side of our sleigh, with his smiling face close to mine, laughing, then swinging off on his own speed, falling into a drift, scattering snow like an angel, like that dead boy who had lived next door, who liked to throw me into the air, and died in the war.

Our sleigh passed dark houses. The two little girls shouted "Yoohoo, Santa!" to make me look, because I was three, and for the first time in my life waiting for something the way my mother was waiting for my brother to be born. I could feel him next to my face inside her stomach, and I wondered "What Child Is This?"

I fell asleep looking up at the clear cold sky lit with stars behind the tree branches whirling by.

Two nights before Christmas, Charley-Pop set up a little tree and me beside it and took a long black electrical cord and a pliers and taped twelve light sockets to the wire, and pulled out twelve big light bulbs, red and green and blue. He took my hand in his and turned the bulbs from dark to bright, and held me in one arm while he draped the lights in the tree.

He was twenty-four and crying and my mother was twenty-one and crying, and I was three and afraid to know why, and the next morning, under a huge clock, I stood shivering next to his legs in the snow while he kissed my mother at the train station, where all the men were kissing all the women good-bye, and the troop train steamed and roared, and he was gone off to the Induction Center upstate in Chicago.

In the crowd of ladies and children, we all began to cry, because we all knew more than one dead boy who had gone to war and never come back, and the women said, "Maybe they'll be 4-F, maybe have flat feet, maybe not able to see without their glasses, maybe maybe maybe."

At home, I sat looking out the window, through the glass pane reflecting my father's Christmas lights that he made because of the shortages of everything, watching the snow fall, and measuring the dark, the way night

fell on snow, waiting all evening, waiting for Santa Claus, waiting to go to Christmas morning Mass to see the Baby Jesus, waiting for my daddy to come home.

Carolers walked down the street singing "Silent night, holy night!" It was the night before Christmas. Christmas Eve. The clock ticked off minutes. My mother pretended for me that there was no war, no fear, no panic. We put out Christmas cookies and a bottle of Coca-Cola for Santa, and late, sitting up together, my mother said, "Look at the time! How time flies! You better go to bed quick! No 'Yoohoo, Santa!' tonight. Santa won't leave any toys if he sees you see him."

I believed her. I believed all of them. I knew I had no proof other than their word, so I believed everything. She tucked me in bed, and I thought of how we had stood together in the department store line to see Santa sitting in Toyland, and I asked Santa to bring my daddy home to me. He could whistle "White Christmas" and knew how to cut figure eights wearing hockey skates on the frozen lagoon in Glen Oak Park and could make Christmas lights out of an old extension cord and was good at driving his truck at the defense plant and I fell asleep praying to Santa Claus, and the Christmas Angels, and Mary and Joseph, and the Baby Jesus to bring my daddy back home to me. In the morning, in the magic of Christmas morning, I woke up to the voice, to the smell of the sweet breath, to the face of my father—with the 4-F eyes and the war job in the defense plant—who picked me up and hugged me and kissed me, and I said, "Daddy Daddy Daddy."

VJ Day, August 14, 1945

After the circumcision and the air-raid blackouts and the tonsillectomy and the supper-table stories of children starving in Europe, fear kept me quiet until the summer the war ended. Meredith and Beverly sat for hours on our front porch that rambled all around the first floor of the big gray duplex at the corner of Ayres and Cooper. They rented the downstairs and we rented the upstairs from a ninety-eight-year-old woman whose name was Peoria Miller. Meredith said she was the first girl born in the town of Peoria when it was no more than a settlement on the Illinois River.

Meredith, who was Beverly's husband, liked to rock on the porch, smoking hand-rolled cigarettes, on guard to chase me from our mutually-owned porch swing. I wore short pants cut from the same material as his best suit and this coincidence, I thought, gave us a fighting equality. He may have been an air-raid warden, but he was small and scrawny and

seemed only a bigger kid than me, always bullying and tattling and pointing his finger at me, saying, "Lickety-lickety."

"Sonny boy, quit tangling those chains and get the hell out of our swing."

I defied his thin line of moustache and twisted the swing around one more full circle.

He shook his raised fist at me.

"Lickety-lickety," I said.

"Don't you mock me," he said.

"Let him alone, Meredith. He's only a kid."

"Aw, Bev," he said.

"Aw, Bev," I mocked.

"Ryan O'Hara," she said to me, "you go upstairs, young man, right now." She turned to Meredith and hissed, "I said, *sit down*. I mean it. You're making yourself nervous." Beverly was bigger than her husband. She told everyone Meredith had been sent home from the Army training camp, because he was "nervous from the service." She measured out her words, *sit down*, like venom from an eyedropper. He sat down. His obedience shocked me. Sometimes they fought so loud we could hear it upstairs and my mom and dad shook their heads. We had lived in Peoria Miller's house a long time, from even before I could remember, when they moved in. I felt that gave me first dibs on the porch swing to do whatever I wanted which was anything he hated, especially winding the big swing up, twisting it around and around until the two chains tangled into one thick knot that lifted the double seat high above the floor. Then anyone could jump up into it and ride it down while it jerked and lurched faster and faster to the floor.

Once when I banged the swing into the house wall, hard, Meredith came running out from their apartment. He had jumped up from the dinner table with one of Beverly's dish-towels tucked around his middle, screaming he'd kick my fanny, *lickety-lickety*, over the rail into the bridal wreath bushes if I ever did that again because the sudden bang made the war sound like it had come to our corner of Ayres and Cooper streets.

