5

September 1960

Eight weeks later, the first day back at Misery, Mike Hager ran down the front-porch stairs. He had decided to come back for our senior year in college.

Wearing black street clothes, I approached him from my taxi.

Tentative, somewhat embarrassed, he brushed at his cassock still wrinkled from the crush of summer storage. "What the fub," he said. He took one of my two suitcases and walked me down the long corridors to my room.

I avoided saying I was glad he had come back to get unscrewed. In fact, for weeks we talked around the summer, knowing his late-night Confession happened, pretending he was a full-spirited seminarian in his black cassock, pretending we had never talked at all in the summer.

Misery taught us to work around certain facts of life. The priests warned us: "After a vacation, never come back to the seminary because you've a habit of returning, or because you like communal life, or because you're afraid of the world." For me, each willful return to Misery became a greater tryst with grace. I wanted the priesthood with every fiber of my soul, but I hungered for some priestly fraternity more than the adolescent regimen of seminary life itself.

Seven years a seminarian, I was twenty-one, and desperate as a puppy for the priests to begin to reveal the words of their sacred mystery, to let me know from the inside out what it felt like to be a priest. My own uncle, the Reverend Ryan Leslie O'Hara, seemed totally indifferent to me in my vocation. He had his own private life as a priest, continuing to minister to hundreds of soldiers from the War. He stayed away from Misery, which was a far more famous and endowed seminary than the Kenrick Seminary where he studied. Maybe he was jealous. Maybe I wasn't good enough for him. Maybe he wanted to be the only priest in our family.

I loved the rich medieval life of study, prayer, and work. But each September, I grew mournfully homesick. By November, my longing for the summer turned into eager expectation of Christmas. My vocation, after all, was not to live in a seminary boarding school, but to be a parish

priest working in the world. The seminary was a test of worthiness. So I diverted my agonizing for the world into tightly scheduled classes, exams, prayer, play, and work. I could only become a model priest by learning how to be the ideal seminarian. I never pitched a softball game where I didn't mean every pitch as an ideal pitch. Every class of the twenty-six hours a semester I aimed for the highest grade.

The silent priests, hands tucked up their sleeves, treated us ever harder, ever tougher, running Misery as a spiritual boot camp to make us earn our vocations. We had dues to pay. We were soldiers of Christ. Our goal lay in a most desired Jesus. Time and self-discipline were keys to success. So I kept climbing, each bright new September, back into the gladiator arena to witness to Christ that I was strong enough to be buffeted by other boys, educated by distant priests, and clever enough to survive to my Ordination Day.

Mike set my suitcases at the door to my room. If ever a seminarian crossed so much as the toe of a shoe over the threshold of another boy's room, he was shipped. Mike stood the required six inches back from my door so his whole body could be seen down the length of the hall.

"I'm glad," I said, "that you came back."

He said, "Yeah," and left me in my room.

The desk and the bed smelled not yet of me, but of the institution closed in antiseptic quarantine upon itself for the summer months. I piled clothes into my drawers, vowing to keep the white underwear stacked neat, knowing the reality that I was not the kind of boy whose socks ever stayed tucked away in tidy rows. My vocation absolutely needed the priests' discipline. To be alone at Misery for four months, with theater and lectures and concerts suspended; to be lacerated like the old monks with discipline, and worse than they, with loneliness; to be whipped into shape if I could not love my way to the grace of a vocation.

My tiny room closed in about me. Very *Pit*. Very *Pendulum*. Breathless, I pushed my empty suitcase on the shelf over my bed and desk. To flee the sinking sense of abandonment, to flee the panic of isolation, I left the other suitcase half-packed. I pulled on my black wool cassock. My body disappeared into the perfectly tailored shoulders and chest that dropped straight down to my black shoe tops. Black trumped the colors of the world.

I ran downstairs toward the laughter in the recreation room. Ping-pong balls popped back and forth. I shook hands with seminarians selling and trading cassocks they had outgrown over the summer. Lock Roehm had not yet arrived.

Mike sat alone on a window sill with an outdated issue of *Commonweal* magazine, which was the epitome of the serious Catholic press. He was intense as a Jesuit.

One boy, showing off on a bet to ten boys, stuffed a full pack of twenty cigarettes in his mouth and lit them all at once, puffing and huffing and choking to rounds of cheers.

The chatter in the room buzzed around Dick Dempsey and other missing boys who had dropped out, or whose rumored quitting was not yet confirmed or denied by their signature, or lack of it, in the official book sitting on the Reverend Treasurer's desk at Misery's front entrance. Each seminarian competed to be the first to know of any other who had lost his vocation. The opening-day tension was electric. Shock wanted. Shock given. For the first day, the missing boy's name was gossiped about, wildly, as if some boys had privileged information, but in time, mention and memory of him evaporated.

Dick Dempsey was doomed to disappear. He had sent me no letter, only a picture card of Philadelphia postmarked on Labor Day and signed, *"Pax te cum, peace be with you. –Saint Dick."* Always he played back, as a joke, the boys thinking he was a special kind of holy saint. We had been best friends, but I'd never know how his vocation ended.

Rector Karg forbade us, under "consequences worse than the pains of hell," to have any communication with former students. "No letters. No visits. No contact. Nothing. Ever."

Dempsey's leaving Misericordia terminated our seven-year friendship as finally as death. Dropping out made a boy invisible. Any communication with such a dropout got a boy shipped out immediately. No questions asked. But my feeling for Dempsey lingered. He had been in my crowd.

"Ex-seminarians can pull you down," Hank the Tank said. "We've only twenty-one classmates left out of our original eighty-four..."

"Eighty-six," I said.

"...somebody's done," he insinuated, "a lot of pulling to reduce our class seventy-five per cent in seven years." He eyed me suspiciously. "Weren't you a special friend of Dempsey?"

"Me? A friend of the president of the Friends of the Friendless Friends?"

We actually smiled at each other. "Hank." I greeted him by his right name and he called me mine. "Ryan." It was good to see the friends. And the enemies. Good to be warm to them, sensing their resolutions to come back and be Christ-like to you. But I knew, inside my human heart where no one ever entered, the truce might last a day or so before hostilities resumed where rivalries had left off in May. The venom and

crotch-kicking would revive, deep as ever, and cliques of skirmishing boys would shift territorially shoulder-to-shoulder during chapel sermons about the primacy of charity in loving one another. The loving fraternity of seminarians was defined by grades, looks, sports, and piety.

Lock said, "The biggest sin at Misericordia is uncharitable speech."

The three of us, Lock, Mike, and I watched good resolutions disintegrate into calumny, slander, short-sheeting, and pink bellies. No one ever terrorized me that way, never held me down, never slapped my belly red, because I announced to everyone, I'd kill anyone who touched me at all, except, of course, in the on-going wrestling match.

Scandal launched our senior year in college. What started as a double-dare joke at a pinochle table grew into the Great Bermuda Shorts Rebellion.

Ohio's Indian summer turned Misery each hot October into a rain-tree garden of dusty flaming color. Long cobwebs drifted lazily through the air, caught silver, and matted across the shoulders of black cassocks. Brushed off, the webs floated up again on the lazy heat, tangled in the apple trees bent for harvest, and sailed out toward the sun. Across the long flaxen field grass, the trees in the deep woods crackled yellow.

The first autumn leaves fell into the still pools alongside the forbidden river that rolled slow and beautiful on the western edge of Misery's acreage. Leaves sank halfway under the quiet, clear-green water, suspended, beautiful, as if no winter rain would ever come, *wild river*, muddying and brown, to freeze them brittle upon the slate gray banks where boys, in warm weather and cold, often smoked and waded and skated against all the rules, because the river was out of bounds, *forbidden river*, and we were never allowed to leave the property. The river was the Beyond Which Not of Misery's western front.

Rumors from Rome came with every letter about the approaching Vatican Council. Prayers in English began to replace Latin in the Mass in the scorching October when a pair of seminarians appeared on the tennis courts wearing Bermuda shorts. Their daring display rippled through Misery. In Rome, the Pope was planning to convene, *aggiornamento*, all the bishops of the world to open a window that would let a breath of fresh air blow through the Church.

