In The Company of Men

My name is Marty, and I am not a priest. I once thought about a vocation and wondered if I had a calling, but I'm not the priest type––my childhood was too ordinary, I don't need forgiveness or redemption, I have not suffered or fallen. Once I thought I had, but I have not. I did grow up in Catholic school and doing the whole alter boy thing though, and I guess it was there––sweating under the surplice while wondering how much longer I could possibly kneel; sitting in Sister Mary's fourth grade Catechism class worrying about good and evil; looking, with George and Billy, at Janice DeLillo's little fifth grade breasts in the corner of the playground and, unlike my friends, feeling partly sorry for a girl who would show this to us––during these moments of clarity from my childhood, I thought I might be different, have a calling. After all, George didn't feel sorry for Janice DeLillo. In fact, he asked if he could see more. But in the end, I turned out to be not much different from George and Billy, but that is not what I wanted to talk about, I wanted to talk about the monsignor, because he's the reason I'm not a priest.

Toward the end, when Monsignor Klein poured the holy water into the chalice followed by the dash of wine, his hands trembled. The congregation sat too far away to notice the tremors, but as altar boys, we saw it clearly. Occasionally, on especially bad days, the old monsignor would even spill a few drops onto the white altar cloth, staining it with the unconsecrated red wine. Afterwards one of the sisters would replace the soiled cloth with a fresh one and the incident would become insignificant to the monsignor who, after his morning Mass, would need to devote his time to more prominent issues. But to the old nun whose job it was to remove the stain from the holy cloth and prepare it for future use, the incident led to half a day's labor involving soaking, hand washing, drying, and pressing. Monsignor Klein did not offer praise to nuns who did good work, and the sister, devout and meek, did not expect it. I learned

about this altar cloth cleaning from Sister Mary, my fourth grade Catechism teacher. She said that today everyone expected rewards, that we all wanted to be acknowledged, a word I did not know the meaning of at the time, but a word that Sister Mary annunciated with such bitterness and disdain that I understood to mean something as evil as cussing or touching yourself. “We fulfill our roles. We each have a duty,” she went on to say. “God expects this of us. Do your duty, not for thanks, not for acknowledgement, not for reward, but because it is what one is expected to do.” I was not very good at this duty thinıg, but I was quickly learning that I was not very good at a lot of things.

Sister Mary used the monsignor to exemplify many lessons during that fourth grade Catechism class. She told us how the monsignor ate very little and how this was a wonderful example of self-deprivation, another term I did not know, but by then, I was so used to Sister Mary that I just wrote down the terms as she spelled them on the blackboard preceded by an equal sign and either the word good or evil in capital letters. Beside self-deprivation, Sister Mary told us to use the label good, and there it stood, in my old crinkled notebook, in my fourth grade awkward letters, right under Acknowledgment=EVIL, Self-Deprivation=GOOD.

I could not imagine how the monsignor lived through the day on what Sister Mary claimed he ate. She said he had one piece of dry toast and half a glass of tomato juice every morning and one hardboiled egg with a glass of water at dinner time. That was it. Somebody asked if communion counted as food, but of course it did not, and even if it had, it still seemed like not enough food. I knew I could never live on such rations. I mean I ate more than that for my after-school snack, at least when I could get away with it. But Sister Mary reminded us, “We must always strive to improve, and even though none of us is perfect, we must never give up improving.”

As it turned out the monsignor was also able to exemplify the trait of cleanliness. Gladys Fluti, from The Lady of Peace Rosary Society, made his toast

Monday through Friday at six-forty-five, and her sister-in-law, Molly Patterson, filled in on the weekends. Between the two of them, they also boiled his dinner egg, changed his linen and generally cleaned the rectory. When Sister Mary brought these two old ladies into the classroom, we were stunned. She had announced the day before that we were in for a big treat that day, and from that, the rumors had sprung. Billy said she was going to pass out candy, and Mary Beth said that Santa Claus was going to visit. This former rumor fell apart when we rechecked our notebooks and sure enough discovered that Sister Mary had made us write Candy=EVIL. The latter rumor, although feasible, seemed odd since it was already Lent and most of the snow had melted. The rumor that did take hold was that the Pope himself was to visit our classroom the next day. And so with pious faces and our best uniforms, we sat up straight in Sister Mary's class that day and eagerly awaited the Pontiff's arrival. But the Pope did not visit, that is unless he had suddenly taken the form of Mrs. Fluti or Mrs. Patterson. As it turned out, they were the big treat.

