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## **Praise for I Served**

*“I Served is Oliver Twist, Romeo and Juliet, and All is Quiet on the Western Front, all rolled into one. An extraordinary literary achievement.”*

*—Jim Morris, author of War Story, The Devil’s Secret Name,  
Fighting Men, The Sheriff of Purgatory, Strawberry Soldier, Breeder,  
and Silvernail.*

*“Honest, gritty, passionate – I Served greatly adds to the personal narrative history of LRRPs in America’s longest war.”*

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Author of Inside the LRRPs: Rangers in Vietnam  
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*“From a turbulent childhood, to a warrior’s role, to a special love—riveting and true.”*

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*“Company F, 51<sup>st</sup> Long Range Patrol played a pivotal and hair-raising role in the defense of Long Binh during the 1968 Tet Offensive. In I Served, Don Hall tells the story of Company F before, during, and after Tet in intimate details.”*

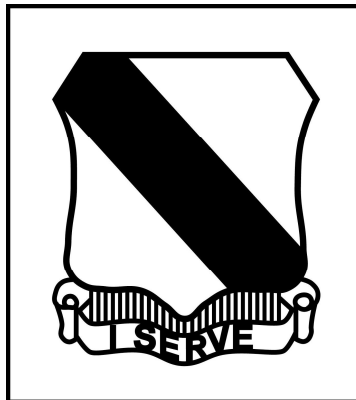
*—Keith William Nolan, author of The Battle for Saigon: Tet 1968, Operation Buffalo: USMC Fight for the DMZ, Battle for Hue: Tet 1968, The Magnificent Bastards: The Joint Army-Marine Defense of Don Ha, 1968, and Sappers in the Wire: The Life and Death of Firebase Mary Ann*

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# I Served

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by  
Don C. Hall  
and  
Annette R. Hall



Published by **A.D. Hall Publishing Co.**  
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Book designed and produced by Annette R. Hall

Published by



**A.D. Hall Publishing Co.**

in cooperation with TRAFORD Publishing, Victoria, BC, Canada

ISBN 1-55212-489-4

**This book is dedicated to Col. William C. Maus (U.S. Army, retired),  
to the twelve men who died in F/51<sup>st</sup> LRP,  
and to all those who served with honor.**

“The soldier, above all men, is required to perform the highest act of religious teachings —SACRIFICE.”

—*General Douglas MacArthur, U.S. Army*

“It is the soldier, not the reporter, who has given us freedom of the press.  
It is the soldier, not the poet, who has given us the freedom of speech.  
It is the soldier, not the campus organizer, who has given us freedom to demonstrate.  
It is the soldier who salutes the flag,  
and who serves beneath the flag,  
and whose coffin is draped by the flag,  
who allows the protestors to burn the flag.”

—*Father Denis Edward O'Brien, USMC*

# I SERVED

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## ❧ Preface ❧

I was born in February 1948 in Rüsselsheim, Germany. Four months after my birth, my father Cecil, a hard-drinking G.I. stationed in Germany after World War II, married my mother Eleonore, a naïve young German girl. On the other side of the world, in America, Peter, a handsome young ex-Marine from Brooklyn, NY, married Drucilla, a beautiful young woman from Hansford, W. VA, also an ex-Marine. They had met during World War II when they served in the U.S. Marine Corps at Camp LeJeune, NC. Their first child, Annette, was born nine months later, in January 1949, in Brooklyn, NY. I always find it amazing that two people born so far apart, and into such different circumstances, ended up meeting each other in an eighth-grade classroom in a small city in southwestern Virginia. Fate put us together.

I SERVED is a wild romp of a journey through one decade in my life, a decade that made me who I am today. Above all, it is a story of great love and friendships. During this ten-year period, I was, at one time or another, a prisoner, a traveler, a naïve child, an altar boy turned warrior. As Mark Twain wrote, “I have found that there ain’t no surer way to find out whether you like people or hate them than to travel with them.” I have no regrets whatsoever, even about the hard times, because I can look back with fond memories about the love I found and the friendships I developed that will last a lifetime.

I always wanted to be a writer, though as a kid I was told by many an adult that I didn’t have what it took to be one. Back in the 1950s and 1960s, kids with dyslexia were relegated to the “dumb” side of the classroom. I was one of those kids. God decided I needed help if I were going to be a writer, so he sent me Annette. Besides correcting my multitude of spelling and grammar errors, she helps me make what I write say exactly what I mean.

In 1984, after having spent years making notes, I finally sat down in front of a computer (a dual-floppy 8088 PC with no hard drive and only 128K of memory) and began typing out the first draft. Annette took each chapter as I finished it and made it readable. Because she was part of my life from such a young age, she was able to add content from her own knowledge that fleshed out the story. In 1985, when we finally finished the first draft of twenty-three chapters, we started sending out queries to a large number of literary agents and publishers. We received nothing but rejections. We were told no one was interested in reading memoirs about the Vietnam War. Finally, Annette and I shelved the manuscript.

In 1991, I went to my first company reunion, and put to rest much of the guilt and anguish I had felt all the years since 1968 when I had gone home from Vietnam and left my teammates behind. The 1991 reunion of Co. F, 51<sup>st</sup> Long Range Patrol (Airborne) Infantry was a watershed event in my life. Because I discovered that the guys were okay, I was able to put to rest so many of the anguished feelings I had carried with me all those years. My friends had survived, just like I had. I came home from that reunion walking on air.

That reunion also opened the floodgates of memory. In reminiscing over old times with the guys, so many memories were revived that I knew I had to add more chapters to my book in order to do justice to the men of F/51<sup>st</sup> LRP. I was revitalized and came home ready to get back to work on it.

After finishing the revised version, now thirty chapters long, I sent copies of the manuscript to many of the men so they could read and verify that I had written the Vietnam section as correctly as possible. At that time, I didn't have the thousands of pages of after-action reports and officer's logs and other documentation that I have now, which I obtained from the National Archives in 1997 and 1998, so I had to rely on my memory, their memories, and my diary.

In 1993, we were recommended to an editor in the Ivy Books department of Random House. He read the manuscript, liked it, and offered us a contract to publish a paperback version of I SERVED. We negotiated the terms, signed the contract, and received our advance. After awhile, for various reasons, we began to have second thoughts about becoming part of Random House's stable of authors in that genre. After much soul-searching, we decided it was best that we cancel the contract and self-publish instead. We returned our advance and moved on. We have never regretted that decision.

In 1994, we published the first edition of I SERVED, a 500-copy limited hardbound collector's edition. In early 2000, though long sold out, word of mouth created a new demand for I SERVED, so we decided to publish this softbound edition. One reason for the demand was the interest that was developing about the documentary we were producing about F/51<sup>st</sup> LRP. Titled *SILENT VICTORY, The Story of Co. F, 51<sup>st</sup> Long Range Patrol (Airborne) Infantry, 25 Sep 67 – 1 Feb 69*, we expect it to air sometime in 2001.

This new softbound edition of I SERVED is substantially the same as the original 1994 hardbound edition. I was able to verify what I had written in the 1994 edition about specific F/51<sup>st</sup> LRP (*Long Range Patrol*) missions by reading the National Archives material I obtained. I was pleased to find that I had made few factual errors in writing that first edition. With this new archival information and with additional feedback from the men with whom I served who read the 1994 edition, I made a few clarifications and modifications that I felt were necessary.

In writing this book, we did our best to make the story as accurate and factual as possible, while, at the same time, striving to make it a good read. I didn't want to make it just a dry narrative of chronological events, with no particular plot. I wanted it to be a compelling story that keeps the reader's interest from beginning to end. To do this, we used literary license in some instances. One way we did that was to construct scenes rich in dialogue. Obviously, it would be impossible for me to remember the exact words in conversations I had when I was a child and a young man, but I reconstructed realistic dialog based on what I remembered about them. I am blessed with an excellent memory, so I was able to do that effectively.

To move the story along, another decision I made was to combine into one mission the three or four training missions I went out on during the one short week of training the second platoon's NCOs (*Non-Commissioned Officers*) went through with Detachment B-36, 5th Special Forces Group. I included my training with B-36 in the story in order to illustrate to readers early on why F/51<sup>st</sup> LRP was such an outstanding unit. Contrasting how F/51<sup>st</sup> LRP operated with how B-36 was run helped demonstrate how lucky we were to have had Col. William C. Maus as our company commander. Although the training missions were combined in the book, each specific incident with



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B-36 I wrote about did occur. I wrote about what I witnessed and I have the documentation on B-36 to back up what I wrote.

In the chapter *The Berm Cross*, I wrote it as if I had been there personally. This is not the case; I left Vietnam shortly before this happened, but I felt the actions that Clark took perfectly expressed the frustration and anguish many of us felt, so I included it in the book. He told me what had happened. In order to weave the incident into the story, I placed my own character there as a participant in the events. Clark gave me his permission to do that and read and approved the chapter before I published it. He said it faithfully portrayed the essence of what happened.

I did not personally know the helicopter pilots who supported our unit well enough to be able to portray any one individual accurately, so I chose to combine their personas into one fictional character, Greg. His character is an accurate composite portrayal of these fine men and the scenes in which he appears are faithful to actual events that occurred.

Except for the soldiers whose names I didn't know, the composite character of the pilot Greg, and the Doughnut Dollies, all the names of the people and the locations in the Vietnam part of the story are real. I have left out names of some of the men that I knew in Vietnam and I am sorry about that. It is not by choice that their names are absent. I have not been able to get in touch with everyone with whom I served in Vietnam, so it is impossible to include all of their names.

In the first half of the book, in order to avoid embarrassment to some of the people up on The Hill, we changed the names of most of the characters. Also, after as long as thirty years, we have no idea where some of my companions from the orphanage and the school now live, so I was unable to get their permission to use their names in my story. The nuns have all passed away, so we felt free to use their real names in this edition. The priests names are also real. I do not know where my ex-step-siblings and ex-stepmother are, so I was unable to obtain permission to use their real names.

The names of my mother, my sister, my brothers, my father, and my aunt and uncle in Germany are real. And, of course, Annette and I have used our real names.

Any important factual errors that readers find in this edition of I SERVED are inadvertent and will be corrected in subsequent editions, provided notification and supporting documentation is sent in e-mail to the authors at: [annette@i-served.com](mailto:annette@i-served.com).

This is not the last edition of I SERVED. Annette and I are working on an expanded edition, which we plan to publish in the near future. After acquiring the massive amount of documentation (over 6000 pages worth) that exists in the National Archives about F/51<sup>st</sup> LRP and the other units involved in our area of operation, I didn't merely experience a renewed flood of memories as I had after the 1991 reunion; I was engulfed in a tsunami of memories! I knew that in order to do complete justice to the men of F/51<sup>st</sup> LRP and to make sure history had the full story from the point of view of the Lurp on the ground, I had no choice but to expand I SERVED. With all the supporting documentation available to me now (after-action reports, officer's logs, radio communication logs, team debriefings, and other official reports), I have a better, fuller understanding of what was going on in the entire company, and how F/51<sup>st</sup> LRP fit into the overall military strategy in Vietnam.

In both the 1994 edition and the softbound version you are now reading, the story is told from the perspective of the 19-year-old team leader who, because of his youth

and his position, has a more limited knowledge of everything that was going on in the company than does the man of 52 who has extensively researched and studied F/51<sup>st</sup> LRP. The next edition of I SERVED will expand the story of F/51<sup>st</sup> LRP and will be written as a truly historical first-person account, backed up with specific information from the actual records.