I did it again. After Beverly made peace between Meredith and my parents, and everyone agreed not to quarrel over the children, we sat long and late on the front porch. But this summer hadn't near the dash of the few summers before, the first I could remember, when the lights had to be turned off and the air-raid wardens patrolled the sidewalks.

Across our river, the factory where my father worked had turned into a war plant and steamed day and night because even as far inland as the

Midwest everyone feared the bombs could come. At first to me the blackouts were all as much a game as teasing Meredith who a Christmas or two later, panicking nervous, dropped dead at the produce counter in Kroger's Grocery where he worked. I never felt I caused him to keel over and fall in an avalanche of cabbages and potatoes any more than I felt I caused the war. But somehow I understood his fear.

They're coming, Mommy. Big and ugly. Germans. Mommy-Annie Laurie, help me run. Help me, Daddy. Tojo will get me. Help me, oh help me. Crying. Screaming. Falling out of bed. Hiding from dreams under the covers at night, *nobody loves me*, grew out of the cold hungry days when food was rationed and hand-me-down clothes were sewed and resewed. Walking everywhere, because there were no cars and no gas for cars and no rubber for tires, the grown-ups could only half-hide their fears. A silent anxiety ferreted my family out, tracked us like all the other mothers and fathers and children watching in horror in the blaring movie newsreels, *armies, tanks, captured soldiers,* and out through our darkened streets, *bombed cities*, and into our home, *refugees in rags*, where our radio, *it's not over till it's over over there*, and the newspaper, *dead bodies*, *our boys*, and the can of bacon-fat drippings in the icebox, *children starving in the snow*, told us the enemy was stronger than mortal danger itself.

"Bombs over Tokyo! Bombs over Tokyo!" Thommy shouted. He was four years old.

"Look out, Beevo," I said. "Thommy's dropping rocks out of the tree."

"Bombs over Tokyo!"

"Cut it out, Thommy." Beevo whooped a war cry. He was eight and he was Meredith's nephew.

"Bombs over Tokyo!"

Beevo waved a shiny hatchet in the air like a tomahawk.

My brother, Thomas a'Becket O'Hara, missed Beevo with another rock. I didn't know it then, but Thommy didn't even remember what Tokyo was. He was only three when the war ended and learned things like *Tojo* and *Tokyo* from us older kids. We might have told him some of the things that happened, but he could never remember stamping tin cans flat in the kitchen for scrap drives or going to Jake Meyer's store with ration stamps or having no car or no tires for the cars some people had. My uncles, framed and smiling in photographs on my father's piano, were fighting in the war and, my father, whose war job was working in a special factory, said we had to eat things we didn't like because children were starving in Europe. Everything seemed somehow significant, because every day gave me new words for new things.

"Get out of that tree, Thommy," Beevo said.

"Bombs away!" Thommy dropped small rocks down on us.

"Get out of that tree or I'll chop it down," Beevo said. "It's my tree."

"Go on, Beevo," I yelled. "Chop it down."

Our dog, Brownie, barked up at Thommy.

"This is Beevo to Thommy. Beevo to Thommy. I'll count to three, then I start chopping."

"Bombs away!" Thommy screamed.

"One...two..." Beevo strung out the count.

"Go ahead, Beevo," I said. "It's your tree. Chop it down on him."

"One more chance. One...two...three!"

I stood back, delirious in the fight, wanting to be the first to yell, "Timber!" I shouted the word a few times to test it out, like the movies, running in circles around the smooth trunk. "Timber! Timber! Timber!"

The frenzy on the ground agitated the little boy in the tree. Frightened, he lowered himself three branches. "Don't timber me," he pleaded.

"Don't come any farther," Beevo said, "or I'll chop your foot."

"Come on, Thommy. Don't let him scare you."

"Don't come any farther."

Thommy moved down two more limbs, looking at me, above Beevo's head.

"I'll chop your foot," Beevo warned.

My little brother looked like a baby bird sitting up in the deep green of the tree. Unlike me, he was blond and fair and he sat perched on the branch beginning to cry because his rocks were all gone and he could not comprehend us dancing around the trunk in a shower of wood chips and our own dog barking at him.

"Don't let it fall toward the mailbox," I said. "Johnny the Mailman will get mad and call the police." I turned to look across the quiet street at our big gray house. No mother in our window. Annie Laurie was away in the other rooms cleaning and fussing with the furniture that had been her own mother's. Even the elm trees, monstrous around the big corner house, were still. Only the trebling of the pigeons in our old carriage barn came from across the street.

"You won't chop my foot," Thommy cried.

"Wouldn't he, smarty. Come down and see."

"I'm coming down."

That was the last thing Thommy said before Beevo smashed his ankle with the hatchet. Blood spurted up all over his sunsuit and he fell from the tree. Brownie barked and yelped and ran for the bushes. The noise I made

as I ran across the street tore down the afternoon, caused the pigeons to start up and circle the barn, brought mother from upstairs, and Meredith from down.

"Oh my God, my baby!" There was blood all over. On me. On Beevo.

"I didn't mean to," Beevo cried. "We were only playing. He put his foot right in front of the hatchet. I didn't mean to. My hand slipped." The weapon hung limp in his hand, a bright sacrificial silver, dripping blood, exactly like the movies.

"We told him not to come down," I said. "Thommy's foot slipped. Beevo's hand slipped."

