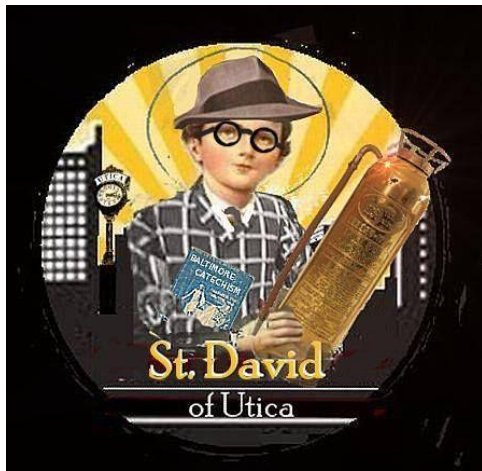


The Windswept Journal

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Mail Boy



1 • I dreamed of her on Friday night. I'd been thinking of her for hours, all afternoon and evening. I was so angry I would have slapped her had she not been a few miles away at home. I was eleven years old that year. My cousin Eileen was fifteen. She was lovely. This is a stupid way to begin a love story.

She had called just before supper to sell Mom raffle tickets. In the summer of 1954 the profits supported her class trip to an amusement park about twenty miles away. Times have changed. In today's world her class might be going to Borneo or the south of France. They could be selling diamond watches.

I had more pressing matters at hand and didn't want to spend time thinking of her. I needed to clean out my bedroom by noon. Of course I admit that was only so I could see her again at the picnic. Yes, this is confusing. Sometimes that's the way a love story begins.... and ends.

In the dream Eileen stood to the left of me and slightly behind so I could not see her at first. I could only sense her. She did not speak, but I knew it was her in the way we are sure a person is who she is in a dream. She moved around to stand in front of me, but then almost instantly she was seated, head down, reading a book. I spoke her name but received no answer. She looked up at me as a smirk stole across her face. The corner of an eye lifted and I witnessed the

transformation from angel to devil girl. I awoke and realized I'd seen something I didn't understand. Not at eleven years old. Not yet.

On the morning after the dream, I was down to the wire and it was time to do as I was told by my mother. I couldn't find my little brother, Jesse. He and I shared the bedroom. It wasn't fair that I had to clean up the place all by myself, though he wouldn't be much help anyway. Mom said if we didn't finish by noon, Dad would back the car up across the lawn to our bedroom and open the trunk. Mom would start throwing our stuff out the window. I was pretty sure Dad would not back over his precious grass, but Mom was less predictable in those days before they found her the right meds.

I was surely smitten by Eileen. My thoughts of her had only recently turned from wanting to strangle her when she embarrassed me, to wanting to be with her and maybe take her to the movies or whatever one did on a date. I had second thoughts about anything so messy as kissing, but I could not deny I wanted to be with her, impress her and have her smile at me. Just like when we were both younger.

Eileen and I had not always clashed. But lately we found ourselves caught in comparisons made between us regarding our class grades, books read and honors given at school. I suppose we were the two brainy children of the family. I believe that left to ourselves we would have formed a relationship of mutual interests. But somehow parental pride had turned our little successes into a contest that neither of us could win. It was a strange competition, given the difference in our ages, some four years. Eileen had knowledge I had not yet been exposed too. But I was the better showman.

Again I tried to put thoughts of Eileen aside for the moment. I needed to find my younger brother Jesse. We should move quickly to hide as much stuff under the bed and the dresser, and temporarily in the dungeon of a basement as soon as possible. To throw anything out never occurred to either of us.

We needed a plan of attack. I might have taken my father's advice on house cleaning, which he periodically gave free of charge to my mother, who ignored him.

"Start at the top and work your way down," he said. "After the clutter, wash what's necessary"

The man would drone on and on, all the while sitting in his favorite chair and never lifting a finger to help. When Mom asked him how he could justify only giving advice, he looked at her with true surprise on his face and said, “But that’s my job.”

Dad was very predictable. He was born Catholic, raised Catholic, would die a Catholic and wanted me to be a priest.

“Why me?” I asked. “Why not Jesse?”

“You get the best grades in school.”

“I want to be a playboy when I grow up,” I told him.

“How will you earn a living?”

“Maybe as a bartender, maybe a microscope salesman, maybe—“

“You have to earn your keep in this world,” he said.

“I’ll be a juh-Guy-low.”

“That’s gigolo,” he said. “and you certainly don’t—“

“I read about them in a magazine my friend Georgie has.”

“What the heck kind of magazine—“

“*Boys Life*,” I said.

“*Boys Life*?”

I had him going now.

“Or something like that,” I said.

I never thought much about it at the time, but entering our bedroom might have been a frightening experience for the timid. One might presume he was coming into the office/workshop of an insane scientist or maybe just a plain old maniac. As Grandma had expressed it once, “Boys will be boys, but you two are just plain slob.”

“Daniel has a lot of interests,” Jesse said to Grandma.

“I’m a collector,” I chimed in.

That was true. I collected fishing worms, dead or alive, construction materials, maps, more maps, string, empty medicine bottles, bicycle parts, the old Wanted Poster sheets they threw out at the post office and my latest craze, toilet seat lids. I scavenged them from the dump and hid the semi-rotting wooden lids under my bed. I needed time to repaint the seat lids and sell them to other boys as knight’s shields. Our bedroom was beginning to smell like an outhouse. When

Dad noticed, I told him an extra large full moon was producing a tidal pull on area sewers and hence the smell in different parts of the city.

