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The Helpmate

• A. W. Engle

My mother was given an A in modern algebra, the first course she had to take to become a regular graduate student in math. She had been doing well in all the tests during the quarter, but to get an A when she’d been so long out of school, to step right in and get one the first shot—it left her a little awestruck and wondering.

My father was very pleased with my mother’s grade. He took her out to dinner, though it was just before their anniversary, within a few days of it, and so he would have taken her out to dinner and a movie anyway, as was the custom. And when the anniversary did come, nothing was said about going out a second time. My father and mother also invited some friends over to the house that Friday night between terms. They all seemed to become quite merry. Paul and I could hear them from upstairs, even with our door shut. Peg’s door was open, but nothing ever woke her.

The next quarter my mother signed up for another course her advisor said she’d have to take to get accepted by the graduate school, a course in analysis. My father knew that analysis was about the calculus. He had taken an elementary calculus course in college.

“I’ll help you when you get to integration,” my father said, “Just let me know.”

Off and on during the quarter my father would ask my mother whether her course in analysis had come to integration yet. My mother would smile and say not yet. Three weeks from the end my father asked her again. “I think we’re just getting to the derivative,” my mother replied.

“It’s either a crazy course or a very elementary one,” said my father.

On her first midterm in analysis, the part on logic, my mother received a ninety-two, and the highest grade, as announced by the professor, had been a ninety-four; but my mother came home thinking that one question marked wrong was really right. The question was worth four points.

I don’t think my father would have said anything since a ninety-two was a very good grade. But someone had gotten a better grade. So my father insisted, despite my mother’s misgivings, that my mother take her paper to the professor after the next class and show him his mistake. My mother reluctantly promised she would.

The next day after class my mother reported to my father that she had seen the man and he had admitted she should have been given the extra points.

“But I’m sorry I listened to you,” my mother said. “What difference do four points make when you already have a ninety-two? I felt silly complaining to him about the grade. I’m not going to do that again.”

“Oh, you’re not, are you?”
"No, I'm not. I'm the one that's going to school, and I'm old enough to make my own decisions. I didn't like the way the professor acted either."

What do you mean?"

"Well, he's a very autocratic person. I don't think he liked it at all to have me challenge his grade, especially when it already was a ninety-two."

My father was instantly alert. "Did he say anything to you?"

"No, he didn't say anything. It's the way he looked," my mother said. "I think touchy people should be left alone and not antagonized. He's like that professor you told me about—the one you had in graduate school—the prima donna."

"Oh," said my father, "one of those."

"Yes, he's always insulting the class and he sneers when anyone asks what he considers a stupid question, and he smokes in class and then points to the no-smoking sign if any student lights a cigarette. He's a real tyrant."

"Oh," said my father, "why the devil didn't you tell me all this before? You're right, that kind should be stayed away from. You shouldn't have gone to see him. He may have it in for you now."

The whole rest of the quarter my father sweated out the course, sure that the professor had it in for my mother. My father would question my mother closely for signs of favor or disfavor on the part of the tyrant. My father would also ask her about what they were doing now in the course, whether the prof had handed back any homework yet (he never did hand back any homework, though he was very strict about its being handed in), and what the next midterm would cover. He was especially anxious on the evenings when my mother was doing homework and couldn't get a problem. "Get up and walk around," my father would tell her, "don't just sit there. You can't force your mind to think. Remember the great discoverers. They made their discoveries not at their desks but when they were doing something else, wheeling baby carriages or playing golf."

"I'm past wheeling baby carriages—I hope," said my mother, "and I don't play golf."

"Don't try to be funny," replied my father. "You know what I mean. You just sit there at your desk and sit there and think that the answer will come because you'll force it to come. But it won't. Get up and walk around at least."

"I'm just not a pacer like you," my mother said. "Some people are pacers, some are not."

"Then at least get up and get yourself a cup of coffee."

"I just had one a minute ago."

"Then explain the problem to me. Sometimes that helps."

And my mother would explain. My father wouldn't say a word. I don't think he understood much of it. His theory was that he didn't have to understand, or even listen, that the mere telling it to him by my mother, her mere voicing it, would help. And sometimes it did. Sometimes while talking to him, she would suddenly say, "Wait a minute, that gives me an idea," and she'd go back to work and the proof would come.

As a last resort, when the proof wouldn't come to my mother even after she had worked on it all evening and slept on it too (my father was also a great believer in the benefits of sleep because the great dis-
coverers had said etc., etc.)—when early the next morning she would go back to the problem not freshly but wearily, knowing that it was due by class time—then as a last resort my father would insist that once again my mother state the problem to him, despite her reluctance, and this time he would get my mother to classify the problem, give it a name. Then he would go to the textbook, and attempt to locate the problem. He would read out theorems and ask if they were relevant; he would try at the very least to narrow the problems down to one section of the book and then make my mother read it.

"No," my mother would keep saying, "no, it hasn’t anything at all to do with that," as my father read aloud another theorem.

"But it's getting close, you'll have to admit that," my father would claim.

My mother would wearily admit it. "Then it can’t be as irrelevant as you say, can it?" my father would ask and get ready to go on to still another theorem. "The trouble with you is that you don’t ever use an index in a book. I sometimes wonder if you know how."

"I don’t use the index in this book because I don’t use the book, that’s the reason," said my mother.

"And I don’t use the book because teacher said it’s a bad book," my father would mimic.

"He never said that."

"But he never uses the book, does he? It’s a multiple-section course. I bet he was out-voted in the textbook committee and he is taking his small-souled revenge. I know his kind. But let’s get back to work. I don’t have much more time."

My father would read out a few more theorems. Suddenly my mother would stop him and turn to her desk. My father would go away. Ten minutes later my mother would say suddenly, "I think I’ve got it."

"Of course."

"It has nothing to do with what you read to me."

"That’s what you think," my father would reply.

My mother studied very hard the last two weeks before the final exam, especially the last weekend when she made an intensive review of the entire course. During those last two days my father insisted that she not work at the desk in the living room but go up to their bedroom, where she could close the door and be safe from noise and interruption and especially Peggy’s "Mommy’s." He made up special rules, the most important of which was that we could go upstairs only to use the bathroom. When my father discovered that Peggy was using her frequent trips to the bathroom to contact my mother, the rule was changed so that Peggy was not allowed to go upstairs at all unless my father accompanied her. "But she needs me," my mother would say, to which my father replied, "Two days of seeing you only at meals is not going to ruin her personality."

My father was unusually nice to us those two days, taking us out on long walks and even stopping for ice cream, an unheard-of thing, for he always said that a walk was a walk and not a trip to the ice cream store. Each time we did stop for ice cream on our walks those two days, my father warned us that these were special occasions and we mustn’t think that he was setting a precedent.

Those two days he also prepared the meals, simple ones, mostly out of
cans, and afterwards he would clean up and do the dishes. My mother would come down to eat with us, and my father would ask her how things were going.

"He covered an enormous amount of material, I'm just beginning to realize how much," my mother would say, shaking her head back and forth.

"Oh, you're always gloomy about exams. You've shaken your head over every exam you've ever taken. The only thing left is for you to get one of your headaches. Have you got one yet?"

"Not yet," my mother answered, "but if you keep talking about it, I will."

"Oh, you'll get one anyway, whether I say anything about it or not, and this way you'll be able to blame it on me. Now go upstairs and hit the books, and I'll take care of things down here."

"Mommy isn't going upstairs now," Peggy said. "She promised to read me a story."

"After tomorrow she'll read you a dozen stories, Peg," my father said. "So many stories that you'll beg her to stop."

"She promised to read me a story now."

"I'll read you two stories, Peg," my father patiently (for him) proposed. "Just let me do the dishes."

"Mommy promised to read me a story now."

"All right," said my father, wiping his hands. "All right—I'll read you a story right now before I do the dishes. I'll read you two of them and you can choose both of them."

But it was to no avail. "Mommy promised to read to me. I want Mommy."

My father turned to my mother. "Damn you and your promises."

"That's all right," my mother said. "I'll read her one story and then go upstairs, it won't take me long."

"No, two stories. Daddy said two stories."

My father threw up his hands. "You see! You see the kind of person you're dealing with?"

I was home when my mother returned from the exam.

"You're late," my father said on seeing her. My father had been pacing up and down waiting for my mother.

"He let us stay longer than I expected he would," my mother said.

"Did you stay to the very end?"

"Until he took my paper away from me."

"He literally took it away?"

"Oh, yes, he came down the aisle at the end of the extra thirty minutes and took the papers off our desks. I'm glad I stayed to the end anyway."

"What do you mean you're glad? What do you expect... an A for effort?"

"Don't be silly. I managed to finish another problem in the extra time."

"How was the exam?"

"I don't know. And I didn't stay around afterwards to talk it over with anyone."

"That's bad. If you don't know how well you did, it means you probably didn't do well. It means it was probably harder than you realized."

"I didn't find it that hard. It was just so long. It covered—"

"Yes, I know," my father broke in. "It covered an enormous amount of material, you both seem to take great pride in that, he in presenting so much material, you in covering it—or in trying to cover it. I'll bet
this prof isn’t being given the advanced courses he craves, and so he tries to enlarge his course to cover the courses above him too. It’s an old dodge. It’s like refusing to use the textbook because it’s not the text you chose. Same mentality.”

“I think I’d like some coffee,” my mother said.

“Help yourself,” said my father, “it’s on the stove.”

Apparently my mother’s vacation, her time of being waited on and catered to, was over.

“Look,” said my mother, raising her cup of coffee. “Look at my hand. I can hardly pick up anything with it. I never wrote so fast and furiously in my life. . . . I think I’ll go upstairs and take a hot bath, that’s what I feel like.”

“When will you know how you did?”

“He said he’d have the grades posted by tomorrow afternoon.”

“What? Only a day to grade exams?”

“It’s easy for him,” said my mother, “he doesn’t give any partial credit.”

