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Fall 1953

North America. Ohio. Misericordia Seminary. September. October. November. Maps and clocks. *Tick. Tick. Tick*. After the hot waxen weeks of the long fall, I awoke one morning in the cold rain. I could read the drizzling pre-dawn sky outside the tall row of dormitory windows. Another overcast day. All around me, in nearly one hundred beds, classmates lay snoring in lumpen disarray, asleep in tangles of blankets, their unconscious faces more innocent than when awake. At the far end of the sleeping hall a student-prefect padded to the washroom to begin his day. The door thunked closed after him. My watch ticked close to my ear, loud as a sound effect in a movie. The prefect's toilet flushed in the muffled distance. For the first instant in my life I was rationally conscious of time. I had twelve years to go to be a priest. I was fourteen years old.

Sixty-three days had passed since September when I had left my family and the world behind. Then, in that gentle late Indian summer, before the drizzle of this morning, the Ohio autumn had sifted down, dry and golden, on the river valley below the seminary. Across that valley, four hundred miles away to the west, was home. The wind sweeping up the long hill from the river, from the patchwork orchards on the far rim of the valley, had blown only the day before across my home on the flat Illinois prairie. Letters from home took three days. The weather my mother invariably mentioned traveled with the post and was hanging in Ohio over Misericordia Seminary at my reading.

By November the summer sun had gone thin for the winter. Gray sky was Ohio sky. The seasons became another kind of clock in my isolated new life. Already I was forgetting what autumn in the world had been. Even that first day, after the first meeting with the priests of the Misericordia faculty in the reception garden, after I had kissed my parents good-bye, and they had driven out the long drive leaving me alone for the first time in my life, things had needed adjusting. I was an Irish-American boy in a German-American seminary.

September 7, 1953

Welcome to Misericordia Seminary!

"Misery loves company!"

"You're from Peoria, Illinois?"

"My God! Can anything good come out of Peoria?"

"Peoria's strictly a vaudeville joke! You know what they say..."

"...If it plays in Peoria,..."

"...it will play anywhere."

"We're the Rimshot Brothers."

"Ka-boom!"

They actually were brothers, each playing the other's straight man.

"I'm Peter. He's Heinrich. We're the Rimski's."

"You can call me 'Henry,'" Heinrich said.

"Or you can call him 'Hank,'" Peter said. "'Heinrich, Henry, Hank.' Get it?"

"What do you do?" Heinrich Henry Hank Rimski said. "I mean besides being from Peoria? Do you play any instrument or sing? Peter was in a show at a mountain lodge last summer." Hank motioned toward his older brother, who grinned. Neither wanted a plain answer.

"You were?" I asked.

"Really, Peoria," Peter Rimski said. "Hank, this must be the kid's first day away from home."

"As a matter of fact, we drove in this morning," I said.

"Can it, Peoria."

"My name isn't Peoria. It's Ryan O'Hara."

"We're from Howl and Bellow. Or is it Bell and Howell? I never can keep us straight," Hank said. They leaned together, laughing.

"I think I got to be going," I said. "So long."

"Wait a minute," Peter said, breaking away from Hank. "We'll show you around."

"I can manage okay."

"Come on. Let us show you," Hank said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because you're a live one," Peter said. They both laughed. "We can tell you've got personality."

"How long've you two gone here?"

"This is my first year," Hank said.

"Then we're in the same class," I said.

"Yes," Hank said, "but I doubt it."

"You should know," Peter said, "that our father studied here at Misery for six years and we know everybody."

"Your father was a seminarian?"

"In this seminary, yeah. He was in Father Gunn's class. But he quit."

"I never thought of that happening. An ex-seminarian being somebody's father, I mean. That's funny."

"What do they teach you in Peoria, kid?" Hank pretended disgust.

"Ever been there?" I asked. "Where you from?"

"P. A.," Hank said.

"The great state of Pennsy." Peter mimed a cheer that reminded me of a girl.

"Are you both in my class?" I asked.

"Never," Peter said. "I'm fourth-year high school, a senior, and you're a freshman like Hank."

"See those guys playing touch football over there, Peoria?" Hank asked. "You ever play?"

"Around the neighborhood. Never on a team."

"Here everybody plays. Except my brother," Hank motioned, "who's got a medical excuse. You'll play and learn to take it."

"Take it? He doesn't even get it," Peter said. They both roared.

"Who said I couldn't take it?" I asked.

"I'll bet he doesn't even own a jock," Hank said.

"God. I'll bet he doesn't need one."

"You got one, Peoria?" Hank asked. He was bigger than Peter, who was bigger than me. "I asked you do you got one?"

"One what?"

"You got a jock?"

"You know," Peter motioned, "a jockstrap. A bag for your bowling balls."

"Sure," I lied. "Sure I got one." I didn't know what they were talking about.

"Good," Hank said. "You better. Because if you don't, when you die all maimed up, Saint Finger will wave his Peter at you. Or is it...hell, I never can keep it straight."

I wanted to change the subject because this was impure. I had only been at the seminary three hours, had watched my family drive off in our big blue Hudson, and people who were going to be priests were talking impure. "Where'd you say you were from in Pennsylvania?"

"What's it to you, Pee-oh-ree-ahh?" Hank said. "Up yours, I guess." He ran off, leaving Peter staring at me.

"Pittsburgh," he said. "Ever been there?"

"This is as far East as I've ever been."

"Hank always did like a good pimping," Peter said. "Why not let's go inside and see who's here?"

We walked from the garden out across the playing fields. Intense blue sky outlined the huge red brick buildings. I was seeing Misericordia Seminary for the first time. The green bronze cap of the bell tower pointed twenty stories high, up and over the hive of buildings at its foot. From miles away, people could see the gold cross on top rise above the surrounding Ohio woods and farmland, a tower of German Catholicism on the American prairie.

Below the imposing tower, gray slate roofs covered all the buildings, including the high-vaulted chapel roof from which, Peter said, a mason had fallen and been killed during construction in 1907. Lower, but tall at four stories were the buildings with classrooms on the first and second floors, and dormitories above. The doorways and windows were framed in limestone set into the red brick. The refectory where we ate was a huge Gothic building with leaded glass windows. Miles of long corridors and tunnels connected all the buildings exactly like my father's best friend, a Mason, had predicted.

