

The Novice

Kieran Egan

(unpublished manuscript chapters from his personal SFU web page)



Chapter One

Their faces became tiny as the train gathered speed. My parents, sister, and Father Bernard stood on the platform, hands above them, waving. I leaned from the window, mouth open in anguish. It seemed bitterly unfair that the harmless boast I had made in boyhood, that I intended to become a priest, which had so pleased everyone, should have brought me to that wrenching separation. There I was, leaning far out as the rear carriages curved between me and my family, leaving home for ever.

I was eighteen and brimming with the working-class young man's usual fears in leaving his familiar world. Added to that was the unusual fear of what I was going towards. I was to become a Franciscan novice. I was dressed in a new black suit, traveling to London, where I would change trains, and continue to Guildford, then take a bus to the village of Chilworth, get off at The Percy Arms, and from there walk up the hill to the Franciscan novitiate. The instructions were in the often-read letter I had in my pocket from Father Romuald, the Novice Master. The novitiate experience had been described often enough by the Franciscan friars who had sat expansively in front of our fire helping my father to drink his whiskey. They began by saying it was a wonderful time in which one's old self, or just one's pride, in some versions, was broken and a new and better self built in its place. But they mostly talked about the alien punishments and humiliations, like sweeping leaves against the wind, that were a part of the process. I was far from sure what constituted my self, but the idea of having it broken was unappealing, and the sense of some new self, some superior semi-stranger, taking over my mind was also cheerless.

Sitting on the dusty seat of the train on that hot day, I knew there was no point reflecting on why was I going towards a form of life that held little attraction for me.

It was indeed the result of claiming I was going to be a priest, and that was a result of an odd shadowy compulsion that had come along with me into consciousness as a young boy, a persistent obligation to do what an elusive God seemed, perhaps, to want of me; a sense of election to something I had numbly taken as a “vocation”, and towards which the train was gathering speed. There were also other motives, no doubt, and some of them will become plain as the details of the novitiate experience emerge. Among the motives, worldly ambition was barely present in my mind, but if I had absolutely believed that I couldn’t eventually become Pope, I’m not certain I would have been carried to that train by the finer motives alone.

The raw and unique experience I suffered then seems now just a cliché of a Catholic upbringing in an Irish puritanical tradition, described by many before me. Of course one was guilty, of sins original and unoriginal, of general and unassuageable inadequacy; the problem was finding out what particular unhappiness to subject oneself to in order to expiate the guilt somewhat. In the context of that Catholic background, with the feeling of being special in some way, the idea that one had a vocation to the priesthood was the obvious solution: privation, celibacy, self-discipline, prayer to a God who seemed unlikely to actually be there. One couldn’t allow that last thought too much room in one’s mind, yet, however suppressed, it lurked like a ghostly presence, flitting into consciousness occasionally at unwelcome moments.

And if I look for the source of that Catholicism, there is my father and his mother. She more than anyone had wanted me to be a priest. I was led into her stifling room eight years earlier as she lay dying, to shake her long bony hand and be kissed on the head. The flesh, hanging loose from her arm, swaying as she reached towards me, her eyes clouded with cataracts, wispy gray hair loose from a wool bed-cap, blue-veined transparent skin barely concealing the skull. Holding my hand between her cold finger-bones, telling me through whistling breath that God wanted me for a priest. She knew it. I was surprised that her breath smelled sweet. Her long fingers and hard yellow nails grasped my joined hands as she’d had me kneel by the bed and say a Hail Mary with her. When I stood, my older sister, who had consistently declared no interest in becoming a nun, had been ushered forward. The old woman had coughed and spluttered, and as Barbara held out her hand she was given a handful of mucus. Then I had to kneel again to kiss the feet of her big crucifix while my sister screamed in the bathroom. Then solemnly giving me the crucifix as her breath became louder with the effort of it all. I’ll see you in heaven. God will look after you as a priest” — and my father had nodded me towards the door.

It was the crucifix we had used to kiss Christ’s feet on Easter Sundays, when she insisted on repeating the ceremony at home even though we had been through it

earlier at church. It had seemed impious to object, but if twice, I had thought, why not three or four times? My father always negotiating for shortened versions, though perhaps afraid of scandalizing my sister and me by suggesting there was no point going through it all again, and likely, too, he was concerned about God's judgment on reluctance to do something holy. Thin, delighted smile as she would stand there, tall and spindle-legged, holding the crucifix in front of the big wooden sideboard where we knelt in turn to kiss it. Wiping its feet with her handkerchief after each one, just like the priest did, extemporizing some prayer that invariably cursed Protestants and those worse heathens, particularly my grandfather, who scoffed at her ceremonies and spent the time in the pub.

Well, perhaps that doesn't capture the sense of Catholicism that led to my feeling I had a vocation. I read memoirs in which this period of life for young men is a romance of great expectations, of the sense of limitless possibilities, of burgeoning power, of setting sail confidently and eagerly onto the open ocean of life. But they were middle-class, secure, with some money they could call on, able to speak loudly in public. The Catholicism described in permitted writers, like Belloc, Chesterton, Greene, and Waugh, was a complex, socially-confident religion that, apart from some basic dogmas and Latin, was wholly unfamiliar to the Irish-oriented, working-class parishes I knew. That exclusive Catholic background seemed to give access to very few of the world's possibilities. My education by priests did not provide even a vaguely proportionate sense of the social world I was on the periphery of. I knew, for example, that there were atheists, somewhere out there beyond Protestants, and Jews, and those pointless eastern religions that hardly recognized a proper God. But the idea that I might ever meet such horrific creatures was disturbing; they would have rabid eyes and be incomprehensibly vicious. I am not suggesting you should feel sorry for my condition; I recognize that we are all at the mercy of presuppositions we are largely unaware of, that distort our sense of reality. But the combination of puritanical and enveloping Catholicism, along with working-class insecurity, didn't make that train ride hopeful or provide anything I can now identify as a positive emotion.

Prominent among my comprehensive bundle of fears was the prospect of meeting on the London railway platform other dark-suited young men with the same destination. These would become my fellow novices. I was sure that they would be stern and worthy, taking this decision with a clarity of mind and decisiveness that I lacked; their vocations would be confidently embraced, and they would know God's will through profound prayer, quite unlike my own embarrassing talks into the darkness, the formal and superficial words. I feared that these severe young men I was soon to meet would look directly into my trivial soul and feel embarrassed and ashamed for me.

At Waterloo station, sweating in the heavy suit, carrying my black coat and white suitcase, I bought a ticket for the next stage of my journey.

“To Guildford, please.”

“Return?”

“No. No, thank you.”

My voice trembled and tears welled up as I stood in front of the ticket office.

I scanned the cavern of the station for other young men dressed in black. Within a few minutes I spotted one strolling ahead, beyond a string of trolleys weaving snake-like through the crowd. I pursued him, ambivalently eager to talk with someone who might share my fear of what lay ahead and the desolation of leaving family and familiar world, yet fearful of stern eyes turning to look into my inadequate heart.

I drew level with the pale face and leaned forward into his line of vision, hoping my own black-suit would catch his attention. I was surprised that the watery blue eyes were examining so intently the acreage of gleaming flesh exposed on the W.H.Smith newsstand.

“Excuse me. Are you headed for the Franciscan novitiate?”

He turned, unembarrassed, “I am, I am. Terence O’Dwyer.” He drooped a limp hand towards me to be shaken. “I’m just on my way down from Osterley,” he said with evident pride.

“What’s Osterley?” I asked after telling him my name.

