

Nowhere

a memoir

I've been known to cringe when I hear friends speak of their so-called recovery from Catholicism, or how they survived the nuns for eight or twelve years of Catholic schools. And while I join in the merriment of making fun of all the characters ... the irritable nuns and crusty old priests ... I remember most of these unsung workers in the vineyard as selfless and caring. But yes, sometimes pissy and arrogant. And I realize that I saw these men and women through the eyes of a child, as I also saw much of the patently ridiculous religiosity some of them tried to teach us.

I still see fellow hostages from time to time who were interned with me at Our Lady of Lourdes School in South Utica during the Cold War. Ike was president, Senator McCarthy was constantly in the news and the nuns were holding us prisoners at O.L.O.L. In truth, I have good memories of the school, but every time I hear its name, one thought comes to mind. Our Lady of Lourdes was hard to say with your mouth full.

O.L.O.L was the school's abbreviation, of course, but it was also the sound that came out when you tried to say Our Lady of Lourdes around a baloney sandwich stuck to the roof of your mouth. That's all I remember learning on the first day of fourth grade, which began when I was dropped off by my uncle and wished the best of luck in my new school. Uncle Dan said he'd be back at 3 o'clock to get me, but I hoped he'd be off the streets by then, napping the afternoon away after a few hours standing at the bar through brunch and then lunch at the Uptown Grille, located ten blocks away. I'm sure it was difficult for my mother to allow Uncle Dan to take me to my first day in a new school, but Dad was at work and Mom was still sick with the flu.

In any event, it was good to be home, back in a Catholic school. True, I was a little bigot, a prissy Catholic militant in the making perhaps, but I felt like I had just been delivered from Purgatory.

Three months earlier, in the fall of 1952, Dad had the bright idea of becoming a homeowner. No one in our family ever had the money to buy a home. But now that wages were rising after the war, a smart real estate developer named Buzzy Cranston lined up a few local

banks to offer mortgages with low down payments. Buzzy, who the year before had been a refrigerator salesman, bought a farmed out rocky field halfway between New York Mills and East Podunk, where he erected tiny prefabricated ranch houses on slabs of concrete. After our inspection of the sales model, my mother wondered if the dwarf house would be large enough, since Grandma had recently come to live with us.

"We'll have to put all three boys in one bedroom," she said.

"They'll fit," said my father.

"Grandma will have to take the tiny room," she said. "She'll have to get rid of some furniture."

"I'll help," said my father.

Dad's enthusiasm was unquenchable. His eyes darted from the partly built houses to the piles of dirt, to the field of hay, an excited grin on his face. He looked forward to a life in the country.

"We can't lose," he told Mom. "Buzzy will take it back in 90 days if we don't like it," he said. "That's the deal."

"I think I'd like it," said Mom.

"What's not to like?" said Dad

Well, to begin with, Pine Nut Circle, our new neighborhood, might be styled country living in the whimsical brochure, but it more closely resembled camping. If you fired a rocket from the middle of the housing development to any point on the compass, the payload would come down somewhere in the vast countryside populated only by cows and people who made their living raising them. On our first visit, I saw only one car on the narrow lane during the last mile or two of the trip. After what took forever, Dad pulled the Ford off into the grass and came to a stop, cheerily calling, "We're here." Out the window we could see a handful of half built houses in a hay field. Mechanical monsters hissed and groaned down a muddy path Buzzy had named "Monticello Avenue," Mounds of dirt and mud were being heaved up as if in readiness for a replay of trench warfare.

Grandma crawled out of the back seat, looked around and began to mumble to herself. She would later describe the scene to her cousin Mabel as "what it must be like living on the face of the moon ... in February."

Everyone was excited about the move but me and Grandma. I liked my neighborhood and enjoyed

walking to school in the morning, sitting in my miniscule garden in the spring and enjoying all the conveniences of living in the Cornhill section of the city. Plus, I'd miss the little girl in my class at Blessed Sacrament School who sat in the fourth desk back in the third row. At age nine, I could depend only on my feelings to tell me this move would come to no good, but I also had Grandma's opinion to go by. And for all her peculiarities, when it came to disasters, most of the time the old woman called the ball in the right pocket.