Meredith pushed Beevo towards the house and carried Thommy to his car and set him in my mother's lap. Brownie jumped up into my lap in the back seat. We raced through the streets with so much blood all over us I thought he'd never stop. I sat hiding behind the dog, alone in the back seat, unnoticed. His blood was on me and no one noticed. No one mentioned what I had caused. Saying nothing, they said everything, *ringleader, cheerleader*, and I willed myself, full of guilt, isolated and alone with the dog in the back seat, not to cry, but Meredith, unable to contain himself, turned and looked a full *lickety-lickety* at me, and sorrow welled up inside my heart and sucked air into my throat that turned to gasping sobs.

Two nights later, Thommy was running with Brownie and playing hide-and-go-seek with us around the tables at Michael and Nellie Higgins' lawn party. He was only four that summer when I was seven and he really wasn't too good at playing yet. But we let him because the summer before he'd been too little to do anything. He wasn't the only thing that had changed.

Last summer, when the neighbors gathered next door at the Higgins' house, the parties had been every bit as fun as tonight. The air felt as warm and soft. The lanterns strung up between the grape arbors hung with the same sweet glow. Even the grass felt the same as last year. But the music now that crooned so softly way up on the porch where the boys were with the girls had been louder and different. Last summer everybody knew somebody who was coming home from the war, the war that had been over for two whole wild honking crying happy days. I learned all the words to the song, "Oh, Would You Rather Be a Colonel with an Eagle on Your Shoulder?" And we all sang back, "Or a Private with a Chicken on Your Knee?"

I took that song so literally that Victory over Japan almost disappointed me on VJ Day. The frenzy struck with the news that came over

the radio on WMBD Peoria. Cars and trucks and buses spewed crowds into our small downtown. Girls shredded paper out of office windows, instantly releasing all thoughts of rationing and hoarding and saving for the scrap drive. An impromptu parade picked up in the streets. People danced on the sidewalks. Conga lines snaked one-two-three-four-conga! Thommy didn't know why the celebration was happening, but he yelled as loud as me on top of our Hudson parked in front of the Palace Theater where the marquee showed one big word: *Victory!* I didn't see any eagles or chickens in the swirl of noise and music and toilet paper rolling out of the windows. The few soldiers who happened to be in town were getting kissed by every girl there was. A crowd of farmers hoisted some sailors to their shoulders and started to carry them down the street and everybody cheered and I cheered and screamed and cried and went wild on the colors and the noises and the people pushing into each other, laughing and hugging and crying. My father kissed my mother and they both kissed us.

I had heard stories and seen the newsreels of the horrible things that happened to children, hung from their thumbs in the village square in some faraway lands. I cried uncontrollably because I was so glad it was over so it wouldn't happen here, in our downtown square, to me. The anxiety left like escaping steam. The void filled with a supercharged emotion that made my brain useless. All I needed was my body that tingled from top to bottom with the excitement of the wild streets. Ever since I could remember, from the dark timeless time to the beginning of my consciousness, the world was at war and now it was over. We were safe. But unseen by anyone, inside my chest, lay the angry marks made by the escaping fear. The jolt of new wild emotion whipped suddenly across the old anxiety like a long red welt from a willow branch that snaps back at you on a trail in the woods. Understanding much too little, I was exposed to feeling a little too much. I took the A5 Army patch a soldier in khaki gave me and put it away in my secret shoe box with my First Communion prayer book, and my first rosary, and a black-and-white snapshot I'd taken of Brownie and wrapped in wax paper with a lock of her fur.

The lights hung low and the ice cream lay melted in a hundred abandoned dishes when I crawled into daddy's lap on the Higgins' porch. The evening was late and a small breeze played with the napkins out on the green lawn. The music died away to the murmur of crickets. A girl laughed down the sidewalk, *pretty girl*, and disappeared into the dark shadows of the big elms. Another shadow, larger than hers, *handsome soldier*, darted, followed, and was gone. On the railing, my jar with sugar blinked on and off, full of lightning bugs.

My daddy felt warm and smelled of cigarette smoke. With my ear on his chest I could feel his heart thumping in quiet time with the rocker and his voice came low from deep inside. He was humming some old Irish song, *Mary of Dungloe*, half to himself, a bit to me and Mr. Higgins smoking in another chair. I felt like running in and telling my mother. We could hear her in the kitchen rattling the dishes with Mrs. Higgins. Their voices sparkled clear, out into the night. Half-awake, I listened to them. Once when my mother laughed inside the house, I laughed because she did and daddy laughed because of me.

I was nearly asleep when the women joined their husbands on the porch. Mrs. Higgins helped mother lift Thommy from the glider into her lap. I stayed in the rocker without moving, listening to their swing creak as heel and toe they pushed. My jar of little firefly lights on the railing seemed to go up and down, if I had known it then, like harbor lights seen from a rolling ship.

"Your brother, Father Les, is he in a parish yet, Charley?" Mr. Higgins spoke to my father. His voice was as old as my grandfather's, but a painting business and many cigars made it thick and deep. Mike Higgins had always been a success. He wanted everyone else to be.

"Yes, Charley," Mrs. Higgins said. "Michael and I were wondering at supper this evening about Father Les. He's such a fine-looking young priest." She sat perched in the swing like a tiny nervous oriole. Her eyes softly caught the lights from the elm-shrouded street lamp. The fullness of her hair made shadows on her face and her face dropped shadows down her thin breasts. I knew she smelled of strong verbena, but she looked fragile, as if she would be cool and hard to lean against. Her white hands neatly smoothed her dress. My mother had told Beverly that Mrs. Higgins could teach the world a thing or two about how to smooth and fashion a husband from a man. Beverly had told my mother, "Annie Laurie, you know who wears the pants."

