The Long Black Line

John L'Heureux
Finn said an awkward goodbye to his parents and watched them drive off in the new Buick they had bought in case he changed his mind. They were pleased, of course, at Finn’s decision to study for the priesthood, but they were wary, too. It was 1954, and priests were still thought to be holy, and Finn . . . well . . . Finn knew that he wasn’t holy, but during a retreat in college he had succumbed to a fit of piety and, dazzled by the idea of sacrifice, applied to join the Jesuits. They had put him through a series of interviews, and let him know that he seemed altogether too caught up in theatre, but in the end they had accepted him. So now here he was, almost a Jesuit, and this annoying Brother Reilly kept calling him Brother.

Brother Reilly had given him a short tour of the public areas—the chapel, the guest parlor, the dining hall—and then escorted him to the front veranda, where the other postulants had gathered to admire the grounds. A green lawn cascaded down the hill to a small wilderness of trees, with a lake beyond. Everyone agreed that it was beautiful. They stood in little groups, sweating in their jackets and ties, while the novices—the real Jesuits—made awkward attempts at conversation. Finn introduced himself to the group around Brother Reilly, and, after the expected hand-shaking, silence descended. Finn was not good with silence, so he cleared his throat and wondered aloud if they all felt as strange as he did in his jacket and tie. There was eager agreement and a little self-conscious laughter that encouraged him to wonder further when they would get to wear a cassock, “if it’s O.K. to ask,” he said.

“A habit, Brother Finn, not a cassock,” Brother Reilly said quietly, a gentle rebuke.


“In good time, Brother Finn.”

Finn realized that he should shut up, but he couldn’t help himself and, attempting friendliness, he said, “Just call me Finn. Brother Finn creeps me out.”

Brother Reilly, with a show of patience, explained that in the Jesuit order all novices were called Brother. He pointed them out—Brother Quirk, Brother Matthews, Brother Lavelle, etc. And then, lapsing from charity, he added, “You are now my brother, Brother Finn, and I don’t like it any more than you do.” Nervous laughter, a fit of coughing from Brother Lavelle, and then silence.

Finn blushed and muttered to himself, “Ah have always depended on the kindness of strangers.”

That night, Brother Reilly made a note in his manudivor diary about Brother Finn’s “singularity”—Jesuit speak for self-importance—and he added, “I wonder how long Brother Finn will be among us.” Then, during examination of conscience, Brother Reilly went to confession and accused himself of disdaining conduct, sins against charity, and anger against one of his new brothers. Anger was a habitual failing, he admitted. He would try harder.

Brother Reilly had been appointed manudivor—he who leads by the hand—because even now, as a second-year novice, he was brusque and withdrawn, inclined to hang back from group activities. He had served as a marine in Korea, and he remained gaunt and hungry-looking, with an intensity that seemed to border on the dangerous. His superiors had judged that he was ill-suited to the role of manudivor, and that therefore it would be a useful trial for him and an instructive one for the novices.

“Feelings,” Father Superior explained, “are always to be distrusted. Jesuits are men of the will. The good Jesuit may feel excited or depressed, but—remember—he never shows it. He is never singular. He disappears into the long black line.”

This was a talk that Father enjoyed giving. It was essential that novices learn self-denial. And denial of feelings came first.

Agere contra—to act against—here is your safeguard against the dangers of feeling. If you feel sad, smile. If you feel elated, exercise self-restraint. If you dislike someone, pray for him, take note of his virtues, imagine that he has virtues even if he has none. Agere contra. Be a man of the will.”

Finn listened, eager and anxious, certain that they would never have let him in if they knew what a shit he was. But maybe this was a feeling he should just ignore. By an act of will.

“Brother Reilly must be a holy man,” Brother Quirk said to Finn.

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, they chose him as manudivor, and he never violates silence.”

“Maybe he just has nothing to say.” Finn thought for a moment and added, “That was uncharitable of me. I’m sorry.”

Brother Lavelle cleared his throat and spat.

Brother Quirk and Brother Lavelle and Finn had been assigned weeding duty during recreation—weeding the tomato patch, where there were in fact no weeds—and, since they were outside the house, talking was allowed. Inside the house, talking was forbidden except in emergencies, and then you had to speak in Latin. If your Latin wasn’t good, you were expected to learn it or shut up.