My mother put her hand to her head. “I think I’ll go upstairs now.”

“Ah,” my father said. “So you got one after all.”

“I had one when I got up this morning.”

“Well, I suppose it’s a good sign. It means everything’s normal.”

The next afternoon my father came home early from the library to wait for my mother. He waited a long time, pacing up and down, up and down, stopping at the slightest sound from the kitchen. My parents always used the back door when going to and from campus, and they always walked unless the weather was bad.

He kept pacing up and down the room, up and down, wiping his face with his handkerchief, and I heard him mumble something about maybe my mother was afraid to come home, she had done so badly.

Once he happened to turn suddenly in his pacing and I was in the way. His big burly figure plowed into me and sent me sprawling, and then he looked down at me in surprise as if he couldn’t understand how I happened to be down on the floor. “Are you playing games or something?” he snapped at me. “Is this a time to be playing games?”

Suddenly as if out of nowhere my mother was there, standing by the kitchen door. We both were astonished that she had come in without our hearing her.

Both of us tried to read her face, but as usual, this was impossible; my mother unlike my father simply didn’t show her feelings that way. “Too repressed,” was my father’s explanation. “And you know by whom,” he would add darkly, the usual reference to my grandmother.

“Well, for God’s sake, what happened?” my father demanded of my mother.

“He was late posting the grades,” my mother said. “And then I stopped in the bookstore.”

“What! Do you mean to say that while we waited here for you, you went to the bookstore?”

“It’s on the way, and you told me we were out of envelopes. And then there were some books—”

“Stop! stop!” my father cried. He took a deep breath. “Suppose you just tell me what grade you got.”

My mother gave a timid little mile. “He gave me an A—though I’m sure I didn’t deserve it.”

My father stood there in silence
wiping his face with his handkerchief. Then he cleared his throat, a sign he was getting ready to make an important announcement.

Finally he said, “I’m glad you got an A, whether you think you deserve it or not. You never think you deserve anything, but I’m not interested in that now. What I am interested in is this. I don’t care whether you go on with math or not. But if you do go on, it will have to be without my help. I’m not going to sweat out your midterms or your final—not even your weekly problems. I just can’t take that sort of thing any more. Do I make myself clear?”

My mother didn’t smile until he was safely out of sight, and then she turned her head to hide it from me.

My father was as good as his word for three or four weeks of the new quarter.

Then one Saturday my mother seemed to be spending the whole day at her desk. I noticed my father glancing in her direction but keeping his distance. Finally, in the late afternoon, he broke his silence.

“What’s the matter? Stuck on a problem?”

My mother nodded yes.

“Have you had some coffee?”

“Yes, I’ve had some coffee.”

“Good, you’ve had some coffee. Now let’s see.” Here he seemed to have to think a moment. “. . . Yes, we could begin by your explaining the problem to me. . . . Yes, and then—”

It was just as if it all hadn’t happened before.

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**Up the Road**

*David Conford*

The self-sufficiency of the progressed soul
Entrances the dung-footed husbandman
With its stellar, distant perfection. He
Is regular, regular as red cocks
At daybreak observing the foreign road
As merely distance from one stinking barn
To another. Suspicions of erratic style
Disquiet at first John Farmer’s sleep, but then
Become glimpsed vision, His eyes now stunned
Can never shut. His old horizons fret him
With shadows that approach but do not touch,
And even the maples speak a new tongue
In a twilight turned scarlet and strange.
Top Spinning

• Martha Bennett Stiles

My son is a New Englander, like his father. I have taken for granted that he would conceal my own Gray background from his true Blue friends, but there are other differences between us that jolt me.

My childhood memories are clear, which I had expected to help me understand my son. Do not do unto others as you would have them do unto you, said Shaw: they probably have different tastes. In avoiding my parents’ mistakes, I by no means infal- libly rack up a better score than theirs, for my son is not myself at any age. I do not know why every time I am reminded of this it should be a discovery.

The other day I set out to the drugstore when David (our son is named for my father) was lounging on our porch working a jigsaw puzzle. "Want to go with me?" I asked. "I’ll buy you an ice cream cone."

One corner of his mouth drew down appraisingly as he eyed first me, then the puzzle. "You’ll bring some home for supper anyway, won’t you?"

"Yes," I winced.

"I guess not," he decided, glancing this time from his bare feet to the shadeless sidewalk. "It’s too hot downtown."

"I agree with you there." I tried to say it heartily, and to set off without betraying pique or disappointment.

"Hey, Mom, wait a minute!"

Pleased, I turned at the gate.

"Will you bring me a comic book?"

We try to influence our son’s reading without resorting to edict. (The watermelon seed will lie in your open hand forever, says the proverb, but try to grasp it tightly and it squirts to hell-and-gone, as I should know.) We surround David with good books, whereas trash has to come out of his allowance.

"Go get your dime," I commanded, determined to be patient. Do comic books still cost a dime?

David scraped one foot—which it was too much trouble to shoe for the sake of accompanying me—against the other. "I’ve spent all my allowance till Friday," he said.

"Better wait till Friday for your comic book then," I replied somewhat heavy-hearted. One day I overheard David’s friend Skinny Adams complaining to him, "My Old Man’s a stingy devil!" When he’s older he’ll say bastard, I had thought, and felt sorry for Jack Adams, who is more than generous with his family. I had waited to hear David praise his own good allowance, but he only said, "Oh, well, when we’re grown up, we’ll have our own money."

Now he nodded glumly, and we went our ways, that is, in opposite directions.

I myself did not have an allowance as a child, but my father never went anywhere without bringing me back a present. It’s true that since, unlike David, I would never have asked my
father for anything, these presents weren’t always things I wanted, but once in a while he scored.

The summer I was seven, for instance, my father gave me a spinning top. I worked with it a great deal. I wanted to get so I could control the direction of its ultimate fall, and I used to smooth out a large flat place in the dust so that after it was still I could study the path I had made. I wanted to see how long I could make it spin at a time, and I used to count to myself as it whirled, always hoping to set new records.

The top played a tune when it gy-rated. It was silver colored and had a broken red stripe around it which when the top went fast enough flowed into itself like Little Black Sambo’s tigers. I watched that stripe by the hour.

I loved the top because it excited me to take a thing and set it moving, then watch it whirl and spin after I had freed it from myself. It was alive, and I had done it.

My father had tried to show me how to use the top when he gave it to me, but he was no good at it. He could never get the cord off fast enough. He took the top out of its box and tried it two or three times before I could get my hands on it, but the last little inch of cord always stopped the spin, and he got irritated. “You’ve got to snap it, like this,” I said, and I set it going perfectly the first time, as at that age we are always sure will happen. After that he never tried.

One day I was spinning the top in the back yard, squatting till my knees ached. It was hot and the dust the top stirred up streaked my sweaty legs, and I drew pictures on them with my finger. I had been watching a pair of stink bugs, too; they looked so much like their picture in my mother’s Book of Beetles that they had a magic charm for me, even though I knew it was dung they were rolling around in that amazingly perfect ball, and that I had better not touch them. I guess it says something profound about most human expectations that, even as a child, coming upon something that looked precisely as I had seen it drawn was a singular thrill.

But as I’ve said, in between the contemplation of beetles or my personal dirtiness, I was spinning my top.

When my father came up, I was counting and by the way the top was still going strong, not even tilting yet, it looked as if I were going to better my best number. But my father said, “Want to go get the mail with me?” and I had to stop counting and answer him, because he always had to be answered promptly.

As a small girl I felt very close to my father. At the same time that I believed every word he spoke was gospel, I believed that the faintest slights would cause him real anguish. On that assumption I pretended raptures over sparsely illustrated books he gave me, even when I had no intention of reading them, laughed like a claque at his dinner table stories, and lied to him frequently for his own protection. It was, I feel now, as if I sensed that there really was some terrible thing lying in wait for him, and that in protecting him from a dozen minor things every day I was really trying to ward off that other, which remained hidden from us both, but that I knew was lurking.

I hesitated only a moment on this particular afternoon before faking a delighted smile—he looked so sure he was offering a treat. Before start-
ing school, I had welcomed any excuse for a trip. It was riding the bus to town five days a week for a whole year that had made the drive old hat.

"Get your shoes on, then," said my father when I had accepted with the enthusiasm I deemed appropriate. "Get yourself cleaned up. You can't go with me dirty."

I hated shoes. This at least my son shares with me. To me the chief significance of my first year of school had been putting on shoes earlier in the season than otherwise would have been necessary. I dirtied up the bathtub and a couple of towels getting a lot of the dust off me and tore up my closet floor looking for the mate to the sneaker I had found back under my bed.

"Come on, I'm going," my father called from downstairs, and I heard the front door slam and the engine start. If I did not hurry, he would leave me, and all the detestable preparations would go for nothing. The ends of my untied laces went click, click on the stairs as I ran and almost tripped me, and my father grinned as I threw myself breathless into the car beside him. He liked to teach my mother and sister and me not to dawdle.

The car was hot from sitting in the sun, and I rolled down the window and let our wind blow in my face as I stared dreamily at the woods we passed. At that time I thought the trees were aware of me, even imagining they would be hurt if I passed without speaking, a thing we were never allowed to do with grown-ups, after all. Of course I was in an embarrassing situation. My father, who did not believe in fairies or ghosts or God, would certainly scoff if I spoke to trees; yet I believed that the trees would be distressed if I seemed to snub them. Perhaps I was only pretending so hard I convinced myself I believed, the way I had about Santa Claus every Christmas since my father had explained to me that it was really your father, but at any rate I put my hand out of the window below the level where it might have been seen inside the car, and pretending I was just letting it hang in the wind, waved to them all.

"Don't stick your hand outside the car," my father said, "You'll get it knocked off one day."

