

The Old Priest

from *The Old Priest* by Anthony Wallace

**winner of the 2013 Drue Heinz Literature Prize
from the University of Pittsburgh Press**

1

The old priest is a Jesuit, brainy and fey. He smokes Pall Malls fixed bayonet-style in an onyx and silver cigarette holder and crosses his legs at the knee. He tells stories as if he is being interviewed for a Public Television special on old priests. A small, guttural chuckle serves to launch one of his very interesting anecdotes: it's a kind of punctuation that serves as transition, like a colon or dash. You bring your latest girl to see the old priest, you always bring your latest girl to see the old priest.

"Mildred, what are you doing with this rascal?" asks the old priest, ordering a Tanqueray martini "standing up."

Mildred squeals at the idea of you as a rascal. Everything is very jolly. The old priest's hair is the same shade of silver as the end of the cigarette holder, a prop which fascinates Mildred.

"This cigarette holder was given to me by the mother of one of my students," explains the old priest. "She didn't think priests should smoke non-filtered cigarettes, and she objected to the bit of tobacco that became occasionally lodged in the corner of my mouth. Later that same mother, emboldened by one too many *grappas*, tried to seduce me in the sitting room of the country house where I was to spend the weekend."

Your latest girl is rapt at the stories of the old priest, they are always rapt, the old priest does half the seducing for you.

Back in the room Mildred says, "That's some old priest. Is he gay?"

"What do you think?"

"I think all you Catholic school boys seem gay."

Another girl and the old priest, always ready to be bought lunch or dinner. He smokes, drinks, laughs, tells stories—makes people feel as though they are participating in the history of their own time. The old priest is a monologist of the old school, tossing brightly colored balls into the air and keeping them aloft.

"Another time, we were in Madrid and wanted to get out and see the night life," recalls the old priest. "We concocted a story that the American Ambassador had invited us to dinner, but the Prefect said that in order to receive permission to leave the house after nine we'd need the permission of the Provincial. The Provincial said, 'If the American Ambassador really wants to see you, he'll invite you to lunch.' My friend Arthur Ramsay thought we were sunk right then and there, but I convinced him that we should go through with it anyway, even though it was against the rules. We danced

the Flamenco till three.”

Everything is very jolly. Your girl is from the South this time and refers to the old priest as a “sexy old queen.”

Time and again you meet the old priest. Years fly by the way they used to mark time in the movies: wind and leaves, the corny tearing of the calendar page, the plangent tolling of Time’s own iron bell. You either bring a girl along or, if you’re depressed, you go by yourself and expect to be consoled.

“I want to write but I can’t write,” you say.

“It will come,” says the old priest. “Give it time. But the pattern is that you should have written your first stories by now. You’re a bit behind schedule, you know.”

You can almost convince yourself that he knows what he’s talking about. He speaks with the authority of a grammar book and is relentlessly optimistic.

2

Life takes you through a couple of twists and turns, you do things you never thought you’d be doing. You live in a rooming house, you drink a lot in the evening, you work a day job as a blackjack dealer in Atlantic City. You wear a white tuxedo, red bow tie and matching red buttons, which your fellow croupiers refer to as “the clown suit.” Nobody, not even you, can believe it.

In summer the old priest comes for a visit. You shake martinis in your third floor efficiency. The heat is stifling, oppressive. Through the walls wafts the scent of frying meat, and a loud conversation that goes on and on.

“This is a house of failure,” the old priest says, jaunty in his white polo shirt and Madras shorts.

“It’s experience.”

“So is being bitten by a shark.”

“I need a membership card that provides entrée into the historical moment.”

“Dear child, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” the old priest says, pausing for the transitional laugh. “When I was your age I was going to the bullfights in Spain. We actually saw Ava Gardner one time. I went beforehand to ask for permission but the Prefect said, ‘Jesuits don’t go to bullfights.’ When we got there the place was crawling with Jesuits in mufti.”

In your spare time you read Rimbaud and crave poetry, mystery, illumination. You find an old fish tank somebody has left at the curb and in it, according to the directions of a mail order kit, you raise a crop of hallucinogenic mushrooms. Two weeks before Christmas you visit the old priest at his sister’s house on Cape Cod, in Wellfleet, where you plan to spend the weekend breaking into the ancient mysteries. Poetry, mystery, illumination: you’d like to get to the bottom of it.

The old priest says to you as you’re unpacking: “Be careful not to leave anything behind. A friend of mine left a pair of black briefs in the guest

bed and now my sister says she is beginning to believe everything she reads in the papers."

"Just from a pair of black briefs?"

"Well, apparently he had *Booty on Board* embroidered into the rather narrow seat. Oh dear heavens!"

You drink a pitcher of martinis accompanied by three slices of American cheese and a box of stale Ritz crackers. For dessert you chew the mushrooms, one or two at a time, unsure of the proper dosage.

"This is a fine delicacy," the old priest says. "It's a first-rate cocktail snack."

You nibble the mushrooms, dried and crumbling in your fingertips. The pattern and texture of the desiccated stems and tiny caps become increasingly interesting until, without much warning, the old priest has sprouted tufts of white hair on his face, and his pinkish hands also have sprouted coarse white hair and the hard dull grayish-black points of two cleft hooves.

"Don't look now, but you've turned into a goat-man," you say to the old priest.

"Is that true?" wonders the old priest, lighting a cigarette. Even as a goat-man the old priest has not lost his taste for tobacco.

"Just look for yourself in the mirror."

The old priest stands to look into the gilt-framed mirror that hangs full length above the red velveteen sofa.

"I suppose I have," remarks the old priest, vaguely amused. "Is it permanent, do you think?"

"For the next eight hours or so, anyway." You laugh. The idea of the old priest transformed into a goat-man is hilarious.

He examines himself in the glass, puffing his cheeks and shaking his oversized head. When the cigarette is finished he shakes the cigarette holder and the final few filaments of burning tobacco fall to the floor. He stands before the glass with the empty cigarette holder and begins to wave it in front of him in frantic, cross-like motions.

"You take life, but you can't give it," says the old priest, his hand trembling but his eyes fixed steadily forward. "Gangsters," he says, "Cosmic bully-boys—"

"Who are you talking to?" you ask.

"I have to chase these demons away," is his response, but after a few more swipes he sits down on the sofa, places the cigarette holder in his shirt pocket, and laces his fingers together. "We're not supposed to see this," says the old priest, plainly worried. "This is a sin we're committing."

"It's just in our heads," you laugh. "It's the power of the human imagination."

That's what you intend to say but it comes out, *It's the power of the fungus humungination.*

"Oh no it's not," is his answer. "It's even worse for you if you think it is."

He gets down on all fours and in the process the cigarette holder drops suddenly to the ground. He clatters goat-like back and forth in front of you on his knuckles and knees, shaking the walls and knocking his sister's knick-knacks from the mildewed shelves.

"Look what you've done to me now," says the old priest, goat-like and forlorn. "Look what you've done to me now."