“I didn’t smell it at your cousin’s house last week,” he said.

“They live on a hill,” I said. “The moon evidently wasn’t that full.”

I’m trying to write a love story here, and I know I keep veering off track to relate one tale or another illustrating what I had to put up with in life. Maybe the love story doesn’t matter to you. You’ve probably guessed Eileen and I would have never been a couple, not as first cousins. It might have worked if we were Protestant Royalty, but in fact we were working class Catholics. To my knowledge, Catholic children in Utica in the 1950’s had only two opportunities for any fun. Physical exercise, which I avoided, and the U.S. Mail.

My father once said he should have charged me rent for the use of our mail boxes when I was a kid. I had begun to amass pamphlets from far away places. I probably cut out every advertisement in the back of Popular Mechanics, Boys Life and The Saturday Evening Post, filled in the tiny boxes with my name and address and mailed them off to one company or another. I anxiously waited for the “free offer” to arrive in a couple of weeks. I don’t remember ever getting much of a return for my efforts, usually colorful brochures and more invitations to spend money. Oh, and the fire extinguisher.

I specialized in brochures and ephemera from the great American West. I was convinced my entire future lie in the state of Arizona. I don’t quite remember why, except I was sure a lot of cowboys lived there. To me, a cowboy’s life was surely ideal, but that was before I fell face first into a cow plop in the field behind my cousin’s house.

Of course, most of the cowboys I admired weren’t in Arizona anyway. I was unaware Hollywood faked everything, including location. I suppose I should have guessed that after watching movie scenes from Mars.

The railroads constantly ran magazine ads and sent out brochures tempting easterners to go west and, for all I knew, westerners to come east. The aim was to sell tickets to the farthest destinations. My collection of Arizona, Montana and California brochures and maps soon mushroomed. Piles grew higher on top of my dresser, the only space left in the bedroom I shared with my little brother. My quest for the west was not a tidy affair. The walls were already

decorated with two by three foot weather maps that arrived daily from the U.S. Weather Bureau in Washington. That's right ... an updated map every single day adding to the pile in our mailbox and filling up the walls. All for only seventy eight cents per month. Uncle Billy said we had more maps than the War Department. Dad bought a second mail box.

I collected stamps, too. The bottom drawer of my dresser was filled with Stamp Collector Bargains. For only a dollar, a company mailed me 1,000 valuable stamps from countries I'd never heard of. "Spend your evenings sifting through them and you might discover a rare stamp worth thousands!" I had as much chance of discovering a rare stamp as a new planet.

Lost in this whirl of trash arriving daily was the man who brought it, poor old Mr. Lynch, our postman. He told Dad the weekly *Life* magazines and kids like me were the reason he became stooped by middle age.

The day of Eileen's visit I stood in the doorway to our bedroom about to edge in sideways while holding my stomach in, I heard snapping and popping out on the street. So that's where Jesse was. I had guessed correctly. I could hear his toy cap gun go off as he pulled the trigger over and over, ambushing an official United States Government employee. Mr. Lynch should have ignored Jesse's game, but the postman's ire almost always flared up when he was shot at.

Bam! A loud report at the front door echoed through the house. Bam! Bam! came two more. Not caps, but shots. Real shots. Before starting his route that morning, as Mr. Lynch later told Mom, he decided he'd had enough of Jesse's game. So the Irishman packed the starter pistol and a load of blanks into his large leather mail bag. Blanks are at least ten times louder than paper caps. Just as Mr. Lynch came to the foot of the steps with the mail, Jesse jumped up from behind the glider and hopped up to sit on the porch railing. He hung out backwards over the shrubs, one hand holding his gun, the other holding on to the flag pole holder.

When Jesse began to shoot, Mr. Lynch pulled out his starter pistol and fired three shots at the boy, right between the eyes. Rattled by the postman's much louder fire, Jesse lost his grip and slipped off the railing, plummeting into the bushes. Crying and rolling around in the dirt, he felt all over himself for bullet holes. Mr. Lynch ran over to the boy, concern mapped across his face. Jesse crawled up the man's leg, bawling and groveling and asking for mercy. I thought this was quite funny, of course, and began to laugh at my brother's over the top portrayal of frightened child, which he may not have been faking. But Mr. Lynch said he felt terrible. He interrupted

his duties to take Jesse down to the drug store on the corner and buy him a milkshake. I was not invited.

So I headed inside to the bedroom and stared at the dying tropical fish while I spent five seconds thinking about picking up the clutter. Then I began to daydream about Eileen.

I imagined some boys thought of impressing a girl with a masterful feat of physicality, such as hitting a home run over the fence. I was the type who leaned toward maximum impact right up front. I had already looked into the cost of getting a barrel and taking it to Niagara Falls.

When I wasn't thinking of going over the falls in a barrel, I was hoping to discover gold. Although I no longer have the paperwork to prove it, I was convinced I owned one square inch of real property somewhere in Canada's Yukon Territory. So did everyone who got one of the 21 million deeds printed in 1955. A marketing promotion sponsored by Quaker Oats, people for some reason remember it as the "Square Inch of Alaska" program. Most Americans have never excelled in geography. I was spellbound by the thought of actually finding gold in my little parcel. I worried about standing on someone else's inch while I dug for riches with a teaspoon. So, in my imagination I saw myself on a platform supported by a single pipe jammed into my square inch of earth. I hoped air rights would not be an issue.