Life on Pine Nut Circle turned out to be very different from city living. For one thing, no public transportation ever came our way. And there was no mail delivery. Letters and packages could be picked up only at the Post Office in the village before the 5:00 p.m. closing time. Dad didn't get out of work in Utica until after five, so we got our mail only when we could pick it up on Saturday, a full week's worth. I remember the extra wait for a secret decoder ring to arrive. It wrote underwater and I mailed away for it using the coupon cut from the back of a corn flakes box.

The promised garbage removal never materialized, either, and instead the men in the neighborhood all met together on Saturday morning to pick up everyone's refuse, drink beer, haul the garbage to the dump in someone's open trailer, drink more beer, come home acting silly and take naps. The womenfolk turned surly by Saturday evening.

As autumn came upon us, it was apparent the little furnace was too small for the little house. It was a high efficiency unit, we were told, and you couldn't get warm standing near it like the old octopus coal furnace back in Utica. Turns out you also couldn't get warm cranking the thermostat up to a hundred. I didn't mind sitting around on cold evenings wearing two sweaters while watching television, but to read a book I had to take my hands out of my pockets and wear gloves. Had we been back in the city with a broken furnace, we would have found excuses to visit neighbors or relatives and take advantage of the free heat. But on Pine Nut Circle, a warm room wouldn't occur again until July.

Dad took us out to the movies a few times to get warm, but funds were scarce and he couldn't keep that up. Besides, Grandma was always a problem at the theater. She would sit tsk'ing or crying or laughing uproariously when she thought something was funny that no one else in the theater found amusing. An entire platoon of U.S. Marines being wiped out at Guadalcanal would somehow tickle her funny bone when the sergeant barked out an order with a southern accent.

We were all sorry she went with us to see the movie "Destination Moon." Very impressionable, the old woman believed just about everything she saw on the silver screen. All the way home after the movie, she could be heard in the back seat muttering, "How could they just leave him behind there on the moon? There's nothing to eat!" And after she saw "The Sands of Iwo Jima" she had wanted to buy War Bonds, even though it was six years after the war ended.

Once winter set in on our windswept prairie ... the last week in September ... life took on the flavor of a snow-bound military base, just like the one in the 1950's classic film Ice Station Zebra. Trying to scare my 4 year old little brother, my main form of amusement at the time, I told him to never walk near the edge of the ice pack or he'd be lost forever in the Arctic Sea. When he refused to go outside the next morning and told my mother why, I was labeled a troublemaker and would have been sent to my room, but I didn't have one. I shared a bedroom with my older brother and he'd just negotiated an hour for himself in there to play his Les Paul and Don Cornell records on the small phonograph we shared.

In the village, my brothers and I marched into a large brick school building and found the principal's office. Ordered to wait and sit on polished wooden chairs in our winter coats near a radiator, the stifling office felt like an oven. I saw myself as one of those two guys in the Bible who was put into the furnace by a nasty King. They survived by some miracle. I wondered if I would. It was the first time in my memory I had been forced to go somewhere I did not want to go. I was lost and anxious. I had begun to have trouble falling asleep at night. Through the transom over the door, I heard the principal's gruff voice bark out an order to someone and I was ready to run out of the office and back down the stairs and out into the street. Maybe I could find the Police Department and tell them I was lost and they'd take me home. Just then we were called into the office. We found The Principal wearing a three piece suit that had evidently been serving him well since before the war. He seemed about as interested in our arrival as he might have been had a toboggan salesman dropped by.

We were about to have a personal encounter with the unholy, the profane world of non-Catholics known as Public Schools. Attendance at this institution mounted a terrific assault on my long held philosophy that a basic goodness pervaded the world and the people in it. Life as a sheltered Catholic boy was coming to an end..

My school mates swore in public and told dirty jokes within 5 miles of the school grounds. They were disrespectful to the teachers. Had they tried any of their antics on the nuns back home at Blessed

Sacramento, they would have landed in an orthopedic ward. Many of my new mates didn't even care about their schoolwork, nor how well they did on tests and quizzes. When I explained to a classmate that the "J.M.J" I had written at the top of my test paper stood for Jesus, Mary and Joseph and invoked their blessing on my work, she looked at me as though I was a member of a cult. Now that I think of it, the Irish schoolboy version of American Catholicism in the 1950's was nothing if not a cult.