"Where's your God now?" you say, laughing, in your best Edward G. Robinson, then are immediately sorry to have said it. You are sorry to have turned the old priest into a goat-man. You are sorry to have spoiled his religion, to have brought him pagan-low. You are sorry for everything. This is something you've been taught, something that will not go away. You are sorry for *everything*.

The Baltimore Catechism: "O my God I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins, because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin."

"This is a bad trip," you say, then add that it is his religion, not a handful of dried mushrooms, that makes one sorry about everything. Then you are sorry for that, too.

3

You find a new girl, it's been awhile, things have cooled a bit between you and the old priest since the magic mushroom incident. The three of you get dressed up and go to the best French restaurant in Boston, where the old priest is taking a year's sabbatical at a Jesuit house in Cambridge. He is wearing his Roman collar and all signs of the goat-man have vanished. He looks a bit less puffed around the edges, and his sea-glass eyes are sparkling. It occurs to you that the old priest has been consigned to a drying-out facility.

"Wine," the old priest says, lifting a full glass of Nuits St. George. "Bringer of *ekstasis* to pagans and Christians alike."

"What's *ekstasis*?" your new girl Ruthie wants to know.

"Well, it's a bit different than ecstasy as you probably know the definition of that word," explains the old priest, and it occurs to you that he is making a pronounced effort not to leer. "It's the state, literally, of standing outside oneself. Of being able to step outside the prison of one's own body, if only for a moment or two. Isn't that what everybody wants, after all?"

"I guess I've never thought about it that way," your new girl admits, leaning in.

"I dined with a Swiss Jesuit one time," the old priest chuckles, passing Ruthie a bite of his Veal Oscar. "He ordered beef and I ordered duck. I wanted a taste of his beef and do you know what he said? He said, 'If you wanted beef, you should have ordered it, and if I wanted duck, I would have ordered it.' Oh dear heavens! The Swiss, well, you know what Harry Lime

says: the great product of their civilization, the cuckoo clock!"

"Were you in Europe a long time?" Ruthie asks.

"Seven years. I wanted to stay and earn a doctorate at the Sorbonne, but the Society of Jesus had other plans for me. I came back to Washington just in time for the Kennedy years, which was quite a spectacle."

"What do you know about anti-Semitism in Europe?" Ruthie asks, a bit pointedly.

"The place is crawling with it, I know that much." He puts down his knife and fork. "Once, during my novitiate, I stayed for a time in a Jesuit house in Vienna. This was in the early fifties, not even ten years after the War, and the city looked it, too. The Jesuit house where I was to spend the summer was an old castle with parapets and ramparts, battlements and whathaveyou. In the first few weeks of my stay I made friends with a Jesuit from Argentina. He liked to joke that so many people from this part of the world had relocated to Argentina that he had to come to Vienna for a while, just to balance things out a bit. Father Madero hated the Viennese Jesuits, though. In the evening after supper we used to go up on the roof to smoke and watch the sky change colors, flocks of swallows darting and diving among the chimneys, and one night he pointed down to a side street—I suppose we were up about eight stories—and said, 'There used to be a synagogue down there, where that kiosk is now standing. One night we were all gathered out here after dinner, smoking cigarettes and chatting, and from this roof we watched a group of men come down the street with sticks and bats. They broke every window in that synagogue, then beat the Jews as they tried to run away. And do you know what your fellow Jesuits did?' asked Father Madero. 'Well, I don't suppose there was much they could do,' I offered, for I knew by then that Father Madero hated the Society of Jesus. 'They cheered,' was his reply, and he began clapping and whistling. Dear sweet Jesus."

"An honest man," Ruthie says, and for a few moments nobody says anything.

"An honest man," Ruthie says once more, reaching with her fork for another bite of his Veal Oscar.

The old priest, it seems, will stop at nothing to impress one of your girlfriends.

You go back up to Boston, this time alone. The new girl once again has not worked out and you are feeling depressed, ahistorical.

"I'm feeling depressed, ahistorical," you tell the old priest.

"Well, so you're making a pile of money, anyway," the old priest says, exhaling cigarette smoke.

"Not a pile, exactly."

"If you're not making a really large sum of money, then I don't get it."

"It's a job to do like any job. I'm not writing anything, so what's the difference?"

"What's the difference with anything?" the old priest wants to know.

"Are you living your life or are you not?"

"I have no sense of my life as a part of the historical moment."

"*Idiot*," he says, as if the French pronunciation will soften the blow.

"Maybe I should go to graduate school."

"I was a contrary student myself," the old priest says, though you were in fact a very good student, bursting with promise and the will to please. "If they told me to read *Hamlet* I'd read *Macbeth*, and if they told me to read *Macbeth* then I'd read *Hamlet*. My junior year in high school I despised my English teacher. One time I handed in an E.B. White essay on skating in Central Park, except that I changed it to Boston Common. I got a C. I wanted to write E.B. White and tell him he'd gotten a C in high school composition. They kept me back a year, and I started to wise up."

"They kept you back with C's?"

"There were other factors."

"Such as?"

"Unbridled contempt. They told me I'd never be accepted at an accredited university, so one day at the end of my senior year, only a couple of weeks before graduation, I walked over to Boston College. They asked me where I was going to high school, and when I told them they simply had me sign the forms and I was admitted at once."

4

The old priest, who was built like an oarsman when you first met him, is nicotine-thin. He is in Philadelphia for the time being, visiting with friends and trying to convince his superiors to reassign him to Boston, where he still has some family in Southie. He eats hardly anything and insists that the second martini be on the table before dinner is ordered. He likes to drink in tablecloth restaurants because it is more seemly than standing at a bar. However, the new smoking regulations land you at a table near the bar most of the time anyway. The bars are noisy and the old priest hears not so well. The evening ends when you get tired of shouting and pantomiming.

The new girl is a red-haired gold-digger named Tanya who has the cheek to order beluga caviar whenever the opportunity presents itself. You eat the caviar on toast points and wash it back with iced Russian vodka. The old priest says, "I was once the guest of a woman who took us to a restaurant in Paris where the waiters came out with great crystal trays of caviar in crystal bowls that were somehow illuminated from the bottom. The lights were extinguished, they brought the caviar out in a procession, a long line of waiters holding the trays aloft on their right arms, the bowls rising up, lit by candleflame, unreal."

The red-haired girl sits rapt, convinced she's stumbled onto a pile of money and that the aristocratic bearing of the old priest proves it. However, this is the third or fourth time you've heard this story, and your attention, like the candleflames beneath the caviar, is quavering.

"The old priest the old priest!" the red-haired girl says, back in the

room. "I've never met anybody like that, a character out of a Waugh novel!" The gold-digger is a gold-digger, but at least she's not an illiterate like some you've brought round. "It's interesting," she says, "the urge toward self-creation. I guess it's what most intelligent people do," she says, then stares at herself in the hotel mirror.