No matter where the land was, I doubt if its climate matched the snowy fields and half-frozen Eskimos standing around in my imagination. Today the 19 acres of tiny square inch parcels are part of a golf course. I wondered if Father Mahlarkey ever played on it.

He hadn't played golf anywhere around our parish since he was assigned to us. We were a working class neighborhood and he couldn't find a partner. The men not only didn't play golf, they thought golfers were sissies.

"See if I'd ever dress up like a boy doll," said Pete the plumber to no one in particular one afternoon at the Tub of Suds Bar and Grille after a nattily dressed golfer stopped in the local establishment for directions. Pete stubbed out his half smoked cigarette and dropped it in his shirt pocket for later consumption. Various brown edged holes showed at the bottom of the pocket. But it hurt less than storing an unfinished cigarette behind his hear like a pencil. Pete had just finished the Lunch Time Special, two Slim Jims and a pitcher of beer.

There was a story of a man who brought a golf club into the bar from his car and handed it to the bartender after the latter told the man he'd never seen a golf club in his life. The barkeep

held it up with the bottom of the club to his shoulder. He aimed the club like a rifle at the juke box and said, “Where do you load the bullets?”

The Tub of Suds was often thought to be a laundry by the casual passersby. The patrons would look up from their beers and see a young mother or a middle aged housewife standing in the doorway with a basket of laundry in her hand and a confused look on her face. That’s how Elton Swaze met his third wife. A young widow (in our neighborhood a mother without a husband was called a widow, whether she was unmarried, divorced, or convicted of the man’s murder) showed up with laundry and a child. Elton hated to disappoint her with the news that soap was the farthest thing from any of the patrons’ minds, so he took her upstairs to his bachelor apartment and washed her clothes in his bathtub. She stayed there for years, eventually alone with her child when Elton was supposedly kidnapped by the sword swallowing lady from a circus. (Most of us thought he had gladly left with the woman. It was rumored the couple had secretly become golfers.)

Golf was making inroads across the length and breadth of society in the 1950s. Sitting at the kitchen table after supper one night Dad told Mom and I that Eileen had taken up golf. A boy her age at the high school treated her to the first game of her life. I was immediately jealous, but said nothing.

It would have been an expensive date, because she needed rental clubs from the golf course. Dad said my uncle should have paid for his daughter’s rental, because the poor suitor had enough to handle with the green fees. Dad found it surprising the son of a successful Protestant businessman would allow his son to date a Catholic girl.

“Why do you say that?” said Mom.

“Are you aware dating can lead to marriage, dear?”

“They’re only 16,” said my mother.

“Yes, that’s when things get started.”

“What things?” said my mother, laughing.

“I guess it’s too long ago for you,” said Dad. “But I still remember you in that white dress you wore to dances.”

I had seen the dress on Mom in an old photo and I’d heard Grandma say the dress was “questionable” because it had a daring neckline. So daring, I noticed, that it dove almost two

inches below Mom's jugular vein. The dress was not only super modest, it was practically water tight. It would have been comfortable in a blizzard.

"Oh, Eddie," Mom said breathlessly. "I remember."

Mom blushed. Dad blushed. I pleaded nausea and left the room.

I suppose it didn't matter that Mom was flat-chested, as was the rest of her relatives. In a caveman society, her family's womenfolk would have all been passed over by the alpha males looking for optimized baby feeders. Of course, those involved might have viewed it differently than an anthropologist. The less developed ladies would have had to settle for the beta males. That's what sort of happened a million years later in Utica at the fishpole factory, but probably for different reasons. Most kids went there to work and found mates after finishing high school. The factory was in a way much like the meeting ground our Homo erectus ancestors met upon when it was time for the young people to choose mates. The difference was Homo erectus knew what he was doing. It's doubtful anyone at the fishpole factory saw their courting as an anthropological event.

Of course, I use the term Homo erectus as a prototype of early man, not related to my friend, George. He had recently begun to identify himself as Homo Erection to the girls in the neighborhood. They all ignored him, of course, even those who might have had some knowledge of the late Cenozoic. Finally, he said it to Buggy's little sister, who was George's age, but easily took offense. So did Buggy, who beat George up.

Later when I attended the local high school, I found a book at our public library that listed the socio-sexual characteristics that early cave men and women used to pursue and choose their mates. (I've since determined it was not written to exacting academic research standards.) I had the stunning idea of mapping these characteristics against the various departments of the factory. You know, if the reel assembly department had the highest percentage of wide hipped (more successful baby delivery) women of all the departments, it might mean something. Reel making was a precise endeavor, and the ladies were quite dexterous, with excellent fine motor skills. What if there was some relationship between fine motor skills and wide hips? You know, like they naturally clustered together. That meant you could find great baby producers in places requiring precision dexterity like car repair shops and maybe locksmiths.

When later in high school I presented this idea for a research project to Sister Claudette she was horrified.

“How dare you bring such an indecent proposal in here to these sacred halls of learning,” she said.

By “sacred halls,” she evidently meant our decrepit high school.

“But sister,” I said, “this is a legitimate area of study for any of us who may have to marry a girl from Utica some day.”

“I beg your pardon, young man,” she said, the heat now rising from under her starched Flying Nun hat. “This is no more than a prurient romp through the heather. And will *you* measure the young women’s hips, sir? Or will you get help from your neighbor George, your perverted partner in crime?”

“I hadn’t thought that far ahead, Sister.”

“I find that especially hard to believe about you.”

“I mean only to bring scientific inquiry to serve a quest more useful than predicting populations of guppies, your Excellency.”

“I am not your ‘Excellency,’ Daniel.”