"Father Les is stationed at Collinsville now," my mother told the Higgins. "The bishop sent him downstate as soon as he came back from overseas. It's a small country parish, that's true, but it gives him a chance to rest."

They said he had to rest from the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium. He'd been a chaplain in the Fifth Army and had buried dead bodies, and parts of them, that everybody said was terrible. But I wasn't sure what death was, so I believed them as I believed them about everything, because I didn't yet know where Europe was, or Belgium or France, or, worse, Germany,

or exactly if they were far enough away so the bad things that happened there might stay there and not come get us here.

"Father Les should be made a pastor soon, I should think," Mr. Higgins said. "He did the Church no end of good being in those photographs."

"Yes, dear," Mrs. Higgins said to my mother, "that was so terribly thoughtful of you to write into the *Journal*. I know that anybody who might have missed the pictures in the magazine was glad to know Father Les is your brother-in-law."

My uncle, the Reverend Ryan Leslie O'Hara, 33, *Major O'Hara*, *Chaplain O'Hara*, burying the dead in the largest military cemetery on the Western Front, at Henri Chapelle, had been in *Life* magazine, April 2, 1945, page twenty-seven, in a famous Wirephoto also published in *Time* magazine and a hundred newspapers. My picture, age five, was in the Peoria newspaper, page three, sitting on Charley-Pop's lap, and the lady reporter, *camera, red lipstick, nylons, Annie Laurie said*, wrote we were namesake and brother of the famous, brave priest who stood over a hole in a barren field of a thousand open graves, burying the young dead boys, his white surplice billowing in the Ardennes winds, his handsome face beautiful as a manly young Irish saint.

"That's what wrong with war," my uncle said in the newspapers, "all those crosses." He waved at the white markers on 25,000 graves, *dead boys, 18, 19,* stretching as far as the eye could see, *dead men, 24, 32*, across the green and muddy Belgian hills, silent, but for the *flap flap flap* American flag flying permanently at half-staff and the sounds of cannons not far off. Every day from the Western Front, Uncle Les rode forty miles back from the German battlefields with the dead young soldiers, *Nazi massacre at Malmedy,* escorting their torn bodies from Germany to Belgium, to bury the dead American boys no American wanted buried in German soil.

All the dead soldiers carried the same things: *a photograph of someone they loved, a pocket knife, a saint's medallion, for Catholic boys, or a rosary, a pen and pencil, and a one dollar bill to remind them of home*. All night long he heard Confessions, and in the mornings, riding back to the front, he said Mass four or five times from the hood of his Jeep, and gave Communion under fire in trenches, knee-deep in mud and blood, and took letters to be mailed. The picture of the "Combat Chaplain Saddened by War, Shot by William C. Allen for the Wartime Still Picture Pool" was framed and hung in our front hall and we always said, "Oh yes," when callers noticed it. "Oh yes, and Ryan is named after him."

His favorite song was "Stardust" and I loved him saying the songwriter's magic name, "Hoagy Carmichael," singing the song for us, folding us

singing along into his singing. Once he sent from France a seven-inch white vinyl record printed with a Red Cross label that said, "A Personal Message from a Service Man through the Facilities Provided by the American Red Cross." On one side, Uncle Les sang "Stardust," *wondering why he spent the lonely nights*, and on the other, "That's All That It Was (But, Oh, What It Seemed to Be)." I imagined him, the way we saw the world in movies, in black-and-white, in liberated Paris singing into a silver microphone, seining smoke from his cigarette, smoke forming words, *stardust*, coming from his mouth, smoke curling around his smile, smoke inhaled again up his nose in a quick uptake of breath, smoke around his head in a halo.

"Being a pastor has obvious advantages over being a second assistant priest, or even a first assistant priest," Mr. Higgins informed us. "Why, the other day I visited Father Fitzgerald..."

"Michael!" Mrs. Higgins sat up, stopping the swing of the glider.

"Mrs. Higgins," he said, "I certainly am not going to mention any check."

She threw herself back into the seat, her command ruined, her eyes raised. I heard my father laugh a little. My mother smiled.

"But surely, to speak of it, a pastor is a man of experience and Father Fitzgerald will certainly know what to do with the donation. If there's anything Father Fitz knows about, it's how much business sense it takes to run a parish. That's one thing Father Les will have to learn, Annie-Laurie, money. Even in the cloth and collar, it's money." He leaned forward assuringly. "But don't worry, my girl. He'll learn. Church and charity. He's a great fine lump of a lad, that brother-in-law of yours. He's as smart as his brother," he smiled at my father, "whom you were smart enough to marry. With the war and all he'll be a pastor before you know it."

Michael Higgins went on and on, building my uncle's career out of church and congregation, telling a story of Uncle Les becoming a pastor, then a monsignor, maybe even a bishop with purple robes and a purple hat and a great big black car, adding it up, ruling over a diocese of a hundred parish churches and a hundred schools, and a thousand priests, and ten thousand nuns, and fifty thousand Catholic families, and a million school children. Half-asleep there on the porch I heard all the things I had ever heard anyone say about my uncle. My father shifted in his chair, a little uneasy. He lit a cigarette and the match sputtered in the dark, its sudden sulphur brightness painful to my eyes. I slid from his lap and went to my mother on the glider. Nell Higgins reached over and touched my head.

"Poor Ry," she said, "so tired. I think when you're big, you'll be a priest like your Uncle Les, won't you."

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Imagine. You, Father Ryan O'Hara."

"What's more than Les?" My father loved his brother.