I put my hand in my lap. Thereafter I concentrated on willing the trees my message. HELLO--HELLO I telepathized, HELLO--HELLO, all the time we were passing any trees. After about a mile of what I thought was companionable silence, my father said, "Look here, if you're going to ride with me, you ought to talk to me. What are you going to do when you get big enough to go out with boys if you haven't had any practice carrying on a conversation? If you just sit there like a lump, a boy won't want to go out with you again." I felt cold inside at the awful prospect in store for me, the coming of a time when, willy-nilly, I would have to go out with boys.

After desperate concentration I said feebly, "What was it the captain said that time the monkey got loose in the mess?" My father had been in the navy during the world war; he had a fund of marvelous stories he used to tell when he was feeling good, and I knew the monkey one just about by heart.

"No-ho," my father said. "You have to entertain me: I'm driving, that's my contribution. Think of something to say."

I could think of nothing.
"Tell me what you’ve seen that interests you, what you’ve been doing."

I ran over all those things as rapidly as the semi-paralyzed state of my mind would permit. I had turned my back on my window now, so the trees would understand I just didn’t see them. I hadn’t been reading anything: I couldn’t admit that. It would badly disappoint my father that his most recent gifts were neglected. I had seen nothing out of the ordinary all day but the stink bugs. And all I had been doing was spinning my top, which it would be tactless to mention, since he could never get that cord off so it would whirl.

"I’ve been reading a tale about a cowboy," I said prissily, dreading lest he detect the story as comic book in origin. I was not allowed “funny books,” as we called them, and when I went to my friends’ houses I read all I could in a now-or-never spirit, because it was vital at school to be conversant with several leading figures.

"That’s fine," my father waited.

"He is captured by Indians," I continued, trying to remember how. "His horse leaps over his pen in the night and bites through this cowboy’s bonds—"

"Don’t use this unless you’ve got the cowboy there on your lap," interrupted my father. "Say the cowboy."

"Yes, sir. The horse bites through the cowboy’s bonds, and they sneak out of the camp together without waking any of the Indians, but just as it looks as if he’s going to escape—"

"It’s es-cape, honey."

"Es-cape. Just as they think they’re going to get away, the—"

"Here we are," my father said.

When we had gotten the mail, we stopped at the drugstore and picked up some ice cream to take home. My father let me pick what kind and I chose vanilla, because I knew he didn’t like my favorite, which was chocolate. I liked vanilla too, I liked all ice cream. It made my stomach sing just to hold the cold box in my lap and know I’d get some the minute we were home (for my mother always put down whatever she was doing and shared out my father’s treats right away).

That particular day I remember it was embroidery my mother put down. She had a pair of hoops, and she used to embroider many-colored flowers onto table runners and things. I used to sit quietly, sometimes all afternoon, watching her fingers hold on to the needle while it stuck in and out of the flowers, and the flowers grew. It wasn’t sewing but magic: colors, flowers, something beautiful appearing that hadn’t been there before. My mother used to tell me fairy stories while the needle worked.

Sometimes she would be telling me a fearfully gripping one, about the drops of blood that cried out to the murdered child’s mother from the stairs, or the prince who put his bride’s wicked stepmother in a keg of nails and rolled her down a hill, when my father would come in with some distraction he though I should enjoy. He couldn’t understand my sitting around the house. "Want to walk in the woods with me?" he would say, or "Want to help me paint shelves?" and I never said no, because he mightn’t have understood that it wasn’t that I preferred my mother’s company to his, but just that I wanted to hear the end of the story. My mother was never hurt. "You go along," she’d say; "I’ll finish telling you at bedtime."

I loved my mother’s bedtime
stories. When I had been quite small, I had also liked bedtime rough-hous-
ing with my father, even though it interfered with these stories. My fa-
ther and I would get down on all 
fours on the rug and roar at each 
other, or he would toss me in the 
air over the big double bed. He 
would toss me up and catch me, and 
one in a while he would miss on 
purpose and I would bounce on the 
bed, shrieking with excitement, and 
my father would laugh and toss me 
again. Of course by the time I was 
seven I had too much dignity to get 
down on the floor and play lion, but 
my father still tossed me sometimes 
—which wasn’t fun anymore either. 
At seven I was too big to be caught 
comfortably in his hands, although 
he was a large man. When I came 
down heavy out of the air, his hard 
fingers would cut into me, and I 
would grunt, then change my expres-
sion quickly to one of pleasure. I 
thought it would be a crushing blow 
to his pride to have to realize that 
he wasn’t big enough for something. 

It was bad enough when he talked 
about the things for which he was 
getting too old. That always made 
me feel so sorry for him I could have 
cried. God help me, I realize now he 
was only forty that summer. He 
would sigh and say he was getting 
too old to do something, and I would 
imagine his approaching helpless-
ness, even though I knew it was a 
long, long way off; and worse still 
his death, although that was scarcely 
imaginable, it was such a long way 
off, and pity would sting my eyes, 
and make my nose water and ears 
hum and stomach move in repudia-
tion of the thought. At such times I 
felt a tremendous need to make up 
to my father for the approaching trag-
edy of his death, for of course like 
all children, I was immortal. 

Then suddenly my father was 
killed. It was in an accident on his 
way home from work. I don’t remem-
ber how I was told; my memory of 
the day starts with astonishing clarity 
just after it had been explained to 
me. I remember the pearl choker my 
mother was wearing, and the color 
of the border (red) of the handker-
chief she was sobbing into. I remem-
ber just how my older sister’s hands 
lay, not touching, in her lap, her face 
still numb as she sat stiff in a 
straight-backed chair, not yet accept-
ing it. Neither had any comfort to 
spare me, and I turned and walked 
perfectly quietly to my own room. 

I could not believe it either, and 
the grief I expected of myself did 
not come. I thought that looking at 
something connected with my father 
would press consciousness upon; 
something to say see, this is what is 
missing; he will never use this tool 
again. He will never sit in this chair. 
That pipe, which he smoked every 
night, he will never hold again. I 
thought in this way I would make 
myself realize the tragedy, for I was 
not crying yet.

I looked at my top, which he had 
given me, lying inert on its side in 
front of the shelf of toys and books 
that he had given me, its cord lying 
limp beside it on the floor. He had 
given me almost everything in that 
room. 

It was then that I lay on my face 
and wept, for it was then that I knew 
I was not sorry he was dead. 

Of course I wonder, when I re-
member my elaborate protection of 
my father from my lack of affection 
for him, what my son thinks of me. 
Not much, I thought the day he 
scorned me for his jigsaw puzzle; and 
I’ve often thought it. Not even
enough to deceive me; I at least cared enough to do that, and I cared almost nothing. But small David is no cavalier; he will never soften indifference with manners or mask his true feelings for anyone’s sake.

I trudged along through the July heat to the drugstore feeling disconsolate and a weak sentimentalist by turns. I collected my prescription, then turned to the ice cream counter for our supper dessert. Like his grandfather, David prefers vanilla. And, like his grandfather’s, my tastes become less catholic with the years. I like chocolate, and I got a quart. Then I bought a pint of vanilla too. I admit I walked faster going home. Why let ice cream melt?

David had gone inside. “Put this in the refrigerator for me, will you, son?” I asked, and gave him the quart from my bag. Though he must have been disappointed that it was chocolate he did not seem especially surprised. He grinned at me as if he would have done the same, and took the carton out to the kitchen.

I tried not to look triumphant when he returned, and I produced the pint of vanilla. “You and I will have this right now, in defiance of the heat,” I said, breaking our house rule that all persons under eight shall have only apples or carrots between meals.

“Yippee!” said David, and that was all he said. We ate the whole pint in silence.

When David had drained the last drippings into his spoon and swallowed them, he leaned back in his chair with a satisfied sigh. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then said, “Gee, Mom, you wanna see the puzzle I finished while you were gone? It’s George Washington crossing the Delaware.” I looked at him.

“Skinny Adams was bragging on himself for having a president’s name,” he added loftily, as we walked toward the porch; “but I told him nobody had as many presidents as Virginia. I told him that’s where you were from, Mom.”

I gripped his Yankee shoulder, but only briefly, for his spins are dazzling when I let him go.

**Encounter**

- **Bruce Berger**

With winds adrift in dream two strangers note
Each other’s approaching car, their habit’s gaze
Turned by slow hypnosis of the eye,
As each vague shape is lifted from the haze
The rush of metal focuses a face
That holds them as a vision, and they float
In the grip of some half-wished fatality.
Casually their stares consume the road
As toward some final homecoming embrace,
And merge in brief undying liebestod.
Bishop O’Hara

• Claude Stanush

Gertie Gallagher panted over to the big plate glass window of Paddy’s Bar and pressed her nose against it. A look, nothing more. My God, she just had to stop a minute and give her boiling body some relief. Her dress was already wringing wet, and not even half way home. Against her nose the glass felt cool, cool and comforting.

Inside the bar the light was dim (that’s the way Paddy like it, cozy), but by cupping her hands around her eyes, Gertie could see almost everything: the sawdust-covered floor, the people at the tables, even the photographs of Big Jim Fitzimmons and President Kennedy (bordered in black), which hung high up on the backbar. The long mahogany-stained frontbar was strung solid with shirts, white, blue denim, loud sporty ones, with Paddy’s head bobbing up every now and then among them.

While she watched, big frosted mugs of beer, flowing over with froth, went sliding down the counter to eager fingers. It had been a blazer of a day. When she had stepped out on the sidewalk from work, it was like stepping out on a giant hotplate; even right here, under Paddy’s tent of an awning, she could feel the heat from the cement coming up through the soles of her shoes.

There was something special about Paddy’s beer, though it was certainly the same beer that was served at all the other bars, and every frosted, foaming mug that went sliding down the counter made the dry wad in Gertie’s parched throat seem bigger, and bigger, and bigger—until she didn’t know how much longer she could stand it. She thirsted, oh, how she thirsted; every ounce of her one hundred and seventy-six pounds thirsted. But she wasn’t going in, she wasn’t giving in. This time she was sticking by her guns!