F/51<sup>st</sup> LRP was fortunate to have had Major (and then LTC) William C. Maus as the founder and the first C.O. of the company. He believed in keeping meticulous, accurate, contemporaneous, and voluminous documentation about everything that went on in the unit. We had dozens of clerks whose sole job was to monitor the radios and record the radio communications, type up the after-action reports, transcribe the officer's daily logs, and document everything that occurred. William C. Maus was a visionary. He knew our unit represented the vanguard of future U.S. Army military strategy and tactics. I remember his telling me our unit was making history. Being just a naïve 19-year-old staff sergeant, I didn't understand the significance of what he was saying. I do now. He knew that in the future, the U.S. Army would study the operations and tactics employed by F/51<sup>st</sup> Long Range Patrol (Airborne) Infantry and would apply the lessons learned from this great unit. The huge amount of documentation that came out of F/51<sup>st</sup> LRP would be instrumental in teaching future generations of soldiers. Ultimately, this valuable storehouse of knowledge would be used to train our modern-day Ranger and Long Range Surveillance units.

I was privileged to have served in Company F, 51<sup>st</sup> Long Range Patrol (Airborne) Infantry, and to have earned the right to wear its crest and to tell its story. Every man who served honorably in F/51<sup>st</sup> LRP is a living testament to the motto emblazoned upon it: *I SERVE*.

*Don C. Hall*  
*January, 2001*

*For information about ordering I SERVED, go to [www.i-served.com](http://www.i-served.com).*

## ∞ Acknowledgements ∞

### **First and foremost, our families—**

**Carina Michele Hall**, our daughter, who helped edit the original manuscript, and who helped Don experience what a fun and joyous childhood is like by sharing hers with him. **Dru Ragone**, Annette's mother, who saw the good in Don long ago and always believed in him, and **Peter Ragone**, her father, who at times had to help support us financially when Don was hurt and unable to work. Annette's brothers and sisters, **Michele, Michael, Diane, Leonard, Chris, Steve, Nita, and Peter**, who all treated Don like a brother. Don's sister and brothers, **Rosalie Green, Mike Hall** and **Karl Hall**.

### **Personal friends and other nonmilitary people who encouraged and helped us out along the way—**

**Virginia Hashii**, a dear friend who, in addition to cheering us on in our decision to do a softbound version of I SERVED, used her professional expertise and great storytelling talent to help us produce the documentary about Don's unit. Without Gini, **SILENT VICTORY—The Story of Co. F, 51<sup>st</sup> Long Range Patrol (Airborne) Infantry, 25 Sep 67 to 1 Feb 69**, would still be just a dream. **Karen Mabry**, a former classmate of ours who is now the principal of Roanoke Catholic Schools. How different our lives would have been if someone like Karen had been the principal back in the old days. **Father Steven R. (Randy) Rule**, former pastor of St. Andrew's parish. **Pat Simpson**, a good friend from school, and **Dave Brinkley**, another good friend from school (and Don's fellow "Renegade"). Pat and Dave recently reminded Don of some great stories from the eighth grade that we're going to include in the expanded edition.

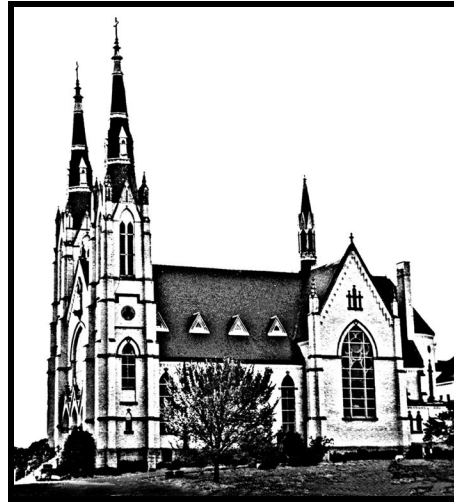
To all our other non-military friends, too numerous to mention by name, who read the hardbound edition or the original manuscript in its various drafts, and who told us I SERVED goes beyond being just a war story, and that they would recommend it to anyone who likes a good read.

### **Thanks to those friends from Don's Vietnam days who provided details on story line, submitted photos, helped with the accuracy of chronology, military details, and other pertinent facts, or who just generally encouraged and inspired us—**

**Col. William C. Maus Jr., (U.S. Army, retired)**, for his encouragement and assistance, and for being the finest C.O. under whom Don ever served. He made Company F, 51<sup>st</sup> Long Range Patrol (Airborne) Infantry the premier Long Range Patrol unit in Vietnam. Bill Maus continued to inspire and influence those around him until the day he died in April 1998. **First Sergeant Walter P. Butts (U.S. Army, retired)**, for his outstanding leadership, for his photos, and for his maps of Vietnam and assistance in story line. **George D. (Big Al) Alexander (U.S. Army, retired)**, for photos and story line. **CSM Catalino Barajas (U.S. Army, retired)**, for photos and story line. **Les Ervin**, for photos and story line. **Jim Miller**, for photos and story line. **CSM Ted Godwin (U.S. Army, retired)**, who served 33 months in Vietnam, for

photos and story line. **Clark Etterman**, for photos and story line. **Joe Havrilla**, for photos and story line. **Michael D. Frazier**, for photos and story line, and especially for saving Don's life while on patrol. **Ron (Short Round) Thorne**, for story line. **Maurice Arnold**, for story line and for saving Don's life while on a patrol. **Bruce Houghton**, for photos and story line. **Roger Roberts**, for photos and story line. **John (Al) Souza**, for photos. **Tiofilo (Speedy) Gonzales**, for organizing the first company reunion and for making sure everyone stays in touch. **Dave Barfield, (U.S. Army, retired)**, for providing information about the company for the time period after I left the unit in July 1968. **Johnnie (Spoon) Witherspoon**, for photos and story line. **Dave Hillard**, for the rubbings of Lindsey's and Lattin's names from The Wall in Washington, D.C. **Dave DeShazo**, for photos and story line. **Les Ervin**, for photos and story line. **Jim Miller**, for photos and story line. **Henry Bonvillain**, for assisting in the story line submitted by Les Ervin. **Norman Taitano**, for his assistance and encouragement. **Jerold Berrow**, for photos and for giving us permission to use information and details from the company's yearbook which he compiled and created in 1968. **Dave Peace**, for story line, photos, and information compiled on the unit's history. **Bill Walsh**, for photos and story line. **Bill (Teacup) Houser**, for photos and story line. **Tom F. Grzybowski**, for photos and story line. **Paul Martin**, for information about what happened after Don left in July 1968. **Gene Slyziuk**, for photos and story line. **Bob Edwards**, for photos and story line. **Chico Hernandez** for photos and story line. **All the men** of Camp Lindsey/Lattin, Co. F, 51<sup>st</sup> Long Range Patrol (Airborne) Infantry, Republic of South Vietnam. **WO Dave Griening**, for his support and encouragement. **CSM Jeff Mellinger**, for writing the excellent synopsis of I SERVED that appears on the back cover.

## MIKE AND DON



The year was 1958 and the dark-haired man with the gaunt, scowling face steered the dusty Plymouth down the rutted, dirt road. He was alone. A cigarette hung between his thin lips, the irritating stream of smoke flooding into his red-veined eyes. He silently steered the car past the cows, chickens, and other animals that inhabited the surrounding fields. He threw an empty beer bottle out the window and it shattered on the edge of the road, causing some of the nearby cows to buck and run. Dust swirled around the car as it abruptly came to a halt in the dirt yard in front of a farmhouse. The man stepped out of the car in his spit-shined Army paratrooper boots, adjusted his glider-patch-adorned garrison cap, and marched toward the old farmer and two small boys who were waiting for him. I was one of the boys. The other was my brother Mike. The man was our father.

The large red, black, and white 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry patch on his right shoulder with its “Indian Head” motif, highlighted by a large white star in the middle, was only one of the many accoutrements adorning his neatly pressed uniform. Rows of ribbons of many colors decorated the front, immediately telling the story of a man who had seen too much combat, but who was also proud of the fact that he had done it, and that he had beaten the odds and survived.

He was taking us from the farm we had been living on for the past two years. We had not seen him in all that time. My brother Mike, who was two years younger than I, was scared. He was always scared. He squirmed beside me as we settled into the back seat of the car, almost ready to cry.

“Where are we going, Daddy?” he asked.

The dark-haired, thin-faced man, who prided himself on his resemblance to the country singer star Hank Williams, and who seemed like a stranger to us, replied, "I'm getting you two off this farm. It's for your own good. I'm taking you to a place where you can learn and study. The nuns are going to take care of you."

"Are you coming with us, Daddy?" Mike asked, the tears now streaming down his face. Our scowling-faced father did not bother to reply.

I was filled with anger. I remembered what our dad was like. He was an Army man with big brown boots, and I could remember the time he kicked Mike with those boots. He was a mean man, and I was glad he was giving us away again. I didn't care to whom.

"Where's Karl and Rose? We haven't seen them in a long time. What about Karl's leg?" asked Mike.

"Stop your crying!" our father yelled, and Mike began to sob even harder.

I was nine years old and trying to be a brave big brother to seven-year-old Mike, but now I was starting to get scared. Mike and I had not seen Karl, our brother, and Rose, our sister, in about a year. They had been at the farm with us for awhile, but had been taken away to another foster home somewhere. Where, we didn't know.

Karl was four years old, and had severe polio in his right leg and hip. Rose, two years old, was the youngest in our family. When she was just an infant, we had all been split up and sent to foster homes because our mother was being sent back to Germany, a place where she said I had been born. My brothers and sister had been born in America and I didn't remember anything about living in Germany. My dad had been a G.I. in Germany fighting the Nazis and had married my mother after the war. She had visited us at the farm to tell us she had to go away, that she was going to go back to her German family, but that we could not come with her. We had not seen her since. We had not seen our dad since then either, but we were glad because we didn't want to live with him. Now we were with him again.

"Listen to me, boys. I can't take care of you. Karl and Rose are fine. I put them in a good home, and I'm taking you to a good home in Roanoke," he explained.

We didn't know where Roanoke was, and were afraid to ask. Mike and I huddled together in the back seat of the car as we started off once again to go to another strange place to live. The scenery passed by us and Mike's crying finally stopped. It was a long drive from the farm outside Richmond, Virginia, to our destination in the mountains of southwest Virginia, and the bitter cold of January added to our discomfort. Looking out at the pine-forested hills and the winter-deadened fields that sped past us, I couldn't help but remember the fights Dad had had with our mother, and the beatings he had given her with us kids watching. I could remember the blood and the bruises on her face. I wondered where she was. It had been so long since I had last seen her that I had forgotten exactly what she looked like. I could remember her long blond hair and her pale skin, and the fact that she used to be a ballerina in Germany before the war. I remembered the ballerina shoes that I had discovered under her bed. The inside of the odd, blunt-toed shoes had been full of dried blood. Then I remembered my father coming home from the other war, the one in Korea, and the constant fights between them. I didn't know why they had fought so much, other than our father drank a lot of beer and whiskey. After awhile, my mother drank a lot, too. And then she went away.

---

At nightfall, my father checked us into a small motel. While he showered, Mike and I lay quietly on the musty, sagging bed and watched television.

"I'm going out to get a beer," our father said, emerging from the steamy bathroom wearing a towel around his waist. "You boys stay here and I'll be right back."

Neither Mike nor I wanted to be left alone in this strange place, and I could see that Mike was getting teary-eyed again. The whole day had been scary, and now we were going to be left here by ourselves, so Mike's crying was soon joined by mine and we both sobbed loudly.

"Stop the goddamned crying!"

