The Fifth Glorious Mystery

A Novel

by

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Abstract

The Fifth Glorious Mystery is a semi-autobiographical work related to the "Bildungsroman" or "Coming of Age" novel. Much of the story is set in a Catholic boys' school in Newfoundland in the 1960s, and traces the lives of a number of students and teachers.

Nipper Mooney, the first person narrator, looks back on his childhood and adolescence in an attempt to understand the psychological and social legacy of a rigid, and often violent, denominational school system. At the end of the novel, in a kind of cathartic "initiation," he comes to fully realize the wide reaching implications of those early years.

The most creative challenge in the writing of the novel involved an exploration of the fictive relationship between experience and invention. Because The Fifth Glorious Mystery is not autobiography, it was necessary to "invent the truth"--to construct, as much as possible, a fluid, resonant story containing the essential connections demanded by fiction. This led to a certain amount of experimentation--especially in terms of point of view, voice, temporal structuring and tone.

The Fifth Glorious Mystery, then, examines fragments of memory and attempts to shape them into something more, to

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Introduction

In recent years a number of scandals involving members of the clergy have drawn attention to the state of the church and school systems in Newfoundland and elsewhere. This has encouraged a vast amount of writing, but it has been mostly in the form of memoir, such as Dereck O'Brien's Suffer Little Children, or as sociological and psychological treatise. No one has yet dealt with the subject in a fictive way. While scientific studies offer insight through facts and statistics, and memoirs are a valuable educational and therapeutic means of coming to terms with traumatic experience, a good novel can give an artistic shape to the subject that cuts through to its human heart, that hits us where we are most vulnerable. Because I had gone through the denominational system and had personally known a number of the Christian Brothers currently serving prison sentences for physical and sexual abuse, I felt qualified to set myself the creative challenge of dealing, in a novel, with that particular educational system and its ramifications.

Once I had made this decision, the first questions I asked myself were, How much of the story, if any, should be autobiographical? What would be the best autobiographical approach? Would the use of a first person narrator eliminate, in the reader's mind, the fictive distance

reader's imaginative involvement in the text?

In some critical circles there seems to be a notion that autobiographical works are not really novels at all, that they are, rather, a curious hybrid of memoir and fiction, and that the marriage of the two leads to a dilution of both. I recently heard a C.B.C. book reviewer speaking disparagingly of a new writer's "compulsory" first person, autobiographical narrative. His tone and general attitude suggested that such fictions are somehow inferior to novels of pure invention pulled, gleaming and whole, from the writer's imagination. The reviewer implied that for some writers the autobiographical novel is a necessary exercise before they can move on to more serious work. There are also those who argue that such writing is easier than non-autobiographical fiction. After all, they say, autobiographical fiction does not invent as much as it merely "sets down," dressed up and disguised, what has already been seen and felt, and which the author hopes might be of some interest to the reader.

No novel, of course, not even the most outlandish science fiction, is drawn all in one bucket from the sacred well of the imagination. The writer's life experiences will necessarily shape the approach, whether the writing is concerned with warp drive or grandfather's farm. No life,

art. A life is full of fits and starts. It lacks the artistic gloss that is a primary concern of the novelist. As Hemingway said, a novel must be truer than true. On the other hand, when asked whether or not he used his own life experiences in his work, he replied, "Does a writer know anyone better?" It seems to me that this is the crux of the matter: the fiction writer uses autobiographical material as a point of departure, and through imagination and artistry transforms it into something more.

There is no lack of examples. Writers have always drawn upon their personal histories with a greater or lesser degree of invention. In some cases, such as the short stories of Dylan Thomas, and Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, the writer turns back to his early childhood and creates what is often called "Coming of Age" or "Initiation" fiction. Closely related to this is the "Bildungsroman" which traces the development of a young person usually from adolescence to maturity. Perhaps the most famous example is Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship. In addition, there is the whole genre of the Roman a Clef where actual persons and events (though not necessarily dealing with young people) are presented under the guise of fiction. One thinks of Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises.

relationship between experience and invention that would be most appropriate for my particular story. While much of my material had some basis in fact, and was often interesting or amusing in itself, I knew that anecdotes alone weren't enough to submerge the reader in a fictive world. I would have to provide a narrative structure and create artistically meaningful connections between various fragments of my memory. I would have to give my reader a continuity, a "thru-line" that real life very often lacks. In addition to this thru-line, I needed to familiarize the reader with believable "round" characters.

For much of the book, Nipper Mooney, my first person narrator, adopts the stance of "watcher." He marvels at, suffers under, reports on and eventually becomes drawn into the events around him. Most of all he comes to question the arbitrary violence and deep-rooted hostilities with which he is continually faced. The story is told in his voice, as seen through his eyes. Is he me? No. Like all the characters in the book he is a composite, a creation whose life I discovered in the fictive course of making connections.

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John Gardner has written of the necessity for the novelist to create a vivid and continuous dream in the reader's mind. He must select and present his material in a

All of the constituent elements, the voice, tone, characterization, plot, must work together. The writer who taps into autobiographical material is faced with the same challenges in shaping these elements as the "inventive" novelist. The fiction of the former must also be a continuous dream, alive and resonant in a full and satisfying way.

During the writing of The Fifth Glorious Mystery, then, I found myself "inventing the truth" for my own artistic purposes. Those scenes which I retrieved from personal experience I altered or extended to make connections. People I remember from my own childhood often provided a starting point for the creation of fictional characters, but it is unlikely that any of the models would ever recognize themselves in the final product. The process of filtering, selecting, and shaping has turned all vestiges of reality into fiction. In the end, the world I invented, while having a general human resonance, exists only within the confines of the novel.

Dialect

In keeping with the realistic tone of the novel, I have tried to phonetically capture the Newfoundland and, in particular, the St. John's accent in such a way that the

reader or serve to break the dream.

The most distinguishing feature of the St. John's accent is a kind of flatness impossible to render in print (it is more a consideration of pitch), but I did try to convey other elements. The boys refer to the Christian Brothers as "Brr." There are many occasions when I drop the final "g" from some "ing" words: "I didn't want to go fightin'." There are also numerous examples of the Newfoundland penchant for adding an extra "s" to verbs: "I hears you singin' along with the Beatles on the radio." I should stress that these conventions are variable, even within the speech of a particular character. Sometimes usage depends, for example, on the placement of the verb in the sentence. In all cases I sounded out the dialogue and made a final decision based on my own ear.

I also use various local constructions and idioms: "There's not a joog in 'im." In such cases I have consulted the Dictionary of Newfoundland English for verification of both meaning and spelling. Wherever there is a chance that a particular phonetic rendering or idiom might not be clear from the context, I have come down on the side of clarity and relied on standard English.

Point of View

tendency to identify the first person narrator of a "Coming of Age" novel as the author himself. This is especially true if the reader happens to know something of the author's life. One way to guard against this is to discard the first person voice for the emotional distancing provided by the third person or omniscient point of view. And in the early drafts of this novel that is what I attempted. But in the end, because of the kind of material I was dealing with, I felt that the narrative needed the intimacy of the first person. It provided a more tangible connection with the reader.

Once I had settled on the first person narrator, I decided to tell the story from the point of view of the child. It seemed that the best way to pull the reader into what was essentially a child's world would be to have the child himself tell the story in a manner not unlike that of Huck Finn or Holden Caulfield. But while the immediacy of the voice was compelling, I eventually came to realize that this narrative stance was both restricting and temporally rigid. Children are sophisticated, but their lack of a wider experience of the world makes it difficult for them to see the "bigger picture." I always wanted the story to have a far reaching, dynamic resonance. Only an adult with the benefit of hindsight and time to reflect, could see the full implications of that regimented, violent system. Only an

have been told by Nipper as a twelve or sixteen year old, and that story would certainly have had the candour and immediacy of the child, it would have been a different story, and I felt, in the end, that it would be too limiting. I decided instead to make Nipper an adult, but not so old that the events of his schooling would no longer be fresh in his mind. I put him in his late twenties, young enough to remember, but with the experience to enable him to make the essential connections that, I hope, are at the heart of the book. To strengthen this idea I decided to make him a journalist, to have a flair for reportage. Thus Nipper can say, when he remembers Sister Mary Ignatius, that her pasty complexion reminds him of the wax figures in Madame Tussaud's. It is a different way of seeing. In the end it became an artistic trade off: the candour, directness and immediacy of the child's voice, as opposed to the once removed, more mature voice of the adult who is beginning to see the bigger picture.

<u>Tone</u>

Finding the proper tone for the book required a certain amount of experimentation. While I was dealing with characters and events that were often cruel or violent (both physically and psychologically), I always tried to keep in

become intimate with it--not alienated. I was wary of using the novel as a platform to preach; neither did I want to be inordinately heavy-handed or negative. I tried to balance the essentially serious nature of the story with grey characters instead of black and white, and especially with humour. Walking the thin line between pathos and humour proved to be one of the more formidable creative challenges in writing the book. Usually the humour is drawn from the bizarre, offbeat side of a number of the characters: there is, for example, the choir master who recites Edgar Allan Poe to his singers. But most of the humour is more subtle, and drawn from the general absurdity of the human condition as seen through the eyes of a child. I tried to remember that for the boys humour was therapeutic, and often the only way to stay sane in an otherwise unstable world.

Temporal Structuring

In terms of temporal structuring, I decided that the first part of the novel should focus primarily on one particular school year, 1967-68, when Nipper is in grade eight. There is a general introduction to Holy Trinity when he first comes there in grade five and some use of flashback, but I didn't want to concentrate too much on the younger years. In grade eight Nipper is fourteen, on the

environment with a new maturity. For most of part two and the conclusion, he is seventeen and about to graduate. Now he is on the edge of the adult world, and the legacy of his schooling manifests itself in a more personal and profound way.

Structurally, then, we see Nipper at ten years of age for the general introduction or set-up, at thirteen for the primary focus of part one, and at seventeen for part two and the conclusion. And, of course, serving to bind and oversee all of this is Nipper as narrator at twenty-eight. I didn't see a need to do a play-by-play of each step along the way. I was more interested in creating the general ambience and energies of the school and communities--the kind of electricity in the air, and how my main characters dealt with it.

Style

The writing style is meant to mirror Nipper's journalistic background. The style is not "journalese" as such, but it is straightforward and clear. While Nipper is not a poet he is capable of the occasional vivid turn of phrase. As a child little escaped his curious, questioning eye, and as an adult journalist he remains a watcher.

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create and sustain a particular fictional world. There is some basis in fact, but the end result, I hope, is more than a mere recounting of certain events. What brings the fictional nature of the book most clearly home to me is the sense of <u>discovery</u> I had throughout the writing. I never knew exactly where the book was going, and which characters might stand up at any moment and demand to be taken notice of. But throughout this journey I always had faith that each scene and character was a necessary component of a larger story. My task as novelist was to find that story and present it as best I could.

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Part One

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Alexander Street's motley row houses wind haphazardly up a steep hill to Harrison Avenue. When I first knew it, the street boasted a bakery, a convenience store, a dry cleaning business and two barbershops run by the Bowman brothers, Al and Joe. Another brother, Frank, operated a third shop only minutes away on Water Street. Chip bags and other trash blew in the street and on the sidewalks--especially at the intersection of Saintsbury Place, whose residents appeared to produce more and varied garbage than their Alexander Street neighbours. In winter, pop bottles and Jersey Milk chocolate bar wrappers stuck up from clumps of black snow, or lay crumpled and frozen in the gutters.

To be fair, most of this trash was not the work of the Alexander Street/Saintsbury Place residents at all. Most of it came from boys, the school boys who attended Holy Trinity. The back entrance to the school opens halfway up Alexander Street, and many of the boys, especially those from the West End, used it as a short cut. When the wind from the harbour was especially strong, it peppered the rusting wire-mesh fence with scraps of trash glued fast like flies to flypaper. The Irish Christian Brothers who ran the school continually pleaded with their students to "refrain from littering." It never did any good. So in the early fall and spring, they pressed the entire student body into a

out to pick the surrounding streets clean, the 600 boys scavenged fitfully up and down sidewalks and back alleys. But by the next day the garbage had sprouted again, and by week's end it flourished.

All this will change now. When I walked up Alexander Street last week the bakery, the barbershops and convenience store, were all still there; the pop bottles and chip bags as plentiful as ever. But when I reached the wire-mesh fence and turned into the grounds, the school had disappeared.

On Tuesday, December sixteenth, twelve years after I graduated, Holy Trinity burned down. The fire started on the ground floor; no one knows how. Arson was suspected--especially among the boys--but nothing has yet been proven. Arson wouldn't surprise me. I had always fantasized that the place might go up in smoke. Not, of course, when there was anyone inside--not even the Brothers. No, my fantasy called for a night blaze; no one is hurt, but the place is completely levelled. When I come down for breakfast the next morning my mother says, "You can go back to bed. Holy Trinity burned down last night. You don't have to go to school until next year--maybe longer."

The fire broke out just before the final period in the afternoon. Everybody got out, but there were many close

Bannister had gone back in to insure the building was empty. He immediately rushed out again pursued by a fireball that licked at the edges of his soutane. The picture in The Evening Telegram had been quite dramatic. People who didn't know any better called him a hero.

My favourite story of the fire had to do with its discovery. The only students on the ground floor, a grade five class, were reading quietly, waiting for their teacher. Presently the boy sitting by the door smelled something. He crept out of his desk and peered down the hall which was rapidly filling with smoke.

"Jesus, b'ys, there's a fire," he whispered.

"Christ," another boy said. "Go tell someone." But no one would go. They had been trained, under pain of death, to stay put until a teacher showed up, and that's what they were going to do--even if the place was burning down around their ears. A kid named Joe Murphy ran to the door and looked for himself.

"Shit," he said. "The whole friggin' place is goin' up." One by one the other boys got out of their desks and crowded around the door; but still no one would go for help. Finally, Murphy sprinted down the hall, bounded up the stairs, and knocked on the grade seven door.

He was greeted, to his horror, by none other than

classroom," he demanded.

"Sorry, Brr, but there's a fire."

Bannister glared at him for a moment and then turned to the class. "Memorize the poem "Autumn Splendour" on page 96." He grabbed Murphy by the ear. "All I can say, Mr. Murphy, is that for your sake, their damn well <u>better</u> be a fire."

The building was evacuated in quite an orderly fashion. They had trained us for that too. I wasn't there of course, but I saw the fire--even though I didn't know what it was at the time. I was coming home through the woods from an ice fishing trip when, miles away in the city, I saw an orange glow. When I got home and heard the news the first thing that struck me was that, inexplicably, <u>I</u> had something to do with it. Perhaps the Powers-That-Be had finally, fifteen years later, gotten around to my wish, and decided to grant it. I put on my coat and walked down to the front meadow where the glow was dying, but still visible. I stood there for a long time.

The next evening after work I went to the site. There must have been a hundred people there. The yellow police barrier snapped smartly in a wind that blew hard and cold, harder than usual. Of course, a major wind break was gone now. I stood in the quadrangle next to the statue of the

and deep drifts covered up the blackened debris and the concrete steps leading nowhere. The cold started driving the spectators away, and I pulled my scarf higher around my neck. I was about to leave myself when I saw a tall, gaunt figure huddled inside a thin army parka stamping to keep warm. His scarf hid his mouth and nose, but I knew who he was. I hadn't seen him in over ten years, but there was no doubt in my mind. Our eyes met briefly, but he gave no sign of recognition. He kicked at a piece of jagged ice, and then turned and headed out the back entrance of the school yard and down Alexander Street.

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My school career had not begun with Holy Trinity and the Christian Brothers. From Kindergarten to grade four I attended St. Christopher's Elementary in Kilbride, a small farming community about ten miles outside St. John's. Most of my teachers there had been Sacred Heart nuns. The building, an oblong, hastily constructed one-storey affair, was dirty, cold and overrun with mice to the point where we often found them in our desks, even nibbling inside our lunch bags.

My mother had always hated St. Christopher's, and when

journey into St. John's. The school she had in mind, Holy Trinity, was known for athletics and the strict discipline enforced by its teachers, primarily Christian Brothers.

"It'll be good for you, Nipper," said Mom. She never used my nickname unless she wanted to butter me up. "They'll make a man out of you."

"But you better watch out," said my father, winking. "Those Brothers are a tough lot. I heard they wear black leather straps down the sides of their robes. They'd just as soon eat you alive as look at you."

I had always considered the nuns something of a handful, and had given them a wide berth whenever possible, but if all this were true then the Brothers were a decidedly different and nastier form of the beast. If they were so mean, why did I have to go?

"I've had enough of that St. Christopher's," said Mom. "It's nothing but a hole. No heat in the winter; mice eating the school books--"

"But I like St. Christopher's. All my friends are there. Besides, I think I'd prefer the mice and the cold to being <u>eaten alive</u>."

"Don't mind your father," said Mom. "He's just coddin' you. The Brothers aren't <u>mean</u>. They're good teachers, just a little strict, that's all. Sure, my God, they're almost

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Trinity is a lovely school. I used to go there to Bingo. They got a gorgeous big gym--you'd like that wouldn't you? And everything's right clean." She smiled and adopted the tone that spelled a fait accompli. "You'll get used to it."

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When I first stepped onto the grounds of Holy Trinity my overriding emotion was fear. Mom had been right: the school was huge. It was also ugly: a rectangular concrete box painted a dull beige and completely lacking in line and ornamentation.

The schoolyard rang with the din of hundreds of screaming, excited boys, their roughhousing a striking contrast to the air of respectability suggested by their slicked down hair and fresh uniforms. I had never worn a school uniform before and I felt uncomfortably stiff and starched. My tie was suffocating me, but I didn't dare loosen it. The worst thing was that I seemed to be the only person there who didn't know anyone. I watched the boys cavorting and wished I was back at St. Christopher's.

When the doors finally opened we formed lines and traipsed through the school to the gym where we would be assigned to our classes. I gazed about in wonder. Everything overwhelmed me: the gleaming waxed floors, the sad-eyed statues of saints and angels standing regally in

fourth stories. I was amazed to see that the gym had a stage. I had never been in a gym before; St. Christopher's didn't have one--didn't even have a library. The Brothers, standing stiffly against the walls with crossed arms, also seemed larger than life, and strangely androgynous in their black soutanes. I looked for leather straps and was relieved when I didn't see any.

As I stood waiting for my name to be called, I noticed the boy next to me gazing about with a curiosity even greater than my own. I caught his eye and we smiled nervously at each other. It was also Joe Barnes's first day at Holy Trinity. He had come all the way from Portugal Cove where he attended a school half the size of St. Christopher's, and which only went to grade four. We both sensed that the other was a foreigner in this strange country, and when we were assigned to the same class we put aside our shyness and latched onto one another. Two against this impersonality and hugeness was clearly better than one.

As we marched down to our classroom I wondered what else--besides the Brothers and the sheer size of the place--was making me uneasy. There was something odd about the environment--something missing that I couldn't quite put my finger on. When I took my seat and looked around at my classmates it struck me: no girls. Not that girls

was something unnatural and frightening about this exclusively male world.

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Brother Devine, our home room teacher, was a soft spoken sixty year old with a shock of white hair, a leathery complexion and thick bifocals which persisted in sliding down over his nose. Contrary to what I was expecting, he wasn't at all threatening--in fact, compared to some of the nuns I had known at St. Christopher's, he was positively mild. He spent the first morning entertaining us with stories about King Arthur (with whom I was familiar), but also about some characters named Jason, Aeneas and Odysseus. I was shocked when it came out that they weren't Catholic--weren't even Christian for that matter. The nuns had only departed from our textbooks to tell us stories about the Saints and Holy Martyrs. Brother Devine seemed quite taken with Jason and his friends all the same, and he energetically recounted their adventures, at one point jumping up on his desk and flailing his arms about in an effort to describe how Odysseus had escaped from the Cyclops.

During lunch hour Barnes and I explored the streets around the school. We had been in St. John's before, of course, but never alone. Now we were free to roam where we

stores--even the housewives in curlers and bandannas, shaking out mops on their front steps, seemed strangely exotic.

We saw a group of small boys near Madden's Bakery nosily sharing out some food, and Barnes worked up the courage to ask them what they had.

"Bag o' scraps," said a boy, stuffing his mouth with what looked like cake. Crumbs stuck to his chin and lips and tumbled down the front of his blazer. He had a whole bread bag full of cake and cookies.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked.

"In dere," he said, pointing to a side door into the bakery. "Fifty cents a bag."

"What's in it?"

"All bits o' cake and buns and stuff that they don't use. You know, the stuff off the ends when der cuttin' up the cakes."

Barnes and I had a quick conference and pooled our resources. I gave him a nudge and he went over and knocked on the door.

"You don't have to knock," said one of the boys scornfully. "Just go on in and ask for it."

"For...?

"A bag o' scraps, b'y."

It was quite a feast, especially for someone like me who had a real sweet tooth. There were sticky slices of raisin and cherry cake, pieces of fresh sultana and shortbread cookies, date turnovers and apple flips.

As we walked around nibbling on the "scraps" and sizing things up, a group of Portuguese sailors aswirl in a cloud of acrid cigarette smoke, passed us on Water Street. We stared so hard that one of them must have assumed we wanted something. He stopped and, muttering softly in Portuguese, he reached into his breast pocket, pulled out a crumpled package and handed us a cigarette each.