“Let the bourgeoisie ramparts be brought down by the dictates of science, Sister.”

“I think we’ve discussed this long enough –“

“Let freedom *ring*, Sister!”

Three years later the idea was accepted in college for my Sophomore Thesis. After all my work, the project got a C minus. My professor wrote across the title page, “Your interest appeared to wane after you took all the measurements. Or did you suddenly get busier?!?”

2

I certainly hoped Eileen would escape the high stakes of a You Bet Your Life marriage game at the fishpole factory when she graduated from high school. And I felt she could find a better mate elsewhere if she were able to work in a more sophisticated environment. I knew she could

never marry me. And frankly that was OK. At age eleven, I wanted to enjoy being with her and I simply wanted to end this anger that seemed to exist between the two of us. I did not like being yanked around. Eileen and I had been childhood friends, then wound up hating each other. After that had come a *détente*. Then more insults from her and more anger from me. Then the dream that definitely had the feel of us as united, at least in my mind.

But the day to day change in my feelings toward her tore me up. She might call up and sweetly ask for my Mom and while waiting offer me a compliment on the shirt she saw me wearing on the city bus a few days before. I'd almost swoon at her attention. Just to know she noticed me. But she might also call and with no pretense of asking to speak with anyone tell me I really needed to do something about my pimples. I didn't have any pimples in fifth grade, but I took the insult seriously.

Out in back of her house one day while the families visited inside, she came up to me and told me only stupid boys parted their hair on the left side. I looked like an idiot, she said, and if she saw me on the street and I had not changed my part she would ignore me or point me out to strangers and laugh. She was standing directly in front of me, very close, so I was only half listening, instead marveling at her nearness. Until she struck her hands straight out and pushed me. I stumbled backward and went crashing into the bushes. I saw red.

I jumped up, cursing her and ran after her as she took off on her long legs. She wore a plaid skirt and its hem now rode up her thin thighs as she bounded away from me. Knowing she'd get away if I didn't try harder, I threw myself into a tackle like a football player and brought her down on the grass with my arms around her knees. She whirled around to try to get up but I humped up the front of her and was instantly on top of her. I pushed my knee into her.

All the nastiness was gone from her face. I saw no fear, no hate, no surprise. The absence of any emotion on her empty face rattled me and I let up a bit. She felt her opportunity and brought her knee up hard. I saw stars and rolled off onto the ground. If I could have stood up, even moved just a little, I would have found a way to kill her.

For me Eileen was probably becoming what Jung would call my *anima*, that construction my psyche formed of the female it sought, and then draped it like a costume over a real girl on which to concentrate my psycho-sexual energy. No, I didn't realize that when I was eleven years old. I was probably fifteen before it dawned on me.

Jesse arrived back from his milk shake date around eleven o'clock, burped loudly and blamed our bedroom mess squarely on me.

"And your stupid brochures," he added.

Things were now getting down to the wire. We absolutely had to start on our bedroom. If we didn't get it cleaned up to Mom's satisfaction, she threatened to close the door to the room and send Jesse and I to the movies for the evening. She'd explain to my cousins that we were sorry but we had to see the movie for school before we went back in the fall. I wouldn't get to see Eileen. Would Mom really do that? It was a lie, as I pointed out to her. Mom was an honest woman, but I guess honesty went out the window when faced with the embarrassment of our bedroom.

I squeezed into the room and decided to move the electronics workshop down to the basement. The workshop didn't consist of any real equipment. It was a cardboard box of brochures and sample lessons I had received from various correspondence schools.

I had good grades in school and was pretty impressed with myself and that's when I decided it was time to "make big bucks in electronics." Numerous correspondence schools stood by to aid me in my pursuit of higher education. Used to a free education, I had no idea they would want money. I mailed away to all of them and soon both mail boxes exploded with brochures, course catalogs and loan applications. Many of the envelopes had electrical symbols printed on them. My grandmother, who lived with us, thought these were Satanic icons and told my mother I was being sought after to join a coven. Her imagination was as overworked as mine.

Grandma answered the phone in the kitchen one night and a man asked to speak with me.

"What do you want with him?" I heard her say.

She listened to him for a few seconds as I began to slither away toward the back door in an attempted escape.

Grandma's free hand snapped out as though it was on the end of a lizard's tongue and caught my shoulder. She spun me into the crook of her elbow and held me in a headlock. Gram was an experienced child sitter and home jailer. A bit heavy handed at times, she was nonetheless in demand by the parents of unruly children..

"I don't think he's able to come to Chicago," she said into the phone.

I could hear the man ask a question.

“No, he’s not ...” she began to say and paused. “That is ... he’s not crippled at this very moment, but he certainly will be when I get off the phone.”

I didn’t spend all my time upsetting people with my use of the U.S. Mail. I had other interests. I made the liquor store a regular stop on my way home from Our Lady Of the Holy Innocents School once each week . On Friday afternoons the spirits emporium staff replaced the window displays. In with the new and out with the old. Most of the stuff did not go back to the ad agencies. Instead it was thrown out. But not while I was around. In the 1950s some of the displays made terrific toys. A miniature theatrical stage about three feet tall and constructed of poster board originally featured bottles of Gordon’s gin. I modified it by tearing a hole in the top. It became a theater for my brother’s Howdy Doody puppet.

