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May 31, 1963

Things grew worse. Suddenly someone in Rome, some Machiavellian cleric slinking around behind the open-hearted Pope, probably some Borgia cardinal at the Sacred Congregation of Universities and Seminaries desperate to preserve traditional Catholicism against the progressive theology of Vatican II, promoted simple Rector Ralph Thompson Karg up to the exaggerated rank of Papal Chamberlain with the title Very Reverend Monsignor.

As a young man, Karg had first been a freshly ordained priest saying Mass in a parish in a cornfield in Iowa before the War Department had commissioned him a chaplain in the Air Force with the rank of lieutenant colonel. He had come out of combat in the War into combat in the Church as the longest reigning rector of Misericordia. He had become a soldier-priest championing the discipline of a muscular Catholicism.

He accepted his elevation to Papal Chamberlain like a blister on his 'umility. He wore his new black and purple robes like a penitential hair shirt. He preached to us that the title and robes were vainglorious. He tugged at his cassock and shoulder cape. His rank embarrassed him. He knew he was a lightning rod for both warring sides in the civil war of Vatican II. I hoped the lightning would strike him and kill him.

I had watched him for ten years and I could only wonder if his promotion was the old Roman rule of thumb: *Promoveatur ut amoveatur, Let him be promoted so he may be removed*. Maybe someone in Rome wanted to get rid of him and remodel Misery. Karg had lectured us with his story of his 'umble beginnings so often, my mind's eye had long before fantasized the fub duck movie version of his life to which I added adjectives.

He had been born the only son of an Iowa farmer whose lean-boned German face was permanently sunburned up to the cap line across his forehead. His father rarely took off his cap, and when he did, sitting with the other German farmers at Sunday Mass with their blond-braided wives and towheaded stairstep children, all the men's big-moustached faces were uniformly sunburned red up to the same cap line, above which their bald round heads were stark white, and their blond-white hair was cut short.

"Those Catholic laymen," he told us, "those farmers and fathers, are manly measure against our soft lives at Misericordia. A priest in his every action must always consider what other men will think. You must be manly men."

He regretted his own face was no longer sunburned. Something secret in him made him resent that someone in Rome had elevated him out of any return ever to his farm parish in Iowa and vested him in robes that left Iowa behind. Such honor from the world of the Vatican affronted his conserving sense of personal asceticism. Obediently, he submitted to honor his superiors, the bishop, and the Pope. His obedience made him meaner.

Invested by the Church in Rome, a city he had never seen, he interpreted his new commanding rank as Misery's rector to mean Rome delegated him to use his tight-lipped Iowa ways to rein in liberal tendencies creeping into the seminary. He had swept the pride of the world from his soul. He shaved his face so close his hard jaw looked permanently scraped raw. For himself, to be saved, he had only to obey. Even as commander, he commanded only under a higher obedience which he commanded in all us boys. His one great pride was in his simple priesthood, for without his vocation, he was nothing more than an Iowa farmer's German son with the rank of lieutenant colonel from a War that was over except for its lessons.

As the new Papal Chamberlain, Karg set out to preserve the old ways of Catholicism, without distinguishing between traditional Catholicism and institutionalized Catholicism, even as the progressive Pope John's Council of bishops convened in Rome *aggiornamento*, to throw open the windows of the Church to admit the fresh winds of ecumenical change. Rector Karg preached that the glory of simple, blind obedience kept priests free from every sin.

He went on a rampage, disciplining or shipping boys not because they had no vocation, but because they were willful boys, bright boys, boys crying, begging not to be thrown out after six, seven, ten years in the seminary studying for the priesthood, foregoing all worldly pursuits and education. His reign of terror raided our study halls in wild scenes that made real the hilarious Christmas visit of St. Nicholas and his wild fiend Ruprecht. Parents who thought they were one day soon to be the mother and father of a newly ordained priest called Rector Karg begging him to reinstate their sons. Whole families fell instantly from honor to shame.

Rector Karg told them all the same thing: "Only ten percent of Misericordia's boys reach the priesthood. I'm going to make it five percent. The cream of the cream. Many are called, but few are chosen."

He sent letters to our parents and cut the number of Visiting Sundays from eight Sundays in nine months of the school year to three Sundays, between 1:15 and 3:45. He began opening all our incoming mail. He called me to his room for discipline because my mom and dad wrote me apologizing that they could not drive five hundred miles to see me for two hours and thirty minutes. He told me, singled out in front of all the other boys, that my parents were worldly. He shipped a studious older boy who dared tell him publicly, "You see the priesthood more as a reward than a sacred calling." He said to us, "A boy's only pride can be his priesthood in Christ." The priesthood was his horizon and his sun never rose on a day better than the morning of final Ordination to the holy priesthood.

"Ordination Day," he preached, "is the day that the Lord has made." He turned thumbs down. "No high-school graduation. No college graduation. No days to distract from Ordination Day which comes once every May for boys who have prayed and studied for twelve years." *Ka-thud.*

On the first Ordination Day after Karg's political elevation, on a particularly beautiful Saturday morning in May, Misericordia's chapel, bursting with flowers, was crowded with the fathers and mothers and families of the twelfth-year seminarians who had completed their studies in the Latin and Greek classics, philosophy, and theology. I looked down from the choir loft at Rector Karg far below in the sanctuary. He stood to the side of the main altar. His head and huge jaw sat on top of his purple monsignor's robes. He looked satisfied as the assassin who had whittled down the last of what had been a class of ninety-six boys to sixteen.

I knew that only the night before, he had called one of the brightest young men in the Ordination class aside and told him that he should, even with his family waiting for the glorious morning, withdraw from Ordination. Rector Karg did not think the young deacon was worthy of the tradition of the priesthood, but the young man told Karg he would report him to the Apostolic Delegate, because no one but God at the eleventh hour could stop his Ordination. Karg had raised his hand against the twenty-five-year-old who had said, "I wouldn't if I were you. I'm younger. I'm stronger. I'll sue you in a court of Canon Law."

The ordaining bishop knelt at the main altar and intoned the 142 invocations of the "Litany of the Saints." On the marble floor of the sanctuary, behind the bishop, the sixteen seminarians in white robes lay prostrate in four rows of four. "*Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis. Sancte Joseph, ora pro nobis. Holy Mary! Saint Joseph, pray for us.*" The prayers and the Ordination Mass called God's grace down on the sixteen young men about to receive an indelible mark on their souls from the sacrament of Holy Orders.

Only the Communion rail separated those special ones from pew upon pew of lay people kneeling at their seats and overflowing to stand in the aisles. An invitation to an Ordination was a social and spiritual coup far beyond any wedding. Watching the women and men and children all directly beneath my perch in the choir loft, I could close my eyes and hear how different the chapel sounded than when filled with five hundred silent, obedient boys. I loved the visitors' attentive reverence, their awe, their whispers, their voices responding to the bishop, their palpable happiness that their son or brother was about to be ordained a priest forever. I loved the powdered scented sweet smell of their bodies.

I drifted, *Sancta Lucia,* with the hypnotic sing-song, *Sancte Johannes,* of the Litany. I wondered if anyone famous, *Sancta Agnes,* sat in the chapel crowded, *Sancte Philippe,* with a thousand outsiders. Once, years before, Pat O'Brien, the movie star, had come to a second cousin's Ordination and the priests had told Pat O'Brien they hoped sometime to have his movie where he played Father Duffy to show the seminarians. They were sorry they could never remember that picture's name. I could not see the visitors' faces, but I knew they were the army of parents and relatives and nuns who followed the Pope's admonition of "nurturing vocations." I wondered if I invited President Kennedy or Princess Grace if I'd even get an acknowledgment.

Actual Ordination occurs when the bishop anoints the young man's hands, which are tied together with white cord. The bishop lays his hands on the young man's head and says, "Thou art a priest forever according to the Order of Melchisedec."

At that moment, God brands an indelible mark on the soul of the new priest—a mark so indelible that no one, not Rector Karg nor the Pope himself, can ever take it away.

So great is the sacrament of Holy Orders that all the clergy in the sanctuary rise up and join in a long line. While the bishop and Rector Karg and two dozen monsignors and the hundred visiting priests imposed their hands one after the other on each of the sixteen heads, in the choir we sang the surging hymn, "Holy God, We Praise Thy Name."

"Holy God, we praise Thy Name.
Lord of All, we bow before Thee.
All on earth Thy Scepter claim.
All in heaven above adore Thee.
Infinite Thy vast Domain,
everlasting is Thy Reign.

Infinite Thy vast Domain,
everlasting is Thy Name."

Chills ran through me. Boys were changing into priests, their souls marked for all eternity.

Their mothers and fathers pressed and craned toward the sanctuary where the drama of the ancient ritual unfolded in incense, robes, and music. I could see perfectly down into the sanctuary, but somehow my vision veered off-kilter. I wanted to witness the miracle of Ordination without fearing that a jaundiced old priest like Rector Karg might steal my Ordination away. I wanted to anticipate the very instant the sacrament of the priesthood would mark my own soul indelibly.

Once a priest, always a priest! A priest forever! Nothing more could Rector Karg do about it.

But my joy slipped. Even perfect ritual cannot deliver perfect moments. I suddenly felt sorry for the people down below, for the mother or father who was shoved off to the side or behind a pillar while I could see so well. Rector Karg threatened my path to this day. Always in awe of my vocation itself, I was suddenly overpowered by him.

Our whole seminary year was built up to this supremely metaphysical moment when boys became priests who could conjure Christ's body and blood and soul and divinity under the appearance of bread and wine. My blood flushed with anger. I felt simply, with all my clothes on, high in the choir loft above all those people, naked. I felt stripped, even under my wool cassock, naked, nude as a sculptor's model who, locked and tensed into position, remains totally, separately, existentially himself despite the artist's devouring eye, despite the brush-brush of charcoal sketches, despite the soft slap of hands laid on clay to give it shape.