Barnes and I looked at each other and grinned. It was only our first day of grade five and already we had fallen into delicious, decadent sin.

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Because I lived so far from Holy Trinity I was forced to become an early riser. My mother had arranged a ride for me with a neighbour, Frank Morton, who was a security guard. Frank's shift started at 7:30 A.M., so his beat up green Volkswagen would deposit me at the foot of Alexander Street at about 7:15. The problem was that classes didn't start until 9:00, and the school didn't open until 8:30. I had

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In the fall and spring I would go up to the monastery next to the school, and ring the bell. The housekeeper, Mrs. Critch, a sour woman with a limp and a mustache, would silently point to a corner of the vestibule and watch as I bent and took up the basketball that was waiting there. This was the communal basketball which the boys could use before and after school and during recess and lunch. I was too small to stand much chance of laying a hand on it when the bigger boys were around, but now, at that hour of the morning, I had the ball and the schoolyard--even the whole city--to myself. I practised my shot and dribble. In a couple of years I had become quite good--good enough to make the junior team in spite of my height. Ironically, despite my mother's good intentions in sending me to the school with the gorgeous gym, I was forced to give up my spot: all the games were played after school and I had to catch my ride back to Kilbride.

On days when it was too rainy or cold to play basketball, or if I had become tired of it, I would cross Prince Street and go up the stone steps that led to the back entrance of St. Teresa's church. The church opened at 7:00 A.M. in preparation for 8:30 mass. There was rarely anyone there besides me--certainly not for the first half hour or so. Then, gradually, the old people would arrive: the men

pepper caps in knobby hands; the women with their wool coats, bandannas and bulky leather purses. They would wander in slowly, their coughing and nose blowing echoing off the stone walls. I wondered if they really believed in God or if they were just coming to church because they were old and knew they were going to die soon. I watched as they genuflected stiffly and bowed their grey heads. It was always the old who came to church on those mornings, the old and the nuns who taught at St. Teresa's School for Girls just across the street from Holy Trinity. The Brothers never came.

But for the first little while I would have the church to myself, and I conducted my own private ritual. I blessed myself with holy water from a stained, marble cistern, and stared up at the enormous crucifix that hung just inside the doorway. The illusion of Christ's hanging had been skilfully constructed: His muscular, chipped body leaned precariously forward so He looked as if He might swan dive into the floor at any moment. His head hung wearily to one side, His crown of thorns, pointy and needle sharp, thrust at the ceiling and into His bleeding skull. He hung there placidly, a look of grim resignation on His bruised, bearded face.

In front of the crucifix stood the candle rack. At

take one from the tarnished brass box, savouring its smell and texture, and light it with my own matches. The scents of candle wax and incense mingled. I dropped a penny into the wooden contribution box--even though you were supposed to pay at least five cents. I heard that people sometimes stole from the box, and once Barnes said that what I was doing amounted to the same thing. Sometimes I expected Jesus to raise his head and shout down an admonition from the cross. But He remained content to hang in silence.

The altar was always decorated with freshly cut flowers, especially during Lent and on Holy Days. The damp scent of roses and rhododendrons hung heavily over the polished woodwork and marble statues, the velvet lined pulpit and pews. I found the scent overpowering, so I would go and sit in the last pew on the east side of the church where the sunlight slanted through the stained glass windows. The window just above me showed the Archangel Gabriel holding a flaming sword high above his head. His green eyes were set in a vigorous, youthful face and burned with an intensity mirrored in the flame of his sword. His jaw jutted forward and his wings hovered gracefully erect so he looked like an eagle about to take flight. There was an inscription in Latin at his feet and I wondered what it meant.

through his lean body, or the rain drumming rhythmically on the copper roof, I listened to the creaks and echoes, the whispering and coughing of the old people. I glanced through the hymnaries and prayer books, the outdated Sunday Bulletins and, finally, when I became bored, I prayed.

I had read in one of my religion books about Indulgences, and I wondered if simple prayers could play the same role. Perhaps they could be built up into a kind of holy bank account. I vaguely understood that if I said 100 Acts of Contrition, this might make up for future occasions when I would forget to say my nightly prayer. I wondered how many prayers it would take to atone for looking at Mickey Welch's dirty pictures.

Mickey had shown up at school one morning with a photo of two naked women. A <u>real</u> photo--not something taken from a magazine. Except for the content it looked and felt exactly the same as the photos our parents took of our birthday parties or first Holy Communion. The women were not beautiful, or even very attractive. Only one could be seen clearly. She lay on a rumpled bed staring passively at the camera, one hand dangling over the edge, the other clutching a lock of her partner's curly black hair whose face was buried deep between her legs. The partner's backside, white and overexposed by the flash, took up much

right hand corner of the room was torn and peeling. And although the photo was black and white, I knew the wallpaper was pink; I had seen the same design in my Uncle Steve's house. The photo's gritty reality made it a hundred times more compelling than the touched up, highlighted photos we occasionally saw clipped from Playboy. All of this was shocking enough, but then Mickey announced in a dramatic whisper that the photo had been taken in a whorehouse somewhere on Alexander Street. This led to a furious debate about which house it could possibly be. Barnes and I spent many a lunch hour climbing up and down the street appraising each house and debating its sinful possibilities. What we were going to do, if and when we figured out which house it was, we hadn't really thought about. But everytime we met a woman walking along the street we glanced at her to see if we would recognize the face from the photo. We never did.

I thought, then, that it might be a good idea to make my soul as clean and white as possible, and store up this whiteness like a squirrel storing nuts; that way I would have some protection against those times when I would be inordinately bad, when the lure of Mickey's photos, or their equivalents, would prove too much. So I would kneel, bow my head, and begin to recite my prayers one after another in a long litany: Hail Mary, Our Father, Glory Be, the Act of

saying the Rosary at home. My prayers spilled off my tongue as rapidly as newspapers off a press. I wondered how God could take in so many prayers at once, and had images of a secretarial angel sweating and scribbling with a goose quill as he tried to keep up with me.

After some practice I found that I could say the prayers and think about other things quite easily. But eventually strange hybrids emerged:

> Hail Mary Mother of God who Amen art in heaven hallowed be the Holy Amen Ghost and I am heartily sorry for having offended thy kingdom come Amen.

The last words spun and resonated in my head. When I looked up, dazed and prayer drunk, all the colours and smells of St. Teresa's were heightened. I saw the world with a technicolour clarity: Christ's thorns looked sharper, Gabriel's eyes and sword burned brighter. I felt so holy I trembled and could hardly breathe. Sometimes I stayed in the trance until the ringing of the bells for the 8:30 service jarred me back to reality.

With the sun firing Gabriel's hair and sword above me, and most of the world still asleep, I sat alone with the chipped, bleeding Jesus, and the dying old people and my

Teresa's and watched the world rub the dust from its eyes.

Over the next three years I settled, somewhat uneasily, into life at Holy Trinity, hoping to blend in as much as possible. Usually this wasn't difficult. At Holy Trinity you were a nobody unless you were an athlete, the son of a prominent citizen, or a straight A student. I was none of those things.

As a Kilbrider I felt somewhat out of place surrounded by so many "Townies." The mere fact that most of my fellow students lived in a bustling city granted them, in my young eyes, a kind of cosmopolitan worldliness. I had always been shy, and the big city brashness of the Townies heightened it. I watched in awe as they darted in and out of traffic, or nonchalantly smoked cigarettes on St. Teresa's steps. Kilbride ambled along at the pace of a slow and easygoing outport. Everybody knew everybody else. Locked doors were unheard of. My idea of excitement was when Flossie, the neighbour's one-eyed Holstein, broke into our vegetable garden and ate my mother's baby carrots.

In St. John's many of the Townies hung around in gangs loyal to their different territories--Bond Street, the West

out in the schoolyard between rivals. Three or four other boys at Holy Trinity came from Kilbride, but they were all in the higher grades. They were friendly, but obviously didn't want to be bothered with a ten year old. Still, I kept an eye out for them in case some Townie took it into his head to have a go at me.

I didn't have much experience as a fighter. In fact, I'd only been in one fight in my whole life. Back at St. Christopher's I'd hung around with a boy named Ray Moore and his sister Bonnie. Both Ray and Bonnie had very dark complexions--they could easily have been Spanish or Portuguese, and this occasionally led to some unkind remarks about their personal hygiene. One morning I came to school to see them surrounded by a group of older kids who were taunting them and telling them to go home and get a wash, and calling them a couple of little Jack-o'-Tars. I didn't even know what Jack-o'-Tar meant, but it didn't sound very nice, and soon fists and bookbags were flying. Bonnie handled herself quite well--much better than I did. She was still swinging and kicking when Sister Mary Ignatius charged out the door with her habit billowing in the wind, shrieking in her shrill, crow-like voice: "Now ye youngsters, ye give that up!" Holy Trinity looked like a school where I could use someone like Bonnie.

The Fifth Glorious Mystery

On rainy days I spent my lunch hour poring over a book in the library. It was Brother Devine who inspired this new interest, even though he hadn't really meant to. One day in religion class I bragged to him about all the extra praying I was punching in over at St. Teresa's. He shook his head and told me, in no uncertain terms, that I was wasting my time. "One prayer, said fervently and sincerely, is infinitely better than a hundred tossed off with no thought, with no feeling behind them," he said. "Prayers, Mr. Mooney, are not like popcorn." So, to pass the time, instead of praying in church, I began to read. Now I sat under Gabriel with Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn and all the Hardy Boys I could lay my hands on. The old people smiled and nodded at me as they crept up and down the aisle. I wondered why they had gotten so friendly until I realized they thought I was reading the Bible.

When the weather was fine Barnes and I continued to use our lunch hours to explore the city. One day Barnes stayed sick at home, and I decided to go off by myself. In a little alley at the top of Prince Street I came across a fruit store with a chaotic window display of bananas, grapes and plums, as well as other strange, brightly coloured fruits and long stringy vegetables. I recognized some purple mangoes from a picture in our geography textbook. As

greeted by the scent of Christmas: oranges. On Christmas I would find an orange and a banana stuffed into the toe of my stocking; outside of that, the only fruit that made a regular appearance in our house was the apple. A thick drift of sawdust blanketed the shop's hardwood floor, and sawdust crept into my socks as I wandered among the bins, drinking in the tropical scents of pineapple and coconut and curiously studying some wooden crates embossed with Chinese characters. The shopkeeper began to eye me suspiciously.

"Can I help you?" he asked finally.

"No, that's all right," I said. "I'm just lookin'." But the smells were so wonderful that I worked up the courage to point and ask, "What's them things?"

"Kiwis."

"What wees?"

"Kiwis," he said. "From New Zealand."

"Oh." I watched as he bent and opened a box of bananas. "Umm, how much are the bananas?"

"Sixty-five cents a pound."

"Can I get one?"

"One pound?"

"No, one banana."

The shopkeeper reached into the box, plucked a plump banana from a bunch, and laid it on the weigh scales.

The Fifth Glorious Mystery

"That's all?" Somehow I had thought that such an exotic Christmas fruit coming all the way from New Zealand or wherever would be much more expensive.

"You want it?"

I rummaged through my blazer pocket and handed over the ten cents. The banana was smooth and cool in my hands. It was only a ten cent purchase, but I felt grown up, like I had done something romantic. I took one last look around, one last deep breath, and went out through the jangling door.

I had only gone about ten feet when I came upon two boys sitting on a step with their legs jutting out into the sidewalk. Their school ties were loose and slewed around their necks. The blond one picked at his nails with a sullen, intent expression. The other one French inhaled a cigarette. As I stepped around their outstretched legs they glanced up at me.

"Whatcha got there, buddy?" said Blondie.

They were older boys, and I hadn't expected them to speak to me. "Nothin'," I said, startled. I kept walking, but I heard them murmur to one another; then they got up and came after me.

"Nothin'?" said Blondie to my back. "Looks like a banana to me."

The Fifth Glorious Mystery

"Monkey food," said the Smoker.

"That's right," said Blondie, laughing. "Hey, buddy, you don't want that. That's only for apes and gorillas." Suddenly he sprinted ahead and stopped in front of me. "Why don't you give that to me." I looked up at him with wide eyes. The hardness of his expression sent a trail of goose bumps running up and down my legs. I opened my mouth to speak, but my voice had gone. I stood looking at him, mute and confused, and just when I was about to hand over the banana he pushed me hard in the chest. I backed up on the foot of the Smoker who cursed and shoved me violently into Blondie. That's when he hit me. I don't remember much about the fight--if you could call it that. They obviously knew what they were doing, and I obviously didn't. I struck out blindly with one hand and tried to protect my face with the other. The banana fell to the sidewalk. Blondie punched me in the nose and blood spurted over my white shirt. I had never been punched in the face before and the sensation of his fist on my skin sickened me more than the blood or the pain. They hit me a few more times and then ran down the street. Somewhere along the line one of us had stepped on the banana. It lay crushed on the sidewalk. I felt myself starting to cry, but I swallowed hard and leaned up against a parked car until I got my breath back. A group

giggled, glancing back over their shoulders at me. I flushed and turned away.

After the girls had gone I straightened my blazer and tie, wiped some of the blood off my face with a piece of Kleenex, and went back to Holy Trinity. As soon as I came into the classroom the boys whistled and crowded around. "Someone jumped Mooney!" More boys came running. "What happened? Who jumped you?"

"Nobody." I didn't want to talk about it, but when Brother Devine came in he insisted on the details.

"I bought a banana," I said. "A couple of guys tried to take it off me."

"A banana?" said Brother Devine incredulously. He rolled his eyes. "Why didn't you just give it to them?"

"I was going to--"

"I mean it's not worth getting beat up over. I would have expected more from you," he said. "Fighting out on the street like a hooligan. Who were they anyway? From this school?"

"Yeah. In grade seven or eight."

"What did they look like?"

"A blond fella and another guy."

"I knows them, Brr," Mickey Welch called out from the back of the class. "I betcha that was Frankie Forrestall

on fellas." There was a murmur of agreement all around, and I realized I wasn't the first to get the benefit of my attackers' attentions.

Brother Devine shook his head. "Toughs," he said under his breath. He banged out the door, but then quickly stuck his head back inside. "Quiet until I get back."

About twenty minutes later I was summoned over the P.A. to the office. When I got there Blondie and Smoker were leaning up against the counter with their heads down. Brother Devine stood over them with his hands on his hips and a tight expression on his face that I'd never seen before. He looked at me. "That them?"

I nodded.

"Right," he said. "All of you into the office and we'll wait for Brother Bannister." We trooped into a cramped, dusty room and sat down. There was barely enough room for the four of us. The first thing that caught my eye was a black leather strap hanging on the wall just behind Bannister's chair. Brother Devine shook his head at Blondie and Smoker. "You're some big men, aren't you? Beating up on a youngfella half your size. And over a <u>banana</u>. Sacred Heart, don't they feed you at home? If you're that poor off come up to the monastery and I'll get Mrs. Critch to give you a bowl of soup and a few crackers."

told him what happened, glaring repeatedly throughout at Blondie and Smoker. Bannister clasped his hands behind his back and listened without a word. When he had finished, Brother Devine flashed me a smile and went back to class.

Our principal was like no other grown up I had ever seen. He was a big man with the ruddy complexion of a heavy drinker; his black frame glasses held thick Coke bottle lenses making his eyes shift in and out of focus and roll like marbles. I thought that if I had to look at him for very long I'd get seasick. He sat behind his desk and rapped his pencil against a coffee mug. Blondie and Smoker grinned nervously at each other.

As I waited for Bannister to say something I ran over my story in my mind, but it was hard to concentrate with the strap peeking out over his right shoulder. Finally, he stood up and took in the three of us with his odd eyes. "I refuse to tolerate fighting. Look at you," he said to me, pointing across the desk. "That shirt is ruined, you know. Ruined. What's your mother going to say? Out in the street acting like a bunch of...Indians."

"But Brr--"

He silenced me with a wave of his hand. Then he reached up on the wall and took down the strap. "And you, Mr. Forrestall," he said to Blondie, "I've had it with you.

ran his hand up and down the side of his blazer. Bannister had always seemed like an old man to me, although I suppose he was only in his fifties. But when he raised the strap over his head and brought it down he looked like a twenty year old. The first blow shattered the air in the small office so that the coffee mug jumped on the desk. Forrestall sucked in his breath with a whistle and promptly shook out his hand. Crocker turned away. "Again," said Bannister in a dry monotone. He administered six blows on each hand; after the fourth I could see tears coming into Forrestall's eyes. "Back to your class," he said when he finished. Forrestall jammed his hands into his blazer pockets and rushed out of the room. Bannister turned to Crocker and gave him the same. I felt no pity for either of them. As far as I was concerned he could have given them six more. When Crocker had left he turned to me. "Stand up." My mouth went dry.

"What?"

"Stand <u>up</u>." I looked questioningly into his thick lenses, but those eyes told me nothing. "Hold out your hand."

"What for, Brr?" I said. "I didn't do nothin'. They jumped me. I didn't want to go fightin'."

"Hold out your hand," he said again. His eyes pitched

his parted lips. I had never been strapped before. The nuns at St. Christopher's had occasionally strapped the older children, but the worst that happened to us was a painful rapping over the knuckles with a pointer for everything from having dirty nails to misspelling a word. I closed my eyes and brought up my hand. When Bannister struck I nearly lost my breath. It was like picking up a live wire. He gave me three hard blows and then said, "The other hand." I could hardly see him through my tears, but I managed to obey. "Now back to your class," he said as he hung up the strap. "And no more fighting."

I stepped into the outer office with my hands jammed under my armpits and tears streaming down my face. The secretary, Miss Jackman, stared at me, and despite my pain I reddened with embarrassment. When I got to my classroom door I lingered outside until I gathered myself together. Then I opened the door and went in. Everybody stopped what they were doing and looked. I hoped they wouldn't know that I'd been crying, but they must have noticed my red, puffy eyes. Brother Devine looked at me curiously. Then the realization struck him.

"What happened, Nipper?" he said, more to verify what he already knew than to actually find something out.

"He strapped me," I said. "Brudder Bannister. I

The Fifth Glorious Mystery

Brother Devine frowned and ran his hand through his white hair. "Sit down," he said softly.

I slumped into my seat and stared at the blackboard. Later, when we were busy with an assignment, Brother Devine came and crouched down by my desk.

"I'm sorry you got strapped, Nipper. Brother Bannister he...he shouldn't have done that."

If I wasn't much of a fighter I was less of an actor. When Frank Morton picked me up after school he could tell right away that something was wrong. "You okay?"

"Sure," I said. "I'm all right."

"What happened to your shirt?"

"It was in the gym, during recess. I got hit in the face with the basketball."

"Oh, you got your bell rung, did you?" said Frank. "Well, just remember: it's like fallin' off a horse. You got to dust yourself off and get back on again."

"Yeah."

I gave my parents the same story. Part of me wanted to tell them what really happened, wanted to insist on going back to St. Christopher's where it was dirty and full of mice but at least people didn't beat you up for no reason. But I didn't say anything.

"For God's sake, Nipper," said my father. "Be more

open, b'y."

"You don't need to worry about that," I said. "I will."

4

My teachers, over the next few years, proved an eclectic lot. The only common thread among them was that, with the exception of Brother Devine, none of them could really teach. My grade six teacher, Mr. Gibson was a rumpled, seedy man in his late fifties who always seemed to be suffering from a hangover. If he wasn't perpetually under the influence, he certainly looked it. Barnes said he reminded him of an ugly Dean Martin. Gibson operated in super slow motion, and was so absentminded that it was easy to talk your way out of sticky situations. "Oh, yes, sir, Mr. Gibson. I passed that assignment in yesterday. You were talking to Randy Dooley by the door and I came up and gave it to you. Remember? I saw you put it in your briefcase." Gibson would narrow his rheumy eyes and stare at the boy like he had never seen him before, let alone his assignment.

Because of teachers like Gibson, I became something of an intellectual scavenger, learning to pick things up on my

Holy Trinity if you weren't scared to death--of the Brothers, the bigger boys--you were bored to death. Reading and browsing through the library became my favourite pastime--much to the chagrin of Barnes who viewed books with the same displeasure he expressed whenever he caught a sculpin off the wharf in Portugal Cove.

In grade seven my mother talked me into trying out for the choir. She had heard that, unlike the athletic teams, the choir practised during school hours, so there was no reason why I couldn't participate. She offered to drive me into town for the concerts.

I was surprised to hear that we even <u>had</u> a choir--except, of course, for the Vespers. Holy Trinity had never struck me as a Mecca for the arts.

"Mom, I don't think I can sing."

"Of course you can. I hears you singing along with the Beatles on the radio."

"But they don't sing <u>Beatle</u> songs in school choirs. Besides, just because I likes the Beatles it don't mean that I can sing like 'em."

"Go on. Sure you got a grand voice. You sounds just like Paul." She ran her hand through my hair. "That's why I sent you out to Holy Trinity in the first place: so you can get into things like that." Eventually I agreed to give

more interested in getting out of class for the rehearsals.

Brother McDonald, the choir master, was obviously not a Beatle fan. He looked more like a boot camp sergeant than a musician, which was appropriate, because I soon discovered that most of the songs we sang were of the military variety. When it turned out that I actually could sing, and was assigned a solo in the Christmas concert, it wasn't "Oh, Holy Night" or "Joy To The World." It was the "Green Berets:"

Fighting soldiers from the sky
Men who live and men who die...