Hey, there was Goof Lavelle and Jack Tyner, at the end of the line, facing her. And Rosey Franciosa. The other men standing at the bar, with their backs to her, she wasn’t sure of, though the fellow at the extreme right, with the wide shoulders, looked for all the world like Tommy Ryan. Tommy Ryan? It couldn’t be. Tommy was supposed to be somewhere on the high sea, on an oil tanker. Yet who else had shoulders like that? It had to be him. “I’ll bet half this week’s paycheck it is. He’ll turn around in a minute, I’ll prove it is.” If it was Tommy Ryan, it wouldn’t be long either before he would be plunking down a ten spot and setting up the whole house. “Hail Mary, full of grace, don’t let me go in.”

A yell came from the far side of the bar and Paddy flipped on the TV. It was mounted high up in a corner, so everybody could see it. Gertie could see it too, though the sound coming through the glass was a little scraggly. Two boxers were slugging it out, one in green trunks and one in orange. Gertie’s eyes remained
fixed on them: she liked a good prize-fight. Whenever one of the fighters landed a solid blow, a chorus of cheers arose, loud and lusty, from his fans within the bar. Judging from the loudness of the yells, each fighter had about the same number of fans. That was the way it always was at Paddy's whenever there was some contest, because the people who drank there liked things even, and that was another thing Gertie liked about the place. It was a furious, lashing fight, with lots of cheers and boos back and forth, and for a few moments Tommy and her thirst were forgotten.

Then something connected.

"By golly, the Bishop! He's on tonight, right after the fight."

Gertie looked at her wristwatch. The Bishop would be on in exactly ten minutes. She couldn't possibly get home by then, not even if she ran all the way.

There was no choice. Paddy wouldn't mind. And better to see the Bishop here than not at all.

She stepped inside.

Nobody even noticed her, they were so preoccupied with the fight. She took a seat at the only vacant table in the place, to the far left, away from the TV. From here she could see, in profile, the man with the wide shoulders. He wasn't Tommy, though he sure did have shoulders like him. None of the men in the bar was Tommy. In a way she was relieved. There were six or seven other women in the place, all sitting at tables with men and all cheering and booing with them. Let 'em. She was here to watch Bishop O'Hara, nothing else. She took off her hat, set it to one side on the table, leaned back in her chair, and mopped her forehead with her handkerchief.

Though it was cooler here in the bar (the breeze blowing from the air conditioner was making the feather on her hat dance), it wasn't as cool as it had seemed from the outside; this was just one of those days.

Paddy spotted her and waved; she waved back. It was amazing the way he could keep his eyes on the whole place, all at once, yet give everybody special attention. It was amazing too, considering his size, the way he could work behind the bar, drawing beer with one hand and clanging the cash register with the other, grabbing a bottle of bourbon off the backbar while reaching under the frontbar for the ice, sliding from one end of the counter to the other as if he were on grease, rattling the cocktail shaker on the way. In just about a minute he'd be at her table, asking her what she'd have. . . . And sure enough in just about a minute he was there, looking like one of his kegs of beer with an apron tied around it.

"Nothing today, Paddy. I just came in to see Bishop O'Hara. I hope you don't mind?"

"Mind? Of course not." He was squinting at her incredulously. "But nothing to drink, on a day like this? Yer must be outa your mind, honey. Just look at cha. Yer boiling over."

"I know. But I just can't. I'm on a diet. I gotta lose weight."

He roared. "C'mon now; if ya don't put some liquid in ya pretty quick, yer gonna burn out a bearing. This one'll be on the house."

"No, really, Paddy, I can't. I'll settle for a glass of water."

"Okay, if ya say so; but nobody ought to drink water on a day like this."

When he brought it, she took a couple swallows of the water. It was awful. But that's the way it had to
be, for what was the use of it, walking to and from work, skipping the movies and the hair dresser’s on Saturdays, scrimping every penny to go to Miami next month if she was going to appear on the beach looking like a big, godawful lumpy potato, like last Sunday when she put on her bathing suit and stood in front of the mirror? Any man taking one look at her would turn and run the other way, and she wouldn’t blame him! For a brief moment she hated Paddy and his beer, because wasn’t it coming into Paddy’s that was the cause of it all?

The prizefight ended—in a draw. Catcalls and Bronx cheers filled the bar, as if everybody there had paid good money to see somebody busted.

“It was a fix,” yelled one.

“Yeah, they was playing patty cake.”

“They oughtn’t to match punks like that.”

“You’re right. Neither one of ’em could punch ‘is way outa a paper bag.”

“C’mon now,” Paddy yelled above the hubbub, “cut out the yak! If anybody wants any drinks they better order ’em now, cause Bishop O’Hara’s gonna be on right after the commercial.”

Gertie wryly took a sip of her water.

On the screen the Yankee second baseman was plowing paths across his lathered face with a new, improved Super-Edge blade. Then the screen went blank and there was a moment of expectant silence. Goof Lavelle noticed Gertie and waved to her. She waved back. Nice guy, Goof, if only he’d bathe more often.

A bust of the Blessed Virgin appeared on the screen; in the background a choir intoned a hymn, softly, fervently. From the Virgin the camera panned to the full-length figure of Bishop Dennis O’Hara. Skullcap on his head, a dark scarlet cape draped over his shoulders, his arms outstretched like Jesus beckoning to the little children, the Bishop stood straight and steady, statuesque, smiling. There was loud applause from the studio audience, with Paddy’s patrons joining in. “Thank you, thank you,” the Bishop said, and a hush came over both audiences. The men in Paddy’s who had caps on took them off and set them reverently beside their glasses.

As the camera moved in for a closeup, the smile faded from the Bishop’s face. “My friends,” he began solemnly. His face was so close now that Gertie could see a small mole on his cheek. “My friends, the past few weeks we have been considering the Seven Capital Sins, sometimes called the Seven Deadly Sins. They are called Capital, you will recall, because they are not only sins or flaws in themselves but are the sources of so many other sins. . . .”

“Could you turn up the volume a little,” Gertie called.

“Sure thing,” said Paddy, reaching up and turning one of the knobs. “Don’t you want to sit up closer?”

Gertie shook her head. “I’m fine here; thanks.”

“Shhh.” From the back of the tavern.

“We have already discussed Pride, Covetousness, Lust, and Anger; and tonight we shall take up Gluttony—the very word is foul-sounding, is it not? And it is a foul word, a foul sin. Repulsive! . . .

“I can hear you saying, ‘Me a glutton! No! Oh, I may overeat now and then. My waistline may be expanding more than it should. But a
glutton, no! Gluttony was the sin of the Romans, those gross, voluptuous, corrupt Romans who gorged themselves until they were ready to burst, then retched so that they could gorge themselves some more.' Yes, I can hear you saying that, because few Americans today really think they are guilty of the sin of Gluttony. But if you say 'Oh no!', I say 'Oh yes!' . . ."

"Yes-s-s-s." The last sounds rolled out of his mouth and across the room like the sibilant whirling of surf.

There was a pause. The Bishop was staring right at Gertie.

"Re-e-e-ad all about it! Hat-t-tchet murder in Gren-titch Village!"

A pimply-faced, teen-aged boy wearing a high-crowned red hat and carrying a bundle of newspapers under his arm had appeared out of nowhere and was standing by the bar, screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Shhh!"

"Dammit, shut up!"

"Re-e-e-ad all about the poet killed in his bed." The boy held up one of his papers broadside. Large, black headlines echoed his shrill cry.

"No, dammit, no!"

"Paddy, can't you get this babbling idiot outa here?"

"C'mon, Nick, scram," said Paddy. "Can't ya see Bishop O'Hara's on TV?"

"How th' hell should I know! I sell newspapers!"

The boy silently threaded his way between and around tables, shoving papers into faces. A man standing at the bar called to him. "Hey, Kid, over here! . . . Gimme three o' those papers. . . . Keep the change."

"Isn't it shameful how we will diet for our health's sake, or to be attractive to someone of the opposite sex—and yet how many of us are willing to control our appetites for God's sake? . . ."

It's the truth; the revolting, nauseating, godawful truth, Gertie thought. She ate too much; sometimes downright hoggishly when it was something she liked, like mashed potatoes with gravy or lemon meringue pie; she knew it. And when did she start dieting? Only after she had looked into the mirror and saw not the body that God had given her but a big fat dumpling.

"In most instances those who eat too much commit only a venial sin, . . ." (Well, that was some consolation.)

"Furthermore, eating to excess is not the only form of Gluttony, or even the worst. There is another kind of Gluttony which is far more serious. Which may not only be a mortal sin in itself but may also, as one of the Capital Sins, lead to other mortal sins, to the most heinous and deadly of the mortal sins. Yes, I think you know what kind of Gluttony I am talking about. Intoxication; drunkenness-s-s-s. . . ."

Again the Bishop paused.

Gertie lowered her eyes, wondering if by some gift of the Holy Ghost the Bishop could read her thoughts; she hoped not, because even while he was looking right at her, she was being consumed by desire for a frosty schooner. And if she had one, wouldn't she eventually be wanting another? And then another? And wasn't that it, wasn't that her sin, that she didn't know when to stop?

The man who had bought the three newspapers lurched over from the bar to Gertie's table. He was about middle-aged and beefy, with a big, paunchy stomach jutting over his belt like a cliff. He wore a red-and-yellow striped sports shirt and car-
ried a paper sack which he sat on the table on top of his newspapers. "Wanta read about the hatchet murder?" he asked.

Gertie shook her head, though she hardly heard him, "I'm not trying to sell you a paper. It's free. Here." Unfolding one of the papers he pushed it toward her.

Her eyes went back to Bishop O'Hara. "Okay," the man said. "You don't hav-ta read it. Mind if I set down here at your table?"