"Whatever happened to the gold-digger?" asks the old priest, raising his martini glass. "I liked her. She spent all your money and told you you were a pompous ass when she was through with you."

"The gold-digger hit paydirt, packed her shovel. Is off to another dig, I suppose."

"You shouldn't be so hard on women," says the old priest. "It's their nature to be acquisitive."

"You should have it happen to you sometime."

"Oh dear child, if I were not in the Society of Jesus I'd be prey to every manner of boy hustler." He fixes a cigarette in the holder. "As it stands, I have God on my side and they line up to buy *me* dinner."

"God and history," you say.

"They're not exactly the same thing. Tolstoy calls on us to end the false and unnecessary comedy of history and to dedicate ourselves to the simple act of living."

"Joyce calls history a nightmare," is your response.

"I'm inclined to agree with Tolstoy," laughs the old priest, waving his cigarette in the smoky air. "But that's enough about history. Let's talk about eternity for a while!"

5

The next time you see the old priest he is in Washington, living in a Jesuit house in a sketchy part of Capitol Hill. The Boston plan, it seems, has not worked out, but neither of you mentions it.

"I'm teaching slum children how to speak French," says the old priest. "I must say it's better than working for the man. But what about you? How's the writing going?"

"I haven't written anything in years. A false alarm, I guess."

"A velleity."

"Huh? How's that?"

"A wish for a wish. But what *are* you doing these days?"

"I left the casino business, finally. I'm waiting for my teaching certificate to come through."

"Congratulations, you've finally done something sensible. But don't be like that English teacher I had. He was giving me C's, so one time I handed in an essay by E.B. White. It was on ice skating, and I changed the location from Central Park to Boston Common. Have I ever told you this one?"

"No, I don't think so."

"He gave me a C. I wanted to write E.B. White and tell him he'd gotten a C in junior composition at Saint Francis Xavier High School."

"I won't be that kind of English teacher."

"Good."

6

A year later there is a female English teacher, and the two of you take the train from Philadelphia to Washington. Her name is Dawn; she is twenty-three years old and very pretty and also economy-minded, the way natural-born high school teachers always are. When the old priest starts talking about caviar she blanches, orders a tossed salad with low-fat dressing.

"The bowls were themselves of carved ice and illuminated from the bottom, luminous in the dark against the black sleeves of the waiters' jackets and the gleaming white of the doubled cuffs."

"Such extravagance," Dawn says. "Another time in history."

"The woman who threw that party became attached to a gigolo from Argentina who used her, took her money, and left her addicted to prescription drugs."

"Now *that's* a good story," Dawn says.

The old priest comes to Atlantic City for the wedding, even though you've insisted on a civil ceremony, and the two of you have a bachelor party at one of the casino buffets.

"I remember the last day of my first year at Boston College," the old priest tells you, exhaling cigarette smoke. "Have I told you this story?"

"I don't think so."

"My friend Pat Dempsey was waiting for me in a car with the top down. I went into the office and there was this Jesuit behind a desk and I said, 'I want to sign up here. I want to sign up now.' He told me to finish college first, and I told him that if he did not get me right then and there, on that particular day and time of day, he would not get me at all."

"What did he do?"

"He signed me up at once."

"So why didn't you just turn away?"

"It's a vocation. That's what I'm trying to tell you about: something you absolutely have to do, regardless of what anybody thinks. You have no choice in the matter. Like you with your writing."

"But I don't write—I haven't written anything for some time now. I told you before. I stopped all that."

"You're young yet. It will come to you. You can make a pile of money in the casino business and then retire."

"That's what I'm planning on, yes. I'm considering teaching high school English after I retire. What do you think?"

"That's good, as long as you leave yourself time to write."

"I think I can work it in."

"Sink roots down like the roots of old trees."

At the reception the old priest tells stories to Dawn's parents.

"My friend Itchy and I wanted to go to the movies but you had to go to Confession on Saturday nights, so Itchy said to my mother, 'He can go to Confession in my neighborhood, it's on the way to the movie house.' On the way we met this girl Itchy knew and she said, 'Suckenfuckenickel.' I said, 'What?' And she said, 'Suckenfuckenickel.' As we walked away I said to Itchy, 'What did that girl just say to us?' What she'd said was that she would suck and fuck us for a nickel. Oh, dear heavens! Then Itchy took me to his church and pointed to a confessional box and I went in. There was an old German priest in there and he said, 'Who ist das? Is you boy or girl? Speak up! Speak up!' Oh, it was dreadful. I told him my small few sins and he cried, 'Oh you bad boy, oh you wery bad boy!' and began to beat his hands violently against the wooden walls of the confessional box. When I came out Itchy was standing in the vestibule of the church, leaning one elbow against a holy water font and roaring with laughter. We went to the movie but could not contain ourselves. Every time there was a break in the dialogue one of us would shout, 'Oh you bad boy! Oh you wery bad boy!' The third time we started up, the usher came and threw us out the fire door."

"Where'd you get that old priest?" Dawn's mother asks when you come back from the honeymoon.

"He was my French teacher in high school. French and senior guidance. We've stayed in touch."

"He's a scream," Dawn's mother says.

"He is that."

"You should take a page or two out of his book," Dawn's mother suggests.

7

A year later you go down to Washington by yourself. Your English teacher, you've just found out, is having an affair with the school nurse—a pair of lipstick lesbians is the word in the halls—and you want to be consoled. The old priest seldom leaves his room, which reeks of tobacco and is heaped with dirty clothes and cardboard boxes. Wads of crumpled Kleenex are strewn about the floor and heaped atop the dresser. His hair is greenish in a certain light, and his eyeballs and fingertips are different shades of yellow. He wears a mauve crewneck sweater, loose black corduroys, and bedroom slippers with the toes snipped off. His knees, as he stands for a moment to greet you, open and close stiffly as a churchyard gate.

"This is my last weekend in this room," explains the old priest. "They're moving me to Assisted Living. Father Lemmon was behind it. I helped him through his novitiate and this is the thanks I get. But I shall die as I have lived, safe within the arms of the Society of Jesus!"

You bring Chinese takeout from around the corner and almost get mugged on your way back to the rectory. You set up all the little cartons on his desk, festive as can be, but he barely takes a bite. His hearing has dimmed considerably, and to communicate with him you have to shout. Tufts of coarse white hair sprout from his nose and ears.