It struck me as odd to sing an American war anthem in a concert extolling the peace and joy of Christmas, but when I mentioned this to McDonald he said "The Green Berets" was a fine, uplifting song for any season. In terms of musical interpretation he didn't have much to offer: "Don't forget it's a song about soldiers. So don't make it too pretty."

McDonald also adopted the odd practice of reading to us just prior to performances. "It'll calm you down. Settle your nerves." Considering what proved to be an erratic rehearsal schedule, and the lack of any musicological help from him, we were usually ill prepared and could certainly

except that his favourite author was Edgar Allan Poe. Before concerts we would huddle in a corner of the dressing room, and while the other performers raced around in pursuit of lost props or making last minute adjustments to their costumes, he would stand before us and solemnly intone the measured lines of The Raven or The Tell-Tale Heart:

> I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man's terror must have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment--do you mark me well?

To say we marked him well was an understatement. Some of the younger boys marked him so well that they quickly degenerated into a collection of mini zombies bordering on the catatonic. Sometimes I thought we'd have to carry them to the stage. It was little wonder, then, that when I asked my father what he thought of our performance, he said we'd improve once we got over our stage fright.

The Fifth Glorious Mystery

I started grade eight in 1967, the year known as the "Summer of Love," and my homeroom teacher was Brother Fitzpatrick. He had just transferred to Holy Trinity from St. Mark's where he had been known as the toughest teacher in the school. When he first walked into our classroom we immediately saw that his reputation was well deserved. According to the grapevine he had been a champion boxer, and his build and gait bore this out. Even when he strode to the blackboard he hunched his shoulders and bobbed his head as if making for the centre of the ring to touch gloves with an opponent. But unlike other fighters he never took off his fighting face. It was a face we would come to know well.

We took all our subjects with Brother Fitzpatrick except Latin and French--although it would scarcely have made much difference if he had also taught those: both of the instructors we ended up with had a negligible acquaintance with these languages.

Our Latin instructor, Mr. Simms, was new to the school and the only lay teacher we had that year. Simms, a distracted, introspective man with a taste for threadbare tweed jackets, usually sported a heavy three days growth of beard. In spite of this he always reeked of aftershave, which led Barnes to remark that the aftershave wasn't

face itself needed all the help it could get, for it was oddly misshapen. The line of his chin jutted awkwardly towards the floor; his flat, squashed nose was in shape and texture like something a child might fashion from play dough; his hooded brown eyes had a disconcerting way of gazing off in opposite directions. Simms might have been blown up in a war and not properly put back together. He told us later in the year that he had been in a motorcycle accident: someone had been opening a van door and he crashed through it at fifty miles an hour. The story both endeared him to us in that he was cool enough to ride a motorcycle (the first teacher we ever heard of who did so) but it also, perhaps unfairly, made us sneer at him for being stupid enough to run into a van door.

Simms hated Latin and made no effort to disguise his feelings. He knew very little more than we did, and probably not as much as some of the smarter students. We could easily have tripped him up. This became especially obvious to me one day when he was coming around checking our homework. I had been covertly taking the opportunity to finish an English composition. Somehow I lost track of where he was and suddenly looked up to see him reaching for my scribbler. I was about to blurt an excuse and hand him the Latin homework, but he was already engrossed in the

laid the scribbler back on my desk, ticked a red correct mark on it and moved on.

Our French teacher, Brother Patterson, wasn't much better. He was a short, rough character who also coached the soccer team. We had heard that when he chaperoned the senior dances he often separated couples if he thought they were getting too close; he was also known for carrying a six inch hunting knife just in case things got out of hand.

As a French teacher, the best that could be said for Patterson was that he made no pretence about his shortcomings. Unlike Simms, he didn't bother with conjugations and vocabulary. I don't think we even officially opened the textbook at all that year, although I do remember glancing through it to look at the pictures. My two favourites showed a group of girls in miniskirts taking photos of the Eiffel Tower, and a jovial French chef displaying a tantalizing tray of pastries. As that class was just before lunch, I found myself turning to the pastry photo more and more.

Because Brother Patterson didn't know any French he came up with the odd notion of having us sing. This was especially odd because he knew less about singing then he did about French. He would bring a reel to reel tape recorder to class and hand out song sheets. The first time

music in the "Frere Jacques" line. But the music turned out to be Quebecois pop music performed by sultry female singers who dripped sexuality from every phrase. We would sing along phonetically, never having a clue as to what we were actually saying--which was probably just as well. The worst thing was that while Patterson was absolutely tone deaf and completely lacking in rhythm, he still considered it his duty to stand before us bellowing out the words in a flat St. John's accent, and indiscriminately waving his hands about like a demented traffic cop.

It was a strange way to spend forty minutes. But occasionally it got even stranger. Sometimes he brought us down to the audio-visual room. But we were not introduced to the "Cinema Noire" or films about Quebec or French culture. Instead we were treated to the "World at War" series with Lawrence Olivier narrating. Patterson also showed us films about the Holocaust. One of them, I remember, was Donald Brittain's "Testament." It was my first introduction to the Death Camps, and the images of walking skeletons and corpses being bulldozed into mass graves were both repulsive and riveting. I remember in the Brittain film seeing handcuffed Nazi war criminals being led into the Nuremberg trials, and hearing the narrator matter-of-factly announcing their various crimes. One was accused

French, but I was certainly learning something.

. . .

In most ways my fellow students were typical; many of us had been together since grade five, and some since kindergarten. We were, perhaps, in deference to our boxer teacher, a little quieter than in other years. The majority of us fell into the "drone" category: not too bright or stupid, never too saucy, never too much to say. We did our time stoically. Barnes experimented with clock watching. He had seen something on television about telekinesis and had become convinced that if he stared at the classroom clock long enough, and willed hard enough, he could speed up the hands. I knew it was a ridiculous notion but wished him luck all the same.

Larry Harvey, our class clown, could imitate all the Bugs Bunny cartoon characters with uncanny accuracy, and had used this talent in previous years to get out of scrapes. If, for example, he was called upon in class and didn't know the answer, he would make a joke in the voice of Foghorn Leghorn or Tweety Bird. The first and only time he tried this on Brother Fitzpatrick, he was greeted with stony silence. Humour was not one of our teacher's strong points. Larry was reduced to entertaining us in the hallways and schoolyard. Barnes, with his wide-eyed innocence, wacky

anything, was an unknowing but strong pretender to the clown throne.

Our resident tough guys were Jake Jessop and Carl Kane. Both acquired their status mainly through appearance, reputation and the fact that Jessop hailed from the Brow, and Kane from Bond Street--areas that often erupted into violent gang wars. We had never seen either of them fight, and Kane in particular seemed a rather gentle sort in spite of his somewhat scruffy exterior. Still, they obviously weren't the kind to tangle with.

Dean Murphy, who sat in front of me, was our "brain"--a mantle he wore with no pleasure. Murphy extended the boundaries of his dubious position far beyond anything I had yet seen in my school career. He knew <u>everything</u>--not just the everyday academic information which he generously served up in a bored monotone to anyone who might ask, but also an incredible range of useless information and trivia: sports, politics, music. He could rhyme off the names of all three Supremes, and probably their middle names and birthdays if you really wanted to know. Murphy was clearly bored by the whole useless exercise of school, and spent most of his time daydreaming or smirking at the incompetence of his teachers.

Bob Dinn and Phonse Smith were our token athletes. Both played second string on the Junior hockey team,

spare on the basketball team--a spot that should have been mine.

And, like most classes, we had a resident geek or "bird" as we called him. His name was Darrell Wiggins.

6

I had seen Darrell around the school ever since I'd come to Holy Trinity in grade five, but I'd never gotten to know him. On the first day of the new year he was assigned the seat behind me, and with Dean Murphy sitting in front, I found myself sandwiched between the intellectual extremes of the class.

I had never seen a sorrier looking case. This wasn't Darrell's first attempt at grade eight, and while he was only two or three years older than the rest of us, he looked much older. The tallest boy in the school and the skinniest person I had ever seen, Darrell wore enormous horn rimmed glasses, behind which his round head bobbed on a thin, stalk-like neck. His face was a startling combination of clashing colours: skin milky white, buck teeth a dirty canary yellow, nose a bruised and splotchy red. When he had an outbreak of acne (which was often) and flashed his cracked incisors, his face looked like a partridgeberry

season, he was cursed with a perpetual cold; his nose was always running and he constantly wiped it with a finger, the back of his hand, or, more rarely, with a soiled handkerchief. Most of the boys were convinced he was dying. In science class that year we studied various diseases, and every time we came across a new one someone whispered, "Maybe <u>that's</u> what Darrell got." Barnes held that it was a toss-up between scurvy and beri beri. He asked Darrell if he ever ate any fruit. Darrell grinned and said he liked potato chips.

"But you can't just live on chips," said Barnes. "You must eat other stuff."

"Oh, I eats other stuff," Darrell replied. But what that stuff might possibly be he refused to say.

Perhaps the strangest thing about Darrell was his voice, a strange hooting baritone that reminded me of a sick owl. When he spoke he dropped his head as if addressing the floor, making it all the more difficult to understand him. Not that he talked much. During that whole year he hardly spoke except to borrow a pencil or a sheet of paper--items he was continually without. He usually sat quietly, staring about with a vacant grin on his face like someone who had just been saved at a revival meeting, as if he were hearing some personal, special music.

him--at least not in the traditional way--not like the other students did. What we did was more subtle and much worse: early on in the school year Jake Jessop dubbed Darrell our class mascot. The rest of us acted accordingly. We spoke to him like he was a six year old or a puppy. We reminded him in the cloakroom at the end of the day to zipper up his parka so he wouldn't catch cold. We checked to make sure he had the proper books for his homework--even though he never did any homework as far as anyone could see. We told him to watch out for the cars.

Brother Fitzpatrick's first order of business after he had welcomed us to grade eight was the attendance. When he called Darrell's name he paused. "So, Mr. Wiggins, you're back for another year, are you?" Darrell grinned nervously and stood up. "You don't need to stand, Mr. Wiggins." Darrell sank back in his seat and fidgeted with his pencil. Fitzpatrick poised a pen over the register. "Well?"

"What's that, Brr?" said Darrell.

"Brother Bannister tells me that you're gracing grade eight with your presence for a third time, I understand?"

"Yes, Brr."

"Going to pass this year, are you?"

"I dunno, Brr."

"You don't know? That's not a very positive attitude.

times now you should be able to sing it."

"Yes, Brr," said Darrell.

It quickly became clear that Fitzpatrick didn't have much use for Darrell; he didn't have much use for any of us if it came to that, but Darrell was a special case: Fitzpatrick seemed to be waiting for him to slip up. And Darrell seemed eager to oblige. In spite of all his experience with grade eight, his school work lagged far behind grade eight level. The first time Darrell failed a test or didn't know a History date, Fitzpatrick merely crossed his arms and glared. But this soon degenerated into taking the test paper, crumpling it into a ball and flinging it at him. Then, in the third week of class, Darrell became the first of us to meet Fitzpatrick's personal strap.

While the Brothers did not wear straps down the sides of their soutanes, there was an official school strap--the very one Bannister had used on me for the banana incident. We were all well acquainted with it. Traditionally known as the Black Doctor, it was one and a half feet of a glossy, plastic-like material that looked like it had something to do with plumbing. It had hung on Bannister's office wall for years. Perhaps Fitzpatrick had doubts about its effectiveness, because after he had taken the attendance he dipped into his briefcase, took out a long, white strap, and

himself out of linoleum and electrical tape, and christened it with a boxer-like nickname: the White Bomber. As the year progressed we found that most of the other teachers preferred it to the Black Doctor; this pleased Brother Fitzpatrick no end. Regularly there would be a tap on the door, and some terrified boy would mumble that Brother so-and-so had "sent me for the strap, Brr." Fitzpatrick would reach into the top left hand drawer of his desk, take out the White Bomber and bring it to the boy. Or he might make the boy come in and get it himself, and the culprit would stand before us, sheepish and trembling, while Fitzpatrick pressed him for details about his crime. There was a predictable uniformity about the replies: "talking, Brr; didn't do me homework, Brr; pipped off, Brr; was copyin' Brr."

The White Bomber's practical introduction to our class was less than a success for Brother Fitzpatrick. Darrell was known for missing a lot of days, and, in spite of the fact that he lived close by on Saintsbury Place, for always being late. His mumbled reply when asked to explain his tardiness never varied: "I just left the house, Brr." When absent he usually said he had been sick, and as far as I was concerned it was hard to argue with him: he looked like someone close to death at the best of times. He started off

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In the third week Darrell missed three days in a row, and returned just in time to get back his latest math quiz. Fitzpatrick moved up and down the aisles dispensing the test papers, nodding at this one, grunting at the next. When he reached Darrell he stopped, studied the paper silently, and then slapped it down on Darrell's desk with such force that I jumped. I risked a quick peek: 15%. Darrell had made only 8% on the previous quiz, so I thought he was doing well. But Fitzpatrick was not impressed. He executed an abrupt about face, marched quickly to the front of the class and sat on the edge of his desk. "You can't expect to pass, Mr. Wiggins, if you refuse to come to school," he said slowly.

"I was--"

"Yes, I know. You were sick." Fitzpatrick reached across the desk and pulled the White Bomber out of the drawer. "Come here, Mr. Wiggins."

Darrell stood up but didn't move.

"I said...come here," Fitzpatrick repeated. Darrell refused to budge. Fitzpatrick pursed his lips and looked at him coolly. "Don't make me come down there." Darrell peered at Fitzpatrick, glanced around the room as if sizing up all possible avenues of escape, then he wiped his nose on his sleeve and shuffled up to the front of the class.

from side to side as if blown by a strong wind. Fitzpatrick grasped the White Bomber tightly in both hands, sighed and shook his head. Teacher and pupil looked at each other. "Hold out your hand," said Fitzpatrick. I glanced across the aisle at Barnes; our eyes said the same thing: If Fitz straps Darrell with any force at all, he'll probably kill him. Doesn't he know Darrell's got scurvy or something?

Darrell rubbed his hand on his leg and slowly brought it, shaking and jerking, up to shoulder level. "A little lower please," said Fitzpatrick. He measured Darrell's hand at the fingertips, raised the strap high over his head and brought it down with a loud grunt. But at the last moment Darrell yanked his hand away; the strap sliced through the air and slapped viciously against Fitzpatrick's leg.

I felt it. Everyone felt it. Fitzpatrick certainly felt it. He buckled over and grabbed his leg gasping, "You bastard!"

"Jesus!" said Barnes. "Fitzpatrick said bastard!"

Darrell looked on in horror as Fitzpatrick groaned and clutched his leg. Then Darrell twisted around three times in tight circles like some clownish figure skater executing Camel Spins; he looked around wildly, ran to the door, and bolted down the hall.

He didn't come back for another three days; I was

he spent a long time in the office with Fitzpatrick and Bannister. I don't know what they said or did to him, but when he came in and took his seat behind me, there wasn't a trace of a grin on his face; he was trembling and even paler than usual.

But if Bannister and Fitzpatrick expected Darrell to change his ways, they were mistaken. As the weather grew colder Darrell's tardiness and absenteeism increased. After he had missed a day a couple of weeks before the Christmas holidays, Fitzpatrick waited for the bell, closed the door and sat on his desk.

"Where were you yesterday, Darrell?" he asked.

Darrell stood up awkwardly. "Home, Brr."

"Home? Home? Oh, you were sick again, were you?"

"No, Brr."

Fitzpatrick took off his glasses, rubbed the bump between his eyebrows, and waited.

"The storm, Brr," Darrell blurted, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Because of the storm." A titter ran through the class.

"Because of the..." and here Fitzpatrick paused and looked at us in wonder to verify that he had heard the word correctly. "Because of the...storm, Darrell?"

"Yes, Brr."

remember it snowed yesterday for a while. But I don't remember a storm." Fitzpatrick suddenly wheeled around and pointed at me. "Mooney, were you in school yesterday?" Was I in school? Of course I'd been in school. The bastard had given me two on each hand with the White Bomber for failing a Science quiz.

"Yes, Brr, I was here."

"And where do you live?"

"Kilbride, Brr."

"How far is Kilbride from here?"

"I dunno. Ten miles?"

"Ten miles. Yes, I'd say that was a good estimate." Fitzpatrick stepped toward Darrell who jabbed at his dripping nose with a bony finger. His nervous shuffle stepped up a notch. "Nipper Mooney came to school yesterday, Darrell, all the way from Kilbride. The storm didn't stop him--and sure he's only a little runt." The class erupted into laughter which immediately shrank, but then flared again phoenix-like when they saw that Fitzpatrick would let it run its course. "Now, Darrell, where do you live?"

"Saintsbury Place, Brr."

"But you're no saint, are you, Darrell?" We laughed dutifully. Darrell stared at the floor. "Now, Darrell,"

know your house. And you know something, Darrell, I believe I could walk from here to Saintsbury Place in oh...five minutes. In fact, I'm sure I could." Fitzpatrick stared hard at Darrell whose nose flicking and shuffling increased. "Couldn't I?"

For the first time Darrell stood perfectly still. He offered no response except to insert the index finger of his right hand an incredibly long distance into his cauliflower ear. He withdrew the finger, wiped it on the leg of his grey flannel trousers, chewed his chapped lips and looked nervously at Fitzpatrick.

"Prob'bly."

"No, Darrell, not <u>probably</u>," said Fitzpatrick quickly. "<u>Definitely</u>. I definitely could. Darrell, you know if I went out to the schoolyard, I believe I could throw a rock from here down to your house. Think so?"

Darrell's pointy Adam's Apple rose and fell.

"Prob--"

Fitzpatrick stepped towards him.

Darrell paused and resumed his shuffle. "Definitely," he said.

"That's right," said Fitzpatrick softly. "I definitely could." Darrell sat down abruptly and opened his exercise book. "I didn't tell you to sit." He bounced back up and

said, looking all the while at Darrell. We obeyed uneasily, glancing around the room at each other. Was the bastard going to punish the whole crowd of us just because Darrell didn't have enough sense to come to school? "Out to the cloakroom, quietly, and get your coats and boots on," said Fitzpatrick opening the door. "Move. Second row," he said, waving us on. "No talking."

"Where do you think we're goin'?" Barnes whispered as we put on our boots. "St. Teresa's?"

"Nah. It's Friday, but it's not the first of the month."

"Is it some Holy Day or something?"

"I don't think so."

"Arts and Culture Centre?"

I shrugged. "I dunno."

When we were bundled up Fitzpatrick led us down the hall, past the trophy cases jammed with tarnished, dented trophies, down the stone steps and out the ground level door. We assembled, shivering already, under the basketball net. "Now," said Fitzpatrick, "we're going on a long, difficult mission. It's going to be dangerous and some of you may not make it back."

We looked at each other. Barnes stuck up his hand. "Where to, Brr? Arts and Culture Centre? To look at the

because he had once seen an exhibition of nudes there.

"No," said Fitzpatrick. "But Darrell knows. Where we going, Darrell?"

Darrell looked around in a daze. "I dunno, Brr."

"Well, you should, Darrell. It's a journey you've been known to undertake yourself--on occasion." Fitzpatrick paused. "We're going to your house."

Darrell swallowed and bit his lower lip. "What for, Brr? There's no one home. Mom's gone to work."

"That's all right. I don't want to talk to her." He looked around at us. "Now stick together and no loud talking." Then he added wryly, "Conserve your strength." Fitzpatrick studied his watch. "It's twenty-five after nine." He looked steadily at Darrell. "You take the lead."

Darrell moved awkwardly to the front of the pack and we headed across the icy schoolyard at a moderate, steady pace. Darrell shuffled along on his long legs, the hood of his parka tied tightly around his chin, his red idiot mitts pulled halfway up his forearms, his buck teeth yellow against the sparkling snow.

We proceeded past the monastery, continued beyond the statue of the Virgin Mary, down the lane and out the wire mesh gates to Alexander Street. The scent of fresh bread

looked at my watch: nine twenty-seven. The line of boys curled lazily onto the sidewalk. Fitzpatrick halted us in front of Al Bowman's barber shop.

"Shit, I'm dyin' for a smoke," Barnes whispered. "Think I should risk it?"

"Sure Barnes--if you wants Fitz to beat the face off you."

There was little traffic on Alexander Street at that time of the morning, and Fitzpatrick walked into the middle of the street, looked up and down, and waved us across. We turned into Saintsbury Place. It was garbage day and the street was dotted with green garbage bags. At least half of them had been torn open by cats and gulls; Libby's bean tins and twisted egg cartons spilled onto the street. Presently we gathered at number twelve, a yellow, peeling row house. The boys bunched on the sidewalk and overflowed into the street, but it didn't matter: Saintsbury Place was a dead end.

"Halt, men," Fitzpatrick said loudly. "You, too, Darrell," he added. Jake Jessop laughed, but most of the other boys only managed a grin.

An old woman in the adjoining house pulled back the curtain from an upstairs window and looked down at us. I could see her lips moving and a moment later a man joined

show of pulling back his sleeve to expose his watch. He raised his eyebrows at Darrell. "Well, Darrell, I was wrong. It didn't take five minutes after all; it took three. Three and a half if you want to get picky."