“So, he was in Korea,” Brother Quirk said.

“God help the Koreans,” Finn said. Then, to change the subject, he added, “These tomatoes are on their last legs. What do you think, Lavelle?”

Brother Lavelle never talked, but now he sat back on his heels and said, slowly, deliberately, “I think this whole fucking thing is a mistake.” He stood up and looked around. “Christ,” he said, and without asking anyone’s permission he walked back to the house.

Finn, for once, remained silent, but later he noticed that Brother Lavelle was absent from dinner and evening prayers.

“One down,” Finn said, as they left chapel that night. Brother Reilly heard him and gave him a hard, knowing look.

In conference, Father Superior explained the use of what were facetiously called “scroop beads.” A tiny string of beads attached to a safety pin and worn inside the habit allowed you, unobtrusively, to pull down a single bead each time you broke silence or sinned against charity or had an unkind thought. The beads kept you scrupulously aware—hence, “scroop”—of your failings and came in handy at the
twice-daily examination of conscience. Wearing them was, of course, optional.

Finn waited for Father Superior to say "Just joking," but Father Superior was not given to jokes.

The new men, still wearing jackets and ties, finally began their eight-day retreat. The silence was absolute, and time stretched out endlessly before them. Their world contracted to an intense focus on Father Superior's conferences, three a day, followed by an hour of private meditation, as they tried to engage each of their five senses in the day's topic: sin, Heaven and Hell, the life and teachings of Christ, the Gospel mysteries, the wonders of living the Christian life.

Finn thought of Brother Lavelle. Maybe this was all a fucking mistake. But as the eight days passed he found himself surrendering to the power of silence and meditation.

Most nights, he lay awake while the others slept. On the last of the eight nights, his mind wandered from Christ's Resurrection and the empty tomb to the summer theatre in Vermont. Gillian Cantrell had been his girlfriend that summer, a sophomore at Brown. She was a good actress, full of life and wit, and she was very sexy—too sexy for him. Gillian.

Sexy Gillian. He thought of his last night with her. He found that he was getting aroused and forced himself to think of Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb.

The problem was that Finn had always wanted to be an actor. He had spent the summer after high school studying at the New Theatre Academy in New York, and after his first year of college he had acted in summer stock in Vermont. Acting was fun. Acting was thrilling. In his sophomore year, he'd acted in every play the drama department had put on. At the same time, he'd had this secret life in which he gave himself over to prayer. One night on his way back from the library he'd decided to make a quick stop at the college chapel. The place was dark, with only the red sanctuary light blinking next to the altar. It was sort of spooky, and Finn was glad that nobody could see him. He knelt in the back pew and closed his eyes. After a while, he felt foolish, as if he were faking some kind of piety, and he decided to leave. But when he opened his eyes he was startled to see the flickering red altar light move toward him. He blinked and it moved again. The dark, and the single red light moving toward him in that dark: it had to be an optical illusion. But for a moment his heart stumbled and, looking back, he knew that that was when he'd seen it clearly: acting was not enough. The best thing he could do with his life was sacrifice it, and what better way to sacrifice it than as a Jesuit.

Suddenly, from the bed nearest the door, there came a terrible shout. It was more than a shout: it was a wail of pure terror and it seemed to go on and on, before trailing away into silence.

Someone turned on the light. Someone else said, "It's Brother Reilly. It's the manuductor."

Brother Reilly, the manuductor, still fighting his way out of his dream, pulled himself together and said in a shaking voice, "Everything's fine. There's nothing the matter." He turned off the light, saying, "Sleep, everybody," and he left the room. Incredibly, they all slept, even Finn.

The next morning, their trial period behind them, the new novices were accepted into the common life of the Jesuit community. It was a free day, with a sung Mass in the morning and a special feast in the evening and Benediction before bed.

Finn was at last a member of the long black line.

Once in a Dark Wood

Brother Reilly had had a fit. The word went around during laborandum, the afternoon work period.

"It happened once before," Brother Quirk said, "when he was in his first year."

"It was worse," Brother Matthews said. "He woke us all up howling. He dreams he's back in Korea."

"My brother was in Korea and my father was in the last war—in Germany—but they never wake up howling."