“Osterley! You don’t know about Osterley? Good heavens. Why, that’s an amazing thing. I hardly know anyone who doesn’t know Osterley. And yourself off to be a priest, too. That’s where the Jays run courses for late vocations or people needing some more academic background and some more Latin.”

“The ‘Jays’?”

“Jesuits,” said Terence after examining me for a moment in silence. “The Franks have been keeping me there these last couple of years. The Franciscans. Need the vocations, dyasee?” He had stood too close for my comfort, eyes seemingly fixed on my tie-knot, then a quick glance up with a grin, “Vocations getting scarce these days.”

Once settled in the train's restaurant car and moving south, the thick Irish-accented monologue picked up: "I was born back home in Connemara. The father died early so I had to work, dyasee, to support the mother till she died, Godrestersoul, just a few years back. Kieran, ha. I was at the Christian Brothers in Ireland, and we had a Brother Kieran who was a tall fella with a wedge shaped face, but when he took the strap to you then, by jimmeny, you were leathered so you really knew it."

Terence's fugitive eyes had rarely left the tea and scones he'd ordered, except to wink up at me, "Dyaknow, they gave me five pounds just to get down from Osterley to Chilworth."

I remember Terence's catalogue of the religious orders he had tried to join. "Well I tried my vocation with the Jays first off, but wasn't really, I suppose, academic enough. The Cistercians were a bit too monastic, if you know what I mean. I tried the seculars then, but ran up against the academic thing again. The thing of it is, I left school early. Mother, Godrestersoul, The Doms then--that's the Dominicans--they suggested I should go to Osterley to patch up the Latin and things a bit, and then they suggested I try the Franks. I was at Osterley these past couple of years. I told you that, That's a grand place." As he had discovered the extent of my ignorance of ecclesiastical affairs, and the famous Jesuits at Osterley, Terence rapidly poured out the highlights of his previous ten years of trying to get inside a Roman collar or religious habit.

My fears subsided, but bewilderment increased, as Terence told about his meeting with the Archbishop of Leeds and how his mother was an O'Dwyer too and so they might be related. Terence was not going to peer into my soul and say "Thou fool!" Indeed his eyes had seemed to see little except what was before him on the table, not glancing out at the house-backs of south London or the Surrey fields and woods. Was that what they called "custody of the eyes"? Terence had not looked across the aisle at the thin, balding man with the newspaper close up to his face, nor at the plump, middle-aged, artificially-blond woman opposite him, with pink face and bright red lips, a short skirt, and prominent almost bloated white thighs, her eyelids closing against the smoke of her cigarette. I had kept glancing across in wonder as she blew perfect smoke-rings that broke and scattered soundlessly against the back of the man's paper, stopping only when she caught my eye and, without moving another muscle of her heavy, tired face, winked.

But closer than brothers, they said. You always remain in touch with the men with whom you were a novice. My relief and brief rise in spirits was slowly crushed under Terence's account of the world I was to become a part of, and Terence himself, cadaverous face, thin lips dropping crumbs, seemed so far from the young men I had

expected and feared to meet. From the window the villages looked very dear and the trees unreally beautiful. The clumps of woodland, where I suddenly longed to be, as in the woods I cycled to outside Nottingham, dark and quiet and unbearably rich with blue-bells not many weeks ago.

At Guildford bus station we met Edwin Parsons. "Hello there! You fellows off to the monkey-house too?" he had shouted from twenty yards away, in what my father would have called a 'cut-glass' accent. Tall, sweating inside a too-large black overcoat, prominent eyes and big, crooked teeth, he had laughed, or barked, at his joke. "Though I suppose for accuracy's sake it ought to be fish-and-chip fryers." It had seemed an odd sense of accuracy. He shook hands with us both vigorously -- "Call me Ned"--and I felt the shopping-laden housewives looking cautiously round at the three black figures.

Ned led us onto the bus, checking loudly with the conductor where we should get off. "I say, he says he'll tip us the wink. Have you heard that expression before? Tip you the wink. I rather like that." As the bus wound slowly out of Guildford and through the green and idle Surrey lanes, I watched the world drifting by and away; men in cars, owners of houses, husbands of wives, fathers of children. An ordinary late August day. Ned too was nothing like the young men I had expected to meet.

The bus had crawled, then was stopped by an old woman crossing a village street with half a dozen cats on glittering leads, her hand up to the traffic while she solicitously herded the cats across. Her rapid matchstick legs encased in wrinkled purple stockings, a cheap flowered dress and sparkling jewelry round her neck. She had turned to the sniffing and spreading cats, holding up a silver bell whose pure tinkle could be heard faintly inside the bus. The cats responded rather to the tugs she gave the spray of leads.

Then, as she backed onto the pavement by a telephone box, the rapid movement of a blond head caught my eye. A small fist beat against the glass of the phone box, the skin yellow-white at the point of contact. The head of blonde hair was shaken vigorously. She seemed to say something, a single word. She looked up and out towards the bus for a second, then put her hand over her face and let the hair swing down to hide it. But I had seen the tears. The old woman urged the last cats onto the pavement, and as the bus moved the head of blond hair began to shake steadily.

There had been a sudden clear sense of the enormity of my decision to become a Franciscan, or, if not decision, as I could locate no point at which I had ever imagined I would be anything but a priest, a sense that I was moving unresistingly towards a life that entailed the loss of so many others. Could I do better than whoever was on the other end of that telephone line? Could I walk from that expensive car across that

gray-pebble driveway to open the red door of that house, to be greeted by a wife and children? Imagining such possibilities laid open for a moment a world of unknowable richness that was being cut away, in favor of this one stark, drab, unwelcome vocation.

Ah, but that puts it falsely. The drabness so visible on the surface of the priestly life hid the magical power to remit sin, to change bread into God, to comfort the suffering, and to be potent in the forward ranks of the great cosmic battle between good and evil. I don't recall these mystical benefits playing a large part in my thinking at the time, but they no doubt carried greater sway than I can now easily imagine.

In the long village of Chilworth we climbed clumsily down from the bus with our suitcases, no doubt appearing somewhat mad to those passengers who eyed us grimly from the windows, but glittering novice-warriors in the cosmic struggle of the Church militant to the throng of saints and angels who surely watched us from high above the bus. We crossed the railway lines by the Percy Arms, and ahead could see a heavily wooded ridge in the midst of which, Terence informed us, the novice house stood. He had visited it a few times from Osterley. The sky was deep blue with small puffs of clouds drifting slowly over. But the sweat rolled down my ribs as the steepening incline took its toll. We stopped every hundred yards or so. Ned discovered that my suitcase was considerably heavier than the smaller of his matched set, and insisted on the exchange:

“You see,” he explained between gasping breaths, “much better to have two . . . equally weighted ones . . . considering my shoulders . . . a fulcrum . . . that should be maintained . . . horizontal . . . so that the weight may be carried . . . by those muscles . . . best able for it . . . No, no. These two are ideal . . . just equal to my strength.”

We rested for the last time under the gory crucifix at the entrance to the novitiate's driveway, and then made a last effort up the steep path. Ned struggled the last few steps to the high Norman door, sweat seeping from his hair and running down his face. Dumping his burden, he stretched his arms wide, noticed the metal bell-pull, and gave it a tug.

Running steps from inside, and the door was opened by an old gnome in a Franciscan habit who ushered us in almost singing “Welcome, welcome, welcome!” Our cases bumped and scraped the walls of the narrow corridor as we struggled to keep up with his impressive pace. He mounted a few steps at the end of the corridor and heaved against an iron-encrusted door, whispering over his shoulder, “Papal enclosure. No women beyond here or it's a Mortal. Automatic excommunication.”