The Gibraltar-like front-entrance building where the priests lived, each in a small apartment, continued, Peter said, "the formal Flemish Renaissance tone. The suite for the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Amleto Giovanni Cicognani, is always kept available for his frequent visits from Rome. Apostolic Delegates to the United States eventually always become cardinals, and, sometime, someday, Pope."

In that main residence lived the forty or so priests who were to teach the hundreds of us boys how to be priests. In the building nearest to the priests lived a small group of students, ages twenty-one to twenty-five, closest to Ordination to the priesthood. The forty or fifty of them studied theology in Latin textbooks and learned to administer sacraments like Confession and Extreme Unction and practiced saying Holy Mass. Between their theology department and our high-school building lived the collegians, two hundred of them, who studied the humanities and majored in philosophy, and who never spoke to the three hundred of us high-school boys.

Like Gaul, the seminary was divided into three parts, but all three parts were united like the Trinity. All these buildings connected with one another through off-limits tunnels and forbidden corridors that passed under and through the chapel, the one place priests, theology students,

collegians, and high-school boys congregated. All told, five hundred boys and young men made their way through the twelve years of study for the priesthood.

"Misericordia is a community built around the tabernacle," I said.

"But you better never find any communication between departments," Peter warned. "We can't speak to theologians or collegians, or them to us or to each other. There's three departments. Four years each. High school, college, and theology. If you fraternize across the boundaries, you'll get shipped."

"Why?" I asked. "The collegians and the theology students are closer to the priesthood. I'd think they could help us some."

"It's part of the plan, part of the game. Rules. Penalties. Go directly to jail. Collect two-hundred dollars. You'll get a rule book," was all he said, dropping the subject.

For the first time I sensed the boundaries and secrets signified, but not revealed, in that calibrated tangle of sacred buildings. I determined then and there to learn the mystique, for that mystery could make me holy, make me a priest, and set me apart forever. I knew it would have to be learned slowly, the word for the mystery. I knew it had to be learned inside. Inside Misericordia and inside me.

No driver speeding down the highway and catching the first glimpse of the red-brick sprawl on the hill could ever guess at Misericordia's maze of secrets, could ever really comprehend the inner strength and recesses of the cluster. Isolated in a clearing of Ohio woods, a mile from the nearest roadhouse, Misericordia stood, cloistered and alone, enigmatic on the valley rim, no more than a landmark telling tired salesmen only sixteen miles more to Columbus, a drink, and bed. But to the thousands of teenaged boys who entered and stayed, marking the years from one to twelve, the seminary stood as a house of search and journey, winter and summer, in season and out.

That first day I did not know the seminary. It was, if one of those passing travelers had asked, a place where boys can study to be priests. That was it. That was all. If a boy believes he has a vocation, if he feels God has called him to the holy Catholic priesthood, all he has to do, *God told me*, is announce his belief and his feeling.

That surety of vocation I had with all my heart and soul. Everything was settled. I questioned nothing, because God would take care of me. I knew His general plan, but His details were a holy mystery to be revealed through prayer, studies, and sports.

But I had hoped that something of what I had seen of boarding schools in the movies was true. I hoped that in the dormitory where Peter guided me, kids would be sitting around, laughing, bursting into some song.

"I do play the ukulele," I told Peter on the way to the building.

"Key of 'C'?"

He sounded so snotty.

"I can play 'Ain't She Sweet?' and 'Danny Boy.'"

"Of course, you can," Peter said. "Because you are ha ha ha a real 'Danny Boy.' He stuck out his lower jaw and repeated himself, "Of courssse, you kahn. Becawze you awh." He was his own favorite fan. "I play the accordion and the piano. Hank plays the drums and we both sing. We could play vaudeville in Peoria."

"If it plays in Peoria," I said. "That's what they say: it will play anywhere."

"So Peoria is the ultimate audience," he said, studying my eyes, considering my challenge.

"Go figure," I said, "what that makes me...to you." *Ka-boom*. I was learning fast that the freshness of freshmen was survival.

"What did you say your name was, Peoria?"

"Ry." I bit my lip. "Ryan," I said. I had decided "Ry" and all the things he'd done before were going to be put away like the things of a child. Exactly as Saint Paul said. Now that I was older in a new life, away at school, I wasn't any longer little "Ry" O'Hara.

But lying half awake in the cold November morning, remembering, knowing the electric matins bell was about to wrangle the sleeping dorm, knowing another day out of days was to begin because time had me cloistered where priests wanted me, because the timeless Priest Jesus seemed never so far away, I never felt more like poor little lost "Ry."

My classmates' November talk of the coming Christmas vacation—everyone counting the days backwards in white chalk on the blackboard—stirred in me the old worldly troubles of the early autumn, of my first night sleeping in a room of ninety freshman boys.

"Only ten percent of new boys make it through the twelve years to Ordination to the priesthood," Father Gunn had told us our first night after lights-out.

Blankets rustled. Someone farted. Boys laughed into pillows. I pulled the blanket and sheet up close to my chin. The dormitory had been dark except for the exit lights burning over the door. The settling sounds began to quiet and from under them, up and over, rose the whooshing sound a black voile cassock makes around walking ankles. Father Gunn, the

disciplinarian, a Marine Corps chaplain during the War, was pacing the long center aisle. He paused under the bright pool of exit light, his solider's face prologue to his speech.

Early that first day my family had met him, Father Gunn, who introduced himself as the priest who always introduced himself, told us all manner of things—of how he was hard to trip up on names because if he forgot a boy's name, he always asked, "What's your name?"

When the boy said, like my name, "Ryan O'Hara," he'd say, "Oh, I knew your *last* name. It's your *first* name that slipped my mind, Ryan, old boy."

"Old boy," he called me that on our first meeting and I was thinking how easy the welcome, because I had feared he'd call me what I was, a new boy.

"Old boy," he said, "you'll be surprised how quick a good boy can become a priest." He smiled. He cracked and wrinkled up his great athletic face and smiled a slow handsome smile, displaying all his teeth, perfect and white. "We'll whip you into good shape here," he said.

Late in the dark, that first night, my parents gone, alone with all the other new boys, I lay on the hard cotton mattress in my brown metal bed, watching Father Gunn establish his command presence among us, him patrolling like a sentinel in the dim dormitory light, his rosary swinging from his right hand.

"All right, you men, listen good to what I have to say." He paused.