"My wife is a lipstick lesbian," you shout.
"How's the cat?" is the old priest's reply.
"I have dogs."
"How are the dogs, then?"
"Fine."
He stares at you, blinks, stares some more.
"*I said they're fine. The dogs are just fine.*"
"Dear child, why are you shouting?"
"I'm passionate about my dogs."
"How's the writing?" the old priest asks.
"I haven't done any writing since I was a young man."
"But you're a young man still."
"That's a matter of opinion, but whatever the case I haven't done any writing for quite some time."
"Well then, how's the casino business?"
"I got out of it years ago. I teach English at Atlantic High. 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,' that sort of thing."
"There you are, I knew you'd come to your senses. And you've had children?"
"No, not yet. Maybe soon."
"Don't wait too long: you'll shorten the time you have with your grandchildren."
"That's a point."
"My brother got married at fifty, a very Irish thing to do. He died when his only daughter was still in her teens."
"I didn't know you had a brother."
"Oh, I had two of them, one still alive."
"Why did you never say anything about them?"
"How's that?"
"*Why did you never tell me you had two brothers?*"
"I don't suppose it ever came up. But Itchy was more like a real brother to me anyway."
"Whatever became of Itchy?"
"Have I not told you that story? Itchy's mother ran off with a man who arranged a *ménage a trois* between himself, the mother, and the daughter. Itchy stayed with his father, who became very bitter and drank all the time. I think he beat poor Itchy. I came to the door one time and Itchy said, 'Oh, it's you again. Go 'way,' he said, and I went away. I never saw him again."
"Why do you think he did that?"
"He was embarrassed by the situation, I suppose."
"That his father beat him?"
The old priest gazes at you, and again you realize you have to speak up. "*He didn't want people to know his father was beating him?*"
"That I loved him." The old priest leans forward to take your free hand, the hand not holding the drink, in his own two hands. He sits peering

at you as if by lantern light. "Dear sweet beautiful child of light and grace. He was embarrassed that I loved him."

8

You picture the old priest in his ritual garments, his "vestments," lifting the host up high at the consecration, the process of transubstantiation, the moment when a dry disc of unleavened bread becomes the body of Jesus Christ.

Per omnia saecula saeculorum.

Amen.

Pax Domini sit semper vobiscum.

Et cum spiritu tuo.

You picture the old priest in Europe in the fifties, spotting Ava Gardner at a bullfight in Madrid. She is wearing a beret, he is wearing a *soutane*. This is history. No, wait, he is not wearing a *soutane*, he is wearing mufti. He is in history and he will lead you into the promised land of the historical moment, the instant in time in which history is happening and you are in history, you yourself present in that unique and meaningful moment: the moment in time when everything makes sense.

This is only theoretical, of course, but even so it seems clear enough to you that there are those who stand inside history and those who stand outside, like beggars at the gate. This is not a matter of money; it is a matter of something else, though it is hard to say exactly what. Whatever it is, though, the old priest seems to have plenty for everyone.

To penetrate time you must go outside of time. Outside of time is the world of myth, of eternal and meaningful recurrence. Even as the old priest tells his anecdotes again and again they acquire substance, a kind of permanence or narrative integrity that goes beyond their literal level. No longer does the old priest as a young boy simply knock at Itchy's door; he eternally knocks at Itchy's door. Itchy, perhaps having just come from a fresh beating, eternally answers the door. This is a cool trick. You'd like to try it yourself, but you keep steady contact with so few people that there aren't many whom you could repeat your stories to, if you had any stories you considered worth repeating. Well, you do, as it turns out. The stories of the old priest.

9

You call the book *The Old Priest* and you get an agent interested, and he gets a publisher interested. Priests old and otherwise are hot news that year because of the sex abuse scandal that is in all the headlines. In the popular imagination priests are rapidly becoming synonymous with pedophiles.

"I like the way you leave the whole sex thing ambiguous," your editor says. "That's really the heart of the matter. The idea of the priest as traditionally representing good is juxtaposed against the current idea or perception of the priest as representing evil. And you walk the fine line down the middle. Very 'Young Goodman Brown' of you. And of course your

character is destroyed the same way as Young Goodman Brown. We don't know what or how much really happened. It could all be in his head. Was there sex between the main character and the old priest?" the editor wants to know. "I mean, just between us."

"I don't know. I left it up in the air, so I never really had to make that decision."

"Smart. Play both ends against the middle."

The Old Priest is a short novel that was formatted and marketed as a novel, on the supposition that some people would like to say they've read a novel but not spend a lot of time actually reading one. It is written in the second person; it is "mannered, overstylized, derivative," to quote one reviewer. As a writer you have some talent, most people seem to agree, but you also have an odd quirk that has proven a fairly severe limitation: you are only truly comfortable writing in the second person.

In fact, you wanted to change the title of your book to *The Second Person*, but the publisher didn't want to do it and the book went out into the world as *The Old Priest*.

"Old priests are what sell," the editor told you, "not witty references to grammar books and Graham Greene. Let your character be the sap and you be the smart one."

He was smart, that editor, but he missed the reference to Jesus, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Also perhaps the second person as the conscience or moral self, now that you think of it. (Can the self be parsed out grammatically? The self of the first person, the self of the second person, and the self of the third person? Our own interior Holy Trinity?) All the same, you liked that: "Grammar Books and Graham Greene" really should be the title of something, though nothing you will ever write.

10

Somewhere along the line it occurs to you that you should let the old priest know you've written a book about him. Well not about him, exactly, but a book in which he served as the artist's model. You don't, though; something stops you whenever you think about it.

The last time you saw him was right after Father Lemmon had him moved to the Assisted Living facility outside Baltimore, and the room and his condition were even more depressing than they'd been when he was fending for himself in the Jesuit house on Capitol Hill.

"They seem to have taken the assistance out of assisted living," you observed dryly.

"They come in once a week to give me a shower, shave me, comb my hair. Then I sit here for a week, smoking and doing crossword puzzles, until they come back again. I get a carton of cigarettes and some books, two meals a day brought to this room. Oh dear sweet Jesus." No irony, no dry twist: no guttural colon or dash.

"Are you getting any visitors? Any family members dropping in?"

"My brother Jack came by two weeks ago and brought me a crab

cake," said the old priest, and gave you a sharp look.

He also mentioned the name of former student X, who'd arrived the week before with a six pack of beer, drank all six cans, then went off to the National Gallery for an afternoon of Vermeer. You've dined with former student X on a few occasions, have even bought him dinner once or twice. He is one of those people who are always working on their dissertations. Sometimes if you came with a new girl the old priest would bring former student X. You always wondered if he and the old priest were having an affair, although that might not be the right term. Illicit sex, in any case, since priests young and old take a vow of celibacy, and also since homosexual behavior is considered sinful by the very organization which the old priest claims to represent. At these dinners there would always be too much drinking, and sometimes former student X would sit across the table and leer at you in the manner of a gothic double, your very own William Wilson. He is six or seven years younger than you, athletic, not as bright as you but possessing an ingenuousness the old priest seemed to consider a highly valuable quality: an ingenuousness that liked to flirt with disingenuousness. The old priest would frequently say about former student X, "Oh, he is like a big kid! Oh, he is like a big big kid!" You asked one time, rather pointedly, why big-kiddedness should be such a desirable quality, but the old priest waved the question away with a puff of cigarette smoke and the hoarse, watery laugh. "Oh dear heavens!" he laughed. "Oh dear heavens!"

It occurred to you in the Assisted Living facility outside Baltimore that you would be happy to see former student X never again.