The lady's were there to testify about the next entry on our list, Cleanliness=GOOD. By way of introduction, Sister Mary, who had become privy to the Pope rumor, told us that we should always dress and keep our rooms in such a way that if the Pope were to drop in, he would not think us to be animals. "After all," she said, "even the Pope values cleanliness." Both women testified that the monsignor was an exceptionally neat and orderly man, a trait which minimized the amount of cleaning needed, and which allowed merely the two of them to handle all the rectory cleaning responsibilities. The women were not paid, but the monsignor did offer one Mass a year dedicated to all those who served, and after this Mass, The Lady of Peace Rosary Society held their annual luncheon social in the church pavilion and reiterated the monsignor's acknowledgement. This latter information, Sister Mary told us after the ladies had left so as to remind us about duty.

Monsignor Klein had originally learned his Catechism in German and during Mass he sometimes offered German phrases and colloquialisms which we did not understand. From these German phrases, however, the altar boys had constructed an entire mythology about the monsignor in which, among other things, it was acknowledged that the monsignor was some type of odd Catholic Nazi who had fled WWII Germany upon realizing his country's imminent defeat. Some of the altar boys kept notes of his German phrases along with their own English translations which always read as Nazi propaganda. Sister Mary once found one such list in George's notebook when she was checking his good and evil word list. Needles to say, she was not amused. After lecturing both George, who cowered in his seat, and the rest of the class for the remainder of the period, she instructed us to once again turn to our list and enter Fictionalizing=Evil, an entry which nobody understood.

The monsignor celebrated his Golden Jubilee during his eighty-first year of life. The bishop came to Saint Pius to say the Mass, and those of us who were not selected to serve on the altar, were forced to join our respective classes and join in the singing of a class hymn. Being in the sixth grade by then, the highest grade in Saint Pius' Lower School, my class was made to sing *Ave Maria*, a Latin hymn which we neither understood nor could possibly sing in key. We did manage to get through it somehow, though I mostly mouthed it along with most of the boys.

During the sermon of the Mass, the bishop reminded the congregation of the monsignor's esteem, an action which seemed in direct contradiction to our fourth grade list, but which seemed okay for the moment. The bishop recalled that the monsignor had personally met the last three Popes and had even been granted a private audience with John Paul II. He told us that the monsignor had performed 2465 marriages, 7621 baptisms, and had presided over 1897 funerals. After the Mass, the monsignor stood beside the Bishop on the steps of the church and quietly accepted congratulations from his parishioners.

The monsignor forbade all forms of horseplay in the sacristy, and the altar boys lived in fear of incurring the monsignor's wrath. It was also part of the mythology, even though Sister Mary had made a special effort to hold it as another example of fictionalizing, that one altar boy, years earlier, had been locked in a dark room in the church's basement by the monsignor after he was caught mimicking the off-key singing of Deacon Gallo. In some versions of the mythology, the boy is still down there living on scraps of stale bread and dirty water which the monsignor tosses to him when he is in the mood.

The Parish of Saint Pius consisted of four buildings, two parking lots, one which doubled as a playground, and a picnic pavilion. Of the four buildings, the lower school was the largest. Its three floors provided classrooms, a gymnasium, and a cafeteria space, as well as apartments for the sisters. No students ever saw the sisters' apartments, but the mysterious third floor was nearly as mythologized as the monsignor himself.

The monsignor had not had direct involvement in the lower school for many years. The sisters, along with a handful of lay people, served as both teachers and principal. In fact, the monsignor had not been seen in the school since my second grade year when he, garbed in his long black robes and black biretta, out of no where, walked onto the playground during our recess and asked for the football with which we were playing. Some of the kids did not see the monsignor at first, but soon the entire playground had ceased to be a noisy bumble of activity and, with stationary jump ropes and held basketballs, every kid on the lot looked at the monsignor.