Around me some freshmen sat up in bed or rose to a halfway rest on their elbows. I lay quiet and listened. Four beds away I could see Hank, huge as the grade-school football player he'd been, outlined in the darkness against the dormitory windows. I wondered where in the building his brother was sleeping with the seniors.

The end of the first day of my new life had left me very tired. Strange sights and sounds and smells had greeted me all day long. In the cool, unwrinkled sheets that smelled of disinfectant, with my new black khakis hung over the head of my bed, I felt that on this day the end had ended and the beginning had finally begun.

Father Gunn called us men and I lay back to listen to him, waiting for him to tell me what to do to be a priest on my first night in the seminary.

"A lot of you are away from home for the first time and you're going to feel lonesome and maybe want to cry when you think about your families and friends and the good times. Many a night for the first nights it's nothing to have homesickness. But if you're men, you outlive it.

"When I was a chaplain in the Second World War, a lot of the young Marines, they were out for the first time. Up at the front and plenty scared. They came up to me and couldn't say anything. Maybe looked at me kind of funny and started to cry.

"Men, everybody gets lonesome for the good things. Anybody here thinks he's not going to miss his ma's cooking, and his own room, and all his friends is wrong. If not tonight, you wait a few days. I guarantee it. Because you miss your folks is no sign you haven't got a vocation. It's only God testing your vocation to see how much of a man you are and if you can take it. One way or another you've got to pay for your vocation.

"Go ahead and cry. Get it over with and make a prayer out of it. Don't any of you think of leaving because you're homesick. You come down and talk to me and we'll straighten it all out. I make appointments with anybody. There isn't anyone going to go home the first two weeks because he's a weak sister. Nossir. You've got to take it.

"Hear me good one more time. I don't say these things for money or to fill up the time while I wait for some civilian boat. You've got to be men, manly men, especially nights here in the dormitory. There's rules of the Grand Silence to keep for the Christ you're to receive in Holy Communion the next morning. Don't be afraid to say extra prayers at night.

"Many's the night I've walked through the seniors' dormitory and seen hands, precisely where hands should be, out on top of the blankets, the rosary wrapped tight around the fingers, and the man there asleep on his rack.

"A priest should have a tender love for God's mother because she is the mother of priests and therefore your mother because you are future priests."

I thought of Annie Laurie halfway home in a motel, with Dad and Thommy, and lost all track of what Father Gunn was saying. I thought of our car and our house on a street of Chinese elms and my old school, and Sister Mary Agnes, and my dog, Brownie, who was almost ten years old, because my dad had given her to me before I went to kindergarten.

I knew my family was gone. Tomorrow they'd be even farther from me than tonight. Homesickness sat on my chest like some panicky choking thing and pressed a single syllable, *uh*, from up behind my mouth, and my eyes crinkled. I wanted to cry but would not.

The whooshing of Father Gunn's cassock stopped. He blessed us with his night blessing and was gone. Inside our dim, vaulted dormitory high up on the fourth floor, I was left to hear in the Grand Silence the world's music from way across the grounds, a miracle from the roadhouse a mile

away. From across the highway, up and over Misericordia's stone fence, came sounds of golfers' laughter from the night-lighted driving range. The hollow hit of driver and ball pucked solid through the warm September night, and echoed through our settling dorm where summer was for us officially over.

Everything was gone from me. Alone. For God's sake, I prayed, for His sake.

Then came the long march of mornings at Mass. The autumn grew colder, and the Ohio dawn came later. When the Grand Silence of the night ended after breakfast, the dorm, where we returned to make our beds before classes, erupted with the suppressed wildness of our small lives. For days the only adults we saw were professors in the classroom. Few of the priests associated with us. The younger priests were not allowed to mingle with us. The older priests did not want to. Our parents knew nothing, trusted everything, and relied on the will of God.

Hank stood at the foot of Dick Dempsey's rumpled bed. He was looking for trouble. "Dempsey better get that mattress out of here. He wet the bed again. It's enough to gag a maggot. He's too lazy to get up and go to the jakes. Every night he lays there and pees all over himself."

A curious crowd of hungry, excited vultures of prey began to gather. They were the terrible birds of my childhood circling over my crib.

"Hank, we should do something," Porky Puhl said. "Can't we tell the dorm prefects or Father Gunn?"

"Porky, Porky, you are too stupid to keep breathing." On cue everyone laughed at Porky. "God knows who can stand breathing here." Everyone always laughed at Hank's menacing jokes. "Gunn already tried to burn three of Dickie Dempsey's mattresses. They were too wet. They went up in steam." *Ka-boom*.

"We gotta do something," Porky Puhl insisted.

"What do you suggest?" Hank asked. "We should tie Dickie's dickie in a knot maybe?"

I pounded my pillow, pulled up the spread, tucked it, and walked past the group.

"Hey, Ryan, Ry-Anus."

"What?" I said very flatly. Hank had a mouth on him.

"I'm declining your name in Latin," he said. "*Ryanus, Ryani, Ryano, Ryanum, Ryanibus.*"

I hated his vicious sense of humor. I was beginning, more than ever, to hate Hank. His wildness was spreading, attracting, and creating boys in his image. Every day the ninety boys in our class clicked a bit this way

and a bit that, forging new alliances. Our freshman class was working out a group identity, pushing boys up and down the pecking order.

"Hey, Ryanus, fella. Ryanus." Hank put his arm around my shoulder. "Dickie Dempsey's your friend, right? What do you suggest we do to make him stop peeing in his bed?"

"Let him alone."

"But, Ryanus, he stinks up the whole dorm. Maybe you don't mind the smell."

"I smell it."

"But you don't mind it."

"I mind it. So what? He and Father Gunn come up here every morning at recess to change the sheets. He can't help himself. He's embarrassed. He's nervous...from the service."

"Nobody's that nervous,'" Hank said. "He goes all day without ever standing at the jakes."

"Maybe he squats," Porky Puhl said.

"Maybe he drinks it," Hank went on.

"Maybe he's modest," I said.

"Hank!" Porky sounded the attack. "Look who's coming in the door. The Great Pisser himself."

"Shut up, you guys," I said.

"Shut up yourself." Hank moved towards Dempsey.

Everyone stood, perched in shifting pecking order, waiting to go with the winner. Three mornings before, Hank and his clique had wrestled Dempsey to the floor, ripped open his shirt, held him down spread-eagle, and given him a "pink belly," twenty hands slapping his belly fast and hard.