“Good show,” Ned whispered back.

We followed the flapping sandals up the steps and along a broad red-tiled cloister, onto which the sun shone through tall windows that looked in on a square of grass. At the first corner of the cloister, the lay-brother knocked at a door. “Novice house,” he confided with a wink.

The door was opened by a boy who seemed no older than me. I had only seen priests in habits before, and it was a shock to see so young a head sticking out from the brown cowl.

“Hello, I’m Frater Wulfstan. Welcome, welcome. Come on in. Father Romuald will be down in a few minutes.”

Chapter Two of The Novice



Chapter Two

I was woken next morning by a noise outside my cell door. Was it the signal to get up? I pushed off the blanket and sat irresolute in the dark. A faint yellow light came through the gaps around the door, enough to make out the high, narrow desk with its two empty shelves against the pale plaster, and my suitcase beside it. There was a draught on my shoulders. The arched window was darker than the stone around it.

No, it was sandals on the linoleum and the occasional chink of rosary beads; the footsteps of the novices hurrying for a quick wash in the lavatorium before going down to choir. We were to sleep in this first morning and join them later for breakfast. I lay back and pulled the rough gray blanket tight about my ears. I could hear the novices moving around on the bare planks of the lavatorium, the cold water splashing them awake.

Last night I had crowded with my fellow postulants and the eight novices over a long slate-bottomed trough in the lavatorium. I was at the end above the drain, struggling to share a tap with two brown-habited novices, each of us yielding to the others with such charity my teeth were on edge. The room was filled with the energetic flapping of the heavy cloth of Franciscan habits. Tooth-brushes under the slow stream of water, one after the other; my elbow jostled by a retreating and apologizing novice as he had tried to ease paste onto his brush. Then forward again, after waiting with a mouthful

of tingling foam, bending my head sideways under the tap to gather enough water to wash my mouth out. I had my first glimpse of community life as the accumulated toothpaste, spittle, and water oozed sluggishly along the trough and into the sink below me.

I reached my fingers under the blanket to touch the dark wall of my cell--rough plaster, not the embossed wallpaper of home. Yesterday was real; it had all happened. My parents, sister, and Father Bernard had stood on the platform waving me away for ever. I lay straining after their images in the darkness, tears threatening again. Moving my head to find a dry spot on the pillow, finding only the cold dampness from last night's crying. I remember forming a question that recurred often in the following days, perhaps weeks--Dear God, what am I doing in this strange place?--until it became obvious that this question might equally apply to the world I came from as to the novitiate.

A faint sound of chanting began somewhere in the distance. I raised my head to be sure, catching the slight change of tone as the chant alternated verse by verse across the choir. I settled back, tucking the blanket in behind my shoulder, curling up tighter against the cold and the sharpening pain in my stomach.

The cell seemed unfinished, with its broad, bare planks. I felt that I could be here only as a visitor, for a few days, and then I would return home. Always I had gone home from strange places. But I knew I had to stay at this one until it was as familiar as home, until I knew the unwelcoming trees and lawn I had stared at numbly from this cell window yesterday as well as I knew the garden at home. Otherwise I might make the decision to stay or leave on trivial, worldly grounds. The pain in my stomach grew sharper, like gnawing hunger. The novices would be in the church a couple of hours yet before breakfast.

I listened for the distant drone of the choir chanting the psalms. Father Bernard had told me that the chant and plainsong of the church were the only survivals of ancient Greek and Roman music. We owe the style of chanting to St. Jerome--or was it St. Ambrose? I sounded both names in my head, trying to hear which better echoed what Father Bernard had said that morning in the Nottingham friary as we sat over Franciscan bowls of coffee after early mass.

On bleak winter mornings I used to cycle down to the Victorian house that served as the friary on Blue Bell Hill, to serve as altar-boy at the seven o'clock mass. One hand freezing on the handlebar, the other hand in a pocket, to be brought out quickly to cup around an icy ear. If I arrived early in the little chapel that had been built into the front room of the house, or if the priests were late, I would come in on them still chanting the psalms and hymns that made up the first of the canonical 'hours' of the day's

Office. Usually there would have been just two or three of them, brown habited, often unshaven, standing at the lecterns, chanting loudly at enormous speed. Sometimes it had gone on well after seven o'clock, drowning the sound of the occasional car outside, or the clicking of high-heels past the altar-hidden window.

Looking up at the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling of my cell, I tried again to call back that moment of sudden clarity yesterday while I had watched the old woman with the cats and the young woman's head shaking in the telephone box. That moment had been like a flashing vision that exposed the proper course of my life. I tried hard to recapture it, but couldn't. It had become clouded or submerged under the urgencies of getting up at the right time and behaving in ways that those around me would approve of. But it created the hope that I could perhaps find again that buried knowledge of the proper course my life should take. If that was what I had seen, then decision-making is just constant regulation of our lives to their true lines, if only we can keep these visible through the thousand nothings of each hour. The immediate trick was to see simply whether mine was a clerical or a lay line. But I was stuck in the clutter of the present looking forward and back, unable to find much help either from the direction that had brought me to this day or from that which extended emptily forward.

When next I opened my eyes, the sky was light blue and I could make out clearly the furnishings of the cell. Yesterday, Frater Wulfstan, the senior novice of the previous year's group, had led me up the stairs, slipped the metal latch and pushed open the cell door, announcing cheerily "Here's home!" I had stood holding my suitcase, looking into the cell, chilled by the bare boards running over to the rough stone wall and by the stark furnishings--desk, stool, and iron-framed bed.

A cock began crowing, crazily, wildly, as though suddenly furious that anyone should still be in bed. I had not heard the chanting for some time. Perhaps the other five newly arrived postulants had heard the knock while I was dozing. Were they already downstairs eating? I listened for some sound from nearby cells--the creak of a bed or foot-fall or cough. Nothing.

I decided to get up, to be ready as soon as I was called. I swung my feet out and lowered them onto the cold planks, quickly lifting them to put socks on. A fierce draught whipped my legs. After dressing to trousers and shirt, I walked over to the leaded window and leaned into the deep sill. There was heavy condensation on the inside of the glass.

A fresh sunny morning. Everything looked newly made. The trees on the small rise beyond the grass were richly green, dew dampness evaporating in front of the line of shadow cast by the novice house. The only movement was away to the left. The cock

strutting darkly, then a sudden flash of red as it jerked its crest up to scream again and again. Sedate white hens pecking in nearby coops. I pushed the window open and leaned out to look to the right along the grey novice house wall, following the pathway below my window leading into the woods, tangled with ferns.

“Laudetur Jesus Christus!”

“Come in . . . I mean, Amen.”

I grabbed my sponge bag and towel from the top of my suitcase, and flicked up the latch of the cell door. Wulfstan was continuing down the corridor, beating on the other postulants’ doors, inviting them to praise Jesus Christ till he heard the “Amen” that told him they were awake.

That half minute leaning on the window sill and looking out on the grass and trees, at the crowing cock and the ferny wood, deposited one of those lucid memories in my mind. I am aware of just a few of them; images so complete and clear that it seems only a small effort of will is required to make them again one’s present and to re-emerge into them. Everything about that self of thirty-five years ago leaning on the cold stone feels so familiar, yet so much of his mind and motivation seems incomprehensibly distant from the experience of my children, and I have to wonder too about how any of us gets from the there of our childhood and youth to the here of our later adulthood; from that postulant, in my case, to this atheistical academic.