Gertie wagged her head: she did mind, but she didn't want to start an argument now; she wanted to hear what else the Bishop had to say. "It's a terrible sin, drunkenness. It robs a man of his reason—the most precious gift that God has given to man." The Bishop's eyes were flashing, his whole body trembling. "It cuts the reins by which a man controls himself, lets loose the wild beast that is within every man. It stimulates the passions and arouses illicit desires. Oh, how many sins against the Sixth and Ninth Commandments are due to intoxication! ..."

"Bull! A lot of bull!" The man at Gertie's table roared it across the room. "Uh-h-h." There was a loud, collective gasp. Gertie's arm jumped, almost knocking over her water glass. "Bull! Nothing but bull!" "Shhh!" Someone was hammering on the table with a mug. "Shut him up, can't you, Paddy!" "He better shut up or I'll throw him outa here!"


Paddy scattered over, his face flushed, his arms swinging like a prizefighter coming out of his corner. "Okay, that's enough. Now button up yer lip or out ya go!"

"It's a free country, ain't it?" the man with the newspapers growled. "There's no law against a body saying 'bull' if he wants to."

"For God's sake, Paddy, let him have it!"

"Not in my bar ya can't! And not to Bishop O'Hara!"

"Says who?"

"Says me! Now just one more word outa ya—and out ya go!"

"God created man out of mud, but into that mud He breathed an immortal soul; so while man belongs in one way to the earth his ultimate destiny is Heaven. That is man's predicament, his despair and his glory—that he is half brute and half angel. And the Big Question is whether the brute shall dominate him, or the angel!"

"Bull! Bull! Bull!"

"Okay, ya asked for it," said Paddy, grabbing the man by the arm.

The two bodies twisted and thudded against each other like mastodons, Paddy was trying to lock the man's arms behind him. He might have succeeded if he hadn't slipped on a swath of sawdust. The other man jerked free.

A chubby hand reached into the paper sack on the table. Gertie saw the glint of shiny metal. "Oh, God!" she screamed.

"And you asked for it," the man said, aiming the pistol at Paddy. The bartender stood with his mouth open, his knobby hands drooped to his sides.

Not a muscle moved anywhere in the bar. Every eye was on the gun. "Don't shoot, please don't shoot." Gertie's throat was so tight the words stuck there like balls in a pipe.

"You, you put that gun away,
said Paddy. "I don't want no trouble in here."

"I don't want no trouble either; I'm just warning you," the man said. "Now"—motioning with the pistol toward the bar—"you get back o' there and mind your own business—and nobody'll get hurt."

Paddy hesitated but moved back of the bar where he stood, his hands outstretched upon the counter, like a statue.

Returning to his seat, the man shifted his chair so that he could watch the whole bar; he still held his pistol. "What you looking at me for?"—to the faces staring at him. "Look at him"—pointing to the Bishop; "keep your eyes on him 'n keep your seats 'n nobody'll get hurt." To Paddy he said, "If you please, I'll have another double beer."

Paddy brought him a king-sized mug. He picked it up and drank a quarter of it without stopping.

"When a man drinks to excess, he is letting the brute in him rule him. Nay, he is worse than a brute! For the brute does follow the law of nature, eating and drinking only what he needs. Whereas the intemperate man flaunts the natural law, gorging himself until he is bloated. He wades and wallows in the muck...."

"Muck, schmuck."

Eyes moved furtively, nervously.

"Muck, schmuck!"

But not an arm or leg so much as twitched.

What a bunch of sheep, Gertie thought. He's committing blasphemy and nobody has guts enough to say or do anything. Why doesn't somebody defend the Bishop! She looked over at Paddy. He was looking intently at the TV screen, as if he hadn't heard. A good Catholic he was!

If I were a man, Gertie thought, I'd stand up and defend the Bishop. Lifting her water glass to her lips with a gesture of defiance, she tilted it all the way until she was sucking in empty air. Oh, if only she were a man!

"Bartender," called the man with the pistol; "the lady here needs a beer. Would you bring her one please; a double one; it's on me."

"No, no," Gertie started to protest, for as much as she wanted one right now she didn't want it from him, this brute, this blasphemer; but the words only gurgled in her throat and when Paddy brought her the brew, looking at her quizzically, all she could do was nod. The man shoved a bill toward Paddy. "Take the lady's out of this—and bring me another double one, with a whisky chaser."

"Modern psychiatrists—and oh. how smug they are because they think they are so modern!—tell you not to repress your impulses, that you'll injure your psyche if you do. But I tell you—and God tells you—"; shouting the words the Bishop hurled his right arm forward like a baseball pitcher delivering a fast ball. "I tell you and God tells you. . . ."

The beefy man had finished his second mug and was smacking his lips.

"You gotta lotta nerve you have," he shouted back at the Bishop; "talking like you was God Almighty Himself." Raising his pistol, he took careful aim at the screen. . . .

"Uh-h-h!" The whole bar gasped again.

"I'm gonna give it to you. . . ."

Good God, Gertie thought, he's really going to shoot the Bishop. Somebody do something, quick!

The man lowered his gun. "No, I won't. Not yet. First I want my
friends here to get their fill o’ that glop.”

“So you want another drink! Well, go ahead and take it. Gratify your desires! Indulge yourself! Then take another, and still another—if you feel like it. . . .”

If he raised that pistol again and pointed it at the Bishop, she was going to do something. What, she didn’t know, but something. Oh, why did the Bishop have to talk on and on? The big clock above the backbar showed that his time was up. He ought to be through.

But the Bishop showed no sign of letting up. He was pitching his words faster and faster, hotter and hotter; Intemperance does not wait until the next world to exact its price; it takes its toll in this world here and now; in heart trouble, in high blood pressure, in diabetes, cirrhosis of the liver, and schizophrenia; all of these medical science can trace directly to excess of some kind. . . . Gertie’s heart sank. It was now five after seven; the program must have been extended to an hour. No telling what would happen before it ended.

And sure enough, in a few moments he was doing it again; sighting his gun at the Bishop. “I’ve had just about all of this claptrap I’m going to take, I’m gonna blast ’im."

No, he wasn’t! She’d stand up to him. For the Bishop. She would!—But suppose he blasted her instead? Oh God! Oh God! Oh God! She’d better get in the state of grace, quick. Bless me Father, for I have sinned. The Deadly Sins. Pride, Covetousness, Envy. Lies. Impure Thoughts. Gluttony, Gluttony. One, two, three, four, five beers; walking home tipsy; falling asleep on the couch without supper; waking up in the morning with a big head. . . . Would the Bishop be able to give her absolution over TV? It would be awful dying without the Last Sacraments! . . . But if she died defending the Bishop, wouldn’t she be dying for her faith? Wouldn’t that make her a martyr? Of course! And the souls of martyrs fly right over Purgatory into Heaven!

Gertie grabbed the mug in front of her and in a few quick gulps emptied it.

She stood up. And as she did, the man with the gun got up too. Oh-h-h. The bar was whirling around—and around—and around.

She was falling. The wages of sin are death. DEATH.

She grabbed the man’s arm. It was hairy, fleshy, worldly.

“Oh, excuse me,” she said, coming to her senses and realizing what she had done.

“Where you going?” He was looking at her suspiciously.

“To . . . to . . . to . . .” Her head was still spinning. “To . . . to . . . the ladies room. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay, but make it snappy.”

All the way to the ladies room she held her breath, as if by holding it, with her back to the brute, she was miraculously impregnable. But once through the door she closed it quickly and threw the latch; breathing again, deeply. Thank God!

Then she realized that she did, after all, have a pressing need. She took care of it, feeling much better.

Above the toilet there was a small window painted black. Gertie wondered whether she could squeeze through. Stepping up on the toilet seat, she tried the window. It was stuck. She hammered on it. It wouldn’t budge. Again she hammered on it, this time a lot harder, trembling for fear that that brute outside would
hear. Lucky for her that the Bishop’s voice had steadily grown in volume until it was now like thunder, reverberating through the tavern with such force that it was rattling the restroom door. With an “ugh-h,” she threw her whole weight against the sill, it gave.

For a moment she stood panting, measuring the window with her eyes, watching it grow smaller and smaller. Wouldn’t it be something if she got stuck in there, like a pig in a butchering chute, the victim of her own gluttony? God-awful thought! Still she couldn’t stand there on the seat forever. Any second that devil might come bursting through the door. And there she would be on the front page of the morning paper, lying crumpled on the floor in a pool of blood, the big, black headlines shouting her embarrassment to the world.

By standing on her tiptoes she could just get her shoulders through the window. “Well, here goes,” pushing out as far as she could.

The window overlooked a narrow alley. Peering up it, Gertie saw clumps of squatty garbage cans, nothing else. In the shadow of the buildings they looked dismal and ghostly, but there was no question what they were, the stench went up Gertie’s nose like a shot of sulphur. She looked the other way. There was someone, a man in a floppy hat and baggy pants taking things out of a can and loading them onto a pushcart. “Psst,” she hissed.

The man went on about his business.

Blowing herself up like a balloon, though she could hardly stand the foul air she was inhaling, she let go with all she had. “P-s-s-s-t!” The man looked up and around. Throwing caution to the wind, Gertie cupped her hands and yelled. “Here! Over here!”

The man saw her, “What d’ya want?”

“Emergency,” she screamed. “I need your help.”

The man shuffled over to the window. “What th’ hell’s the matter?”

In the dark shadows his face was only a blur.


“Bishop O’Hara? Who’s he? What th’ hell’s he doing in there?”

“I’ll explain later. Please, please go before it’s too late!”

“Sounds nutty to me.” The man turned and headed down the alley, at a walk.

“Hurry, please hurry,” Gertie yelled after him.

A cold chill came over her: that fellow wasn’t very bright; no telling where he was heading or when he would get there. And while Bishop O’Hara’s voice was still rattling the door, there was little comfort in that. She’d better get back—right away.

Steeling herself, she unlocked the door and plodded back to her table.

Things were about as she had left them: Paddy behind the bar, all eyes still glued on the Bishop, the man with the gun at her table with a double beer and a chaser in front of him, his eyes skipping around the bar.