Back at Ice Station Zebra, isolation continued to flank us. Once Dad left for work each morning in the family car, we were all marooned for the next 9 hours if school wasn't in session. On school days, which began to feel like holidays, the arrival of the school bus in the morning was greeted like a long awaited Coast Guard cutter steaming up to rescue drowning sailors. Housewives and live-in grandmothers bribed the bus driver to take them into town along with the kids. But I hated that damned bus, so full of raucous children that it gave me a headache.

Halfway through the winter, Dad was becoming disenchanted with our new home on a frozen slab of concrete, ten miles from Utica and seemingly not too far south of Iceland. The tiny ranch house was indeed small, and didn't easily accommodate 3 adults and 3 growing boys. Outside among the still heaped up mounds of dirt, most of the folks living around the circle seemed strange and secretive. Grandma had begun to keep a list of suspicious neighbors for Senator McCarthy, who she wrote to monthly.

Myself, I missed Italians. They had constituted half the population of the neighborhood we had forsaken in Utica. For some reason, they were not well represented out here on the tundra. Oh, for those golden warm days on Cornhill, with the smell of tomato sauce cooking, black olives on a plate spattered with oil, vino flowing across festive tables at the Villa Restaurant on Leah St and down on Taylor Avenue at Audette's Ristorante. Lovers sang O Sole Mio and Italian smiles lived on the faces of everyone, no matter what their nationality. Just to see the vegetable man sleeping in his horse drawn wagon or the rag man singing his way up from Eagle St. Or to hear Mrs. Nicotera lean out from her house and scream at her 7 children playing in the street, finally sighing aloud, "Ooo fah!" and slamming down the window. I couldn't imagine that Tuscany was any better.

But I put on a happy face and braved the rigors of a future on the ice. At least we had new surroundings to explore. On weekends, all the neighborhood kids would walk up the road searching for igloos and polar bears.

My baby brother wound up sharing the tiny room with my grandmother. He always said he was glad he was too young to remember bunking in with his first roommate. My father's commute to work in the morning was bothersome, too. He worried about the car not starting, and if it did, he worried about the coming winter and snow covered roads. My mother missed running down to the corner for a loaf of bread. And she found annoying having to count the number of telephone rings which would tell us if the call was for us or one of 12 other neighbors. She'd lose track after five or six rings, and we were number eleven. Heat had to be delivered in the form of fuel oil. Once it didn't arrive on time and Dad had to drain all the plumbing for the night and drive us through a snow storm over to our Aunt Toot's house. But especially grievous to my father was that we boys couldn't go to a Catholic school, something he felt was his solemn obligation to provide for us, and something I needed for my feeling of well being.

All of this soon proved too much for Dad's limited sense of adventure. He stopped by the Pine Nut Builder's office on a Saturday morning and gave back the house. We had to be out by the end of December. My mother wanted to be settled somewhere by Christmas. We moved on Christmas Eve, landing in West Utica, a mile's walk to O.L.O.L

Even though the billboard on Whitesboro Street proclaiming "Welcome To Utica" was plainly visible as we snuck back into the city on the day before Christmas, I would have been forgiven for entertaining the possibility that we had landed in Post War Europe or a Polish Immigration Roundup. Behind Faxton Hospital, as the terrain ran downhill toward Lincoln Avenue, the only neighbors who spoke English did so with difficulty. We had dropped down into a demilitarized zone between the mostly Irish parish of Our Lady of Lourdes and the White Eagle environs of the Polish Holy Trinity Church. Because we were technically in Holy Trinity territory, and because Dad was a stickler for following the rules, he set out to apply for our admission to the Holy Trinity Parish School. But when he could find no nun with a good command of the English language ... so he said ... he high-tailed it up to Lourdes and begged sanctuary for his sons. O.L.O.L quickly took us in and happily accepted Dad's tuition check.