My very desire for the crystalline purity of the priesthood caused an unaccustomed hardness in me. Perfume rose on the warm air. No, my God, I said calmly, I want no pleasure from this natural feeling that will go away if I distract myself. I concentrated on singing our rendition of the hymn, "*Veni, Creator Spiritus, Come, Creator Spirit.*" My body was betraying my soul, so I stepped outside my body. Everything, I realized is not either-or. Some things are plain neutral. I wanted nothing: not pleasure, not indistinct desire. Nothing in the world could matter. Not even the world. No one could get in my way. Not even Rector Karg. I stepped fully into my vocation. I could will my way over anything, even the hard physical joy in the very idea of the priesthood.

In the faraway movie down in the sanctuary, the sixteen new priests in their new robes moved about con-celebrating the mass with the bishop. A thrill passed through my soul, but I would not be seduced by spiritual emotion any more than by physical pleasure. I was not stupid. I wanted every kind of purity possible: physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual. I was a syllogism.

I possessed my vocation with a surety transcending emotion.

The only good Rector Karg had done was warn me off emotion.

The Jesuit O'Malley himself had said that my emotion had too much driven the intellectual and moral responsibility I had taken toward my studies, until I could work so intensely no longer.

Only by abandoning all feeling had I been able to defeat Rector Karg.

I vowed to express my vocation only through clean, clear, intellect.

This was the safe path to the distance of holiness.

I vowed to be analytical, chaste, and obedient.

No one could assail such Jesuitical heroism.

A priest could not leave himself open to any emotional compromise.

Circumstances of feeling cannot be logically explicated upon questioning.

The rationale of intellect can always be examined, clearly, objectively, without suspicion.

Rector Karg had taught me that. I learned it from him.

I learned about the triumph of reason.

My vocation was no longer based on a swell of boyish feeling.

God had used Rector Karg to redefine my vocation with reason.

I could think.

Therefore, I existed, cool, distant, high above them, and I hated Karg.

"Never become cynical," Father Gunn had warned us. "God knows there's nothing worse than a cynical priest except an ironic priest. Irony versus sanctity. Like chastity, the choice is not a choice."

I watched my classmates and the younger and older seminarians all swept up in Misery's chapel and choir loft into the hot May emotion. Ordinations came every year and each class of boys took one giant step toward the altar. I had written a progressive article about "The Objectives of the Second Vatican Council" for *The Misericordia Review*, and gotten in trouble. The other seminarians spoke in slogans.

They said, "The priesthood is a sacramental change of your soul." They said, "Ordination is a metaphysical change of your person." They said, "We've got to pray for our vocations to feel the totality of grace." They said, "You lose yourself to become an *alter Christus, another Christ*."

They said, "Every priest has to pay for his vocation. Far better to pay for it in the discipline of the seminary than later on in the practice of the priesthood."

They defined my goal and my cross.

Disappear, vanish into Christ.

Every boy seemed hypnotized. Every boy except Lock and me. Even during this Ordination Mass, I didn't want to feel my vocation. I wanted to think it. I'd felt too much in the last months. My best feelings had been misunderstood by the priests who should have respected them most. But Rector Karg's raging at the top of his lungs that I could be dismissed for feeling, his way of talking to me as no one had ever talked before, delivered me. Having reached two awakenings after ten years of flat seminary life, I was delivered by reason. I stood outside the pale of traditional Catholic feeling. I vowed not to be swept up by pious claptrap. I would never again tell any priest, any teacher, anyone anything that could not be explained to lions in sheep's clothing like the sanctimonious Rector Karg.

I liked seminary life, but I wouldn't be taken in by its sentimentality of pious little boys with rays of light haloing their heads, because my call was not to be forever a seminarian, but to leave the seminary by becoming a priest. I stood away from the other boys. The gap between us became wider. They posed and pranced. Two years before, in all sincerity, I had requested, according to our custom of praying nightly as a group for sick relatives and friends, that three Hail Mary's be said in chapel for a sick woman. The next day when Father Gunn asked me in front of Hank the Tank and his brother, PeterPeterPeter, and another older seminarian if my mother were sick, I said, "Oh, no, my mother is fine."

When they pressed to know the name of the woman, I told them that they had prayed for Elizabeth Taylor because she was nearly dead in London and needed a tracheotomy so she could finish filming *Cleopatra.* They were shocked. "You brought a scandalous woman into our prayers." They said the Vatican newspaper, *L' Osservatore Romano,* had called her morally bankrupt. They accused me of condoning adultery. They said the world condones sin.

Actually, I told them, the world never has condoned sin like they thought. The world is always fundamentally righteous. Christ, I said, had to save thieves and harlots and sick people from the stones of the righteous world. Besides, I said—because I wanted them to talk meaningfully to me—after the War and Auschwitz and Nagasaki, you can't stone people any more. They shook their heads and told me I was worldly, and I told them they were righteous, and the distance between us widened into sniffy

suspicions and whispers. Hank the Tank said in German, "*Der empfindsame Mensch, cheap sentiment*. What else can you expect of a Danny Boy?"

The Ordination ceremony ended with all us fifty boys in the choir singing "Handel's Anvil Chorus" out over the heads of the crowds flooding the aisles. Parents ran to white-robed sons giving their First Blessing, dropping tears and Kleenex. People hugging, giving kisses. The voices of the world crashing into our retreat. Pretty girls in summer dresses kneeling for the special indulgences that come with a priest's First Blessing, and boys, shooting their cuffs and tugging at shirt collars, intending to use what they had, awkward before ordained brothers they did not understand. Fathers in suits, and mothers in summer fur and perfume, and aunts and uncles all eddying around their beloved fresh new priests who were all completely handsome on their Ordination Day the way grooms are on their Wedding Day.

Above it, above it all, Rector Karg stood between huge bouquets of roses and peonies, above the love and effusion of the world of families. Off to one side, bearing it, alone, as if to say pay me no attention, because I'm the long-suffering servant of Jesus the High Priest, he tugged at his robes, and behind his ashen face, I could hear his voice, the rhythms of his voice, the way he lectured us, wishing to God that the celebrating crowd would move out the doors, away from the silent center of the gold tabernacle where Christ resided behind a locked door under the appearance of bread, attended only by the candle burning inside the red glass of the sanctuary lamp. I prayed that God would forgive my nasty, uncharitable thoughts.

I stood alone in the choir loft, behind the organ scattered with sheet music. Forty-nine singing boys, minus me, had run down to congratulate the new priests or to roam curiously among the guests. Rector Karg, seeing the crowd receding, walked purposefully behind the altar to the sacristy. I could hear him sputtering, roaring at finding the seminarian sacristans drinking unconsecrated altar wine, on this special day, right from the jug. Even some of the visitors noticed. I was happy he screamed at everyone and not only me. I figured the Pope knew Karg was crazy, and that made him infallibly crazy, and made me suspicious of Papal Infallibility.

I pushed open an old door behind the organ pipes in the choir loft. It led through a neglected attic stacked, *creepy*, with boxes of dead priests' effects, to another door that opened outside to a high parapet on the upper church. A hot rectangle of sun spilled into the dark cool of the attic. Pigeons cooed, flapped, flew up, and circled. Swallows swooped to farther battlements or perched far below at gabletop on the limestone crosses of Misery. The world fell down and away from this upper porch,

down the falling lines of stone, across the slate-roof dormers, down the ancient red-brick walls to the green firs and red cannas and cement walks dotted with visitors.

Men in suits stood near willowy girls in dresses that lifted and floated in the spring breeze. Little groups crowded together, lined up smiling in front of cameras, and surged in circles around newly ordained sons. Junior seminarians, high-school boys in ironed black slacks and starched white shirts, and college seminarians in black cassocks with red sashes, moved through the throngs of visitors. All the boys were on their best behavior. Rector Karg told us to act like hosts to the visitors to Misery, because you never knew when one of them might die and leave a bequest large enough to fund one boy's entire twelve years of education.

"Every boy must replace his scholarship," Rector Karg said. "If you can't secure a bequest, you'll have to repay Misericordia yourself."

The threat was considerable because most priests earned no more than a hundred dollars a month.

I stood on Misery's rooftop looking down on the world below. God Himself must have such a view, and from God's perspective I watched all those people down on the lawn. Unlike God, I could not will them to move or not move, to wave or not wave, to open car doors or not. So much for priestly providence. They had a life of their own. For minutes, hours, years the world was down there before me. I could not hold back the joy of the day. O my God! I turned, ran back into the choir loft around the organ, down all the marble stairs, throwing open the doors, wanting to run across the porch to be down with them on the lawn, walking among them, almost touching the women in wild hats that floated over everything. I ran for the main foyer, my heart hurting, pumping beneath my cassock, trying nonchalance, weaving upstream among the guests working their way from the church to the front garden.

They walked, stood, milled about, talking, congratulating, hugging, eager to spy out the halls of Misery where their sons and brothers had spent twelve secret years of youth. Their laughter rang liquid down the marble corridors, banked against the stone walls, and echoed back like ripples on water over stones. I pushed through them easily. *Excuse-me, excuse-me, hello, congratulations, excuse-me.* An Italian family caught me up, *bellissimo* and *ciao*, and we all spun out onto the porch blinking like babies strollered suddenly into the sun. Other families, mostly German, some Irish—all Americans—mixed in and we were all swept down the steps, to the lawn, in the May. Together. Italian and German and as my parents both said, "Irish and Catholic, thank God!"

Life poured into my very being. Senses glutting, digesting. Soul expanding like a sponge in sweet deep water. I, among them, moving, smiling, seeing, hardly being seen, listening, nodding, smiling, feeling, leaping nearly, wanting to reach out, touch, grasp all to me to protect them, to save them, to lock them all forever into their happiness.

My own mother was thrilled at the prospect of being known as the mother of a priest. My own father counted the days until he was the father of a priest.

Sun soaked deep into the black wool of my cassock. I felt like David Niven in *Around the World in Eighty Days,* floating in a balloon high above the world, watching out for it, landing on a white bench among the shade trees where three little girls in Sunday dresses played hide-and-seek.

"Ryan," Lock called. "Come here."

I turned, seeing him all in black break from the colorful crowd.

"Come quick," he said. "Live ones."