In my mind, I could hear Uncle Les singing a song he'd learned in Belgium when he was lost in the Battle of the Bulge. French children sang it, or maybe Belgian children, and he taught me all the sounds, but I had no idea what it meant when he and I sang together, with him teaching me to be his little echo on the *ollie oom, ollie oom*.

"Ryan," Nell Higgins asked, "can you sing that little song your Uncle Les brought back from France?"

I sang, not understanding a word, "Dess lardenn melodien econterr melodien. Ollie oom, ollie oom, ollie oom, ollie oom, ollie ollie ollie oom lay ollie oom."

Falling asleep cradled so soft in the swing, I heard my mother say, "A priest like his Uncle Les. He always has said that's all he wants to be."

May 1, 1953

"That's all I want to be, Father. That's all I ever thought about being." I sat across from Father Gerber in the little room outside the principal's office. It was May Day in the month dedicated to the Virgin Mother of God. Father Joseph Gerber was the pastor of St. Philomena's Parish and Sister Mary Agnes was my eighth-grade teacher and the principal of our school. I felt flushed rose that I could talk to him. The last month of eighth grade was time to be adult. Sister Mary Agnes herself, playing a record of Frank Sinatra singing "Young at Heart," led off a classroom practice dance right in the rows of desks to instruct the proper distance between boys and girls. Our Mothers Club arranged graduation robes and diplomas and breakfast. A full-grown priest who could actually make dreams come true took a real interest in me. I was almost fourteen and flattered. His attention proved I was right and my classmates were wrong, because they were all so smart, and I couldn't be like any of them. I had made up my mind.

My conviction jelled earlier in the spring when Billy O'Connor ran into Barbara Martin in the cloakroom during lunch hour. Only he had been pushed, and Danny Boyle had done it. He pushed himself into Billy and knocked Billy into Barb so he could bump her sweater.

"Quit your bawlin'," Danny said. "You ain't the first girl's been bumped."

"And you bumped them all," Barbara wailed. "I'm going to tell Sister."

"She's solid." Danny, unruffled, preened.

The boys standing around laughed. I edged away, pretending I never heard it ever happened because I wasn't sure what really had happened. I only guessed the edges, especially when a few minutes later, after the bell, the girls were excused and the boys held after.

"Daniel Boyle," Sister Mary Agnes looked stern, ruler in hand, "what did you do in the cloakroom?"

"I watched queerbeer Billy trip over Barbara."

"You needn't call William names," she cried, "and add uncharity to your impurity."

"I watched Billy bump into Barbara," he said.

"You mean you pushed William into Barbara as an excuse."

As an excuse for what?

"Daniel Boyle, tell me. You shave already."

"Yes."

"Yes, what?" She slapped his hand with the ruler.

"Yes, *Siss*ter." He hissed out the word.

"Do you know what a beard is, Daniel?"

"A big hairy deal."

Laughter rolled through the room.

"It's the mark of Cain, young man. Because of the first male's sin of impurity, man's face has grown covered for shame." She waved the ruler. "Did you realize that?"

"No, *Sis*ter."

"Do you know, Daniel Boyle, that to jostle a young lady is a serious sin of impurity? Do you know it will make your face grow dark with hair? Do you know it will make your soul grow blacker still?"

I felt my smooth chin and my stomach in the area of my soul.

"You young men of tomorrow must be like the young men of yesterday. Oh, I fear for you. I fear for you," she said with menace. "You must be pure and keep all black spots off your souls like all those young saints who died when they were your age." She brandished the ruler. "Nothing is worse than impurity. You must never look at bad pictures or say impure words that make your mouth dirtier than the bottom of a sewer. You must die before listening to impure conversation because you could commit mortal sins that would make your souls black and filthy and keep you from going to Communion and receiving Our Lord's body and blood, soul and divinity into your hearts."

She paced before the chalkboards, her face flushed inside her white and black oval. Outside the windows, the other classes were leaving school

amid shouts and the rattle of cars and the roaring smell of the worn yellow buses. Danny Boyle had sat down unnoticed in his scarred desk.

"It's wrong, as you've been told before, to look longingly at the parts of your bodies nobody ever sees. If you do, you will commit a black, black sin. If you go to Communion so disposed, you will only make Jesus suffer more. You will drive one more nail into His body, or beat Him once more, or spit on His sweet face, or push one more thorn into His precious head. Not this, oh please not this, young men, to the Sweet Babe of Bethlehem."

Danny Boyle was carving his desktop with an Eversharp pen. Sister didn't notice. She was telling that story again about Ted who had committed a mortal sin with a girl and how driving home he was killed and plunged into the deepest, hottest pit of hell where it was so terrible Lucy and the Children of Fatima fainted when they were gloriously gifted with a vision of it.

"Impurity is the worst sin of all," she concluded. "Boys can always be impure at the movies and women in the movies are the worst temptation of all."

I felt hot with shame. I went to the movies, but I always sank down to try to keep the back of the seat in front of me, especially at 3-D movies, between me and the actresses' chests.

"Athletes of Christ are pure and good and clean. As you live, so you'll die."

I knew this was true. Boys had to be really careful around girls.

"Go," she said. "Sin no more. Do not make Jesus weep."

I moved with the class shuffling in a rush toward the door, my resolves renewed. I didn't mind missing my bus. I could think on the long hike home and I would say a prayer for my father who would be angry I was late and who would curse and say, damn, what's the bus fee for anyway? And I would say a grateful prayer for the nuns that God had given to preserve me, and for my dad who was always watching out for me.

"Look out, Ry," Danny's gang of three boys shouted. They pushed by me down the steps.

Their hero appeared at the top of the divided stairs.