My feelings upon arriving at the school on Barton Ave. wouldn't have been much different than those of the Pope coming home to the Vatican. The building was constructed in the architectural style of a 12th century castle and fortress that Ivanhoe would have been proud to own, and I'm sure he would have sworn allegiance to Rome on the spot had he been offered the keys. The hallways were darkened in monastic reverence and the

entire building smelled of sacred candles. Statues of the saints, wall mounted crucifixes with palm branches affixed all brought back peace in my soul. All the kids were in school uniforms and the nuns softly padded the halls in their medieval regalia. God was in his heaven as the sun shone bright (figuratively) and everything was Roman Catholic all over the place.

At Lourdes, I quickly became lost in an ocean of children. Fourth grade teacher Sister Clementia managed 56 children in a classroom built for 26. That's not a typo; fruitful Catholic parents, heeding their Church, were hard at it procreating in those years and the schools were bursting at the seams. Mothers were worn out and fathers worried about money, but the Bishops were evidently happy.

Up until I lost it years ago, I had a photo of our fourth grade class, Sister Clementia sitting up front near the camera and myself way back on the horizon of the fifth row, my finger just coming out of my nose. The nun looks pensive as she sits there under a huge Flying Nun hat called the Cornet, dressed as a typical nun of the time in floor length garb that might have been considered a cute little outfit in 15th Century France. She may be wondering if a jungle outpost in Borneo would be more to her liking than bronco-busting tens of boys and girls each day.

I think the photo may have been taken on a Tuesday, and if it was the third Tuesday morning of the month, Father Fudzniak, who absolutely hated children and cared even less for nuns, was probably then walking from the rectory over to the school to preach at us. Without asking, Father always chose his topic with no regard to what we were studying in our Religion lessons. He might lecture us nine year olds on the evils of birth control or he might summarize the major points of the Third Lateran Council, which took place about two hundred years before Sister Clementia's clothes were designed. Father Fuddy was an overly serious man, having lost his sense of humor in the war while assigned to an outpost in Borneo.

Still, I was relieved to be back in a more militarily crisp environment where the order of the day was set by the nuns rather than the ping-pong precepts of modern child psychology. Little man that I was, I appreciated someone being in control. Whatever weapons were used rulers or blackboard pointers or "the back of me hand"..... it didn't matter to me. What did matter was a predictable environment I could enjoy for six hours each weekday.

At lunch time, we were all sent to the basement to eat, a symbolism that was not lost on me. Students up through the fourth grade ate in a low ceiling room filled with small tables seating eight, with tiny little

chairs that were too small for the smallest of us. Light streamed in the high cellar windows and outside I could see telephone wires that I pretended was the barbed wire fence I'd seen in the prison camp movie, "Stalag 17." Swaggering forth like a young William Holden, I approached the black attired SS prison guard (Sister Mary Gertrude) and asked if I could join my fellow prisoners outside on the stalag's parade ground. She grabbed the brim of my hat and pulled it down over my eyes, then spun me around twice and pointed me toward the door, just like Pin The Tail On The Donkey. Staggering forward like I had been on rice-only rations for six weeks, I proceeded out through the sally port. Sister Trudy would have had a good time in the Hitler Youth when she was a kid, I imagined.

I climbed the stairs from the basement and stepped out into the damp frigid air, letting my ears delight in the sound of traffic passing on Genesee St. My young soul had now been saved from the remote desolateness of a small town. Lourdes School and its environs were to me much preferred over the eerie frozen quietness of that other village. Here there was slush and cars caked in road salt. Even in winter puddles sometimes formed when the temperature peeked just above thirty two degrees. Fog abounded most days, thrilling the heart of this winterized boy. Everything was grey and wet, damp and cold. But not frozen solid and below zero, thanks be to God. Most days were pleasantly balmy in the low twenties. By the time we returned, winter's end was in the air with the temps headed toward thirty. I didn't need a thermometer; spring beckoned with the smell of melting dog poops as they began to warm up underneath the snow.

Now returned safely to my hometown, I'd had a long trip to nowhere, a scary detour on my journey upward. As I walked the mile home after school, slogging through slush covered sidewalks, I could not but thank all the saints in heaven that I no longer had to ride a school bus home across the tundra and put up with all those noisy and profane children. I could walk home by myself, and when I arrived, feet and gloves and seat of my britches wet with the slop of winter in the city, I would head for the cellar and change into dry clothing while standing before the immense roaring octopus coal furnace, the winter god of my childhood. It was good to be home.

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