A three foot long reasonable facsimile of the Yacht America came home on my shoulders one Friday afternoon. It too was made of lightweight poster board, which was helpful because there wasn’t much space left in the bedroom and I had no shelf on the wall for the boat. My brother and I just taped it up on the wall with the weather maps. It stayed put most of the time, but often fell down in the middle of the night and woke us up. There was no way I could squeeze it among the brochures on my dresser. My brother’s bureau was already filled to capacity with model airplanes and his rock collection, which to me didn’t appear any different from a handful of gravel, so small was each rock. I would lay them out to spell bad words and he got blamed. We weren’t allowed to use nails on the walls. So we taped the Yacht America, sleek with “Schenley’s” writ wide down the hull from stem to stern, back up on the wall and threw a dart at it for extra support. Within the letter of the law, we never received a complaint.

Mom was embarrassed the night my brother told Aunt Sue I stopped at the liquor store on Fridays after school to stock up for the weekend. Dad finally put his foot down the afternoon my friend George and I used his Radio Flyer wagon to truck home an honest-to-goodness bar from the liquor store, with a brass foot rail and teak top. All made from cardboard, of course. Constructed at half scale to fit in store windows, it was just about kid size. We set it up in the basement after my mother refused to let us put it in the dining room. I guess it didn’t match the furniture.

Then too, alcohol was getting a bad name in our household as the family began to deal with Grandma’s sister, tipsy old Great Aunt Eusebia. I still remember the Thanksgiving dinner when she fell into the bowl of mashed potatoes. She was talking a blue streak ... telling on one of her

neighbors in Oriskany ... when her elbow slipped on the table cloth and she flopped over into the bowl, coming slightly out of her seat at the table. She never stopped talking, but hauled herself up and wiped the potatoes from her face with the napkin she pulled from Dad's neck as he sat there stupefied, holding the dish of asparagus he was passing to my mother.

"Are you all right, Great Aunt?" he managed to ask Aunt Eusebia.

"I'm terribly sorry," the elderly woman answered with a slur in her voice, "but I seem to have gotten a bit clumsy lately, ever since I began to take Dr. Messerschmitt's Elixir of Life."

"Perhaps," offered my father, "you should take it only before bed."

"Oh," she said, "I'd never be able to finish a bottle each day if I waited that long."

Great Aunt Eusebia's run-in with the mashed potatoes put my father on high alert. He did agree Jesse and I could keep our kiddie bar in the cellar, but there would be no more stopping at the liquor store for future advertising displays. The place was now off limits, Dad said, and he drove there himself to tell the salesman to kick me out the next time I came in. I tried to enlist Mom's support but she stood firmly behind my father. She didn't mind the cardboard junk so much, but she did mind the mock plastic liquor bottles and cocktail glasses Jesse and I removed from the displays. They were quite life-like. My brother and I taped them on the window panes in our bedroom and the next door neighbors had quite a laugh.

Jesse and I began to make progress on our job of cleaning out the bedroom. We hauled five cardboard boxes of stuff down to the cellar. It took longer than we anticipated, because we had to wait until the kitchen was empty each time and Mom was elsewhere in the house. Had she caught us simply moving stuff to basement instead of throwing it out our little game would have been exposed.

"We're gonna have to come up with something for Dad to take to the dump," said Jesse. "Or else they'll wonder where the crap from the bedroom is going."

"Well, let's throw some of your stuff out," I said. "Your's is real junk anyway."

"It is not," he said. "I'm just about to perfect my perpetual motion machine and make millions."

"That's crazy," I said. "No one in the history of the earth has ever made such a machine. And you think some kid in Utica is gonna do it?"

"Edison invented the light bulb," he said.

"Edison was from New Jersey," I said, "not Utica."

We found boxes of Dad's ski clothing, boots, a couple of award statues, newspaper clippings and other outdoor items in the attic. We knew Dad would never use them again. Jesse transferred them to cardboard boxes the old man wouldn't recognize and I stacked them in the back hall for him to take to the dump. When a week later he realized what happened, the poor guy was beside himself with grief. Years later when I arrived to visit with him in the nursing home, he would ask me if I'd seen his ski boots and a special scarf someone had given him. I'd look terribly sorry and he'd laugh. There came a day he didn't laugh about it, when his mind began to plummet into the past.

No one laughed at my short career as an advertising salesman, when I tried to sell ad space in the Baltimore Catechism. The book of Catholic questions and answers was owned by every Catholic school boy and girl. It did not carry ads, of course, until I printed them up on my rubber type printing press and proposed to glue them on the back covers. I could fit up to five ads on the Catechism cover and reap a quick \$25.

Mr. Czurperna, the tailor and pants presser on James Street, was my first prospect.

"It's only five dollars for a 2 by 2 ad," I explained. Next I planned to call on Frank's Barber Shop, two grocers and the hardware store.

"How you gonna get these on the Catechisms?" asked Mr. Czurperna.

"The kids will glue them on their own books," I said.

"Why would they do that?" he said..

"Because at the bottom of the sheet I'll be printing Catholic jokes."

"Tell me the jokes," he said.

"I haven't made them up yet."

"It could take forever to think of anything funny about being Catholic," he said.

Mr. Czurperna said he'd take some time and think about it.

Frank the Barber's reaction was more immediate. He called Father Mahlarkey who called my father who locked my printing press up in a trunk in the attic. When only a few years later churches began to run advertising in their bulletins I felt vindicated.

Father Mahlarkey wasn't finished with me, however.

"You're going to need to perform some penance, young man, for your little larceny," he said.

"But I never actually took any money, not really, Father."

“I want you to think of something to build up the Church, some project that will take up some of your time and be a benefit to us all.”