I am reminded of a poem by Philip Larkin about revisiting Oxford and his old tutor, who, while evoking uncheering memories, tells Larkin that the son of one of his contemporaries is now at the college. On the train home Larkin wonders what made his contemporary choose to marry so young, and to have children so young, and what made Larkin choose to do otherwise. He cannot recall making the decisions that brought him to being unchilded and unwifed. The decisions seemed rather products of a style our lives bring with them; something that “something hidden from us chose.”

If the past can seem like an uncertain territory that shuffled itself into some plot that didn’t really need much in the way of our decisive participation, one can only wonder why we bothered murthering anxiously through it--we could have floated freely on the strong tide that brought us irresistably to this present. And the past that plotted me from that novitiate window to this Vancouver house, to this particular carpet and wallpaper that I know my wife and I chose, or somethings hidden from both of us compromised to choose, seems to have changed me from that alien being to a familiar piece of furniture to my children.

They say that our memories contain all that has happened to us, and past experience just needs the right evocation to unroll into our present minds. As I have written this account I have been bemused to realise that what they say seems true; the past is all in there, ready to be drawn into the bright circle of our consciousness. I wasn't so alien, of course, but the daily forms of life, the things I did and believed, seem alien now, certainly to my children. The days were regulated by bells, and filled with prayer, work, and study, as we were initiated into a life that strove to achieve a medieval ideal of male sanctity. Now that makes it sound alien or odd. But it's not that far from the video-arcade, from surfing the Net, from the engagements of my children. Superficially, a medieval ideal of male sanctity is, well, medieval. But I recognize in my children's lives much the same struggles and accommodations.

While I have paused, perhaps I might mention that as I have worked on evoking memories of that time and place, the voices of my fellow-novices have become clear again in my mind. I have included a lot of conversation in the text, and no doubt it will seem that this must all, or mostly, be invented. And I suppose much of it may not be exactly the words spoken. But the words used are those that come back to me as the animating sound-track of the remembered events. My memory, though, hasn't delivered up a continuous narrative. It usually locates a particular incident, or emotion, or sensation, and I then have had to do some work to unfurl the penumbra of details that create the somewhat discontinuous sections that follow. I have arranged the incidents more or less in chronological order. I have also changed a number of names, to avoid causing offence or embarrassment to people still living.

This memoir is of the period of the Second Vatican Council in the late 1950s. The changes of ritual instituted by this Council, including the use of English in place of Latin in the Catholic Mass and in other areas of the Church's activities, brought to an end some of the traditional forms of the novitiate experience that had existed for over seven hundred years. Part of my intention is to recover something of the flavor of that form of life as I experienced it before the Council's changes were implemented.

The Franciscan Order was founded by St. Francis of Assisi in 1222. Shortly before that, in 1214 at the fourth Lateran Council, the novitiate year was made obligatory for all young men who wanted to join a religious order. During this novitiate year, they were to live the daily life of the community, under the supervision of a Novice Master.

For the first ten days, the incoming young men are called Postulants. On the tenth day, at the Clothing ceremony, they become Novices. For those ten days they overlap with the previous year's group of Novices, who pass on to them all the lore about the daily

life --work, prayer, and study--of the novitiate. Those days, which take up the next few chapters, were by far the longest of my life.

Chapter Twelve of The Novice



Chapter Twelve

Casimir grabbed my sleeve as I turned towards the sacristy after crown rosary.
“Columba, you busy now?”

“I was going to prepare the cases for the outlying masses.”

“But it's only Tuesday.”

“I just like to be sure everything's ready in good time.” Perhaps I was being excessively cautious, getting everything ready so early? Ned stood beside Casimir by the church door, looking off to one side at nothing in particular. We were becoming used to Ned's trance-like withdrawals when he wasn't immediately involved. Also, he had decided that ‘Raymond’, his religious name, “naturally abbreviated” to its last two letters, with a verb to help them out, and that we should simply continue to call him ‘Ned’. I thought that if, or when, Brother Gabriel found out about this, his investment in Ned being first to depart might merit a further flutter of a couple of hundred Hail Marys.

“Well you could leave them an hour or so, couldn't you? Half an hour. Maybe even less.” Casimir nodded his head in response to his own question, as though to persuade me to nod as well. Casimir's cowl was too big, and looked as though it was swallowing him, his small head in danger of sinking irrevocably into its enveloping darkness.

“What do you want?”

“Come on out to the chicken run and I'll show you. I've got everything ready.”

We walked round the cloister in silence. Inside the back door of the novitiate, Casimir handed me an old cane chair he'd found somewhere, and Ned a splintered cricket bat.

He led us out into the afternoon sunshine, carrying a spade that was almost as big as he was.

“Terence won't help me, but Ned's offered and I knew you'd pitch in.”

I lifted the front of my habit walking up the couple of steps towards the chicken run, holding the chair in my right hand, waiting to discover what I was pitching into. Casimir pulled himself up the steps like an old man, using the spade as a support. He seemed reluctant to continue.

“What are we supposed to do?”

“Symbolic stuff,” said Ned, letting out a quick barking laugh. Casimir looked up at him with a frown. We stopped by the end of the coops. The cock came rushing across to attack us, smashing into the wire and screaming wildly. Casimir shouted above the din, standing imperturbable a few inches from the snapping and screaming beak.

“He's our problem.” He tapped the heavy wire mesh fence with the spade, driving the cock wilder. “They call him Andy. The last lot of novices did.” He stopped again. I put the chair down.

“Look, I don't get it. What's the idea? What are we supposed to do?”

Ned was practicing swipes with the cricket bat, supplying approving grunts after each stroke. Casimir looked down at the tip of his spade.

“We've got to kill him.”

“Who?”

“The cock.”

“What for?”

“Look at him! He's crazy. They should have done it last year. He's smashing himself up tearing at us or the hens' coops. And he's no good at his job either. If you let him in at the hens he goes berserk and tries to tear them to pieces. The young cocks are able to handle all that now anyway. He tries to mount the other cocks when he can get near them. We can't even get in to clean the coop. Look at the shit all over. Brother Gabriel said he'd pluck and cook him for the feast of St. Francis if we kill him.”

The cock gave up shrieking and strutted back across his pen, pecking fiercely at the base wire.

“What am I supposed to do with the chair?”

“Well, I reckoned that if one person could hold him off with the chair, Ned's got a long reach and can knock him out with the cricket bat, and then I'll chop his head off with the spade.”

There was a few moments silence. Casimir looked up at me with an appealing grimace.

“You're kidding. There must be better ways of doing it!”

“What? I've been working this out for days.” He pointed indignantly at the spade. “Brother John said this is the sharpest blade. He even sharpened it more for me.”

“Was he laughing while he did it?”

“No. He agreed it was the best way. So does Ned. Right, Ned?”

“Oh, surely. Man against the wild beast, with his ingenuity and technology.”

“Doesn't anyone have a gun or something?”

“I don't think so. Anyway, I've never shot a gun.”

“I've done some shooting,” said Ned. “But this is more poetic.” He stopped swinging the bat and came to look down at us, suddenly serious and didactic. “I think this is how the cock would prefer it. A fair fight for life. Or at least a chance of scarring your antagonist.” Then he spun away to practice his sweep again, the bat whooshing down at knee-level.

“Terence wouldn't help,” said Casimir. “Said it was un-Franciscan.”

“He's got a point there.”

“I don't think so. Unless we could cure it, like St. Francis did with the wolf. You want to go in and try? I think Sergius is just scared stiff. He wouldn't even go in the next coop with food. I've always had to do that.”