“. . . The inebriate falling in the street, in the gutter, is the symbol, is he not, of fallen man? Of man who was given everything, Paradise itself, and yet wasn’t satisfied. Who ate of the Forbidden Fruit because he wanted more and more and more than what God, in His generosity, had already given him. Who, by his very
greed, brought about his own fall and his own corruption...."

"Bull! Bull! Bull!" cried the man with the gun.

"I came back as quick as I could," Gertie said, taking her seat.

"Good girl. You didn’t miss much." He took a swig of his beer. "You don’t know how that Bishop bugs me. I oughta blast ‘im right now and get it over with."

Too late. The Bishop had ended his talk, bowed his head humbly to the vigorous applause of the studio audience and the camera was panning back to the bust of the Blessed Virgin while the choir sang,

"Mother Dear, O Pray for me
Whilst far from Heaven and
Thee-e-e-e,
I wander in a fragile bark,
O'er life’s tempestuous sea-a-a-a..."

"O Mother Dear, get me out of this fix and I’ll never take another drink in my whole life," Gertie prayed.

"Hey bartender, I’m setting ’em up again for the lady," the man yelled to Paddy. "A double one for her and a boilermaker for me."

The man smacked his lips as he gulped his beer. But his hand was shaking and his left eye twitching. And when he had downed his chaser, he rose and addressed the whole bar. "I’m leaving now but nobody better move a finger till I’m outa here." He waved his pistol. "I’m warning you."

He backed toward the door.

"Oh, no, you don’t!" Two long blue arms circled around the man’s chest like giant tongs and held him tight; other blue arms moved to jerk the pistol out of his hand.

The bar exploded.

Cheers, curses, handclapping, the banging of bottles and glasses on tables, the scraping of chairs on the floor, shouts of "Stomp him," "Mur-der him," "The dirty son-of-a-bitch" rocked the room. The noise drowned out a circus band which was blaring from the TV; only now and then the strident whine of slide trombones rose above the din.

Handcuffs went on the man. And one of the cops barked, "All right, what’s the fuss all about? ... No, no, one at a time. ... Where’s the owner of this place? ..."

"Here." Paddy pushed his way through the flesh that had massed around the officers and their prisoner. "This slob—he pulled a gun on me when I brought him a beer. And any minute he was going to blow the whole place to Kingdom Come."

"He was insulting Bishop O’Hara; he was gonna shoot him," added Ger-tie."

"Where’s the Bishop? Let’s hear what he has to say."

"The Bishop was on TV. ..."

"On TV! How the devil could he shoot the Bishop if he was on TV?"

"Every time the Bishop’d say anything he’d blaspheme against him," Gertie declared, "And he kept saying he was going to blast the Bishop right off the screen."

The man looked down. "No."

"Okay, okay, let’s hear his story. ... Is that right, that you were gonna blast the Bishop off the screen?"

An angry murmur went through the crowd.

"Come on, don’t lie to me. The lady here says you were, and she’s got a lotta witnesses to back her up. ... D’ya know what that means, threat-en ing a man’s life?"

"It was all bull. The gun wasn’t even loaded."

The cop opened the chamber; it was empty.

Sputtering noises came from the crowd, like a motor shorting.
"It's still against the law, displaying a deadly weapon," the cop said. 
"We're gonna have to take you in; and tomorrow you can explain to the judge. . . . Bob, go call a car. I c'n take care of him."

The prisoner shifted his feet and looked at the cop. "You can do what you want with me, but I tell you I wasn't trying to insult the Bishop. I'm a good Catholic myself; so help me, I am."

"Yeah, we're all good Catholics," sneered a man with tousled hair and a dirty white shirt.

"Dominush vobish-cum," intoned a short, round woman who looked like the Fat Lady in the circus.

"Et cum spiritu tuo," her woman companion responded.

"No good Catholic would do what you did," Gertie blurted out. "Threatening to blast the Bishop, frightening everybody half to death."

The man hung his head. "All right, I had one too many. I admit it. But my old lady drove me to it. She's always bugging me, bugging me, bugging me, till she drives me right off my rocker. If I didn't take a drink now and then, and let off a little steam, I'd end up right in the booby hatch. . . . D'ya know what I mean, Officer?"

"All I know is that it's against the law to display a firearm. . . . Where'd you get that cannon?"

"Down the street in a pawnshop. I was gonna take it home 'n scare my old lady, to cure her once 'n for all. I came in here for a couple of drinks, I really needed 'em; then the bartender started bugging me, and I jus' went bats."

"But how about the Bishop?" Gertie said. "He didn't do you any harm. You had no right to take it out on him."

The man looked up at her. "Tell you the truth, lady, he got under my skin too. Blasting off about a guy taking a drink 'r two, making out like you was going right to hell for it. . . . Better to take a drink 'r two, if you need 'em, than to go plumb off your rocker. Right, Officer?"

"I told you all I know is that you can't go around displaying a firearm."

"Well, to prove to you that I didn't mean anybody any harm I'd like to set 'em up for the whole house; the bartender too. . . . Hey, bartender, set 'em up for the whole house; on me, . . . Officer, if you reach down in my right pocket, you'll find a ten spot there. . . ."

"Man, you can't buy anybody any drinks. You're under arrest."

"Come on; make out like you found it on the floor."

The policeman groaned.

"And if the Bishop was here," the man went on, "I'd count him in too—God bless 'im. . . . He's living in no bed o' roses either; you can tell that jus' by looking at him. If it ain't the Cardinal or somebody bugging him all the time, it's probably the Pope; and if he builds up a head o' steam, he can't come into any bar and let it off, like you and me. All he can do is blast off over TV, like he was doing. But if he was here right now, I'd bet he'd say, 'Officer, go ahead, let Frank Malone set 'em up for the whole house'. . . . Right, folks?"—addressing the throng around him.

"Right you are," said the man in the dirty white shirt; and a cheer went up from the others that almost shook the roof off of Paddy's.

"Dominush vobish-cum," shouted the Fat Lady.

Gertie's eyes started to blur.

The cop thrust his arms into the
air. "Here, here, things are getting out of hand. This guy can't buy anybody any drinks. He's under ar-rest..."

Loud boos drowned him out.

"Come on," said the officer, grabbing his prisoner by the arm and pushing him through the throng toward a police car that had just come to a screaming stop at the curb, siren wailing, red blinker spinning wildly. When they got into the car, the door was slammed and it sped away again with a screeching of tires.

Inside the bar everything was confusion, as curious ones from the street entered and milled about, asking questions right and left. "Was there a murder?" "A holdup?" "A fight?"

Paddy parried all questions directed at him; shouting above the clamor, "This here bar's for my customers, please. Anybody who ain't a customer get the hell out!" Few paid him any attention, and it took a long time for the crowd to settle down.

The TV by now was popping with a giveaway show for which there was a whole stageful of prizes—mink coats, washing machines, stereos, hair dryers, a motor boat, all surrounding a long, shiny Cadillac. "A guy can't even hear himself think with all this damn noise," Paddy muttered, snapping the set off. He trudged over to Gertie's table, where she was sitting blankly, a mug of beer in front of her untouched. "Go on drink it," Paddy said. "He paid for it—and it ain't contaminated." He stood by the table, a kind of dumbfounded look on his face. "Some crazy things have happened in this place," he said, "but this was the craziest."

Gertie took a long draught of the beer. The Blessed Virgin would understand; even Bishop O'Hara might. And what did she care, right now, how she looked in a bathing suit! She took several more long swallows, almost emptying the glass. Then she sobbed. "That poor man! Driven half out of his head! Doing something like this! And no bullets in his gun. The cops might've killed him... And he woulda bought the Bishop a drink, if he could... He must have a real bitch of a wife!"

She motioned to Paddy to bring her another one. She needed it.

In Fashion

- Paul Ramsey

The eyes wide open, and the faces blank.
The skirts are short. The money's in the bank.
From News about the Biafrans

Beverly Sopp

"With every passing hour, Biafra becomes more and more a death trap. . . . It is the irony of death from malnutrition that in the final, fading hours one is at last completely free from the pangs of hunger."

—THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE

The moon lay on the ground, full circle, edges smooth as a blade.

Outside, eyes crawled the darkness phasing out the moon.

Tonight: a chunk scooped out.
Tomorrow: moon sliced to quarter.

Tonight: a curve of light slivered to a chip.
Tomorrow: moon buried under night.

Outside the darkening circle, boasts warmed their blood.

Their struggle must be brief—a month, two months—against men frailed past begging.

Laughter cracked like gunfire at the thought of men dining on freedom, stuffing their hunger with dreams.

The wait lengthened; talk thinned like smoke in air.

How could they have known the taste would linger longer than bread.
One can spot a victim of malnutrition: “his skin grown taut, his hair yellow, his limbs become matchsticks . . . He stares at you blankly . . . The fear is in the waiting. Death is the ultimate relief.”

—THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE

1
For the hundredth time
she said softly to self

“She has small fever”
all the time cradling

the face flaking like
ash under her fingers,

stroking life into
brittle gold hair,

trying for the word that would melt
the ice filming

her daughter’s eyes.
How not to feel

the bones of truth
breaking her hands.

How to say
“she has small fever”

again tomorrow.

2
Her hands reached down
into the scooped-out hole,

warming the grave,
moving slowly

among strange rocks—
smooth and round as loaves
that would never break
into bread.

No longer the need
to outhope hope.

Her hands packed the dirt
tight. And in the untensed
quiet, no grief echoed
as she, who had

never seen leaves
grow gold and cold

but knew the autumn
of a child, stood

cradling winter air.

'The constant, daily exposure to the dead and dying begins to take a severe toll on the spirit. . . . A priest asked: 'Is there a God? What kind of God?'”

—THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE

The weight of air pressed
against his temples;

his voice barely cut
the darkness; still he called

the names. But some could never
answer. Flesh became word again. . . .