"I wonder why he does it. Why it happens, I mean."

"It's a cross to bear," Brother Quirk paused, then added, grimly, "The real cross is that he may have to postpone vows. For a year."

"For howling?"

"It's canon law. His mental state... his fits may be an impediment to ordination. Like epilepsy or schizophrenia or even facial disfigurement."

"You mean if you're too ugly you can't be ordained?" Finn doubted this. "That would mean a lot of priests got through by accident."

"Father Taylor, for instance."

"Or Father Hanson."
the day was divided into blocks of time for conference, rosary, class, examination of conscience, lunch, two hours of assigned work, study, more meditation, dinner, chores, spiritual reading, a second examination of conscience and, finally, at nine-thirty, following a visit to chapel, bedtime.

“At least they give you time to hit the toilet,” Finn said to anybody listening, and, as God would have it, that happened to be Brother Reilly, who looked at him as if he were an insect.

Finn’s rabbit imitation had come to him during a visit to chapel. He was wondering what made Brother Quirk so annoying and, with no shame at all, he stared at him. He looked like Bugs Bunny. His front teeth stuck out a little and he had a nervous tic that sometimes made his lips twitch, just like a rabbit’s. A pious rabbit. With a pronounced Dorchester accent.

Finn pushed his upper lip forward and exposed his front teeth, and for an awful moment he became Brother Quirk. It was unkind. He wouldn’t do it again. But later, alone in a toilet stall, he tried it one more time. Just for practice.

“Grace is God’s free gift. We can’t earn it. We can’t deserve it. God gives it to whom he wills.”

Finn knew this well and he found it depressing.

“We can open ourselves to grace by constant prayer, but we can’t merit it. It’s given gratuitously.”

Finn’s mind wandered. Was novitiate life making him infantile? Other men his age were fighting in Korea, and here he was on his knees, confessing to uncharitable thoughts. What ever happened to making his life a sacrifice?

It was visiting day. On the great south lawn, guests gathered in groups, anxious to greet the new Jesuit in the family, with his new black habit and his new air of holiness.

Finn’s group included just his parents and himself. They had brought him presents—a black sweater, winter gloves, a huge box of chocolates—and Finn thanked them lavishly. But he was proud of his new poverty and couldn’t resist telling them that gifts of any kind became common stock.

“We don’t own anything. Isn’t that wonderful? If somebody needs a sweater, he just asks, and they’ll give him this one.”

“Oh, but we got it for you.”

“There isn’t any me anymore, Mother. Not like that.”

Her eyes filled and she said, “Don’t.”

“He’s just being dramatic, Claire,” his father said. “Let it go.”

Finn bristled at “dramatic,” but he knew that his father was right and found himself blushing.

“I love the sweater,” he said. “Maybe they’ll let me keep it.”

“You don’t want to ask for exceptions,” his father said. “A rule is a rule.”

It was the old family dynamic: his mother hurt and his father stepping in to lighten her disappointment and shift the blame to Finn. This was how it would go. She would be depressed tonight and need her tranquilizers. And his father would lie awake beside her, talking until she could finally get to sleep. And the unsaid blame would be laid on Guess Who.

Finn leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “My sweet old Mutti,” he said. “She’s the best.” She raised a hand to protect herself, but Finn was determined to salvage their day. “Come on, Momoo,” he said, and, pretending to twist her ears, he made motor sounds—“Start your engine! Come on! Lift off!”—until she pushed him away, saying, “People will see!” But she laughed and his father laughed, and so the visit was saved.

The afternoon was made easier by brief visits from the young priest, Father Lomax, who taught the novices Latin, and by Father Spalding, the old priest who taught them Greek. They said hello and welcome and goodbye, smiling and nodding as they moved on to the next group.

“They’re all so nice,” Finn’s mother said. “What about that young man, the one who showed us around last time? He was very nice.”

“Brother Reilly has fits.”

“Oh, no.”

Finn thought, Here’s a good story,
but he knew it was a story that he had no right to tell.

"He has screaming fits in the night," he said.

"That's awful."