"Oh, Danny Boy!" I sing songed the nickname he hated most, in a high voice imitating Barbara Martin. "Oh, Danny Boy!"

He slung one long leg over the median banister and slid down the flight, screaming past me as loud as he could: "The nuns are *coming!*"

May 14, 1953

I thought we would all be on our guard at the real spring dance, but the party was our first one that wasn't a kid's birthday party run by adults, so we were on our own, and hesitant. Mostly the guys watched and the girls danced and stood together around the plaster statue of the Virgin brought to Barbara Martin's knotty-pine basement from the classroom. After about an hour, three of us went outside to see where some of the wild ones had gone to sneak a cigarette, blow smoke rings, and spit.

"What you doin' out here?" Danny yelled. Smoke came out of his face.

"Mind your own business," Billy O'Connor said.

"Is that clumsy Billy who bumps into girls?" Danny asked.

"Mind your own business," I said.

Danny walked toward us, his voice singsonging back at me, "Mind your own business." He danced a little dance like a boxer. "Mind your own business. Chick, chick, chicken!" Danny advanced on Billy. "Come here, lover boy!"

Danny Boyle's gang of three stepped in behind him. They started after Billy. I pushed him to the door, but they grabbed him back. Danny Boyle flipped out an open pocketknife. He shoved Billy against the house wall, grabbed his belt, and held the knife in his face. "Hey, clumsy Billy, you been fixed? Maybe I should ask old sweet tits Barb."

"Don't talk dirty," I said.

"Shut up, or I'll fix you."

"You and what army?" I said. "Let him go." I made a fist.

"You telling me what to do, you ass-kisser?" He let go of Billy's belt and came toward me. "Go kiss your sweet nun's ass, Ry. Go brown-nose till it falls off." He closed the knife in his hand and shoved it into his pocket. "I don't need this to fix you!" He made two fists and jumped at me.

We pushed at each other. Danny threw a punch and missed. Billy and I laughed and bolted inside, hooking the screen door. Danny led his gang circling the stoop making finger signs. "Chick, chick, chicken!"

I shouted, "Oh, Danny Boy!" The three of us started singing high in the back of our noses, making fun of big fat opera singers to make fun of Danny Boyle: "The pipes, the pipes are calling! Oh, Danny Boyle! The cops will come and haul you off to jail."

Billy flicked the porch light fast, on and off, and the gang charging toward our door scattered back into the shadows of the yard.

"Chick, chick," Danny Boyle yelled back from the dark. "I rule the roost around here!"

I crowed back, "Cock-a-doo-doodle-doo!"

The challenge thrown down between us charged us up like some contest between the bad boys and the good boys. If Danny Boyle could show himself the best of the worst, some other boy could be the best of the best. My Uncle Les had bought me a two-year subscription to *Catholic Comic Books* starring Chuck White, All-American Catholic Boy, who in page after page of cartoon strips was the best of the best.

The Sisters had insisted something bad could happen between boys and girls. I didn't know what it was, but I was very careful because they said you never know when you'll die and go to the deepest part of hell for all eternity with not even a drop of water. But I could always sense when someone was sniffing around the edge. The recess before, Danny Boyle had been impure on the playground with all the girls. He swung a pale old rubber balloon around on a stick, waving it in their faces. They laughed and ran and came back laughing more. I knew they were not being good and I thought we'd all better pray for them that they didn't get amnesia while they had a mortal sin on their souls because they said if you forgot to be sorry for a big sin you'd go straight to hell.

Later I was glad when Father Gerber came into the classroom because he could forgive sins and make your soul as white as snow. I felt better than Danny because I was careful and always confessed impure thoughts about going to the bathroom and was careful not to watch the whole screen at the movies. At least I didn't run around being impure out in the open. It was hard enough trying not to think of girls going to the bathroom.

"You boys and girls," Father Gerber said, "are going to be graduating in three weeks and next fall you will start high school. As you become young men and young women you will discover that you want to do much good for the greater honor and glory of God. Some of you will become mothers and fathers. But to some others of you the Holy Ghost, the dove of peace, will whisper in your ear that you should become sisters and priests of almighty God."

I knew what was coming. Every year Father Gerber came to the graduating class and asked the same question. My answer was prepared. I was different from all my classmates. My best response to their sex and stupidity was the safety of a vocation. I recognized what I needed. I saw the way out. I sat on the edge of my seat waiting to raise my hand to volunteer to become a priest.

"No greater vocation on earth can come to a man or a woman," Father Gerber said. "Only the finest children of Christ are asked to carry on God's work. You girls have seen all the good that the Sisters do. Teaching

and nursing and praying for long hours before the most holy Blessed Sacrament. What greater life could be yours than as daughters of Holy Mother Church? You boys know that the priest calls God down from heaven, body and blood, soul and divinity at the consecration; that the priest helps the sick and must go to help the dying even risking his own life in burning buildings and caved-in mines."

"Would you risk your life for me, Ryan?" Barbara whispered.

"Barbara!" Sister Mary Agnes snapped.

"The time is short," Father Gerber continued, "and the day of your graduation is at hand. This is the biggest chance in your lives." He looked about the room at Monica and Audrey and Ara Ann shining over girls like Barbara. "How many girls in here would like to seek the challenge of the Sisterhood?"

We all sat quietly, straining to see whose hand went up. The girls sat stock still, poised like stones in a Virgin grotto of varnish and chalk. No one moved. No hand was raised.

"Is there no one," Father Gerber repeated, "who seeks the challenge of the Sisterhood?"

Danny Boyle whispered, "I would."