I walked toward him. He took my arm and I went cold. On no day but this would one seminarian dare touch another without wrestling for a hold. On Ordination Day, Lock thought nothing of it, forgot the rule completely. He wanted me to meet, I had to, really had to, he said, meet this wonderful group of lay people come for the Ordination. He'd run into them, quite by accident, them asking for directions on the lawn. I really had to meet them. Particularly this one couple who were writers. I really had to, he said, and he pulled me toward them, a rare cast to his always precise eye.

Five guests stood in an eager, curious circle that opened expectantly to receive us. A gaunt thin girl with a high forehead stood between an acne-faced boy and a tall smiling man with yellowish skin. The girl gestured frantically across the circle to a shorter man. He reached into his green suit and produced a package of cigarettes. The big woman next to him frowned, started to speak, but seeing us, instead showed her teeth and placed a small white-gloved hand lightly across her enormous breast.

"I could cry." She was being wonderful. "I could just cry meeting all you dear sweet dedicated boys at once."

"This is Ryan O'Hara," Lock said.

"How do you do?" I looked directly at the thin girl with the unlit cigarette. She looked petulant. I spoke directly to her. "How do you do?" She seemed as if speech were an effort beneath her.

The big woman intervened. "How do we do? Not so well as you, Mr. O'Hara," she said. "Not nearly so well as you. Or should I call you 'Father O'Hara'?"

"Call me 'Ryan.' I won't be ordained for another two years."

"You've a great future, Ryan O'Hara," the man in the green suit said. He toted his publican's stomach toward me to bestow the confidence. "The wife and I are writers too."

"That's very nice." I looked at Lock.

"This is Mr. and Mrs. Thuringer," Lock said.

"Berrengar," the man said. "Not Thuringer. Berrengar. Thuringer is a sausage."

"I told them," Lock said, "you do a bit of writing."

"A bit!" Mrs. Berrengar exploded. "Why, my dear Ryan, we have read several of your stories and I said immediately to Mr. Berrengar that here certainly was a writer of great Catholic promise." Mr. Berrengar's green suit rocked back and forth in affirmation, smiling. "Walter, that's Mr. Berrengar. You can call us 'Walt' and 'Mauve.' Walter and I do a bit of writing ourselves. Free-lance, of course."

I smiled. The thin girl, tired of the useless waiting, lit her own cigarette. I knew the tip would be pulled wet from her mouth. I knew that any hotel room she would ever be in would have a flashing neon sign outside the window. She looked to be their daughter-in-law, the wife of the tall yellowish man, perhaps his college acquisition.

"The money in writing isn't important," Walter assured us. "We can make enough at our jobs to get by on. More than get by, I guess." He coughed modestly. "It's the good...son...Ryan...may I call you...'son'?...the good you can do."

"It's such a thrill to know you're doing something for somebody to see your name in print," Mauve said. "Maybe you could read some of our stories," she said directly to me. "You helping edit on *The Misericordia Review* and all. Of course, we haven't hit the big Catholic magazines yet."

"But the little ones love us," Walter said.

He only needed to slap his thigh and stick a red ping-pong ball on his nose. Oh God, I thought, help me to be kind. These are nightmare people from some nightmare parish in some nightmare town. They're not at all like the other guests. Lock searched hard to hunt these clowns out for sport. It was a cruel game we often played with unsuspecting visitors, especially ones more Catholic than the Catholic Church.

"For instance, take Skippy's best friend there." Walter motioned to the boy with acne. "Why, we got a feature article out of him that might save hundreds of teenagers' lives. Why that little boy, Skippy's friend—Jim, Jimmy, his name was—went off and shot himself right in the head in a field not two blocks from our house. Had felt down in the dumps, his folks

said. Good people, his folks, but not too cognizant," he lingered over the word, "...cognizant...of what goes on in modern kids' modern-day heads. We wrote it up and called it 'Teenage Doldrums.' Of course, we never said in the article that Jimmy shot himself for sure; said it could have been an accident, like the coroner told his folks. It could have been an accident."

"You always leave room for hope," Mauve said. "I certainly wouldn't want it on my mind if one of my boys, or Edith there, went off and shot their heads off on my account. Edith won't have to shoot her head off. Edith smokes cigarettes. Edith is my daughter-in-law, Chuckie's wife."

"That poor man and woman have never been the same," Walter said.

"That's sad," I said. "There certainly is a great opportunity to express social responsibility in the Catholic press."

"Yes," Lock said. "Our *Misericordia Review* has a circulation of 20,000 souls."

"Think of that," Mauve said.

"Jimmy's parents never will be the same either," Walt said. "Always thinking they might have caused him to do it. Skippy here don't know why he did it."

"He certainly doesn't." Edith said her first words.

They looked at her. A kind of fear flushed suddenly in their faces. Chuckie, the man with the yellow skin, shifted slightly, touched her arm, and said, "Now, Edie, honey."

"Christamighty," Edith said, "the Catholic press stinks."

They stood in silence before her. Lock and I said nothing.

"Edith, please," Mauve said, her white hands fluttering to her powdered head. "I'll have an attack."

"Jesus will cure you and make you well." She mocked the older woman.

The two men, father and son, moved, each to his own wife.

"We'd best be going," Lock said. "We've some things to do for Rector Karg."

"He's such a lovely man," Mauve said.

"Ordination Day is a busy day today." I moved back, smiling. "Nice to have met you." *Liar*.

The five of them stood there, Walter and Mauve and Skippy and Chuckie and Edith, caricatures of themselves, glaring. Skippy, the boy with acne, turned rosy red. Only he nodded good-bye.

"Damn you," I said to Lock, "they were finally getting like interesting. Whose guests are they?"

"Somebody's aunt and uncle, I think. How about that Edith."

"Some witch."

"Some bitch. Damn intellectual girls," Lock said. "That's the kind of college graduates they keep warning us we'll have to preach to."

"I doubt if she even goes to Mass on Sundays."

"Girls like her with a chip and real hostility," Lock said, "I always want to go up and ask, how old were you when you were screwed, my dear. Ha ha ha. Screwed by the existential."

We laughed, wandering curiously through the crowd, smiling back at people, seeking some new adventure, feeling guilty at our pleasure in examining them, and them us. Up on the front porch, back among the arches, the faculty stood huddled together, priests playing at Roman nobles, aloof on Nero's palace steps.

"It's a beautiful day," Lock said, turning about, gathering in the crowd.

Over his shoulder I saw a prominent guest, a priest, his cassock scuffing about his legs, walking quickly toward us.

"Batten the hatches." Lock sounded a warning. "Here comes the Reverend Cyril Prosper." Lock turned toward the porch.

Cyril Prosper, like his once-upon-a-time classmate, Christopher Dryden, thought of himself as one of the leaders of the younger clergy, the hope of the new Church. A Misery alumnus, coming back every year, a buddy example for the Big Day. He was four years a priest, but still had the look of his seminarian days: a big, blond man, heavy in shoulder and chest. His eyebrows had bleached to near white over the dark frames of his glasses. He looked like an athlete gone esthete. As if one day he'd hung his jersey up and seen a book, really seen a book, for the first time and felt bound to like what he saw, because it was good for the priesthood.

"There you are," Cyril Prosper said, extending his hand, the blond hairs on the back catching red from the sun. I could tell he was very conscious of keeping the beautiful hands of a priest. "There you are, the two of you, same as last year. Not changed a bit."

"You either, Father. How are you?"

"Cut the 'Father' bit, man. I thought I broke you of that last year." He was in very good humor, come neat from the faculty lounge. His mouth was slick with a little good bourbon.

"Putting on a little, aren't you...Chick?" I said, recalling his old nickname, barely.

"A mite." He patted his cassock over his belly. "I got me a little pooch. About twenty pounds here that was never ordained. Mean to work it off this summer. Get back in the old shape, you know."

"Still the good confessor you were last year?" Lock asked.

"Better, much better. There's no sin I haven't forgiven."

"I'll bet."

"How's Dryden?" Lock trusted Cyril Prosper. "Seen him recently?"

"Cut it, man," Cyril Prosper said drawing closer. "Don't mention Dryden around here. You know that." He moved in confidentially. "Actually, I stopped to see him at the sanitarium, but they wouldn't let me in. Misery left orders. Misery doesn't love company. You know?"

He enjoyed feeling conspiratorial gossiping about the "retreat facilities" where bishops send disobedient priests off to secret little Catholic jails, little cells in little monasteries administered by great big monks with great big keys to the little tiny doors.

"Nobody can get in," Cyril Prosper said. "Nobody can get out. But I did pick up a few things."

"Like what?" Lock said. "Like what?"

"Like Dryden wasn't all as knowledgeable as everybody thought. So offhand. He'd drive to the library in town and check out lecture tapes and listen to them in his room. Obscure tapes, you know, by real authorities on a subject and then he'd come down and introduce the topic to you guys in the lounge and pass it all off as his own thought. Neat, huh?"

I wanted to say, I knew it. I guessed it all along. There was something phoney about him. Dishonest. But now, after the act, it seemed too pat to say.

"That means trouble," Lock said. "Plenty of trouble for us. And it explains a lot."

"How do you mean," I asked.

"Listen to me," Cyril Prosper said. "What drives Karg so crazy that all the priests on the faculty are getting so afraid of now? Reading. Books. Being intellectual, radical, prideful, undocile. It's all the same serpent to them. Dryden undermined a good thing." He looked very stern, and I wondered whose side he was on. "Anybody," he said, "caught thinking now is suspect because somebody once who was thought to be thinking was that forbidden word that doesn't exist. Cribbing ideas wasn't even thinking. It was memorizing."

"Doesn't that last part sort of cancel out their major premise?" I asked.

"How?"

"I mean if he wasn't thinking in the first place, then what does being that word..."

"You can say that word, Ryan."

"...that word have to do with thinking in the second place. He wasn't thinking at all."

"But he was clever," Cyril Prosper said. "The Reverend Christopher Dryden was the epitome of everything clever. That really scares them. You've got to give him credit for that. He sure as hell was clever. 'The *sss*erpent in Eden,'" he said, imitating Rector Karg, "'hath many ways even unto the days of our own.'"