"He had one a few weeks ago. He started screaming, and I mean major full-on screaming. It was the middle of the night, and we all woke up—we were terrified, you can imagine. Reilly, of all people! Then he stopped and everything went quiet and he said—calm as could be—he said, 'Everything's fine. There's nothing the matter. Just go back to sleep.' And he left the dorm and went down to the infirmary and he was there for days. It was incredible." Finn paused. This was all wrong. He added, lamely, "He had a fit."

"Poor man. Isn't there anything they can do for him?"

"It's shell shock or something."

They were quiet for a while, thinking.

Finn broke the silence. "I probably shouldn't have told you that."

"It's sad. It's a sad story."

"I shouldn't have told it," he said again.

Toward the end of the afternoon, when they all seemed talked out, his father said—and it was obvious that they had planned this—that if ever Finn wanted to leave they would completely understand, that what they cared about was his happiness, that's all. They wanted him to be happy.

Finn assured them that he was happy.

Finally, it was over.

Visiting day had been a great success. Finn, however, felt sick. He had squandered what little progress he had made in the spiritual life. He had trivialized it. He had talked it away.

De more for months now. Mass and meditation, spiritual conference, and on and on, until litanies in chapel, and so to bed.

Then Father Larsen arrived. He appeared one day at noon, silent, forbidding, entering the refectory behind everyone else. He looked ancient. His back was crooked, and he walked slowly, bent over. His habit hung on him like a shroud. But it was his face that was shocking. A thick scar ran from his left eyebrow down to his chin, pulling his mouth a little to the side so that he appeared to be sneering.

The novices, observing custody of the eyes, pretended not to see him. They stood for the prayers before meals and, when they sat down, Father Superior declared, "Deo gratias," which meant that they were free to talk.

Finn, who was waiting on the faculty table, noted that although the priests spoke quietly among themselves, Father Larsen hardly spoke at all.

Later, as Brother Quirk gave out laborandum assignments, he explained that Father Larsen was ill. He was completely off limits. No confessions and no spiritual advice. These were orders from Father Superior.

Father Larsen had been a prisoner on the Bataan death march. He had survived torture and starvation, but he had never really recovered. So he was here to rest. Period. The novices had many questions about the death march and about the torture—what had happened to his face—but it was work time and Brother Quirk sent them on their way.

So Finn felt deeply betrayed the next day, when, coming out of chapel, he saw Brother Reilly leave the line of novices and join Father Larsen, who was waiting for him on the veranda. They exchanged a few words and then, like old chums, took the path down to the lake.

Finn went off to laborandum to dig up more goddam potatoes and wrestle with his jealousy of that fucking Reilly.

Winter was long and cold, but at last the snow melted and Lent began and Finn was a changed man. He no longer imitated Brother Quirk or broke the rule of silence or said witty things at the expense of his brothers. Moreover, he was content. He felt no need to perform. He listened while Brother Haberman told his stories about life in Dorchester, and he dutifully learned the names of Irish parishes in Southie, and, when he and Brother Reilly were assigned to the same work crew, Finn did his best to draw him out. They were planting those everlasting potatoes.

The day was cool, but Finn felt uncomfortably hot, except for his hands, which were freezing. He was tempted to complain, but he concentrated on Brother Reilly instead.

Finn scooped out a hole and buried a chunk of potato, the eye facing up. "I guess this isn't much like the Marines," he said.

"It is, as a matter of fact. Mindless tasks and no women."

Finn pondered this, shocked.

"What about that! I notice you walk with Father Larsen. What is it like?"

"It was an order from Father Superior. For my mental health."

"Oh." And then, "What do you talk about? I mean, what does he talk about?"

"Baseball. Sports."

"Sports? But he must talk sometimes about ... well ... about being a prisoner."

Brother Reilly punched a hole in the dirt and said nothing. He was pale with anger.

"Or about the death march."

"Cut it out! Would you just cut it out! All this shit! Honest to God."

Finn fell silent, and at the end of laborandum, when Brother Reilly said, "I apologize, Brother Finn," Finn resisted the urge to tell him to shove it and merely said, "I shouldn't have pried. My fault."

Later that day, he learned that Brother Reilly had been told he would have to wait another year before taking vows. Poor Brother Reilly. Finn went to chapel to pray for him. He didn't feel well. He had a pain in his chest and his breathing was strained. He was coming down with a cold. Never mind. It was another thing he could offer up.