Darrell didn't say anything; he wiped his nose on the back of his mitt and stared at the sidewalk.

*****

Part Two

The Fifth Glorious Mystery

1

One morning toward the middle of January, Brother Fitzpatrick announced that a new student would be joining the class. Where the boy came from, or why he was starting school so late, he didn't say. The only information offered was that the boy's name was Power, and we were to make him "welcome."

As I walked along the crowded corridor the next morning, I glimpsed someone ahead of me looming above the other boys. At first, because of the height, I assumed it was Darrell, but the figure wasn't quite that tall. Perhaps it was a teacher, a substitute; but then I saw long, red hair and decided it was a woman. It occurred to me that I had never seen a woman in the school before (with the exception of Miss Jackman who was about eighty and didn't really count). The other boys turned and stared as she passed. I lost the figure momentarily in a throng of jostling boys, but then saw that she had stopped by my classroom door. She looked behind the door, checked the number, and then disappeared into the room. There was something peculiar about the way she moved. I followed into the classroom and found her in the cloakroom hanging up her coat. When she turned around I realized with a start that

sixteen with freckles, a broad nose and a thick, muscular body. He pulled a black plastic comb out of his back pocket and ran it through his long hair. He wore a short sleeved shirt with the top two buttons opened, and as he preened I could see the muscles rippling in his forearm and its fine covering of blond hair.

"What are you starin' at?" he said gruffly. In spite of its gruffness, the voice was surprisingly soft; the tone suggested that he was not so much interested in the reasons for my staring, as it was the most appropriate thing to say at that moment. For my part, there were so many interesting things about him that if I had attempted a truthful answer I wouldn't have known where to begin. Well, no: I would have begun with his hair. After all, the boys from Holy Trinity supported three barbershops within minutes of the school. Most of us visited one of the Bowman brothers (my favourite was Al) at least once a month where we were given the Holy Trinity special: a brush cut flat enough to land model airplanes on. It was little wonder, then, that this boy's hair looked entirely out of place. It wasn't hard to guess what Brother Fitzpatrick would have to say about it. A few nights before I had seen an item on the news about recruits for the Viet Nam war. The young men, many with hippie hair, were shown lining up for the army barbers. They folded

the heads of their comrades already in the chairs. In a short while all of the recruits stood around in their singlets looking very bald, very embarrassed and very much the same. I wondered how long it would take before the same thing happened to this fellow.

Next would have to be his school uniform--or, more precisely, his <u>lack</u> of school uniform. We were required to wear grey flannel trousers, a blue blazer with the school crest, a white shirt (long sleeved), a green and gold school tie and, preferably, black shoes. Perhaps the best that could be said for the new student was that he was wearing <u>parts</u> of the uniform. I had noticed his short sleeves because he was not wearing a blazer. The school tie hung loosely around his neck but it was much too small for him. His pants were grey, but made from some thick, jean-like material. And instead of shoes he wore a faded pair of black sneakers.

All of this I noted and marvelled at. But the thing that struck me the most was that this wasn't a boy at all; this was a man.

"Well, what are you starin' at," he said again, wiping the comb on his pants leg.

"Oh, nothin'." As I took off my coat and hung it up, Barnes and Bob O'Grady tumbled into the cloakroom laughing

and stared at the stranger.

The young man rolled his eyes and turned away. He picked up his battered school books and went out into the classroom which he surveyed with a detached air. The other boys stopped what they were doing and looked the stranger up and down. "Any extra desks?" he asked suddenly. I looked up and saw that the question was directed at me. It wasn't a very complicated question, but for some reason it seemed to overwhelm me.

"What?"

"Any extra desks," he repeated. "Shit, have I got to be saying everything twice?"

"Desks? Oh, yeah," I said, pointing to the last one in Barnes's row. "No one sits there."

He sauntered down the aisle, swung himself into the desk and began to lazily unpack his books. This task accomplished, he stuck out his long legs, stretched, yawned and clasped his hands behind his head. And the minute he assumed that pose I realized I knew him. He had changed profoundly since I had last seen him, but that was to be expected; it had been four years earlier in St. Christopher's. I remembered that Fitzpatrick had said the new boy's name was Power.

"Are you Tony Power?" I asked.

"How did you know?"

"You went to Saint Christopher's. We were in grade four. Sister Mary Ignatius--remember?"

Tony shook back his long hair. "Yeah, I remembers the old battleaxe." He leaned forward on his elbows and sized me up. "Who're you?"

"Eddy Mooney," I said. "But they calls me Nipper."

Tony nodded, but I knew my name hadn't registered.

"What're you doin' here?" I asked.

He shrugged again. "Good friggin' question."

The bell rang and Fitzpatrick came into the classroom. He looked at Tony silently, took out his register and motioned him to the front of the class. As they stood talking we all watched and waited for a confrontation. They made an incongruous pair: Fitzpatrick with his black soutane and shiny white collar, his short hair neatly parted and fastidiously greased and combed; Tony with his bastardized school uniform and unruly red locks spilling far down over his collar.

But for some reason Fitzpatrick chose not to notice. Tony went back to his seat seemingly oblivious to the thirty pairs of eyes that followed him. We had prayers, and when Fitzpatrick called the roll he gave Tony a perfunctory introduction. Then we carried on just like it was an

Sister Mary Ignatius had been principal of St. Christopher's for the five years I had been there, and in grade four she was also my home room teacher. She was the most colourless person I have ever known. The only parts of her that were not black or white were her washed out blue eyes and her antique gold-rimmed glasses. She stood well over six feet which may have accounted for the fact that, unlike the other nuns, the skirt of her habit rode up three or four inches above her ankles: you could easily see her scuffed black leather shoes.

Her method of teaching consisted of filling the blackboard with endless lines of an illegible scrawl which we dutifully copied down, attempted to memorize and were later quizzed on. During some of those writing marathons I often thought that all the colour had been drained from the world. It struck me one day that the reason nuns went in for teaching was because they blended in so well with the blackboard: the white of the chalk and the black of the board merged mystically with their black and white habits, and, in the case of Sister Mary Ignatius, with her pasty white complexion. When you looked up momentarily from the drudgery and glanced outside, the grass in Beechwood

you hadn't noticed it before. It was like the first time I saw colour film footage from World War Two. I had always thought of the wars as being lived and fought only in black and white, because that's the way I had seen them on television.

The nuns' habits covered every inch of their bodies with the exception of their faces and hands, and some, like Sister Mary Ignatius, often pulled their hands up inside their sleeves and crossed their arms as if even the sight of bare hands was something to be shunned. This made the image of the naked, crucified Christ hung on their chests (nuns didn't have breasts), all the more arresting.

Because of their uniform dress and the way their long skirts floated and twirled, they reminded me of birds--especially when three or four together would be engaged in some frenzied activity such as setting up or taking down the chairs for Bingo. At Christmas or Easter, kneeling silently in the first row of the church balcony, heads bowed, hands full of Rosary beads, the nuns looked like a line of murres dozing on some precipitous rock face. At the blackboard, engulfed in chalk dust, her bony hand wrapped firmly around a minuscule chalk end, Sister Mary Ignatius looked remarkably like a crow scratching in the dirt.

When we had exhausted the material on the blackboard

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As she leaned over your desk you were assaulted by that unique nun smell: a combination of chalk, powder and the musty odour of her habit. How often did they wash them? I wondered. Did they wash them themselves? How many habits did they own?

The only thing that intrigued us more than their habits was their hair--or lack of hair. There was a certain mystique about it; was it short, long, put up in a bun? Did they have any hair at all, or were their heads completely shaved? And if so, who shaved it?

Their imposing costume and stern demeanour provided them equally, regardless of age, with omnipotence. The clear-skinned novitiate barely twenty years old was as imposing to us as the dour, sixty year old Sister Mary Ignatius.

Anything that veered from this norm fascinated us. Occasionally nuns from an order specializing in mission work overseas, visited the school to show slides and talk about their calling. Their gleaming white habits--so diametrically opposed to the black of the nuns who taught us--made them look like exotic members of a rare line of the nun genus. These nuns didn't blend in with the blackboard; they looked as if they shouldn't be in school or even indoors at all. When they stood next to Sister Mary

the mutant albinos I had seen on a science special. Although strangers, the missionaries were not as intimidating as our teachers: they were more of a curiosity, made all the more exotic by the fact that they were often suntanned and wore sun glasses even in the dead of winter. Prior to their visits the thought of a nun wearing sunglasses seemed as wildly improbable to us as a nun skiing, or, God forbid, kissing. And a suntan in Newfoundland was a rarity even in summer. They often had odd, foreign sounding names, many of them Spanish or Portuguese, and seemed most energetic when describing the horrors of the slums they worked in, or when a graphic slide showed an especially sorry victim of leprosy sprawled in a bamboo hospital ward. I wondered what their unfortunate patients thought of them, what they would say if <u>they</u> were the ones giving a slide show in some hut in the mountains of Malaysia. Were the Sisters considered angels of mercy, or simply a bunch of foreign women, obviously mad, who traipsed around wearing long white dresses in temperatures that regularly exceeded one hundred degrees.

We were told one morning that one of these Sisters would be visiting us and warned to be on our best behaviour. During religion class there came a tap on the door. Sister Mary Ignatius escorted one of the exotic creatures, complete

was suntanned, wore green tinted granny glasses and was introduced as Sister Francesca de Palma, recently back from a two year stint in Monsefu, Peru. I looked at her curiously. She was younger than most of the other missionaries we had seen, possessed an endearing lopsided smile, and as she bent over her slide projector it became obvious that some nuns did indeed have breasts.

Her singularity ended there. Her talk, given in a melodious Spanish accent, was the same as all the others. When the last slide had flickered away the lights were switched back on, and Sister Francesca smiled brightly and asked for questions. Normally questions were rare; most of us were far too shy. But Sister Mary Ignatius, anticipating correctly that if left to our own devices we would sit mutely like so many miniature sphinxes, had employed the teacher's trick of ordering two or three students to prepare beforehand. Now the chosen sat nervously, folding and unfolding their pieces of paper, the sweat from their hands smudging the cribbed questions. Sister Mary Ignatius smiled sweetly and selected her victim.

"Stella, I believe you have a question for Sister Francesca?"

Stella stumbled out of her seat, her lips pulled back in an inane grin composed of fear, nervous energy and self-

"Sister Francesca, how does--"

"Louder, Stella, so Sister can hear you," Sister Mary Ignatius interrupted.

Stella cleared her throat.

SisterFrancescahowdoesthemoneywecollectinschoolforthemissionshelpthepoorunfortunatenativesofAfricaandSouthAmericaastheywallowinsqualorinthedepthsofdespairwithoutadequatefoodclothingorshelter?

Sister Mary Ignatius grimaced and glared at Stella who exhaled audibly and flopped into her seat. The rest of us looked around and grinned. Sister Francesca smiled and nodded. "Well, Steela," she crooned in her odd accent, unknowingly christening Stella with the nickname that stuck to her for the rest of that year, "every penny helps. And Our Lord knows what great hardships you good children go through in order to donate to the missions; He smiles on you for it." Perhaps to add her own thanks for our magnanimous generosity, she too beamed benevolently around the room.

We were suddenly startled by a voice from the back of the class; a voice that had not been preceded by a raised and acknowledged hand; that while low in volume was not halting, that did not stumble or stutter but, rather,

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"Then why don't God smile on them people down there and give 'em some food and houses and stuff in the first place?" Although technically a question, the tone of the speaker cast his words in the form of a flat direct statement. It was as though he were mocking the answer his clairvoyance had foreseen.

We had never heard such an outburst before--certainly not with an important guest in the room. The entire class swivelled in their seats and stared at the speaker. In the last desk in the window row, Tony Power sat slumped, his eyes fixed on Sister Francesca, a pencil shoved firmly between his teeth, his face devoid of expression. Sister Mary Ignatius was too shocked to immediately respond. Some desultory giggling brought her back to her duties; she silenced it with a venomous glare. "Tony Power, you know better than to speak out of turn--"

But she was gently cut off by Sister Francesca.

"It's all right, Sister," she said, nodding and laying her hand on her colleague's forearm. "It's an excellent question." As she gathered herself to answer, Tony swept the pencil out of his mouth and gestured around the room with it.

"I mean, like it's no hardship for most of the crowd here to give twenty-five cents to the Missions every week.

Sure half of 'em don't even do that--they just gets an extra quarter from their mother." Some of us hung our heads guiltily--especially those who had solicited the quarter from an unsuspecting parent but, instead of giving it to the Missions, had greedily squandered it on an extra Puff Bar at Downey's Groc. and Conf. "That crowd in the pictures you showed us, sure they probably never even seen a Pepsi or a bag o' chips, did they?" Tony's speech had left us all a little breathless. I found myself nodding in agreement. Of course they had never seen a Pepsi. How could they when the world was filled with sinners like me who weren't content with their good fortune and stole from them. It was one thing to talk about and collect for the poor overseas, but once again, through the miracle of slide photography, they had been graphically presented to us with a somewhat pock-marked and emaciated but thoroughly human face. I hung my head and looked away from Sister Francesca. Sister Mary Ignatius swayed slightly on the balls of her feet and stared at Tony like he was a particularly complex road map, her slack jaw and pasty complexion making her look like some poorly executed statue in Madame Tussaud's.

Sister Francesca, however, smiled and looked at Tony inquisitively. "No," she said. "I wouldn't say that many of them have seen a Pepsi."

of them poor people in them hot countries got nothin' not because of what they done or anything, but just because of where they lives. Don't seem fair. They never asked to be born down there."

"Yeah, well at least they haven't got to shovel snow in the winter, do they?" piped up Bobby Smith whose family's driveway on the top of Kenny's hill was a source of continual despair to him during the winter months.

"Sure who cares about that," said Stella indignantly. "I'd rather have to shovel snow and not be hungry than not to and be starved half to death all the time."

"At least we haven't got hurricanes," said Barb Cleary. "And earthquakes."

"Or leprosy," said Stella shivering with disgust. "Parts of your arms and legs rottin' and fallin' off--"

"Enough," said Sister Mary Ignatius stiffly. She paused and took a deep breath. "It is not our place to question the will of God--"

"I'm not saying that the Sister there is not doing a good job or nothin'," said Tony sitting up. "I just can't understand what God has got against them people, that's all."

"God hasn't got anything against them," said Sister Mary Ignatius. "God loves us all equally. Doesn't He,

Sister Francesca nodded and opened her mouth to speak.

"He got an awful queer way of showin' it, then," Tony said defiantly. "Look at them pictures she just showed us-"

"She has got a name," said Sister Mary Ignatius. "It's Sister Francesca. Please be so kind as to use it."

"--Sister Francesca showed us," Tony continued. "Sure my Uncle Frank got a old huntin' shack up on the Witless Bay Line that's ten times better than their houses. And he don't go to church, he drinks like a fish, he got about seven youngsters even though he was never married--"

"Enough!" said Sister Mary Ignatius through clenched teeth. She glanced apologetically at Sister Francesca.

Tony examined the point of his pencil. "Yeah, well I'm just saying it don't seem fair to me, that's all," he said quietly. He shoved the pencil back in his mouth and stared out the window.

"What was your name again, young man?" asked Sister Francesca.

"Tony."

"Tony what?" said Sister Mary Ignatius. "Take that pencil out of your mouth and look at Sister when she's talking to you."

"Tony Power," he said, shifting in his seat.

"Yes, Tony, you're right," said Sister Francesca. "It

out, the ways of God are not always ours to understand. We must have faith that the Lord knows what is best. You see, in this world there are many Mysteries..."

She talked until the bell rang, all about the Mysteries and the stuff we'd memorized from the grade two Catechism. But you could tell that Tony had stopped listening. It was funny. Sister Francesca was a nice woman and she seemed to really want to help those people. And she was very pretty with her suntan and green tinted glasses, and her breasts moving gently beneath her white cotton habit even though she was a nun. But after a while I stopped listening too. We all did.

Tony's excellent question earned him a week's detention. Surprisingly, though I had never seen him give to the Missions before, he began to contribute five or ten cents a week. When I asked him about it he shrugged. "I don't know nothin' about God's ways and faith and all that bull," he said. "But the shacks them black people lives in makes the crowd on the Brow look like a bunch of friggin' millionaires."

3

Although we had been classmates in grade four, I had

than the rest of us--a consequence of failing and being held back--and he usually kept to himself. According to my mother, his time at St. Christopher's had been erratic--sometimes pushed ahead, sometimes kept back, sometimes not attending at all. By the time I was in grade six his father had died, and Tony and his mother had left Kilbride.

There was, though, one other incident concerning Tony which I remember from grade four. It was November 1963, the day President Kennedy was assassinated. The news quickly filtered through the school, and although we didn't understand it fully, a deep sadness fell over everyone. Then the rumour spread that Kennedy's death meant there was going to be a war. I became so upset that I nearly got ill. This was heightened when Sister Mary Ignatius announced that school was closing early. I figured a war was probably the only thing that would make them give us a half holiday when there wasn't a snowstorm.

As we put on our boots and coats there was an unnatural, hollow silence in the cloakroom. I was convinced that the minute we walked out the door, a bomb was going to fall on us. Tony was the only one who looked relatively unperturbed.

"Tony, what do you think is goin' to happen?" I asked as I was buttoning up my coat.

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"You don't think there's going to be a war?"

"Why should there be a war?"

"Well, they killed President Kennedy."

Tony stopped and looked at me carefully. "Yeah, but that's not our country. Our country is Canada. That's the United States."

"Oh," I said, and for a moment I considered the mysteries of international politics and geography. "So there's not going to be a war?"

"No," he said. "There's not going to be a war."

And he was right. When we went out to the school bus, the only thing falling was snow.

. . .

I had thought that with the addition of Tony to our grade eight class, things might liven up. But they didn't; not at first. Outside of our delicious anticipation of what we considered a sure confrontation with Brother Fitzpatrick over his hair and uniform, things proceeded normally. In most ways Tony was a model student. He seemed to have lost his outspokenness. Perhaps Sister Mary Ignatius and his subsequent teachers had succeeded in squeezing it out of him--or perhaps he just couldn't be bothered anymore. In any case, he sat silently in the back of the class, and at least went through the motions of what was required.

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French songs with Brother Patterson, mixing up the dative and accusative cases with Mr. Simms, and doing our best to stay on the good side of Brother Fitzpatrick--usually a difficult assignment. On days when he was feeling particularly belligerent, or when one of us had knowingly or unknowingly stepped over the line, the White Bomber would make its dramatic appearance. In the twisted logic of the school the entire class was often punished for the sins of a few; not even Dean Murphy was spared. If, for example, Fitzpatrick stepped outside for a moment--perhaps to take a message in the hall--and returned to hear someone talking, he would often strap all thirty of us unless we fingered the culprits--an alternative our code of honour would never allow. Complaints at this injustice fell on deaf ears.

It was in such a situation when Tony was first strapped. We were called to the front of the class by row, and as I waited I glanced over at him. As he watched the proceedings and listened to the sharp report of the White Bomber, he seemed more bored than anything else. But when Darrell shuffled up before Fitzpatrick and shook pathetically while he attempted to work up the nerve to offer his hand, Tony grimaced and looked out the window. When it was his turn he put out his hand nonchalantly, as if he expected Fitzpatrick to read his palm rather than strike

didn't look Tony in the face; he dealt out the blows in a mechanical, businesslike manner. Tony didn't flinch; he stared straight at Fitzpatrick, a sardonic smile curling his thin lips. When the punishment was over he walked slowly back to his seat, disdaining our usual ritual of shaking our stung hands or slipping them under our armpits.

A common practice among the Brothers was shoulder pinching, and Fitzpatrick was one of its most ardent proponents. Sometimes when reading quietly in a study period, I would feel him standing behind me. All I could do was close my eyes and pray for him to move on. And sometimes he did. But if not, a piercing pain might shoot through my shoulder as he dug his fingers deeply into the muscle and pinched the nerve.

"What's that for, Brr?" I'd moan, attempting to squirm out of his grasp. "I wasn't doin' nothin'."

Then the inevitable reply: "That's for doing nothing. Imagine what'll happen if you <u>do</u> something."

Surprisingly, both Darrell and Tony were the only ones spared. Barnes conjectured that Darrell was so skinny Fitzpatrick couldn't be bothered trying to find his shoulder muscle. I thought it more likely that he just didn't want to <u>touch</u> Darrell. Why he left Tony alone remained something of a mystery.

a strange state of boredom and fear and learning next to nothing. We hardly ever asked a question; our survival instinct told us to keep a low profile, speak only when spoken to, and pray for the ringing of the bell at three o'clock.

. . .

With Tony's looks it was inevitable that sooner or later he would acquire a nickname. Most of us looked upon his shoulder-length hair in awe, as symbolic of a rebel spirit. Although it was 1968, Flower Power (which itself would have made a good nickname) had yet to make a significant impact on St. John's, and hair styles like Tony's were few and far between. We enjoyed a vicarious thrill when he ambled down the corridor, tossing it coolly out of his eyes while Fitzpatrick and the other teachers glared at him in disgust.