The next day two things happened: a seminarian played a guitar during Mass while we all sang "Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore," and later in the morning, a doubles set of four more boys, tentative in their own Bermuda shorts, joined the first pair.

None of the faculty noticed the high jinks. The priests were busy arguing the canonical correctness of whether a priest should say Mass the

traditional way with his back to the congregation, or the new way, facing the people. The most senior seminarians, about to be ordained, wondered would facing 'front' or 'back' affect the design of their new gold-and-white Mass vestments.

Father Gunn, traipsing around in his full Marine Corps uniform, was preoccupied with a Misericordia reunion of military chaplains who had served in World War II, minus my Uncle Les who sent his regrets. "Who," Father Gunn asked me, as if I knew, "does that uncle of yours think he is?" He focused on me. "And what does that make you?"

I ran from Father Gunn. I loved my Uncle Les.

The following Saturday afternoon a Roman holiday spirit swept the softball fields as one or two boys, then whole teams of seminarians, appeared in Bermuda shorts cut with scissors from black khaki wash pants.

Rector Karg made no comment. He paced the faculty walking path chain-smoking cigarettes and knuckling his black rosary through his fingers. He was nervous, in a personal retreat, isolated away in his dark front quarters, waiting for the latest alarming gossip from the planners of the Vatican Council in Rome.

Sunday the temperature reached ninety-six. Monday was hotter. By Tuesday, our black wool cassocks, wet from three suffocating days in chapel and classrooms, began to break unnaturally in their drape, about knee-high. Wednesday, shortly before noon, the fad escalated to barely disguised sniggering when a seminarian crossing his legs in Father Polistina's philosophy class hitched up his cassock and revealed an expanse of bare leg.

Still the priests said nothing. Thursday and Friday the movement spread, a week old. Boys began to take sides. In the overheated chapel, audible gasps, pro and con, interrupted the Gregorian chant as here and there, entering in procession, boy after boy genuflected, one knee forward, up, revealing through the slit in the cassocks the bare white flesh of hairy naked knees.

Saturday morning Gunn canceled our last study hall before noon and scheduled an unexpected assembly in the auditorium. He stood at attention in his dress blues.

"The ship's hit the sand." Mike sat next to Lock.

"As Cleopatra said to Antony," Lock whispered, "I'm not prone to argue."

Gunn called for silence, and exploded. "Three weeks you've been back here at Misericordia," he said. "Three weeks and already you stand in open rebellion. Another mutiny! I can somewhat understand you breaking rules

three months from now. But at the beginning of the year, at least then, we expect you men to come back with certain resolutions. If you degenerate this far in the first three weeks, where will you be in three months?"

The hundred-forty seminarians of Misery's college department sat squirming in absolute silence.

"I have been busy in town," Gunn said. "I trusted you collegians to be beyond caprice of the high-school boys. But no. Not you overgrown boys. You've less internal discipline than the greenest boots I ever chaplained in the military. I need not mention what you've done. Your consciences will remind you not only of your breaches"—someone snorted a laugh—"of classroom manners but also of chapel reverence for our Blessed Lord in the tabernacle. There were naked calves in the chapel."

"How 'C. B. de Biblical,'" Lock whispered.

More snorts disguised as coughing.

"There is a poison upon us," he said, "and the only changes around here, Vatican Council or no Vatican Council, are changes I make."

In the nearly eight years I had known Father Gunn as disciplinarian, I had never seen him so viciously controlled. He was not lashing out, flailing in every direction. He had the focus of a rifleman sniping from the Dome of Saint Peter's.

"I know it will be nearly impossible to find the ringleaders of this insidious movement. But I plan, indeed, I intend to start right here right now. You will all stand."

"God, no," Mike said under cover of the sounds of the auditorium seats rising up.

"I intend to weed this hot bed." The set of his face had never been more calculating. "You will all hoist your cassocks up over your shoulders and file one by one down the aisle past me. If your bare limbs are showing, you will sound off as you pass. I will record your name which Rector Karg will add to his personal shit list. Action, I can assure you, will be taken. Some of you boys will be shipping out."

Even nervous laughter ceased at the fatal shuffling of feet as a long line formed through the room.

"Storm troopers," Mike whispered. "Never trust a German institution." In our fourth year learning "Hoch Deutsch" with Father Kleinschmidt, we were reading *Der Tod in Venedig, Death in Venice,* trying to figure out what Thomas Mann was actually saying about entrances and exits and gowns and uniforms as we translated him line by line day after day.

"Lambs right, goat knees left." Lock turned to me. "Are you washed in the Blood of the Lamb?"

I showed him my bare knees in my blue Bermuda shorts. "Goat knees," I said.

Ahead, first in line in front of Gunn, Hank the Tank stood with his cassock gathered up around his thick waist. Lock could see his chunky immodest calves. "Goat knees," he said.

Mike shuffled past Gunn. "Hager," he mumbled and let his cassock fall down his Bermudas around his bare calves.

"O'Hara," I said.

Lock came next, perfectly dressed as always, home free.

"Two-out-of-three boys: naked goat-knees," Mike tallied.

"Safety in numbers," I said. "Bermuda shorts: the new vestments in the coming attractions for *Vatican II: The Sequel*."

"The most swift punishment I can mete out," Gunn said, "is to deny tonight's movie to this entire college department. No one will be allowed to watch *The Song of Bernadette*. The names I have collected certainly deserve no entertainment and you others deserve the same punishment, being collaborators in silence."

"What's the good of being good, Lock?" Mike asked. "You miss the first movie of the year same as anyone else."

In the refectory, we ate lunch in double-enforced silence, because Gunn was so furious he forbade us to talk at a meal during which talking was never permitted in the first place. In my sweltering room, I regretted I had been caught wearing Bermuda shorts. How could something that began as such a lark turn so serious that vocations ended up on the line with boys being shipped? I hadn't long to ponder before Mike and Lock coaxed me out of my room. "More absurdity?" I asked.

"Come on," Mike said. "Hank's got a bench down by Ski's garden."

The spring before, Ski had asked his mother to send him vegetable seeds so he could plant a garden in the woods near the pond we called Lake Gunn. He thought the spot secluded enough that no one would find it. But everyone knew and raided Ski's patch for what food it was worth, which wasn't much. Misery fed us, but we were five hundred growing boys who were always hungry. The German nuns who cooked for us served mystery meat gravied up in deep plastic bowls of noodles.

"Their specialty," Peter Rimski said his father said, "was pup-gullion where they'd take a pregnant dog and hang it by its feet and beat its belly till its guts fell out."

That's why the older seminarians taught the younger how to raid the priests' refectory, stealing their food and cigarettes. That's why we smuggled in food from the outside. Bad food caused bad behavior that led to a venial kind of scofflaw rebellion. All this meant that most boys felt no guilt stealing from the priests or stealing from the crop behind the pond where Ski had tried to grow his own food with a stolen hoe.

"I'll come," I said.

Lock had a transistor radio built into the false bottom of his shaving kit. Transistors made Rector Karg insane. Never before had radios been small enough to hide. Sputnik was shrinking the world in the space race. I threw in some candy bars my mother had hidden in my suitcase. Mike had nothing. He was trying scrupulously to keep the rule exactly, not to muddle up whether he had a vocation. That was his business.

The beautiful afternoon was ours, a chance to get away together from the turmoil about Bermuda shorts. No doubt, Father Gunn and Rector Karg would inflate the perceived disobedience to seize upon some boys they had been trying to ship out anyway, because they didn't any longer want to feed their faces.

Down in the woods, the slanting acres between Misericordia and the forbidden western front of the deep river at the bottom of the valley seemed a million miles away from Gunn's regimentation. If we could never leave Misery's five hundred acres, then we could disappear into the woods, thick with trees, moss, and gouged with dusty shale ravines where we exchanged the hot marble corridors of Misericordia for the golden October.