“So I'm supposed to hold it off with the chair while Ned takes a swing with the bat?”

“That's it.”

“What if it goes for Ned and not the chair?”

“We'll be behind you. You might have to hurt it with the chair, but the quicker Ned gets a swing at it the less it'll have to suffer.”

“It beats packing vestments for next Sunday, I suppose.”

“I knew you'd help. Are you ready?”

I looked at the cock, still hacking at the wire. Then remembered it flying at us as we came up beside the coop.

“Let's get it clearer first. Do we stay close to the fence, or am I supposed to move out towards the middle of the coop?”

“Just enough for me to get my swing in, old man.”

“How far's that? Where do you suppose? About to that mound of crap there?”

“Let's see how much room I need,” said Ned, moving behind me, then jumping to the side, knees akimbo like a Samurai warrior, and swinging the cricket bat. “Oh, I could manage with only a few feet, I think.”

“What if it goes round to your side, Casimir, after running into the chair?”

Casimir was silent for a few moments. “Can you angle it so that you push him towards Ned?”

“I don't know. I don't even know if I can stop him at all with this.” The chair seemed something less than the ideal tool for the job.

“Well that's our only hope.”

“If that's our only hope, I'm not going in.”

“Not only hope like that. I mean that would be easiest. Come on, he can't kill us. We know roughly what we've got to do. Are you ready Ned?”

“Ready for action, commander,” Ned saluted, cricket bat on shoulder.

“Come on, Columba. We've got to move fast or else it'll be on top of us before we're inside properly. Get ready. Sidle up to the gate. I'll give the word and open the gate. You dive in first, Columba, then you, Ned, and I'll follow and close the gate behind us.”

My stomach tightened with the approach of the action. Hadn't I heard of people being killed by cocks? I wasn't ready for it, and wanted to suggest some more planning.

“O.K. Now!”

As soon as Casimir jumped for the gate latch, the cock looked up. I found myself inside the coop as the cock was screeching and running at us, wings flapping and dust and crap flying around him. I moved forward a few more steps, eyes riveted on the crazy scarlet head as it seemed to fly right at me, its feet barely touching the ground. I angled the chair down a few inches. Its neck stretched, eyes staring, blood rimmed. Then a soft thud as it hit, the screech stopped in its throat. Then yowling like a wounded cat, tearing at the ground, claws flying, spumes of dirt everywhere. I felt the filth splatter my ankles.

I was amazed at its strength, and strained to lower the chair to prevent the mad animal clawing its way under. My feet were forced into the soft muck, and a chair leg caught in the hem of my habit. The yowling head was nowhere visible, but it seemed to me it would at any second start tearing at my bare legs.

Ned jumped out to the side, bat high. But the cock was entangled in the chair legs, a terrible mad choking shriek. I pushing with all my strength, trying to turn it towards Ned, feeling the body of the animal scraped round in the dirt.

“Ned! Get it! I'm going to push it.”

“Ready. Right!”

I heaved the chair out to arms length, then pulled it away and backed up to the wire. The cock was clear, rising shrieking and tearing forward. Ned swung. The body thudded into the chair again. He'd missed! I still had the chair leg tangled in the hem of my habit, and the cock was caught by an angle of one leg of the chair and one of its rungs but also was flailing against my habit. I scraped it around in the dirt again, having difficulty keeping my own footholds in the soft, loose dirt. I put a foot against the fence and pushed the screaming bundle out towards Ned again.

“Now Ned!” Pulling the chair away again. Casimir's silver blade poked towards the animal. The bat smashed the small head. Crack like a wooden ball. It slowed, head up

again looking round, silent. Ned smashed again. Crack! Legs tearing at the earth, it still came forward and slammed more softly into the quickly lowered chair. Then it was down on its side, one leg jerking at the dirt, the other clawing the air. Casimir was in quickly with the spade before the chair was away. A flash down. The legs jerked faster, pulling the body upright. A huge spurt of shit as it rose. Suddenly silent, except for the scrabbling feet. I backed against the fence as it came to its feet. Gorge rising to see its head was off. I jumped sideways out of its way as it tore headless into the fence. The three of us stood watching it claw the earth, the bleeding neck through the wire. The red-eyed, scarlet-crested head lay beside me, bespattered with its own shit. Its body subsiding, jerking finally and falling sideways, the neck slipping inside the coop.

The animal's shrieking wildness all finished. We watched the legs give final tiny twitches. My stomach pushed up against my chest. I looked up at the pines swaying gently against the calm sky.

“Thanks you two,” Casimir said quietly.

“Pleasure old son,” said Ned.

“Perhaps you can help me pack vestments some time,” I suggested, leaving the chair and walking quickly toward the woods.

Chapter 19 of The Novice



Chapter 19

The most boring of the classes was Liturgy. It wasn't so much that liturgy itself was so boring; there was a pleasure of gaining professional and privileged knowledge about all the services of the church and about the details of the clerical life. The problem was Father Thomas. He used to stand beside the small table in the convocation room, slowly reading from his blue exercise book on Liturgy, while we copied the words into ours. His voice was prissy with a slow sing-song drone as he read, whose affectations to tight precision and a middle-class accent irritated me, like a small torture from which there was no escape.

My Liturgy book, as I look at it now, has a question mark on the third page, where I missed something that Father Thomas recited. The question mark represented Father Dominic, whom I saw only once. It appears in a section which we copied one morning early in the autumn:

“The Canonical Hours of the Divine Office . . . are directed by their composition . . . to the sanctification . . . of the different hours of the natural day . . .” Father Thomas read so slowly we could cut the words on a clay tablet. “. . . approximately the time proper to each” And there is the question mark. He had said something--what I guess now was probably “Canonical Hour”--but turned as he did so, interrupted by someone noisily opening the door from the cloister into the novitiate and slamming it shut behind him. Surprised, we looked at each other, then towards the entrance to the convocation room. No-one ever came in unless it was the priest who was giving a class.

An enormous, habited figure lumbered into the room, one hand out towards the snooker table as he came unsteadily over the loose tiles at the doorway. I had seen him in the sacristy that morning before the eight o'clock masses, stumbling around clumsily as though straight from bed, tossing vestments on and pushing Casimir before him to serve his mass at one of the side altars. A pure white fringe of hair across his forehead, round rimless glasses that magnified his eyes alarmingly. He looked well over seventy, perhaps eighty.

“Father Thomas, good mornin' to ye.” A strong Irish accent, waving a benediction more like an irritated gesture that we should sit down as we climbed out of the benches to genuflect.

“So these are this year's lot, eh?” He surveyed us. I tried not to smile, as the old friar frowned in pretended distress.

“Very ordinary looking collection, wouldn't you say, Father?” very loudly, half-flicking his head in Father Thomas's direction, but not looking at him. Father Thomas smiled weakly and nodded. “The usual varieties of shape and size. Dear God, but they look like babes in arms. Has anyone told them what they're letting themselves in for, eh?” Thomas's smile unchanging.

“Has anyone told you?” he bellowed at us, to an uncomfortable silence. The question was asked in earnest. “No? Well, I'll tell ye. Up you get. Too sunny a day to be sitting around inside. Too few days to waste them this way. Well come on, up, up!” We looked uncertainly at Father Thomas, whose mouth was open, eyes dashing around finding nothing to land on. I stood with Alberic and Ned, drawing the rest with us.

“No problem now, Father,” the old priest said as he lumbered towards the door. “I have Father Master's permission to engage in a colloquium and offer some brief homilies and encomia to these poor helpless children.”