Sister Mary Agnes spoke, over the snickers, too loud, from the back of the room. "Some of the girls are indeed interested, Father. I have talked to them, but they seem to think it better to wait until after high school."

"I'd rather be the mother of a priest," Barbara said.

"And I'll be the daddy," Danny whispered.

"Maybe it's the times," Sister Mary Agnes said. "Girls today."

"That's prudent thinking, girls, that you want to wait to be sure." The priest looked at the nun in a way that made her look like she hadn't done her job. "But it's best not to keep almighty God waiting. It's a far more blessed thing to save your vocation from the temptation of high school and go to the good Sisters' convent as soon as you take off your graduation gown."

A few boys snorted at that, but there were no volunteers. Father Gerber reddened, then recouped. "How about all these fine young men, Sister? Who here now is thinking about being a priest?"

I sat a minute savoring the delicious moment of my perfect ascension into heaven. I had settled on the seminary by myself and the fact I could declare it in the very faces of the impure was incidental glory. The heads turned toward me, mouth-breathers marveling a little as I was ushered up from the long rows of desks and pencils and books. This moment of affirmation, of stated resolution, of perfect nya-nya-nya, was enough to

separate me from all their stubborn childishness massed together in one room. For the first time I knew I was more than a name in their alphabetical order. I was apart, independent. I liked the taste. My exit toward the door was all topping, because behind all the payoff I knew this was only God's will.

"So long, chick, chick, chicken," Danny whispered.

I marched toward the door like a slapped soldier of Christ. Truth and justice and purity walked with me and I resolved ever to be so good. For I had never been so perfect. The priest held out his hand and made me his equal. I would be cut fabric and soul in his image. I would be a priest like Annie Laurie's favorite actor–she called him "Monty Clift" like she knew him–who refused to tell the police a killer's Confession in *I Confess.* I'd be a priest like Bing Crosby wearing the collar and singing and taking care of women and children in *Going My Way* and *The Bells of St. Mary's* where he tried not to be in love with Ingrid Bergman who was a nun. I walked past Danny Boyle. I whispered, "We'll see who rules what roost." I imagined him years in the future as the father of six sets of twins coming to ask me in Confession if he for God's sake could use some birth control, and I'd say *lickety-lickety, no* and make him for penance say twelve rosaries and the fourteen Stations of the Cross twenty times.

In his office, Father Gerber asked me to sit down. "You've thought long of being a priest, Ryan?"

"All my life, Father. That's all I've ever wanted to be." My words were inspired.

"Knowing the O'Hara family so many years, I can certainly believe you. Surely you've talked to your uncle, Father Les, about your vocation."

"Last Christmas I told him I was thinking about going away to the seminary, but he thought I better wait until after high school and maybe some college."

"He risked waiting?"

"Yes, Father."

"You see, Ryan, your uncle was very, very lucky. Many boys who wait until after high school don't wait at all. They turn their backs on God and lose their vocations dancing and dating. Many, I dare say thousands, lose their vocations this way. And perhaps their souls. Even our good Holy Father desires that vocations to the holy priesthood be nurtured from a tender age. Which is certainly the eighth grade. Holy Mother Church has counseled this for centuries."

"Yes, Father."

"I myself skipped my last year of grade school. I went directly from the seventh grade right into the seminary."

"That's wonderful, Father."

"I've never regretted it. Thanks be to almighty God."

"Yes, Father."

He picked my mind and moved words and arranged thoughts so I became kin with him. My will and my true heart rose up to meet him. Danny Boyle and Barbara Martin really didn't matter, because I had a divine vocation. I listened to his sound advice. I might lose my sacred calling. Jesus would whisper only once, and only into undefiled ears. "Now," Father Gerber said, "now is the time. Souls are waiting. The night is passed and the day is at hand. Jesus has no hands now but yours. Come to Me, He cries in the night. Be Mine. Be Mine. If you say *no* to your vocation, thousands may burn forever in hell because you gave no hands to help them, to baptize and bless them, to anoint and absolve them. If in your pure heart, He calls you away from the world, if He asks you to do more, to give more, to bleed with Him on the Cross of the world, then you should, nay, you must, go to Him now. Give Him all, now. Now is the time. Before the world and the flesh and the devil rip you away from your holy Saviour. Now, Ryan, now. Remember, Jesus needs you to work in the vineyard of Holy Mother Church. Christ needs you as his priest. You can be an *alter Christus, another Christ*. Now, Ryan Stephen O'Hara. Now."

May 31, 1953

"I, the soothsayer, the prophet of the Class of 1953, beheld or dreamed in a dream how that we of '53, or most of us (I added that to leave out Danny Boyle), were united in a great orchestra." I did believe this, these words I memorized for the graduation breakfast. I looked down into their faces and the eggs and pancakes and the bouquets of peonies on the cafeteria tables. Already I was forgetting them marching off into the anonymity of their high school. I stood confident, without stage fright, facing my classmates and their parents, knowing I was singled out.

Something so great and big had touched me that something rose out of me and separated from me in the same way I was separated from them.

God's grace came down upon me and some ideal me took my place.

I would be the spiritual leader of the orchestra. I would forgive the impure. I would forgive the boys who bumped into girls and would make sure they all got saved even if they didn't deserve it. I stood before them with the promise to save them from their own sinful natures. I pledged

myself to them. I was, after all, only three weeks and one day shy of my fourteenth birthday, and, I felt, late already, older by two years than the accomplished boy Jesus in the Temple.

"Har," Danny Boyle said, "Har dee har har."