SEMPER FIDELIS

Brother Infirmary was old and he was tired. Over the years, he had given pills to countless novices who had dealt with doubts about their vocation by working themselves up into a fever. Finn's temperature was a hundred and one, nothing surprising. So Brother gave him the strongest cold pills he had—the yellow-and-black ones—and told him to take a lie-down instead of laborandum for the next few days. A day passed and then another, and though Finn took the yellow-and-black pills, he was racked by a constant cough and dizzy with fever. His coughing distracted everybody during meditation, so he was sent back to the infirmary. His fever was now a hundred and three, and he was badly dehydrated, so Brother Infirmary, against his instincts and
BEAR

Twenty, on a Paris backstreet I took in a bear brought out to entertain our gathering crowd.

I shit you not, I say in my language of that time, this really, really, happened. Snouted,
declawed, castrated probably, he danced on hind feet to the musics of a short whip.

Twenty, a student whose bad French was his worst pain since he had a childhood he couldn’t remember

and he told everyone that he was happy.
That was before three friends overdosed,
four more were suicides, before
we lost a child and in twelve months

I lost my mother, father, sister,
before analysis brought my childhood back—

abused by my sister until I had that pain *liquidated*, in the words of the kind witch doctor.

“I had to puke,” I said to the girl I was with that night,
a bid for the quick sex of her understanding.

“He kept on dancing, dancing, bleeding, dancing.”
“Poor baby,” she said. She was nineteen.

Where is she now? Years back, I heard: L.A.,
moved, three kids, like me. I have these nights

like tonight, again, the bear comes back
to make me wonder: does she read my poetry?

Probably not. Does she remember me,
she was nineteen, probably not, poor baby.

—Peter Cooley

principles, admitted him as a patient deserving of antibiotics and his devoted attention. Finn began to feel better at once, and after his second day he hoped for visitors. Maybe someone interesting would get ill, Finn thought—just slightly ill—and he'd have a roommate to talk with. He should have guessed it would be Brother Reilly.

Brother Reilly had had another fit, even worse than the previous ones. He woke, raging in the night, loud and obscene, with a soaring fever and a compulsion to talk. He was brought straight to the infirmary.

Far from being company for Finn, Brother Reilly continued his fit, mumbling angrily about whores and gooks and dead marines. This called for Sec- onal, Brother Infirmarian decided, along with his own private concoction of honey and water and a little whiskey, for the love of God. Brother Reilly slept through the entire day and then through the night, muttering the whole time. By the following morning, he had quieted down and showed signs of returning to himself. Around noon, he growled something unpleasant to the infirmary and toward evening, with a grunt and a moan, he acknowledged the presence of Finn. At ten o'clock, lights out for the Great Silence, Brother Reilly had recovered sufficiently to attempt a chat. He was groggy but plain-spoken.

“I disliked you from the day you arrived,” he said.

“I know you did. I disliked you, too. But I prayed about it.”

“Did it work?”

“No really. I’m sorry about your vows.”

“Fuck the vows.”

This was too much for Finn. “We’re not supposed to be talking during the Great Silence. I’m not going to talk.”

“Fuck the Great Silence.”

Brother Reilly fell asleep then, and when he woke in the middle of the night he was shaking with fever and his teeth were chattering. He called out to Finn.

“I’m sorry for what I said, Finn. Finn?”

“Thank you for calling me Finn.”

“I’m having a hit. How are you?”

“We’re not supposed to talk during the Great Silence.”

“We could say the Rosary together.”

Finn got out of bed and padded, barefoot, across the dark room to kneel down beside Brother Reilly’s bed. They said the Glorious Mysteries, with Finn starting the prayers and Brother Reilly responding. Finn was eager to finish and prayed fast. “Amen,” Finn said finally, and Brother Reilly said, “Amen.” Finn knelt in silence, in the dark, unsure what to do now.

Brother Reilly made a choking sound, as if he were trying not to sob.

“Are you all right?” Finn couldn’t bear the silence.

“I wanted to be a Jesuit to make up for my life.”

“To sacrifice it.”

“No. To make up for it. To atone for all I’ve done.”

“I wanted to make my life a sacrifice. Self-obliteration. For God.”