Father Thomas stuttering after him, “But we're in the middle of class. Their recreation is during the afternoon, Father.”

“I'll be asleep then, Father. Grasp the nettle when the iron's hot! Come along, chickens.” Ushering us out the door ahead of him saying to no-one in particular. “Do you know it's a quarter of a century since I was in this room, and before that visit thirty five years again since I was a novice. So I'll give you a bit of perspective on what you're at. See you in a while, Father. We'll be along to Sext and Nones.” He followed us towards the back door, then paused and called back, “What are you doing with them? What's the class? What? Liturgy? Good. I'll continue it on our perambulation.”

He joined us in the shadow outside the back door, magnified blue eyes doleful. “I'm Father Dominic. Come on along now.” We fell in around him as he led us into the sun, moving towards the woods. I dropped back as I found that Father Dominic needed plenty of girth. He moved at a good pace, but unsteadily, slamming his feet down at each stop throwing his weight from side to side, swaying like a great galleon up his more than six foot length. He stopped before reaching the wood and addressed us, sadly shaking his head.

“I'm afraid there's been a great decay in the quality of novices during my lifetime.” He paused looking each of us in the eye in turn. I tried not to smile back at the clownlike scowl. “When I was a novice nearly sixty years ago we used to jump over those pine trees.” Shaking with a quick burst of laughter, then back into his tank-like progress. “But they were only about three feet high then. Let's see how yer Latin is.” I tried to edge closer round Sergius to hear as Father Dominic began to chant in Latin. It was a delicate plain-chant, running down rapidly at the end. I couldn't hear most of it, the breeze and the sandals on the cinder path drowned it out. Father Dominic looked around at us. “None of you understood that?” He seemed genuinely disappointed, and began chanting it again.

“About a horse, taken to a river, was it Father?” said Alberic.

“Yes. What does the horse do though? Aqua. . .”

“Walk passed?” asked Ned.

Father Dominic groaned. I was frustrated and cut across behind him to the other side thinking I'd hear better. "No. No. Passed water. Micturated. Oh dear. We'll try some more. Don't you know any dirty Latin chants yet? This is terrible. Well now I'm supposed to continue your lesson on the Liturgy. What were you doing when I came in?"

"That ideally we should say the Canonical hours on the appropriate hours of the day, but that it is all right as long as they are said within the twentyfour hours," I said.

"Ah, yes. You'll find that what most of our holy brethren in the Province do is sit up with their cigarettes and coffee and begin the day's Office at about 10.30 p.m. They read like crazy, belting through the psalms like locomotives, and finish off at around five to twelve or ten to twelve. Then, with that piety which has been inculcated through long years of progress in the spiritual life, they have a few fags and a cup of coffee till about five past or ten past twelve and they do a repeat performance with that new day's office, sanctifying the new day, by galloping at a meaningless mumble through psalms and lessons and hymns. Now aren't they evil men? Blackguards all." I was shocked at the image.

"Where are you from?" he nodded at Alberic, as we crowded along one of the narrow paths of the wood. I was over the edge trampling on the ferns to keep up and hear.

"Buckingham, Father."

"Do you know Father Elias? Of course you do. But I bet you didn't know he had a wife in the town, did you? More or less a wife, I mean. A conscientious man at visiting parishioners. One parishioner anyway. And Father Barnabas is as queer as a coot. I've been telling them to get him out of that school before he runs amuck in the showers some day. It's a terrible life, boys. It's not a matter of it being the ideal life for saints, you see, but if you aren't a saint it will be an utter disaster. If you want to see human misery just travel around our province. More than half of them would leave if they weren't even more terrified of the world. They couldn't survive any more without the Order. And they can't get jobs now, poor dears. What can they do? No qualifications or skills. You should all go away and get degrees from university and then come back, so you could at least earn a living if this life became intolerable. You see, I know over a hundred men in this province who are living intolerable lives. And where are you from?" he nodded at me.

"Nottingham, Father."

“Ah, you'll know Bernard then. I stayed at Nottingham for a couple of days last year. Bernard comes in at all hours, taking his horse upstairs with him.” He stopped and drove ahead, waiting for the question.

“His horse, Father?”

“Must have been a horse. Nothing else would make that kind of noise going upstairs.” I laughed, a little surprised at myself, but with a sense of relief and freedom, knowing so well Father Bernard’s constant noisiness, drawing attention to himself in everything he did. “A rather heavy footed man, you see,” he explained to the others, who laughed politely. “I hear they're going to build a new friary up on Blue Bell Hill. Big arguments in the Province about it now. A lot of our brethren want to have washing bowls in the rooms and others oppose it. Instead of a common lavatorium, you understand.”

“But that sounds like a good idea, Father,” said Ned.

“It does, eh? You all think so, do you?” He looked us over. “Can't anyone think why some of us might oppose it?”

I looked across at the big silver head, that was flicking from side to side examining the trees and path. I wondered whether it might be to foster community spirit, but felt too unsure, a little afraid of appearing innocent and ignorant to the old man.

“No-one any ideas.”

“For the community, Father?” asked Casimir.

“Well that's what is talked about, yes. But no. You see, now, if there were washing bowls in the rooms most of the dirty blackguards would hardly leave their cells at all. They'd pee in the bowls.” I looked across in shock, revolted at the idea, revolted that such a reason could even be contemplated. “It can be a slow death, living without the influence of women. This province is full of men in decay. Even young men. They live in dirt and squalor. And would live in greater dirt and greater squalor if they could. They are without any hope or joy. You don't know what that means, of course. Think carefully while here. Remember that men quite as good as you have decayed, and are dragging themselves sluggishly through their lives because they lack the particular and peculiar qualities that surviving celibacy requires. Think very hard about yourselves. You're doing no-one a favour by becoming a dirty friar.

“And then you've got to remember the brutality you'll suffer under different Guardians. With the decay of self-respect, the slightest glimmer of human sympathy

dies quickly too. Think of your own disagreements here. And then think of being totally subject to the novice you like least. The little annoyances will become big ones. And you'll want revenge. And there's many worse and bitterer men in this province who'll be your superiors. Oh yes. Power, especially total power in a small friary, corrupts horribly.

“The province is full of young men with lists. Lists of friars whom they have suffered under who one day will be under them. And they live out their days nursing their desire for revenge. Aye. Aye,” he grunted in conclusion.

We walked on, the novices silent, Father Dominic humming cheerfully. This image of the province as cold friaries full of bitterness, squalor, and decaying men had chilled my heart. Instinctively I knew it was true.

“And we have a new Lawrence, I understand?” Lawrence looked up, half raising his hand. “Two Lawrences before you used to walk along here with me just a little while ago when we were fellow novices. He was a nice young fellow. A trail-blazer in many ways. He was a good friar in Manchester. Great promise. Guardian and Provincial without a doubt. You know what happened to him?” Shaking heads. “Well, he disappeared one day. Just never came in. Then a few weeks later he turned up, only about quarter of a mile from the friary, with this very pretty young woman. They had bought a fish and chip shop. Her father put up the money apparently.” He shook with laughter. “They had five children, and a lovely home. Fourteen grandchildren, now. I always visit them. Better to sit in a warm and happy home, boys, than in a cold friary. The shop thrived because all the parishioners liked him, well, except some of the old prunes.