The one exception was Jake Jessop. From the moment Tony first arrived, Jake regarded him warily. It was obvious that he didn't relish the prospect of losing his "toughest guy" status to a hippie. Not that Tony made any attempt to usurp him; I don't think he had even spoken to Jake. Still it played on Jake's mind. I often saw him glancing surreptitiously at Tony, attempting to size him up. Of course it never occurred to Jake to make friends with

way the matter could be decided was through a confrontation, something Jake didn't seem eager to initiate.

He decided instead to belittle Tony by gossiping about him. One morning in the washroom I heard him talking to Barry Gallagher, a tough guy from the grade eight class across the hall from us. "Power's like one of them mutes--never opens his gob," he said. "And he should get a haircut. He looks like a fucking caveman or something." Gallagher laughed, Jake's eyes lit up, and soon Tony was known all over the school as Caveman Power.

And, in some ways, it was an appropriate nickname. With his heavy build, broad face and long hair, Tony <u>did</u> look a bit like a stereotypical caveman. No one, of course, not even Jessop, had the nerve to call him that to his face, and for a while I wondered if Tony was even aware of it. But Jessop took the communal use of the nickname as a victory for himself, a consolidation of his position.

Our other tough guy, Carl Kane, didn't take much interest in these matters, but he pointed out to Jake while they were fooling around in the gym one day, that Jake had it all wrong. If he was worried about Tony being considered a harder case than he was, then he should never have dubbed him "Caveman."

"Why not?" said Jessop.

wrestler or something."

"Like a wrestler?"

"Sure," said Kane. "Just picture it: in this corner, Gorgeous George. In this corner...Caveman Power."

Jessop, while concentrating on the slow, stupid connotations of the name, had overlooked its appealing undercurrent of violence. "Are you telling me," he said to Kane, "that everyone is calling him Caveman because they thinks he's tough, and not because they thinks he's just, you known, dumb?"

"I dunno," said Kane. But you could tell that he did know, and that was exactly what he thought.

"Fuck," said Jessop, scowling.

. . .

About a month after Tony had joined our class, we were putting on our coats in the cloakroom after school one day when Jessop turned to Darrell and gave him a playful punch on the arm. "How's it goin', Elvis?" His failure with Tony's nickname hadn't stopped him from christening Darrell with this one.

Darrell winced but managed a grin. "Fine, Jake," he mumbled.

"That's good, Elvis. You got a date tonight, or what?" We all laughed. Darrell grinned again and bent down to pull

probably got a dozen women lined up just waiting for you." He gave Darrell another punch. "Don't you now?"

"Not me," Darrell mumbled, his skinny neck blushing scarlet.

"What? You mean you don't even have <u>one</u> girlfriend," said Jake. "I finds that hard to believe--good lookin' fella like you."

"No, I got no girlfriend," said Darrell, straightening up and digging his mitts out of his coat pocket.

"G'wan, Darrell. You just wants to keep 'em all for yourself now, don't you? And here's poor old Jake dyin' for a piece o' tail. Jesus, Darrell, I thought you were my buddy. Well, all right for you."

Darrell picked up his bookbag and started for the door. Jake stepped in front of him. "No, Darrell, you're not goin' nowhere--not until you gives me the name and phone number of one of them hot pieces you knows."

Darrell grinned weakly, shrugged, and attempted to push past Jake.

"Well, I never knew you were that greedy," said Jake, looking around at us and winking. "You wants to keep all that pussy for yourself, don't ya?" Jake caught Bob O'Grady's eye and motioned him to the door to watch for teachers.

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"He wouldn't know a pussy if he tripped and fell head first into one."

"That true, Elvis?" said Jake. "I bet you'd love to get some nice hot pussy, wouldn't you?"

Once more Darrell attempted to leave and again Jake stepped in front of him.

Suddenly a hush fell; I turned and saw Tony standing in the doorway. "Leave 'im alone, Jessop."

Jake glanced quickly at Kane, and then raised his eyebrows at Tony in mock surprise. "What's buggin' you?" he said. "We're only havin' a bit o' fun."

"Go on home out of it, Darrell," said Tony. Darrell glanced uneasily at Jake, and made his way out through the crowd.

Tony watched Darrell leave, then turned and reached for his coat. None of us looked at Jake. We waited for him to say something, but he didn't. It looked like that was the end of it. Once again the boys started talking and skylarking. And then came a cold bald statement: "It's none of your fucking business anyway." All sound died in the cloakroom as abruptly as if the plug had been pulled from a stereo. Tony stood before his coat hook with his back to us. He zipped up his jacket and sighed, raising his shoulders high on the intake of breath, letting them fall on

fists clenching and unclenching. Tony turned around slowly and looked him up and down. Then he stepped toward him, shook back his hair and folded his arms.

"You know, Jessop, you thinks Darrell is nothin' but a poor fuckin' retard, don't you?" He leaned forward and pushed his face close to Jake's. "And maybe he is. But at least he's not a prize arsehole like you." Jessop swore and stepped back abruptly; a muscle twitched in his cheek. He glared at Tony, and then glanced quickly at Kane who shrugged and stared at him impassively. Jessop turned back to Tony, then looked around at the rest of us. Suddenly he grabbed his coat off the hook and put it on. Tony watched for a moment, then headed for the door.

Jake wheeled around. "Fuck you, Caveman," he said to Tony's back. "I'm not scared o' you."

Tony stopped. He turned around slowly and looked at Jessop. His whole body flinched, then tensed. A flush started at the bottom of his neck and crept up his face. "What did you call me?"

Jessop paused and blinked nervously. "You heard me. I said I'm not scared o' you."

"I don't give a fuck if you're scared of me or not. I asked you what you <u>called</u> me."

Once more Jessop looked at Kane. "Don't be lookin' at

you call me?"

Jessop rubbed his fingers over his lips. "I never called you nothin'," he said stiffly. He picked up his books, and with his eyes on the floor he walked quickly to the door.

Tony stepped into the middle of the doorway and pushed an open palm into Jessop' chest, pulling him up straight. "You listen to me good now," he said. His voice dropped in pitch and he growled through tight lips. "If you call me that anymore, or fuck with me--or with Darrell--I'm going to have to give you a knockin'. Got it?"

Jessop stared at him silently. Then, almost imperceptibly, he nodded. Tony dropped his hand. Jessop rushed past him and disappeared down the corridor.

Tony watched him go, then he looked back at the rest of us. "And that goes for ye too."

4

Over the next couple of weeks I noticed something else about Tony. Whenever we were given a silent period where we could read or write on our own, he would take a special pen from his shirt pocket and, screening his paper with his arms so no one could see what he was doing, he would begin to

totally in the work. One day the bell rang startling him, and one of the sheets blew off his desk and floated across the aisle to me. I picked it up and looked at it with surprise. He had been copying something from our history text, but what amazed me was that the handwriting was exquisite, the most beautiful I had ever seen. I didn't know the term "calligraphy," but that's what the script was like: rhythmic and flowing, each letter perfectly formed and connecting effortlessly with the next. And there was more. The margins were covered with tiny, graceful drawings of animals: unicorns, centaurs and fauns. I became so absorbed in the paper that Tony reached over and pulled it out of my hand. I wanted to tell him how impressed I was, but his expression warned me not to say anything.

Before class in the afternoon I went up to him. "Did you have to learn how to do that stuff, or can you, you know, just do it?"

"What?"

"That fancy writing and drawing."

"There's nothin' to that," he said shortly. "I just fools around with it when I got nothin' better to do." Then he leaned down close to me. "You don't need to be goin' tellin' anyone about it, either."

"Why?" I said. "I wouldn't mind knowin' how to do

shut up and went back to my seat.

. . .

For some reason the confrontation with Fitzpatrick failed to materialize. This was a source of mystery and debate among the rest of us--after all, we had often seen him strap a boy for something as insignificant as a missing school tie. The poorest boy in our class, Gerry Bowering, always wore sneakers because his family couldn't afford any winter boots for him. On snowy or rainy days Fitzpatrick would make him take off the wet sneakers. One day the water had soaked right through to Bowering's socks. When Fitzpatrick saw the wet sock prints on the floor, he pulled out the White Bomber and gave him five on each hand. Not that Fitzpatrick was the only one capable of such things. Phil Burke sang in the Vesper choir and one Monday morning there was a knock on the door. Brother Lannon, who led the choir, asked Burke why he had missed the Saturday rehearsal. Burke said he'd had to go out of town with his parents. He was taken out in the corridor and strapped all the same.

Barnes suggested that maybe Fitzpatrick was <u>afraid</u> of Tony. I found that hard to believe, but as the days wore on it became a notion that I was not about to dismiss totally.

What interested me most was whether or not Tony was as backward as his school record seemed to indicate. Why had

class he was as articulate as the rest of us--with the exception of Dean Murphy--and he knew the answers at least as often as I did. He obviously had special artistic gifts, but there were no art classes offered in Holy Trinity and no one seemed to know about this talent except me. He was never disruptive in class and seemed to pay attention. Yet, in spite of all this, his test results were hardly better than Darrell's. Each time a marked paper was returned, he would look at it uneasily before turning it over to see the grade. Sometimes he didn't bother to look at all.

. . .

After his encounter with Jake Jessop we were careful whenever Tony was around. Darrell didn't know what to make of his new found freedom. While he seemed genuinely pleased to be rid of unwanted attention, he was also at something of a loss to know why he was being suddenly ignored. Years of taking abuse had made him used to it. But if his classmates consented to leave him alone, Brother Fitzpatrick did not.

In spite of Darrell's vast experience with teachers and school, he never seemed to have picked up the basic survival skills. Every time he was summoned to the front of the class for a strapping, the rest of us would roll our eyes and settle in for a painful, drawn out scene. We were all afraid of the White Bomber (with the possible exceptions of

embarrassed us. I had long since learned that the best way to get through the whole thing was to offer your hand, grit your teeth and get it over with as quickly as possible. When you got back to your seat it helped to sit on your hands. There was really no way to guard against tears, although Fitzpatrick would usually have to dispense at least six of his medium to heavy blows to make most of us cry. But even if you did cry there was little shame in it. We all knew that if Fitzpatrick really wanted to he could make any of us cry, Jessop and Kane included.

But Darrell had never mastered the short, quick, let's-get-this-over-with approach. He would dilly and dally, in a repeat performance of his first strapping. Fitzpatrick, of course, had learned to be careful when using the White Bomber on Darrell. Their encounters had evolved into a pathetic black comedy of wills. Fitzpatrick watched in exasperation as Darrell went into his ritualistic dance: he shifted his weight from one foot to the other like someone in urgent need of the bathroom; he swallowed and wiped his lips with his bony fingers; he ran his hands incessantly up and down his rumpled blazer. All this served to put Fitzpatrick into an even nastier state of mind. When he finally swung and struck it was with a force usually reserved for the most serious offenses; he struck like he

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At the conclusion of one of these marathon scenes just before lunch one morning, Darrell made his way back to his seat, obviously in great pain. I turned around and looked at him. His yellow teeth were locked in a rigid grimace, his eyes were clenched shut but tears still leaked down to his pimply chin. I had never seen him in such a state.

I knew there had been something different about the strapping. For one thing it had sounded different. During lunch Barnes and I made Darrell show us his hands. His fingertips were cut and bleeding and the undersides of his forearms were swollen with red and purple welts. I was filled with a sense of injustice, but there was nothing to do about it, no one to whom we could turn. But when Tony came into the class that afternoon I called him over. He looked at me quizzically, and dumped his books on his desk.

"Get a load of Darrell's hands," I said. "Fitzpatrick made minced meat out of him. Show 'im, Darrell."

Darrell sniffled and then offered his hands palms up for Tony's inspection. "The bastard," Tony said under his breath. He pushed back Darrell's sleeves and revealed the welts on his forearms. Then he swore and shook his head. "Listen, Darrell, we all knows what a prick that Fitzpatrick is, but you brings half this on yourself, you know that?" Darrell stared at Tony with a hurt, uncomprehending

get strapped, don't go dancin' around like a friggin' Yo Yo or something. Half your problem is that you moves around so much the fucker don't know where to hit you. So don't be pullin' your hands away. That's why he's catching you on the fingertips and arms. Hold your hand out straight, take it in the middle of the hand and then let it give a little once he hits you. The middle is where it don't hurt so much. Jesus, there's nothin' worse than gettin' cracked over the fingertips. Hold your hand out flat and take it like a man." Tony's eyes softened. "Fuck, b'y, I don't know what else to be tellin' you." He turned and went back to his seat.

Tony's advice seemed to work; the next strapping went better. As Darrell walked up the aisle I saw him look over at Tony. When he held out his hand without the usual fuss (except for the customary biting of his chapped lips), Fitzpatrick looked at him curiously as if checking that this was, in fact, the right student. He seemed uncertain as to how to administer the blows.

In the cloakroom after school we crowded around Darrell and congratulated him. Even Jake Jessop was impressed. "Way to go, Darrell," he said.

. . .

My mother was interested to hear that Tony had ended up

him. Besides the fact that he was a good artist and had stuck up for Darrell, there wasn't much I could tell her. But once she had talked to some friends and made a few phone calls, she soon pieced together the story.

Tony had started the year in St. Phillips at Our Lady of Victory, a medium sized high school not far from where he was living with his mother. Mom didn't get all the details, but somehow he got into trouble. His long hair was definitely a contributing factor. At Christmas he announced that he'd had enough and was quitting. He had decided to try for a job on the waterfront with his uncle, a longshoreman. His mother pleaded with him not to do it. She argued so long and vehemently that Tony finally agreed to give it one more try. But he absolutely refused either to go back to Our Lady of Victory, or to cut his hair. Mrs. Power had gone to Brother Devine whom she had known since they were children, and he had set up a meeting with Bannister. Mrs. Power argued that Tony was smart--he could do so many things. He was good with his hands, he could draw and write beautifully. She wanted more for him than ending up on the dock like his brother and uncles. And although I found it hard to believe, they had talked Bannister into letting Tony come to Holy Trinity "as is." But he was on probation and would eventually have to spruce

speech: "You must understand my position. If I permit one student to come to school like that, then the rest will claim the same privilege. And that, Mrs. Power, I cannot have. But for now we'll see how he makes out." How Fitzpatrick took the news that he would have to grant Tony this period of grace I can only imagine.

And so the weeks went by. Tony came to school every day and went out of his way to stay out of trouble. Fitzpatrick didn't pick on him any more than the rest of us, and when Tony was strapped he took it without a wince or a word.

5

Over the years I continued my early morning ritual of sitting in the back of St. Teresa's with a book. I had also given up trying to keep my reading habit to myself. Whenever I got the chance, I hunched down in the library next to a steaming radiator, and while the other boys played basketball or skylarked in the classrooms, I lost myself in a book. My classmates couldn't quite figure it out. If I was such a bookworm, why wasn't I a brain like Dean Murphy? And it was obvious that I wasn't a brain. Academically, I was firmly entrenched in the middle of our class, usually

boys regarded my excessive reading with wry amusement, and although they didn't tease me I was still sensitive about it.

I read all kinds of books: novels, history--even the encyclopedias. Sometimes I found pictures of art nudes which I generously shared with Barnes. Those pictures were about the only thing that could get him into the library when he wasn't forced to be there. But, for me, there was something else: the library was a lot like St. Teresa's in the early morning--there was hardly ever a crowd. And that was the way I liked it.

I was surprised, then, one afternoon to look up from my book and see Tony slipping into the seat opposite me. "Whaddya at?" he said. I raised up my book and displayed the cover: a Zane Grey western. "Any good?"

"Not bad," I said. "Not as good as Louis L'Amour."

Tony nodded and opened a binder. He extracted a sheet of paper and studied it. "What's that?" I said.

"Friggin' English composition. Fitzpatrick's making me write it over again."

"Whatcha get?" It was the compulsory rejoinder to talk of a test, but the minute I asked I knew it was the wrong thing to bring up with Tony. "Not that it's any of my business," I added quickly. Tony frowned and slipped the

but I felt him looking at me across the table.

"A D minus," he said suddenly. "All you got to do is blow on it and it'll turn into an F." He leaned across the table and shook back his hair. "What did you get? An A I suppose."

"No, I didn't get no A. I got a B."

"Nothin' wrong with that."

"Tell it to my old lady. When I showed it to her it was like I failed or something."

"What's her problem? There's nothin' wrong with a B. I wouldn't mind gettin' one."

"Yeah, well she keeps sayin', 'If you can get a B you can get an A. You just got to work a bit harder.'"

"Sounds like my old lady," said Tony.

"I guess they're all alike."

"Yeah. Guess so."

Tony picked up the composition and glared at it. And then, on impulse, I said, "You want me to have a look at it?"

He looked at me quizzically. "Why?"

"I dunno. Maybe I could give you a hand or somethin'. I mean...if you want."

Tony stared down at the paper. Then he glanced quickly around the room. "Just between me and you, hey?"

He looked down at the paper again and then slid it across the table. Fitzpatrick had assigned the cheery topic "Death," and Tony had written about his grandfather's wake. Once again I was struck by the calligraphy, but while his handwriting was exquisite, his spelling and sentence construction were atrocious. Still, in some ways the piece was surprisingly effective. He talked about the stillness of the body as it lay in the coffin, and how he felt when he saw a fly walking over his grandfather's nose. He wanted to brush the fly away but had been afraid. There was a lot of feeling and maturity there. My composition, like most of the others, had been about the death of a pet dog. But although it was moving, it looked like it had been written by someone in grade four.

"Well?"

I came around the table and sat down next to him.

"It's not too bad. The first thing you got to do is get your spelling straight." I pointed to the paper. "What's that word supposed to be?"

Tony took up the paper and ran his index finger along the line until he stopped at the word. His lips parted to form the syllables. "What's wrong?" I said, jokingly. "Can't you read your own writing?" He glared at me in exasperation and laid the paper down. For a moment I

paper and read the sentence aloud: "'I looked in the cofin. I was serprized because he dint look ded.'" I looked at him. "That's not how you spell surprised." I got up and brought a dictionary over to the table. "Look it up," I said, pushing the dictionary towards him. Tony took the dictionary and began to slowly leaf through the pages. It seemed to take him forever just to find the S's. Again I saw him mouthing the word, but then I noticed that he was looking under the se's instead of the su's. "Here, let me have a look," I said. "Just to save time." I found the word and showed it to him, glancing at him sideways as his eyes darted over the page. I wrote surprised and some of the other misspelled words on the top of his paper and grinned at him. "Okay, why don't you read me the first bit of the composition." He sighed and took up the paper.

But he had barely struggled through his own first sentence when I finally understood: Tony couldn't read.

6

The janitor was mopping down the hallway; I could hear the mop sloshing back and forth, and the periodic creaking of the step-pail when he wrung out the dirty water. We were struggling with a Math exercise when there came an abrupt

momentarily talking to someone. The scent of industrial soap wafted through to us from the hallway. We heard low laughter and Fitzpatrick stepped aside, holding the door open for the two people who followed him into the classroom: Brother Reid, the homeroom teacher from the grade ten class down the hall, and a boy who immediately caught our attention.

We all sat up and stared. Reid noted our expressions and gave a satisfied grin; he directed the boy to the centre of the class and stood behind him, his thick hands gripping the boy's shoulders. Periodically he worked his fingers into a double shoulder pinch. The boy shifted in pain but Reid held him still and kept up the massage.

The boy wore his school uniform, but I noticed his grey flannel trousers were threadbare at the cuffs, his shoes were scuffed and dusty, and his school crest had been ripped away from his breast pocket at the top left hand corner. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back like the pictures of Prince Philip I had seen. All of this we gathered in cursorily, because something else both horrified and fascinated us.

The boy's head was completely swathed in bandages.

The ends of the bandages drooped loosely around his neck and shoulders. Uneven, grotesque slits had been left

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Fitzpatrick regarded the boy with wry amusement and then turned to the class. "No, this is not a history lesson. Brother Reid has not brought us a mummy today--although he certainly looks like one, wouldn't you say, Brother?"

"Yes, I suppose he does," said Reid. "But this is nothing so grand as an Egyptian king." Suddenly the pieces of the boy--the shoes, the shabby uniform--jelled with his particular size and height, and I realized who he was: Bill Tobin, a student in Reid's class. His father owned a farm a couple of miles down the road from us; we called him Farmer Tobin. He was as strong and unflappable as one of his father's work horses, and was known for not being too bright academically and the fact that he was almost immune to strapping. His hands, torn and callused from baling hay and other farm chores, repelled the strongest blows of the White Bomber or Black Doctor with ease.

Now he stood before us wrapped in bandages. The gauze near his nose blew rhythmically in and out with his heavy breathing; I experienced a sickening sense of claustrophobia.

"No, this is not an Egyptian," Reid went on. He had the kind of voice that made everything he said sound like he was shouting it. "This is a boy who doesn't know"--he

each word--"how-to-shut-up!" Tobin gave a muffled cry that was lost in the bands of gauze and twisted out of Reid's grasp. "You see, Brother Fitzpatrick," said Reid, "I figured the only way to teach this boy how to be quiet would be to make it impossible for him to talk. Nothing else seemed to work." He grabbed Tobin once again by the shoulders. "Do you have any boys like that in your class? I wouldn't like to think so."

"Well, Brother," said Fitzpatrick, "I think I can safely say that I've got a few yappers in here. In fact, if I wanted to bandage them all up I'd have to use every first aid kit in the school."

"Yes," said Reid, nodding. "I wouldn't be surprised." He sized up the class, his eyes coming to rest on Barnes. "I know Mr. Barnes there from last year, and he's got more tongue than an old rubber boot."