11

The old priest appears to you in a dream. He is eating duck liver *pâté* and drinking a glass of *Meursault*. The grayish-brown *pâté* froths at the corners of his mouth. Then he turns into a goat-man, cloven hooves and wispy white fur on his hands and cheeks. Then he uses the cigarette holder to subdue the goat-man. When you wake up you think you finally know the secret of the old priest, but as the day wears on you see that you were mistaken. The idea of the old priest is a mass of sticky contradictions and reversals.

The old priest is a kind and gentle man, a generous and considerate friend. The old priest is a pedophile who enjoys the company of high school boys or their equivalent. The old priest is old as sin. The old priest is witty as redemption.

12

In the Catholic grammar school you attended as a boy the priests kept themselves at a distance while the nuns ran the show, dour and plentiful in their identical costumes, as if they'd tumbled out of a machine that vended them a penny apiece. If a priest came into the classroom on the odd Tuesday afternoon it was like Jesus Christ almighty had come down from the cross to tell a few jokes or riddles. One priest was a fanatic for spelling,

another asked questions plucked randomly from the *Baltimore Catechism*.

Who made us?

God made us.

Who is God?

God is the Supreme Being who made all things.

And so on.

Another priest, an older man, the pastor, came into the classroom a few times a year and claimed to be able to read everyone's thoughts. As he went through the catalogue of what all the children were thinking he threw his arms around and paced violently, in the manner of Bishop Sheen. He scared the bejesus out of you, you have to admit. Then too, that was the whole point.

At a certain time of year the parish priest came to bless the house. You remember your grandmother kneeling down in the cramped living room, her head bowed, the priest intoning the words and sending sprinklets of holy water flying from a small, occult-looking bottle drawn from his inside pocket. You like to remember his black suit, his black hat with its short brim, his small black cigar balanced nimbly on the railing just beyond the open doorway. The priest reeking of cigar smoke and spewing holy water on the dated furniture. Your grandmother kneeling on the spinach-colored carpet, kerchiefed head bowed low. Years later this memory or set of memories was triggered by the climactic scene in *The Exorcist*: the two priests standing in the room with the possessed girl, throwing holy water and chanting, "The power of Christ compels you! The power of Christ compels you!"

There have been other movies, other movie priests:

Pat O'Brien as Father Jerry Connelly, the slum priest who has turned away from a life of crime in *Angels with Dirty Faces*.

Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald in *Going My Way*.

Bing Crosby once again as kindly and melodious Father O'Malley in *The Bells of St. Mary's*.

Spencer Tracy as fighting Father Flanagan in *Boys Town*.

David Niven as the ambitious but unhappy Episcopal bishop in *The Bishop's Wife* (helped to a deeper level of spirituality by Cary Grant's angel Dudley).

Karl Malden as the two-fisted activist priest in *On the Waterfront*.

Oskar Werner as the tormented and dying theologian in *The Shoes of the Fisherman*. Also in that same movie Anthony Quinn as the Pope who opens the coffers of the Church to the world's poor and hungry. The Pope, don't forget, is also a priest (he roams the streets of Rome, gives tender counsel to an English woman whose marriage to David Jansen is on the rocks).

A not very well known actor as the priest in *The Song of Bernadette* who believes Jennifer Jones has had a true vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary. (The same actor played the father-in-law in *The Days of Wine and Roses*, if

that is any help.)

Rex Harrison as the Pope who commissions the painting of the Sistine Chapel in *The Agony and the Ecstasy*.

Thomas Tryon, before he became a novelist, in *The Cardinal*.

Richard Chamberlain as the priest with the untamable lust in *The Thorn Birds*.

Robert DeNiro as the priest who tries to play the complicated game of church politics in *True Confessions*.

William S. Burroughs as the junkie priest in *Drugstore Cowboy*.

There should be more movie priests, priests we have yet to see upon the silver screen.

The priest who solicits oral sex in the sacristy, then absolves the altar boy when he is finished with him. *Absolvo te* blah blah blah. There has never been a language better than Latin when it comes to being an old priest. Mysterious, arcane, dripping of the long ago.

The cheerful parish priest who lives a decent life, ministers to his flock, likes to treat himself to a good dinner, likes even better to be treated by his well-heeled parishioners. He is affable, physically soft, a guy who knows how to go along to get along.

The priest lost in the mysticism of his own religion, sitting alone in his room, chanting gibberish. If he were not a priest he would be on the street, living in a cardboard box. His illness is legitimized, yet who is to say he is not a true mystic? Then too, who is to say the guy living in the cardboard box is also not a true mystic?

The priest who leaves his order and breaks his vows to marry the woman he met working behind the counter in the pizza shop. The priest who leaves his order to marry the nun he met in the grammar school. The priest who leaves his order to marry the priest he met in the seminary or, much later perhaps, the one who reminds him of that charming young fellow.

There was an old woman, one time, the grandmother of a high school acquaintance, who said that you should be a priest, you had just the right look. You pretended to wonder what she meant by that, but you knew exactly what she meant by that.

You are sitting in a bar in downtown Atlantic City on a weekday afternoon.

"The Catholic Church," somebody says.

"Yeah, the Catholic Church," somebody replies.

"The Gay and Lesbian Society of North America," the first man sniggers.

"So it would seem," is the only thing you can say.

"They take their training in the *seminary*," another man chortles.

"They're just like anybody else," someone else says.

"But they say not," another man, all the way down at the end, puts in. "They say they're in the know."

"Who says that?"
"They say. They themselves."
"Someone should be in the know, shouldn't they?" you wonder out loud.
"Sure," the first man says. "But we all know nobody is."

13

The old priest no longer answers his phone, he does not have voice mail, he does not have e-mail. A few years go by, a few years then a few years more.

Once, when *The Old Priest* was first published, you did a reading at a Barnes and Noble in Philadelphia and former student X turned up, leering at you from the back of the room.

"This is great," said former student X, coming forward after the reading to have his copy of the book signed. "This is absolutely fantastic."

"Thanks. I guess my writing has finally come to something, though I'm not expecting much from this financially."

"Does he know?"

"Who?"

"Who!"

"Oh, well, no, I've lost track of him, actually. He's become fairly reclusive, it seems." Then you looked at the book in former student X's hand, the book jacket with its illustration taken from the *Baltimore Catechism*, the three milk bottles that illustrate the soul in its various states: the full milk bottle is the state of grace, the empty milk bottle is mortal sin, the milk bottle with some spots in it is venial sin: heaven, hell, purgatory.

"Oh—oh, I see—you're jumping to conclusions there, but of course I can see the impulse. I can definitely understand—"

"He mentioned you, you know," said former student X. "Last time I was down there, in that terrible place in Baltimore. He was wondering why he never hears from you anymore."

"Oh, was he, now? I'll have to be sure and give him a call and tell him all about this, though of course the character of the old priest is a composite of a lot of priests I've known over the years. Some that are now in jail, actually!"

You broke into a loud, obnoxious laugh then moved to sign the flyleaf of your book for the next person in line.