“Celibacy does strange things over the long term. You'll find it isn't natural; and if you are less than a saint you may have the strange experience of watching yourself go mad in a more or less interesting way. Oh yes, I'm mad too--no doubt you can tell that. And so is Rom. And Adrian. I came into the lavatorium in the priests' quarters this morning to find it in pitch darkness, but there was someone splashing about in there. In the dark. I switched on the light and there was Adrian washing himself, no soap of course--can't afford that--but he's very clean, I'll give him that. I threw some water at myself, and went out, and do you know as soon as I was out he crept to the door and switched the light off again. The man's got a string of ulcers that are erupting like Vesuvius all day long. He's so worried about money I can't imagine that he believes in God. You know, all that stuff about a sparrow's wing.

“Paul's holding out quite well. He's a tough lad. And Thomas . . . well. Let's go up by the pines. I'd like to see them again.”

Humming as he swayed hugely ahead. I was hedged in behind Ned and Lawrence on the path, crushing browning ferns at the side as I struggled to stay close to Father Dominic. Every word seemed infinitely valuable.

“Looks like you'll be getting a new novice master at the next Provincial Chapter.”

“Won't they leave Father Romuald, do you think, Father?” asked Ned.

“Possible. Doubtful. He's had six years, and he's let through too many lads who've had to be given the push later. You can look forward to someone tougher. And knowing the Custodes they'll likely go overboard in the other direction.”

Chill on chill, and fear on fear. The prospect of a new Novice Master frightened me more than Father Dominic's stark vision of the Province. I liked Father Romuald, was familiar and becoming comfortable with the novitiate. I was unready for a new and tough Novice Master.

We stopped at the end of the broad pathway between the pines. Father Dominic stood legs apart, hands hooked over his habit cord, pulling it down at the sides.

“I can see it so clearly, boys, as it was more than half a century ago.” His voice for the first time without any overtones of irony. “People always say it seems like yesterday. But it does, you know, it really does. It's only childhood makes life seem long. Along there,” he pointed to the end of the row of trees. “We--there were five of us, Frater Anselm, Frater Lawrence, Frater Gerald, Frater Esmond, and me. Only me and Lawrence still alive, though their young faces are so clear still, racing up here, jumping over the trees,” he looked up at their tips, “from this side to that and back again. I knew them throughout their lives but when I call them to mind it's always their young novice faces I see. Isn't that odd? Much like you, we could see our futures as good priests in the province, hearing confessions, preaching, and saying masses. Ah God, we knew nothing.” He shook his head and looked down.

“Anselm died in bed,” his voice suddenly ironic again, sweeping his doleful eyes over us, and pausing. “Alas, in the bed of a Mrs Carbonell.” He walked slowly up the path, hands still hooked in his cord. I followed close behind, expecting visions of my own future. “Gerald decided God called him to the missions, and died heroically of malaria just a couple of months after landing in India. Esmond killed himself.” He put the palm of his hand on one of the pine trunks, leaned on it, patted the rough bark. “And here stand I”

The bell in the church tower rang three times. Father Dominic joined his hands and began the Angelus.

“The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary”

“And she conceived of the Holy Spirit.”

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee . . .”

I watched Father Dominic as he prayed. Eyes closed, sun on his white hair shining like a halo. We finished the Hail Mary.

“Behold the handmaid of the Lord,” Father Dominic began with the second ringing of three bells.

“Be it done unto me according to Thy word”

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee . . .”

I listened closely to Father Dominic's intonation in the prayer he must have said a million times. Calm, unhurried, with no affectation at all. That seemed an heroic accomplishment, a sign of sanctity.

“Pour forth, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the incarnation of Thy son . . .” A serious voice, talking to God. I was impressed that his cynicism about men seemed to have left his faith in God untouched. I felt awed by Father Dominic. A sense of great strength, and innocence, and clarity of vision. If only I could become an old friar immediately, I had a model I admired. But I couldn't imagine Father Dominic as a novice or as a young priest.

“Amen.”

He continued strolling towards the end of the pine path, drawing us after him. Sergius moved alongside Father Dominic, leaning forward to speak.

“Em... Father? The Angelus is at twelve. And Sext and Nones are before it. We've missed the office and it's meditation now. I'm Senior Novice, Father.”

I was furious, wanting to pull Sergius back and shut him up. To swap this for meditation!

“By God, you're right. Well, off you go. I'll stroll about here for a bit.” The novices genuflected for his blessing. He joined his hands and said in his calm serious voice: “Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus,” making a sign of the cross over us, “Pater, et Filius, et Spiritus Sanctus. Amen. Along with you now.”

I was reluctant to turn with the others, searching for a reason to call them back, to stay and hear more. I looked up at Father Dominic, who was turning away to walk back along the pines. He pausing to nod down at me, then swayed heavily forward. The novices were walking between the pines down onto the football pitch. I stuffed my hands into my sleeves, kicked the habit hem before me and followed my fellow novices across the sandy football pitch.

Chapter 22 of The Novice



Chapter 22

And sex. Eighteen years old and at the height of sexual virility. People, especially after recent newspaper-reported scandals about priests sexually abusing young males or females, show an interest in what happens in the training of priests that might predict or even prepare for such abuses. Not long ago a woman who had studied the sexual and other abuses inflicted on young native children in Residential schools in British Columbia, asked me what it was like being a novice. I tried to express briefly to her, as we stood on an old dock amidst magical scenery in Haida Gwaii, what I am trying to express here at greater length. It quickly became clear that she was impatient with my accounts of novitiate life, and her general question about what it was like became focused on how were we trained to be sex-maniacs and sadists.

Training for the priesthood is not uniform, and the kinds of people it attracts at different times and places varies. No doubt, as Father Dominic had said, something almost heroic is required to be able to live a celibate life, and perhaps especially so today when so much of the medias' messages and advertising constantly associate personal fulfillment and all possible happiness with sexual gratification. But for me and my time and place as a novice, I have largely disappointing things to report to those looking for clues to sexual deviations. I suspect Freud was largely correct, at least for my experience. Libidinal energy was sublimated into work. I worked as never before or since. For most of the time I seemed to have had infinite energy, which was as well, as the days seemed infinitely long and infinite work was expected of us. No doubt those who planned the novitiate experience knew, long before Freud, all that he might have told them. In addition to all the activity required of us, I began to learn Greek, began reading whatever theological and philosophical books existed in

the novitiate's small library, and worked at my studies with a concentration that astonishes me now to recall.

But I do remember one sexual incident. Here it is. (And I later remembered another which will appear in due course.)

It was Kathleen Turner. By the Trent, where we'd cycled the month before I had come to the Novitiate. She was the sister of a school friend, and I had asked her if she'd like to go for a ride after Benediction on that Sunday. Brother Louis had come up to us outside church as she had been expressing reluctance, and talked her into it on my behalf. I was impressed by the old lay brother's technique, and surprised that he would be deploying it so persuasively on my behalf. What was he doing arranging a bicycle ride for me with the best looking girl in the parish just a month before I was due to leave for the novitiate?

She lay back on one elbow, looking down at her hand slowly unbuttoning her blouse. I sat an arm's distance away watching, breathless. Down to her waist, smiling. The bare side of her breast, the shadow and crease below it. The blouse moved in the wind. I gazed. Erection ready to explode, if she moved, if the wind blew, if she smiled up at me.

I woke at the edge of ejaculation. I held the image a moment, the white blouse moving open. No. Dear God. No! It would be a mortal sin if I went off while awake. Eyes open, let it recede, the pressure ease. Dear God, holy Mother of God, pray for me. The weight of the blanket; I was pushing my groin into it. Let it ease. I relaxed. It was still on the edge, ready to explode. Dear God, no. I would have to confess a mortal sin on Saturday. I would have to miss communion in morning masses. The shame would be terrible. I was afraid to move, lest the engorged penis be triggered. I lay rigid trying to pray: "Hail Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, Hail. Hail our life, our sweetness, and our hope. Ad te clamamus exules filios tuos, misericordes oculos ad nos converte. . ."

