

Take Abe To Mass

by Jerry Ratch

Near Christmas in Chicago they used to have these pictures of a five dollar bill on billboards all around the city, with the caption: *Take Abe to Mass*. On the front steps before going into the church, we encountered a very drunken man, belligerent at any and all who were entering the church. He cussed out me, and then my little brother. I looked to Robbie to do something, before remembering that he couldn't — that drunk would have torn him to shreds. At the same time there I stood with my angelic little brother — who didn't look at all like me, but very much like my mother, with his pale blue eyes and blond Polish hair — looking at us to do something about this loud foul-mouthed drunkard, who stood cursing out God in front of us and our sacred church. My little brother kept looking up at Robbie and at me. "Do something," he seemed to be saying. But what could I do? What could anyone do?

Robbie turned his back on the drunk, growling, cursing under his breath. I could hear him getting angry, talking to himself. "Fuck. Shit. Damn it."

"Robbie!" I said. "This is Christmas Eve. My brother's ears. Please!"

"Oh, for Chrissakes," he spit out. "If I had a gun, I would have blown the man's brains out, that's all!"

Robbie hustled us up the stairs into the church, which was crowded with people jammed into long wooden pews. It was warm inside, while the wind kept blowing on the steps out in front of the church, carrying the drunkard right along with it probably to the next bar. We sat down among the faithful. There was activity on the platform in front of us where a priest was saying prayers in Latin, which sounded for all the world like he was saying: "I'm goin' to eat a Nabisco. I'm goin' to eat a Nabisco." The next thing we knew, a basket on a long pole was being jiggled in front of us. The change in the basket made a loud noise, as the man holding the pole stopped it

right in front of Robbie's face. The man jiggled the thing some more. The basket hung there in front of Robbie and wouldn't go away. Robbie looked at me. I put a dollar bill in his hand. "He wants you to put a donation in the basket," I whispered.

Robbie looked at the dollar bill that I'd put in his hand.

"That's coercion," he stated.

"Just do it. It's my money."

"That's not the point."

"Do it for me, Robbie. My brother's here."

He dropped the dollar bill into the basket, and the jingling noise quit. The basket moved on to the next person, who added still more money to the take. Most of the people around us looked pretty poor. This was not a rich congregation, by any means, but the Church managed to suck the ducats out of the people anyway. *Take Abe to Mass!* I knew he was right — *it was coercion*. But...

Oh, hell, Robbie was always right. I guess maybe that's why we were not destined to be together. And I still take Abe to Mass to this day. Even so.