I always wondered why there was no Block Rosary on my street, where neighbors got together to pray the Rosary out loud in a group in someone’s living room. I told Mom I’d help her start one for my penance, but she kind of looked at her shoes and then at my hair and told me to go comb it. So I asked Dad, probably the most enthusiastic Catholic on Cornhill.

"Great idea," he said, "you should start one."

So, I asked my friend George if the two of us could start a Block Rosary, but all he could think of were the girls we should invite.

“Of course, we’ll have to turn all the lights out,” he said. “That way it will be much more spiritual.”

A girl in our neighborhood named Rosie sat in the front row of my classes at school and when she heard about my quest for prayer she offered to go in the closet with me and "say whatever you want." But at eleven years old I wasn’t interested.

I suppose the idea of sex for its own sake had not captured me. Rosie didn’t interest me, but my cousin did. Eileen was of course a sexual being, but as I’ve pointed out she was much more. For example, she had been closer to me when she was eight years old and “played the little mother” to her four year old little Daniel. Yes, I remembered it. And the lunches she made me that were no more than PBJ’s and potato chips. We kept house in the tent she and her brother set up each summer in their back yard. (I always got the chore of carrying the dirty dishes into the real house.) Listening to her read from books while she played the teacher and I the student, I became interested in what she was reading for its own sake and not just for the value of the play.

Eileen became a real person to me, a friend, a confidante. I suppose part of the trouble between us began when she graduated from her play role into that of a young lady. I balked at losing her in the familiar roles of our childhood fantasy. I wondered if her annoyance with me came when I reminded her of times she wanted to forget. Otherwise, I don’t know why she began to hate me.

Maybe I should have offered Eileen penance for my transgressions, like Father Mahlarkey continued to bother me about. My Penance Project, he called it.

“Don’t forget you promised some kind of project as penance for the Catechism Caper.”

I was tired of hearing about it. Finally, I suggested a Church-wide pilgrimage to St. Lucy.

"You mean the island in the Caribbean?" he said, his eyes lighting up.

"No, Father, St. Lucy the patron saint of eyesight."

"I knew that. I went to seminary."

"For all us kids who wear glasses," I said.

"Where is her shrine?" he asked.

"I don't know. Tell everyone she was from Utica and she lived on Eagle Street."

"Daniel, that's not the truth. We can't do that."

"Ask for ten dollars from each family," I said. "Call it a Special Injunction for the Expiation of Cataracts."

"Ten dollars?" he said.

"Times 400 families is four thousand dollars. Skim twenty percent off the top for your expenses and I'll take just \$25."

"There is indeed that old convent on Eagle Street"

3

Just before the year when my interests turned to social activities and girls, one final foray into the world of free offers through the mail led me to more durable goods.

A magazine ad promised a career with ample compensation and exciting work as a fire extinguisher salesman. Everyone needed this product, so it would be very easy to sell and the work could be pursued part time. That was just right for me, having to spend most of my day in Sister Purgatorious' fifth grade classroom. Here was my chance to outpace my older brother's income from his paper route. I planned my sales pitch and even my clothing to help me look older. The ad emphasized getting started right away. Older or younger salesmen were encouraged to apply. You couldn't start too early, the ad said. However, an eleven year old fire extinguisher salesman wearing a Spike Jones suit and his uncle's discarded fedora may have set a record.

To get started all I needed to do was fill out an application and in two weeks the U.S. Mail would deliver the sample fire extinguisher. Plain old discretion convinced me to say nothing of this to Mom or Dad. Plus, my older brother advised me of a tactic gleaned from his on-going teen age experience: He called it Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

It was pretty warm that July as I waited for the mail man to bring my equipment. As a future salesman I planned to answer his call like a grown-up, wearing my suit and a school shirt that still had most of its buttons. I needed to retrieve my tie from its summer job of hanging a plastic model of a jet fighter from the light fixture in our bedroom. I hoped I was strong enough to grab hold and carry the fire extinguisher to a hiding place when poor old Mr. Lynch the mailman dragged the thing to our door. I'd seen them on the walls at school and, unlike modern devices, they were twice as large in the 1950s and made of thick brass plating. They were very heavy.

I missed Mr. Lynch the day he brought my free offer, but found a small package sitting below the mail box when I got home. Inside was a six inch high plastic replica of a fire extinguisher. I was disappointed, of course, but relieved to no longer agonize over where to hide a seventy pound fire extinguisher. Fitting it under my bed among the lumber pieces I was collecting for a tree fort might not have worked out.

Thinking about how to use a fake tiny fire extinguisher to its full advantage, I realized research would be necessary. We had the remains of a 14 volume encyclopedia in our bedroom and I often consulted it, but it was never easy to use. Most of the volumes were employed as structural support for projects like my brother's perpetual motion machine or under the front of the tropical fish tank to keep it from tumbling out of the old easy chair Grandma had given us. Every time I wanted to look up anything on the Medieval period we were studying in school, I had to pry Volume 7 from under the broken back leg of my bed against the wall. In the only fight Jesse had ever won, my bed did not fare well. But although many of the books were put to good use in ways the publisher had never intended, volumes in frequent demand dealing with sex, explosives and the paranormal were always kept handy on the discarded washtub we flipped over and used as a desk. I found an article that said extinguishers were at one time powered with nothing but baking soda and water. The little plastic model looked like it would hold pressure if I forced a sink stopper in the top.