Mike skipped stones across the pond. He couldn't pass the still pool without tossing something in it. I felt, at least since I had been reading Teilhard de Chardin—one of the new anthropologically-minded French Catholic philosophers—that it was something atavistic he was expressing.

"Atavistic, my ass," he shouted, pitching another stone into the small pond, rippling the mirror surface into multiple circles. "Why do you think everything has a hidden meaning?"

"I think the reason people like the ocean so much," I said, "or lakes and rivers, is because one day man kind of crawled up on the shore. *Ka-boom.*"

"Washed up," Mike said.

"It was a beginning," I said, "and we never forgot where we came from."

"If I was going to evolve," Mike said, "I'd never crawl up out of this pond on this shore. Little Lake Gunn isn't even a real lake."

"Gunn dug it with a road-grader."

"I prefer the river," Mike said. "It's natural."

We cut down the embankment through the undergrowth toward Ski's clearing.

"I mean," Mike said, "you know the lake's piss-poor."

"Quite the contrary," Lock said. "Boys piss in it all the time. Even Ryan's peed in it."

Mike stripped off a low branch. He flailed away at the brush ahead. We stopped.

Suddenly.

We stared at each other, *uh*, in one of those moments when truth surfaces.

"I wanted to get along in the seminary," Mike said to Lock. "Not to get in trouble." It was the first time Mike mentioned our talk of the past summer. "Ry said to come back and talk to some priest. I wanted to talk to Gunn, I guess, but I take one look at him and know what he'll say and do." He whipped at a small buckeye tree. "The rest of the faculty's worse. Wind them up, they say Mass and disappear for the day."

"Unless they come to inspect your legs," I said.

"Or to teach," Mike said, "which is worse."

"Congenital idiocy," Lock said. "Misericordia's holy reputation hides a history of intellectual incest. Take one student. Train him for twelve years to Misery's way of thinking. Pack him off somewhere conservative for a bit of advanced theological study. Recall him before he's finished, so he can teach for free room and board. Promise him if he's tractable he might someday get his doctorate in something not too worldly. Finally mince around so long both he and you forget the promise. Result: perfect blandness."

"The intellectual bloodline gets tired," Mike said.

"It's Appalachian when it's not Machiavellian," I said, leading the way toward the clearing. "That's no bench," I said. "It's a couch. Hank hauled it down here..."

"...on his back...," Lock said.

"...from Monsignor Linotti's suite. I think old Linotti died on it."

"Father Dryden," Lock said.

"Father Dryden," Mike said.

"Father Dryden," I said, "threw that cruddy couch out last week when he started remodeling Old Linotti's place." When Monsignor Linotti had died suddenly, alone, in his ascetic rooms, full of Greek classics, all Gunn had said was, "When you grow up and can't pee like a horse, see a doctor."

Six weeks earlier, the Reverend Christopher Dryden had returned to Misericordia, his alma mater, to teach. He quickly picked up a following.

Boys favoring the progressive side of the Church announced a major breakthrough in seminary education: a faculty member observed speaking to seminarians outside of class.

Like a Kennedy, Dryden played tennis and touch football, and on Saturday afternoons after a game jumped into the traveling wrestling matches that continued like relay matches, boy tagging boy, on the lawns, in the gym, the halls, the dorms, the playing fields, the woods, the river bank, day in and day out, month after month, year after year. The wrestling never stopped.

Word was Dryden was a great guy, well rounded by his post-Misery years of study at Innsbruck and Rome. Brilliant. He could speak with authority on almost anything. One of the highest IQ's in Misery's history. The perfect model of the modern new-breed priest.

After the first week, I hated the Reverend Christopher Dryden for better reasons than his always jumping over the tennis net between sets. He usurped me. He quoted Catholic writers I felt were my Irish preserve. He knew Coventry Patmore's line that the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins was "the only orthodox and saintly man in whom religion had absolutely no narrowing effect upon his general opinions and sympathies."

Dryden was too much the wholesome type of priest pictured in the seminary brochures. No one could be that absolutely perfect, unless that kind of perfection was the secret of the priesthood itself. His kind of athletic good looks, exuding the untouchable masculine appeal that blooms in celibate men, was the kind that sets some women off on a mission to seduce virginal priests.

He seemed hired from some modeling agency as the perfect prototype for aspiring boys who hoped to secure some golden image of themselves in a seminary cassock and surplice. I never believed those seminary recruiting ads in the Catholic press any more than the ads around them for the truth about arthritis or how to be sure with the rhythm method.

Mike hit the late Monsignor Linotti's couch with his stick, flailing dust and dye out of the rotting print upholstery.

"Dryden's redoing Old Linotti's whole suite. Throwing out all the traditional early-Misery junk. He's reforming his rooms, he said, modernizing medievalism to make the medieval thoroughly modern."

"I bet Gunn never heard of that," Mike said. "If they didn't have it in the Marines, no one ought to have it now. Newfangled effeminacy. We got trouble in River City. Right here." Mike marched around the garden waving his stick like Robert Preston. Our glee club was always adapting show tunes for our concerts, censoring any reference to girls. We sang a song

from *South Pacific* with new lyrics: "There is nothing like a steak." Such a twist, of course, only added mystique to the subtracted original lyric.

"What next?" Lock said. "What next?"

That precisely, I guessed, was what the whole faculty was asking about the dashing advent of Christopher Dryden. Something inside Misericordia was shifting on its axis. Years before, the seminarians had been docile, obedient, reading only the literature and philosophers required for class, and mostly outwitting the priests by drinking altar wine in the attic while sitting on the boxes of silks used for the Virgin's May altar. I saw color-slide pictures of one of those parties with seminarians, all fresh young veterans from World War II, later ordained priests, slugging smuggled bourbon right out of the bottle.

Gunn, I think, really preferred that kind of rebellion. It was easy to deal with. He caught them, if he could, and shipped one or two of the leaders. Then he had discipline. For awhile. Drinking didn't scare him, because he knew the thought behind a drink or two.

But with Dryden's coming, the old shenanigans had mutated and Gunn, consulting with Rector Karg, could not understand the refined edge of the new expressiveness. Change was blowing through the Church. On the sly, we read about the worker-priests in France who supported themselves at jobs and did not live in a rich rectory supported by their flock. Dryden had returned from two years at the Biblical Institute in Rome with a third glamorous year with the Vatican diplomatic corps, changed, despite all the formation of his years at Misery.

He had come back from the world to Misery. He had lunched with Sophia Loren, and he had met Fellini during the filming of *La Dolce Vita*, which was condemned by the Legion of Decency, and he had worked with Roman charities for destitute boys. He had sped through Rome in his own red Frogeye 1959 Austin-Healey. He was shocking. He spent time talking with the seminarians outside of class. Mike, who began seeing him for counseling, reported he gave a glimpse of priestly professionalism: what it was for a man to be a good priest on the human level.

Perhaps this priest was the priest I had hoped would initiate me fully into the inner secrets of the priesthood. He had introduced a new intellectual honesty. Our Misery education in humanities and theology had always been excellent even though rigid. Scholastically, Misery was the Oxford of Catholic seminaries, and Dryden was the new champion, at least, for those ambitious boys who planned to get ahead in the priesthood.

A few moral theology books written by the new breed of theologians approved by the Pope circulated more openly despite cautions by Misery's

old guard. Boyish conversation became at times serious shop talk. Rules were kept and broken under a new rationale of personal responsibility that made Father Gunn angry and Rector Karg enraged.

"The Communists are bad enough," Karg remarked, "without this creeping socialism in the Catholic Church."

I hated Christopher Dryden, probably as much as Gunn did, but for different reasons. I disliked him as a person. Something about him I recognized without knowing what it was. Gunn resented his undermining Misery's safely institutionalized uniformity. I resented the way he made the priesthood into a show-business cult of personality. Dryden had emboldened, almost immediately upon his arrival in the small-town world of Misery, a disturbing shift in values. He was like one of those drifters in the movies who blows into town during a long hot summer and changes everybody.