September 7, 1953
Labor Day Weekend

The last Sunday of the summer, the September Sunday before I left for the seminary, I wanted to be left alone. In four days I would abandon everything for the honor and glory of God. From here on out I would be pure and holy and kind to all, never raising my voice or quarreling with Thommy or being envious or gluttonous, fighting even harder the snares and wickedness of the world and the devil and the flesh. I had saved a dollar to rent a horse for an hour to ride fast as I could out the trail and into the woods. I wanted to feel the big horse heave and jounce and fly beneath me. I planned to give my good old dog, Brownie, a bath and a currying, and I'd pack up all my most precious secret stuff into my shoe box and put away childish things forever.

After Mass, Dad suggested a driving lesson I didn't really want as much as I wanted him to drive me out to the stable to rent a horse. But I was obedient. I drove our big blue four-door 1948 Plymouth down an old dirt road, shifting on the steering column, grinding gears, *"first" and "second" and "third,"* working my feet on the clutch and brake pedals, popping the clutch, riding the clutch, herking and jerking, because I hated driving. A mile down the lane through the woods, I coasted to a stop inside a glade of maples and oaks. I announced I'd had enough. "You'll have to back us out," I said. "You know I can't find 'reverse.'" I gave my dad the wheel. Something was on his mind.

"Ryan."

"Yes, Dad."

"Because you're going away to school and all, there's some things I, well, I think I ought to tell you. Since you're growing up and all."

He was skirting the edges. I knew the area and I remembered Sister's words not to listen to impure conversations. My mind puckered and turned in on itself.

"I know when I was growing up and it happened I thought maybe something was wrong with me. I worried maybe I'd been hurt. But it's natural and nothing to worry about."

"I know," I said, trying to end it, trying to shut it out. I wanted out of the car. *Suffocation*. He was always so good to me. I wanted to run out into the hot September sun, off through the dusty goldenrod. I willed not to panic and my hands were folded hot between my knees and a bead of sweat rolled down my cheek to my chin and down my throat.

"A boy grows up to become a father."

But I'm not going to be a father, I wanted to shout. I ached all over wanting to find the words to exorcise this devil in this man I loved who was subjecting me to hearing this. He had wanted to be a father. That was his vocation. I had to stop him. Because if I didn't know about impure things I couldn't be tempted and then I couldn't lose my soul in fires hotter than the chrome on the dashboard.

"Do you know what I mean?" he asked.

"Yes. I do. Sister at school explained it all to us," I lied. "I understand." But I didn't. *Liar*. I had no inkling. *Liar, liar*. I didn't need to know what he was saying. *Pants on fire.* There would be no girls at the seminary. No temptations.

"Am I relieved!" he said. "I certainly wouldn't want you to worry about those nights the way I did." He looked at his watch. "Shall us men stop and get a milk shake?" He smiled.

Thank God, he dropped the subject. My soul was completely safe, because I hadn't the slightest idea of what he was saying.

"I'd rather just go home."

He looked a bit disappointed.

"Or maybe to the stables. I saved up a dollar so I can rent a horse and go riding one last time."

"It's God's will for you, I guess." He rubbed his chin.

I felt for him, sitting sweating with him in the hot car parked in a lane of goldenrod, that he would have to get used to my being gone.

"I know it's God's will," I said.

"Okay. Because you say so." He turned the key in the ignition. "... Ryan."

"Yes, Dad."

"Son. You really do want to go away to school? I mean, leave town, and your mother, and Thommy, and Brownie?"

I looked at him and loved his kindness, his generosity to me. "Yes. More than anything."

"You're not going away just for us? We don't want you to become a priest for us."

"No, Dad. Gee!"

"I want to make sure you go because it's what you think is right."

"It's right. I want it more than anything. More than anything in the whole world."

I did, sitting with him in the car with the sun beating down. I did want the priesthood more than anything. I knew it then, eight years after the World War. I had known it all along from the first moment the shadow of the War's wild violence had crossed my three-year-old life in 1942. I had known it, sitting in dark movie theatres, from the cruel atrocities in the blaring black-and-white newsreels of marching soldiers and orphaned children and bombed cities. I knew it covered with my brother's blood. I had heard Michael and Nellie Higgins, man and wife, suggest my whole enduring life on a summer night. But even before these things I had known it, perhaps from before time. I could save people.

No matter how silly I was or scared or immature or full of myself, my vocation had been whispered to me out of some cosmic Pentecost when a Holy Ghost bird of red and yellow and green circled above my crib, in the wordless time before I recognized words, making me later imagine what primitive people felt like when huge birds with claws and beaks and teeth hungry for human flesh flew overhead. Some virgin, I knew from Hawaiian movies like *Bird of Paradise*, had to be willingly sacrificed to keep the cannibal bird away from the cave door.

The threat of that flapping violence mixed all my war-torn sympathy for a fallen world into a small green-apple ache, straight from the Garden of Eden, cramping my soul and my heart. An ache of appeasement inside me burst in my chest like the hot red bloodspray of a spear piercing my side, *Jesus' side*, spreading through my body, reaching up to my face, burning my eyes, and I knew I wanted to offer myself up like Christ on the Cross. I could taste the holy life of my heroic uncle anointing dying soldiers on the battlefield.

Cosmic desire had lodged in me, moved me to find how the Word was made Flesh, how missionaries became martyrs, how virgins became saints. My vocation was right and good and I would embrace it willingly like a whole holiness I remembered from before I was born, and being born, was in danger of losing. Through Ordination to the priesthood, I would humbly renounce the whole proud and wicked world and save it by going my way.