We tried to fight back the tears, afraid he would get even angrier.

"Stop it, now!" he shouted, moving toward us with his hand raised to hit us. Mike and I scuttled about, frantically trying to escape from the middle of the sagging bed. As he drew near us, the scars covering his chest and stomach area stood out on his body. I remembered his showing me those scars a long time ago, telling me they were from the wars he had been in. Maybe that's why he's so mean, I thought, struggling to get out of his way.

"You bunch of crybabies!" he yelled, slapping Mike and me on our buttocks.

Mike and I scurried off in different directions to avoid his getting us both, hoping, of course, that he would calm down and not get too vicious. Tearfully, we stood looking at one another from across the confining room while our father returned, still cursing us, to the bathroom. We muffled the crying as best that we could.

"That's all you two have been doing today, is crying! Stop it now or I'll give you both something to really cry about! Sit back on that bed so I can keep an eye on you. Get on the bed! What's on the TV?" he shouted from the bathroom.

Mike and I slowly moved back onto the bed, but only sat on the edge. We didn't want to sit in the middle because it was too difficult to get away quickly. We were still sniffing when he yelled again, "Shut up, you two! The news is on. Shut up!" He came out of the bathroom once again, shaking his razor at us. "I want to hear the news!"

He turned the volume of the television set up as the newscaster was speaking. The man was talking about some war being fought in a place called Asia. Mike hiccupped and sniffed, and I squirmed about, trying to get in a more comfortable position on the squeaky bed.

"Quiet!" the half-naked man yelled back at us, leaning closer to the screen to hear the words coming from the television. "You made me miss half of the news with your damned crying. You two had better toughen up. You hear that on the news? Last time it was Korea, and I fought there. See these?" he said, pointing to the myriad scars on his stomach. "A slope did this and this to me in Korea. Now that's something to cry about. You'll have your war, too, so you'd better be tough and save your tears for that."

The newscast was over, so our father put on his clothes and said in a disgusted tone, "There's nothing to cry about now. I'll be right back."

The door shut behind him and we were left alone in the strange room. Lying down on the dilapidated bed, we found no solace in his claim that he would be right back. We both cried ourselves to sleep.

Sometime during the night the door opened and the rank smell of cigarette smoke and alcohol invaded the room as our father staggered in, bumping into furniture as he

made his way over to his bed, where he flopped down and almost immediately started snoring. I was relieved that Mike and I weren't by ourselves in that dingy motel room anymore.

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The following day we arrived at our destination and our father pointed to a massive gold-colored stone church sitting on top of a hill, overlooking the city. "That's your new home. I'll be back to get you soon, and you'll be with your brother and sister soon. Do as these nuns tell you now. It's what you boys need."

"What are nuns?" Mike asked, looking up at the large Gothic-style church as we drove through the twin shadows of its steeples.

"They are women who will keep you clean and make you study."

There were four other large brick buildings nearby, and that gold church dwarfed them all. We drove to one of them. We got out of the car and followed our dad to the front door of the large, multi-windowed, rectangular structure. Mike and I stood there beside our father, holding brown paper bags containing our clothing, waiting for the large wooden door to open. I could barely hear the doorbell ring over the pounding of my heart. Mike hid behind me, leaving me to face the large door as it swung open.

A terrifying apparition in black suddenly appeared, and I turned and ran, bumping into my brother. I scrambled to get past Mike, and both our bags fell to the floor, spewing the contents. "Run away, Mike!" I screamed. "Run away!"

My father grabbed me by the coat, and with a twist, spun me around. He shoved Mike and me forward to face the small woman in black.

"Sister, my name is Cecil Hall, and these are my two boys I've brought for you."

"Hello, Mr. Hall. My name is Sister Maria Barbara." She stepped aside while my father gathered our clothes and the bags from the steps. "Go on in, boys," she instructed.

Stepping in through the doorway past her, I realized that she was a woman, and that she was only as tall as I was. I stared in disbelief because this was the first adult I had ever come eye-level to eye-level with in my life. She wore a hard white hat that looked like a shoebox form-fitted around her head and pale face. She had on thick eyeglasses that made her eyes look twice as large as they really were. It looked like she had a bloodshot nose because it was big and covered with red broken blood veins. To me, it looked like her nose and glasses were holding her face onto the white shoebox on her head.

Entering the room, I could smell the wax on the buffed floor, and the cleaning detergent on the black-garbed woman. I was so fascinated by the sight of this strangely dressed person that I hardly noticed any of the details of the surrounding room. My father and this woman conversed while Mike and I gawked at her. Mike's chin was now starting to quiver and tears filled his eyes. The door we had come through was shut tightly and I started anxiously looking for a way to escape. As I looked for a way out, I saw a statue standing on a pedestal in a corner of the room. It was a beautiful lady dressed in bed sheets with her heart on the outside of her body. Almost immediately, I heard footsteps and a jingling noise that got louder and louder as someone approached, until another black-garbed woman entered the room. I began to worry about the significance of their dark garments.



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The tall woman's long black robe created a draft of air that swirled around me as she strode past and walked over to the smaller woman, who gave her some instructions. Then the second woman turned to Mike and me and said, "My name is Sister Mary Joseph, and you will call me Sister. Get your belongings and come with me."

Mike and I followed the tall woman out of the room, relieved to be away from the short, scary looking one. Through cavernous rooms filled with plain wooden furniture and up two flights of stairs, we struggled with our torn paper bags and passed by more statues of ghostly little people with bloody holes in their hands and feet. The woman's footsteps were loud and forceful as we walked through the building, and her clothes made a constant jingling noise. All these sounds echoed through the large rooms, which added to the fear and anxiety that we both felt. An image of Hansel and Gretel being pushed into the witch's oven suddenly popped into my mind.

At the top of the stairs, the woman turned and took our bags. "You won't be needing these."

Mike, who was still crying, but who could not contain his curiosity, stared and pointed at the lower part of her dress and sobbed, "What is that?"

The woman looked down at her dress and said, "That is my Crucifix."

"But, it looks like a dead man on a stick," Mike replied between sobs.

"Now stop your crying, young boy," ordered the woman. She led us down a hallway to a long, narrow bathroom full of shiny white sinks, then past the sinks to a door that opened into a small closet-like room, which was full of clothes, towels, sheets, and blankets. As we stood there at the door to the little room, she said, "Pay attention to me. I am going to assign each of you a locker number. All of the clothes that I will give you will have that number on it. You will be assigned a wash sink with that number. Everything will be done around here by locker number. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am," we both replied.

Immediately, the woman shook a stern finger in our faces and said, "I'm not a Ma'am! You will refer to me only as Sister. Do you understand?"

I was confused about what to call her because the only other person in my life who had ever been referred to as a sister was Rose, my sister. How could this woman be called sister? The woman was getting more and more angry.

"Do you understand?" she yelled at Mike.

"Yes, Ma'am," Mike replied, out of fear and confusion.

In a mean voice, the woman said, "If you call me Ma'am one more time, I'm going to rap your mouth! Now listen and stop crying. Your number is five. Don't forget it. If you forget your number, you won't get your underwear."

She handed Mike a set of clothes and a towel and repeated to him that his number was five. Mike was crying so hard that he could not answer her, but could only nod that he understood. The woman turned to me with another set of clothes and said, "Your number is eleven. Do you understand?"

Taking the bundle from her hands I automatically said, "Yes, Ma'am." *Smack!* My lips, nose, and cheek felt the hard stinging effect of her bony fingers slapping me across the face. Next, she ordered us to take our clothes off, making it clear that she expected us to do it immediately. Thoroughly embarrassed and humiliated, we both were sobbing while we struggled to get undressed as quickly as possible.

“And the underwear!” she shouted over our loud crying. “Look at you two!” the woman, exclaimed. “Where did you get those clothes? You both are as dirty as pigs! Where did you come from?”

“F-f-from the farm,” Mike stammered, coughing and gasping between words. He tottered and hopped about on one foot, trying to keep his balance while taking off his boxer shorts. The shorts were so big that they hung like a pup tent on his little bony frame.

“The farm! Did you ever take a bath on this farm?” she snorted indignantly as she led us over to the long row of sinks. She shoved me in front of one of the sinks, and I glared at her reflection in the mirror. After Mike finished taking off all of his clothes, the mean woman pushed him to a sink. Looking in the mirror at myself, I could see the streaks my tears had made through the dirt on my face. My grimy hands left prints all over the pristine white surface of the sink.

“Wash!” came the order as the woman stooped to gather up our dirty clothes from the floor. “I’ll be right back with your new clothes. Be finished when I get back!” Holding our grimy clothes at arm’s length, she marched down the long, narrow bathroom and went back inside the little room.

“They’re witches, Mike!” I cried to my brother as soon as she had disappeared through the door. “Our dad gave us away to some witches!”

Mike stood in front of the sink rubbing his face with water, crying hard. I could hear the jingling noise and the mean woman’s footsteps coming back, so I started rubbing water on my face. The cool water felt good on my swollen eyes after all the crying I had been doing. My chest heaved and I gasped for air between sobs.

“That water is cold. You are not using any soap—here!” The woman pushed me aside to take over the sink and turned the hot water on; hot steam billowed up in front of me. She vigorously rubbed the washcloth and bar of soap together until a mountain of soapsuds foamed out of the hot cloth.

She’s going to boil me in that water, I thought worriedly. I shivered and goose bumps popped up all over my naked skin.

“Come here,” she ordered, grabbing my long, unkempt blond hair and pulling me closer to the sink. The hot, soap-filled washcloth was on my face, covering my eyes as she forcefully and expertly cleaned the dirt from my ears, neck, and forehead. She shoved the cloth into my hands. “Here, do I have to teach you how to clean yourself? Wash. Do not look at me—wash!”

Finally, we both were clean enough to satisfy her, and she gave more orders. “Now, get those clothes on and follow me. You are going to meet the rest of the boys and you will be allowed to play.”

“Where’s our dad?” I asked the woman.

“Your father is gone. Hurry and dress, and enough questions.”

We didn’t even get to say good-bye, I thought. I knew that it would probably be a long while before we saw him again, because in all the time we were living on the farm, he had never visited us. I missed the kids from the farm. We were all wards of the state, but we had liked it there. We used to play in the woods and work in the fields. There were open spaces, horses, cows, chickens, birds in an aviary, and all kinds of other animals. This new place, though, was scary. Mike and I followed the woman as she led us through another part of the large complex. In every room, there were statues

of ghosts standing on pedestals in the corners, and dead men on sticks hanging from the walls. All the furniture was plain, and there were a lot of wooden chairs and tables. I wondered how many people lived here. Coming close to one of the figures on the wall, I could see that it was a man who was half-naked and all bloody. Did these witches kill this guy, I wondered fearfully, staring up at the figure on the wall. Are they going to kill us like that, too? "Mike, they're gonna kill us," I whispered as we marched along.

The woman opened a door and the cold January wind swooped in. Stepping outside, Mike and I could see twenty or more kids our age and older playing on a blacktop playground. They were all running around, screaming and playing ball with one another.

"Donald, you and Michael go run along and play with the rest of the boys now," the woman ordered. A few of the children approached us as the woman went back inside. As she shut the door, the wind swirled her black robes around her.

"Mike, they're gonna kill us, I just know it," I said, walking toward the approaching children. "These witches are gonna clean us up and kill us tomorrow." I looked around me, and seeing what I was searching for, I pointed to the gold church, whose steeples loomed over the building out of which we had just come. "Yeah, they're gonna do it in that big church there."

"We can find their brooms and fly out of here," Mike offered.