And when the list ran out,
when he was pastor of words,

only words . . . Already
he could feel the Word

pushing into his sides
like burning sticks.
Mea Culpa

Bill Rodriguez

I

Suddenly he was certain he was evil. He was an odious, disgusting, filthy person, evil to his bones, oozing evil in his tracks like a movie monster trailing slime; le�rously evil, his soul would rot from his sins like a maggoty apple; the ground would leer open at the height of his foulness and consume him to hell, where he'd roast blacker than burnt marshmallows, and little devils would leap gleefully about him and prod him with pitchforks as he cried he was sorry, he was sorry, and Satan's laughter would boom from the distance as Satan bellowed: It's too late, Tommy, you dirty little boy! Should have listened to your mommy and daddy! Tommy was five.

Peter prodded him with an elbow a second time, harder, while the other children squeezed and jostled past them in the pew. From the aisle, Sister Madelene automatically nodded a thin-lined smile to the two who remained to say a rosary or toss up an extra prayer, then snapped a light double-take when it struck her they were boys.

“Come on.”
“Now.”
“Come on.”
“I'm not coming.”
“Why not?”

Tommy glowered briefly at his older brother, then threw his eyes ahead again. “Just not, is all.”

“Boy, that’s stupid. That’s really dumb. Cripes, you’re too little to be religious and stuff.” Peter always very carefully apportioned his profanity, as though it would run out some day and leave him ventless. This frustration merited more than a cripes, he felt.

“Dammit. You’re not gonna stay and pray and stuff, are you?”
Tommy shrugged. “I dunno.”

“If you don’t come right now,” Peter said slowly, after a calculating moment, “I’ll tell Mommy you didn’t put both dimes in the baskets.” The violation of their silent mutual non-disclosure pact was a desperate gambit.

“I don’t care.”

“Well, I do. I’ll catch it sure from Pop if I leave you here,” and he grabbed Tommy by an arm.

“I’ll scream,” said Tommy calmly, then squinted up, eyes set. Peter immediately relinquished the arm, knowing the threat was no bluff.

“Okay. Do what you want. Only tell me what to tell Pop about why you’re not coming, to get me off the hook.”

“Because if I go outside, I’ll die.”
“Huh?”

“God’ll kill me.”

“Oh,” Peter sidled warily out to the aisle, genuflected, and crossed himself, his eyes on his kid brother. “God’ll kill him. Loony twit.” Peter was eleven.

Tommy continued staring up at the painting on the ornate half-dome above the altar, as he had been doing
through most of the children's Mass. A lady in flowing robes carried a child above the upstretched hands of the tormented in purgatory, and Tommy's gaze visited over and over each anguished face. He wondered how many of them had committed adultery.

II

Peter DiAngelo senior started the next nail into the shingle with the solid whack of a man sure of not hitting his thumb—not from the confidence of a Marksman of Nails but from the blithe cockiness of someone accustomed to getting away with things. He smiled and picked up another shingle. His brother-in-law, Sammy, who was working down the scaffold on the other side of a window, spoke to him.

"How could a body stand being inside on a sunny day like this?"

"That depends on just what a body's up to inside," came the reply, but from a woman passing by.

Peter spoke. "Well, hello, Mrs. Walker. I guess I can't argue with that, can I? Got yourself a point there." She walked on, and Sammy said, almost under his breath, "Hmmm, maybe she does," in a way that made Peter wonder if perhaps he had caught the drift.

"Peter, Peter. I ever tell you I envy you, you bum?" Sammy came out with after a moment, out of the blue.

"What? Sammy, get in the shade. Sun's getting to you."

"No kidding. Every once in a while it hits me, seeing you with two fine boys, married to a good woman—my scrappy sister being no Florence Nightingale, but a good person anyway. And I gotta envy you. Sort of wish I'd married."

"You'd envy a blindman because you like German shepherds. Chee, Sammy."

"No, really."

"Well, guess I got no real kicks coming, but it's got its problems, though."

"Hey, what hasn't?"

"Especially with the kids. Like the other day. Get a load of this, now: standing in the bathroom doorway talking to Cathy in the tub when who tries to squeeze between my legs but the little one. ‘I wanna see Mommy,’ he keeps saying. Had to swat him to stop it and send him to bed."

"So the kid's curious."

"Curious. That kind of curious there'll be time enough for. Like maybe when he's a ripe old six. Sammy, what we gonna do with a nation of over-sexed five-year-olds? And it's coming to that. Chaperon sliding ponds?"

"Come on. You got to remember sneaking peeks at girlie magazines in the drugstore."

"Sure, sure. But then I never knew my tool was connected to more than my kidneys till I was thirteen. Now they want to teach them in school. Honest, Sammy, kids are gonna be thumbing through Playboy over their pabulum if things keep up."

"Thank television. Can't sell a Ford without a dozen broads draped all over it."

"Yea. Kids are surrounded by it. Bring something you think'd be safe like Life into your home, and the next thing you're gawking over their shoulder at some stacked cavewoman with her knockers tanning."

"Right."

"So you try to raise them strict. Send them to parochial school, get a good name in the building supply trade for an example to them. You
make them watch their language at home—keeping on them hard for the little sins that don’t really matter, you hope it’ll fix them up for the big ones that do.”

Sammy nodded weightily at the pause.

“It’s not like I’m some candle-lighting fanatic about the Church, though, even though I keep it up for the kids. The way I figure, God’s got to be a good guy and all, I mean you can’t tell me Christ didn’t turn when a skirt passed, you know? Anyhow, he’s gonna understand a fella being human and now and then busting out of some of the rules.” He stopped his work and gestured with his hammer. “You know how the Church is still run by a pack of frustrated cherries—bless ‘em. Half the rules would be a whole lot different if only they got some action once in a while.” He went on hammering. “Of course, you let this on to kids today, and they take it as an excuse to do it in the streets.”

“Pete, you ought to be a Dutch theologian, with logic like that. Or at least a Jesuit.”

“Like my other brother-in-law, the loudmouth? No offense. No thanks. But, hey, do me a favor and don’t be disrespectful to the Church like that when the kids are around, okay?”

“And blow their careers as missionaries? Not on the Irish in ‘em.”

Sammy pursed his lips and his eyes fell distant for a moment. “Well, guess that leads me into something I’ve been meaning to bring up these last few weeks, Pete.” Sammy’s hammer fell to his side and he turned. “Now, don’t get me wrong or start swinging before you hear me out, but I’ve been noticing, from things I’ve heard and from a few things you’ve let drop, that maybe you’re

fooling around a bit on the side. Now, I’m not about to start meddling in what’s all your own business, but anything that can hurt my sister becomes my business too, you understand. All I wanted to say about it is make sure you keep it from her, all right? I know it would really hurt the kid bad if she found out.”

“Wha—” Pete stood a bit flustered. “What kind of cold philandering bastard you take me for, Sammy?” he asked with a hurt face. “Of course I’ll make sure she don’t find out.”

Pete junior swung through the wire gate.

“Hey, Pop. Tommy won’t come home from church.”

“What do you mean won’t come home? He sick or something?”

“Naw. He’s just being a stupid twit again.”

“Hey—I told you about name-calling, wise guy. Well, I don’t got time now to go drag him back. Go tell your mother.” Then as an afterthought, as Peter junior bounced up the stairs, and in a coarse whisper: “And don’t mention you told me first.” Pete senior was 42.

III

Catherine DiAngelo, nee Catherine Delaney, caught the front screen door to choke the slam—as she always kept at the kids to do—although no one was inside to be disturbed. She ventured the porch stairs one at a time, toddled past Pete senior and Sammy pecking away at the siding, and pulled her pounds up the street toward the church two blocks away. So Tommy doesn’t want to leave the place, she thought; he padding his record for a canonization or something? Ah, but the boy’d make such
a fine priest, a mother’d just hover above heads, so proud to see him hold up the host. Tommy, Tommy, listen to one thing from a mother who’s thought about it: do it that way and give up some of your life for the suffering you’ll be spared in the rest of it. By poor St. Joseph’s patience it’s a nervy thing for them to ask you to pretend, that the most hungry part of your body isn’t there; but with it to choose again a nun’s habit it’d be instead of my young and eager free ones. About time the Church started recruiting good boys instead of the hellions like my kid brother, Mickey, who used to “accidentally” open the door on me in the bathroom all the time. Still not convinced he didn’t get in it for the security and the uniform, like Ralphie did the marines. But Tommy, now. Since a baby such a quiet, behaved child, even his tantrums were polite. A different animal from rambunctious Pete junior, although Petey’s settled down lately to behaving like a normal sugarbowl-salting brat instead of like a reform school full of them. With his namesake to take notes from, it’s a breakneck gallop for which one of them’ll reach manhood first. Eh, Pete senior, the carousing goat, you look twice to his face to see he doesn’t have acne, he surprises you so the way he acts the girl-crazy teenager. Wet dreams I half expect from him some nights despite my most exhaustive effort, the way he sometimes seems so unsatisfied—even sighing that one night, sighing when he rolled over, as though to say woman, without the fanny firm as a peach for me, without the belly taut and flat any more, the boobs sloped like Bob Hope’s nose, I’d just as soon be in my workshop making a birdhouse. They pick you at your prime, fill your belly full of babies that bloat your body and drain the fever from your enthusiasms; they devour all they find good, down to the core of you, then toss the rest behind them and proceed to the next young apple of their eye. When I take a chance and look him in the face afterwards for the tender word or smile to say he lifts it above the rutting of dogs and his eyes say I’m no longer enough of a woman for him, if I’d let go even then. . . . Peter, I suppose it must be Sylvia Walker this time, the horny widow. Poor woman, I feel; the slut, I think. She always stops for a few words with him when he’s working on the siding, and lately he’s taken to stepping down to the fence to chat over it. They laugh too much, like we used to, and from the window I’ve seen the look she gives him when he turns. Two afternoons this week I couldn’t reach him at the shop, and him not trusting the cash register alone with the new help to go to the john. Well, I won’t let the poor hungry child take him away from me by making a fuss over it, though can’t say I’d mind her pulling him off me for a breather once in a while. No, won’t try the foolishness of my mother when she found the old man going at it with the cleaning girl. Don’t want to have to pry off each dollar for the kids’ lunches with a lawyer. No, let them go at it under the bed while I’m vacuuming around them, just so they let me keep the face of ignoring it and he keeps bringing home the full paycheck. Ah, Tommy, Tommy, don’t you grow to torment some poor girl with your running around. Better to marry Holy Mother Church, however perverted that sounds—her you can’t hurt so much. Though I’ve a weak case complaining about Pete’s
tomcatting when for those few years back at the beginning, before the bottom lost the bounce, I found myself on the fence often enough, yowling for a tumble. If I'd put any more horns on him in the frustration of those days, he'd have scared a moose. I had seven years on him when we married, when we had to marry, seven years and enough education to be embarrassed at his chewing food with his mouth open, I wasn't ready for it then, even then, near thirty. Still so free and yearning, so unused to fetters, so eager to swallow things whole. The first was that truck driver, Jake, from the diner, then the grocery boy, which is as much of a joke as a milkman, and then nearly Eddy Profaci, I think, before I stopped, though it's some credit I stopped before I had to. Still blush at the very sight of Father Profumo, not knowing whether priests match voices with faces afterwards out of their heavy-breathing curiosity. Yes, it seems another life, though not another person. Suppose I can't begrudge Pete his strange nooky if he can keep it happy, no mean trick for him these past years. But Tommy, little boy I really do love—though I know it's small challenge with you such a puppy—do learn to be kind to any you find, if that's your choice.

