

10

Father John stepped into the fluorescent lit room which was bubbling with ten animated seven-year-olds. The priest jokingly referred to the basement of the Brooklyn, Catholic Church as the bowels of the beast. The church was called Our Lady of Perpetual Help and had been given the dubious moniker, Our Lady of Perspiration, due to a whimsical furnace. The temperature was usually stiflingly hot.

He carefully and deliberately hung his black overcoat on the coat rack that stood at attention guarding the room's only exit. This habitual action allowed the children just enough time to plant themselves in their assigned seats. Then, Catechism class could begin.

As the youngsters fell silent, the ominous sounds of the pipe organ began echoing through the stone walls. Father John suppressed a smile as beads of sweat began to form under his graying temples. The heat of the room would facilitate the drama.

A showman at heart, the good Father had asked Mrs. Dennis, who had been conveniently practicing for the afternoon funeral, to play Bach's "Toccatina and Fugue in D Minor" as a prelude to his presentation. He pulled himself to his full five foot seven inches, spun suddenly around to face his captive audience and boomed:

"SIN!"

His stern eyes bore deeply into each and every last one of them. After a full five seconds of this unexpected gravity, Snotty Scotty dropped his Spiderman pillow and started to snivel. Fearing he had overshot the mark, Father John said with softening eyes, "It's ok, Scott. Just wanted to get your attention."

The children, who had collectively stopped breathing, let out a united sigh of relief. *On with the show*, thought Father John. As he gave each child a handout, he preached his well-prepared lines:

"The Age of Reason is upon you. Soon, children, very soon, you will no longer be able to blame your wrong-doings on your innocence. Nor on your parents. Only on yourself, just as every God-fearing member of the Roman Catholic Church before you, from your own dear mother to Pope Paul himself..."

The priest stopped in front of a scruffy looking child. Had this boy been in the class before? Father John prided himself on knowing the parishioners' names. *The show*, he thought, on with the show!

"You, and you alone will be held accountable for your sins. No longer will it be your parents' fault if you sin. The end of innocence. Accountability, Accountability for your actions. YOU, not Mommy, not Daddy, YOU are accountable for YOUR sins. YOU! Did you hear me, Billy?"

Billy, who was seated next to Scruffy, nodded indecisively. Father John turned his head towards Billy.

"Then what did I just say?"

Billy's mind drew a blank as his mouth fell agape.

"Do I need to tell your father that you haven't been paying attention again?"

Margaret, Billy's twin, was sitting to his right.

"Countable sins!" said she.

"Thank you, Margaret," said the priest.

"Do you understand what that means, Billy?"

Sitting up straight in concentration, Billy pulled at the cuff of his shirt and thought,

Jesus H. Christ! an expression his older brother had taught him, but chanced,

"Onetwothreefourfivesixseven?" in a rushed succession.

Father John raised his eyebrows.

Billy continued, "eight, nine, ten? Count your blessings? Count your sins? Countable sins?"

Father John tilted his head and smiled uncomfortably thinking, *six years at the seminary and I have to deal with this prepubertal genius*. Without taking his eyes off Billy, Father John said, "Snot, stop picking your nose," which caused a wave off giggles.

"Scott. Not snot," he said, correcting himself.

"It's ok, Father," said a stuffy-nosed Scott. "Everybody calls me Snot."

And the giggles morphed into laughter.

"SILENCE!" bellowed the priest.

Remembering what the Monsignor had said about remaining composed, he counted to ten.

"A'one, a'two, a'three, a'four,"

Billy was perplexed. Had he been right? He mouthed, *was I right?* to Margaret.

“a’five, a’six,”

Billy’s twin shrugged her shoulders and mouthed back, *dunno?*

“a’seven, a’eight,”

As he counted, Father John chided himself for being so easily distracted. He was not sure why his lesson plan was falling apart. It reminded him of the recent, disastrous World Series. Father John, a native Bostonian, had rooted for the Red Sox. That was the year of Boston’s “Yaz and the Impossible Dream.” Watching the ‘69 Series had been a bit like teaching these kids. The dream had dissipated into a glorious debacle.

“A’nine... TEN!

The Ten Commandments!

In your hands, you hold the Ten Commandments of God. Just as they were given to Moses on Mount Sinai, you now have been given the laws of God. You must learn them by heart. The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost command you. It is your duty to learn and understand the true meaning of the Lord’s ten laws. Do you know, really know, what I mean by that?” Billy shook his head profusely despite it being a rhetorical question.