"That he does," said Fitzpatrick glaring at Barnes. Barnes grimaced and hunched down in his seat.

"Well, Brother," said Reid, "I must be taking my little project off to the other classes. I believe it would benefit them all to get a peek at him." He steered Tobin abruptly towards the door, but Tobin lurched blindly and barked his shin on a corner of the desk. We heard a muffled cry that sounded like a curse.

"It's perhaps better that you didn't quite catch it," said Fitzpatrick grimly.

"Yes, you're probably right. Thank you, Brother," said Reid, pushing Tobin outside. Once more we smelled the soap, but it was weaker. The mopping had moved further down the hall.

The door closed. Fitzpatrick sat at his desk and looked down at us. "Back to your exercises," he said. "And no talking," he added with a grin.

We looked around at each other and then turned back to our work. There was no sound except the rustling of paper and the scratch of pencils. Then I heard a voice. "That's not right, you know."

Fitzpatrick looked up and appraised the room. "Someone has something to say?"

"I said...that's not right."

Fitzpatrick got up, walked out from behind his desk, and came down to the front of the class. He folded his arms, inclined his head slightly to the left and looked down the aisle at Tony. "Well, this is a special occasion. You're offering us your opinion on something, are you, Mr. Power?"

"Doin' that to that youn'fella. It's not right."

"Really?" said Fitzpatrick. He gave a short laugh.

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"I'm not saying I'm no expert--"

"No, that's right. You're not."

"That don't mean I don't know when something's not right. Doin' him up like that and bringin' him around like he was one of them freaks in a circus." Tony shook his head. "It's not right."

"Freaks in a circus?" Fitzpatrick spat incredulously. "You're a fine one to be talking about freaks--you traipsing in here, day in and day out, looking like a bloody streel. Hair on you like a hopped up hippie."

"That haven't got nothin' to do with it. Besides, Jesus had long hair too you know. Was He a hippie?"

Fitzpatrick froze. He looked at Tony with such ice that I felt the whole room grow cold. He started walking slowly down the aisle. When he got to Barnes's desk he stopped and turned towards the front of the class. For a minute there was absolute silence. "Mr. Power, you don't pretend to compare yourself with Our Lord, the saviour of the world--and of your miserable soul, do you?"

Tony stared into Fitzpatrick's back. His lips had tightened into a mere slit. "All I'm saying is that He had long hair--longer than mine, too, according to some of the pictures I seen of Him."

Fitzpatrick turned and pounced. He grabbed Tony by the

him roughly against the back wall. I heard Tony's head crack against the concrete. Barnes tumbled out of his seat and stumbled up the aisle. I saw Tony's eyes glaze over; his expression was vacant and faraway, but he brought his hands around and grabbed Fitzpatrick by the forearms. They stood locked together, their faces only inches apart.

"Now you listen," said Fitzpatrick breathing heavily. "Nobody here is interested in your opinion--least of all me. So you better shut that mouth of yours or I'll shut it for you." He adjusted his grip and pushed Tony further into the wall. "Do I make myself clear?" Tony blinked and shook his head to clear it. "Well, do I?" said Fitzpatrick. Tony didn't answer. The bell rang. "Nobody move," said Fitzpatrick. We could hear the other classes spilling into the corridor. We waited. It was probably only half a minute, but it seemed like hours. Then, abruptly, Fitzpatrick let Tony go, and quickly stepped away from him. Tony reached up and felt the back of his head. "Now get out of here," said Fitzpatrick. "The whole bloody crowd of you."

Silently, we started putting our books away. Fitzpatrick looked at Tony one last time, then he turned and left the room.

Tony moved unsteadily to his desk and picked up his

him attentively. Jake Jessop and Carl Kane came and stood next to his desk.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm okay."

. . .

Farmer Tobin took the same bus home as I did, and when I got on it that afternoon I saw him sitting in the back seat, staring straight ahead, oblivious to the racket going on around him. He sat as still as a real mummy. I could see the red marks the bandages had made on his face, and the tiny bits of sticky residue that still clung to his chin and eyebrows.

7

I continued to help Tony with his English composition. For three days we met in the library at lunch hour. Barnes didn't know what to make of it. "Shit, if he wants help, why don't he go to Dean Murphy like everyone else?"

"Cause he asked me, that's why."

"Must be because you're a bookworm."

"Must be," I said.

The more I worked with Tony the more I realized that his problem was that he couldn't get down on paper what he was hearing in his head. When he told me what he wanted to

degenerated into misspelled fragments. In the end I had him dictate and I wrote it down for him. Then Tony copied out the finished product. As he was doing this during our last meeting he looked up and said, "Fitzpatrick's going to know that I didn't write this."

"Didn't write it by yourself," I said. "But sure they're all your ideas. I just helped you get them down and fixed up the spelling. But it's your composition." Tony didn't look convinced, but he turned back and finished the work.

And when it was done it was impressive. He had used a special, long type of art paper and with his handwriting it looked like an ancient scroll.

Before the first period in the afternoon Tony went up to Fitzpatrick while he sat writing in his register, and held out the composition.

Fitzpatrick took it and looked at it sceptically. "What's that?"

"Composition, Brr. I redone it."

Fitzpatrick looked at it briefly, then he held it away from his desk and let it fall to the floor. He turned back to the register as if Tony wasn't there. We all fell silent. Tony stood looking at Fitzpatrick. I could only see his back, but I could picture the expression on his

again to Fitzpatrick. "Brr, it's my composition, the one you told me to do over." Fitzpatrick looked up, took the paper and again let it fall to the floor. Once more Tony picked it up. But this time he laid it on the desk and headed back to his seat. Fitzpatrick stood and picked up the paper.

"You can take this back, Mr. Power. I don't want it."

Tony turned around. "Why not? I done what you asked me."

"Mr. Power, we don't need your kind in this class. That composition is done on the wrong sized paper. I specified eight and a half by eleven. I can't read that." He held the paper out to Tony who stood looking at him silently. "You don't want it back?" Fitzpatrick crumpled the paper into a ball and threw it into the wastepaper basket.

"You fucker," I said to myself.

"Now, if you're not going to play by the rules like the rest of the boys, I think you better write out chapter three of our religion text three times."

"I'm not doing that," said Tony quietly.

"No? Then you can take an F on your composition."

Tony shrugged, walked back down the aisle, and dropped heavily into his seat.

The Fifth Glorious Mystery

It was getting close to spring; the snow was melting around the basketball nets. After prayers one Monday morning Fitzpatrick pointed at me, Bob O'Grady, Barnes and Tony. "You, you, you and you," he said. "Off to the gym and wait for me." When he said gym, I knew right away what it was about: Bingo. There was always a Bingo on Sunday nights and we were being detailed to take down the chairs. O'Grady, Barnes and I bounded up the stairs with light hearts: any excuse to get out of class was a welcome respite. It was especially so for me; because of my size I was rarely picked for these chores. Tony followed along at his own pace. We went into the gym and jumped up on the stage.

Tony came in, looked at the chairs and swore. "Gettin' us to do their friggin' work," he said. "Slave labour--that's all they thinks we're good for."

But I wasn't about to let Tony's sour mood dampen my elation. "What odds, b'y. At least we're not stuck down in the class. I'd rather be here any day."

"Sure," said Barnes. "Bit o' fun."

"Right," said Tony.

When Fitzpatrick turned up, any ideas of fun quickly

were required to stack the chairs on trolleys that stored under the stage, and Fitzpatrick wanted the job done as quickly as possible. The only good thing was that the collapsing and stacking made an incredible racket which we enjoyed and did nothing to soften.

Fitzpatrick stood near the stage and barked out his orders like a warehouse foreman. "Come on O'Grady, get the lead out." I looked over at O'Grady and saw him struggling under the weight of three of the metal collapsible chairs. He staggered to one of the trolleys and dropped the chairs with a crash. "Harder work than it looks," he muttered.

Tony, with his longer reach and superior strength, was the best worker. He could pick up four or five chairs at a time. I could barely handle two, so I scurried about frantically collapsing chairs and stacking them, hoping Fitzpatrick would see the value of speed over brute strength. It didn't work. "Come on, Mooney!" Fitzpatrick yelled as he sized up my meagre load. "You can take more than that." I collapsed three chairs and carried them, half walking half running, to a trolley where I promptly tripped, sending myself and the chairs spilling onto the floor. Fitzpatrick rushed over, grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me violently. "What do you think you're doing?" he shouted. "You're useless. You're all bloody useless. I'm

'em up," he said, shoving me towards the trolley. I saw Tony with his hands on his hips, breathing heavily, having just deposited a full load under the stage. "What are you looking at," Fitzpatrick snapped at him. "Get to work." Tony bent and picked up four chairs, struggling to get them adjusted neatly in his arms. Fitzpatrick looked at him for a moment, then he strode briskly across the floor and stood behind him. "Come on, Power," he said. "You can take more than that. Big strappin' fella like you. Or do they call you Caveman for nothing?" I had moved to the stage with my trolley, and now I looked across at Tony. His heavy breathing ceased. He stared at the chairs with cold eyes. And then everything seemed to happen in slow motion. The muscles in his arms and shoulders relaxed and the chairs spilled to the floor, their crashing ringing thin and faraway. I saw Tony's right hand curl into a fist which he brought gently over to his left hip. Then, slowly, he began to straighten up. As he did so his fist flew out in a graceful arc gathering speed and power, reaching behind his head so he looked like a discus thrower entering his first spin. But Tony did not continue to spin into additional circles. His fist whipped blindly behind him and crashed into Fitzpatrick's jaw with a wet smacking sound that echoed through the gym. Fitzpatrick's head snapped back; his eyes

sagged and he dropped vertically to the floor as if an invisible puppeteer had abandoned his strings. Then he pitched forward and lay still.

For a moment there was no sound. A truck chugged up Alexander Street. We stood frozen, Barnes still clutching a chair to his chest. We stared at Fitzpatrick and then moved in unison to where he lay. Tony looked down at him indifferently.

"Holy fuck," Barnes whispered in awe. We looked at each other and then back at Fitzpatrick. "Holy fuck!" Barnes said again. He glanced quickly at Tony who stood with his fist still clenched. Barnes made as if to speak to him, but then stopped and turned to me. "Shit. You don't think he's...dead, do you?" Before I could answer Tony starting walking down the centre of the gym towards the main entrance. He never looked back. He pulled open the heavy fire doors letting in a collage of street sounds, and then disappeared down the concrete steps. The doors banged closed.

"What are we goin' to do?" said Barnes, looking back at Fitzpatrick. "What if he's dead? Shit, Nipper, there's not a joog in 'im."

I struggled to get my thoughts together. "He's...he's not dead," I said. "You don't die from gettin' punched in

caught on the words.

"Go get someone," said Barnes looking at me anxiously.

"Me? I'm not going. You go."

"Like fuck," said Barnes. "O'Grady, you go." But O'Grady just stared at Fitzpatrick as if he hadn't heard.

"There's no way I'm goin'," said Barnes. "No way."

"Jesus," I said. I turned and headed quickly for the door. "Shit," I kept saying under my breath. "Shit, shit, shit." I took the stairs two at a time, ran down the hall and turned into the general office. Miss Jackman sat at her desk typing noisily.

"Excuse me, Miss," I said hoarsely. She kept pecking at her typewriter. "Miss," I said louder. "Miss!"

She turned and looked at me. "I suppose you've come for the strap, have you?"

"No, Miss, I...I..."

"What's wrong? Are you sick or something?" She got up and came to the counter.

"No, Miss, I...I got to see Brother Bannister." I don't know why I said that. I could easily have told her what the problem was.

"What do you want to see him about? He's busy you know."

"It's...it's about Brother Fitzpatrick," I managed to

"What about him?"

"I...I..."

"Oh, for God's sake, take a seat," she said. "I'll ask if he'll see you." I was numb. My whole body burned with pins and needles. I sank into a chair. Miss Jackman turned back to her work.

I twisted in the chair and looked at Bannister's office door. When was she going to tell him about me? I picked up a "Journal of St. Anne de Beaupre" that was lying on the next chair and began to leaf through it. Suddenly I threw the magazine down and went up to the counter.

"Miss," I said loudly.

Miss Jackman spun around and glared at me. "What <u>is</u> wrong with you?"

"Miss, I think I better see Brother Bannister. <u>Now</u>."

She adjusted her glasses, and looking at me quizzically she picked up the phone and pressed a button. "Brother, can you come out please? There's someone here to see you. I think it might be important." She listened for a moment. "No, it's a student." She glanced at me. "What's your name--Mahoney, is it?"

"Mooney."

"Mooney," she repeated into the phone. "In grade...?"

"Eight," I said.

then." She hung up. "He'll be right out."

Almost immediately the door opened and Bannister stood before me with his pipe in his hands. "What's your problem today?"

"Brr, you better come up to the gym," I said, standing up. "I think there's something wrong with Brother Fitzpatrick."

I don't know why I said, "I think." Bannister's eyes narrowed and his long face grew grave.

"What do you mean? What's wrong with him?"

"I...I think you just better come up to the gym," and I moved to the door where I stood looking back at him like a puppy with his leash in his mouth enticing his master for a walk.

Bannister took off his glasses and cleaned them with the hem of his soutane. He placed them carefully back on his nose. "Lead on, MacDuff," he said, gesturing with his pipe towards the door.

I wanted to run but Bannister plodded along in no special hurry. I kept having to wait for him to catch up. "What's wrong with him?" he said again as we were going up the stairs. "Is he sick."

I considered. "Sort of."

When we finally got to the gym Fitzpatrick was sitting

the stage regarding him warily. Bannister ran over and helped Fitzpatrick to his feet. He staggered and laid his hand on Bannister's shoulder. "What's wrong with you, man?" said Bannister. "Did you faint."

"No, Brr, he didn't faint," said Barnes.

Bannister shot him a stinging look. "Get back to your classroom."

We headed quickly down the stairs. "No one's goin' to believe this," I said. "No one's ever goin' to fuckin' believe it." Suddenly Barnes laughed. "What's so funny?"

"Well, just think about it," said Barnes. "Brother Fitzpatrick, our tough, boxer teacher. Who'd of thought he'd have a glass jaw?"

I didn't know what to think. But that was the last we saw of Tony Power.

*****

Part Three

[redacted]

The Fifth Glorious Mystery

On my seventh Christmas I was given a Chinese puzzle, a puzzle unlike any I had ever seen. There were no curlicue pieces to fit together into a dreamy forest landscape, or litter of blue-eyed Persian kittens nestled in a furry heap. There were no screws or tape or even string included. There was only an assortment of sticks of various lengths, cut from bamboo the colour of ripe grain. The sticks came packed in a long yellow box like a pencil box, and on the bottom, stamped in faded red ink, was the solitary word PEKING followed by a Chinese character.

According to the picture on the cover, the pieces fit together to make a tower with a hut on top.

I stared at the puzzle blankly.

Were there any instructions? I rummaged through the packaging and found only a small square of paper densely covered with Chinese characters; I turned the paper over to see if there were any figures suggesting how the puzzle might be assembled. It was blank.

After a half-hearted, bumbling attempt to copy the picture, I put the puzzle away; but although I never solved its mysteries I continued to play with it. At times, for reasons I could never understand, the puzzle drew me like a song, and I would go to the bottom of my closet, shake the

would stare at the faded and smudged PEKING on the bottom of the box and run my index finger along it. I forgot entirely about trying to put the puzzle together.

The sticks and box had a peculiar odour, musty and green, like lime-scented water. The smell intoxicated me. Then it struck me one day that the smell was more than the packaging and pieces of the puzzle. What I was smelling was akin to the magical scent of an orange in the toe of your stocking on Christmas morning; or the taste of salt air when walking by the ocean on a low, foggy day; or the perfume of incense and flowers in St. Teresa's on Ash Wednesday. What the puzzle gave me was the scent of warm wind blowing through Peking at dawn, and the patter of fresh rain falling on the northern mountain forests.

What the puzzle gave me, was China.

1

For high school there were some noticeable changes at Holy Trinity. During the summer before I entered the ninth grade, mice infested St. Christopher's had finally been condemned--twenty years too late according to my mother. My father worked on the demolition, and he said it was the easiest job he ever had. "We hardly needed the heavy

in and started swingin' away with the sledge hammers. Mice scampered all over the place. The walls collapsed like popsicle sticks--rotten right through. A good wind could have done the job."

With St. Christopher's gone and no money for a new school, it was decided to bus the students to Catholic schools in St. John's: Holy Trinity for the boys, St. Teresa's for the girls. After four years of getting up at six o'clock to ride in with Frank Morton, I had the luxury of sleeping in an extra hour.

It took me quite a while to get used to seeing my fellow Kilbriders hanging out on the school steps, or roaming up and down Alexander Street looking so pinched in their blazers and grey flannel trousers. I remember Terry Driscoll clutching miserably at his school tie. "Jesus, it's one thing to wear a tie in church," he said, "but <u>every day</u>?"

"Don't worry," I said. "You'll get used to it."

My four years in the city had made me something of a celebrity, and during lunch hour I proudly showed the Kilbriders around, pointing out Noseworthy's fish and chip shop where it was easy to walk out without paying, Madden's Bakery where they could buy a bag of scraps (the price had gone up to seventy-five cents), and Joe's Groc. and Conf.

The Fifth Glorious Mystery

Tom Skinner and I trudged up Alexander Street on our way back to school, I told them about the mysterious whorehouse.

"It's number 66," said Billy.

"What?"

"The whorehouse. It's number 66."

"How do you know?"

"Everybody knows that. It's common knowledge. Anyway, it's been closed for years."

I didn't know whether to believe him or not.

I breathed a little easier that year, especially considering that the worst rackets involved the high school students. Finally, there was a Kilbride gang at Holy Trinity, and I didn't have to face the other gangs alone. St. Christopher's had left my friends a little rough around the edges, and word quickly spread among the Townies that it was better not to mess with the farm boys. Even the guys from Mundy Pond and Buckmaster's Circle took pains to stay out of our way.

. . .

While the Kilbriders made a welcome addition to Holy Trinity, there was also, on that first day of high school, a conspicuous absence. Darrell, having turned sixteen and striking out for a third time at grade eight, had finally quit. And although Saintsbury Place was, as Brother

minute walk from Holy Trinity, Darrell seemed to drop off the island. I saw him only twice during that whole year: once in St. Teresa's on Ash Wednesday, and once walking up Alexander Street with his mother. I never met Darrell's mother, but I was sure it was her: she was as tall as him, and even skinnier if that was possible. With her flat hair and lumpy wool cardigan she looked like a sixty year old Olive Oyle. As mother and son ate up the sidewalk with great loping strides, I studied them curiously. Darrell seemed remarkably calm. His teeth were as yellow as ever, but his acne was clearing up, and he swung the plastic shopping bag he carried in a light, carefree manner.

As expected, Tony Power never came back to Holy Trinity. I heard through my mother that he had gotten his wish and was working on the St. John's waterfront. But on all my excursions downtown, I never once ran into him.

2

At fourteen, I was in many ways a typical teenager. Still something of a loner, I continued to read voraciously. But I started thinking more about girls and rock music than books. I even sneaked an occasional beer. Barnes went a step further and started to experiment with drugs. Like

or three years behind those of the rest of the country. My first brush with illegal drugs came one day after school when I bummed a cigarette off Carl Kane. As he was taking one out of the pack I noticed two hand rolled cigarettes. Not wanting to deprive Carl of his store-boughts, I said, "I don't mind taking one of the rolls."

Kane laughed. "I bet you wouldn't."

"I mean it. I rolls me own all the time. It's no odds to me."

Kane handed me a Rothman's and cupped his hand over my ear. "They're not cigarettes," he said in an exaggerated stage whisper. "At least not <u>regular</u> cigarettes."

"Then what are they?" But Carl just rolled his eyes and walked away.

Barnes told me later that he smoked the occasional joint with the crowd down in Portugal Cove, but I never really believed him. One day he said, "Sure last summer I tried something else."

"What?"

He looked over his shoulder and lowered his voice. "L.S.D. California Sunshine."

"You didn't."

"I did so."

"Where'd you get it."

"The Regatta?"

"Sure. Me and Brian Hennebury wanted to buy some grass, but the pusher was all out. Said all he had was California Sunshine. I'd never heard tell of it, so I asked him what it was. 'Oh, it's the same thing as grass, b'y,' he said. 'Just a bit stronger.'"

"You buy it?"

"Me and Brian dropped a hit each."

"So, what was it like?"

"Wild, b'y. For one thing, no one told us you're only supposed to take a half hit. We probably shouldn't have done it at the Regatta, either. I heard on the radio that there were 16,000 people there, and about an hour after I dropped the acid I thought they were all talkin' to me. I nearly went off me head. Cool though, all the same."

. . .

Starting in grade nine, the Saturday night dance at the Kilbride Parish Hall became my social event of the week. It was the best place for both girls and music. Kilbride was well known for its dances. We were close enough to St. John's to attract the better known bands, and people drove in from all over.

Ironically, the thing I did the least of at the dances, was actually dance. But I was never bored. I spent most of

friends. Above all, I watched: the girls, the band, the power struggles and intrigues of teenage sexual politics. And, if that wasn't enough to keep me interested, there were always the rackets.