That was the last time you saw former student X, thank God.

14

After his novitiate in Europe the old priest came back to run a Jesuit high school in Georgetown, beginning in the early sixties, the Kennedy years through "We Shall Overcome" and "Burn, Baby, Burn" right into the middle of Watergate, the old priest always one to stand with both feet planted squarely in the historical moment. He came to Philadelphia in the fall of '73, he was your senior guidance counselor and also became your French teacher when

the original Jesuit who was your French teacher left midyear to marry a woman he'd met in a pizza shop. Those were somewhat different times, the seventies, when a man might suddenly drop whatever he was doing and run off with a woman he'd met in a pizza shop. (Of course that is still possible, but it no longer seems quite so commonplace.) Love was in the air, also anxiety, depression, the mounting dread brought on by Vietnam, Nixon and Watergate, Black Power and Women's Rights, the death of the patriarchy that seemed likely to accompany the gradual breakdown in faith in government and religious institutions, a return to individuality and the pleasure principle, the inevitable victory of subjectivity and moral relativism, blah blah *blah*—

You remember how he seduced you, the old priest, how he charmed the David Bowie pants off you. Maybe that was part of it: '73, David Bowie and Rod Stewart, a little later Mott the Hoople and Queen: androgyny was just then having its fifteen minutes. The David Bowie pants? Oh, well, they came up really high at the waist and then billowed out in an exaggerated three-pleat, descending to two-inch cuffs designed to go with platform shoes. You had two pairs of each, an interesting style for a skinny seventeen-year-old prep school student, it lasted about fifteen minutes.

One day the two of you smoking cigarettes in his office after hours he told you all about William Peter Blatty and the young Jesuits of Georgetown, in a smoky pub one afternoon merrily gathered round a mongrel-brown Lester spinet. Stories were told. Information was leaked. Classified information about the Devil got out. There really was an exorcism, though it was performed on a Lutheran boy by not one or two but an entire team of exorcists. The exorcism itself went on for months, the whole thing audio taped and the tapes themselves locked away in some vault in the Vatican.

The best parts of the book, according to the old priest—the best parts, of course, being the scariest parts—were taken directly from the secret transcripts. He knew people who knew people who knew the Devil! Talk about being on the inside track!

The old priest told his stories—he always told stories—which meant of course that he had stories to tell. You fell in love, *whatever that means*, can you just admit that much? People fall in love: kids and old ladies, middle aged bachelors and hot young kindergarten teachers. The heart has its own secret life, like the family cat, and what it might drag home is anybody's guess.

Not love, perhaps, but a schoolboy crush. Something glandular but at the same time completely non-glandular.

Can you admit *that* much?

Of course you can. Sometimes. Once in a while.

15

You remember your childhood, the lower middle class Irish neighborhood in South Philadelphia, the corner tap rooms with their blacked-out windows, Krause's bakery each Sunday morning after eight o'clock Mass. You

remember polishing your shoes for Easter Sunday, the church the next morning filled with fresh white lilies, the pews and the side aisles, all along the stations of the cross, overflowing with parishioners there to perform their "Easter duty," which is another way of saying that they didn't go very often but neither did they wish their membership to lapse.

When you were eight years old you watched *The Song of Bernadette*, in rerun, on your grandmother's black and white Motorola. You looked up at the dark place at the top of the stairs, hoping that the Blessed Virgin Mary would suddenly appear to you. Wanting that to happen more than anything else in this world. Also not wanting that to happen more than anything else in this world.

You think sometimes of the candy store lady, whose response to everything was JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph.

One day a punk of the neighborhood came barreling into the store and knocked your pinball machine on tilt. You backed down, of course, the boy took your machine, and the old woman sent up a fervent chorus of JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph JesusMaryandJoseph.

Then there was the time with the little girl in the alleyway, exposing yourselves as little children sometimes do. You were both five: tiny Adam and miniature Eve. The girl, you've heard, has grown up to be a junkie, a prostitute, a queen of the do-it-yourself porn industry. "Her name was Grace," you say out loud. Her name *is* Grace, you correct yourself, though not out loud. But you don't know if she is among the living or the dead.

16

One time, very drunk, as drunk as the two of you have ever been together, the old priest said: "I send this one out to live in the world. This is the one you see. You like this one. But you wouldn't like the other one."

"How do you know?"

"Trust me, you wouldn't."

"Just give me a peek."

"I'm afraid I can't do that. He can't be trusted. No, I'm afraid it's absolutely out of the question. He's locked up safe and sound as The Man in the Iron Mask. Ha ha."

You went home, thinking of the real old priest bound and tossed into a dungeon, the iron mask locked securely to conceal his face, the brutal, ignorant guards to glimpse only his wry mouth and sea-glass eyes. Of course the question then becomes which old priest is out in the world and which one locked away? It occurred to you then and has crossed your mind a few times since that the old priest is an arch fiend, an imposter who walks the earth while the true old priest—well, it's too horrible to imagine.

Years later it occurs to you that you have done much the same thing with the old priest, or rather with the simulacrum of the old priest. He imprisoned the real old priest while you imprisoned the fake one. He's in a book you wrote called *The Old Priest*. He's in there, drinking *Tanqueray* martinis and telling his charming anecdotes. He's locked up, safe and sound.

17

The Old Priest, as it turns out, pretty quickly became a period piece. It went almost at once to the remainder tables, probably due to its lack of explicitness. Old priests are what sell, but only if you catch them *en flagrante*. Once in a while you take a peek at the book yourself. It is not very good. It is "mannered," as one reviewer pointed out, and it is also derivative, a re-telling of the old priest's stories combined with some mildly ambiguous hints at homosexuality, a strange and self-conscious amalgamation of *The Power and the Glory* and *Brideshead Revisited* by way of *A Separate Peace* and *The Trouble with Angels*.

It is as outmoded as those lace things they used to place on the tops of parlor chairs so that one's head wouldn't stain the fabric. Why would one's head stain the fabric? Hair oil, perhaps, or dye the color and consistency of shoe polish. The old priest would know what those things are called, were called. But you don't, although among your students it is well known that when asked your favorite book your immediate response is the OED. Nobody, not even your colleagues, seems to remember that that was Auden's famous reply. You've got your tweed, your manners and your mannerisms, a few chestnuts in the one hand, a couple of shibboleths in the other.

Still, it was your dream, publishing a novel, the dream of your youth, and since you have a novel, albeit one that has not done very well and is currently out of print (alas), you now have a job, comfortable enough, in which you will live out the rest of your days, professionally speaking. Teaching English in a posh New England boarding school, well talk about mannered! Tweeds, rep ties. For a joke on the first day of school you sometimes wear a boater!

And so once again you are back in Boston, this time without the old priest, a strange and portentous reversal to have ended up where he would like to be but is not. You are getting on in years, living by yourself in a large but shabby one-bedroom on Washington Street, the bedroom itself facing the street so that you have to protect your sleep with a white noise machine or an air conditioner, depending on the time of year. The white noise machine, which looks like something designed for a low-budget sci-fi movie, sounds like the endless slosh and chop of some eternal ocean. The air conditioner sounds like the void: empty and metallic, within its steady whoosh the pock and ping of atoms whirling into extinction.