IV

"And why would he do that, cherub?"

"Because I did a Mortal Sin."

"A Mortal Sin? Ah, my crazy monkey, what do you know about that? A quarter from Mommy's purse? A stone at Mrs. Kilbey's cat? What could you call a sin that God wouldn't get a good laugh over?"

He didn't respond and she pulled his head to her chest. "I don't want you to tell me. It's none of Mommy's business." She suddenly realized where she was and plucked out a lace handkerchief from her purse and clipped it to her hair. "Now. Do you want to tell me about why you think God's going to let you die?"

"Not let me die, kill me. And then send me to hell with bad grownups. Father Profumo said so in his sermon."

"Tommy, Father Profumo never bothers to stretch for a topic, so I'm sure he didn't devote his entire sermon to what a bad boy Tommy DiAngelo is. Petey, what did Father speak about at the children's Mass this morning?"

He struggled for a moment, then shrugged. "About how kids should obey their parents and stuff because otherwise the devil was gonna tempt them to do bad things and—"

"I see. Number four. Tommy, he has only five other themes. And he uses one version at old ladies at the seven-thirty Mass and another on grownups at the ten-thirty or twelve. You just took it too personally."

Tommy remained unaffected, looking ahead.

"And if, my little Augustine, God were going to kill you, why just outside? Why wouldn't he let you have it in church here?"

"It would embarrass him."

She gave up.
Tommy, Mother is going to walk out the door and you're going to follow her. Remember, Father Profumo also said to obey your parents." She kissed him atop his upturned head and left the pew.

When she reached the side door to the vestibule and dipped her hand into the holy water font, he left to follow her. The simple ploy might have worked if she had chosen the front door, but halfway down the side aisle Tommy caught sight of something on the lectern of the pulpit and stopped dead. Father Profumo's horn-rimmed glasses, forgotten, hooked over the front of the lectern, glinting like the fanatical eyes of an accuser.

Now just because you people are children is no reason to think you're about to get off lightly in the matter of sin. (You want to, Carla?) Childish temptations are temptations no less, and sins resulting from them are as vile. The devil and his disciples have devious ways to lure children to sin and evil. (No. My mommy'd be mad.) And you children won't find your sins discounted like you do your tickets at the movie house. When you step up to Saint Peter at heaven's gate, he'll exact full payment from young, old, rich, and poor alike—and the Pains of Hell will be the price to those with Mortal Sin on their souls. (Come on. I'll show you if you'll show me). All you in states of sin will die—if in sin, God will damn you to hell. (Hee. I guess so.) No, evil isn't simply the province of grownups, my children. Just think of that evil child in Kalamazoo we read about last week who shot his mother, his father, his sister, and himself with the twenty-two rifle his good father had given him for Christmas. His soul is surely roasting with the evildoers of other ages this instant. (Gee. . . . There's nothing there!)

Tommy bolted to the nearest enclosure: the middle booth of a confession, and slammed its door behind him.

"Peter. Get your father. I need reinforcements."

When Mr. DiAngelo arrived, she briefed him and told him to can the whats and get into the confessional on the other side. Then she slipped through her own velvet curtain and repeated for the third time some basic theology to Tommy to satisfy him his soul was not irreparably damaged. She thought he was getting incredulous.

"You see, Tommy, a little boy like you can't commit a Mortal Sin, just venial ones that aren't enough to more than tarnish a halo."

"I'm not a baby, Mommy. You always treat me like a baby, but I can commit Mortal Sins just like you and Daddy."

"Bunny, be glad it's not so and believe your mommy. Five-year-olds just can't commit such dreadful sins because they haven't reached the age of reason, among others, as you're demonstrating. You have to know what all the rules mean before God will hold you to them."

"She's right, kid. You gotta know how to hold the bat before God'll strike you out."

"Thank you for the clarification, Casey Stengel."

"Chee. I'm trying to help the kid understand."

"Tommy, don't you believe your mommy and daddy? Have we ever lied to you?"

"Yes."

Mystified pause.

"Oh! When?"

"Daddy said if I touched my pee-
pee too much it’d fall off. Pete told me that ain’t so.”

“Mr. DiAngelo, you’re incredible. Fall off, yet.”

“Whad’ya want from me? How else you expect me to teach the kids?”

“A little sense might be refreshing. I suppose your idea of making up for it now would be telling him it’d grow back, like a starfish arm.”

“Don’t go too far in front of the kid, Cathy. Tommy, your mother clean in this? She ever tell you a fib?”

“Once I asked if a mommy and a daddy have to be married to have babies. Mommy said yea, because if they weren’t, there wouldn’t be any shower presents, But Pete says they don’t have to be.”

“Little Petey’s quite the bird-and-bee authority. Wonder who tips him off.”

“So Cathy the liberal mother gets flip when the kid asks a serious question, heh? The girls are gonna pull away your union card, sweetie.”

“He probably asked that along with twenty-seven other questions while I was clearing the table with one hand, serving dessert with the other, and fighting off the dog with a foot.”

“So don’t crucify me for telling the kids wrong. I’m not the authority on sex. I’m not the one with two years of college.”

“Here we go, my man of the soil is getting bitter again.”

“A-ha! You’re saying there I’m dirty, huh?”

“God, Pete. Can you see the problem here for searching to place the blame? Our baby was as frightened as he could get over some little boy crime because we gave him some wrong dope on what his thing is for. We. If some silly Sister had scared him like that, we’d both strangle her with her rosary, but we did it.”

They went on, giving and taking blame, now and then apologizing in their first conversation in months, their voices a few times drifting shrilly through the pews slowly filling for the next Mass, and didn’t even notice Tommy slip out silently without so much as an ego te absolvo.

“You don’t know anything,” he told his brother. “Little kids like me can’t go to hell for Mortal Sins like adultery, only adults.”

When Tommy turned to bless himself at the font by the door, his eyes rested upon two faces in the painting over the altar. He noticed slightly condescending smiles on the hovering mother and child.

Substance

• Paul Ramsey

What are we of? Need a soft sound say?
Of fire, of air, of stone in broad day.
Six Shapes for a Calligrammatic Eye

• John Fandel

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or a kid’s birthday
but most of all for a
you to don cap-a-pie as
the only fitting headgear
when you forget an inscrutable beauty

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Meditation

• Burton L. Carlson

We yield time to time-honored procedure,
prone in still grass,
still breathless October,
our own fields sown with the winter allotment.

We gather the further tract,
its brief immaterial cover,
far back, far back of this field where we lie as if sleeping.

So many, much seems in motion.

The goldenrod, birches,
frilled torches,
leap up,
dance.
Crab apples,
deep in their wintery color,
like children’s cheeks brilliant,
burn.

Dull embers embellished by evening,
or rubies,
turn with the turnings of swordplay,
the red leaves,
unshed leaves: oak and dogwood,
boxelder and maple,
sumac that chokes.

And the birds’ birds,
the grackles and starlings like charred things thrown away,
weightless clusters exploded,
dandelions blown
and the dried songs,
the insects that rattle,
dry paddles leaves sent skidding on schedule by windblast:

Who retrieves?
Who has witnessed quick clouds sent a-scudding
come tucking home?

Is there a laureate poet
extends lines
outside the poem?
Contributors

A. W. ENGLE had a story, "The Interruption," in the March 1969 issue of four quarters. Both DAVID CONFORD and BRUCE BERGER have appeared in previous issues of this magazine. CLAUDE STANUSH has been a reporter, a science writer, and has worked on the screen play of a film called The Lusty Men, made from his writing about Bob Crosby, king of rodeo cowboys. He lives with his wife and three daughters in San Antonio, Texas. "Bishop O'Hara" is his first published fiction. PAUL RAMSEY has been a frequent contributor to four quarters. BEVERLY SOPP is a writer who lives in Baltimore, Maryland. BILL RODRIGUEZ lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. JOHN FANDEL writes about his calligrams: "The slight pun on 'grammar' is not frivolous, considering these shapes are grammatical statements, too—as the eye that loves form and meaning must see." He is poetry editor of COMMONWEAL and a member of the Department of English, Manhattan College. BURTON L. CARLSON is a writer who lives in Reston, Virginia.