A thin stiletto voice cut into our laughter. "I'm surprised. I didn't think Catholics could quote Scripture." Edith Berrengar, that girl, had followed us, smoking, her black dress flecked gray with tiny ash. She was alone. Chuckie and the rest were lost in the crowd.

How ugly she is, I thought, how very horsy, how kind of...attractive, sexy even.

"Your persuasions, your persuasions," she continued. She gestured toward Misery's huge red-brick buildings. "I'm glad, really so glad to see the priest-factory. Where they take men and wrap them in the sweet bosom of God."

"Your terms sound mighty religious," Cyril Prosper kidded. He thought she was joking.

"Religious!" Her laughter cracked dry, crumbling down. "Christa-mighty. I got tired waiting for the new revelation by the time I got to be twelve. These two here," she waved a gesture of bracelets at Lock and me, "haven't reached twelve yet. I can tell. Oh, brother, can I tell. They're all kind of wrapped up in the old religious womb. Singing some prosy, rosy prayer of semiconsciousness. Look at them!" She chain-lit another cigarette. Smoke enveloped her face. She didn't smell as if she'd been drinking. "And you, priest, dear, you're the same. Just older, not wiser."

Cyril Prosper looked at her, amazed, his cool, priestly suavity almost swept from him. "Miss? Miss? I'm sorry I..."

"Mrs. Berrengar." She waved her ring in his face. "Mrs. Berrengar, the younger. As opposed to Mrs. Berrengar, the older and uglier, the mother of my husband, Big Chuckie, who probably only loves me, Big Edie, because he's afraid not to. Tell me, priest. Priests. Priests and priestlings. How to cope with that. You're supposed to know all about love and marriage. Your guns all unshot under all those skirts. Your bodies may be virgins, but your minds are fucked."

Violent, smoking, ugly standing there, she made me feel hot and moving, wanting to mate with her, throwing her to the damp filthy straw of some medieval lodging. The summer before I'd split the back of my head water-skiing and told the barber to be careful, *be careful of it*, and he, not knowing me a seminarian, presumed, "She slugged you, huh?" She could have, Edith could have, standing smoking, could have been the one if ever

one was to be the first one to knock me senseless, and it would have been more pure than impure.

"I went to Confession two months ago," she said, "and I asked the priest a question and told him my opinions about marriage and sex. He asked me what I'd been reading. I told him de Chardin."

"You read Teilhard de Chardin?" I was amazed.

"Shut up, Ryan," Lock said.

"Anything you can read I can read," she said. "Anyway, do you know what this Father Abortionado said to me? 'My daughter,' he called me—imagine!–'we should be wary of the pride that makes us attempt intellectual pursuits beyond our capacity. De Chardin,' he was telling me off, 'tries impossibly to marry biblical doctrine to theories of evolution. We must leave theological speculation to the experts and be content with the simple definitions of Holy Mother Church.' I gagged, really gagged. I wanted to say, oh, you stupid, stupid old fool, wasn't Holy Mother Church ever a girl? I haven't been to Confession since. I'll go again. But I haven't been since."

"He was probably one of the older clergy," Cyril Prosper said. "Some of them don't understand the new Church too well."

"They better," Big Edie said. "They bloody well better. Christamighty. I won't, I won't be part of their scapular-kissing, medal-jangling crowd. And you! Kid! What's the matter with you? You're young. What's going on? How do they do it? How do they do it to you? How do you do it? Is it some course they teach you here? How do you learn to go around reducing ordinary good people to gibbering idiots? Why do you do it?"

I was quiet before her because she sounded somehow right and I knew she was more right than kooky, though vocationally I was unable to agree with her. But she was right, crazy right. Next to us, all around on every side, on this very Alice-in-Wonderland lawn, the power play was happening. The Bishop had shooed the black-cassocked faculty out among the colorful crowd to play their roles as priests. Visitors, grown and successful men, disintegrated into the masks of what they were in high school when confronted by clergy in authority. The visitors shuffled, looking at their shoes, laughing at anything or ready to, because good Catholics always laughed at priests' jokes. I wondered what they really thought.

"And sex!" She raised her voice. Several faces panned politely shocked and amused toward us. "If the clergy knew anything about sex. There's such a gap between you and we marrieds..."

"...*us* marrieds." I found myself editing her.

"Ryan!" Cyril Prosper called my name.

"Why is it," Big Edie said, "that any Catholic boy who fears he's not very masculine thinks it a sign of a vocation? Christamighty, who knows where vocations come from? How they get here?"

"You certainly think a lot," Cyril Prosper said.

Lock and I laughed.

"You're charmed, aren't you," Big Edie said to Cyril Prosper. "I'm so charming. I'm everything you gave up. Ain't you lucky!"

She was nothing like the nuns and aunts I'd spied earlier in the day from the choir loft. I hated this ugly jaundiced girl. I hated her because she had brought to flower in herself cynical seeds I had recently been finding in my own soul. Narrow, oh narrow, I thought, is the gate of heaven to the cynic, oh Lord. She was a warning to me of what not to become, and I wanted her, or wanted the idea of her.

She looked at Lock and me. "That boy in the story. Jim. Jimmy. The boy that shot himself. That was Walter and Mauve's boy. They'll never admit it. Their pastor has been helping them 'bow to the will of god,' encouraging them to go out to others. He prints their pathetic little paragraphs of hope and despair on the back of the Sunday bulletin. That's where they write. That's their big-deal idea of the Catholic press."

She could not stop blurting out everything she ever knew or wanted to confess.

"That boy with them. Skippy. He's not their son. He's a foster child. The pastor arranged a whole bunch of Skippiness for a distraction. They don't need a distraction. They need a doctor. A psychiatrist. But they won't go because the pastor has talked them into being happy in accepting their *cross*. He calls it that. The Church needed a new saint in heaven, he said. Saint Jimmy. God! Can Saint Skippy be far behind?"

Strands of black hair had fallen sticking damp across her forehead. "You're such dummies at this miserable school of ventriloquism." She shook her head as if she might be sick. "Christamighty. What's wrong with me? I don't want you to go out and do the same stupid things most stupid priests do, mouthing pat answers to questions no one can answer." She backed a bit away. "I'm not sorry," she said. "I...I thought you ought to know...about their son."

Then she ran away. She was gone.

"Oh," Cyril Prosper said. "Oh!"

"Some girl," Lock said to him.

I felt sorry for her, married into those people. Maybe two dirty coffee cups left in her sink, waiting for her, deadly, when she returned from the wide world with Chuckie, the yellowish smiling man. Coffee stains in her

sink. She'd work for days to soak them out. In frustration. Ring around the sink, around her whole life. Because, poor thing, she felt too much, could accept too little the given limits of life and grace itself. "Ventriloquists," she had said. "Dummies. Parrots. Magicians. Hocus Pocus." She had blasphemed the very words of the consecration of bread and wine: *Hoc est enim Corpus Meum. This is My Body. Hocus Pocus.* She asked too much, expected, what? Something.

I felt she had a right to expect me to answer her dilemma as much as I expected the priests to reveal to me the secrets of the answers I needed for my sake as much as hers, but she was an occasion of sin, her voice, her body, her snotty arrogant way intimating she came from some place better, and deserved to be, needed to be, was really asking to be fubbed, because her vocation was seducing innocent priests like Cyril Prosper who had been turning chivalrous and dandy toward her, following after her with his eyes.

"Mr. O'Hara," Rector Karg stood suddenly next to me and squared off his place opposite Cyril Prosper and Lock Roehm. "May I see you a moment? Excuse us, please, gentlemen."

I followed Rector Karg into a cove of evergreen that sheltered a small outdoor shrine to the Virgin Mary. He looked straight ahead and made a big business with his Army Zippo of lighting a large candle among the many small candles already burning. We were alone. He had, he said, by chance happened to see me. How fortunate, he said. He had, he said, wanted to remind me of my situation. Finally, he turned and faced me.

"You came so perilously close, son. Your honesty, that's what saved you. Had you lied once, about the transistor radio or anything, the smaller lie would have exposed larger lies, larger faults. Small things fall into large patterns. Are you innocent? Have you innocence?"

"Yes, Rector."

"Forgetting nothing, I will forget everything so we can begin anew next September. But one caution." His face folded deeper behind his jaw. "You must be prudent. Prudent enough not to tell anyone what happened. Not your uncle. Not your parents. Lay people can never understand what occurs in seminaries. *Silencio.* Do I have your word?"

"Yes, Rector."

"Promise me."

"I promise you."

"You will tell no one."

"I promise."

"Your uncle has promised."

"I promise."

But more, I promised God, for I was not like other men. I would be the perfect young seminarian. I would go back to my German translation on summer nights at home. I would apply myself to apostolic work in my parents' home parish. I would keep a cool reserve of myself, but I would fire up all the warmth of Christ in my personality. I would work with the poor and help keep the parish records. I would work at the teenagers' center and teach catechism classes. Everyone would see the emerging young priest in me. They would all know the difference once I was there. They would find me warm and loving. Empathetic. Emptied of feeling. Solid in my vocation. They would look at me and see actually the essence of the priesthood. They would see an *alter Christus*, *another Christ*. I would disappear into Christ and Christ would appear and no one would even see me. It was perfect. I would live on Communion wafers and I would say Mass and people would ask me to pray for them and I would be handsome and gaunt from living on wafers and I would baptize and confirm and marry and bury them and I would be personal with Christ who would Himself protect me always.

I promised, really vowed, to tell no one the intimacies of our seminary life.

Rector Karg pulled from his sleeve a sheaf of typed pages. He held them up in front of my face. "You recognize these papers?"

"Yes, Rector."

"What are they?"

"The title pages of my new German translation."

"You know what I want you to do with them."

"You gave me permission."

"I'm taking it away," he said, "for the good of your soul."

"I never know what you want."

"Maybe you should go home and never come back."

My face blushed red enough almost to betray me.

"I prefer you speechless," he said. He looked deep into my eyes. "Your renegade Häring's work is under the most severe examination by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith." He stretched out his arm until his hand, full of the pages of my translation, was near the Virgin's bank of candle flames. "Promise me," he said.