Several young boys our age gathered around us for inspection and a couple of them asked how old we were. "You're nine and in the third grade," one of the boys said to me. "Billy here is the toughest guy in the third grade."

"Yeah, you can't eat here until you fight him," someone chimed in.

Even though the black-dressed woman was no longer in sight, I nervously looked back for her. A boy pushed his way through the other kids and stood in front of me. "I'm Billy, boy. You've got to fight me!"

He was bigger than I and had an arrogant look on his face. The anger I had built up against the mean woman for smacking me exploded at the boy in front of me. *Bang!* I struck Billy in the nose with all my might and the blood spurted.

"Sister! Sister!" he screamed, running away toward the door to the building. "Sister, that new boy hit me in the face with his fist!"

The woman came out of the door in seconds and yelled angrily, "Who hit you?"

"That new boy there!" he cried, pointing his finger at me.

"Come here right this minute, young man!" the woman said menacingly. She grabbed me by the ear and pulled me back into the building. "I will show you what we do to boys who fight!"

Through the rooms and up the stairs she pulled me by the ear. As she yanked me through the halls I thought, this mean woman is really trying to pull my ear off! I was sure I could feel and hear my ear coming loose as she dragged me, howling in pain, through the building. On the landing, near the top of the stairs, I made the mistake of trying to fight back. Holding me fast in her iron grip, she whirled me around like a toy and banged my head on the metal railing. I could hardly comprehend the pain that exploded in my head. My face flushed with sweat, not able to hear, I was vaguely aware of what was happening as she dragged me up the stairs. She jerked me around by my clothes, and dragged me to the little room off the bathroom, where earlier she

had obtained Mike's and my clothes. She opened the door to the small room and shoved me inside.

"Young boy, you may find yourself spending a lot of time in there unless you learn the rules around here very quickly."

She closed the door and locked it. I was alone in that little room. My head pounding, feeling claustrophobic and nauseous, I staggered to the narrow window and opened it for air. I had never been locked in a room before and was terrified at being trapped. As the nun quickly marched away down the hall, I listened as the jingling of her clothes faded away until nothing was left but silence.

## THE NUNS



“In the name of the Father and of the Son—get out of bed and on your knees! — And of the Holy Ghost—get up, get up now!” Sister Maria Barbara yelled in a shrill voice as she worked her way through the maze of beds, on which slept about thirty boys in the large room. —“Amen!”

Still half asleep, feeling dizzy and nauseous, and with my head still hurting from the blow inflicted by Sister Mary Joseph the day before, I rolled out of bed onto my knees, like all the other boys, and listened to them groggily recite some prayers. I could not understand many of the words in these prayers that the nun was yelling at us, and I did not know why we were supposed to say them. It was still dark outside when everyone got up off their knees and went into the bathroom to wash and get dressed. Mike and I copied everything the other boys did, then marched downstairs with the group. We followed them to a large dining room where each boy walked over and stood by a chair according to locker number. Mike and I found our proper places at the long, wooden table, and watched in amazement as everyone began to make those funny signals with their hands again while reciting some more prayers.

“What does this mean when you do it?” I asked the boy across from me after we had sat down. I demonstrated, making the motion of touching my head, chest, and shoulders with my fingertips.

“It’s the Sign of the Cross. Don’t you know that?” the kid replied.

“Huh?”

“Yeah, we always do it before we say Grace or any other prayers.”

“Grace?”

“Keep it down!” a nun ordered, as the din created by talking and the clanking of silverware against china began to get louder.

Leaning closer to me and speaking in a near whisper, the curly-haired boy said, "You guys are new here and don't know much. My name's Bernard. Just call me Bernie, but not when the nuns are around. Then you have to call me Bernard. Stick with me and I'll show you everything you need to know, so you don't get sent to the wardrobe like you did yesterday." He sat back up and readjusted his thick-lensed, black-framed eyeglasses to sit more securely on the bridge of his nose, then glanced around to see if the nun was looking in our direction.

I had spent the rest of the previous evening in that claustrophobic little room off the bathroom upstairs with only sheets, underwear, and towels for company. It wasn't until after supper that one of the nuns had unlocked the door and let me out. She had taken me downstairs to eat a sandwich and a bowl of soup, though I had eaten little because I still felt dizzy and nauseous, and then had led me to a room where Mike and the other boys were watching TV. Not long after that, we had all gone to a room filled with identical metal-framed beds and wall lockers. Lying in our beds, which were next to each other, it had taken Mike and me a long time to go to sleep.

"What does Grace mean?" I whispered as Sister Mary Joseph served a large portion of hot oatmeal to everyone at the table while another nun followed behind her, serving oranges and cartons of milk, after which the women swiftly moved to the next table. I wasn't very hungry, so I just pushed my oatmeal around in the bowl.

"Ah, don't worry about that mumbo jumbo; you'll learn it soon enough. But the main thing is, watch out for these nuns, especially Sister Mary Joseph." Bernie tilted his head in the direction of the nun who had been so mean to my brother and me the day before.

"Yeah, I know about that one," I said, furtively looking at the woman serving food to boys sitting at another table. Her face was washed out and pinched looking. The morning sun streaming through the windows lining the yellow-tiled wall of the dining room glinted off the thin wire-framed eyeglasses that she wore.

"Why do these women act like this?" my brother, who was seated next to me, asked.

"Cause nuns come from a nunnery, where they take women and turn them into sourpusses. Make 'em get up out of bed at four o'clock every morning, work and pray all day, every day, forever," Bernie answered. His explanation didn't make things any clearer for us.

"How long have you been here?" I asked him.

"Five months."

"Nuns are mad 'cause they aren't dead. You'll see when you have religion class," an older boy beside Mike added.

"How many nuns are here?" I asked.

"Five," Bernie answered. "One of them is in the sewing room, and some say she's over a hundred years old, and all dead and stuff. They keep her in a rocking chair and she never moves, just sits there all day, deader than a doornail. You see her and you've seen death on a cracker, ready for the bugs to eat on. She gives me the willies thinking about her. Ugh!" he said, shivering in his seat.

This boy really had our attention now and we listened, anxious to hear more. Before continuing, Bernie looked around to make sure the two nuns in the dining room were not close by. "Don't ever go over on that side of the building," he whispered,

pointing with his spoon at a door. “That’s the Sisters’ part of the building, and just never go over there. There’s a lot of rules and restrictions here, but I’ll help you figure them out.”

“Why are they called Sisters?” I asked.

“I don’t know. The priests are called Fathers and the nuns are Sisters.”

Mike and I quietly finished the rest of our breakfast, pondering the events of the last two days. I don’t want to be here, I thought to myself, rubbing my still throbbing head, and if there is a God, I don’t think He knows about these witches.

As soon as the meal was finished, and after we helped wash all the dishes while others cleared the table and swept the floor, everyone trooped back upstairs to brush their teeth, wash their hands, and comb their hair. Then we were all assigned chores to do, such as mopping the floors, scrubbing the bathroom toilets and sinks, dusting all the furniture, picking up the trash, and putting everything away in its proper place. The nuns hovered over us the entire time, barking instructions and making sure everyone worked diligently at something.

The boys were just kids like Mike and I, and we felt a little safer surrounded by all of them, sort of like the groups of tadpoles I used to see clustering together in the ponds at the farm. But Billy stayed away from me, and I was delighted when the nun got him while we were working. I didn’t know what he had done, but I was pleased to see him getting in trouble.

“Billy, come here!” screeched Sister Maria Barbara. “If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a dozen times—don’t you ever talk back to me!” *Smack!* Billy’s cheeks turned as red as a tomato. *Smack!*

“Put your hands down!” she demanded as Billy tried in vain to fend off her blows.

“It’s the bullet! Oh, no, she’s giving him the bullet!” an excited, little red-haired boy said to me.

The “bullet”? What is the “bullet”? I thought, looking at the ruckus starting at the end of the dormitory room.

The short angry nun was now yelling even louder at Billy as she tried to get past his blocking arms to hit him in the chest with her fist. “Put your hands down, I said!” screamed the woman, spraying spit into Billy’s face.

He reluctantly put his hands and arms down to his sides. I watched as the tiny nun struck him in the chest with her fist. Her forefinger was extended slightly, so that it would jab into his body with each blow.

With each thud of her forceful hand emphasizing her words, she shouted, “Do-not-talk-back-to-me-young-boy!”

Billy’s face was streaming with tears when the nun abruptly turned and walked away, leaving him standing there, shaking. I felt sorry for him.

“Wow! Billy got the bullet!” came the squeals from the boys. “The bullet!”

Billy unbuttoned his shirt, exposing his flushed chest, and we could see there were small, round, purple marks all over his clammy skin. The nun yelled at us to be quiet, and, in a few minutes, she and another nun lined everyone up and herded us out of the building, toward the large gold church. We all filed into the church and moved quickly into some squeaky, wooden, tall-backed benches. It was dim inside this cavernous place, and it smelled funny. Suddenly, everyone stood up and started mumbling words, then knelt down and stood up over and over again, for what seemed like hours. I could

not see what was going on in the rest of the church because there were a lot of adults in front of us, blocking my view. Every now and then, through the forest of adult bodies, I would catch a glimpse of a man in the front of the church, who was dressed in luxurious gold-trimmed white garments, moving back and forth on a white stone platform that stood in front of an ornate marble ediface. The entire time, the nuns chastised anyone who wiggled or moved, whispering loudly, “Stop squirming, fold your hands, kneel up straight, stand up straight, keep your eyes in front of you, no talking or moving around.”

I could not understand any of the things that were going on. This dark mysterious place was scary even though there were paintings on the walls and on the vaulted ceilings of beautiful people with wings, and of little pink babies sitting on clouds, holding signs I couldn't read because they didn't look like any words I had ever seen before. After church was finally over, we all filed outside, and one of the Sisters pointed and told me that the large, red, brick building across from the orphanage was the elementary school, which the Catholic children from the parish attended, including us. I wondered what “Catholic” and “parish” meant. She said the boys from the orphanage walked the short distance across the grassy mall to the school buildings every morning after church to join the other children in the classrooms. I started the trek to the school, feeling relieved that I was going to get away from those black-clothed hateful women, at least for awhile. I had been told to follow the other boys and that they would show me where to go.

Trooping the short distance to the school building, I felt out of place because the boys all had books, and Mike and I did not. When we arrived and went inside the grade school building, one of the boys pointed out a classroom to me and told me to go in and sit down. Mike was directed to another classroom and gave me a worried look as we parted. As soon as I stepped inside the classroom door, I saw the teacher—she was wearing one of those black witch outfits. I was crestfallen, realizing that every hour of my life was going to be spent in the presence of those stern, angry women. She showed me to my seat and gave me a book.

“I'm Sister Mary Jeanette, and this is your Catechism book, Donald. We use this book in religion class. It's a very important book, which we are reading and studying. Also, Donald, this is the second grade religion class, and even though you will be in the third grade for all your other subjects, you have a lot of catching up to do in religion. So, pay attention and listen carefully to everything I am teaching.” Walking to the front of the room with that now familiar jingling sound, she turned to face the class and said, “Who made us?”

“God made us,” came the class's quick reply.

“Who is God?”

“God is the Supreme Being, infinitely perfect, Who made all things and keeps them in existence,” the children seated around me answered in unison.

What does “Supreme Being” mean? I wondered. The whole class seemed to know as they responded to the tiny nun's questions.

“Why did God make us?”

“God made us to show forth His goodness and to share with us His everlasting happiness in Heaven.”