Whatever has become of the gaiety of the old priest? Sitting at a dinner table, enraptured with the present moment, seeing and being seen, fine clothes and expensive bar drinks and first class victuals, all of life's

possibilities laid out before you like a flight of oysters. Now you are getting old and have resigned yourself to bachelorhood. Your talent, paltry at its best, has left you; you walk the cold streets of Beantown in shabby clothes, a denizen of the pubs and second hand book stores.

Your students like you all the same. You are an affable old failure who is nevertheless a tough old bird, an eagle's eye for the misplaced comma and the misused semi-colon: some of the hipper students call you "Old School" behind your back, or you wish they would. The truth is you give them all B's, and the girls with pert breasts get B plusses. Oh, even the girls without pert breasts get B plusses, who are you kidding? The poor sad pimply-faced freshman boys, arms and legs askew, get the B minuses, and they deserve them, too. They themselves admit as much.

"Walk among them," advised the old priest when he found out you'd become a high school English teacher. "Always teach standing up. Be a presence among them. Let them feel your presence as you walk among them."

You walk among your own students and wish to tousle their hair or to trail your fingers across their downy arms as they sit, scribbling in their notebooks. And what would be so wrong in that?

In your free time you tinker with a second novel, which you call *The Western Gate* after a line from "Luke Havergal." These days if you can only get to twenty thousand words they'll package it some way to make it look like a novel, or at least they will if they think they can sell it that way. *The Western Gate* is the story of a dissipated novelist, a drunk and a womanizer who is his own worst enemy. He drinks, adulterizes, insults powerful people while going about his drinking and adulterizing. Once again the material is a combination of thinly veiled biography and heavy-handed fantasy. You use the details of your own boarding school and place within those details yourself as an idealized creation, a writer talented but with a checkered past and an unreliable conscience. You yourself have neither—at least not to a degree anybody would find interesting. You have never adulterized, have rarely insulted anyone, and go quietly home from the pub after two pints. You have no illusions about leading your students into the promised land of the historical moment; in fact, you have no illusions about anything at all.

18

Life goes on this way—wind and leaves, the corny tearing of the calendar page—until one October afternoon, after explaining to your A. P. seniors the theological underpinnings of "Everything that Rises Must Converge," you go to check your e-mail and there is death—exactly where you expected it would be.

(Salutation,)

I am sad to inform you Fr. passed away. He has a viewing this evening in Philadelphia and then a mass tomorrow morning at St. Ignatius Church in

Baltimore and then afterward is being buried at the Woodstock cemetery, also in Baltimore.

I think of you often, and gather you are a quite successful writer.

Be well,

(Former Student X)

19

You write back, describing what you were doing on the day of the old priest's passing— the conversation you had with your students about "the world of guilt and sorrow" just moments before reading of the old priest's death— expressing regret that you were not present and asking the obvious questions. What you really want are the details that will allow you to form a resolution—the resolution that will allow you to close the book.

(Salutation,)

The viewing was in Philadelphia at Manresa Hall on Friday, October 27th. A place for old and dying priests. There were about 10 really old priests in walkers and wheelchairs, as well as former student Y and former student Z and myself from the class of 1982. There was also one gentleman from Gonzaga's class of 1961, who is an architect in Bryn Mawr now, and one other impaired middle-aged man present. I overheard the gentleman with a short leg and hearing aid tell another priest that when he was at Georgetown Prep he was bullied because of a speech impediment and his limp, and Fr. helped put an end to it. The day was cloudy, cold, and drizzling wet. After the viewing he was taken to Baltimore. Fr. Lemmon did the ceremony (I was not there) at St. Ignatius Church. Apparently, there is a Woodstock cemetery in Baltimore, and that is where he will be buried.

As for not seeing him...no one knew how sick he was. I saw him in mid-September. My wife Susan (I recently got married) and I went to the Provincial's House in Baltimore where he was living and took him out for lunch. We showed him our wedding pictures. Of course he had his cigarettes and martini. He was frail. When I inquired to his health, as I always did, he said "not bad for a man of my age, don't you think?"

In early October, he was sent to Manresa Hall in Philadelphia. They could not care for him at the Provincial's House in Baltimore any longer; for the last year he had been struggling with throat and neck cancer. Yet even his sister and niece, nor anyone close to him knew until a week or two before he died. He was in Philadelphia, 15 minutes away from me, and I did not even know. His sister remarked that it was the typical Irish way, not to talk about illness and dying. That is all she could understand of not knowing, and she would be likely to do the same, if she was dying.

As for “the world of guilt and sorrow,” remember Flannery O’Connor also said “All is sacred, nothing profane,” and as Fr. used to quote to me from St. Julian of Norwich, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” Fr. would not want us to spend any useless time on guilt and sorrow.

In the last month, the cancer became extremely aggressive, and he developed a large tumor on his neck and left chin. It was visible, although I did not see it a month ago. On his last day, Friday, October 20th, he got up, although hard to eat and talk at this point. He got dressed. At lunch went outside to smoke and had a drink while reading the New York Times. After lunch he told the head nurse he was going to take a nap. She went in to check on him, because that was not typical, and after a time, he appeared to wake up abruptly, got halfway up from the bed, looked her way, collapsed to his side and died. He went without pain, quickly, doing what he loved—smoking, drinking, and reading. He said to me, he thought of death as a perfectly open door, with bright light radiating, and that one day he would casually walk through the door. He also told me he cared about this life, and that he did not give a shit about death because it was completely unknowable.

It is particularly strange that you were teaching Flannery O’Connor and the underpinnings of theology. I am sitting here with Fr.’s Master’s Thesis from Louvain completed April 2, 1954, entitled “Theology and Prayer.”

In it Fr. writes, “A book is a machine to think with. In a good book this statement is verified both for the reader and writer alike. I do not flatter myself that this short paper offers that advantage to any reader it may have. My problem is too personal, as is the solution I have worked out for myself. This paper is a nothing more than a machine for thinking out a problem that has long troubled me. It were better compared to a loom upon which I propose to weave some of the unraveled elements of science, service, and prayer. My problem in its simplest form was this: how to integrate the elements of prayer, theology, and daily routine into a unified whole? Or more exactly, what is the point at which theology can become the living source, the principle of prayer and action? If such a point of insertion existed, and I did not for a moment doubt that it did, I wanted to find it and to formulate it as accurately as possible. Because, above all, my solution had to be a practical solution. I wanted a principle that would be operative beyond the walls of the Theologate, that would prolong, not only the effects of our four years of study, but would keep theology as the central point of reference from which all flowed and to which all returned, so that no phase of my life as a priest would not know its permeating presence. I think I have found such a principle in that method of theological reasoning we call the ‘Argumentum ex Convenientia.’ I look upon the ‘Argumentum ex

Convenientia' as the summit of theological reasoning, that towards which all the rest of theology is ultimately oriented; and I find that it is at the same time a form of prayer, a method, if you want to place it in a category, which partakes of the nature of contemplation.