Misericordia was a school where the wrestling never stopped.

Our bodies cast us all in inescapable roles. Dick Dempsey was a walking target, tall and thin. My grandfather O'Hara said "Dempsey" was a name as Dublin as could be. A shock of red Irish hair fell over his milk-white forehead. His nose was arched and his face was much too bony. His neck was long and when he swallowed, the big lump in his throat went crazy. He was a good kid.

"Hey, Dickie Lickie, Dummy Dempsey," Hank said.

The group shifted expectantly.

"You peed your bed again last night, didn't ya, ya old wetback."

Dick ignored them all, reached for his pillow, placed it at the dry end of the bed.

"You tried to cover up the pee spot with the blanket, but we could smell it. All over the place. Like some stupid puppy."

Dempsey pulled the faded blue spread over the bed. He ignored Hank completely. Standing in the group, I could feel their frenzy rise, electric.

"Like some stupid puppy that pees on the rug. Listen, you stupid shit. Quit making that bed and listen. What are you going to do about it?"

Dempsey, tight lipped, clapped his slippers together, twice, and placed them deliberately at the foot of his bed.

"Dick, come on. Let's go," I said. "We've got class."

"Shut up, you priss. Ryanus, you big *priss*." Hank turned to Dempsey. "Listen, you puppy. You know what we do to stupid-shit puppies that piss on the rug at home?" He reached for the covers and in one thrust stripped the bed right down to the acrid yellow damp. "We rub their noses in it."

He jumped on Dempsey, grabbed him in a full-nelson wrestling hold, bent him over the bed, the palms of his hands finger-locked flat behind Dempsey's red head, pushing his rosy face ha ha ha down, inching his mouth closer and closer to the cold sodden sheet.

"Cut it out," I said. "Stop it." I gave Hank, who was as big as a twenty-year-old, a push that hardly moved him.

The mob, uneasy, broke up into sheep.

"Hey, come on," someone said. "A joke's a joke."

I pushed Hank again, hard as I could, with the first bell ringing for class, as he shoved Dempsey's face into his own cold urine. Hank released him, threw him face down across the bed, and turned on me.

"Just you wait, Ryanus. Nobody pushes Heinrich Henry Hank Rimski. Just you wait."

He was Danny Boyle all over again. Boys like Danny were everywhere.

October 31, 1953
Halloween

The clocks at Misericordia ran on their own sweet time. At the end of every finite minute they hummed and the big hands all jumped together in one big nervous *tick* to the next tiny black etching. Time defines a boy's life. The watched clocks moved so slow, we Misericordia boys existed outside of time, bound on the east by the busy highway and on the west by the slow-rolling river, forbidden to leave the property. We could be an hour or two hours behind the people walking down the streets of Columbus, Ohio, and into the Colonial Drugstore.

Those ordinary laypeople in town had always to know in the back of their minds that five hundred boys lived outside the town like little ghosts, white as sheets, living lives of starched linen conscience under the bell tower that chimed every fifteen minutes. They could drive past the Gothic red-brick buildings of Misericordia, imagining the fearful quiet and the holiness of boys forbidden to have radio or newspapers or magazines.

We did not know what happened in their town or what they heard of the world on their radios driving past. In their profane time they must hardly have thought of us boys and men, isolated and rural and alien, living outside time where the jumping hands on our clocks taught us every minute how long eternity actually was.

To be out of the world's time, I searched myself for the word that would lock me into the eternal, away from the awful possibilities of changing time where any moment could bring temptation, or an occasion of sin, that could undo a whole lifetime of doing good. This was how I would save Danny Boyle and Barbara Martin and myself. At moments, in the classroom or in the chapel, I would believe that the *tick-tock click-clock* of time was beginning to turn into eternity. But the other seminarians didn't. They refused to leave time behind. They indulged in finite measurements of time and brains and sports and looks and piety. I had thought to enter a community that understood what I understood. But these boys studying to be priests proved as foreign to me as everyone else I'd ever met. The twenty-four-year-old priests in the Ordination class of 1953 were so old-fashioned they'd been born in 1928.

Misericordia was no quiet pocket out of eternity. It was about the same as any other adolescent boarding school that drilled boys through foreign language and literature classes in novels–German ones, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless, Young Törless*, and Irish ones, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Southern ones, like *End as a Man,* about military academies with secret initiations and uniforms and cliques run by blond bullies with flattops where Hank could have played kingpin.

The inspirational pictures of seminaries sketched on the back pages of the *Sign Magazine,* and all those other Catholic magazines with athletic, smart-looking seminarians recruiting vocations, stretched the distance from appearance to reality the way faces in *Life* and *Look* and *Sports Illustrated* photo ads promised a boy could become an ideal boy by using the product. Priests needed squared-off wrists like the full-page Speidel Wristwatch ads, and teeth like the Colgate Tooth Powder ads, and chins like the Lucky Strike ads. I had felt, like the young men in the Misericordia Seminary recruiting advertisements, each and everyone handsome

and athletic as a blond German Jesus, an apostolate to the whole world. By entering the seminary, the priesthood, I could become perfect like my Uncle Les.

Finally, I knew I must somehow bring the word to even these chosen ones, these profane seminarians, as John the Baptist had brought the word to the Chosen People of Christ who was Himself the Word. If I could hold my breath for twelve years, I could be ordained a priest.

November 19, 1953

Porky Puhl swiped down the chalk rail one last time and gave the wet rag a two-handed jump shot into the wastepaper basket. He looked content with himself, even from the distance of my fifth-row desk. We were alone in the classroom, recess time, except for Lock Roehm studying Latin second conjugation *moneo*, *I admonish,* in the back corner.

"Lock, lock, who's got the lock, Lock?" Porky said.

Lock and I ignored him. We were studying conjugations of verbs for Father Polistina's daily Latin quiz next period.

Porky turned to his newly cleaned blackboard and began drawing an arty frame, something that was occasionally acceptable, to surround the Latin teacher's chalk talk. On the far left panel he sketched a turkey, this Wednesday class before Thanksgiving, and in a cartoon balloon coming out of the turkey's mouth, he printed: "For Daily Latin Saying–Write Right Here!" In the upper corner on the far right panel, where the day before he had written "24," he wrote in huge blocks, "23."

Porky stood back. His fat face grinned like a full moon in a German almanac. He lobbed the chalk accurately onto the rail and said, "That's the time."