Why did God make these nuns called Sisters all so small? I wondered, watching the little nun swing her arm back and forth, directing the rhythm of the class's answers. The nun asked a few more questions, and the class gave her a perfect answer every time. This is really a strange place, I thought, not like the school Mike and I used to go to where the teachers were nice and wore regular clothes. Boy, our dad sure must hate us to make us come to a place like this, I thought, gazing around the room at all the other children. I wondered what the other kids had done to have made their parents send them to school here.

"Turn around and sit up straight, young boy," the nun ordered, looking at me sternly.

"Yes, Ma'am," I quickly replied, and then caught myself. "I mean, Sister."

"Now, if you have any questions, feel free to ask, Donald," the nun said. "You have a lot to learn for your First Communion."

"First Communion" and "catechism"? What are these things, I wondered? She continued on as I struggled to try to read the unfamiliar words in the catechism book.

After she had asked and been given the answers to another long list of questions, she laid the catechism book down on her desk. Sweeping her gaze over all of us, she said, "Now, children, let us say together the prayer we have learned to the Virgin Mary. Let us see if we can do it without making any mistakes."

She then made the motion that Bernie had told me was called "The Sign of the Cross." All the children in the class did the same and started reciting some words. "In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, amen. Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, amen."

The Sister and the other children finished the prayer using that funny motion again while I looked on, trying to copy them. What did all of this stuff mean, and what did all those words in that prayer have to do with the lady the sister called Virgin Mary, and death? Boy, I just have too many questions to ask, I thought, still feeling somewhat confused and dizzy from my headache as I looked to the front of the classroom where there was another statue of a bloody dead man hanging on a stick on the wall.

"Class, now we are going to talk about Purgatory. Purgatory is like Hell; it has fire there and it burns. Souls have to stay there for awhile as punishment for venial sins before they can get to Heaven, but have a chance to get to Heaven more quickly through the indulgences that we living souls on earth make through prayer and other good works. Children with venial sins go there. What is a venial sin? It is a black mark on your soul that you get when you do something wrong. If you have a lot of these black marks on your soul and you die, then you have to stay longer in Purgatory before you can go to Heaven."

Well, that makes sense, I guessed. I do not want to burn in Hell or this other place, so I had better learn this stuff real fast, I decided. I was starting to feel a little better now because my headache was diminishing somewhat, so I raised my hand. The nun nodded to me.

"Yes, Donald. You have a question? Stand up, please."

I was starting to feel a little less apprehensive, because she seemed so much nicer than the nuns at the other place did, and she hadn't hit me for calling her a ma'am.

“Yes, M—, uh,” I stuttered, almost saying that forbidden word again and expecting an angry response.

“Yes, Sister, when addressing me, please,” said the nun with a smile.

“Sister, what is a ‘Virgin’ Mary?” I asked.

Snickers and giggles spread through the class as the nun immediately started glaring at me over her wire-rimmed glasses. I nervously smiled at my classmates, thinking that it had been a reasonable question. “And, what is a ‘holy womb,’ too?” I added, ready to give her a long list of words for which I didn’t know the meanings. Muffled laughter spread through the class, but when the nun quickly stood, the laughing immediately stopped. Uh—oh, I thought, when I saw the anger on the woman’s face, what have I done now? She swooped down the aisle toward me and I quickly sat back down. She threw her catechism book at me and the sharp corner of the hard book struck me on the top of my head. She started punching me with her fists. Her sudden rage, and the swiftness of her attack was a total shock.

“Put your arms down, boy!” she yelled as I tried to protect myself from her. “Put your hands down!”

One of her blows caught me on the side of my head, and even though I grabbed the desk to keep from falling over, the force of the blow sent both me and the desk to the floor. I was terrified. The pain in my head was back in full force and I thought I was going to faint. Then, as suddenly as it began, her attack ceased. Satisfied that she had made her point, the woman stalked back to the front of the room and angrily ordered me to get back in my seat. All the children were silent, avoiding looking at me, and, rubbing my aching head, I awkwardly struggled to set the overturned desk upright. I could not believe how quickly the nun had changed from that polite person to this angry one, so I decided that I would not ask any more questions. I did not know what had made her so angry, so I spent the rest of the day in the school trying to be as inconspicuous as possible.

## The Hill



“An idle mind is the devil’s workshop,” Sister Maria Barbara said when we boys returned to the orphanage after my first day at school. She ushered everyone into a room that looked like a classroom. “Your religious studies are just as important as social studies, so open your books and study your catechism.”

It seemed that the nuns thought it was more important to memorize all this church stuff than anything else. I couldn’t understand most of the words, but I didn’t dare ask any questions for fear of the nuns’ quick tempers. Even though my head was still hurting, I wished I could go outside and play. I wondered if these women were going to make us study all the time.

As all the boys reluctantly turned the pages of their books, Sister Maria Barbara pulled a gray paper box from her desk at the front of the study room. Tapping her small fingers on the top of the plain box on her desk, she seemed excited about something and even smiled a bit.

“Boys, listen to me for a minute, please,” she said. “Father Brown has just given me a box of blessed scapulars, one for each of you.”

Everyone seemed pleased and a few wiggled in their seats in anticipation of the gift. The Sister began handing out funny looking strings that had squares of plastic-covered paper edged with cloth attached to each end of the string, forming a kind of necklace.

“It’s a scapular. Put it around your neck. If you die tonight, you’ll go to Heaven immediately if you have it on,” the tiny nun instructed, smiling at the boys as she passed the thin strings out.

The nuns seem to have every base covered about dying, I thought, looking at the piece of paper attached to the strings. On it was a picture of a person wearing funny clothes. What about the people who don't know about this? I wondered, afraid to voice my concern out loud. A lot of things really don't make sense here, and I don't know if I'll ever understand all the things I'm supposed to about being a Catholic, I worried.

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The months passed into spring, and, despite my misgivings, Mike and I did learn a lot—especially how to avoid the nuns with their jingling rosaries forewarning their arrival. We learned to act submissive and at least pretend that we were studying hard; sometimes I actually did study hard. The nuns did not play games, tolerate tardiness, and above all, they always saw to it that we got religion starting every morning as soon as we woke up. The bullet, hours spent in silence in the wardrobe as punishment, thousands of Hail Marys, church every day (and twice on Thursdays for Benediction) was more than my mind could comprehend, but the time passed and Mike and I caught on quickly to the game of survival in the orphanage. We studied hard and learned all the stuff about death and dead things that the nuns taught us. There was a dead language that everyone was supposed to pray in during Mass. It was called “Latin” and we had to use it at Mass every day and on weekends and Sundays. If I asked what any of it meant, I was told, “Never mind what it means, just recite it like you’ve been taught. Lower your head and keep those fingers and hands together.”

Eventually, I memorized the required Latin and after my First Communion in May of that year, I became an altar boy. By then, the strange sights in the church had become familiar, and I thought it was fun being up in front of the congregation at the white marble altar with the priest. By this time, the aura of holiness that the Gothic-style church exuded had filled me with the conviction that God did live there. When you were inside the ornate vaulted structure, it felt like you were in Heaven. Every sense was bombarded with the evidence of Heaven’s presence. Sweet-smelling incense mixed with the musty odor of the old church and permeated the air. Stained glass windows that seemed to stretch to the sky spewed colored light onto the worshippers below, who sang hymns of praise and adoration, accompanied by the echoing music of the enormous pipe organ that took up a big section of the large choir loft. Candles lit up the white marble altar with a soft heavenly light. Above the altar hung the constant reminder of Jesus—the six-foot-tall representation of Christ crucified, bleeding from the wounds inflicted by the crown of thorns, the spear hole in His chest, and the large nails in His hands and feet.

The Catholic enclave where I lived, played, and studied, and which everyone referred to as “The Hill,” sat like a self-contained, medieval fortress on a small hill a few blocks north of the downtown section of Roanoke. The large, yellow, Gothic-style church, with its twin soaring steeples, was one of the city’s most prominent landmarks. Although most of the non-Catholics in the area had never been in the ornate church, they were as used to its distinctive silhouette as they were to the impossible-to-miss, eighty-eight-foot tall, manmade star that graced the top of Mill Mountain toward the southwestern end of the city. In 1949, some civic-minded individuals had installed the star on top of the 1847-foot mountain, which lay just a short distance from the center of the city. Heralded by many as a unique work of art, but by some as a monstrous

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eyesore glaring balefully over the city, it became a municipal symbol and gave rise to Roanoke's description as the "Star City of the South." The star and the church were usually the first things newcomers to the valley noticed when they arrived. Both were brightly lit at night.

There were crosses on top of each of the church's steeples; the red neon lights on both of them accentuated their holy shapes. Down below, massive floodlights ringed the base of the church, their illumination making the structure seem to glow. On hot summer nights, bugs filled the beams of light, and the cooing of the many pigeons that roosted in the steeple openings filled the air. The aura of grandeur that surrounded St. Andrew's church made me believe, at least for my first few years there, that God really did live in that beautiful building. Since His house was so close to the orphanage, I couldn't figure out why He didn't seem to notice how mean the nuns were to all of us boys.

I was walking back to the orphanage from the church one day, the summer before the sixth grade, when I saw Father Brown walking alongside the church. He was one of three priests who lived in the rectory beside the church. He was one of the better-liked priests, at least by us kids, mostly because he said Mass really quickly every time, racing through the motions and the Latin, finishing the normally hour-long Mass in just twenty minutes. Father Brown was carrying a rifle in his hands, looking up at the steeples.

"Hey, Father, what are you doing?" I politely asked, joining him.

"Just a minute. There's one!" Father Brown said, raising the small rifle. *Bang!* I looked up at the steeples to see feathers flying and a pigeon falling toward us, trying to flap its wings. *Thump!* The plump bird smashed onto the ground between Father Brown and me. The creature was dead, with blood oozing out of its mouth, its eyes staring up at me.

"Wow! What a shot!" I exclaimed, gaping at the dead bird.

Again Father Brown raised the rifle and I saw another pigeon high up on one steeple, its head visible as it peeked over the ledge. Fly away, I thought. *Bang!*

"You got him, Father!" *Thump!* Another bird lay on the ground, dead. "Why are you killing the birds, Father?"

"Because they create a mess around the church, Donald."

Especially when they are dead, I thought to myself as I looked down at the two bodies. "But, I thought God says, 'Thou shalt not kill?'"

"God meant people, not birds. Here, want to shoot one?" Father Brown asked, handing me the rifle with a smile. I wanted to shoot the rifle, so I nodded my head yes.

"Here, I'll show you how a rifle shoots and how to aim," he said, demonstrating for me how the mechanism worked and how to aim it. I was very excited about shooting the weapon, but I had no intention of hitting the birds. "There's one," Father Brown said, pointing high up at the steeples. I took aim and fired the .22 caliber rifle, making sure that I aimed well over the pigeon's head. "Here, you put the dead ones in the bag for me and I'll do the shooting, Donald."

As the priest and I walked around the church, I found it a good opportunity to ask some questions. "Is it okay to kill people in wars, Father?"

"Yes, if you are fighting for your country."

"Have you ever been in a war, Father?"

“No, I haven’t.”

“My father was in two wars. I don’t think he liked it much, the killing and all. He always said, ‘Animals are better than people and people are the devils roaming the world.’”

“Animals do not have souls,” Father Brown explained, taking aim at another pigeon. *Bang!* The wounded bird flew across the mall and crashed into the ground, staggering to hide under some bushes in front of the nuns’ convent, which was located beside the high school.

“Well, thanks for letting me shoot the gun, Father. I have to get back to the home,” I said, handing the priest the bag containing his dead pigeons. I ran back down to the orphanage to find my brother Mike.