George, who was holding the football, handed it over quickly, and we all waited. With the worn ball in his hands, the monsignor walked twenty feet or so to an off-limits section of the parking-lot playground. He turned then and faced us, the children of Saint Pius Lower School, the boys in our beat dark-blue dress pants and ratty white oxfords, our clip-on navy ties partially hanging out our back pockets (we

were allowed to remove the ties during recess), the girls in their plaid knee-length jumpers and white blouses, us with our retainers and cow licks, awkward and undeveloped kids, momentarily silent, as if we were in the church itself, looking at the monsignor holding our football.

The monsignor slowly bent down then and touched the nose of the ball to the gray asphalt. He spun the ball in a way no student has yet to imitate. The ball, spinning like a top, or a figure skater, balanced there in front of the monsignor while he slowly straightened up, positioned himself, and with his old black priest shoe, kicked the spinning ball, lofting it gently back into George's hand. The monsignor smiled after that, then walked away as silently as he had appeared.

The second largest building was the church itself. It was a stone building still in its original old-style design. There were several stone steps leading to the large oak front doors which were fashioned to look solid and important. Stained glass windows sectioned the sides of the structure into ten separate areas. The windows depicted saints with gold auras and praying hands. A simpler side entrance was built toward the front and faced the rectory. It was this entrance that the monsignor used.

When I was in eighth grade, the monsignor began to walk slowly and slightly hunched over almost sliding his feet which he seemed unable to lift more than a few inches from the ground. On winter mornings when the monsignor would need to cross to the church on snowy sidewalks which Mr Arthur had not yet had a chance to clear, the monsignor's tracks were more like channels than footprints. He did not negotiate stairs well either, but he had yet not to make it up to the altar or back to the rectory, even though several of the altar boys bet baseball cards before the daily Mass as to whether this would be the Mass where the monsignor would not be able to climb the two stairs necessary to make it to the altar.

Also by then, being unable to drive, one of the sisters would taxi the monsignor to his hospital visits and various appointments. It was widely held that such trips were

conducted in complete silence. In fact, one of the more daring altar boys even snuck into the rectory garage and reported that the monsignor's car had no radio. But this is not what I want to tell you about either. It is part of it, but only the early part. The real story came later, during my junior year at Our Lady of Victory, when I got my first real girlfriend, Jennifer, a girl who I would not end up staying with, but a girl who was a good first girlfriend, who understood the awkwardness of dating without a car, of being a virgin, of inexperience; when I had forgotten all about Sister Mary's ideas of duty and self-deprivation; when I had pretty much decided that masturbation wasn't a real sin; when the monsignor began to die.

The monsignor was eighty-six years old and dying, just shutting down, just failing. I suppose he had cancer or heart disease or some other terminal illness, but to me, he was just dying of old age. The doctor saw no reason to confine the monsignor to a hospital and thus, with the support of the congregation, the monsignor was sent to the rectory to wait for the end.

The Lady of Peace Rosary Society and the sisters in residence were enough to provide care for the monsignor, and the bishop had sent Father Henderson several years before to say most of the Masses and assume the duties of which the monsignor was no longer capable.

Father Henderson did not move into Saint Pius' rectory; however, for both he and the bishop thought it best for him to house at Saint Patrick's rectory until the monsignor passed. Father Henderson was a young priest, only seven years out of the seminary, and, with our allegiance still tied to the old-school theology of the monsignor, the congregation treated Father Henderson with cold reverence. After all, Deacon Gallo was old enough to be Father Henderson's grandfather, in fact, the young priest seemed more like somebody I could be in a few years than like the leader of Saint Pius Parish, but Father Henderson turned out to be alright. He stayed for four or five years, and by the time I came home from college, he had moved on to do

missionary work in New Guinea. An older priest had been assigned to the parish, but by then I had pretty much lost interest in Saint Pius'––a parish that was and always will be the monsignor's parish to me.

Between Gladys Fluti, Molly Patterson, and the nuns, the monsignor was fed, and cared for, but several of the mothers thought it would be nice if some of us older altar boys took turns sitting with the monsignor for an hour or so after school. My days were Mondays and Thursdays.