I promised hoping my promise would save my work.

"Promise me again." He moved the papers slowly into the candles. A flame licked up to a page. "Promise me again." The pages browned and curled and flamed. He held fire in his hand. The pages burned and burst

and dropped off to ash. “Promise me you will be good.” He dropped the burning ends of the pages to the floor. “Promise me again.”

“I promise. Oh, I do promise.”

I was twenty-three years old.

In the escalating mystery of change, seventy-two hours later, on June 3, the open-hearted Pope John XXIII suddenly died.

On the Vatican chess board, everyone moved.

August 29, 1963

Threats work. Karg scared me to death. My well-intentioned summer collapsed in a June panic. My secret reading of the *Index of Forbidden Books*, the Church’s feckless guide to good reading, had led me to Richard Wright’s autobiographical novels, *Native Son* and *Black Boy.* My dad’s collection of James T. Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan* trilogy led me to Chicago. Farrell was a Chicago writer, Irish and Catholic. Jack Nicholson was starring in the movie of *Studs Lonigan*. The Christian Family Movement in Chicago was promoting the idea of worker-priests. *“Observe! Judge! Act!”* Chicago was the logical escape, north 150 miles, from the provinciality of Peoria. I needed a place to hide out, regroup, and plan my strategy to survive Karg.

By July, the humid heat of the South Side of Chicago spiked my moral urgency to a crisis. I gasped for breath inside the once-grand mansion of the parish house where I had told my parents I was under Church orders to go to live for three months. I lied to them. Of course. As usual. To protect myself. I ran away from them, my own mom and dad, and my five-year-old sister, Margaret Mary, even though I loved them so much that my love for them verged on worldly attachment. Karg told me so. “You must leave father and mother for Christ’s sake.”

I was under more fear than orders.

My family did not see me that summer, because I had to experience what a priest’s daily life was like in a parish of two thousand souls. I knew nothing of any folks, especially black folks, but figured they were like white folks, except somehow more full of hurts, and regrets, and secrets they might reveal. I sat beneath a ceiling fan at Holy Cross Rectory trying to decipher sense in the parish records of the pastor I had begged to take me in. His parish had changed from all white to black in less than twenty-four months.

Father O’Farrell welcomed me, and any help he could get, with open arms. With a couple other seminarians and young priests, he put us to

work days, and he set us up evenings in the rectory library with parish paperwork and some books of essays, Jimmy Baldwin's new *The Fire Next Time* and *Nobody Knows My Name*. We read Ralph Ellison's novel, *The Invisible Man*, and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The themes of estrangement thrilled me. Father O'Farrell was a working-priest creating a new kind of parish.

"Want to deal with change?" he said. "Change."

Through him, I disappeared under the crush of new parishioners moving from the Deep South of George Wallace's Alabama and Orval Faubus' Arkansas to the formerly white parish at the El station of 63rd and Cottage Grove.

Daytimes, in the parish office, I mouthed words of encouragement to people in trouble and in sorrow. In the school gymnasium, I could hear myself, *shut up*, make pious admonitions, *yes, almost a priest, really,* to hold off, at arm's length, Negro teenagers almost as old as I was, being friendly with boys talking about Chicago soul and the guitar of Buddy Guy, and nice to girls singing sweet but raunchy along with Etta James, "Somethin's Gotta Hold on Me," so they would not ask me questions, "Baby, What You Want Me to Do?" or tell me Confessions about their experiments in the Sixth Commandment.

I typed up sheets with lists of doctors and clinics and libraries and turned out purple mimeographs of school services and went door to door, *go 'way, boy*, knocking, knocking, talking through doors that would not open, *you got a doctor name?*, on all sixteen floors of the new high-rise monoliths of the Robert Taylor Homes.

Hank the Tank sent me a postcard: "Keeping tabs thru the grapevine. What movie are you now? Peter says, Angie Dickinson in *The Sins of Rachel Cade*." One of the other seminarians or young priests was a spy.

In the churchyard, old women and old men pulled on my sleeves. They wanted exactly what white folks wanted, but they wanted it revivalistic, singing where the Church met the Top 10, "For Your Precious Love," biblifying with Curtis Mayfield, "People Get Ready," pushing before them any fresh young priest who could save them before he became like the old priests silenced by the world and woe and women and whiskey.

Christ was bread and wine. Christ was flesh. Christ was a man. How could I ever be another Christ?

With another seminarian, I escaped uptown one night to a theatre in the Loop to watch James Earl Jones performing live in *The Blacks.* I wanted to hear his voice, learn some secret, see some scene. I tried to add up the equation: literature plus metaphor equals real life. Do actors

understand literal Transubstantiation? Does anyone? The other seminarian was happy the theater manager invited us two white boys to sit front row center, until we figured it out. The play could not be performed unless at least two white people were present, and if no white people were available, then two dummies dressed as white people were to be placed in the front row. The casting was perfect. Ha ha ha. All the white couples in from the suburbs laughed, relieved they'd got off scot-free.

I gave the people at Holy Cross Parish, kneeling at the Communion rail, Christ's body to eat and Christ's blood to drink.

Actual body.

Actual blood.

No metaphor.

Real.

But it was my body and my blood. They demanded the be-all of something, life perhaps, and maybe with good reason because they had been promised life everlasting, and what they got was me, very *Suddenly,* very *Last Summer*. They judged my vocation a sign that life to me was no riddle. They said, *Help me!* They cried, *Answer me!* They said, *If priests don't know, who does?* I envied them. I suspected their particular answers lay in themselves particularly.

Irony, the sin of irony, if irony is a sin, was rusting the edges of my soul. The other seminarian, probably Hank's spy, the pipeline to Peter-PeterPeter, told me so. God! What must Vatican politics be like at Saint PeterPeterPeter's Basilica in Rome!

The people pulled at my black cassock in the poor parish church, tugged at my Roman collar on the street, shredded my soul to bits seeking the Jesus-comfort in me. They took Communion on me, and the other priests, and left satisfied, for awhile, until some next great hunger called them back.

"A priest," Father O'Farrell said, "needs a spiritual life. Anyone dedicated to public service needs a spiritual life to survive." Very *Jack*. Very *Kennedy*. *Ask not!*

The work was hard. Very hard. Self-effacing. A priest's work is not about the priest. A priest must be all things to all men. A priest, who is truly another Christ, must remember eventually he will be crucified. A priest must give the people everything, including the hammer and nails. Black or white made no difference when life squeezes a person down to scary questions about what happens when we die, or worse, fearful terrible questions about what happens when we do what we have to do to survive in dirt and poverty and crime.

I got what I wanted. An element of blank. I became some black-dressed Jesus-blur, *a two-hundred-pound old lady, nice old lady,* regarded maybe more kindly than the older priests in residence, because I was a young seminarian, *help me, she begged*, a terribly serious white boy, *my son done gone*, a jokey transient peckerwood novelty, *cleaning her up from excrement*, of the long hot summer that peaked in the heat of August, *changing the sheets*. The priests in the house, *remembering Dempsey pretending he was cleaning up Jesus*, were kind that I was not up to their speed in civil rights experience, *a future time exists, she said, when you are already dead*, even though I had marched with them and The Woodland Organization, learning on foot in the streets the words and rhythms and meaning of "We Shall Overcome," and sat in at Mayor Daley's office, where the marble floor was cool, cooler than the humid air, *she was the old religion of conjure voodoo*, until the police dragged us out, women and children and men, back to the street and dropped us on the curb and called us *niggers* and *nigger lovers*, and we bussed back to 63rd and Cottage Grove, laughing and clapping and dancing, discussing the kind of folks who sat on the front porch, and why black women never much cared for the foundation garments that girdled into shape the figures of white women, and all of us tuned listening to WVON, the Voice of the Negro, spinning the records and screaming and scratching and knocking out the blues on the radio in the night.

The group of young priests invited the labor organizer Saul Alinsky to a supper at the rectory, and when we asked him a question about President Kennedy, whose newborn son had died the week before, and about Martin Luther King, who the day before had marched on Washington, *I have a dream*, Saul Alinsky for some reason looked straight at me, as if I had asked him a question, and he told me, "Kid, here's what you got to do and how you got to do it."

Why he looked at me, like I was there, really there, present, when no one else could even see invisible me seated like a dummy in the front row, shocked me with stage fright that I might somehow have to perform, or actually do something, because he was somebody important and famous in the world, and I was the new kid in town, new in the world, and ready to be used. I knew what the young are for. He made me gasp. I ran from the dining room.

Escaping up the rectory stairs, climbing up, shoes thumping up wooden steps, I heard from outside an El train's metal wheels pitch a long, whining squeal against the hard tracks. Suddenly, deep in that hot August night, in that rectory, in that attic, I really fully knew no one

had looked at me, at the real me, in years. My parents looked and saw a priest, but I had never looked at me. I had never ever even seen myself. In my small room, high up under the eaves, I threw myself down on the bed covers and fumbled to turn off the lamp. The window shade, drawn up, revealed the black city night bright with light and with the moon. Sirens shrieked down streets, avenues, boulevards. Sirens shrieked down me. Years of prayer and examinations of conscience and soul and intellect had plowed me back into myself. I at least stood on hope's margin. I might have a self worth finding.

Heat lightning flashed across the sky.

I bolted up and stood in front of the one luxury in the room that had, in the better days of the parish, been the second housekeeper's quarters, a three-quarter-length mirror. I took off my shoes and socks and shirt and slacks and underwear. I dared stand naked. White and naked and more naked than white. Blind parents raise invisible child. Another invisible boy turning into another invisible man. In the summer suddenly, I could die like Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman, virgin-martyr-saints of civil rights. The shell of my outside was new, forbidden. I looked at every part of it.