“All of this dead stuff is crazy,” Mike said when I joined him at the playground and told him about the pigeons. “Everything is dead and mean around here.”

I had to agree totally with my brother on that point and I also could see that he was changing. He had always been timid and shy, but on the farm he had been happy. The lady who ran that place made us work hard, but she never beat on us like the nuns did. Mike was becoming more and more withdrawn and I didn’t know what to do about it. I tried to get him to join in our games, but usually he wouldn’t. He would just go off by himself and brood, especially when he had been punished for something. It seemed that the nuns were never satisfied with what we kids did, no matter how hard we tried, and as more and more new boys arrived at the orphanage, some of whom spoke Spanish and had come from Cuba, the Sisters’ dispositions worsened. At one point, there were over fifty of us boys living in the home with only five nuns presiding over the unruly mob. Every now and then, when things had been a little more peaceful than usual, the real person under the nun suit would sneak out.

“If I were a boy, I’d be a boxer,” said Sister Mary Joseph one day as we were choosing up sides for a softball game out on the black-topped play area. Billy was closest to her and she danced around him in a boxer’s stance with her fists held high in the air. A big smile covered her pale face with its shiny pink cheeks. She had an almost young look in spite of all that black material and the starched white collar and bonnet. But to me, her overall appearance was still that of a witch. Billy looked nervous and backed away, shaking his head no.

“Put ’em up, Donald,” she challenged me, dodging and weaving around me. All the kids were laughing as she playfully danced around.

“No, Sister!” I said with a nervous laugh as I edged away from her.

“Come on, I won’t hit you,” she grinned.

Sister Mary Joseph was lean and quick. I knew she had some strong muscles hidden under her habit and I wanted to avoid any contact with her. It was nice to see her in a good mood, but I knew how quickly that could change, and I didn’t want to risk being anywhere near her fists.

“No, Sister.”

Looking disappointed at her failure to round up a boxing partner, she told us to go ahead and finish choosing up sides for the game. She was the only nun who played softball with us and she could knock the ball over everybody’s head. She looked like a for-real witch when she ran the bases, her black, ankle-length dress billowing out behind her. Her black, pointy-toed, lace-up witch’s boots would get covered in dust as

she raced from base to base, carefully holding her white bonnet securely to her head. That evening at dinner, though, her usual mood had returned.

“Eat your liver, Billy!” she yelled at the reluctant boy, leaning over him at the supper table.

“Oh, God, Sister, it’s got cooties and makes me sick!” Billy exclaimed, looking white as he squirmed in his seat.

“Don’t you ever say ‘Oh, God’ in that tone of voice again, and quit trying to bluff your way through the English vocabulary!”

“Yes, Sister, but I can’t eat this stuff. It makes me sick,” Billy pleaded, looking queasily at the meal in front of him. Liver and squash was the most hated meal at the home, but we got it at least two or three times a month. They said it was good for us. Yeah, good and pukey, we thought. Sister Mary Joseph walked around, shouting at all of us to eat the meal.

“Eat it or sit here all night long!” she yelled.

We all groaned and grimaced, pushing the food around on our plates, hoping somehow to make it look as though there were less of it than what we had started with.

“The taste makes me feel like I’m gonna throw up, Sister,” my brother Mike said as Sister Mary Joseph loomed menacingly over his shoulder while he tried to eat the rubbery meat.

“It will not make you sick. It’s good for you—now eat!” she barked.

I was sitting at a table across from Mike and I could tell that she was getting ready to hit him. When he tried to choke down the vile meal, gagging on each bite, she got angrier and angrier.

*POW!*

Mike’s head rocked forward as the nun hit him with a hard blow to the back of his head. It caught him completely unaware and his hand knocked his open milk carton to the floor.

“Clean it up, clean it up!” she screamed, hitting him with a barrage of open hands and clenched fists while he frantically tried to cover from the blows. His tray of food hit the floor, infuriating the nun even more. It always hurt to see my brother get beaten up, and after witnessing this time and time again, my hatred for these black-robed witches was mounting.

“Eat your food, boy. Don’t you know there are starving people in China? Eat!” She hit Mike again as he tried to gather up the spilled food from the floor. She’s not going to stop hitting him, I realized. She continued striking him, yelling, “Clean that up! Now!” I had to do something to stop the nun, to distract her in some way.

“Hey, Sister! Why don’t you stop hitting my brother? If there are so many starving people in China, just put this cruddy stuff in a box and send it to them!” I spoke up.

Cheers and laughter burst out from all the boys in the dining room, but that was quickly followed by a dead silence when the nun headed in my direction.

“What did you say, young man?” Sister Mary Joseph demanded, barreling toward me like a high-speed locomotive.

“You heard me; send this stuff to China! It’ll probably make them sick, too!” I yelled at the rapidly approaching nun, standing up to face her.

No matter what she does to me, I am not going to cry I promised myself. Sister Mary Joseph hit me as hard as she could over and over again; the only reason she

stopped was because she became exhausted. She was breathing hard and bending over at the waist with her hands on her knees, glaring at me. Having not raised a hand or arm in self defense, I forced a big smile at the exhausted nun and watched her face contort with hate when she realized that now that I had grown bigger, I could take her hits and not cry. The nun turned and ran out of the dining room, accompanied by the sound of cheers and laughter.

“These nuns are crazy!” my brother sobbed while I helped him clean up the food on the floor.

“Donald Hall! Get to the wardrobe—now!” came the angry yell from Sister Maria Barbara, who had just entered the room. Her anger was barely under control, and she immediately began smacking any of the boys who were out of their seats. Up the stairs I ran to the familiar room.

“Damn these witches!” I hissed under my breath after Sister Maria Barbara followed me up the stairs and locked the door behind me.

I’ve been here almost four years now, I thought to myself. I’m thirteen years old and I’m taller than most all of the nuns. Even though I am being punished in the wardrobe, I feel good for a change because I can take old Joe’s best hook, I proudly thought, rubbing the sweat from my face and checking out my bent-up glasses. But, can Mike take it? I worried.

“What can we do?” I asked myself, pacing back and forth in the narrow confines of the locked room. “These witches have taken away our names—I have to call Mike Michael, and I have to be called Donald. I hate that name, Donald. Why can’t they just call me Don? I hate this place!”

I heard the laughter and yelling of the kids playing outside. I ran to the narrow window, but was not able to see any kids when I opened it to look out. I was three flights up on the other side of the building from where the boys always played. The height of the window intimidated me when I peered out at the hard concrete below. Standing there considering my predicament, I heard a shout.

“Hey, Donald!”

I looked down to see Billy coming around the corner below me. He had a grin on his face, and was followed by two more boys.

“What do you want, Billy?” I demanded, getting ready to close the window.

“When Sister Maria Barbara left to put you in the wardrobe, Sister Mary Joseph kicked your brother’s ass.” Billy was grinning even bigger now and the boys behind him were snickering.

One of the boys stepped around Billy and said, “She kicked him right in the butt, real hard with her boot.” The boy was thrusting his foot quickly back and forth to demonstrate. “Right in the butt!” he finished.

Billy smirked, “Your brother was on his hands and knees cleaning up his food right after you got sent upstairs and Sister Mary Joseph booted him out of there!”

One of the boys with Billy said as they were leaving, “Mike is in the downstairs bathroom and he’s hurt plenty bad.”

Anger and hatred for the nuns seethed through me and I shook the window in frustration and then ran to the door. “Locked! The damn witches lock me in all the time!” I yelled. I quickly ran back to the window, but Billy and the two boys were out of sight. I could still hear the other kids playing around the side of the building.



“Somebody help my brother!” I yelled out the window. Suddenly, I knew what to do. I began to pull sheets down from the shelves. “Lock me up, will you! I’ll get you, Crazy Joe, I’ll get you!” I muttered as I hastily fumbled with the length of sheets, tying them together and then looking around the room for an anchor point. I spotted what I needed. The shelf supports were made of two-by-fours and I tied my makeshift rope to one of them. I checked all my knots to make sure they wouldn’t slip. Dropping the sheets out of the window, I gave no thought to the dangers involved in dangling by sheets from a third floor window over concrete.

“I’m tired of these crazy nuns hitting on me and everyone all the time!” I mumbled as I descended to the pavement below. I kept bumping against the brick wall during my slide down the sheets, scraping my knuckles and making them bleed. Once safely on the ground, I crouched low and ran close to the wall, heading for the downstairs bathroom. On the other side of the building where the boys were playing I saw Sister Mary Joseph, who was standing with her back to me. I restrained myself from going after the old witch and went into the side door to the bathroom. Inside one of the stalls, I could hear my brother crying. “Hey, Mike, it’s me,” I said, opening the toilet stall door.

I was shocked to see my brother leaning his head against the wall with his pants down around his ankles. There was blood on his leg and a glob of blood in his underpants. “Mike! Are you all right?”

“Sister Mary Joseph kicked me in the butt with her witch shoes,” Mike answered, sobbing. His skin was pale and clammy. With a scared voice, he cried, “I thought I had to go pooh-pooh and that I went to the bathroom in my pants.”

Enraged, I ran out of the door and outside the building where I immediately saw Sister Mary Joseph, who still had her back to me. I looked around the play yard, saw a loose football and picked it up. “Bombs away!” I yelled, heaving the football. It arced through the air in a perfect spiral. “Bull’s eye!” I hollered when the rocket I had thrown hit its target, bouncing off Sister Mary Joseph’s head, making her stagger backward.

The impact of the ball crushed the nun’s white bonnet. The angry woman picked up her glasses and checked to make sure her bonnet still covered her head, and then quickly turned in my direction. I stood thirty feet from the nun and beckoned her to me as a crowd of boys gathered around.

“William, go get Sister Maria Barbara!” the nun yelled at Billy, who was heading my way.

“Take your time, Billy, if you know what I mean,” I said, shaking my scraped fist at him. I stood my ground as the nun bore down on me. “Now, let’s see what’s under that hat,” I said when the black robes swooped around me. I punched at the witch as she moved in close and then I grabbed her in a headlock and threw her over my hip, all in one quick motion. In an instant, the nun was lying flat on her back on the asphalt pavement with me standing over her, holding her white bonnet in my hands. Her first reaction was to cover her exposed, flattened short hair.

“Come on, you want to box? Get up, witch!” I yelled at the dazed nun. “Get up, witch!” I screamed at her. “Get up! I’ll give you a square fight!”

The nun fearfully lay on her back, looking up at me, waiting for her reinforcements to arrive. I could see Sister Maria Barbara coming now, and so did

Sister Mary Joseph, who scrambled to her feet and grabbed me. “You leave my brother alone!” I yelled at the grasping nun, pushing her away from me.

“What you have done is a mortal sin! A mortal sin!” Sister Mary Joseph screeched, hastily putting her ruined bonnet back on. Both women began smacking me.

“You’re going to the wardrobe!” Sister Mary Joseph yelled, pausing to adjust her smashed bonnet.

“He *was* in the wardrobe,” Sister Maria Barbara exclaimed, her face red with rage, “and I locked...!” Realizing that I had somehow escaped from the locked room, she demanded, “How did you get out?”

Before I could answer the question, the bullet hit me dead center in the chest. Sister Maria Barbara struck me several times, grabbed my ear, and jerked me off to the wardrobe again. She discovered the open window and the tied-up sheets, and yelled some more about my being an incorrigible youth, who was destined for the fiery pits of Hell. Alone inside the locked room once again, I stood at the window and gazed at the tall gold church, and pondered my situation. As soon as I am free from this place, I’ll never go to church again, I decided. These nuns are crazy and so is that church.