The two smallest buildings on the grounds were the rectory and its garage. The rectory was built for four priests, but the monsignor had always lived there alone. The two second floor suites were simply closed off and unused as well as one of the first floor suites. The back door opened into a dim kitchen from which one could pass to a formal dining room, mostly unused, a large receiving room, and a wing of four offices. A hallway led off the receiving room allowing access to the two downstairs suites and the stairs tzo the upstairs. Each suite consisted of a bedroom, a small sitting room and a private bathroom. With the monsignor's illness, his sitting room had been converted into his bedroom to allow for the larger size of the hospital bed and his bedroom had become a repository for the flowers which he had received.

Even though the original plan was for several altar boys to take turns sitting with the monsignor, as it turned out, I became the only one who actually ever visited. The others either refused to go or said they were going but never actually showed up. I thought about this latter option, but I felt sad thinking about the monsignor alone in his room all day. I mean the women were there, but I thought maybe he would like a guy, or at least a boy, around.

During my first visit, the monsignor could not lift his head from the pillow and mostly slept. I sat in a maroon armchair beside his bed and looked at the Crucifix on the wall so as not to have to see the monsignor sleeping. Wedged between the wood of the cross and the plaster wall was a dried-out brown palm branch tied in the middle

with its ends shooting out almost making a second horizontal arm on the Crucifix, for a minute I even imagined what the Crucifix would like with two victims instead of just the one, but that somehow seemed like a wrong thought.

The body of Jesus on the Crucifix was painted in great detail and mostly in subdued flesh-tones and almost colorless pale browns, but where the wounds were, on the hands, the feet, and around the thorny crown, the blood was painted such a brilliant red that it both subdued the other colors further and almost looked moist, real, like it might drip, like it needed to be dabbed or cleaned. The Crucifix was old, and I could imagine that even after the monsignor died and Father Henderson moved in, even after new paint on the dreary walls, one would always be able to see the faint hint of where that Crucifix had hung.

After a while I did look at the Monsignor. He was not in his clerics but rather in tattered old flannel pajamas. I had never seen him without the collar. Lying there like that, the monsignor looked like any other old man––thin grayish black hair slicked back, a big old man's nose, and bushy eyebrows that he seemed to have grown overnight.

Earlier, Sister Mary had asked me if I knew about shaving. I was too embarrassed to tell her the truth, and so the task of shaving the monsignor became mine. Sister Mary had located the monsignor's shave lotion and shaver and had given me a small bath towel and a basin of warm water. Shaving the monsignor was awkward. I had never actually touched the monsignor before and to rub the shave lotion on his stubbled face seemed like running my hand over the face of God himself.

The monsignor's skin was leathery and rough, not at all like Jennifer's, whose cheek I had caressed while we kissed after school that afternoon. No, her skin was young, soft, angelic, but his was the weathered tired skin of an old man. Yet there was something very much the same in the touching of these two cheeks, something I could not immediately understand, but when the monsignor smiled slightly with pleasure as

I massaged the lather onto his cheeks and neck, I realized that the commonality was just that, the pleasure of the human touch, to touch another human being, to be touched by another human being, this was pleasurable. I couldn't remember for sure, but I would have bet that somewhere on that fourth grade list that Sister Mary had forced us to write, were the words Touching=EVIL, and that was wrong.

I wet the blade of the razor in the basin and drew from his sideburn down to the bottom of his neck leaving a glistening trail of fresh skin that looked for a moment like Jennifer's supple skin before it returned to the lifeless weathered dun skin of the monsignor. I rinsed the blade and repeated the stroke on the next section of his check and neck. When I got to the monsignor's mouth and shaved above his lip, I noticed the short black hairs growing bushy from his nostrils and almost apologized to the monsignor for not being able to trim them. I somehow wanted, at that moment, to make him as beautiful as he could be, to keep him neat and clean.

When I finished shaving the monsignor, I toweled his face. I had nicked his neck in several places and tiny drops of blood formed as markers of my errors. During all this the monsignor kept his eyes closed, but after I toweled him off, he opened his eyes and looked at me. I don't think he had ever really looked at me before that moment, but I guess he now had a right to look closely. "What's your name?" he whispered. I told him, but he did not listen to me. Instead, he called me Thomas. "I'm sorry, Thomas. I did not want things to turn out like this." I sat there holding the towel. "I have thought about you, Thomas. I have thought about you." The Monsignor closed his tired eyes again and was soon asleep.