His influence moved things fast. Suddenly, the unchallenged Reverend Disciplinarian, Father Gunn, ran into some opposition shipping a seminarian for reading books or for knowing the latest in Protestant biblical exegesis, though Gunn did construct an expulsion case for one seminarian caught reading Martin Luther's autobiography in chapel.

Books became a battle ground, and, though we shared a common roof, the faculty priests never knew a tenth of what went on. If, so quickly, the reading of rebellious theology books was allowed *sub rosa*, I went farther *under the rose* to read every novel and poem mentioned in our English class, even *Leaves of Grass*, which was so beautiful, I cried, and wondered why it was on the Vatican's *Index of Forbidden Books*. Unless a boy grew really careless, even Gunn wasn't so crazy as to try to explain he was shipping a seminarian for reading.

Getting even for many of the boys' late-night raids on the faculty food lockers, Gunn took to raiding our rooms, searching for books, transistor radios, and heating coils used to brew a cup of hot water for bouillon or coffee. Rector Karg himself conducted his own searches for forbidden books, magazines, anything that could justify him shipping out any boy who was wiser, and suddenly more aware, than they had bargained for. To protect true vocations from worldly poison, they needed concrete reasons to ship out the intellectually curious and the abstractly rebellious. Gunn grew clever building his shipping cases around, quote, minor infractions of the holy rule that fell into a not so minor pattern, unquote.

Misery had no mercy, especially on boys the priests had fed and taught and counseled for nine, ten, eleven years. It was not a time in church history for a seminarian to get careless or expose any weakness. I hid my

shoe box full of personal things away behind some pipes in the boiler room where Gunn would never look.

"Beautiful day." Lock flopped onto the couch of the dear departed Monsignor Linotti. He peeled his shirt, planted his feet on a crate, faced the west.

"You'll burn with the late sun," I said.

"Here's a burn for you." Mike tossed a match at Lock.

"Watch it," Lock said. "You'll start the couch on fire."

"The burning of Rome," I said.

"Vatican II is burning down, burning down." Mike lit a cigarette and tossed the match at me.

"Lock's in the hot seat," I said, "on Nero's couch."

"Hank Rimski, the zero, is no Nero and no hero," Lock said.

Our ongoing war with Hank, his brother, whom Lock had begun to call "PeterPeterPeter," and all those holy seminarians who thought they were destined to be bishops and cardinals continued. Their attitude made the couch in the woods symbolic. Ski's garden had become their choice retreat. Hank said PeterPeterPeter and his crowd called the garden "Little Rome."

Mike lit a match. "Look at this." He set the whole matchbook on fire.

"You're demented." Lock stretched out his full length on the couch. "I'm not getting up."

"Wanna play Joan of Arc?" Mike threw the burning matchbook at the cloth-covered couch. The wind snuffed it out.

"Jeez, if you're really going to burn it," Lock stood up, "dump it over on the garden. The weeds are too dry out here."

We tipped the couch upside down. Mike lit the upholstery and the wind whipped a spiral of black smoke up into the bright air. "Ha!" Suddenly, brilliantly, fire engulfed the whole couch. "Jeez!" The wind cracked the flames. "Christ!" We retreated back from the blazing heat.

"Fire is amazing," Mike said.

"The whole woods will burn," I yelled. "We need water!"

"The pond's too far," Mike said.

"Throw dirt on it." Lock beat at the burning grass with his shirt. "Get that side of the clearing."

"Break up that crate box, Ry. Hurry." Mike stamped around on the burning grass, flames licking at his shoes.

We beat at it, clawing handfuls of smothering dirt. "Piss on it," I kept yelling at the visions of the goddam woods burning down, flames licking up Misery's bricks, burning the wood floors and desks and papers and

books and chapel pews, melting the gold chalices and the gold tabernacle, fireballs shooting up the bell tower, flames roaring out the top, setting the bells ringing madly, like the fall of Troy, fire itself the flaming Trojan Horse, burning down the school house, sacking the seminary, like all the war stories in our Latin and Greek lessons, and Gunn shipping us out.

The wind funneled the main fire hot up through the frame of the couch that was blazing alone in the center of the garden while wider and wider a ring of fire spread out through the dry grass.

"Piss on it, goddammit." I really had never said anything like that before except once or twice to show off. Now the words seemed commanding. My heart pounded in my chest. We were choking on the smoke. But finally we beat the fire out. At the edge of the burned circle, grass smoked and died. The couch collapsed and crumbled all over itself on top of the scorched garden patch.

Lock and I laid down inside the warm circle of ash-white black, exhausted.

"Oh God," was all I said. "Oh God, Gunn would have killed us."

Mike was laughing, dancing, mimicking how I had kept screaming, "Goddammit! Piss on it!"

"This sure ought to fix Hank's buns," Mike said.

Lock, for the first time in his straight-A life, looked happily ridiculous, sitting with part of his burnt shirt in his blackened hand. Dust stuck all over him stripped to the waist. He looked like a wild blond Indian. I pulled off my sweatshirt to my T-shirt and tossed it to him.

We threw more dirt on the couch, and on each other, in a sudden wild dirt fight of dust and ash, jumping, wrestling, tossing each other to the ground, constantly changing two against one, everyone for himself in a free-for-all, until Mike stopped, leaving Lock straddling my chest, all of us screaming like Indians with laughter, leaping up, heading back through the woods to the school, laughing, running, the three of us almost hysterical with excitement, singing, "Cheer, boys, cheer! Old Misery's burning down! Cheer, boys, cheer! It's burning to the ground. The faculty will be run out of town. There'll be a hot time in the old Mis tonight!"

Hank the Tank was in a small basement room lifting a set of barbells and dumbbells Dryden had donated. We stopped at the door, still laughing, to make fun of Tank, who was working at making himself even bigger. Lock joked about how seminarians weren't sure about their body image. Dryden had talked Gunn into designating a special exercise room. Gunn at first protested such a gym would be temptation to a worldly

preoccupation with the body, but Dryden reminded him of the disciplined Marines and their stamina.

Gunn half-capitulated and assigned over part of a boiler room, though he was by no means convinced of this kind of a *mens sana in corpore sano, a healthy mind in a healthy body*. Ever so often in assembly he made uneasy mention that it was all right to care for the body, but not to get all preoccupied with it, and not to eat spices or a lot of pepper, and not to look at it more than you had to for hygiene, and always to be sure to sleep on your right side with your hands folded across your breast so you wouldn't feel your heart beating and start thinking about blood and what it could do to a boy's body.

"Hey, Tank," Mike announced from the door, "we're from the Friends of the Friendless Friends Society and, we regret, we reject you."

"Drop dead," Tank said. He chewed a wad of bubble gum like chaw tobacco.

"Hey, Tank," I said from the door, "how much do you weigh?"

"What's it to you?" he asked. "You're all covered with dirt."

"The Tank used to be a two-hundred-pound weakling," I said to Mike, "and they kicked sand in his face at the beach. But they don't any more."

"Why not?" Mike said.

"Why not?" I said. "They blacktopped the beach!" *Ka-boom*.

"Ain't you guys funny as a rubber crutch," Hank the Tank said. He turned his fat back to us, pulled at his seat where his hacked-off khakis had ridden up, cut the cheese at us, then rotated his shoulders, spreading them, arching his elbows slightly from the sides. He stepped and turned. Like a strong man in the circus, he faced us, squatted behind a weight, gripped it, and began a lift. Showing off, he inhaled.

"Sniff that cheese," I said. "Sou-ee!"

Hank the Tank stood up straight with the iron weight at his huge thighs, curled it to his chest. He face reddened with the exertion and a vein knotted down his forehead.

As he pressed the bar with all his force above his head, Mike said, "Down in Ski's garden we burned up your couch."

"You freaks!" He exploded. He dropped the weight to his knees, threw it rolling across the cement floor. "You damn freaks." He moved toward Mike. "Get out!" His voice careened up in pitch. "Get the hell out of here before I rip your balls off. Aaaaaaah!"

"You're screaming soprano," I said.