I stayed locked in that room for most of that weekend. When I was finally let out by one of the other nuns, I knew things were going to be tense. Heading for the outdoors, I stopped at the bottom of the stairs on the second floor and heard Sister Maria Barbara speaking to someone in an angry voice that verged on tears. I listened intently, glancing around me to make sure no one was around to see me there.

“I will not put up with your hitting the children so hard! You can’t kick them! Do you hear me?” Sister Maria Barbara demanded, her voice cracking from frustration and anger.

“Yes,” Sister Mary Joseph replied meekly.

This was great! The tiniest nun on The Hill was chewing out Sister Mary Joseph.

“You are hitting the boys with your fists and kicking them. Stop it right now. We will not discipline the children that way.”

“But, Sister...,” Sister Mary Joseph interrupted.

“There are no buts to it. Stop! You have really hurt some of these children the way you punch them. Stop!” Sister Maria Barbara’s voice cracked with emotion and I looked up and down the stairwell again, making sure no one could see me, ready to exit quickly through a nearby door.

“Do you hear me?” Sister Maria Barbara demanded.

“Yes, Sister,” Sister Mary Joseph answered in a totally uncontrite voice, and then all I could hear was the jingling of their rosaries as they walked away to the nuns’ section of the building.

I bounced down the rest of the stairs to the first floor, looking for Mike, feeling somewhat triumphant at having heard Crazy Joe getting chewed out. Downstairs, I found him sitting listlessly in front of the television set with a group of other boys. I pulled my brother by the arm, saying, “Mike, come here.” I led him over to a corner of the room and began telling him of my plans. “Mike, tomorrow after Sunday Mass, we’re going to leave here.”

“We’re going to run away?” Mike said, looking excited. I listened carefully for a few seconds before I answered him to make sure that I couldn’t hear the telltale jingling of any rosaries.

“How’s your butt?”

“It’s still sore, but it stopped bleeding, I think,” Mike said.

“We’ll leave tomorrow and it’ll give us the entire day to travel, and since it’s Sunday, we’ll be in our best clothes. That’ll help us catch a ride to Richmond. Do you feel well enough to go?”

“Yes, but we’ll need some money,” Mike answered.

“Yeah, and some matches, a knife, and a compass.”

“And a map,” Mike added, more animated than he had been in a long time. The nuns did not permit us to have money, watches, or any other personal items, so Mike and I would have a hard time securing the needed provisions for our adventure. He and I headed over to the one guy at the home who always managed to have some of these forbidden goodies.

“Hey, Bernie, my brother here and I need a favor,” I said.

“What do you need?” he answered, turning from the TV screen to face me. I had to stifle the snicker that threatened to undermine any generous feelings he might have, because, as usual, a gooey green substance hung from his nose.

“Mike and I are running away,” I whispered.

“You’re running away!” he exclaimed, gaining the attention of the rest of the twelve or so boys close by.

“Sh-h-h! The nuns may be near,” I said, looking around. I was very nervous about our plan and didn’t want to take any chances on having the nuns overhear. Somehow they usually seemed to find out when any of us had any unauthorized activities in the works. I often thought that they must have some sort of radio antennas stuck inside the white bonnets they wore. A lot of the older boys joked that nuns could hear through walls.

“You’ll need some things,” Bernie said in a lower tone.

“Yeah, that’s why we’ve come to you.”

Bernie got up from his seat and paced around with his hand to his chin, thinking. “You’ll need money,” he said.

“I’ve got two nickels,” one of the boys offered, pulling his shoe off and handing the change to my brother.

“I know where there’s fifteen cents,” another boy said as Bernie continued to pace.

“I’ve got two dollars and some small change I can let you have. If you get caught, you owe me; if you get away, forget about it,” Bernie said. “Where are you going?” he asked, stooping down to remove the air vent cover from the floor beside the TV.

“We’re heading to Richmond to find our dad,” Mike said as we gazed in wonder at the secret hiding place. Bernie pulled up a bag that had been tied with string and suspended in the depths of the heating vent. The boys who knew about the plan were as excited as Mike and I about it, and gave us what meager possessions they could muster up.

“If the nuns catch you, you’ll be in a lot of trouble,” Bernie said.

“We are always in trouble with these nuns anyway, so what’s the difference?” I replied. “At least we’ll be free and, besides, what are the nuns going to do anyway, put me in the wardrobe for life?”

“Good luck, men,” Bernie said with a salute.

The following day after Mass, as soon as there were no nuns in sight, Mike and I slipped over the edge of the steep hill behind the orphanage. We quickly ran down the hill, through the woods, and between the small pink, green, and yellow wood-framed houses of the Negro neighborhood that surrounded The Hill. Mike and I didn't say much as we put as much distance as possible between us and that yellow church.

"Let's get some food at the next store and camp for the night," I said after we had walked until the evening hours along the railroad tracks that paralleled the road, which we knew from the map led to Richmond. We could still see the church in the distance.

"We can't spend too much in case we have to pay Bernie back the money," Mike said as we entered an old wooden store.

"Get some matches and let's see what we want for supper. I know, get some hot dogs and some buns!" I said.

"We don't need to spend the money on buns."

"You're right, Mike. What else do we need?"

"A dessert. Here, get these marshmallows," he said, handing me a big, fluffy package containing enough marshmallows to last the trip. We paid for our feast, left the store, and headed back for the railroad tracks to build a fire.

"Look!" Mike said. "We'll use the coal that's fallen from the trains for the fire!" We busily started the fire with some wood we had already gathered up and added the chunks of coal to it. It was starting to get dark as Mike and I held our hot dogs, impaled on sticks, over the black smoky fire.

"It tastes like coal!" I said. We were both so hungry that we ate them anyway, soot and all. Equally charred marshmallows soon joined them.

"The marshmallows and hot dogs don't taste too good," Mike said with a grimace. We both were feeling a little queasy.

"Better than squash and liver!" I retorted.

"And getting kicked in the butt with witch's boots," Mike said, laughing.

"I can't wait to be a man and get away from these crazy adults," I said, covering the fire with dirt.

"What are we going to do when we get to Richmond?" Mike asked.

"We'll try to find our father in the phone book or something." It hadn't crossed either of our minds that our father might not be glad to see us show up out of nowhere. "Besides, I don't want to stay with him at all. Maybe we can get some money from him and travel around. In a few years, I'll be old enough to go into the Army and be on my own."

"What if there's a war and you have to go get shot and stuff?" Mike said.

"Aw, the wars are all over with and it will be a good way to see the world and get a lot of money," I replied.

We both laughed and then agreed it was time to set up camp and make a lean-to. The Boy Scout book Bernie had given us was going to come in very handy on this trip. We spent a chilly night huddled together underneath the branch-and-leaf construction we had erected.

The following morning after a breakfast of marshmallows, we decided to try to thumb a ride on the highway. That's where we went wrong.

"Mike, it's a police car!" I said, turning around, wanting to run when the state police cruiser rolled to a stop beside us.

The trooper rolled his window down and said, "What are you boys doing?"

I was so scared that the truth spewed out of my mouth before I could stop it. "We're running away."

My brother poked me and exclaimed, "Donnie!" The police officer got out of his car and ordered Mike and me into the back seat of the vehicle.

On the brief trip back to the orphanage, Mike asked me, "Why did you tell the policeman the truth?"

"I'm not going to lie to the police. I can just see myself going to confession and telling the priest I lied to the police!"

After the policeman left Mike and me at the door step in the custody of a smiling Sister Maria Barbara and Sister Mary Joseph, the two nuns' expressions changed from bland politeness to outraged anger. The furious women both exploded at Mike and me as we all stood in the same room that he and I had first entered several years before with our dad. "Donald and Michael Hall, you will be sent away from here the next time you run away, and we will not be responsible. Where were you two boys going?" demanded Sister Maria Barbara.

"To Richmond to find our dad," I replied.

The tiny nun snorted derisively and motioned for us to move to the boys' side of the house, saying, "Your father isn't capable of raising children; he isn't even making the monthly payments he's supposed to for your upkeep here. And how could you possibly have found him? What are you trying to prove?"

"You both are incorrigible!" interrupted Sister Mary Joseph.

"We will not put up with any more insubordination or renegade-type behavior. Do you understand me?" continued a furious Sister Maria Barbara, shouting up at me, spraying saliva all over me. Her teeth were crooked and mashed together, causing her to spray spit whenever she yelled or screamed at us boys. She always carried a white handkerchief in her hand for wiping her mouth, and sometimes she looked like she was in pain from toothaches.

"Tell Sister Mary Joseph not to kick my brother in the butt like a dog or something!" I retorted. A stinging smack was Sister Maria Barbara's reply.

"I'm tired of all these beatings!" I shouted at the tiny nun in front of me, my cheek stinging from the slap.

"Get to the study hall, Donald Hall!" she ordered and shoved me in that direction. Sister Mary Joseph had already dragged Mike off by the ear to the wardrobe. The study hall was an alternate punishment area, used when the wardrobe was already occupied. Since it was summer, all the rest of the boys were outside playing.

"And the next time you strike a Sister, young man, it will be the last straw! I will notify your father and he will be forced to retain custody of you both," Sister Maria Barbara informed me, still spitting saliva into my face.

What's the use of even arguing with these crazies, I thought. "I don't care what you do," I replied.

"You'll be excommunicated from the Church, Donald!" shouted the red-faced woman, using the ultimate threat that the nuns held in reserve for when we had been especially bad.

"Well, give me my papers and let me out of here!" I yelled, preparing myself for whatever onslaught might be coming from the enraged nun.

“Why, you ungrateful!” she sputtered, but seeing that I was not going to back down, she covered her mouth with her handkerchief and stormed out of the room, leaving me alone to think about the consequences of my misdeeds and the possibility of her carrying out her threat to have me kicked out of the Church. Excommunication was something to be feared because it guaranteed upon death, a swift descent into Hell, or, if I were lucky, just some Purgatory time. I just could not understand how God could allow the nuns to behave like they did. In a few minutes, Sister Maria Barbara returned. “Donald Hall,” she said, quickly jerking open the door to the study hall, “Go up to the church. I’ve called the priest’s rectory and a Father will be there to hear your confession—now!”

I obediently walked past the stern-faced nun and received a smack to the back of my head as I went by her. Damn headhunters, these nuns, I thought, ducking to avoid any more blows. Entering the back of the church, I dipped my fingers in the holy water font and made a sloppy Sign of the Cross, like all the adults did at Sunday morning Mass. I avoided the water font on the other side of the door because on Sundays I always watched one old man enter the church and drink water from the bowl. The old man’s mustache would drag in the water as he slurped the liquid. “The holy H-2-O fountain has the cooties!” Bernie had yelled after church one day when he witnessed the man bend over the container and slurp away.

“This holy stuff is nuts,” I said to myself, looking around the dark church. Purple bags covered all the statues in the church because it was the beginning of Holy Week, which meant more stuff about holy dead things. I opened the wooden door to the confessional and entered the closet-like enclosure. The priest slid open his small window and I knelt down and quickly recited the memorized words. “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been a week since my last confession. Father, I hit a nun and have been insubordinate to the Sisters,” I confessed.

“You hit a nun?” came the shocked voice of Father Brown. “Why?”

“She’s crazy, Father. She was beating up my brother real bad and I hit her.”