It seemed to be receding. I held the blanket away from it. The pyjamas were sticking to me all over with sweat. *Salve Regina, mater misericordiae, vita dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve. Ad te clamamus exules filios tuos. . .*

Why the image of Kathleen Turner like that? Our cycle ride had been as innocent as such things might be. I had tried not to look at her blossoming figure after 10.00 a.m. Sunday masses for the past few years, and, even more, tried not to be seen looking. I could recall the dream so vividly even after I'd woken; I could see the texture of the skin of her breast. Inside the blouse as she opened it. The full plumpness I could almost feel. Oh God. Stop, stop! Again. It was hardening again. It would certainly be

a mortal sin now. It kept coming. No. God. No! Get out of bed. No. Any movement would explode it.

Pray! What prayer? Think of the statue of our Lady. The calm smile over the flickering votive candles. Ave Marie, gratia plena, dominus tecum, benedictus tuus mulieribus et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus. Ora pro nobis peccatoribus. Terrible peccatoribus. I had sinned already. It had stopped coming. It was receding again. I held my breath, holding the blanket away from my penis. Silence all around. The window black.

It felt enormous, engorged almost too much for the skin to contain. It was torture letting it fade, so slowly, reluctant, against nature. I wanted to touch it. To lay my wrist on top of it. No. No. The devil's prompting. Don't touch it. Dear Lord, estote vigilante, guard over me, and save me from the devil, who goes about the world seeking the ruin of souls!

The blouse flapped away from the breast, she let it go, the nipple exposed as she smiled up at me, leaning back. Both of them free as the blouse came off her shoulders. Oh no. Away, get away! My teeth grinding, head pressed back into the pillow, shaking the image away, of the girl's smile and the soft whiteness. It's the devil is near. Dear God, estote vigilante, make haste to help me. St. Columba, pray for me. That it go down. I felt the pulse beat inside it, like a separate heart throbbing. Arms aching holding the blanket up. Pyjamas twisted and damp. The sheets damp on my legs. Relax the neck; the back of my head thrust down into the pillow, the chin straining into the air, teeth clenched.

‘A Friar Minor is bound to abstain from all venereal pleasures which come from thoughts, desires, and consent.’ Ave Maria, the statue above the candles, a rosary dangling from one hand, holding the infant Jesus in the other.

I was serving Father Adrian's mass tomorrow. Servers had to put a host in the chalice for themselves: Frater, you've forgotten a host for yourself, he'd say. No, Father, I'm in mortal sin so I can't go. I'd have to pretend to be ill. But then they'd offer to bring it to my cell.

It was becoming less tight, the pulse less insistent. She was opening the blouse herself. Dear God; St. Michael drive away the devil and his black winged angels, St. Francis Xavier, pray for me.

It was blowing off her shoulders as she stood quietly looking at the river. Oh, she is beautiful. I pushed the blankets off. It rubbed against my stomach, the twisted cloth of my pyjamas tightened on it. It was coming again. I gripped the edges of the bed, the

iron frame cold under my damp hands. Hail Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, Hail, Hail our Life, our sweetness and our hope. The cold was helping. I kicked the bottom of the blanket from my feet and lay still. Concentrating on the image of Our Lady holding the baby Jesus. Simply holding it in my mind. It was easing again. I relaxed my grip on the bed frame, moved my neck, and relaxed the rigid backbone. It was shrinking. Dear Lord, thank you for your kindness to me a sinner. I sat up carefully and began to straighten my pyjamas, shrugged them free from their grip around my shoulders, pulling the trouser legs down, jumping up and down to ease them from under my bottom, away from my groin.

Had I committed a mortal sin? When I woke I had held the image. The sin lies in the acceptance of pleasure. Had I accepted libidinous pleasure? Yes, I had. But not mortally? Venially only, surely? I feared it was mortal. How could I know for sure? It was adultery--adulteration, accepting improper pleasure. I had been surprised to learn that adultery in the Middle Ages was not unlawful intercourse, but the acceptance of inappropriate pleasure from intercourse even with one's wife. In fact the acceptance of any libidinous pleasure. What I had accepted in the way of pleasure was not so great, not much more than was outside my control. Yet even in ejaculation during sleep, if one should awake in the middle, it was sinful to accept pleasure from it. One must resist all venereal pleasure. I had certainly not accepted any pleasure from the ejaculation during sleep last week.

I brushed my hand over my penis. Yes, it was nearly down now. Thank God for that. I relaxed into the warmth of the bed. It was bitter cold outside the blanket. Perhaps that's what had saved me. God working in his mysterious ways. I should get to sleep. To deny the body's pleasures is only the beginning of virtue, not virtue itself. What was the distinction Father Adrian had given us? The moral virtues don't have God as their immediate object, they are simply a means towards union with him, whereas the theological virtues have God as their immediate object. To go and say a prayer at the prie-dieu above the back of the church would be a moral virtue then.

I threw off the covers and stood up. Curling my feet on the cold planks, the chill immediately penetrated the thin pyjamas. Both hands on the latch to raise it quietly; the scrape of it like a saw on metal. The door opened with howling creaks. My feet were even colder on the linoleum of the corridor. The barest dark-grey of the window was visible at the end of the street. Everything else black. I turned round quickly. A ghost now would kill me.

Even the unsticking of the skin of my feet from the linoleum sounded like a whip-lash. I passed Casimir's door. Would he wake and wonder who was walking where? Past Lawrence's cell. No sound from behind the doors. A sense of walking through

space, along a cold floor on an infinite dark plain. I closed my eyes. It made little difference. Near the end wall, I slowed, both hands ahead of me. The cold face of a dead friar under my fingers. I shivered. My testicles were contracted and uncomfortable. There was a sense of strain around my whole groin.

My hands touched the wall. Feeling to the right for the doorway to the prie-dieu. Down the two steps, one hand back on the door frame, the other ahead of me. Heart sinking as I missed my footing and stumbled forward. There were three steps. A terrible noise echoing monstrously through the dark church below.

I caught my balance and moved to the right, feeling the second pew and passing it, hand out for the rail. There was a flicker of light ahead. The little sanctuary lamp shone like a red beacon above the altar, throwing ghostly light and deep shadows into the choir stalls.

Kneeling down, I was suddenly conscious that there was someone in the church! I listened, heart thumping, to creaking below me. I couldn't make out any movement among the shadows. It continued irregularly from around the church. It was just the creaking of pews, talking randomly to each other through the cooling night of their aches and pains.

“Dear Lord, forgive this theatrical gesture, and my foolish pride in it. I only came to beg you for the grace of faith, humility and the simple wisdom you give to many of those who are least proud. Thank you for all your goodness and mercy, and please bless my father and mother and sister Barbara, and all the novices, and Father Adrian and the community and all Franciscans, and everyone, dear Lord. Help us all to have faith in thee. Holy father St. Francis, pray for us. And keep my heart pure. Amen.”

I had never before shivered quite like I did then. On the way back to my cell I was shaking, having even greater difficulty being quiet as I tip-toed down the street. My teeth were chattering, and I enjoyed the feel of them working away by themselves, though they sounded like horses galloping down the corridor. I dropped the latch quietly into place and slid back under the sheet and blanket. I lay shivering for a few minutes, ambivalently delighted and ashamed by what I couldn't call either virtue or stupidity.