"What?" Lock Roehm asked, not looking up, his finger tracing the page of *Englman's Latin Grammar.*

"That's the countdown. Only twenty-three days left till we go home for Christmas."

"Amazing," Lock said. He looked up. "You can count backwards."

"That excites you, eh, Lochinvar?" Porky clapped his hands together.

"Yes." Lock pulled off his glasses. "As a matter of fact, it does excite me."

Back in September, our first day, Hank had swiped at Lock. "Lochinvar's not a saint's name. You have to be baptized with a saint's name. You can't make up names. What kind of name is Lochinvar anyway?"

Lock had said, "It's a hero's name." I had liked him standing up immediately to Hank's bullying. "My middle name is Thomas for Saint Thomas Aquinas, the most brilliant theologian the Church has ever seen."

"Are you taking the train?" Porky asked.

"Plane." Lock said it flat. "After all, it is 1953."

"Bet you won't get reservations what with Ohio State going to play Southern Cal." Porky challenged everything.

"They're already confirmed by mail," Lock said.

"You planned way ahead. Big, big man."

"I always know how I'm going where I'm going."

"Doesn't everybody." Porky pushed the prof's chair in under the desk. "The train's good enough for me." Then silently, dramatizing his nonchalance, he walked down the aisle toward Lock's rear seat.

"You know," Porky said, "there's only seventy-four boys in our class now. Counting the three that left the first week, the one that didn't show at all the first day, and the six dummies who got shipped first quarter for grades—that's ten already left from our class. Seventy-four out of eighty-four. After only one quarter. I figure after the first quarter of our junior year, we'll be in the hole."

"Gee." Lock crossed his perfect blue eyes. "Only forty-seven more quarters till our Ordination."

I looked at him. I had never thought of counting the time that way. I'd never thought about dividing it up in sections or anything. It was always: "Well, Ry, you're going away to study for the priesthood. How long will it take?" I always said, "Twelve years after grade school, sir." But in my mind it was all one vast blank time when I would study Latin and pray fervently and be sportsmanlike on the ball field. Lock Roehm had said forty-seven quarters and suddenly the twelve years unraveled into terrible, tangled possibilities.

He could do that, unravel things, Lock could. Even in class he always stood head and shoulders above the rest. He had the best answers and wrote the best papers and all the priests showed him a kind of open, grown-up respect.

Misericordia was a very German school and Lock Roehm looked very German. He had blond hair and white sharp teeth and fair white skin with a lot of moles and the kind of mythologically perfect Greek body Germans idealized. He was incisive the way he looked and the way he acted. He had "Cardinal Roehm" written all over him, even standing in class, called out by Father Polistina to recite Sir Walter Scott: "Young Lochinvar is come

out of the West. So faithful in love, and so dauntless in war, there never was knight like the young Lochinvar."

No one laughed.

Incisive. Lock had told me he had read nearly the whole dictionary in English, Latin, and German, and learned a word a day. Somehow I thought Ryan Steven O'Hara is not blond and fair and German like Lochinvar Thomas Roehm, but I can learn a word a day and I started reading the dictionary. If the Holy Rule of Misericordia had not forbidden special friendships, I would have picked Lock Roehm as my best friend.

"The first thing I'm going to do on vacation," I broke in, "is drink about six Cokes and see any double feature at the Palace Theater."

"Crap," Porky said. "I'm gonna see me some basketball. The Celtics maybe. My buddy wrote he can get us some tickets. I'll see my cousin play for Monessen High at least twice."

"Does your cousin dribble better than you?" I asked.

"How would you know anyway?" Porky said.

"I'd know," I answered. I walked up to the blackboard and added an extra fold to his turkey's craw.

He came running to the front of the classroom. "Hands off!"

"I'd know," I repeated. "On a basketball floor I can look down on the top of your head and see the dandruff flaking off."

"Fuck you," he said. "Fuck you."

His forbidden language spun me around into a kind of fit. I dropped the chalk and lurched toward the window. "Stop it," I yelled, my arms going rigid.

"Fuck you, Ryanus."

I clung to the window, my forehead against the freezing glass. "Stop it, Charles Puhl. Stop it!"

He picked up the fallen piece of chalk and struck the four letters across the clear blackboard. "F-u-c-k, Ryanus, f-u-c-k," he spelled.

"Stop it. You're dirty. Dirty!"

"Get thee to a nunnery, Virgin Mary." He turned and stalked from the classroom.

Lock Roehm came toward me.

"Erase it," I begged. "Please, erase it before I have to turn around."

"Look at it," Lock said.

"No. It's a sin. A mortal sin."

"Look at it," Lock repeated.

"No. I can't. In conscience, I can't. Please erase it."

"Do you know what it means, Ry?"

"No. I don't want to. It's bad—that's enough to know."

Lock made a clucking sound. "You are very much a simp, Ry. You're always talking about words and how important they are to you. Yet you stand nearly falling out of the window because of a word."

"Words are powerful. I've told you I think there's a word somewhere that can save us all. Jesus was the Word made flesh. To find His secret we have to find the new word for our time."

"Ry, get real. This is a word on the blackboard."

"I've never said it."

"It's four letters."

"I don't need to spell it. I'm not going to write it."

"Crimanetly, Ry, turn around."

I turned halfway, facing him and all his blond Germanic confidence. "I can see you, but I won't turn any further till you erase the board."

"Ry, crimanetly. Understand things, will you? The four letters in that word are based on old English law. So many people were charged with this particular crime that the bored police scribe abbreviated it: F period, U period..."

"I know how it's spelled!" I said.

"The four letters simply abbreviate 'For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge.'"

"Don't tell me what that means."

"Read the Bible, for cripesakes."

"Yes. Yes, Your Grammarship."

"Act your age," Lock said.

"You're disgusted. With me you're disgusted," I said amazed. "You're disgusted with me and not with Porky Puhl."

Lock picked up the wet cloth and began wiping off the four wide scrawls of chalk. "I'm not disgusted," he said.

"You are. You are too," I said. "You're so smug. You think you're so mature and you understand things just because your father died and you can be the head of your family."

Lock was totally silent. He finished his last swipe and his silence was awful. Finally he turned to me and said simply, "Ry?"

"What?"

"*Fuck* is a word." He threw the wet cloth back into the wastepaper basket. "*Fuck* is the word for you. Fuck you!" He went out to the drinking fountain in the hall.

