Your story in this week's issue, "The Long Black Line," involves a young novice in the Jesuit order, who struggles with his desire to devote his life to his faith. It's set more than sixty years ago. What took you to that time and place now?

"The Long Black Line" is set in 1954, when I was in my first year as a Jesuit novice, so it is a time and place I know well. The novitiate was a period of concentrated prayer and meditation, the study of classic spiritual literature, and the pursuit of humility. It was also an awakening self-awareness. The ordinary day was divided into a staggering number of duties, spiritual and practical, and conversation in the house was allowed only when absolutely necessary, and then it had to be in Latin. Jesuit novitiate training has been much modernized since then, so I am told, but, for me and my fellow-novices, the notions of blind obedience and monastic silence were no more exotic than the Latin conversation we found so demanding and often discouraging. Latin was essential to our lives. Our eventual three years of philosophy and four years of theology would be taught in Latin: three hours of Latin lectures each day and a two-hour oral, also in Latin, at the year's end. But that lay in our future. Our religious training in the novitiate was a source of doubt or certainty, depending on the man, the day, the hour. The
novitiate was a hothouse for the development of faith and—for some of us—of wonder and insecurity.

*Finn wants to “sacrifice” his life, but it’s never quite clear what that means to him, or why. What is the sacrifice that he envisions?*

The previous question raises the issue of Finn’s devotion to “faith” and the present one Finn’s notion of “sacrifice.” Finn would say that faith is belief in God even without the benefit of proof. But he would be unlikely to talk about faith; he would take it for granted that faith is the stuff of belief, for which no proof is possible or, for the believer, necessary. To Finn, sacrifice is another matter altogether. In his infirmary talk with Brother Reilly, Finn makes clear what he means by sacrifice. When Reilly says that he entered the Jesuits “to atone for all I’ve done,” Finn replies, “I wanted to make my life a sacrifice. Self-obliteration. For God.” Self-obliteration is a very questionable desire, and one that marks Finn as a more suitable candidate for acting than for the priesthood. For Finn—as, frankly, for me—self-obliteration was a mysterious desire: to surrender everything now. And it cannot be explained.

*As you say, Finn also wanted to be an actor—a profession in which one’s purpose is to stand out and be seen. It seems almost completely opposed to the desire to become selfless, one small link in the “long black line.”*

Finn’s attraction to theatre lies in the desire to conceal his true self within the character he plays. “If they knew what a shit I am,” he thinks of the Jesuits, “they never would have let me in.” He comes from a family dynamic in which he is viewed by his parents as the primary cause of his mother’s incapacity and his father’s disinterest. He thinks of his desire for obliteration as love of God; he discovers it to be a perverted kind of love of self. I have known a few actors and they had this in common: they were most truly
themselves when they were onstage being someone else.

*Finn is resistant and often mean-spirited. How does he—or do you—reconcile those qualities with his urge toward religious devotion?*

Lots of awful people—mean-spirited and intolerant and worse—want nonetheless to be found pleasing in the eyes of God, and some of them think that religious life is the way to go about it. Some succeed and become saints. Others just get more annoying, but they offer their fellow-priests or nuns the opportunity to exercise virtue. I want to stop here and say what it is that I admire in the Jesuits who stayed, the ones with a real vocation. I include here any successful religious—priest, nun, brother. The man or woman who has a true religious vocation has, by the gift of grace, the rare ability to become and remain a full, humane, generous person. His service is marked, and illuminated, by joy. He is capable of friendship and devotion to others. He is able at the same time to live without the strength that comes from sharing a life of intimacy and sex with another person. Some people think they have a vocation because they are personally generous, so they give it a try, but thinking does not make it so. They run the risk of becoming merely dutiful priests, dry husks, and, when they discover the truth about themselves, they stay or they leave. Sheer heroism can make staying possible, can even make the life a saintly one, but if you believe in God at all, you must believe He wants more for you than a life of desperation. And sometimes it is better just to give up and try to serve Him in some other way, one that does not penalize your fellow-priests.

*VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER*

Lies and Truth in the Era of Trump
You mentioned that you struggled with this story and wrote four different versions. What made it such a challenge for you?

There was the obvious problem of introducing so much foreign material—the rules, the Latin terminology, what’s at stake—but then there was the extreme closeness of much of the story to my own life. Only recently have I messed with autobiography-in-fiction, and I remain wary of confronting a time in my Jesuit life that I found stressful and depressing. I think I must have been very much like Finn in his most unpleasant ways, and that’s not easy to deal with. Example: on the day after our eight-day retreat, after finally joining the long black line, we were all taken for a celebratory hike to Mount Monadnock. We stopped and sat on rocks, the better to admire the greenery. Each new novice was asked what came to mind as he viewed the mountains, valleys, etc., and each one said something uplifting. “What comes to your mind, Brother L’Heureux?” the manuductor asked. I responded, “I’d give my soul for a Martini right now,” and there was a great silence. Twelve years later, over a beer, the manuductor told me that he wrote in his book that night, “I don’t think Brother L’Heureux will be among us for long.” My real concern in this story was to get the Jesuit
novitiate “right.” The dropout rate was very high, an indication that a lot of expectations were not met. There was a common feeling that to drop out was to have failed. During my first year, I thought at least once a week that I should leave. Then I’d be swept up by a tsunami of fervor and I’d put off making a decision. You can last quite a long time that way.

*In the story, there is a pivotal homoerotic encounter in the infirmary. Afterward, Finn is shocked by Father Larsen’s suggestion that perhaps he should have granted Reilly’s request to get into bed with him. Finn thinks that it would have been a mortal sin. Do you agree with Father Larsen?*

I’m dealing here with the problem of a moral asceticism that is destructive of charity. The human need is real: in that moment, Brother Reilly is mentally—and perhaps spiritually—in extremis. He needs to be held. The fact that Finn perceives getting into bed with him as an occasion of sin and feels that holding Reilly is forbidden by his understanding of chastity—leads to a kind of sanctioned holiness wherein law overrules charity. This kind of decision has little to do with genuine holiness. It is, rather, sanctioned narcissism. Note: Finn, master of virtue in this scene, does not hesitate to steal one of Reilly’s Seconals.

*You yourself were a Jesuit novice—and, I assume, unlike Finn, did take your vows, since you were in the order for seventeen years. How do you view that time now? What made you leave the Jesuits?*

I always answer this question by saying that I entered the Jesuits because I thought it was the best thing I could do with my life. And I left because being a priest was much too hard for me to do perfectly and it’s much too important to do it any other way. I spent seventeen years trying. I regard it as a reward for all that trying that, within a year of leaving the Jesuits, I got a job as a staff editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, I wrote my first novel, and, best
of all, I met my wife. She was worth seventeen years of waiting.

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