That night, I told my mother that I did not want to go back there, that the monsignor was calling me Thomas, that I had to shave him. I told her I was scared, but my mother did not allow fear as an excuse. Jennifer thought I should go back too, she said I was kind and caring and that a man, especially the monsignor, needed to be in

the company of other men when he was dying. I don't know how she knew that, but she did.

The following Thursday I returned to the monsignor's bedside and once again shaved away his priestly stubble. I only nicked him once that second time, but it was more severe than any of the first nicks, and the blood trickled down his neck and onto his white pillowcase before I could get some paper from the bathroom with which to patch the cut. The monsignor again kept his eyes closed while I shaved him, but afterwards he addressed me as Thomas. "I have a gift for you." His voice was so low and quiet I did not at first make it out, but with only his right ring finger he motioned to a trunk at the foot of the bed. "Open it, Thomas." The trunk was old and traveled. Its leather handle-straps were rotted away. Its black covering was well scarred and scratched. I did not really want to look inside that trunk, so I simply stood beside it and waited to see if perhaps the monsignor would fall back asleep. He did not. Instead he motioned again, only this time by raising his hand and again telling me to open the trunk. I lifted the lid. The trunk contained the monsignor's personal belongings, the jumbled worldly possessions of an aged priest.

It contained an old photo album which the monsignor asked me to show to him page by page. The photos were of the monsignor as a seminarian––a young, dashing German––posed with other seminarians and clergy. The entire album covered from these seminary days through the monsignor's early years at Saint Pius, but as the photos became closer to the present day, they became mostly holiday shots and the professional portraits taken annually at the church fundraiser. There were no photographs of his family. At the time that seemed right to me. The monsignor had no past as far as I was concerned. He was and always had been the monsignor. In fact, aside from the spinning football trick, I had never seen the monsignor in any light other than as a priest. That is until I first walked into his stale suite and lathered his old face. When we flipped to the last photo in the album, a head shot from 1978, the

monsignor touched my hand. “Thomas, it could have been different. It could have been different.” His grip loosened on my hand, and the beaten old man fell asleep.

After that second visit, I developed a strange curiosity about what else was in the trunk, and even though I was still mostly awkward about being alone with the monsignor, I also partly looked forward to my next visit. Jennifer was also fascinated with what else might be in the trunk, for to her, and I guess for me too, that trunk offered a possible window into the past of a man who seemed almost non-human, a man who seemed to have no past. But a strange feeling gradually began to come over me starting like a drip but soon flooding over my entire being. The monsignor was mine. His past, if there were any, was mine. I was Thomas, what he showed me was for me, was between two men. It was not for Jennifer’s voyeuristic pleasure, or for my mother’s, or for anyone’s for that matter. I didn’t tell Jennifer about this feeling as we kissed on her parent’s sofa that night, but I felt it, and even kissing a pretty girl in the dim light did not drive that feeling away.

I shaved the monsignor again on my next visit, and he seemed to remember the two of us looking at the photo album although he still was calling me Thomas. He instructed me to look again in the trunk, still maintaining that he had something for me, well for Thomas, inside. Besides the photo album, there were four old thick wool sweaters, two gray and two brown. They were oversized and moth eaten in places. They looked like the kind of sweaters a fisherman would wear on the docks, or a sailor out on an icy ocean. They were beat and foreign looking. “Take those, Thomas.” I really didn’t want the old tattered garments, but I set them aside as if I would carry them out when I left. Under the sweaters were twelve or so old books with German titles. I held them up one at a time for the monsignor to examine. The monsignor pronounced the title of each book which meant nothing to me, but the monsignor seemed to enjoy pronouncing the German titles and examining the books as I handed them to him one volume at a time. The last book from the trunk was, Der Zauberberg