“You gotta be careful what you ask for. Sometimes you get it.”

Another long silence.

“It’s late,” Finn said.

“Do you want to get in bed with me?”

“Yes.” Finn astonished himself,
“When you enthusiastically declare Pam’s layered jello salad is ‘better than sex,’ I fear some may see it as a commentary on me, and not the layered jello salad.”

because that was indeed what he wanted. “But I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“It wouldn’t be anything sexual. We’d just hold each other.”

Finn felt himself getting hard.

“I just want to hold you,” Brother Reilly said.

“I don’t think I can do it.”

“The truth is,” Brother Reilly paused, his voice shaking, “the truth is I need to be held.”

Finn thought about this and shook his head. “I can’t,” he said, and then, determined, “I won’t.”

He went back to his bed and tried to sleep. He could hear Brother Reilly moaning, perhaps crying. Finn blocked his ears and turned from side to side. Finally, he got up and took one of the two Seconals from Brother Reilly’s nightstand and in minutes he fell soundly asleep.

Finn woke the next morning, groggy and numb, barely aware that something was happening around him. Brother Infirmarian and Father Superior were wheeling Brother Reilly out to the corridor, where an ambulance was waiting to take him to the hospital. Finn turned his face to the wall, guilty. What had he done? But he had no time to consider what he had done or, more important, what he had not done, because Brother Infirmarian had decided that it was time for Finn to go. He wanted his infirmary back the way it should be: empty.

In no time at all, Finn was standing at the De More bulletin board, where a notice from Father Superior suggested that, to prepare for the feast of St. Ignatius, they should all meditate on the vows.

Finn was distracted in his meditation by thoughts of Brother Reilly. Do you want to get in bed with me? He had wanted to and he had nearly done it. He felt his face burn. He would go to confession during this evening’s examination of conscience.

But, when the time came, Finn couldn’t bear to tell all this to Father Superior, so he went to old Father Spalding, the Greek teacher, who had taught at several different Jesuit colleges and had heard everything. Besides, he was a little deaf.

Finn confessed that in the infirmary one of his brother novices had asked him to get into bed with him. “He just wanted to be held, but I knew it was clearly an occasion of sin,” Finn said, “and I knew it was my own fault.” Father Spalding belched softly. “That’s all, Father.”

Father Spalding sighed and said, “I know.” He gave Finn a long talk about loneliness in religious life and the importance of chastity and the danger of friendships that became emotional. He paused and, as if he were merely distracted, he said, “Religious life is not for everyone. But be of good cheer and pray for a peaceful heart.”

Vow day came and went while Brother Reilly remained in the local hospital. After two weeks, he was transferred to Shrewsbury Mental and then was released to his family.

On his first day at home, he shot and killed himself with his Marine service pistol, but not before writing a letter to Finn, saying, “My death happened years ago and has nothing to do with you. Have a happy, holy life.” It was signed, “Love, Brother Reilly.”

Father Superior opened the letter, as he opened all novice mail, and after he had considered the matter at prayer he called in Brother Finn and told him of Brother Reilly’s death. Finn went white and slumped in the chair but said nothing. He put the letter in his inside pocket, next to his scroop beads, and went downstairs to chapel. He sat in the back pew and tried to think. But he didn’t know how to think anymore, and old words kept circulating in his brain. Finally, it came to him that he was to blame. For everything.

Finn knocked at Father Larsen’s door and waited. He knocked again and heard a kind of grunt, so he pushed the door open and entered. The room was thick with smoke and smelled of
whiskey. Father Larsen was at his desk. He looked annoyed. He pushed his drink aside.

“I don’t hear confessions.”

“I know, Father.”

“Or give spiritual advice. Or listen to novices’ sob stories.”

“No.”

Father Larsen turned his scarred face toward Finn, so that he seemed to be sneering. “Well, what then? I’m not able to help you, whatever it is.”

“It’s about Brother Reilly.”

Father Larsen pushed aside the book he’d been reading, the New Testament in Latin and Greek. He lit a cigarette and told Finn to sit down.

“What’s this about Reilly?”

“It’s about his death.”

“Who told you he’s dead?”

“He wrote me a letter before he did it.”

“Reilly was a good man. A good marine.”