Father John continued, “That means that not only do you need to know the Ten Commandments by heart. You need to be able to explain them in your own words.”

Father then paused, trying to assess whether the lambs of the parish were following him. The only intelligent face was that of Margaret. So, he directed his words to her.

“When I am satisfied that you are capable of understanding the Ten Commandments, you will have reached The Age of Reason.”

Billy echoed Father John, “The Age of Reason.”

Nodding in agreement, the other nine piped in, “The Age of Reason.”

“That’s right, children. And once you have reached the Age of Reason, well, what happens then? Anyone?”

The seven-year-olds looked at each other to see if anyone would dare to risk reawakening the wrath of Father John. Scotty raised his right hand to wipe the mucus from his nose with the arm of his shirt.

“Scotty! Good! Tell us! What happens once you’ve reached the Age of Reason?”

Scotty looked like he was about to faint when Margaret rescued him, “First Confession! First Confession and then First Communion!”

“Very good, Margaret. You’re the only one that really listens here. It’s a shame you’re not a boy. Why, even at your young age, I bet you’d do better than most of the brethren in the seminary. And, if it were allowed, *YOU’D* be the altar-boy.”

Margaret sock-kicked her brother.

“Ow!”

He had been promised the next altar boy slot after making his First Communion. Margaret could not understand why. Why did he get to be an altar boy but not her? *A boy in a dress? It should’a been me*, she thought and kicked him again.

“Double ow!”

Father John looked at the boy who was rubbing his shin. Billy was wearing a look of mocked shock.

“Thank you, Margaret. I would get in trouble for doing that.”

Margaret glowed.

“Anyway!” continued Father John, “You will be tested on the Ten Commandments next week. You must know them and be able to explain them in your own words. Does everyone understand? Good.”

That evening in the twins’ apartment, while their drunken father was in the process of dragging their older brother by the scruff of his neck towards the bathroom, the twins were sending messages to one another with facial movements and private hand signals. They both knew better than to speak at the table, or they would be next in line for the bathroom. When the door to the commode slammed, even the plates jumped in fear.

A muffled, “Bang! Boom! You’re going to the moon!” reached their young ears and then the sound of skin hitting skin.

Neither of them could stomach another bite of the Shake ‘n Bake pork chop that had just recently been tasty. Instead of eating, Margaret was testing her brother’s knowledge of the Ten Commandments. It was not going well. She motioned that he would get the snot beat out of him if Father John told their own father that he hadn’t done his homework. This caused Billy to focus on the promised lashing and so, he could not remember any of the commandments. *Thou shall be killed*, he thought to himself. *Not on my watch*, thought his sister.

When the older brother and father returned, their mother cheerfully asked,

“Who wants ice cream?”

The father pinched Billy's arm hard saying, "You finish your food or I'll smack you silly." Margaret had hidden the remains of her dinner in a napkin.

At school the next day, during recess, Snot asked Margaret if she had heard about Scruffy's Dad.

"Scruffy? From Catechism?" she asked.

Snot nodded and then wiped his nose on his fake fur jacket.

"What about 'em?"

"His Dad croaked. At the dinner table. Choked."

"On a pork chop?"

"Huh? How should I know?"

Snot continued spinning slowly upon himself, "Dead as a dodo. Dead as a doornail. Dead as..."

But Margaret had taken off to find her brother who was kicking a soda can near the monkey bars. When she told him of Scruffy's father's fate, Billy replied, "Some guys have all the luck. Choked, huh. On a pork chop?"

"Maybe it wasn't just luck. Maybe, it was God."

Billy was not sure what she meant but thought it better not to say more than, "nuckin' futs," and gave the can a good kick.

Margaret continued by echoing Father John's words, "Age of Reason. Sin. No longer will God punish the parents for your sins. Wait a minute.... What do you think Scruffy did to get God to kill his Dad?"

Billy, who was not an astute listener, heard her loud and clear.

"Nucking futs! Ya think?"

"I dunno. Maybe."

Billy thought about Scruffy and suddenly felt a great deal of respect for the unkempt fellow. He started going through the Ten Commandments in his head. It wasn't going well.

"What's the first one again?"

"Put God first."

"How do you break that?"

"It's like, you shouldn't love Spiderman more than God."

"I can do that!"

Margaret agreed, "Yeah, right? That's a cinch."

“Hey God! Spiderman is the most! I love Spiderman most. I love Spiderman more than you!”

Feeling quite pleased with himself, he said, “That was easy. Give me another. What’s the second?”

“I think you broke that already.”

“Really?”

“Yup, it’s worship only God, and you just worshipped Spidey.”