I looked up at the crucifix hanging over the blackboard, begging Jesus would not convict me of taking part in Charles Puhl's impurity. Then I left the classroom, walked past Lock Roehm, who until that moment had

been one of my crowd, and went into the washroom to scrub my face and eyes with freezing water.

December 3, 1953

The first week in December I spent reading an underground copy of *Oliver Twist*. The priests warned not to read anything except assigned books; but forced day and evening into six hours of study hall, even after a day of classes in Greek, geometry, civics, and ancient history, I couldn't find enough to do. Every day a Latin assignment. *Gallia est divisa in tres partes.* Translation line by line was as tiresome as decoding. And always some English. That was best. And algebra which was terrible and religion lessons that Rector Ralph Thompson Karg came to teach us, regular as orthodoxy, three times a week. He warned us that every minute of wasted study time was stolen from God and endangered our vocation.

The Father-Treasurer, Gilbert Durst, often climbed up the five steps to the reader's lectern in the refectory to berate us about how expensive was our food and study. He told us that we were wasting the money of poor people who sent in dimes and quarters to support the seminary up on the hill to help boys become priests because God called them. Gibby Durst carried inside his cassock a worn envelope which he produced periodically and read aloud at our silent meals while the food grew cold. It was from an old and blind German lady in Mankato, Minnesota, who sent fifty cents "*für die armen Studenten, for the poor students*," he said. "You boys have," he emphasized, "more than she."

Lock Roehm always said the Father-Treasurer was no better than a butcher doing a thumb job on a scale. All five hundred boys were on full scholarships for tuition, room, and board. A boy had to keep very good grades, play sports, and work on the cleaning crews to keep from being shipped out by the Father-Treasurer, or the Father Disciplinarian, or the Rector himself, all of whom ultimately had more power than the Pope over a boy's vocation. If God called a boy, how could humans, even if they were priests, tell a boy he had no vocation, unless the priests spoke directly for God.

Even though reading *Oliver Twist* didn't seem like stealing, especially from the blind German lady, I wrapped the jacket in plain brown paper, elaborately penned *Misericordia* across it, and read it, pretending I was studying an old Latin book for translation, not bothering anybody.

In three days of pretended work during half my study periods, dodging glances of the watchful priests, I had gotten to the part where Fagin

sends Nancy to look for Oliver. That was when Father Gunn came into the hall for one of his Son-of-a-Gunn pep talks. When I think of the good times, he was interesting, at least better than the study halls, but not so good as Dickens. I closed the volume of forbidden fiction and hid it in plain sight on the edge of my desk. A kind of cheap thrill rushed through me.

"Men," Father Gunn said, slightly out of breath.His cheeks were fiery, his black hair damp from the shower. I had spied him earlier out the study-hall window running his daily twenty laps around the frozen cinder track.

"I promised to talk to you about studying soon after first-quarter exams in October. Time's been slipping by like time always does. While I don't want to keep you long from your studies, I do want you to be good priests. So understand it's God's will that now, today and every day, you study your lessons seriously. Maybe some poor soul will be saved from the fires of hell because you studied your Latin well. Studying is now your vocation in life.

"The seminary's not supposed to be a bed of roses. Vocations are hard to come by and have to be paid for. Either in the seminary or after Ordination. I swear to you, it's far better to pay for your vocation before Ordination. Not after. God help you. Your endurance in study and prayer is one way to pay off the debt we owe God and His Blessed Virgin Mother for giving us the highest vocation in the world."

He marched, talking, up and down the main aisle of the study hall, between the rows of varnished desks and craning freshmen. He punctuated his words with his powerful hands, the same hands that called God down to earth every morning, the very hands that he'd told us had given the sacraments to dying soldiers.

I thought of my priest-uncle, his chaplain hands, and his mother, my grandmother, Mary Pearl O'Hara, who had on the lilac wall of her room a framed poem about the wonderful hands of a priest. She herself wrote out a copy of it especially for me. "You have beautiful hands," she said. "You have beautiful fingers. I have arthritis." She held her sweet fingers up for me to see. I kept her poem, so hopeful, so sentimental, in my shoe box.

"The Beautiful Hands of a Priest"

We need them in life's early morning.
We need them again at its close.
We feel their warm clasp of true friendship.
We seek them when tasting life's woes.

At the altar each day we behold them,
and the hands of a king on his throne
are not equal to them in their greatness.
Their dignity stands all alone.
And when we are tempted and wander
to pathways of shame and of sin,
it's the hands of a priest will absolve us
–not once, but again and again.
And when we are taking life's partner,
other hands may prepare us a feast,
but the hands that will bless and unite us
are the beautiful hands of a priest.
God bless them and keep them all holy
for the Host which their fingers caress.
When can a poor sinner do better
than to ask Him to guide thee and bless?
When the hour of death comes upon us,
may our courage and strength be increased
by seeing raised over us in blessing
the beautiful hands of a priest!

My father had said, "Ryan, never touch my tools. Be careful of your hands. You can't work on the car with me. You can't lose your hands and lose your vocation." My father looked forward to my Ordination Day. My Uncle Les and Father Gerber both had instructed him that Canon Law decreed that a boy with damaged hands could never have those hands anointed for the priesthood. I couldn't touch pliers or saws or car parts.

The very first days at Misericordia I had wanted to obey everything the priests told me, so I could learn the priestly mystery and feel the chill go down my back every morning when as a priest I would say the words of consecration, "*Hoc est Corpus Meum, This is My Body*," and hold Jesus in my hands.

"The sophomores," Father Gunn said, motioning to the sixty-three second-year boys drawn up in shorter aisles at the rear of our large study hall, "have stepped one year closer to the priesthood by one-hundred-percent keeping their part of their deal with God."

He wanted all of us to be fine-looking, broad-shouldered young priests marching out to all the people in the world who were sinning and dying and who would fall like starlings to the oil fires of hell if we didn't learn to save them.

Danny Boyle and the German lady who was blind, and Porky and Hank and even Father Gunn needed my dedication to duty. My obedience could eventually cure all kinds of blindness. It could lead me to the words and introduce me into the mystery. I renewed my summer determination and let poor lost Oliver Twist go his hapless way. "*Ich habe Dienst*," Father Gunn kept repeating. "*I have a duty*." Despite everything, worldly temptations and desires especially, to God, "*Wir haben Dienst, We have a duty.*"

I was an Irish-Catholic boy in a German-Catholic school where German was taught one hour a day four days a week for six years to instill the discipline that comes with language.