"I'll ruin you," Hank yelled. "I'll get you three shipped out."

"Tough toenails," I said.

We retreated to the hallway. Hank slammed the gym door. He was cursing and shoving chairs around.

"He was so mad his voice squeaked," Lock said.

We looked at each other, blackened by the smoke, and suddenly found the leg inspection and the fire and the weight-lifting tenor hilarious.

"What a day," I said.

"We sure snapped his jock." Mike was swept up into our horseplay, happy, as if he never had a problem with his vocation during the summer.

"Come on, Lock," I said. "Toss me back my sweat shirt."

The gym door opened. Light silhouetted Hank the Tank, who screamed in his enraged soprano: "The glee club! The choir! The chanters! You three will never sing in this seminary again. I'll see to it."

"You?" I said. "You and what army?"

September 26, 1960
The Kennedy-Nixon Debate

Within a month, Father Christopher Dryden's Sunday afternoon soirees collected all the best collegians into his newly decorated rooms. His open-door policy was shocking. An affront to the established order. Until his return to Misericordia, seminarians were never allowed into faculty suites. That policy changed after Dryden and Rector Karg were overheard in a noisy argument that emerged from Rector Karg's office in comic dialog balloons: *Never!* Yes! Change! *No!* Brave new world! *Heresy!* Papal decree! *Against my better judgment!* Thank you very much!

Dryden had arrived crisp with the fresh smell of Rome on him. He seemed backed by all the power of all the bishops of all the world who would be called to the Vatican by the Pope to remodel the Church. That power made him exciting to some boys, but Rector Karg thought such leanings dangerous. Allegiances changed daily. Pre-council anticipation fueled change. Pope John XXIII had set the Catholic clock ticking. A recording of the African *Missa Luba* experimentally replaced Gregorian chant. Out in the world, nuns free of full medieval habit were teaching Catholic congregations at Mass to sing "Kumbaya, My Lord, Kumbaya!" Inside Misery, I feared that vocations and virtues like purity itself were being cracked open, maybe even redefined to suit the institutional worldly side marketing Church politics.

I felt like a spy on an inside track, because a small Catholic publisher hired me through a friendly faculty priest to translate from German

into English a three-volume moral theology text written by the Reverend Bernard Häring, who was consultant theologian to the theological commission preparing the agenda of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican.

My translation of Father Häring's ground-breaking *Law of Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity* was my first free-lance writing job, and I earned about the same as the French worker-priests: ten cents a page for fifteen hundred pages.

My classmates thought the job was glamorous, the book maybe dangerous, and the schedule probably impossible. I added the translation work to my full study schedule to consume myself, to lose myself, and to test the expansive reaches of my vocation. "Many are called," Christ said, "but few are chosen."

Mike attended Dryden's Sunday soirees weekly, out of gratitude, he said, for the excellent counseling help Dryden was giving him. He almost apologized, Mike did, with every report he gave me. He saw me react to Dryden's immense popularity by throwing myself into making Father Häring's long German episodic sentences translate into short colloquial English. As I translated sheet after typed sheet, the intent of the new theology became clearer to me. I saw my chance, secretly, to be Karg's worst nightmare. I dared loosen even more the tone of some of the author's opinions about sin. I became the old Roman maxim: *Translator, traditor, The translator is a traitor.*

During those Sunday afternoons, I played basketball with another, less complicated, crowd of boys who cared nothing for seminary suckups trying Dryden's Mass vestments on for size. My skin crawled, imagining them posing, sashaying, and gesturing like some Vatican fashion show. I myself never entered Christopher Dryden's suite—never, that is, until I found him more useful than provocative, because he had the first and only television set in all of Misericordia, and he used it like an apple in Eden.

"Jack Kennedy's debating Nixon tonight," Mike said. "Dryden got permission for a few guys to watch the special up at his place. Why don't you come, Ryan?"

"There's a movie tonight," I said. "*Moby Dick*."

"Which the freshmen think is a disease."

"Bad sex puns. That's the level of humor in this German kindergarten."

"You're so uptight. Come on. Relax. Live a little."

"Kennedy I would like to see," I said.

"You can catch a gander at Chris' rooms." He knew curiosity had me. "Only six weeks to the election." We had all turned twenty-one, old enough to vote for the first time. "Right after rosary."

Father Christopher Dryden himself ushered me through his door. "Welcome," he said, "to my drawing room."

I was not about to be strong-armed. I kind of laughed, "Uh!"

He was towheaded and lean, right for a tennis player. His priestly hand, gaunt with gristle and calloused, motioned me toward his couch which was eight feet long. Those boys sitting there shifted on the single long seat cushion, but the "settle" as he called it looked too straight-back to be comfortable, so I veered to a corner near his component stereo tuner. I gauged the room from my standing vantage. Almost all the boys were smoking. Three college seniors, smoking lavish meerschaum, *mirror sham*, tobacco pipes, lounged together off the seat and arms of one Morris chair, behind which hung a painting of John Henry Cardinal Newman, whose book *The Idea of a University* was hidden under my mattress.

His remodeling completely transformed the original Misery three-room suite. To emphasize the natural woodwork, he had painted the walls in schemes of greens, browns, and yellow, stenciled around the top at the ceiling. He had stripped the heavy curtains from the trademarked Misery windows and left them undraped to exhibit the light spilling in the clear glass at the bottom and the ornate stained glass at the top.

Six or seven top boys sat around the dark oak library table where a tall ceramic vase, decorated with irises, stood beautifully empty. Two other boys, each almost disappearing in two deep wooden chairs, lounged gesturing languidly with cigarettes whose smoke curled up under a stained-glass floor lamp.

On a green-and-yellow area rug, showing off the bare wood floors, three boys sat paging through an array of worldly magazines they found in the glass-fronted oak bookcase, on which sat a hand-hammered copper lamp with a mica shade like I'd only seen in old Marshall Field catalogs from Chicago.

Everything in the room, including a richly framed color print titled "A Converted British Family Sheltering a Christian Missionary from the Persecution of Druids," bragged that Dryden's family had money. This was not the cell of a worker-priest. Overhead, the indirect lighting from a suspended stained-glass shade lit the room like a set in a play. I recognized the taste and tone from the mansion of the parish rectory where my Uncle Les was assistant pastor. More than one vocation to the priesthood was motivated by materialism.

Dryden had defined the wall opposite the door with ritual masks and spears and textiles brought from his Ordination trip to Indian reservations out west. Several black-and-white photographs, taken years before, featured real Indians standing stoically outside their teepees. On his dark and ornate desk sat a lushly baroque ceramic ink stand from Italy. A single lamp shown down upon it, spotting, I felt, his cocky Roman credentials.

Opposite, under a priceless Venetian triptych of Mary, Joseph, and the Child, stood a French spinet he had purchased in Florence. His one uncontrollable passion, he had told the Sunday group, was music. He invariably entertained them with his greatest classical hits each Sunday. He played the piano, his courtiers said, expertly. With music and readings of poetry, he charmed the suckups at his Sunday soirees.

This night, two seminarians sat on the piano bench and knocked out the usual four-handed duet of "Heart and Soul."

"Penny for your thoughts." Mike edged up beside me.

"This all reminds me," I said, "of a poem by Robert Browning."

"I like Browning," Mike said, "but I like Kipling better."

"I don't know," I said, "I've never kippled."

We specialized in refurbishing old jokes.

"A poem," I said, "by Browning. 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church.'"

"Ryan, why do you always confuse literature class with life?"

"For the same reason you confuse Bible stories with life."

"Ape!"

"Monkey!"

"Beatnik!"

"When's the debate start?" I asked

"Half an hour."

I felt tricked. "You got me here early."

"To get a taste of Chris' style."

"It's bourgeois," I said. "Not worker-priest."

"Also, he wants us all to mingle first."

"So," I said shrugging, "that's the curse that goes with the diamond."

"TV or not TV," Mike said.

From Dryden's corner of the room, the conversation heated up.

"But our battles don't carry any universal overtones," someone protested.