“Wow, Shazam! The third? Hit me. I’m on a roll.”

“It’s don’t use God’s name in vain.”

“What’s vain?”

“Like, don’t say, God dammit!”

“You just did!”

“I know! God dammit!”

Billy began to run around his giggling sister shouting at the top of his lungs, “God dammit! God dammit! God dammit! God dammit! God da...”

“Billy, run!” shrieked Margaret.

Sister Mary Ellen was barreling across the school yard towards the twins.
They ran.

As is the case for many young boys, Billy had forgotten about the incident in the school yard once he got home. Lost in play, he sat on a rug with his Incredible Hulk doll. Margaret was doing homework at the desk. One desk, two chairs. However, she was having a hard time concentrating on the vocabulary words. Margaret was worried. Margaret worried a lot. Being six minutes older than Billy, she felt responsible for him. She was concerned about what would happen to Billy when their father got home. She was also worried that her father wouldn’t be coming home because they had killed him. She wasn’t sure which was worse. Fortunately, she was not concerned about going to hell. They had not been taught much about hell as of yet.

When the phone rang, Billy, suddenly remembering his plight, yelled. Margaret dropped her pencil and shushed Billy saying, “It’s probably the school.” Billy paled.

“Hello?” they heard their mother say after the third ring.

“Yes, this is she. Yes. Oh, hello, Sister Mary Ellen.”

The twins looked at each other but said nothing.

“He did? My Billy? No, no. I’ll take care of it. Yes. No need. Yes. Yes. No Sister, that won’t be necessary. Well, if you think so. Yes. Will tomorrow be alright? Eleven o’clock. Of course. No. He has to work. Oh, yes. I’ll tell his father. No, no. I’ll take care of it. Thank you, Sister. Good bye.”

After a brief, incredibly long silence, their mother called, “Billy? I know you’re listening. Come out here so I can talk to you.”

Billy could not think a single thought at that moment. Margaret, on the other hand, said, “Come on. We’re in this together.”

At that moment, Billy knew he truly loved his sister. He loved her more than he loved the Amazing Spider Man.

Their mother sat at the kitchen table. She appeared to be pensive but wore a mild expression and an apron. As the twins approached, Margaret began speaking quickly, “It was my fault. No, it was our fault. Well, mine and his. We were just practicing the Ten Commandments. We were! And trying to understand what it really meant because words like vain, adultery, covet...they’re hard. I mean, how does a kid do adultery?”

“Billy?” said the mother softly.

“Yeah?”

“Why were you saying, you know...”

“God dammit?”

The mother smiled and thought, *oh my babies*, but said, “Yeah, God dammit.”

“It’s like I said, we were pract...”

“Shhhhhh, Margaret. Billy?”

“It’s like she said.”

“How is saying God., you know, *that*, how is *that* studying the Ten Commandments?”

Billy suddenly found the webbing on his Spiderman socks fascinating and said less than nothing.

Margaret, who could not stay silent, filled the gap, “We were trying to figure out what not to do. Like. ”

“Like?” Asked the mother.

“Yeah. Like, like I said. We were practicing, and we were on number three.”

“Do not take the Lord's name in vain,” stated the mother.

“Exactly. So, to explain, I showed Billy what not to do and so, Billy did it too. To understand what not to do.”

The mother cocked her head and said, “that actually makes sense.”

“Right? It’s like spilled milk,” continued Margaret.

“Spilled milk?”

“Yup, how can you say, 'don’t spill the milk', without seeing spilled milk in your head?

You gotta know what it is not to do it.”

“Huh, what do you say, Billy?”

“I plead the fifth commandment.”

His mother smiled.

Margaret corrected Billy and then asked, “Are you gonna tell Dad?”

Her mother stood up and took out three glasses, a gallon of milk and some cookies.

“Oh, he has enough to worry about. No, I think it best we deal with this ourselves.”

“Thank God”, said Billy grabbing a cookie.

“But Billy and I have a meeting with Sister Mary Ellen tomorrow at eleven.”

Margaret asked, “Can I come too? I said it too. It was my idea.”

Pouring the milk, the mother considered this, *best we all are in this together so we needn’t talk about it so much. Then the kids won’t slip up and mention it in front of him. Well, Billy anyway.*

“Yes”, she answered.

Satisfied, they snacked in silence.

When the phone rang again, all three jumped and then let out a laugh. The mother stood up and brushed the crumbs off her apron. And, making a mental note to swab the floor before he came home, answered after the third ring.

“Hello? Yes, this is she. An accident?”