December 5, 1953

Two nights later, on the eve of the Feast of Saint Nicholas, our sober *Dienst, duty,* of the study hall was suddenly interrupted by an old German custom. The older boys had kept this one secret well. All its pleasurable violence depended on surprise.

Exactly fifteen minutes into the evening study period, when the ink bottles and blue-lined paper and Ticonderoga pencils were finally settling into concentration, Saint Nicholas himself, in full ancient bishop's robes and mitre stepped, an old fantastic, very quietly into the front of the study hall.

Only those very close to that door noticed his silent entrance. His beard, white and long, covered his golden chasuble. In his left hand he carried a wooden shepherd's crook painted gold. I thought he might be a vision.

Like a rock dropped into Misericordia's pond, little Lake Gunn, the old man's entrance sent concentric ripples out from the doorway as more and more new boys looked up to see him standing before us, a silent apparition. Slackjawed, no one said a word. We all saw the same apparition.

Saint Nicholas stood, stock-still, serious, silent, watching us. Suddenly all the lights went out and from behind us a wild scream ran toward us through the darkness. Every freshman whirled in his seat, sat frozen in his desk. The lights came on. We fell back.

A short creature, filthy in dark rags and black-caped hood, raced screeching up and down our aisles beating at us, hitting mostly the desk tops, whipping at us with his leather flail. He stopped, threatening individual boys around the room. Two rows away he smelled of onions and garlic and things he caught at night like the dead rats hanging on his belt.

He wore a shoulder harness of sleigh bells that never stopped jangling. He was a conjure man, running like some campfire horror from a Boy Scout story through our startled study hall. His cape, billowing black, caught books from desk tops, dragging them to the floor. *Oliver Twist* crashed down, flopped open to the title page.

He ran in dark circles around the white-robed Saint Nicholas. He shrieked that his name was "Ruprecht!" His menace swooped through the study hall. He pulled out a long list, with names, he cackled, and the names were connected to all the things we freshmen had done wrong, misdeeds, real and false, that he was going to call us out for, to make us eat rats, for all the boys to see.

Suddenly a scream louder than this demon's own brought him to a standstill.

Curdled, but beginning to suspect a joke, we new boys turned.

Russell Rainforth, the most worshipful of all the upperclassmen, the president of the sophomore class, had stopped the accusing specter dead in his tracks. Russell half-stood in his desk, his lips pulled back baring his white teeth.

The older boys stared bewildered at Russell's upstaging.

He screamed again, paused almost as if testing, then repeated the scream. *Crazy.* The blood drained from his face. All his books fell to the floor. His eyes went wide and wild and he charged up the aisle toward the creature humped up in black.

Russell lurched and howled, his the only movement in the frozen room of more than a hundred boys.

He had gone ten steps before Father Gunn burst in and hit him square on the jaw.

He careened and fell to the floor and lay whimpering and twitching with the blood running out of his ear and his mouth and all over his shirt.

The priests tied him quickly to a chair with their belts and carried him out half-conscious to the infirmary, and later, that very night, from there to a hospital and we were never to see him again.

In that first moment, in the tense vacuum their sweeping him out had left, I felt the dead silent air that a tornado sucks out of a room.

The priests had everything under complete control.

Boys' whispers began, fell, murmured.

Father Gunn, returning instantly back into the middle of the wrecked study hall, amid books strewn all over, said, "Pray for Russell Rainforth."

I did on the spot. For him and for myself that God would not let my vocation be taken away by such a powerful sign.

"Carry on," Father Gunn said. "Proceed and carry on."

The creature in black, Ruprecht, Saint Nicholas' assistant, moved slowly toward his dramatics-room bishop. He tried to recover his spell, but the fun was gone. His warts and Max Factor scar no longer looked real. Ruprecht was only Hank's brother Peter with ropes of plastic spit hanging from between his blackened teeth.

As Ruprecht-Peter, recovering his role, read from the Bishop's big book the names of various new boys and their humorous offenses, some laughter returned. The second-year boys tried to cover crazy Russell's disgrace by laughing too loud.

When finally Ruprecht-Peter hunted out Dick Dempsey and whipped him into the center of the room, the laughter slathered with anticipation. When old Ruprecht-Peter handed Dempsey an empty milk bottle, a roar went up that turned the Saint Nicholas charade back into comedy as freshman after freshman was humorously shamed.

I was disappointed Ruprecht didn't pick on me. I had done nothing awkward or disobedient enough to be included, but I felt the scorn quietly implicit in being ignored. Peter Rimski hadn't even bothered to make up something silly against me. I wasn't part of a clique.

Afterwards, the priests handed out hard candy and allowed us to go to the recreation room for ping-pong and shuffleboard and singing carols around the piano.

"You know why Russell cracked up, don't you?" Hank was in the center of his group of six boys surrounded by eight more boys who wanted to be in the first six. They stood around him like spokes around a hub. His shoulders were thick and he was almost overweight. His voice was deeper than most of the new boys and at the neck of his shirt tufts of hair curled out. He spoke with authority, like an actor playing a seminarian impersonating a priest trying to be a bishop.

"My brother Peter found out what's going on. Russell will be put in an insane asylum, because he made up his mind when he came back to Misery this year he was going to ace his studies. When he got elected class president, he knew he had to set a good example, so he stopped everything. Quit playing football and basketball and studied all the time. So he snapped. Like that."

He clicked his fingers and shook his head, staring down the group around him. "Peter and I knew things like this happened here because our father went here and this is a real tough seminary. You gotta know what you're doing. Or else they put you away in an insane asylum."

I heard enough. I walked away. I'd seen crack-ups in the movies. I prayed no crack-up would happen to me, that I wouldn't be carried out of a study hall full of laughing boys, as mocking as Roman soldiers making fun of Christ, with my arms twisted behind my back, my hands tied together, and blood running out of my nose and mouth. I ate candy, considering why Jesus made a distinction between the sparrows He kept His eye on and the seminarians He didn't. I was sure God understood when I went to my desk the next day and picked up *Oliver Twist* where I had left off.