"Ah," Dryden prolonged the syllable as a sign. The room quieted. "The causes," he said, bringing his topic to the fore, "for the defeat of the

human condition lie often in the individual, but more often within the institution which subsumes him."

Lock stood up next to the spinet. "That's not really true," Lock said, uncaged in the free atmosphere Dryden generated. "People fight themselves and call it the institution..."

"The seminary," a voice interjected.

"All right, the seminary," Lock continued, "or the world or whatever frame it is they're involved in."

"You're on to something there." Dryden retrieved his upstage position. "Several years ago at Catholic University we heard some rather shocking gossip about Misericordia. You remember, that fellow who took the freshmen to the shower room to learn the size of the average penis."

"Porky Puhl," Hank the Tank said, "was in our class, but he was definitely not in our class."

Everyone laughed, ha ha.

"But he did 'measure up,'" Dryden said.

The courtiers roared.

Dryden poured something into a small glass. "It's good to ventilate some topics."

I grew wary hearing their lurid details about a shipped boy's impurity.

"What's he drinking?" I asked Mike in a whisper.

"Pernod," he said. "There's Coke for us iced in the bathtub."

Dryden sniffed his glass. "My theory on that poor fellow is that the seminary merely provided, by its very nature as an institution, the hothouse environment in which the individual's neurotic tendencies could bloom."

"Then there is something wrong with such an institution," Lock said.

"Maybe," Dryden sipped at his glass. "If one subscribes to the theory that people are good and institutions are evil."

"Do you believe that?" Lock said.

"This is 1960. A new decade. I believe that when people are evil or misguided or mentally ill, it is the institution to which they belong, be it country, corporation, or church, that is responsible for their dis-integration."

"Then you don't hold Porky Puhl responsible," Lock countered.

"For his curiosity, no. Was his question intellectual?"

"It was cock-eyed." Hank paraded his pun.

Ha ha ha.

"His guilt, I contend, is mitigated, and is inversely proportional to the guilt of the institution which fostered and fed the growth of his neurosis."

I pushed Mike aside. "Personal guilt is impossible? I have always taken personal responsibility for myself in the face of every impersonal institutionalization forced upon me."

"Bravo!" Dryden beamed as if I were a new devotee. "Proceed."

"I'm responsible for myself," I said.

Sporadic applause.

"I have a social consciousness."

Ha ha ha.

"Nevertheless I have a Roman Catholic conscience. So I wonder, what if I am wrong in my personal stand within the institutional seminary or the institutional Church? Then what?"

"Yes, then what?" Lock asked. "We stand up to Gunn and Rector Karg. We read books the Church itself has condemned."

"We risk getting shipped. We risk our very vocations," I said. "Trying to learn something about the world without becoming worldly."

"We now talk to you, a priest!" Lock said. "What a contradiction. For all these years, the priesthood is our ideal, but the priests—our teachers—are our worst enemies."

"How do we know," I said, "you're not a turncoat?"

"Or a double-agent?" Dryden said.

"Yeah," I intoned comically, ambiguously.

"You don't," he said.

"We need you," Lock said, "or priests like you, to teach us how to be effective personal agents for Christ. That's what a priest is. Yet as seminarians we're trapped in an impersonal tyranny Christ never dreamed of." Smattering of applause. "We're supposed to be the institutional Church, but we can't stand its present condition."

"As priests, as persons, we need some safe harbor," I said. "A priestly vocation shouldn't have to mean personal isolation. Now, with all this change from Rome, where do we stand? I have a vocation to priestly chastity, but what if...what if the Pope, during Vatican II, commands priests to marry..."

Ha ha ha. He he he. Ho ho ho.

"Ahhh, then!" Dryden was triumphant, "what would we all do? What would you do? Or you do?" He looked around the very anxious room. "Or you? If the Church suddenly commanded priests to marry!"

"What?"

"Shocking, isn't it? Look at your faces. What a thought. How our lives would change." He stared the whole room down. "Would you do it? Would you 'marry' on command the way you 'don't marry' on command?"

Dryden circled through his crowded smoky room, taking random ecstatic kicks at furniture and pillows and doctrine and dogma. "I am," he said, "a follower of T. S. Eliot. I subscribe to his theorem that the greatest treason is to do the right thing for the wrong reason. I also very much think that all institutions would be better organized along the lines of the religious communities of the Middle Ages. A modernized reorganization, of course. Perhaps into communes of peace and justice and love."

I stepped back to the shadow of the corner. "Mike," I said, "something's got to happen to me this winter or I'll die."

"Cool it," he whispered.

"You each do what you must for yourself," Dryden said. "People always do. Priests are people. As persons, you must withstand the impersonal institution for the right reason, the reason proper to your own existential soul. The impersonal must be resisted. Resist it for whatever reason is right for you, not solely for the fashionable sake of rebelling. This suite I have changed into a personal statement that nevertheless remains true to the worker-artists who built Misery with their own hands."

"Hmmph," I said.

Dryden stopped beneath a large black-and white photograph of himself sailing with Senator Jack Kennedy on vacation at Martha's Vineyard three months before in June. "Priests, you say, need safe harbor. So true. Priests ought to be more than prayer machines, vending masses to distract their libidos."

"Two-four-six-eight," a boy chanted. "How we gonna sublimate?" He was hissed quiet.

Dryden laughed and picked up the word. "Some physical sublimation must occur, but such purity must find intellectual or esthetic expression, or the person the priest is will crack up, go crazy, turn to the bottle. Christianity is, after all, the ultimate achievement of Greek culture. But always there has been, and is now, even in this sweeping time of change in the Church, too much sterility, loss, and defeat in the priesthood. There need be no sterility in intellectual life, or in spiritual life." He turned, sweeping in the whole room, "We are surrounded by beauty. We are ourselves beautiful creatures of God's grace."

I thought to myself, this guy has escaped from a cuckoo clock. "This year," I whispered to Mike, "something's got to happen to me."

"You won't be a seminarian all your life," he said under his breath.

"Thank God! In four years, I'll be a priest!"

"You've got two hands." Christopher Dryden stared straight at me. "Start wringing them."

Everyone laughed. I pulled at my Roman collar.

"Resist institutionalization to the degree you must," Dryden said. "You must resist, if you have," he glanced my way, "any conscience. Make a stand, passive if need be, but a stand, a commitment, someplace in your intellectual life. There's no difference between praying and thinking."

He took a long dramatic pause that pulled the focus of every boy to him.

"If pushed by any institution to give up your intellect, your will, or your personal conscience, you must consider rebellion, civil war, disobedience. Even the bishops eventually to be seated at the Vatican Council cannot legitimately sit and argue about granting the right to the individual conscience. Every person has that right, bishops' ruling or no bishops' ruling. There is no such thing as a correct theology. The Church speaks, yes, but the Church has spoken, and the Church will speak. The verb tenses evolve. What the Church has said is not necessarily what the Church will say. The individual conscience, in the present, can live by anticipated future morality."

I almost liked him for redefining vocation in terms of the person who was called, and responsible personally.

"You all in one way or another," Dryden said, "must resist adolescence, isolation, and the lack of counseling the best you can. Opt for the original, personal experience of life," he said. "Don't settle for the institutional ritualization of experience. That can change, and is changing in Rome at this very moment."

He looked at his wrist watch, and gestured to a boy eagerly waiting to turn on the TV.

"This is no commercial," he said, "but I'm available at any hour to any one of you."

He dimmed the overhead chandelier. His twelve-inch television sprang crackling snowy to a stark rectangle of black and white coming live from Chicago.

Senator Kennedy smiling.

Vice-President Nixon nervous.

Questions.

Answers.

Quemoy and *Matsu*.

Kennedy trouncing Nixon with the two names of those two disputed Asian islands.

The television picture clicking, podium to podium.

Kennedy puncturing the air with his driving forefinger.

Nixon leaning back, clinging with both hands to his lectern.

Barrages of the right words. Kennedy unloading, growing more handsome, articulate, self-assured, youthful.