Except for the unseen soul inside, *corpus meum, my body* could have been any young white man's body, naked, downed downy with Irish down, passably athletic. Inside me is me. Outside is me too. Ridiculously obvious. But meaning much more. My body a metaphor of the veil between me and all the world. Pushing tongue against the permanent gold bridge backing my perfect white teeth. For years when I was a child, men spoke to me as a child. Paralleling Saint Paul, I put away the childish things and men spoke to me as a seminarian. The second state little different from the first. Child and seminarian. Seminarian and child. *Childseminarian*. The darkling umbra penumbra of labels. I had always handled myself well without ever touching myself. Without interfering with myself. I stared into the mirror.

For years, no one had seen me. I only that night stopped to look at the white dummy from the front row. "Child of God," I said. "I am that they see, but they've never seen me." Never seen me: Ryan O'Hara, Person. A young person. Trust in Jesus. Trussed in Jesus and Rector Karg and Father Gunn, because they went *lickety-lickety*, the way James Earl Jones could in his "Old Man River" *basso profundo* intone *lickety-lickety,* wagging their pious fingers, saying I could have no crisis, no growth, nothing but the innocence of my childhood from which I was to come to them perfect, remain untroubled, and survive without blemish.

Blue sheet lightning crashed off in the night. Hopefully a bit to the west, over the Iowa plains, striking the birthplace of Rector Karg, and burning it down.

Misericordia didn't give an inch for any bent to the normal adolescent crises of the very adolescence it protracted. I was shocked at my physical boldness. I had never seen myself naked. Even as a metaphor. Oh Jesus! I was no Dryden! I waited for lightning to split the hot humid night air, lighting my body, finally hearing thunder roll in from the flat Illinois plains and prairies toward the third-floor attic of the parish house at 63rd and Cottage Grove *and the spoom tilly* in the darkest meanest part of Chicago *doggley bedeep* where the main difference between me *gaspoom toggley* and the black folks was that I could leave the ghetto any time I wanted. "Lullaby of Birdland. Doo wah doo."

September 5, 1963

A few days later, I dared myself to return, despite Karg, to spite Karg, to Misericordia to begin my eleventh year.

"You came back," Karg said. *Check.*

"God told me to," I said. *Checkmate.*

"The clock is ticking," he said.

"Do not ask for whom the clock ticks," I said.

My summer masquerading as a worker-priest in Chicago fascinated Lock. "How can I now regard myself?" I asked.

"What possessed you to come back?" Lock asked.

"How do you regard yourself?"

"You might have disappeared bongo-bongo into some neat, beat Chicago writer's garret."

"I disappeared years ago. I'm trying to reappear. That's the point. I haven't been seen in years."

"Then why come back here?"

"Karg was betting I wouldn't. Nobody can use my vocation against me."

"Karg can."

"No one can use my purity of vocation or purity of intention against me."

"He does treat you strangely."

"I came back for perspective."

"The only perspective here is Ordination, and getting picked up by a progressive bishop in a liberal diocese."

Lock, for all his Vatican diplomatic corps promise, was not much help. The intensity of Chicago had diverted me even farther from my classmates writing little blab-blab sermons to have on file once they were priests. They sat in circles in discussion groups gibbering endless spirals about "the social implications of religion." Jesus H. Christ. They ought to spend one hot, humid, muggy hour, sixteen flights of stairs up, on top of a public housing high-rise and listen to the roar, screams, and sirens of the world below.

My German translation was out of the question, so I started reading again. On my own. Secret stuff. Little Modern Library books that felt good and handsome in the hand. Thomas Wolfe. John Dos Passos. James Joyce. John Steinbeck. Ah, the rhythms of the writing in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The stories of Ernest Hemingway. I might have to go across the river and into the trees. Like a convict, I watched the calendar: September to May, I had nowhere to go. The Church feasts pointed up the days, weeks, months, hours, minutes, seconds of the semester.

My physical boldness I spent among the other seminarians on the playing fields. Softball in September and football in October and basketball all winter. A writer's garret in Chicago sounded as sweet as a mystic's cave, but I would never have anything as personal and romantic as that. My life was dedicated to the service of God through service to others. Around me, some boys achieved good grades and other boys were shipped. No matter what happened, I kept focus on studies, prayer, and my spiritual life.

Objects on my desk in my private room moved about mysteriously when I was in class. Rector Karg was everywhere around me, like a monster you have to kill in a movie to save yourself. I prayed that God would give me the strength to embrace my vocation which is, oh my God, I know, so much more than fantasies of You whispering in my ear. I pray for some wonderful mentor of a priest to come along and take my hand and lead me through some spiritual boot camp of the soul that will strengthen me, that will make me grow up, that will deliver me from perpetual adolescence where all I have to do is be a good boy, a good seminarian, and a good priest. What, oh my God, does *good* really mean?

Alfie Doney, the retarded man, was good, and I knew I was no better than him, trying to read Saul Alinsky's book on the sly.

September 22, 1963

"Alberto, a brave boy, is dead, *muerto*."

Movies can change on a dime. Characters die suddenly. The audience gasps. Rector Karg stood in the pulpit and announced, "Hank Rimski is dead, drowned."

For three days, we five hundred boys had prayed for Hank's safe return. The weather that autumn, blowing up from the South, brought a strange flood of rain. Lake Gunn filled to overflowing across the rim, across the path where we walked, barely wetting our shoes at first, spilling in an inviting waterfall down to the river beyond which was the Out of Bounds where we could never go.

The river rose out of its lazy banks, flowing grandly, gently it seemed, carrying ducks quacking happily downstream. Boys stood on the hillocks in the woods watching the silky muddy water swirl around the high necks of trees ten feet from the small river's usual banks. Nature was our only entertainment. We waved at a couple of boats, one wood and one aluminum, that floated past, shouting to the men, *Hey Mister!*, who used their oars only to guide their boats propelled along by the current. A couple of boys splashed into the water, calling to the men, asking for a ride. Everyone laughed.

Hank grabbed someone's hat and skipped it like a stone across the eddies. The river was splendid, flooding its banks after the dry summer. The hat spun and swirled and caught in tree branches and freed itself and floated left and right, and once, even floated back upstream for a moment, riding across the deep pools of water that made the tiny, silly, negligible river suddenly magical, flowing up, flowing down, flowing across, as boys, stripping to their underwear, one after the other jumped from overhanging trees into the water, floating easily, borne almost sensuously on the slow rolling current. I waded in up to my knees, and I heard my mother's father's Irish warning, "Stay away from water. Drowning runs in our family," even though no relation had ever drowned coming from Ireland or since.

"Come on in," Hank the Tank called to me, "You're a duck. You can float like a duck, a fub duck."

His crowd laughed. My crowd booed, but only one or two boys dared to leave the bank or the shallows to join him out as far as he was in the swirling sky-blue water reflecting the last gold on the autumn trees.

Hank the Tank rose up in the water, shirtless, strong, lit suddenly brilliant by a shaft of sun cutting through the clouds. He swam against the current, making some headway, then stopped and floated laughing downstream, catching a tree branch with his hands, proud of his strength, pulling himself up into the tree, where he stood in his wet underwear

like an acrobat on a branch, about to swing out on a trapeze, bowing to the shouts and applause of the boys who were some meter, I guessed, of the kind of applause Hank would win as a priest. Men would like him. Women would confess to him. His feet gripped the branch and he turned backwards to the crowd of boys and pulled his undershorts, white-cotton briefs bagging with muddy water, tight against his buttocks, standing in the tree like a photo-plate of a gladiator statue in our Latin books. He turned his face over his shoulder, looked at us all, laughed, and pulled his shorts down, dripping mud, mooning us with his bare butt, which was the most shocking thing I had ever seen at Misery.

That was the last time I saw him. That evening at supper, when all the boys who had been at the river returned, Hank's chair at table was empty. Every boy thought another boy had stayed behind for one last water frolic with Hank in the muddy river. It was biblical, exactly the way Mary and Joseph lost the Boy Jesus in the temple when He was twelve. Mary thought Jesus was with Joseph on the walk back to Nazareth, and Joseph thought He was with Mary. I could imagine their hysteria, losing their Child, by the wildness that broke out in the dining hall of Misericordia. Boys disappeared, but no boy had ever gone missing.

Outside the high red-brick walls, new sheets of rain lashed through the night against the windows of Misery lit bright by the light fixtures Tank had been sentenced to wash. Death never came to Misericordia except for old priests. Young boys never died. One time all five hundred of us had been sick with the flu, but no one had ever died. Boys don't die. But Hank the Tank died, swept away downstream, missing three days in a flood that lasted a week. My mind went blank.

At the funeral for Hank, in Misericordia's main chapel, PeterPeter-Peter returned to say the Mass for the Dead over the coffin of his brother. Their father, who had once been a boy at Misery, sobbed on the arm of their sobbing mother. The choir and the sinecure of Gregorian chanters made the hymn "*Dies Irae, The Day of Wrath*," into pure opera.

Rector Karg preached that death was God's will. "You should all be happy that Hank is in heaven, having died in the state of grace, a good seminarian. He will never be a priest, but he is God's new saint."

All the boys were whimpering, but I cried out in real despair.

He'd fub duck, but somehow he'd won. Saint Hank.

Ka-boom.

Even so, tonguing my new teeth, I loved the mud flowing through his death.

The next morning, two boys, smoking cigarettes in the attic where Karg stored dead priests' stuff, found Father Polistina, Misery's mystic, hanging, dead, naked, from a rafter, swinging above an overturned chair. The rope around his neck was the rope he had worn for years wrapped tight three-times around his waist, knotted every six inches, to rub his skin raw and calloused for penance, to remind him always under his clothes of the suffering of Christ. Karg buried the overworked Polistina, *his kind*, without ceremony, *always,* under cover of night, *kill themselves*, and he was never mentioned again.

October 22, 1963

At table in the refectory, eight of us sat at supper laughing and talking over a pupgullion of noodles and boiled meat.

"Can you guess," I said, "what happened a year ago today?"

Ski stared straight ahead. Minus Hank.

"It was a year ago today," I said, "that Gunn first let us listen to the radio while we ate lunch and supper."

"It was a month ago today," Ski said, "that Tank disappeared."

The whole table of boys kind of grinned, watching Ski dog-paddle in the debris of his special friendship.

"Tank was a pain," Lock said.