Father Gunn warned us very strictly, almost with the Seal of the Confessional, not to mention Russell's accident when we went home for Christmas. "Rector Karg," he said, "feels your parents might not understand. If Catholics get the wrong impression about seminaries, non-Catholics will never be converted, especially if they see anything but a clean bill of health on our altars. Priests and seminarians are to be like Caesar's wife: above reproach. Actually," he added, "you boys have an obligation in charity not to tell a soul. Not even to ever mention Russell among yourselves again."

On December 19, I took a Greyhound bus across the frozen Midwest flatlands to the snowy river valley of Peoria. I felt very responsible, trusted with our seminary secret, not mentioning Russell Rainforth. I had never before kept a secret from my parents. I felt old. Older than when I had gone away in September. Summer was gone. I had been away at school. That meant something very special that first Christmas, serving midnight Mass, combed hair, perfect teeth, in our parish church decorated with pines and ribbons and candles. The choir soared into "*Gloria in Excelsis Deo, Glory to God on High*."

Leaving my soul, I levitated above the congregation. I was more than an altar boy in black cassock and starched white surplice serving Father Gerber in his white vestments. I was a seminarian swinging the gold censorium of burning incense out three times on its golden chains right into the faces of the congregation.

The church was packed with two thousand people standing behind Barbara Martin standing in the front row closely next to Danny Boyle crossing his eyes at me, cocking his head, and sticking out his tongue.

Returning to Misericordia in January, I could remember nothing significant about that vacation except that the ceiling in our house seemed lower. My family, the Higgins, my dog, Brownie. Nothing had changed with anybody.

But everything was changing with me.

Spring 1954

In February, the "Apostleship of Prayer" leaflet for seminarians featured Saint Valentine, the priest, as Patron of the Month, with the special mission intention of "Social Justice in Africa." I was reading the dictionary and happened on *puberty*. I had read a lot and knew whatever *puberty* was, at fourteen, *pubertas* was supposed to be happening to me, *the puer, the boy*. My father had tried to warn me something would happen. The priests had warned me.

"What happens to a boy when he's fourteen," Gunn had said, "marks you for life."

He scared me, but it sounded wonderful, like a secret club of brotherhood. I knew from my grandfather's *National Geographic* that some tribes initiated their boys and I wondered if that's what it was. Some secret ritual nobody ever talked about where they came in and surprised you and took you out somewhere and maybe painted you all green and purple and showed you a quick glimpse of a naked woman and then said you're a man now.

I really doubted that, because somebody would have leaked something that stunning out. Besides it would be impure to look at a naked woman and even if that was the initiation of the human race, they couldn't allow it to go on in seminaries. I hoped whatever it was wouldn't hurt, and that Hank wouldn't be involved, but I was very worried about the naked pictures, because I had never seen one, and I worried what my real reaction might be compared to how I was supposed to react.

Right below *puberty* I saw *pubes* which I knew was Latin and I was glad because I could chance the impurity to increase the vocabulary. There was an *L.* that was followed by *pubic hair, groin*, and *adult*. I turned more pages and found *genital* and *genitalia* next to *genitive case*. *Sex* in Latin meant *six*. So I looked up *sex* and *sexpartite* and *sextillion* and *sexton*, which has to do with the Church, and *sexual* and *sexy*.

Noah Webster stated humanity's case so politely I bit off my frustration. He said everything without revealing anything. Males fertilize the ovum. Females have a pistil and no stamens. I remembered a girl with a big band singing "Pistol Packin' Mama" during the War and thought the pun was great, though I couldn't tell anybody, because I wasn't so sure what the pun was. In March, Father Polistina started Latin verbs, copulative verbs, and half the boys laughed as hard as we all had when he had introduced the Latin verb *scio, I know, scis, you know, scit*, *he knows.* Ha. "Keep saying

it," Polly Polistina said, ha ha, and we kept repeating the Church's soft liturgical pronunciation, "*Shee-o, shis, shit*." Ha ha ha.

My grades were good when spring broke and I was reading *My Friend Flicka* and *Thunderhead* and *Green Grass of Wyoming*, all under brown paper. I imagined myself at night far away from the corral of a hundred beds in the dormitory, out in the cool green West, with a white horse and a life free as an eagle's soaring over the peaks. Flicka had a baby horse, a colt, a stallion that grew up to pursue wild mares across the plains. He'd search them out, fight for them, nuzzle them to marry them.

At the first evening of May devotions to the Virgin Mary, I asked her if nuzzling was for people too. Life's not like the movies, I said to her, and I've no one else to ask. I knew she had a baby, all alone. At least the baby had no earthly father. But I knew everyone else did. I was sure it took two, but how the two got together was beyond me.

My father had tried to tell me something, but I lied and told him I knew everything. I was always lying, white lies, to protect myself.

Absurd of me, I prayed, to get so upset about something completely irrelevant to my celibate choice in life. You can't be tempted to do something you know nothing about. Besides, I had the final exams of my first year in the seminary to occupy me. I wanted to do well with only eleven more years to learn the secrets the priests would surely begin to tell us the next year.

I had one more secret book to finish called *Tales of the South Pacific,* and on one of those first May nights, a character from the book, a girl, came and sat on the foot of my bed. Her dress was red with white flowers that matched the flower in her long black hair. Her arms moved gently, in soft undulations from some really slow hula. She beckoned me to get up and follow her, up and out the dormitory doors, to places I had never seen. I held back.

This was different from the other dream I had once a week about some boy, some boy unidentified in the dark, standing over my bed with a shoe in his hand, ready to use the heel like a nightstick.

I was happy, and the girl came closer, and her white smile and dark skin and darker hair melted me away, like snow running in the first warmth of spring, and I fainted in my sleep which struck me as probably so unusual I never told anyone.

The next morning at Mass, I knelt back unworthy, blushing, as the other seminarians filed past me to receive Holy Communion. Hank, as he stepped over me on his way to the Communion rail, snickered and

winked and kicked my leg on purpose. No boy ever did not go to Holy Communion except for one reason.

I resolved, whatever the girl's reason, I could not follow her. I was a seminarian and resolved seminarians must avoid occasions of sin. I confessed to the priest an accidental sin of impurity, but explained I took no pleasure in it.

"I did not, Father, interfere with myself."

He said, "Night time is the worst time. Sin happens in time and takes us out of eternity. Go to sleep at night time."

I said my penance of three Hail Mary's and resolved myself against the girl, and vowed to stop reading worldly books.