Nixon disagreeing, his lack of a forefinger, the words not coming, the sweat running down his nose, streaking the pancake makeup he used to hide his five-o'clock shadow.

Dryden's close, crowded room, dark, boiling with smoke, silhouetting heads wreathed with rolling blue halos of burning tobacco.

I was amazed, transformed, transfigured.

Irish Jack Kennedy was the first politician I'd ever seen who didn't look as old as my grandfather.

Leaving Dryden's for night prayers, Lock said. "Some advisor should have informed Nixon, off, exactly, what continent those two islands are."

January 20, 1961

The evening of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's Inauguration Day, the after-supper ritual of our small lounge room was more excited than usual. The talk in the dim parlor, made dimmer by the smoke of the cigarettes allowed only in this room, pursued the new reality of our lives in the televised events of the Inauguration. Jack Kennedy was a new dawn of a new day. The feeling was palpable. The Oath of Office in the freezing snow. Himself, Kennedy, redheaded with a top hat, usually so bareheaded.

Cardinal Cushing reading a prayer while white smoke, like a hopeful omen, wafted out of his lectern from a short circuit. The ancient laureate Robert Frost reading his new inaugural poem in the biting cold Washington breeze. The triumphant parade through streets plowed clear of the deep snow that had blanketed the city quiet the night before.

John Kennedy was the ideal Catholic man. In our priestly quest for manliness, I wanted to be like him. I fully understood in my priestly heart what he meant on all levels, even the religious: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." The way my uncle had served as a priest-chaplain, I would be a worker-priest.

The air in the crowded lounge was blue. Cigar smoke, because Catholic Jack Kennedy smoked cigars, hung like a rug vibrating with the upper reaches of Puccini spinning rpm's at the delicate fingers of the opera crowd who fantasized political connection between Washington and Rome.

Christmas vacation had ended less than three weeks prior to Jack's exciting inauguration, so I was depressed, gasping for breath, afraid the old

stuffed furniture would fold around and smother me in its worn unhappening arms.

A boy who carried himself as if he would be bishop turned the stereo louder. I cursed him, afraid I would never surface for air, suffocating in the room jammed with determined young men all dressed in black.

I was making extra visits to the chapel during play time to stare up at the huge crucifix over the main altar where hung the Christ I was to become when, as a priest, I became an *alter Christus, another Christ*. I always lived alone among all the other boys, but in the chapel, I could be left alone. I had been studying hard. Twenty-eight semester hours in physics and philosophy and modern history. Trying to decipher whatever anyone said about the needs of priests. Not only the way priests studied, and not only the way they administered the sacraments, or said Mass. Wondering how priests actually lived, minute to minute, how they felt emotion, how they handled temptation. Translating the daring Father Bernard Häring's German moral theology trilogy. Writing on the side for the Catholic press. Determined feature articles about *brazeros*, Mexican migrant workers. Winking allegorical short stories about "The Untimely Death of Juan Cristobal." Driven poems about men and women too busy in the world to realize all the grace God poured on them.

I wrote one feature article about James Dean, who had been dead only four years. To get it published, I passed it off as a moral cautionary tale: "James Dean: Magnificent Failure." Rector Karg, who censored every word of writing any seminarian mailed out, okayed the sinner angle, but said no one would publish it because James Dean was the glorification of sickness. He was very angry when he opened my incoming mail and found that the first place I sent it, *The Catholic Preview of Entertainment*, bought the fifteen-hundred word piece for two cents a word.

"Don't let it go to your head," he said. "Of course, you'll be donating your royalty check to the fund for the poor students, *die arme Studenten*." He handed me a pen to endorse the check. "I always keep my eye on you, and your accounts."

"Thank you, Rector," I said. I knelt down. I handed him my first royalty check. "Would you please give me your blessing?"

I had a seminar paper, "How Asceticism Leads to Mysticism," to finish and I was dead tired, an absolutely perfect state for mysticism. All my activity was making me more and more introverted. So much time to think. Six chapel periods a day. Thinking was the same as prayer. Writing was thinking. *Ergo*, writing was prayer. The syllogism suited me.

The priests said to look in on ourselves and find our identity and shape ourselves to Christ's priesthood. I was finding identity, or at least ego, but only between moments of almost compulsive plotting of story lines and distracted delectations on morose fancies that might lead me to find a potentially popular song hit to be lifted out of the hymns we sang, the way "Love Me Tender" came out of "Aura Lee."

I read *The Roman Martyrology* looking to adapt story lines of love and death and faith. I tried to discipline our long periods of classroom lectures, study hours, and meditation, like Gunn said, all the while we were tutored in the manly ways a priest must conduct himself.

"A priest can never be too masculine. A priest must be a man's man." Gunn advised that when we sat in the privacy of the rows of toilet stalls, we should concentrate on dropping our voices down to where we wore our jockstraps to make our voices deeper so our sermons would impress the men and women in our parishes. Sometimes, in the jakes, when all the stalls were filled, the room echoed with boys intoning, each competing to be deeper than the others, the first four notes of "Old Man River." All advice in any boys' school spins into jokes, satire, resistance.

Nevertheless, I prayed for the revelation of some priestly mystery to come and shine itself on me my senior year in college. I knew I was not like other men, not even like most of the seminarians sitting in the lounge arguing over "Kumbaya." But each is God's image, I thought, and God has many facets. They're drips, the Drips of Dryden, the way other boys were the Sons of a Gunn, and all were the Friendless Friends.

I vowed to respect both sides and worry only about the impossibly huge job of perfecting, dissecting, correcting myself. No one had appointed me referee in the seminary civil war. I had no right to force other boys to my choices of natural discipline, working my own way to mysticism through asceticism, physical penance, extra fasting, inserting a pebble in my shoe to hurt my foot when I walked, tying a hemp cord around the skin of my waist.

My vocation roared inside me. A fever was upon me. Perhaps I was not meant to be a traditional parish priest, or a French worker-priest, or even the editor for some bishop's diocesan newspaper. What if I were a mystic, like Father Polistina, in the Mystical Body of Christ? What if Christ's Stigmata, His Five Precious Wounds, opened in me and I began to bleed from actual wounds in my hands, and feet, and side, and ate nothing but Communion wafers, and lived to be really old like saintly Padre Pio in Italy, curing people with my touch?

I knelt alone in the chapel. The red sanctuary lamp, signifying Christ's real presence in the gold tabernacle, burned steady in the half-light. Gunn startled me. He came from behind and tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Why aren't you kneeling up in those front pews? It's Church Unity Octave Week, but why save the best seats for the Protestants?"

I had to say, really say, I preferred kneeling in the back. For perspective.

"We can be," Father Gunn said, "too ecumenical. Move up and kneel in the first pew. The real reason you're back here is you don't want to miss seeing everything that goes on. That's your main problem, O'Hara. As God is my witness, O'Hara! Oh ha-ha! You think you are God's witness. You've got a lot to learn," he said. "You're no judge of us. You think you're something. Just like your uncle. You're nothing."

Gunn rattled me more ways than one. He was so crazy. He was jealous I had an uncle who was a priest who had been a chaplain exactly like him. Gunn pressured me because Karg was pressuring him because the Pope was pressuring the Church.

"Gunn and Karg are the Iago Twins," Lock Roehm said. "No one understands their motives. Not really. Not even them. Not any of us."

I always took Gunn and Karg, like all priests, at face value, always interested in my own good even when I failed to perceive what I needed.

Later, Lock stood in the doorway of my room. He motioned me out to follow him.

"What is it?" I walked fast down the hall after him.

We passed the closed door of the lounge room where everybody's favorite hit album, the Ray Conniff Singers' *'S Wonderful*, was playing. Lock dragged me into the corner darkness under the stairwell. "It's serious," Lock said. "Something's up."

"Way up," Mike said. He was waiting for us under the stairs. "Something bad."

I sniffed the smell of sin, of possible impurity, but in charity I could not flee from my two best friends. Besides, backstairs gossip was the salivating heart and soul of Misery.