"If the objection were raised at this point that I am assigning too large a place to Theology in the life of prayer, that the spiritual life can be lived on the highest level without any reference, explicit at least, to theology, I would reply that although this might be true, it should not be true in the case of a Jesuit."

Fr. goes on to say that "To highlight one aspect of this interdependence of Theology and Sanctity is my purpose here." Much of the writing is in French and hence I am unable to translate, given my poor skills as a French student. There is another passage I think you would like, a few pages on, in which Father talks about eternity as a place that contains everything that has ever been, every lost dog, as he describes it, every broken watch and burnt dinner, then adds, "If eternity really is eternity, then nothing is ever lost. It's all there, for all time, safe and whole within the sight of God. This in itself is the 'living source' that Theology describes and that prayer allows us to stand in daily relation to and which, properly understood, is the source of meaningful action."

As for my life, I am a tenure track assistant professor of counseling at Community College of Philadelphia. I love my work. I hear Fr. in my work every day as a teacher and counselor. I got married in June and live in Collingswood, New Jersey with my wife Susan, a medical writer from a Nebraska farm of strong willed German stock. She has a Ph.D. in food science and an MBA, was in the Peace Corps in Ghana, and lived in Tunisia for a year doing research. She is a fascinating woman, and she makes me a better man.

I struggle every day with good and evil in my life, but it is a worthy fight. I am not a very good Christian or Catholic, but I never give up the fight. Sometimes I make the fight harder than it needs to be, but I guess I fight better as an underdog.

Life is beautiful, fleeting and tragic, and I love every minute of it.

I have attached a picture of Father a little less than a year before he died, and a wedding picture. I picture Father now at this moment frolicking among the lost dogs and broken watches and burnt dinners of Eternity.

I hope you are well. Thank You.

Your brother through Christ,

(Former Student X)

20

In Maytime of a certain year, in the auditorium of your Catholic grammar school, you attended a vocational fair hosted by the Maryknoll Fathers, who are missionaries. You saw a glossy illustration of a Maryknoll Father who'd been tortured by savages, and you got an erotic charge. In the same week you read *Dracula*, which was your favorite novel until *The Scarlet Letter* came along a few years later. In Maytime of a certain year you began to see the connection between sex and death. Sex is sin is death. Then, as you continued to look, it really got confusing. Sex is sin is death is the resurrection and the life.

The old priest: "Once, in that Jesuit house in Vienna, I found a room that was like a medieval torture chamber. There were whips and straps, iron benches and wooden racks. Good heavens!"

"But why would anybody want to do such things?"

"To abase the flesh, of course."

"But why would you want to do *that*?"

"*Idiot.*"

"Did you try it?"

"I went in there one afternoon, the room completely empty and still, sunlight coming in through the barred windows and the little chinks in the wall, and I thought of Itchy, and I flogged my bare back mercilessly for one hour. There are some things lost to us in modern times that ought not to be lost. Many things, actually, that most people would call barbaric, or medieval, but ideas and practices we might need all the same. Things lost to us which we can't do without, even if we don't know we can't do without them."

In the end you are alone, a bachelor-teacher at a posh New England boarding school. Not the worst life you could have imagined for yourself, though a suite of rooms at the boarding school would be better than taking the train each morning from North Station. Your colleagues are entertained no end with the stories of your colorful past, the casino days of your profligate youth. Oh, how they wish they had lived such a varied and adventurous life!

In the end you are alone in your room, still thinking of the old priest, what to say about your friendship, your "relationship," what not to say, how to write an end to this, if the ending is yours to write. As a young man you were awkward and depressed, youthfully morbid but far from Keatsian. Women found you dull, ponderous—"bloodless," one of the cleverer ones called you from the other side of an open doorway—intelligent but without much style or imagination. The old priest alone took an interest in you. Years later you read a few newspaper articles that caused you to see this overweening interest in a somewhat different light.

In the rooming house in Atlantic City where you settled down after college the old priest came for a visit that very first summer, jaunty in his white polo shirt and Madras shorts. You sat up all night smoking cigarettes and drinking gin and tonics, the two of you talking with the drunken high-mindedness of fraternity boys. Later you found out from former student X that it was the real and true *modus operandi* of the old priest to stay up all night smoking and drinking with a former student, talking all that drunken, high-minded talk until daybreak, but then, at that moment in time when it was taking place, you thought it was the first time it had happened to either one of you. In the morning you walked the block to the beach and swam before breakfast in the gently breaking waves. He sang "O Mio Babbino Caro," plunging up and down in the easy current, and you can still see his face as it was in the early sunlight, spouting water from both nostrils and singing in Italian. Later you cooked cheese omelets then lay together side by side on the pullout sofa which was his bed, holding hands. As he drifted off to sleep his final words were not his own. They were Shakespeare's, sort of: "I will grapple you to my bosom with hoops of steel."

After he left you decided the whole thing had been a terrible mistake. A few months later you went to see him, in Philadelphia, to explain it. You walked along the cobblestone streets of Old City, sullen and intractable, refusing to hold his hand. "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang," was his reply, gazing up into the leafless branches of the maple trees.

Two lines of Shakespeare (plus a little Puccini) to fix in place the simple but overwhelming fact: you loved another person, even though you did your best to cancel it out or turn it into something else, even if it was your right to cancel it out and even if it really was something else, something other than what you took it for at the time, whatever that was.

The ending, then: you loved him, something you were in a big hurry to forget but which he was in a bigger hurry to remember. For he loved you also. That is the one thing you seem most of all to avoid considering. Others he loved as well, perhaps—at least that has been your suspicion all these years, supported mainly by the leering presence of former student X—but he loved you, or at least the person you were in your youth. The handsome boy with the David Bowie pants and the nicotine-stained fingers, the frenetic teenager bursting with promise and the will to please.

All right, love is love but resentment is also resentment, and little by little you came to resent the way the old priest continued to look at you, as if he could fix you in a certain moment of your life and experience and keep you there. As if you yourself were a story to be told, and told the way he'd decided to tell it!

As if you alone could save him.

And so one day you went away, intending to return, as many another time you'd come and gone, but things happened, one thing and then the next, time and distance, and you never got the chance to go back.

You abandoned him, is what really happened.

Just face up to the ending, the real ending, even if that's not how your

book ends.

The book ends with you and the old priest having martinis and Chinese takeout the evening before he is to be placed into Assisted Living. The book ends with the old priest, having gone a bit senile, drinking martinis and casting out imaginary demons between bites of tea smoked duck.

But this story does not end with imaginary demons and cold dim sum.

He betrayed you, is what really happened, following which you betrayed him. You abandoned him also, following which he abandoned you.

Just face up to it. Be honest. Admit what happened and move on.

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