When the kitchen was empty, I loaded the miniature with baking soda, poured water in from the sink and quickly jammed the stopper on. Grandma used baking soda all the time and

although I expected a little fizzing, I had no idea how explosive it could be when combined with water. In any case, I reasoned it would make an excellent demo to use in all the grocery stores I planned to visit where I'd make a killing.

My parents were out and Grandma was safely asleep, taking a nap in her bedroom off the kitchen. I'd already written a sales pitch, so I stepped to the kitchen table and began my spiel to an imaginary green grocer across an imaginary counter. I had a good presentation, but without any pizzazz since my older brother talked me out of lighting up a sheet of newspaper in front of the prospect in his store. So for emphasis when I declaimed, "And what will save your business from the eternal fires of happenstance?" I slammed the model extinguisher down on the table surface.

POW! The stopper shot up to the ceiling and shattered the glass shade on the light fixture. The light bulb exploded and all the lights throughout the house went out. The errant model extinguisher flew from my hand into the clock on the stove, bounced back and took off on a powerful line drive right through the kitchen window and out into the driveway as if it were headed for Neptune. Slivers of glass fell from the ceiling and the window pane was now no more than a gaping hole. Slippery baking soda solution had splattered all over the table and chairs, stove and counter tops..

Grandma came running out of her bedroom, hand to her throat, her face approaching purple. Gasping, she surveyed the launch site, rolled her eyes and sat down on a wet chair. She slid sideways, almost off the seat, but caught hold of the table and hung on for dear life. I glanced at the light fixture and the window. Close to tears, I said. "What'll I ever do?"

As she tried to catch her breath, between gasps she croaked, "You could always join a coven."

"I'm sure I'd need a letter from my mother or someone."

"Get me a pen," she said.

I ran into Eileen at the library about two weeks before the family picnic and for a wonderful twenty minutes we did not spar or insult each other. In the little room off the main foyer my cousin and I spoke of a book of poetry she was reading. I was thrilled with her interpretation of the lines she read to me and knew there was so much I could learn from her when we met if we could refrain from killing each other.

There was simply no one else in the universe with whom I could ever discuss poetry. An eleven year old boy in 1954 was about to enter the John Wayne machine of teen age boy production. We would later hear the great man reach his poetic peak on Rowan and Martin's Laugh In in 1969: "The sky is blue, the grass is green. Get off your ass and join the Marines." As a boy child and later a man, I never wanted to dwell too much on my feminine side, but neither was I about to completely scrape it out of my soul with a potato peeler.

I couldn't count the many ways Eileen meant to me at the time, but as I look back it's obvious she represented more than my own personal sex symbol. She resonated that part of me that would soon push itself forward as I approached my teenage years and began to deal with choices between my dominant male side ... that part of me that ordered myself to do the tough jobs of life ... and my feminine side that wanted to follow intuition and listen to what I could not see. It wanted to draw castles in the air when my masculine side insisted on digging a hole in the ground and laying up the stones.

Even at eleven years old, I knew I didn't want to be Eileen, or even be like her. And I didn't want to marry her. I just wanted to listen to what she had to say. This was the older girl I had rough-housed, chased through the house with rage in my heart and tears in my eyes, jumped down on top of and kneed her where I knew it would hurt, unsuccessfully tried to strangle and let her beat the shit out of me. Well, I didn't let her. She was stronger than me. I could never beat her. I could never have her. I warned you ... this is a terrible love story.

So Jesse and I waved goodbye to Dad on the day of the picnic while he unknowingly toted boxes of his ski keepsakes to the dump. I was looking forward to seeing Eileen that night because I hoped to resume our détente. I had been so mad yesterday. But there was the dream last night and how it affected me.

Eileen and her family showed up late in the afternoon just as Jesse and I finished helping Dad to set up the tables. She brought Leonard along. I was quite put out that she would bring another boy to my picnic, even though it wasn't my picnic.

We youngsters drifted off toward the back of the yard while the adults began to cook the hot dogs and hamburgers and the quasi-adults like bachelor Uncle Pat began to suck up the beer. Paddy, as we called him, belonged to the Beer Drinkers of America and had a large bumper sticker (BDA Forever!) on his car which put him in the crosshairs of every policeman in the

county after ten o'clock at night. This was probably fortunate for him, because he was usually arrested earlier rather than later, before he killed anyone and before his blood alcohol level rose and qualified him for a felony.

Leonard reached for Eileen's hand to hold, but she withdrew hers and put it in the pocket of her jeans. I looked up at the tall teenage boy who was ignoring me. He was ignoring everyone.

"Are you the golfer?" I said. He didn't answer.

"Are you the Protestant golfer?" I asked again.

"Who's this little shithead?" he asked of no one in particular.

"Daniel, be quiet," Eileen hissed at me.

"I'm as Catholic as your Miraculous Medal," said Leonard.

"He's not who you think," Eileen said to me.

"Oh," I said. "I just thought with a name like Leonard he must be Protestant."

"What you are talking about, creep," said Leonard.

"Leonard is not a saint's name ... like Joseph or James," I said.

"Daniel, be quiet," said Eileen again.

"A Catholic couple," I lectured, "married under the auspices of Holy Mother The Church, would give their son only a saint's name."

"Can I hit him?" Leonard asked Eileen.

"No, Leonard," said Eileen. "Daniel thinks you're the boy I went golfing with a couple of weeks ago."

"Protestant? You went golfing with Larry?" said Leonard

"Yes," said Eileen.

"Larry with that screwy birthmark on his butt?"