Mike gushed with suspicion. "I've been seeing Father Dryden for counseling since September, four months," he said. "Believe me, without Dryden I'd have left Misery long ago. He encourages my vocation, but today he said the strangest thing, for no reason at all. He just said it."

"What did he say?" Lock demanded.

Mike looked at both of us. "Praying to have a nocturnal emission."

"Uuh," I said. My heart sank to the pit of my stomach.

"Dryden said it's okay," Mike said, "to pray to have a wet dream."

Anything but that, I thought. This was the heart of vocational danger. Could the new Vatican II theology be that progressive? Dear God, don't throw me in that briar patch.

Mike laughed at me. "Ryan, don't look so horrified."

"What's the punch line?" Lock asked.

"God's truth, Lock," Mike said. "Dryden says he prays for release all the time. As long as you don't touch yourself or do anything to cause it but pray for it."

"Pray for the spray!" Lock folded his hands in mock piety.

"Uuh," I said. I had never touched myself. I had never, would never, interfere with myself. Self-pollution was a mortal sin. I was afraid of burning in hell, alone, *nobody loves me*, forever in an agony of pain. Protestants and Jews don't know the secret penalties on Catholic boys.

"What are we going to do?" Mike asked.

"Stop finding loopholes," I said, "in the Ten Commandments."

Lock, incisive as the canon lawyer he hoped to be after Ordination, said, "I live for loopholes. Let's play detective and find out what Dryden's told other boys."

"Where there's talk, there's action," Mike said.

"Don't be scandalous." I turned away from them. "Let it alone. Prudence dictates we keep our distance from sin."

"Ryan," Lock grabbed my arm, "this has to be handled right."

"Don't start a witch hunt," I said. I'd seen what witch hunts had done to Hollywood. My forbidden reading under plain brown wrapper had evolved from novels by Charles Dickens and poetry by Walt Whitman to dramas by Arthur Miller like *The Crucible*. "We've got trouble enough with our own vocations. Let Dryden alone. Pursue this line and we're lost."

The bell ending the brief evening recreation period rang. The door of the lounge room opened to the hallway.

"Up, everybody," Hank the Tank yelled, "the wee-bitching hour."

He walked past us shaking his cassock down around his legs. His brother, PeterPeterPeter, was only eighteen months from Ordination, and their father, Mister Gustav Rimski the Huge, had come to visit several times to sit on the Board of Directors. Tank's family was everywhere at Misericordia, and he was full of himself. He walked up the stairs past us, leaned over the rail, and looked down on us.

"My, my," he aimed at me, "you're so young to be going bald on top. Your Ordination photo will look like Yul Brynner."

"Yours will look like Liberace."

I hated him. He was the first person ever to mention my deepest secret: my hair, like everything else about me, was exactly like my Uncle Les.

Tank shook his head. "'S Wonderful!" he hissed at the three of us.

"'S fub duck," Mike said.

"Jeez!" Lock said. He asked me again. "Will you help us get Hank, Ryan, and guys like him?"

Were we starting to decide who had a vocation?

"Yeah," I said. "So much for philosophies of 'I and Thou.' I guess I need to learn to listen." Sooner or later, a seminarian must start training for the rigors of the Confessional, where people who do everything can say anything.

The lounge crowd milled past us, out the doors, talk dying, stubbing cigarettes, still exhaling on the stairs, smoke rising up the chimney of the stairwell toward the chapel. I was afraid among them, the marionettes, marching up in line, wondering who was praying for nocturnal emissions. More than ever I lived alone in that crowd of boys. Their talk, their gestures, all more advanced. I was twenty-one and not feeling adult. Possessing vocation, same as theirs, aching to identify my specific priestly vocation. The throes of my adolescence, I called it, the last throes.

I felt the child in me, the boy in me, the *hey, kid*, in me telling me he did not want to leave his innocence, his purity, his joy, just so I—as if *I* were not *he*—could grow up, turn into a man, an adult, and a priest, but only if I grew away from the boy.

None of the other seminarians seemed ever to have spiritual crises about the obligation of growing up. They all loved acting grown up. All their crises were the predictable pecking-order problems with grades and sports and who was sucking up to whom. I felt no connection to ambitious older boys, closer to their Ordination, whose talk ran to the money management of parishes and dioceses, like my Uncle Les who showed me how in his own church he placed loose change in the collection plate at the foot of the Virgin's statue, because "If you don't leave pigeon feed," he said, "people don't know what the plate is for, and you have to cover your expenses to keep your bishop off your back."

I hated my overwrought sense of the dramatic and entered the darkened chapel for rosary. Shuffling feet moved off into the assigned pews. I dipped two fingers deep into the holy-water fountain. I felt suddenly close to them, all those boys, dipping my hands into the same bowl where they had all dipped, almost sacramentally.

"I have a social consciousness," I had foolishly said in Dryden's suite. They had applauded, and giggled, but their applause repelled me.

My closeness to them chilled to my usual distant freeze-out. *I don't love them.*

Their ordinariness repelled me. *They don't love me.*

Their obedient subservience injured my sense of free will. The well-trained goodness of all those boys, called to be shepherds of the flock, seemed taught by Saint Pavlov, the Patron of Salivating Dogs. They understood ceremonial piety. They were all so pious. So pietistic. So instantly able to hit a pose like a Holy Picture.

I wondered what was the nature of true spirituality. Certainly spirituality was more than liturgical pageantry. Even the truly good boys hurt me with their ordinary goodness, because they were ritualized beyond personality. *Hello in there!* They were walking clothespiles of black cassocks and Roman collars and white surplices. Whitened sepulchres, Christ had said.

I hated them, because if I was like them, no wonder Thommy had called me "Phoney, a fake," and I had to punch him. What if Thom, who lived like a man in the world, was right. What do real men really think of real priests?

Immediately, I prayed to be forgiven for my vain pride, to be given the grace to mature finally without going mad, so I could become like them, because I so envied their uncomplicated vocations, and was desperate to be exactly like them, *simplex, simple,* not *complex, complicated*, because under the watchful eyes of Gunn and Karg and all the other priests, they had grown so fub duck perfect.

The hypnotic counterpoint of the rosary recitation–Angel's words, *Hail, Mary*, followed by sinners' words, *Holy, Mary*–seemed form without function. I knelt unfeeling in the crowd of seminarians hailing Mary's like taxicabs. Before I could save parishioners, maybe I had to save these lost boys themselves. I wanted to reach out in the chapel to the five hundred dark figures kneeling around me and give them all I had. Would they applaud? I feared the crazy Russell Rainforth in myself, the modicum of self-inflicted insanity no one admits to, till it boils over and Saint Nicholas' helper socks you in the face and blood runs out from ears and nose and mouth and the priests tie you to a chair and cart you away to an insane asylum for lost seminarians.

I stared hard trying to find the dark tabernacle. What was it John Henry Cardinal Newman had written back during the Oxford Movement, sitting among the Pre-Raphaelites, when he had been silenced by his bishop? "Lead, Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom."

When things were good, Oh Lord, we should have stopped all the clocks. *Tick. Tick. No Tick. Nothing destroys me but myself. Pitiable destruction. So small a chastisement for my words. Unfair I should find myself capable only of destroying myself. If You will to drive me mad, Oh Lord, do it from without. Make Hank or Gunn or Karg the villain. Them I can handle. Deliver me from within. Don't turn my very insides against me. Don't let me destroy myself. Let me understand. Make something full of grace happen to me. Make me start to live. Don't bring me to the steps of death. Don't ever let me die without being ordained a priest. You could...push me into the darkness... easily...so easily...as once before when from outside, during the War, banging the gurney into that blazing white surgical room, before I could talk, pulling at me, they gassed me, to push me back to where there was no word and no time. Oh God, why do I hold back? If my vanity can't have a perfect vocation, my modesty will settle for an imperfect one. Whatever is Your will. Why can't I admit for all time I have a vocation, exactly as required, so finally I can grow into it? Why do I resist my superiors? I am vain. I am prideful. I want to be a priest, Oh Lord. I'll bend my will. You know You called me; so help me answer Your call.*