by Thomas Mann. The monsignor pronounced the title; he looked at the book, and then he looked at me. He smiled. “Thomas Mann, Thomas. Father named you after him. Did you know that, Thomas? Before the war, Father met him while attending lectures in Munich, did he ever tell you, Thomas? Well of course I guess not, you were so young and with the war. But father loved him, Thomas, thought he would save Germany, be the next Goethe. Father never read this one though, this one would have made him even prouder of his friend. But that was long ago, Thomas. Another world, almost another life.” The monsignor held the book close to his chest and closed his eyes. I thought he might have fallen asleep, but then he spoke. “Read some to me, Thomas.” Of course I could not read German, but when I tried to protest, the monsignor insisted. He did not seem to care how I pronounced the German words or how I stumbled through the lines. He just listened to me, an English-speaking parochial kid from the east side, mispronouncing Thomas Mann’s German, and smiled. After the first three pages of *Der Zauberberg*, the old man was asleep. I set the book on his night table, returned the others to the trunk, and then closed its lid. I left the room quietly. I did take the sweaters though. I had intended to toss them in the Goodwill collection dumpster someday when I got around to it, but for then I carried them home and hid them on the shelf of my closet. I thought that maybe Jennifer and I could each wear one to a football game or something, but we never did.

Over the next several visits, I continued to get better at shaving the monsignor’s beat face, and I even got a little better at reading the German, at least I thought I did. I developed some standardization to my pronunciation, albeit a pronunciation all my own. Every time I read, the monsignor smiled. What else could one hope to do for a dying man?

Jennifer kept asking about my visits with the monsignor, but all I told her was that he slept mostly and when he was awake, he was too weak to talk. My mother

seemed content with the knowledge that I was visiting and didn't ask me anything other than when I was expected to visit again.

Eventually the monsignor asked me to return to the trunk. The only things we had not yet gone through were four cigar boxes full of trinkets and mementos. The first one had some old military medals in it, some old German paper money, a tarnished Zippo lighter and three dried-out black fountain pens. The monsignor held up the medals one by one and looked at each closely. "These were Father's. We used to pin them on ourselves when Mother was away. We pretend to be great heroes. Do you remember that, Thomas? No, you wouldn't remember that, Thomas, you were too small."

The next two boxes held religious relics, miniature icons, a small German version of The New Testament, and several religious medals and their chains. Before I handed him the last box, the monsignor looked at me. "Thomas, I saved this for you." He then took the box and opened its lid. Inside were four yellowed handwritten notes in German, a lock of brown hair, a scapular and a cracked and fading photograph of two small boys, probably eight and ten, wearing wool breeches and dress jackets, arm-in-arm, both smiling like Christmas morning. "Do you remember that, Thomas?" I made no reply. "We were so happy then. Why Thomas? Why did you make me do it, Thomas? We could have opened a business, met nice girls, settled down like Mother wanted. Why Thomas, why did you stay there?" I did not answer. "Look at the letter, Thomas." I unfolded one and looked at it. "See how Mother suffered, Thomas, when she found out. Yes, she found out. I know I promised, but she found out. Thomas, did you really think Mother wouldn't find out? Take my hand, Thomas." I took the monsignor's hand in mine and stood over him holding the letter from his mother in my other hand. The monsignor cried. I looked at the Crucifix and felt the bigness of the monsignor's old cracked hand, so unlike the tiny delicate hand of Jennifer, yet somehow holding Jennifer's hand as I had earlier that day while we walked down the

hall, seemed now silly, superfluous, meaningless. This, this big old German hand wrapped in mine, was, I realized, the first time that I had ever really held anybody's hand.

"Thomas, Mother never forgave me. She grew old in France, and those three letters are all she ever wrote to me. They're all about you, Thomas, about why I did it, about Father and how he would have forced you to go had he been alive, about how I could have become so cruel as to allow you to stay. But Thomas, you know all that by now. You know I could not have forced you to change. But if I had tried Thomas, maybe you would have listened. Not at first, but maybe later, here in America, you would have seen what you were getting yourself into. But I didn't stop you, Thomas. I did not believe it was my place, but now I know that it was. Forgive me, Thomas." I don't know why I spoke, I mean I wasn't Thomas, but I bent down close to the monsignor's ear and whispered, "I forgive you." The monsignor held my hand tightly. "Thank you, Thomas." He then closed his eyes. "Thank you, Marty." His grip loosened, and he fell into sleep. I wiped the tears from his old face with my thumb, closed the trunk, and left carrying the cigar box with the four letters, the photograph, the lock of hair, and the scapular.

That night I called Jennifer and broke things off with her. I said I just had too much going on. She said she understood, that we could still be friends. Then I dug out my old fourth grade Catechism notebook and opened it to Sister Mary's list, and, at the bottom of that worn page, under all those old entries, I wrote: Forgiveness=GOOD.