An awkward silence, and then Finn blurted out, “It was all my fault.” He began to sob, softly at first, then louder. He choked finally and blew his nose. He said, “I’m a mess. I’m sorry.”

Father Larsen pulled deeply on his cigarette and waited.

Finn told him of their instant mutual dislike. “Mostly my fault,” Finn said. He searched for the least offensive words and told him about the encounter in the infirmary and his refusal to get into bed with Reilly. “He wanted to be held,” Finn said, “and I refused.” He looked at Father Larsen and his scar and said, “It’s all my fault.”

“Is it?” Father Larsen said. “Or would that make you more important than you are?” This caught Finn’s attention.

Father Larsen tapped the ash from his cigarette and looked at him. As if that were an invitation to tell him everything, Finn began with wanting to be an actor and exchanging that for scourge beads and his struggle with the rules and on and on, until he reached that desperate scene with Brother Reilly.

“He wanted to be held. What he said was he needed to be held. And I refused.”

Father Larsen sat back in his chair. He said to Finn, “Would it have been so bad to get into bed with Reilly? Would there have been terrible harm to anyone?”

“Do you mean I should have? Is that what you’re saying?”

Father Larsen hesitated and then said, “I would have, poor shit that I am. Sometimes we have to risk our soul to save somebody else.”

“But it would have been a mortal sin.” Finn blushed. “Because I wanted it.” He paused. “I wanted to get in bed with him. I was aroused. I had an erection. So I walked away and left him there.” He paused again. “I stole one of his pills and went to bed. The next morning they took him to the hospital. I’m to blame. I blame myself.”


Father Larsen lowered his voice, to a whisper. “You. You. You. It’s all about you. I really think you should go. I think you should leave now before it’s too late.”

Finn made a choking sound.

“Leave. Before you turn totally inward . . . and rot.”

“Leave,” Finn echoed.

“Everything you’ve told me is about you. Your guilt. Your blame. Your pitiful erection.”

“But I was following the Jesuit rule. Or trying to.”

“You’ve turned it inside out. You’re supposed to be growing in Christ, and instead you’ve been growing in self-satisfaction.”

The clock ticked on Father Larsen’s desk, and from the chapel came the sound of the bell for litanies. Then there was silence in the room and it was terrifying.

“Is this because of Reilly?” Finn asked.

“Reilly has nothing to do with it.”

Father Larsen made as if to wash his hands. “You should go. You should leave the Jesuits. That’s the only help I can offer. That’s it. Finis. The end.”

He sat back again. He was done with Finn. He had said the painful, necessary thing, and now they both had to live with it. He lit another cigarette. He was exhausted. He said, “This is why they don’t want me dealing with novices.”

Finn thought. So this is despair. Reading his mind, Father Larsen said in a hard voice, “Don’t despair, kiddo. There are plenty of other ways to sacrifice your life.”

Two days went by. Finn found that he could not pray. He went through the motions of meditation, Mass, and thanksgiving, but he was not conscious of praying. He was merely existing, a testament to shame and disgrace. And then, on the third day, he woke at five-thirty, de more, yawned, and before going back to sleep—at that precise moment and with a joyful heart—he decided to leave the Jesuits, admit his failure, and let sacrifice find him when he was ready for it. He slept until nearly eight and got up just in time for breakfast.

It was Friday, which meant pancakes, and he had three of them, with extra syrup. He looked frankly around the refectory at his brother Jesuits. He admired them this morning, men who had made a free choice and, at great cost, were trying to disappear into the long black line. Finn did not want to disappear.

“I’m free,” he said aloud. The other novices continued eating. Everyone knew that Brother Finn was impossible.

Finn left that afternoon. He had Father Superior’s blessing, and he made a last visit to chapel with no sense of regret. He felt comfortable in his jacket and tie.

As he stood alone at the train station, he was visited suddenly by feelings of remorse. He wouldn’t have it. “I’m free,” he said aloud again, just to hear it. And then he shouted it—the platform was empty—and it felt right and true. But with a year’s grace behind him—unearned, undeserved—he recognized that this freedom was only temporary, and that the words he shouted to the empty air would in time come back to him, and back, in a pale echo: Brother Reilly, Father Larsen. But for now life was good and Finn chose it.

The train arrived and Finn got on and left.

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