"Where a doctor couldn't reach and a nurse wouldn't dare," Ski said, "but that Tank, he was quite a guy. Makes you wonder."

"Wonder what?" I said.

"Why the young die."

Lock and I both rolled our eyes.

"Why does anyone die?" Lock asked.

Ski slurped up a fork of pupgullion. Gravy splashed, landed on his black cassock, and disappeared into the wool. He was crying. I felt sorry for him in a way. Hank the Tank had never recovered his reputation from the plate caper. Ski was alone now. Like me. But I had chosen my aloneness. Not he his loneliness.

"How can anyone," I said, "explain Tank's lapse in the river–uh, I mean, laps in the river. I thought only the good die young."

Ski looked daggers, the kind he scribbled on paper during class, arrows shooting out of the eyes of one stick figure at another.

"If only he were quick," Lock said, as if Ski were not sitting broken, crying into his pupgullion. Time had bored us with each other and whittled us down from eighty-nine boys to eighteen.

"Hey, numbnuts," Ski said. "I'm sitting right here."

"But do you remember Gunn's radio a year ago?" I said.

"I remember the first day I saw you eleven years ago, you stupid mick, you and Lochinvar there, and you haven't changed."

"The Cuban crisis, stupid. When JFK made us finally take a stand against Khrushchev and Castro," Lock said. "Gunn brought in the radio and put it on the corner of his table. Were you out to lunch?"

"If Kennedy had sent in the Marines, I would have gone," I said.

Ski spit pupgullion all over the table. "Oh, Mary! And Joseph!"

Lock put his hand to his mouth.

"My brother Thom is in the Marines," I said. "Gunn was trying to inspire us to be patriotic priests, maybe turn out to be military chaplains like he had been."

"War is immoral," Lock said.

Ski blew raspberries.

"Hey, you, Ski," Lock said. "Stop spitting out your food!"

"My uncle was a chaplain," I said. "He was in the Battle of the Bulge. He had his picture in *Life* magazine saying Mass in front of a Jeep in Belgium."

Ski scowled. "Kennedy stopped the Russians, didn't he?"

Keith Fahnhorst said, "If he hadn't, and if there'd been a war, the government would have made us stay here inside Misery all year round to keep our clergy exemption. Like in the last war."

"If Kennedy and Khruschev had gone to war," Ski said, "there wouldn't be any Misery. There'd be fallout all over the place. My pastor says so."

"Phooey."

Everyone had a two-bit opinion. We argued on till Gunn rang the bell for silence and we stacked the dishes. I loved Irish Jack Kennedy. His call to arms was stronger than the call to the priesthood. I was committed to Jack Kennedy. If he had taken us to war, I would have knocked on the redheaded Jesuit's door and said, "O'Malley, I cannot sit still at Misery while the world blows up." I would have joined my brother Thommy in the Marines. Kennedy had drawn a line with the blockade of Cuba. Washington peaked at war intensity. Any Soviet arms-running ship refusing inspection and immediate return to Russia, he ordered sunk.

Gunn and Karg and all the old priests who had served in World War II grew more excited than I'd ever seen them. They brought radios into the refectory, and we ate quietly listening to Kennedy's Roman-orator's voice crackling direct to us between reports from on-the-spot announcers. In a day, the first letters from home, stuffed by boys' parents with newspaper

clippings, showed us how frightened the world had been with civilization and mothers and fathers and children teetering on the brink, the real brink, of real nuclear annihilation.

Himself I blessed: John Fitzgerald Kennedy. He committed himself. He took a stand. He dared face the bravado of the Communist dialectic. He remained calm. He resisted dropping nuclear bombs. Finally, after four tense days, when I did not know if I would live to be a priest or die fighting in a nuclear war, the blockade lifted and U Thant went from the United Nations to Cuba. We were wary: when on a Friday Khrushchev can deny Russia has bases in Cuba, when on a Saturday he admits them, saying he will swap his Cuban bases for our Turkish missile sites, when on a Sunday he suddenly capitulates as he's never capitulated before, anything could be a ruse, except for an encounter with the committed greatness of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Weeks later I told the Jesuit, I would have followed Jack Kennedy to Cuba, to the ends of the world. From Jack Kennedy I tried to learn calm in standing up to the Very Reverend Monsignor Ralph Richardson Karg, Papal Chamberlain and Rector of Misericordia Seminary. I hadn't been dragged out of Mayor Daley's office without learning something.

"Your idealism," Lock had sniffed, "is crap. The religious vocation is what's important to save the world."

"What came first," I had said. "The soldier or the priest?"

"The fried chicken or the scrambled egg?"

I had handed Lock a letter from my brother, Staff Sergeant Thomas a'Becket O'Hara, USMC, stationed at Guantanamo Navy Base, Cuba.

"So life's a Rimski Brothers vaudeville routine," Lock had said. "For the Christmas skit, you can dress up like Mrs. Doney. I'll make you a poster that says 'Kennedy, *Si!* Cuba, *No!*' You can sing a chorus of 'I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier.'"

November 1963

Late on Halloween night, after lights out, Rector Karg stood with a flashlight at the door to my room. He tilted the beam up, lit his face from below, and then aimed the beam at me. He ran the light up and down my body like a gunsight.

I looked at him and he looked at me. Neither said a word.

As quickly as he appeared, he swept off in silhouette down the dark hall. I stepped to my threshold. His flashlight preceded him left and right, and then he turned around once and shined his light down the length of

the hall and again right at me. I felt the force of the light as a kind of cold heat penetrating the dark night of my soul. *E! E!* The shrieking violins of the *Psycho* score!

I closed my door and ran to my bed, hoping he wouldn't come back. Always I had set impossible tasks for myself, because the thrill of defeating the threat of failing caused in me a rush that always caused me to succeed at the very last moment. When I was a little boy, I often laid on my stomach lengthwise on the edge of my bed, whispering *nobody loves me*, inching over bit by bit, till half my body was on the edge, then half was over the edge, *nobody loves me*, then more than half, and still more, as my pajamas clung to the sheets, until in a slow tense avalanche of bedclothes, *nobody loves me*, I slid ever so quietly, ever so thrilled, chest, stomach, thighs, knees, and ankles, to the floor. I had fallen in love with anxiety. Oh God, life would be perfect if I weren't mentally ill.

The clock was ticking.

I had known, felt, for four days, at least, that, as sure as Tank sank, I must leave Misery. Hank the Tank had got out easy. Come our Ordination Day in fifteen months: subtract me, one less boy. I would not be white-robed in the chapel. My impossible task was to escape Misery even if I had to delay or deny my vocation to the priesthood. I had been sliding out of this miserable bed for three years. My breathing stopped. The difference between my vocation and my seventeen classmates was a simple matter of talking out timing with the Jesuit. For a month or two. Until Christmas. To be certain. Wait until Christmas. Eleven years. My parents. My uncle. My brother. My little sister. Me. Knowing nothing of the world.

What I will do, oh Lord, I prayed deep in the night of my room, the secret my own—no one else's—I do not know. Why, my God, are You doing this?

I have a vocation, but this is the wrong time in the world and in the Church to become a priest.

Vatican II is an earthquake.

The dome of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome shakes over the epicenter.

Misery is trembling under my feet.

Priests, once simply Catholic, good Catholic priests, are shaken by Vatican politics, scurrying right to tradition and marching left to change.

Maybe I lack real faith, my Lord, but how dare I promise a permanent vow of celibacy in the sacrament of the priesthood that puts an indelible mark on my soul during a civil war of politics and purity?

The faces of Gunn and Karg tell me who will win this time around.

Oh, I recognize this.

Once again the Germans are coming to get me, like a patient etherized upon a table, a rubber mask tied over my face, pushing me back down where words cannot exist.

I will become a simple, honorable man. My profession or career I do not know. My wife, if any, I do not know, and my children, if any, I do not know. My home and country I do not know. My friends I do not know. My happiness I do not know. My sadness. My life. This litany is late in beginning, oh my God, but I must be free, my Lord. I am smothering in the security, the safety, the conformity. I regret it is late. Eleven years of my life on the bittersweet block. How long, oh Lord, have You hidden Your face from me? Why play coy with me who have loved You so long?

At chapel I wanted to shout with fear and excitement and warning. *Enormitas conformitatis, the enormity of conformity!* I was so depressed I thought my heart would break. In the mirror, I saw the saddest boy in the world, betrayed by the only world I had known. I prayed for clarity as much as purity. Make me clear. Question myself. Question them. Question everything. This is sin. Sin. This is Adam's sin: wanting knowledge of good and evil. All my classmates were careening toward the priesthood, toward an indelible mark on their souls, toward something you can't get out of in this life or the next.

Run. I wanted to shout, *Run*. *Churchquake. Run.*

I could not breathe looking at them sitting in row after row in chapel, wearing the same black cassocks, singing the same antiphons of Gregorian chant, itself fading away under the strumming strumpeting approach of folk music. "Kyrie" versus "Kumbaya." Our seminary life had once been all so beautiful, so medieval, something in a book, something in a movie, but it was horrible, awful, the denial of self and independence. I collapsed before the paradox. Can one have the talent, morals, health, have all a vocation needs, but not be able to accept because his personality wants to run naked down the main aisle to the altar for absolutely no reason but freedom?

Why not climb the cross and rescue Christ? Salvation dictates you can't stop a crucifixion. It's like being possessed, twice. I slid from the safe schoolish life I'd known, and from the safe rich life that lay ahead of me, only this time I wasn't slipping off a bed to a floor, *nobody loves me*, where my father would come in and ask me, *are you okay, son* and pick me up, rescued in his arms, *I love you, honey, your daddy loves you,* and put me back in bed. I was slipping down a rope, rope-burned, my hands were rope-burned so raw no anointing could ever balm away the blood in my palms.

Oh God, help me. My creative unbridled attitude is immature. I'll have to tone myself down no matter what my vocation. Or perhaps the priesthood will give me greater freedom than any other life. The point of my independence, after all, is freedom to express myself by creating something, anything, new, adding part of me to the sum total of humanity. But what am I trying to express except some weird metaphysics of life?