It was a rare dance when there wouldn't be at least one fight. Guys from St. John's, Petty Harbour, or the Brow would turn up, and sooner or later a scuffle would break out. The reason was just about always the same: a non-Kilbrider would ask one of the Kilbride girls to dance, and her boyfriend, or some Kilbrider who <u>wanted</u> to be her boyfriend, or who just didn't want to see a sweet, innocent Kilbride girl dancing with some scumbag from Petty Harbour or wherever, would have a few words with the stranger and soon they'd be into it. The strangers, no matter how tough, hardly ever won--they were simply outnumbered. There was nothing of letting the two main players settle the matter on their own. As the girls screamed and chairs skidded across the dance floor, the Kilbriders pounced on the strangers in a kind of feeding frenzy that I dubbed "Kilbride Overdrive." The funny thing was that none of our tough guys--Doug Whalen, Les Penny, Max Sinnott--thought there was anything in the least wrong with this "ganging up." They argued that on their forays into Petty Harbour or up to the Brow, the same thing happened to them. It was almost expected that if

back cut-up and bruised--often worse. But the wounds weren't regarded as a sign of weakness: they were battle scars, marks of honour. To return home unscathed was almost a disgrace. Besides, they gave you something to talk about.

The gang from Petty Harbour was led by a tough named Benny Ryan, and known as "Benny Ryan and the Forty Dirtnecks," although the Kilbriders referred to them disdainfully as "Randy Ben and the Dirty Fortnecks." We heard that Benny Ryan himself had coined the name as a way of striking fear into his opponents, which, at least in my case, worked beautifully.

Doug Whalen, the leader of the "Kilbride Mafia" (our gang's current nickname) had a long standing grudge against the Dirtnecks. One night after leaving a dance at the Petty Harbour Legion Hall, he had been surprised by Benny Ryan and a half dozen of his cohorts. And while Whalen showed plenty of gusto in facing down a gang of drunken Dirtnecks on their own dance floor, he was deathly afraid of water and couldn't swim a stroke. It was a gross violation, in his mind, of all racket ethics, when the Dirtnecks promptly threw him off the wharf. The only thing that saved him was that he landed in a dory. Whalen never forgave the Dirtnecks. "Christ," he grumbled, "it's one thing to beat the shit out of a fella. But there's no need to try and friggin' <u>drown</u> him."

up at the Kilbride dance, Whalen was more than eager to start something. Of course, if there was going to be a fight, it usually happened just before the last dance: no one wanted to get thrown out until the dance was nearly over anyway. There was always an electric expectation in the air just prior to the final waltz. Guys who had put off asking a girl to dance, had one last chance. And those who had more violent things on their minds, set about their business.

On this night, as the singer of the "Abstract Number" announced the last dance, and the band launched into a passable rendition of "A Whiter Shade of Pale," I saw Whalen lounging by the men's washroom, carefully patting his greased down hair. He made his way through the crowded dance floor, strutted nonchalantly up to one of the Dirtnecks who was standing by the stage lighting a cigarette, and decked him with a right cross that just about broke his jaw and sent his cigarette flying into the air. On cue, about ten Kilbriders appeared out of nowhere and piled on top of the strangers in a convincing approximation of a rugby scrimmage. The unfortunate Dirtnecks could certainly have used the help of Benny Ryan and their thirty-eight comrades. In the ensuing melee they were given the worst beating I'd ever witnessed. Well, perhaps "witnessed"

through the multitude of swinging, kicking Kilbriders.

Later, when the dance was finally over, I caught a ride home with Andy Turpin and Max Sinnott, both of whom had been right into the thick of the fight. As we drove by Aylward's Service Station we saw two people walking along the shoulder. "Look," said Sinnott, who was driving. "That's them Petty Harbour guys." I thought for a moment that they were going to stop the car and start round two. I hoped not. By their gait the Dirtnecks looked like they'd taken about as much as they could for one night. Their shuffling reminded me of the pictures I'd seen of First World War soldiers blinded by poison gas: the men stumbling through the mud with dirty bandages over their eyes, one outstretched hand pathetically resting on the shoulder of the man in front. I prayed that Sinnott would drive on by, but Turpin said, "Haul her in, Max." We pulled onto the shoulder and Turpin rolled down the window. "Hey, you want a run up the road?" The Dirtnecks stopped and sized up the car. Their faces, in the cold neon from the service station, were so bruised and swollen that I couldn't make out their expressions, but I sensed that they were scared to death. They looked at each other uneasily. Turpin jumped out and pushed down the front passenger seat. "Come on," he said, gesturing into the car, "hop in." The Dirtnecks

shuffled up to the car and squeezed painfully into the back seat next to me.

"You don't mind a little detour, do you, Nipper?" said Sinnott.

"No, I'm in no rush."

"Suppose you guys are goin' back to the Harbour, are you?" said Turpin.

"Yeah," said the Dirtneck next to me.

Sinnott put the car in gear and screeched out onto the highway. As we shot by Kilbride's meadows and barns, I kept waiting for him to make an abrupt turn onto some little side road where they would take the Dirtnecks out and give them a second, more secluded beating.

"How come you're walkin'?" said Turpin.

"Friggin' car wouldn't start," said the Dirtneck next to me. His friend stared silently out the window.

"Shit, not your night, is it?" said Sinnott. "But sure the same thing happened to us one time up on the Brow. Remember that, Andy? I had that blue '59 Duster. We come out after the dance, and not a bloody joog in the car."

"Yeah, but that was because them fuckers from the Brow were after rippin' off the distributor cap," said Turpin. "We had to walk all the way back to Kilbride. Took us about three friggin' hours."

day," said Sinnott, rolling down the window and spitting, "there's the Duster with no hubcaps, no radio, the antenna cracked off--"

"And not the one bit o' gas in her," said Turpin.

"Dry as a fuckin' bone," Sinnott concurred. "Siphoned off. Yes, my son. That crowd from the Brow--they're some hard bunch."

Turpin turned around and waved an Export A package at us. "Anyone want a butt?" The talking Dirtneck took one and placed it carefully between his bruised lips.

"You guys ever go up to the Brow dances?" said Turpin, lighting the cigarettes with his Zippo.

The talking Dirtneck exhaled a cloud of smoke. "Oh, yeah, the scattered time."

"Well, you're lucky you're not walkin' home out o' there tonight," said Sinnott. "Lord Jesus, it'd be sun up by the time you got back to the Harbour."

Then we all sat silently as the car sped through the night. "Where do you fellas live?" said Sinnott as we turned off the highway and headed down the winding road to Petty Harbour.

"Just across from Harvey's Bridge," said the talking Dirtneck. "We'll both get out there." Presently we pulled up in front of a shabby house crisscrossed with metal

contractor. Turpin held open the door as the two Dirtnecks climbed painfully out. I heard the ocean softly lapping, and caught the sharp scent of salt and rotting fish. A thin slice of milky moon nestled low over the ocean.

The silent Dirtneck cleared his throat and spoke up. "Thanks for the run."

"Yeah, thanks," said his friend.

"No problem," said Turpin.

"You guys coming to the dance next week?" Sinnott asked.

The talking Dirtneck grimaced. "I don't believe so."

We turned around in the driveway and headed back to Kilbride. Turpin switched on the radio. I settled back in the seat and grinned. My favourite group was singing, "All You Need Is Love."

3

In 1970 I started grade eleven, my final year at Holy Trinity; there was no grade twelve in the Newfoundland school system. Despite all the religious indoctrination to which I had been subjected, this mercy was the only thing that ever made me think there might really be a God. As the events of grade eleven unfolded, I continually thanked Him

The Fifth Glorious Mystery

By now I had begun to drift away from the gang in Kilbride. The routine of drinking, smoking up (I never did find the nerve to try L.S.D) and hanging out in front of Pike's Store was wearing thin. Even the dances seemed flat and predictable. I was sick of the bravado. No matter how hard I tried, I was continually being drawn into a fight, either to back up a friend or to save face. It was expected--even from, in Brother Fitzpatrick's words, "runts" like me. The fights were all different, and yet they were all the same. Sometimes guys got a black eye; sometimes they ended up in hospital. Because of my size I rarely inflicted much damage on my opponents, but I did show a remarkable resilience to fists and boots; so while I wasn't known as a fighter, I developed an odd reputation for being difficult to scar.

At the beginning of grade eleven, I met Gerard Scott and Ray Peddle, who lived in Waterford Heights just across the tracks from Kilbride. One day they told me they were starting a band and asked me to be the singer. Soon I was spending most of my time rehearsing in Scott's basement. I gave up going to the Saturday night dances. My new friends preferred parties, and at some of them we were even asked to play.

that tempted me with thoughts of God, was that Brother Fitzpatrick had transferred to Ontario. I didn't know of anyone, including the other teachers, who was sorry to see him go. The face of our class had also changed. More students had dropped out: Bob O'Grady in grade nine, Jake Jessop in grade ten; and then, at the beginning of grade eleven, Barnes quit.

The reason for Barnes's departure was Brother Spencer, our homeroom teacher that year. He was a tall, wiry character with sharply cut features, a receding hairline and a thin, humourless mouth. Barnes called him "No Lips." I had never had him before, but I knew all about him. There was a standard debate among the boys about who was meaner: Spencer or Fitzpatrick. But for me there was no question. Despite all my first hand experience with Fitzpatrick, the winner was Brother Spencer, hands down.

I first saw him in grade five, and even then he made an indelible impression on me. St. John's was having a typically rainy winter that year, and the school yard was often covered with sheets of black ice. One day a group of grade ones and twos made a kind of rink next to the monastery. It was about twenty feet long, and they took turns running and then sliding the length of it on their bottoms. I was standing around watching (still too shy to

monastery and yelled at them to give it up, saying it was dangerous and they were liable to break their necks. The boys stopped until he had gone back inside, but they were having such a good time that the fun soon resumed. A few minutes later the monastery door opened again, and Brother Spencer came striding down the steps with a grim look on his face. I suppose Brother Thomas thought that if the boys wouldn't listen to him, why not pull out the heavy artillery? Spencer stepped onto the ice just as one of the smaller boys--he couldn't have been more than seven--was finishing his run. The boy slid down the ice whooping and flailing his arms around. Then he saw Brother Spencer. He tried to dig his feet into the ice, but while this succeeded in rotating him like a curling stone, it didn't stop him. I'll never forget the look of terror on his face as he crashed into Spencer, toppling the Brother like a bowling pin. Spencer struggled to his feet, his eyes popping with rage; he promptly slipped and fell down again. For all its Chaplinesque quality none of us dared laugh. The boy lay on the ice, pulled into a rigid fetal position. I thought for a moment that he was hurt, but he was just too scared to move. When Spencer finally made it to his feet, he picked the boy up by the scruff of the neck, and gave him a vicious kick in the backside that sent him flying headfirst into an

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The succeeding years had not mellowed Brother Spencer. Although I had been largely successful in staying away from him, my luck ran out in grade ten. I think my hair had something to do with it. I had started to grow it long, and occasionally I saw Spencer staring at me unpleasantly in the corridors. Then one afternoon our biology teacher, Mr. Carter, didn't turn up for our last period class. Brother Bannister instructed us over the P.A. to read quietly until the bell rang. Whenever a reading or study period was the last of the day, the teachers usually let us go to the cloakroom and get our coats on so we'd have a head start on the rush down to the buses. Now, most of us got up and proceeded out to the cloakroom; I slipped into my brown, fringed cowboy jacket, and came back to my desk.

As we sat reading, someone walked into the room. Although we had been relatively quiet, an absolute hush fell. I didn't bother to look up; the silence told me who it was. I was sitting in the first desk by the window, and I heard Spencer's shoes click across the waxed floor until he stopped directly in front of me. I kept my eyes glued to my book. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. Spencer stood before me for a moment, and then flicked disdainfully at my fringes. "Howdy, Buffalo Bill," he said in a terrible Western accent. "Where'd yuh park yuh hoss?"

to say, but he clearly wanted an answer. I looked up at his poker face, and tried to read his mood. I supposed that even Spencer made an occasional joke. I jerked my thumb towards the window. "Oh, just out there in the parking lot." The words were barely out of my mouth when he reached back and slapped me so hard that I fell out of my desk and sprawled in the aisle.

"Take off the coat," he said, looking down at me. He turned and glowered at the rest of the class. "All of you." The boys jumped up scattering books and pens, and headed back to the cloakroom. I struggled to my feet and took off my jacket. Tears ran down my stinging face, blurring my vision. After everything I had seen in that school, it was the closest I had ever come to wanting to kill someone. I turned to go back to the cloakroom, but Spencer grabbed me by the arm. "This school day is not over for another twenty minutes, cowboy," he said. "I'll tell you when you can put on your coat."

Now, for my final year at Holy Trinity, Brother Spencer was to be my homeroom teacher. I wondered if he would remember me as Buffalo Bill. I hoped not.

that he always singled out one boy in each of his classes for a particularly hard time. From the first days of September, it became obvious that in our class Barnes was to be that boy. Soon he was playing the same adversarial role with "No Lips," as Darrell had played three years earlier with Brother Fitzpatrick. Spencer picked on him for everything from the way he tied his tie, to the kind of pen he used for his homework. The animosity was mutual.

One day, during lunch, Barnes tagged along with me to the classroom so I could get a book. He was in a playful mood, and when he stepped inside the door, he jumped up on the first desk, and skipped down the entire length of the row where he executed a crude approximation of a tap dance, whirled around, and bowed.

He looked up to see Brother Spencer sitting at his desk with his daily planner opened before him.

I stood in the doorway looking from one to the other. Barnes paled, froze, as if a witch doctor had cast a spell on him. He wanted to move, but his muscles refused him. Spencer stared at Barnes stolidly. Then he raised his hands and clapped: once, twice, three times. He got up slowly, crossed his arms, and came to the door. "Good-bye, Mr. Mooney," he said, closing the door in my face. I found myself alone in the corridor. I put my ear to the door and

desk scraping the floor and muffled cries. They went on for a long time.

Afterwards, Barnes wouldn't say what happened, and I didn't press him.

Only weeks later there was another incident. Because it was our last year of school, Spencer had given us a "job interest questionnaire," the results of which were supposed to indicate our most appropriate field of employment. As we sat filling it out, I saw Wayne Rose, who sat behind Barnes, lean forward and whisper something to him. Rose must have asked about the questionnaire, because Barnes turned back to his sheet and studied it with a puzzled expression.

Instinctively, I looked to the front of the class to check on Spencer. He was reading, resting his head on his hand, but as he turned the page he glanced up just as Rose whispered again to Barnes. Lying on Spencer's desk was a heavy blackboard protractor. Barnes turned to Rose to answer his question, and as Spencer dropped his eyes back to his book, I saw his right hand creep spider-like over the desk, and come to rest upon the protractor. I tried to catch Barnes's eye, but he was too engrossed in the conversation. I waited for Spencer to jump up or say something, but he turned back to his book and pretended to read; every few seconds he glanced up. Suddenly Barnes

and looked to the front of the class, Spencer stood up and hurled the protractor at him like a frisbee. Barnes threw up his hands and ducked, but he was too late; the protractor hit him in the face and fell heavily to his desk where it wobbled back and forth like a spent spinning top.

Barnes raised a hand to his face; it came back bloody. Blood spurted onto his questionnaire. He examined the blood with glassy eyes, as if unsure what it was. Then he stood up and stared at Spencer.

"You fucking prick."

The curse was delivered in a surprisingly even tone of voice. Spencer looked at him expressionlessly. Barnes rushed down the aisle with one hand pressed to his face; he kicked open the door, and disappeared down the corridor.

As the class looked at Spencer in shock, his naturally pale complexion blanched to a sickening egg white; his thin lips seemed to disappear altogether. I waited for him to do something, say something, but he just stood there. Finally, I got out of my desk and ran out into the corridor. It was empty, but, like Hansel and Gretel's bread crumbs, drops of blood pointed the way. I followed the drops downstairs and pulled open the door to the washroom. Barnes was leaning over a wash basin, running the faucet full blast. As I came in, he took his hand from his face and let the blood drip

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"That fucking bastard."

"Let me see," I said. I bent down and looked at him sideways. There was a deep, two-inch cut over his left eyebrow; already a purplish bump swelled underneath. I tore a roll of paper towels from the dispenser and submerged a thick handful into the water. "Here," I said. Barnes took the towels with a shaking hand and applied them to his face. Blood and water flecked his shirt and tie.

"That's going to need stitches," I said. At that moment the heavy wooden door creaked open, and through the mirror we saw Spencer standing in the doorway. I turned around. "He's bleeding."

"Get back to class. I'll take care of it--"

"We've got to get the first aid kit."

"Back to class, Mr. Mooney," Spencer said quietly. "Now."

"He should go to the hospital. He needs stitches."

"I said...I'll take care of it." Spencer held open the door. "Now go."

I stepped out into the corridor, but as Spencer closed the door behind me I glanced back into the washroom. Barnes stood hunched and shaking by the wash basin. He seemed very small. He stared into the mirror, holding a fistful of bloody paper towels to his face.

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Later, Brother Bannister took Barnes to St. Dominic's hospital in the Holy Trinity van. The cut took seven stitches. Barnes never came back to school.

Occasionally, though, he would be waiting for me when school got out at three o'clock: waiting for me in his car. Barnes had turned seventeen and was lucky enough to get his drivers license on the first try. He had always bragged that he owned a car, and had been working on it in his father's garage, but I thought it was just another tall tale.

The day he got his license he waited for me at the school gates, and brought me down to Alexander Street where he proudly showed me an ancient, multicoloured Valiant which seemed to be constructed mostly from polybond.

After he took me for a drive around town, we pulled up in front of Madden's Bakery and smoked.

"So you're really not going back?" I said.

"Would you?"

"I don't know. I keep telling myself that it's just another eight months and I'll be shed of the bloody place."

"Yeah, well I don't care how long it is. Fuck 'em all. I'll go to work with the old man in the garage. That's probably what I would've ended up doin' anyway." We stared out at Alexander Street.

He lit another cigarette and looked at me. I could see the jagged scar running through his eyebrow and curling onto his forehead. He was going to take it to the grave.

"Yeah?"

"He waited."

"What?"

"When Spencer threw the protractor. He waited. He saw you turned around whispering to Rose, but he waited until you turned face on again before he threw it."

Barnes shrugged. "So?"

"Don't you get it? He wanted to hit you in the face."

Barnes grimaced and stretched his arms out on the steering wheel. "Is that supposed to surprise me?"

I sighed. "No. I guess not. But maybe we should do something about it. Report him."

Barnes laughed. "To who? Bannister? He knows all about it. He was the one who drove me to the hospital."

"Fuck Bannister. The police, b'y. We could go to the police and charge him. Assault with a deadly weapon."

"A protractor."

"Why not? Jesus, he could've fucking killed you."

"He'd get off," said Barnes, matter-of-factly. "He's a Brother. They wouldn't do nothin' to a Brother. Sure you know what my old man said when I told him what happened? He

trying to scare me. My old man said that. Come on, Nipper. Nothing would happen. At worst they'd give him a warning." Barnes laughed grimly. "Where's Tony Power when you really need him?"

. . .

So with eight months left to graduation, Barnes turned his back on Holy Trinity. Those eight months were the longest of my whole school career. It wasn't that Spencer picked on me more than anyone else. In fact, after the incident with Barnes he calmed down considerably. He didn't even adopt a new scapegoat. Perhaps the school board or the Superior General of the Christian Brothers had gotten wind of the episode, and advised him that while it was all right to maintain discipline, he should be careful not to murder any students while he was at it.

The unfortunate thing was that Spencer taught Algebra and Trigonometry, my worst subjects, and I was sure I was going to fail both. Whenever I thought that I might have to repeat the year, I nearly got ill. But the harder I tried to concentrate, the more I kept seeing Spencer's hand creeping across his desk and onto the protractor, or Barnes holding those bloody paper towels to his head. It was especially bad when Spencer actually used the protractor in a demonstration. And while I was rerunning those scenes in

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Trigonometry exam.

5

One Saturday night in December, our band was invited to play at a Christmas party in Mount Pearl. None of us had a car, so I suggested that we wangle an invitation for Barnes and drive out with him. Charlotte Gosse, who was having the party, had the house to herself because her parents had gone out of town for the weekend.

When we got there the place was packed. I went downstairs to the rec room to find a suitable area to set up, and there, sitting on the couch with a Jockey Club beer in his hand, was Tony Power. I hadn't seen him since the day he knocked out Brother Fitzpatrick.

"How's it goin'?" he said, toasting me.

"Jesus, you're a stranger." I sat down next to him. He looked pretty much the same, except that the wispy peach fuzz over his lip which I remembered from grade eight, had bloomed into a full, fiery red mustache.

He reached over and flicked at my hair. "You're gettin' to be a real hippie. I hear you plays in the band."

"Yeah," I said. "Well, I don't exactly play. I'm the singer."

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"It's my last year--if I don't blow it."

"Ah, go on. You'll pass. A smart fella like you." He looked at me coyly. "Fitzpatrick still there?"

"Nah, he got transferred to the mainland. Toronto, I think. I don't care where he is as long as it's far from here." Tony nodded and took a swig of beer. "You know that was really something the day you decked him." I laughed. "Barnes thought you'd killed him."

Tony peeled the label off his beer bottle. "The fucker had it coming."

