

Father Dunne's School for Wayward Boys #6

by Kyle Hemmings

One late nippy September afternoon, Charley and I broke into Father L's desk to steal the answer sheets to tomorrow's pre-algebra test. Instead, we found his red-inked list of boys who would never be saved, never make it to heaven. There were five of them, Peter's name was at the top.

When we arrived back in Dorm D, we confronted Peter with the bad news in mock fashion. Charley put an arm on his shoulders and said, "Sorry Pete, there's only so much room in heaven. It's really for faggots anyway."

Peter blushed and stepped back. His eyes swept, took in both of us. He was tall and muscle-toned with a constantly distracted look on his face, as if his body belonged to one god and his mind to another. He was definitely in between gods. His mother, he once confessed to me after a kickball game, was always confused. She slept with strangers while she was still pregnant with Peter's youngest brother. Peter was never sure who his real sources were. He definitely was not cut out to deal drugs, which was why he was here. Somebody had talked him into it and somebody had ratted him out.

His father, a "shady narc," as Peter's mother described him after the separation, was killed in a drug bust.

That night, Charley and I were awoken by the clang coming from the bell tower. I scrambled to the window, saw that it was Peter who was pulling the rope. We dressed and scurried out. Father M, with thinning tousled hair and crinkled bed slippers, stood next to us with arms folded. There were now twenty something students standing in

their stupid button-down pj's, prisoners of God.

"Hey Pete," I shouted, "what do you think you're doing? We can't sleep."

Father M spoke in his trademark Germanic accent. He loved telling stories of his encounters with grisly bears during retreats in the Northwest. He always emerged without a scratch or so he claimed. We never believed him or his tall-tales of visitations while camping near the Neosho River. Charley once said that his visions were the result of a car accident. "Gave him accidental memories."

"You mean hallucinations," I had said.

"For every minute you stay up there, " said Father M., "it will be ten days of detention."

Peter stopped, leaned over the edge of the belfry, panned our faces over and over. He might have even smiled.

"I was lonely, " he said. "I wanted to get closer to heaven so I could see my real father."

"Come down, now" said Father M.

Peter rang the bells five more times.

"Your real father is inside you," yelled Father M. His voice was a rich baritone that could entrance, I imagined, the small malnourished animals of the forest behind the school.

"You don't know my father," Peter shouted back.

"Oh, but I do, dear boy. Do not underestimate my faith."

Father M. lumbered closer to the tower. Their eyes seemed locked in a stare that was at once cruel and loving. I doubt either one flinched. Each, I believed, was malnourished by either too much or too little faith.

Father M. started to smile and reached out his arms in a wide embrace as if to say "These will catch you if you fall."

Peter broke out in a wide mischievous grin.

We all moved forward like heavy versions of ourselves, and I tried to imagine the way I would falter when I'd turn forty and thicken around the waist, stubborn and one-way in my inclinations. I'd probably have at least one failed marriage and one illegitimate child trying to reach me.

Peter then swept his arms outward and stood in that position for several minutes. He and Father M. looked like angels camouflaged as star-struck sinners.

Suddenly, Peter blurted out, "Fake Jesus!"

He then dove off the tower and into Father M's arms.

It was quite a catch.

I mean the sound of bone colliding with bone.

They must have both died on the spot.

Blood to Autumn ashes.

Jesus cries for all of us.

Years later, after I graduated Father Dunne's, after I made my way around the tortuous circuit called life, after being shocked and burned and given new skin grafts, I take my young wife to visit the spot where Father M. and Peter died. The school is no longer there.

Only the forest and blank brown patches of land.

There is nothing there at the spot, just grass and weeds. No proof that they ever existed or caught each other.

I turn to my wife and her face is deeply contemplative. Her hair is long, and chestnut-brown, and luscious. She still has the slender legs of a svelte virgin with Audrey Hepburn eyes, and I imagine she is still keeping a secret or two. And she loves to fake a French accent when we're in the mood. She might even be a saint someday, if they lower the restrictions.

I say "They've disappeared. The two of them. I wonder where they went."

It's like a miracle because I still believe in miracles that we sometimes mistake as major infarctions. I still believe solids can sublimate to gas with little or no intervening steps. It's a fact. It's a miracle.

She turns and says in a voice not her own, "Listen. I can hear them breathe in the center of the earth."

I take a breath in, hold it, and try to listen. My ears ring with the sound of nothing.

"Did they ever make it that far?" I ask.

"I think so," she says softly.

I reach down and scoop a handful of loose dirt, rub it in my hands,
let it go.

"Then the earth below us must be very hollow."

We ponder each other's face.

She shrugs and smiles sweetly.

We leave with soiled piety.