Oh God, I'm going to explode. I'm dying. I need salvation. I need a play, a concert, a foreign film. A movie. A radio station. I'm so worldly I can taste it. I'm too young for this. Uncle Les said so. Maybe I should wait till I'm older. If you're older, at least you don't have to live with your decisions so long. Saint Augustine waited till his death bed to be baptized. I mean, how much of me can I abdicate hoping God will fill the void? Is this the devil calling me like Bali Hai? Is this that first night, all over again in a different way, when the Polynesian girl sat on my bed, arms gesturing in a slow hula, trying to lead me out of the dormitory. Why not? The Jesuit, the crazy mad redheaded Irishman, says the Holy Spirit is talking to me.

I realize the insane temptation.

All I have to do is say *God told me* and they all believe whatever I say.

So basically I'm alone on my own.

I could make all of this very easy for myself.

The Jesuit sees my coming back perseveringly every year to Misery, despite my awful agony of adjustment to captivity, as a sign of my selfless wanting to serve. But why do I have this love-hate attraction to the people in the priesthood? These actual seminarians and actual priests. I could fubbing murder them where they fub-duk kneel inside their fubbing little cliques. What's one more *Murder in the Cathedral*?

What don't I get?

When will I get it?

Perhaps I should spend all the rest of all the Sundays of all my life saying two Masses in the morning and in the afternoon sitting in the rectory basement slitting open the envelopes of dollar bills and checks from the parish collection basket. If I take that road, if I accept the cross of loneliness, of a long-distance runner, with all my priestly heart, I shall still, with all my human heart, my frail human heart, my unseeing, my fanatic heart, miss what could have been on the road not taken. No other vocation is forever, and no other vocation makes you be alone forever.

Can God–and I shook my head not wanting the question–ever mean as much to me as does my possible life or my possible wife and my possible children and my possible creative work? But if it turns out I decide to follow Christ in the priesthood, then it will prove only that although Christ

might not mean so much to me as my life, I love Him more, the Word made Flesh, the Man-God, divine and human, noble, naked, nailed, huge up on a fifty-foot cross, seventy feet high over the chapel sanctuary, agonizing, dying to save me. He hangs, transcendent, glorious in this salvific, romantic moment, this epic moment chosen by theologians and artists, this crowning single frame of western culture, crucified, high over the small red flame of the sanctuary lamp.

My ambivalence seesawed across the November days. Misery's code of silence meant I could not discuss any of these doubts with my friends. Just me, Jesus, and the Jesuit. It sounded like a song in a Misery skit: "Me and My Shadow." The roundelay repeated again and again till on a cold November morning I meditated. *The Lord is my Shepherd.* In the cold chapel in the long dark before dawn, with the radiators knocking with the first stingy heat of the day, I said, *there is nothing I shall want. He leads me to lie down in green pastures.* My prayer book fell open, full of trust, to the pages worn thin through eleven years of prayer. But the pastures, the pastures. During the autumn, the fall, the long fall from the bed, I volunteered for the Misery farm crew to harvest the corn on our land and bale the hay. I craved the physical resolution of work, the need to feel close to the earth, like Levin in my secret copy of *Anna Karenina* to help me think. Or to keep me from thinking.

But signs and omens were everywhere.

At the farm, the lay tenant's son, a little nine-year-old boy asked to ride the tractor with me. He wore an outgrown crewcut and faded jeans and an old denim jacket and he was like some long-ago far-off ghost of me come back. I had not wanted to grow old the way of Misery. But between me and the boy on the tractor, between me and the boy I was, lay an infinity. Me seated, driving; him standing, holding on to me. I felt ponderous, grown older, certain that life required more than mere physical survival. I wanted to hold him close as myself, and one afternoon I took his picture, him sitting in a barn window, as if I was photographing the last instant of my own boyhood, that last afternoon that I ever saw him.

My own private Jesuit thinks beneath all this German *Sturm und Drang*, *Storm and Thunder,* is the right stuff that defines a really true vocation. My Jesuit leads me to waters where I may rest. He refreshes my soul.

He says I have a true vocation to the priesthood.

He plans to work the final wrinkles out before my yes-response to God's calling me. God guides me along straight paths for His name's sake. *Even if I shall walk in the valley of darkness, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art*

with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, these comfort me. I will willingly give up myself to serve you.

Later, after lunch, I dropped my copy of Sigrid Undset's novel *Kristin Lavransdatter*. Just dropped it. Dropped it right to the floor. Lock told me, dumbfounded, stood in front of me, crying, weeping, and told me.

He was dead.

Jack Kennedy, my Jack, was dead.

The day had dawned so gray and sweet, so muted in dry November. April's fool, a joke, had come to November. Till that noon hour, till today, April was the cruelest month. This feeling. Fragmented. What makes a man so alive one minute? What lays him low, snuffs him out the next? He was the only person I really knew in all the outpost of the world. With any other death, the past could have died. But with him, all the bright future, somehow linked with my passion of giving, vanished. As long as he was being president, I could see myself being priest. *Alter Christus. Alter Jack*. Oh, God. Civilization slipped from us. Violent. Bloody. Jack's brains were all over Jackie's yellow roses. *Big D, little A, double L, A, S*. All the boys were in tears. The priests were in tears. For the first time in history, television sets were carried into the recreation halls and left on and on and on. I could talk to no one. Alone in my room, hours later, the night of the longest day, I pulled my tiny journal from inside my torn shoe box and wrote before the onrushing terror of darkness, psalmish, sighing, keening, kaddish, half-dead myself.

22 November 1963
Tonight, oh Lord, the dun land mourns
disbelieving believing,
dessicated leaves of this week
before Thanksgiving (feast from his New England)
rattle and skitter across brown grass.
This Fall's been a drought on the land,
ended now,
well-watered by weeping.
John Kennedy has passed.
Safe-comfort they had hawked,
sixty-nine cents a pound.
He could have bought it and did not,
chose not to recline in wealth.
Sought rather service.
Sacrificed until sacrificed.

By a young man in the Texas Theater.
Tonight the networks say nothing so well as it is true.
And outside, where there is no moon,
the dessicated leaves rattle across November.
It was gray and wet,
unseasonably warm today.
But in the unloved wind tonight,
unnumbing, beginning to believe,
I taste the coming bleak
of the world's most lonely winter.

My heart broke that day the earth stood still. The world quaked, fell to its knees, stopped, not knowing what to do, where to go, feeling time itself divide into *before that day* and *after that day*. Oh Jack!

December 5, 1963

Days of mourning later, after the Widow, after the tiny daughter, after the young son saluting, after the saddled black stallion, riderless, with the boots turned backwards in the stirrups, after the days of drums, Lock kind of slapped me around. He said my sentiments were hopeless, *God rest ye*, so hopeless they weren't even Christian.

It was again the Eve of the Feast of Saint Nicholas, *merry gentlemen*, and while Ruprecht ran wild through the study halls exciting all the boys, *let nothing you dismay,* with thoughts of Christmas vacation, I told Lock, my best friend, nothing of my decision to abandon my vocation. He would have judged cause and effect in what was only sad coincidence.

John Kennedy was dead and I was done a-grailing.

I had saved enough money in my shoe box for a one-way train trip home to Peoria.

Later, in the dead of the night, at 4:30, before dawn, fourteen days after the martyrdom of Jack Kennedy, the martyrdom of my vocation, I left Misericordia Seminary.

I walked quietly down four flights of terrazzo stairs, alone, and with one suitcase, into which I packed eleven years of my life, I pushed open the heavy wooden door and stepped out into the snow still lit by moonlight. Misericordia stood dark and separate behind me.

I was a twenty-four-year-old boy, and I had never ever in eleven years of keeping the Grand Silence from dusk till dawn been outside the seminary buildings after night prayer.

All the other boys and all the priests lay asleep. Only the sacristy light, high in a chapel window, showed out in the cold air. The sacristan was already up preparing the vestments and chalices for early Mass in honor of Saint Nicholas.

An incredible sadness took my breath. I stood on the steps staring up at the moon over the silent white snow.

Oh my God, I offer the rest of my life to You. I offer You all my prayers, works, joys, and sufferings of this day, of this life, in union with the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the intentions for which He pleads, and offers Himself in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass throughout the world in reparation for my sins and the sins of the whole world. Oh my God, I am so scared.

I trudged through the snow, feeling the true knee-deep meaning of trudging, out the stately drive winding like a postcard out to the highway. To leave the property was a mortal sin. The moonlit night was freezing cold. I stepped off the drive and put my foot down. A semi-truck roared passed. I walked along the shoulder of the forbidden road toward the town. Kennedy was assassinated and so was I. Misery was growing distant in the dark. Cars and trucks swept by me, wheels swirling snow, flakes caking my face.

Several times I turned and looked back, and, as Lot's wife turned to salt, I turned to ice. My heart turned to stone. My breath turned to steam.

I stood on the shoulder of the highway and watched a few early lights at Misery come slowly on. A horn swooped wailing beside me. The headlights and the gusts of traffic overpowered Misery itself. The swirling snow turned Misery into one of those toy miniatures in a glass dome of water that kids shake to watch the snow fall. I picked up my suitcase and left Misery behind me swirling like a tiny fortress in a snowy medieval keep.

Down the highway, I walked into a drive-in coffee shop decorated for Christmas. On the jukebox, Bobby Helms was singing "Jingle Bell Rock." The waitress took a look at me and nodded to a couple of truck drivers sitting at the counter. I was one of them now. I was no longer set aside from life.

"You're from that place, aren't you," the waitress said. "They always come here like you with their suitcases. You all have the same hangdog look. Maybe I should call the SPCA."

They laughed, but they didn't laugh at me, so I smiled. Maybe they thought Misery was a joke.

Eleven years...and I choke.

"The pay phone's over there," the waitress said. "Here's a dime. Call yourself a cab."

"Hey, kid," one of the truckers said. "Have a cup of coffee. On me. Merry Christmas."

I tried to feel their cheer.

I had told none of my friends of eleven years goodbye.

None of them, I knew, would ever contact me.