"Did they ever do anything to you? I mean, like charge you for it or anything?"

"Nah. I never heard a word about it. Fitz probably thought that if he bitched I'd come back and finish him off. I probably would've too."

"Guys still talk about it at school," I said. "Of course, a lot of 'em thinks we just made it up."

"It's no odds to me," said Tony. He drained his beer and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "You know the only thing I wish? I wish he'd read that composition I wrote--we wrote. Not that I wanted to impress him or anything, just to show the son-of-a bitch that I could do it." He settled back on the couch. "Anyway, it's all ancient history now."

"I don't get much chance, b'y. It's kinda busy down at work. By the time I gets home I'm too baffed out to do anything."

"I know what you mean. My old man says the same thing. Well, I better go get the boys."

"Hey, you guys any good, or what?" said Tony.

I laughed. "You tell me."

. . .

When I got upstairs Barnes was fishing a beer out of the refrigerator. "Guess who's downstairs?"

"Who?"

"Tony Power."

"Yeah? What's he doin' here?"

"Beats me. I suppose he knows Charlotte."

By one A.M. we had finished playing, and most people had left. I was thinking that it was time for us to leave too, but Barnes had developed an interest in our host and wasn't in any hurry. Eventually, the other guys in the band caught rides home with friends. Soon, Barnes, Tony and I were the only ones left.

As I sat chatting with Tony, Barnes and Charlotte came up to us.

"Have you had a gander out the window?" said Barnes.

"No. Why?"

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They led us upstairs to the living room; Barnes discreetly pulled back the edge of the drapes. "Get a load of that." Charlotte's house was at the top of a lane about five hundred yards from the main road, and in front of the house and spilling down the lane were about forty teenagers.

"What do they want?"

"They're Mount Pearlers," said Barnes. "See that big guy in the green army parka? That's Jackie Simmons. They were at a party and some idiot who was here told them there was a bunch of Kilbriders over at Charlotte's."

Charlotte looked worried. "Doreen just called and told me."

"Jesus," I said. "I'm the only Kilbrider here."

"You want to go out and share that bit of information with them?" said Barnes. "Most of 'em are half crocked."

"I'm a Kilbrider, too," said Tony. "At least I used to be." I peeked out again. The crowd consisted of girls as well as boys. They wrestled and jostled to keep warm.

"Christ," I said. "They're carrying on like they're at a hockey game or something."

"They're waitin' for us to come out," said Barnes. "For the Kilbriders to come out."

"What are we goin' to do?"

I'm too young to die."

"Take it easy," said Tony. "We'll hang her down here for a while. It's cold out. They'll give it up and go home out of it soon enough."

A half hour later the crowd had shrunk to about half its original size, but those remaining looked like they weren't going anywhere. Cars had pulled up into the lane, and the boys took turns sitting in them to get warm.

"What are you going to do?" said Charlotte, biting her nails. "I knows that Jackie Simmons; he's a nut case if there ever was one. He'll probably stay out there all night. What if someone calls the police? If Mom finds out I had a party tonight she'll murder me."

"Maybe we should go talk to them," said Tony.

"Talk?" said Barnes. "You think they know how?"

"Come on," I said. "We can't stay here."

We went into the vestibule and put on our boots and coats. Tony opened the door and walked out onto the front step. Barnes and I followed. I heard car doors slamming, and the click of the closing screen door. The crowd looked up at us and fell silent. Barnes was right: these guys weren't in the mood for talking. They didn't even bother to hurl any accusations or insults. We followed Tony down the steps. The crowd surged toward us, and I suddenly found

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Jackie Simmons pushed his way through the circle and stared at us. He dismissed Barnes and me, and then looked at Tony with interest.

The circle closed in.

Someone grabbed me by the waist and threw me into the Mount Pearlers across from me. Two guys caught me and threw me back again. They kept it up until I felt like a tennis ball in a volley. "Christ," I said to myself. "They're not going to beat me up, they're going to shake me to death." But soon they began to punch as well. I tried to time myself so that when I was thrown into the circle, I struck out with my fist. A couple of times I actually hit somebody. I saw out of the corner of my eye that Barnes was getting the same treatment. Once we nearly crashed into each other. I looked out for Tony and saw him lying face down in the snow. Jackie Simmons and a bunch of other guys took turns kicking him.

Suddenly Charlotte charged down the stairs with her purse in her hand, and began swinging it wildly at the Mount Pearlers. "You leave them alone!" she screamed. And soon, almost as if a flock of pigeons had been scattered by a cat, I found that we were alone. I lay on my back staring up at the stars. I felt no pain. Charlotte sank down next to me and rocked back and forth on her knees. "Are you all

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I sat up and looked around. Barnes staggered over to me like a drunk. I looked for Tony, and by the light from the lamp over the steps, I saw him lying in the snow, his head pushed into a snow bank. Charlotte and I rushed over and turned him over. His face was badly swollen and his hair was encrusted with snow and blood. He was moaning and cursing. "Shit," I said. "We got to get him to the hospital."

We helped Tony to his feet. "Oh, God," said Charlotte. "My parents are going to kill me."

"I'll go get the car," said Barnes.

The hospital was only minutes away. While Tony was with the intern, Barnes and I sat in the waiting area and examined each other's bruises. We had both come through surprisingly unscathed. A raw pink scar ran down the side of my neck. Barnes sported a classic black eye.

After about a half an hour, the intern came out with Tony. "Don't worry," he said. "It's not as bad as it looks."

"Good thing," said Barnes, and I agreed with him. Tony's swollen face was an unsettling collage of purple, red and yellow. Barnes said later that looking at Tony that night reminded him of being stoned on acid. Tony grinned painfully.

turned to go, but then wheeled around and looked back at us. "You know, you guys should grow up before someone really gets hurt."

"Yeah," I said. "I know."

. . .

The next day word got around that the Mount Pearlers were boasting about how they'd "kicked the shit" out of a bunch of Kilbriders. The real Kilbride gang was livid. That night they gathered in front of Pike's store. I watched in disbelief as Turpin, Sinnott and a bunch of the other guys pulled chains and tire irons out of their car trunks and piled them into Doug Whalen's green Impala. When they were finished, Whalen came over to the front step where I was sitting with a Coke, and poked me in the chest.

"You're comin' with us."

"What for?" I said, surprised. "You got enough guys. You don't need me."

Whalen sneered. "I don't want you to <u>fight</u>," he said. "I want you to point out those bastards."

"But--"

"Get in the car."

We squeezed into the Impala and headed off. The car quickly filled with cigarette smoke. Andy Turpin's tire iron stuck painfully into my ribs. My left leg started to

of was that when it came time to jump out, I'd probably be too stiff to move.

For a long time nobody spoke. Then Whalen looked at me through the rear view mirror.

"Who else was there besides Simmons?"

"I don't know. I didn't recognize any of 'em. All I knows, is that there was a lot of 'em."

Whalen stubbed out his cigarette. "Pricks. They knew friggin' well there was no Kilbriders at that party. And the gall of 'em, then, to go braggin' about it. I mean, we'd never do somethin' like that, would we, Andy?"

"Wouldn't have to," said Turpin, smugly. "Anyway, we'll show 'em tonight what the real Kilbriders can do."

There was a chorus of approval. Whalen turned the car onto the road leading to Mount Pearl. But it soon became evident that while the gang had plenty of spirit, no one had thought to formulate a plan. Almost immediately an argument broke out between Turpin and Sinnott about where the Mount Pearlers hung out. Sinnott argued that it was Wong's Take-Out.

"It used to be Wong's," said Turpin, "but that was years ago. Nobody goes there anymore. I don't even believe it's still open."

"Well, where then?" said Sinnott.

"It makes no odds," said Whalen. "We'll check 'em all." And we did. But we hardly saw a soul. It was, after all, Sunday night. Then as we were driving by the Sobey's supermarket, Turpin jabbed his finger at the window. "Look," he said. "There's a bunch of fellas on the steps." Harding whipped the car into the parking lot and pulled up in front of the main door. We all jumped out (me, quite a bit behind the others) brandishing the tire irons and rattling the chains. But the gang turned out to be a bunch of junior high boys sneaking a joint. Their jaws fell open; one of them started to cry. Whalen questioned them for a while, but they said they didn't know anything about Jerry Simmons and his gang. We piled back into the Impala. Around midnight, after a lot of cigarettes and tough talk, we headed back to Kilbride.

6

June finally came, and with it the dark spectre of the Public Examinations. I just wanted to pass, to leave my years at Holy Trinity behind forever. On the day my exams started, I went over to St. Teresa's and said a quick prayer beneath my old friend Gabriel. I didn't really think it would do any good, but I had nothing to lose.

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Algebra paper, my heart sank. The numbers and graphs completely mesmerized me. I completed perhaps half of the test, and walked out knowing that I had failed. Trigonometry was a little better, but I still didn't complete enough to pass. I wondered if they would make me repeat the whole year, or if I would get away with night school.

I had prepared my parents for the worst; my father grunted and shook his head, but my mother remained typically optimistic. The morning my marks came in the mail I couldn't bring myself to ask for them. As I started eating my Corn Flakes, my mother laid the envelope next to my tea cup. I looked at it blankly and turned back to my cereal. After a moment she said, "Do you want me to open it?"

I laid down my spoon. "No," I said. "I'll do it." I ripped open the envelope; the first thing I saw printed at the bottom was "Pass." I quickly scanned the list of marks, mostly 60's and 70's, and stopped next to algebra: 62%; trigonometry 65%. I knew it was a lie. I needed to score at least 80% on the algebra final, an exam I'd only completed half of, to get 62%.

"Well?" said my mother.

"I passed," I said. "Don't ask me how. It must have been the Angel Gabriel."

"Never mind."

My mother smiled and hugged me. "I knew you'd pass. Holy Trinity is a good school academically. Everybody knows that."

I stared at the marks and shook my head.

As it turned out there was a kind of a miracle, but it had nothing to do with Gabriel. So many students had failed Algebra and Trigonometry, that the Department of Education had been forced to either boost the marks, or keep back hundreds of students--students they had nowhere to put. So we were pushed through. It might have been something of a sham, but I was finally free of Holy Trinity.

7

Not long after Holy Trinity burned down, The Evening Telegram sent me out to Stephenville to cover the annual Drama Festival. It's the kind of job I like: free passes to see the shows, free room and board, actors and directors fawning over me, hoping I'll write something positive about their productions.

I had gone to the cast party after the opening night's performance, and it was after two A.M. when I made my way down the steep theatre steps and headed back to my hotel.

spitting. Under the glare of a streetlight two men slouched against a motorcycle--a Harley. One man had long straight hair and wore a patched jean jacket; the other was shorter, stocky, and wore a rumpled leather coat.

The streetlight glinted on glass. I watched as Jean Jacket took a swig from a flask and passed it to his companion. As I continued towards the door I felt the men staring. I looked over my shoulder as Jean Jacket whispered something to his friend. Both men burst into laughter, Leather Coat coughing and choking on his drink. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. My body tightened, and as I glanced at them again Jean Jacket stood up and called: "Where're you goin', asshole?" Both men erupted into more laughter.

"None of your fucking business," I heard myself say. I kept walking.

"What was that?" Leather Coat said, slipping the flask into an inside pocket.

"You heard me," I said, fixing my eyes on the bright doorway. Leather Coat swore under his breath, swung himself onto the bike and kicked it into a sputtering roar; a cloud of black smoke spewed into the air. The head lamp glared and flickered over the lot. Jean Jacket jumped on and Leather Coat gave the bike a shot of gas; it lurched and

Christ," I said. I shielded my eyes from the glare of the head lamp and stood still. It occurred to me to bolt; the door was only a hundred feet away; I was a good runner and these two were drinking and looked out of shape. But I didn't.

They got off slowly. Leather Coat set the bike on its rest but left it running. It sputtered and missed and Jean Jacket reached over and revved the accelerator. I squinted against the glare of the head lamp and saw that Leather Coat was about forty with curly hair and a red beard tinged with grey. Jean Jacket stood behind him, skinny and younger--maybe about twenty-five; his long hair was matted and dirty. I smelled rum.

Leather Coat looked at me and sighed deeply. "Lippy bastard, aren't you?" he said quietly. I looked from one to the other and said nothing. "I said you're a fucking lippy bastard, aren't you?" Leather Coat said louder. "You got an awful quick tongue on you--too bloody quick."

Jean Jacket grinned. "He's probably one of them actors; one of them faggots over at the theatre. And sure all faggots got quick tongues." He pulled a package of cigarettes out of his breast pocket. "Smoke, faggot?" he asked, cupping and lighting one for himself.

I didn't answer.

Leather Coat. "Do you want a fucking cigarette or not?"

I remained silent.

"He ain't so fucking lippy now, is he?" said Jean Jacket. "I believe this faggot is after goin' mute on us."

"All faggots are like that," said Leather Coat. "They always go mute on you. It's because they're so fucking dumb." He sighed again and reached for the flask.

I glanced toward the hotel door and tried to step between them. They closed ranks; the smell of liquor breath intensified. I backed up and attempted to circle around. Jean Jacket stepped in front of me and blew cigarette smoke in my face. "Oops, sorry about that," he said, grinning. I saw Leather Coat look away briefly. Then he wheeled and swung, hitting me full in the mouth. I had been waiting for it but he was quicker than he looked. My head snapped back and down and filled with a rush of stars; I felt my teeth go through my lower lip and tasted blood. My right hand automatically curled into a fist and I came up swinging, catching Leather Coat on his bearded jaw. Jean Jacket swore and leaped on me, pinning my arms behind my back. The blood dripped down my chin. I shut my mouth tightly; when Leather Coat struck again I didn't want to bite my tongue. I braced myself and waited.

The blow did not come.

and reached into his jacket for the flask.

"Spunky little bastard, aren't you?" he said taking a drink. "Either that or you got some kind of death wish."

Jean Jacket laughed and looked up expectantly. "Nail 'im," he said. Leather Coat sucked his teeth, spit and took another drink. "Come on," said Jean Jacket pinning my arms more tightly. "Crack him one."

Leather Coat put the flask away and lit a cigarette. "Nah," he said. "Let the little prick go. He's fucking harmless."

"What?" said Jean Jacket. "The bastard fucking plugged you. Nail 'im."

"I know he plugged me. Let him go," said Leather Coat walking back to the bike.

"Jesus," said Jean Jacket. He watched in disbelief as Leather Coat got on the bike and kicked it off the rest. Then he swore, and shoved me violently forward so that I stumbled and fell. I reached up and felt my bloodied mouth.

Jean Jacket jumped on the back of the bike. "We should've kicked the shit out of the bastard," he yelled over the roar of the engine. I limped towards the door. My right knee was stiff and sore and my pants were ripped.

"Hey, tough guy," Leather Coat yelled. "This is your lucky night. Tonight you came this close to death." He

laughed. The bike lurched, shot down the parking lot and roared out onto the highway.

I looked after them. "Sure. Every night should be like this."

I went upstairs to my room and looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. My left lower lip was purplish-black and swollen. I pulled the lip down and saw the jagged hole my teeth had made. Drops of blood flecked my T-shirt and I felt like throwing up. I filled the sink with cold water and washed and dried my face, patting carefully around my mouth.

8

In the days following the fire at Holy Trinity, my mind kept turning back to the people I had known there. I hadn't thought much about that school since I left, and that was the way I wanted it. I even prided myself on the fact that I had so effectively blocked it all out. But when I went back to view the ruins, I found it strangely disconcerting standing in that open space with the wind from the harbour howling through. Somehow I had thought that Holy Trinity could never be destroyed: there were too many voices and memories absorbed into its walls and varnished floors, its

[redacted]

The Fifth Glorious Mystery

But there was something else, too.

. . .

The day I got back from Stephenville I drove into Kilbride for supper with my parents. I was amazed at the changes. The land freeze had been lifted for only a couple of years, but already most of the farms were gone. There were just two diehards left: lonely pastoral islands surrounded by a sea of houses. The fields and meadows where I played as a child were smothered by ugly subdivisions of look-a-like public housing. It seemed that every second house had a car wreck in the driveway. There was a surprising amount of garbage blowing around. It was almost like Alexander Street.

As I sat down at the dinner table, Mom looked at my bruised lip and clucked her tongue.

"What happened to you?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Well, I got in a bit of a racket."

"With who?"

"A couple of guys out in Stephenville. It's no big deal."

"My God, Nipper, did you call the police?"

"No, Mom, I didn't call the police."

The Fifth Glorious Mystery

"I was walking home after the cast party for one of the plays I was reviewing. It was pretty late. They were hanging around in the parking lot, drinking."

"But what happened?"

"They started calling me names."

"What kind of names?"

"You don't want to know."

"And?"

"Mom, can't we just forget it?"

"No, tell me."

I shrugged. "I told them to fuck off."

"Nipper!"

"Well, you asked."

"Why did you do that?"

"I don't know. They pissed me off, I suppose."

Mom paused and poured herself a coffee.

"Nipper, let me get this straight. You told two hooligans, two drunken hooligans to...f off at two o'clock in the morning in a deserted parking lot?"

"They weren't exactly drunk. They were drinking."

"But why? Why didn't you just walk on?"

"I don't like being yelled at by jerks."

"You prefer getting beat up?"

"No--look, let's just forget it. Please?"

The Fifth Glorious Mystery

"Mom--"

"But you decided to get into it with two drunken toughs--"

"They weren't drunk--"

"--at two in the morning in a deserted parking lot. Does that sound like common sense to you, Nipper?"

"Common sense doesn't have anything to do with it."

"Then what?"

I considered. "Instinct," I said finally.

"Instinct? What are you saying? That you're a caveman or something?"

"No. Look, if you really want to know, I slipped into Kilbride Overdrive."

"You what?"

"It's what we used to call it when we were kids--teenagers."

Mom looked at me like I was a madman.

I leaned back in my chair. "It's kind of hard to explain. When I was growing up you didn't let anyone say stuff like that to you. It was like an unwritten rule or something. A point of honour. You always had to give as good as you got--even shrimps like me."

"Kilbride Overdrive?"

"I know it sounds strange."

if you're sixteen or seventeen. I remembers you coming home with black eyes and all the rest of it when you were a youngster. But haven't you outgrown that?"

I touched my bruised lip.

"I guess not."

Mom laid my plate in front of me. "Well, my lad, you're nearly thirty years old. Perhaps it's time you did."

When we had moved out to the living room for dessert, my father looked at me across his apple pie and grinned. "So have you heard all the news?"

"What news?"

"For one thing we're thinking about moving," said Mom. "It's getting a bit too crowded around here."

"Crowded. I've never seen more youngsters in my life," said my father. "If you ask me, the only thing people do around here any more, is breed."

Mom glared at him.

"Well, perhaps it's the best thing," I said. "I know Kilbride doesn't seem much like home to me any more. I can hardly recognize half of it."

"And did you hear about your old school?" said Mom.

"What about it?"

"The new Holy Trinity is going co-ed."

I laid down my fork and stared at her. "You're

"That's what they're saying on the radio."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"And they've decided not to rebuild on Prince Street," said my father. "The new building is going further west."

"What are they going to do with the old spot?"

"It's slated for a parking lot."

"A parking lot?"

"That's right."

"Well, things change," said Mom, sighing. "I guess that's the way of the world."

9

I went back one more time to see the ruins of Holy Trinity. I'm not sure why, but something seemed to draw me there. Bulldozers and Mack trucks were noisily clearing away the last of the debris. The weather had turned surprisingly warm, and in the bright sunshine the snow melted into rushing rivulets, exposing the previous year's fossilized garbage.

When I came up the driveway I saw Darrell with his hands shoved deep in his pockets looking on as the bulldozers rolled through the debris. I looked at him for a moment, and then walked up to him. "Hey, Darrell," I called

He peered at me myopically, and nodded. "Sure. You were in my class."

"Remember my name?"

"Sure I do. It's Nipper."

"Yeah," I said. "Grade eight. Brother Fitzpatrick. I suppose you remember him?"

Darrell looked up at the bulldozers and trucks. "Yeah, I remembers him."

We stood silently for a moment. "So what do you think of the school burning down?"

Darrell shrugged. "I dunno."

"Come on, it must mean something."

"That was a long time ago."

"Yeah. I guess so."

Darrell chewed his lips and dropped his head towards the ground. "I...I didn't like goin' there very much. It wasn't nice." He turned to me and his voice held a surprising conviction. "I'm glad it burned down."

I looked into the open space and listened to the warning pings of the tractors. Darrell fidgeted with his jacket zipper. "You still living down on Saintsbury Place?"

"Yeah."

"You workin'?"

Darrell nodded. "I works for the Telegram."

The Fifth Glorious Mystery

"I sells it. Down in front of Woolworth's." Darrell reached into an inside pocket and brought out a pack of DuMauriers. "Want a cigarette?"

I took one. "Thanks. I don't remember you smoking."

"Didn't use to." He grinned, revealing his yellow teeth. "Mom wouldn't let me."

"But she does now?"

He shook his head and stared up at the monastery. "She died."

"Sorry."

Darrell took out a box of matches and lit his cigarette. Then he cupped his hands and, stepping around to guard against the wind, he held the flame underneath mine.

"Thanks."

We stood in the quadrangle, smoking, and looking on as the winter wind blew last year's garbage into the sky, and the bulldozers sank their blades into the wet earth.

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