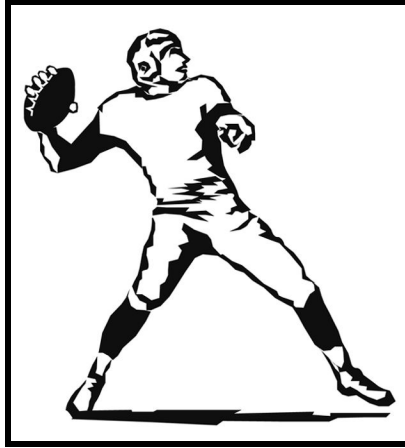
“You should never hit a Sister, young man, no matter what.”

The priest lectured me more, but I wasn’t really paying attention. He gave me the longest penance I had ever heard of—ten rosaries! That’ll take forever, I thought, kneeling in front of the altar after the priest left me alone in the empty church. An hour later I was still on my knees and only on the fifth rosary. I stopped saying the rosary and shoved the beads back into my pocket, looking around the church at the bagged statues. As I knelt there, I looked up at the large Crucifix looming over the white marble altar. “INRI” was lettered on a sign over Jesus’ head. Bernie had said the sign was Latin and it really meant, “The Jew man loses!” I got up from my knees and headed back to the orphanage.

The next day, I gave Bernie the remaining change and promised to pay back the balance as soon as I could. He shrugged his shoulders, patted me on the back and said that the next time he would see if we could come up with a plan to get us all the way to Richmond.

For the next few months, Sister Mary Joseph stayed away from Mike and me. She gave us a lot of dirty looks, but knowing that it was possible that I might not meekly accept further beatings, she avoided confrontations.

## Naked Reverse



The boys at St. Vincent's orphanage were in grades three to eight. We were by far the strongest and most daring of all the other boys who went to school on The Hill, including most of the boys in the high school. Because there were so many of us, we always had plenty of boys to fill out two complete sets of teams for any sport, all of which we played out on the blacktop, at breakneck speed and with all-out effort, even tackle football. Having to play on hard asphalt rather than grass didn't deter us at all. Someone was always having to get stitches, or have broken bones set. We were always trying to prove we were better than anyone else at whatever game we were playing. We had monkey bars—which we called the killer bars—basketball nets, and other assorted playground equipment. Every free moment we had, we were out playing hard and fast.

One time, I broke my right thumb so badly that it came completely unhinged and flopped around. It was a bizarre sight, very upsetting to the nuns, and it even made me queasy until the doctor finally put it in a cast. Another time we were playing football and I tore open my knee, but continued to play because I was having so much fun. Finally, the other boys were getting so grossed out from my blood getting all over them, they made me go in and tell the nuns. Sister Mary Joseph accompanied me to the bathroom to assess the damage and get me cleaned up. There was blood all over me, and when I took off my sock and started to wring out the blood in the sink, she got white as a sheet and had to sit on the floor to keep from fainting. For most of us St. Vincent's boys, pain and injury were just side effects of having fun and playing hard.

For endless hours during the summertime, we all played together on the blacktop, conducting every game at breakneck speed. The scorching heat emanating from the hot surface would bake our feet inside our Converse high-top sneakers. The main objective of our play was football, and then more football. By the end of the summer, we were ready for sandlot football sign-ups. I was very anxious about the upcoming season

because I had practiced all summer to become a quarterback. During the summer, I would slip down into the gym in the grade school with a large basket full of footballs. I'd spend hours throwing a football from one side of the court into the basketball hoop at the other end.

The equipment we received at the end of summer for football season was less than desirable, but we made do. The constant long hours of practicing on the rocky sloped hillside for our first game would pay off. Our coach, Mr. Moser, worked at the post office, so he was able to spend his afternoons coaching us. Because he spent so much time volunteering with school functions and doing all kinds of other generous activities for the kids on The Hill, he was the first man I really looked up to. Most of the time we all liked Mr. Moser. If the team was winning he was neat.

"I want this game! I want you to win and to think about how you are going to win!" yelled Coach Moser. "No matter what it takes, I want you boys to put your bodies on the line for me! The first game will set the trend for the rest of the season."

The previous year, our team had come in third in the league. I played fullback that year, but received the ball to run with only once that entire year. The older boys on the team favored their classmates, who were two years ahead of me. When I did get the football that one time, during the last game of the year, I ran a touchdown. This year I was the quarterback and I was determined to do an outstanding job for the team.

"Tear 'em up. Hit 'em hard. Whatever it takes, win!" Moser continued to exhort.

I looked over on our side of the field and my stomach was in knots. The cheerleaders were dancing and screaming. I was glad that they were making enough noise to drown out Coach Moser's voice. For some reason, the coach seemed full of fire and anger today. I shifted my gaze across the field to our opponents. They appeared to be slightly bigger than our team, and were called the Police Athletic League, PAL for short. A big police officer in uniform stood with his boys, ready for the referees to start the game.

"What the hell you looking at, Whitey?!"

"Huh?" I asked, looking back at the coach.

"Huh? Wake up, Whitey Hall, and get with the program!" Moser yelled. I had developed that nickname because of my pale blond hair, and everyone except the nuns called me that now.

Our team, numbering fifteen ball players, ran to our side of the field, ready for the start of the game. Our new green and gold uniforms were the same color as Roanoke Catholic's varsity uniforms. My big dream was to be quarterback of the varsity football team, then on to be quarterback for Notre Dame.

I grabbed the McPherson twins by their helmets and shook their heads. Pat and Mike McPherson and I had been playing sandlot football together for the last three years. The two brothers were the halfbacks for the team. The only way to tell the difference between the two twins was that Pat McPherson had had a broken nose and it looked like a boxer's nose, whereas Mike McPherson's nose was straight. Another subtle difference was that one was right-handed and the other left-handed. Both boys were straight-bodied, lean, and hard hitters when it came to football.

The first half of the game went back and forth, neither team accomplishing very much. A few fumbles, then some dropped passes. Coach Moser called a play that was a quick pass into the flat to Pat McPherson. The safety across from me read my eyes



perfectly, intercepted the ball, then ran for a touchdown, but we held them on the extra point. At halftime, I could see that Coach Moser wasn't very happy with our results.

"Sit down here, everyone! Just where in the fuck did you think you were throwing the goddamned football, Whitey!?"

For some reason, Coach Moser was especially out of sorts that day. I had no chance to answer because he seemed to come unglued right there on the spot. He spent an inordinate amount of time berating me for the one error I had committed on that play he had called. I couldn't believe the anger that spewed from the man's mouth as he continued to harangue me.

"Couldn't you see the defender coming up?" the angry man continued, saliva spraying from the corners of his mouth. "Are you fucking stupid?!"

I started to really get angry as the enraged man ranted on. I looked at him standing there, a short man, not much bigger than most of the boys on the team, screaming at me like I had committed a football mortal sin. His big nose seemed to grow larger in front of my very eyes underneath the brim of his mailman's baseball cap. Tension and rage built up inside me, but at the same time, I felt crushed and hurt that this man was taking this sport so seriously and so vehemently that he was directing all his frustration and anger at me. At that moment my respect for him plummeted.

"I've spent the better part of three goddamned weeks with you little assholes, and what do I get? A whole goddamned half, and only one damn interception. You've only gained ten yards the whole fucking half. What I gotta do? Play for you pansy asses?"

The coach's cursing made us all lower our heads in shame and embarrassment, but for me, it was mostly embarrassment for our coach. As he continued to point his finger, spitting as he ranted on, I gave up paying attention to the man. Surely he was going to Hell, I thought.

The second half, our team played with as much intensity as the first. We could hear the coach constantly screaming from the sidelines. We managed to score as I drove up the middle on a quarterback sneak for the touchdown, and I made the extra point on the same play. I was getting mad. The other team scored on their next possession, and once again, we blocked the extra point.

"Put that asshole in a uniform," I said in the huddle, nodding toward Coach Moser.

"What's wrong with him?" Pat McPherson asked.

"He missed Mass or something," Mike McPherson replied.

On our next possession of the ball, we received a fifteen-yard penalty. At least it wasn't me that made the penalty, I thought, running back to the huddle.

"Hey, Ref, how much more time?" I asked.

"One minute," he replied.

A player ran into the huddle from the sidelines. "Coach wants you to punt the ball."

"Fourth down and maybe twenty-five or so yards for a first down. Nah! What'll happen to me that hasn't already happened?" I said in the huddle. "Let's run a play."

"No, Whitey," Pat spoke up immediately. The dirt was crusted around Pat's teeth from constantly breathing through his mouth because of his flattened nose. "Coach will really be pissed off if you don't punt the ball."

“Well, let’s really piss him off then. Besides, what’s he gonna do? Curse me out? Hit me? Kick me off the team? What?”

“Whitey’s the QB. Do as he says!” Billy said harshly, yanking the face masks of both the McPherson twins and forcing them to bend over into the huddle.

The whistle blew from the line ref and we were charged another penalty for delay of game. Teammates were now yelling at one another. Moser’s screaming and yelling drilled through the small ear holes in my helmet, and I could feel my knees shaking. I was scared, but now things were out of Moser’s control, and I was angry.

“Huddle up you bunch of pansy, stupid, fucking little assholes!” I screamed.

Shock and disbelief spread amongst the players. In anger, I had said my first curse words, but somehow, repeating Coach Moser’s silly remarks made everyone pull together. The rest of the players in the huddle smiled and looked at me in amazement, for I was questioning the laws of authority, and especially the authority of a man. Quickly, I gave my plan.

“You want to win the game, don’t you?” I exhorted my team members. “We can do it if everybody does this right. The safety will be busy running back up field if we come out in regular formation, and as soon as he’s up, we’ll snap the ball and I’ll fake to the fullback and bootleg around him. Everyone else, especially the McPhersons, follow the fake to the other side.”

The ref blew his whistle on us, then flagged us for delay of game again.

“Hey, what’s another five yards! Here’s the play,” I said, bending over and lowering my head. “Slot right, forty-seven, naked reverse. On four. Ready? Break!”

We came out of the huddle and could hear Coach Moser screaming at the top of his lungs. “Punt formation! What are you doing?! Call time out! Stop!!”

The die was cast. The safety man for the PAL team couldn’t believe we were not in punt formation as he quickly ran back up to the defensive team to his position. For a few moments, the safety looked confused, and I knew at the snap we had a chance. I ran down behind the line of scrimmage with the football, then faked a hand-off to the fullback, who was in the slot. The two McPherson twins pulled around to the opposite side as if to block for the fullback, and I positioned the football off to the side, on my hip. Clear sailing, I thought, as the Police Athletic League fell for the fake reverse and I bootlegged the ball around the end. The thought crossed my mind several times as I raced down the field to simply stop, then let the PAL players get me, just to really piss off the coach who thought this game was a matter of life and death. I slowed down, and out of the corner of my eye, saw the coach running down the sideline, parallel to me, screaming for me to go faster while he waved his baseball cap and jumped up and down. I decided to quicken my pace just a little, and continued to tease the coach for the entire eighty-five yards to the end zone. My teammates smothered me as I held up the football after making the touchdown. I looked back up the field to see if there were any flags, and to my relief, there were none.

The game ended quickly, with our team winning 13 to 12.

After that day, I didn’t like football as much anymore, not just because of how Coach Moser had acted, but because it seemed that the general philosophy of all the coaches I ever played under was to try to win by hurting the other team’s players badly enough that they had to be taken out of the game. And if you were the one to get hurt, the worst sports sin you could commit was to cry. Tears of pain were equated with not

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being a man. What would it take to be a man? The thought of not performing as a man was my biggest fear. By the standards of the movies that we saw, John Wayne always won and settled his disagreements either with his fists or his gun; the first being the tactic favored by the nuns, probably because they didn't have any guns handy.

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