"I certainly wouldn't know about that," said Eileen, quickly coloring, a deep red flush spreading across her face.

"You don't play basketball in the gym with him."

"No, I certainly don't."

I was losing control of the situation. We were walking now, Leonard beside and a little ahead of me, Eileen behind me and not quite abreast of the boy.

"So ..." I said. "why do you have a Protestant name, Len-burger?"

“Step a little closer, bent head,” said Leonard, “so I can rip your heart out of your chest without making a mess on your parents’ lawn.”

Eileen ... almost a foot taller than me ... moved up behind me, reached out and pulled me backwards against her, my head tucking under her chin.

“Now, stop it, Leonard,” she said.

I stood there transfixed by the scent of her. It completely enveloped my head. I had died and gone to heaven. If I had it all visualized correctly, the back of my head was safely nestled on her breast, or as close as I was ever going to get to it. One can’t feel very much with the back of the head and she was flat-chested anyway, so I may as well have been trying to be intimate with stop sign. Still, the proximity to her was exhilarating.

Leonard apologized ... to her. Eileen dropped her arms and pushed me away from her. I went reluctantly.

In the library at school the following week I learned of the Catholic Saint Leonard of Noblac, a Frankish nobleman serving Clovis the First who secured freedom for war prisoners and ended his life as a hermit in the forest. Had he started out life in more austere circumstances we would have never heard of him. In that era, people born poor never got to be saints. Few beggars had publicists.

The last time I saw the devil girl before she completely grew up was again at the public library when I was in high school. She had graduated and was working in a dental office. Like all women in medical offices at the time, she wore a white uniform. She looked like an angel. It was late in the afternoon and she must have come to the library from work, possibly stopping on her way home to check out a book. She sat at the end of a long table in the reading room. The late afternoon sun on that early autumn day shown through the window on her, painting gold stripes across her uniform and lighting up little red sparks in her auburn hair. She looked up as soon as I entered the room and she would have seen the surprise on my face. But her eyes returned to the book which lay flat on the surface of the oak table. I didn’t sit near her, but instead I took the seat at the opposite end of the table. I sat down, opened my bag and got out what I needed to do my homework.

“What are you studying?” she asked.

“Sister Mary Eunice has us reading Coleridge,” I said.

“A nut case,” she said. “You should be reading John Donne.”

“I’ll ask if he’s on our reading list.”

“I meant *you* should be reading him,” she said.

“Any reason for that, Eileen?”

She stood, closed her book, picked up her purse and walked down to my end of the table. I started to get up. I hadn’t seen her in a while and I wanted to hug her.

She put her hand firmly on my shoulder and spoke softly. “Don’t get up. I would be tempted to knee you.”

“Why? What have I done?”

“Nothing,” she said. “And you never will.”

So quickly that I had no time to react, Eileen bent and placed the lightest kiss on my lips, turned toward the door and was gone.

I got up and went to the window. She walked across the lawn with a young man, holding hands. They got into a small foreign convertible and drove off. She married him the following spring, just before I graduated and went off to college.

I surprised her on her wedding day as her father brought her down the aisle of the little church no more than a mile from her girlhood home. My uncle spotted me first, and then the bridegroom saw me. Eileen was the last to notice me standing next to the priest waiting for them. I had wangled my way into the scene as a surprise by trading places with a friend from school who was the scheduled altar boy.

Later at the wedding reception I thought someone in her family would speak of their pleasant surprise to find me waiting for the couple on the altar, but they never mentioned it. It’s true the altar server (today a boy or girl) does not actively participate in the wedding ceremony. He just holds the miscellaneous materials of a Mass and a Marriage and passes them to the priest when requested. Still, to be right there on the dock, so to speak, to wish them bon voyage on their ship of marriage was to me full of symbolism. Evidently it meant little to them. And as I write these words from the perspective of adulthood now, I can see their point. Which was probably something like, “when will this kid just go away?”

I’ll admit the wedding reception was indeed a nice party as well as a get-together for some of us who hadn’t seen each other in a few years. Even Leonard was there, he now a seminarian on

his way to the priesthood and serving an internship in another nearby parish. He seemed the type, frankly. Jesse showed up for a little while with his little girl friend in her training bra. Mom spent a lot of time in the restaurant's kitchen trying to give the help orders. Dad parked outside on the grass. Great Aunt Eusebia came with her AA sponsor. Father Mahlarkey sent his best from the U.S.S. Golden Age where it was unclear whether he was retired as a chaplain or a dance instructor. In any event, he lives on the boat now in perpetual sunshine and relaxation.

My old school friend George, nee Homo Erection, was present by virtue of his job as a bus boy for the restaurant. Mr. Lynch has sadly passed on, finally weighted down by all that junk mail. The coat check girl winked at me and I wondered if it was Rosie. I should have at least asked if I could come in the closet with her.

I did break my silence and complain a little to Grandma, now on her last leg in this world, about my not being the center of attention at someone else's wedding.

"You wonder," she asked, "why they didn't find you popping up on the altar a pleasant surprise? You don't remember tearing the gutters off their house when you and her brother invented the flying machine—"

--It was his idea," I said.

—that couldn't fly?"

"He pulled the wrong rope," I said.

--and couldn't float?

"You mean when we landed in the neighbor's pool?"

"And tore up the pool liner. You uncle had to pay seven hundred dollars to replace it."

"I was only twelve years old," I said in my defense.

"And now you're eighteen," she said. "You've gone and done what they worried about all along."

"What's that?"

"Survived your childhood," she said. "Now they're really worried."