

I Woke to the Priest Spooning Me, His Whiskey Breath on My Shoulder

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Dear Dad,

Happy birthday to me! My special day falls on a Sunday this year. Not that days or weeks or years or celebrations or calendars have any meaning to you anymore now that you're gone. I'm thinking they don't.

But as I wrote the early morning journal entry I gift myself on every birthday, I was reminded that this was the first I

would be celebrating without a call from you wishing me the best and asking "How's the weather up there in New York?" and wondering when I'm going to go to dinner using the fifty-dollar gift card to Applebee's you'd put in my birthday card that always, always arrived three days before my actual birthday.

As the memories of past birthdays came flooding back—hadn't I already written about them last year and the year before that and ten years before that?—I realized they would evolve into another letter to you, maybe because this day was extra special and very different, simply because you weren't in our world anymore.

There would be no birthday card or phone call, but I would still have my memories of you at our annual Fourth of July family barbeque, trying to keep us kids away from that rusty red grill while you waited for the black coals to get their white edges so they would be hot enough for Mom's skinny homemade hamburgers to go on the blackened grate.

My otherwise idyllic summer of 1971 on East Thirty-Third Street in Bayonne had rolled on. I remember waking at dawn in thick humidity that meant it would be another

sweltering summer's day. I didn't have an air conditioner in my room, Dad, remember?

We could only afford one for the entire first floor of our house, and not surprisingly, it was in the window of the porch off your bedroom, so you and Mom were the only ones who got to enjoy cool nights, while us kids suffered and sweated through our underwear.

My bedroom window was open for the entire summer, or until I got sick of the swampy fish smell that wafted in at low tide from the port a few hundred yards to the east, across Avenue E, over a row of houses, and down across the train tracks.

I would slip out of the house alone by 6:00 a.m. for my walk downtown on deserted Broadway and up West Twenty-Eighth Street to St. Henry's to serve the 7:00 a.m. Mass with Father Duncanson, who never failed to greet me with a smile and the thumb blessing on my forehead. I would thank him by serving another perfect mass. No missed cues, no spilled water or wine.

One mid-summer's evening at about six o'clock, I remember Father visiting us four "apostles" in our

sweltering kitchen for dinner. (You took every opportunity to boast that our middle names were those of the writers of the Holy Gospels: Richie's was Matthew, Joel's was Mark, mine was Luke, and yours was John. Remember, Dad?)

You'd whistled for us to come in from our stickball game to get washed up and put on our clean T-shirts. Any time Father Duncanson or any of the parish priests came over for dinner was a special night. We might even get dessert, ice cream maybe, to cool us off from the heat that always seemed to be suffocating us.

Father Duncanson was wearing his priest's outfit that night, white collar and all. His white hair was neatly trimmed and parted, very unlike the way it had looked when we went on our overnight vacation.

I smelled his Old Spice aftershave, the same kind you slapped on after your biweekly shave. He was probably sweating through his clothes and couldn't bear the thought of another couple of hours in our sweatbox, so he suggested he take us all out after dinner for a nighttime cruise on the Staten Island Ferry!

I didn't even know what the ferry was. You drove that night, Dad, and Father Duncanson sat in the passenger seat while my brothers and I bounced around the back seat of our blue Ford Fairlane station wagon. You'd bought the basic, stripped-down version of the model, which meant no air conditioning.

What was it about keeping cool that you never liked? Was it always about the money? Did you feel like it was a luxury we didn't deserve? Or did you actually enjoy sweating?

You never said, so we all cranked our windows down as we drove to the end of town and over the Bayonne Bridge to Staten Island and the St. George Terminal in the northeast corner of the borough.

I remember Father Duncanson giving us each a nickel to drop in the old-timey turnstile before we all walked (ran!) onto the idling ferry. Think of it, Dad. It cost Father Duncanson fifty cents to take us all on a round-trip, nighttime cruise of New York Harbor. We were really living!

I remember standing on the upper deck at the front of the

boat with my brothers, the wind in our hair, the thick ocean air cooling our sweaty faces. I remember being hypnotized by the churning water, then looking up to see the Statue of Liberty as the big orange boat made its twenty-five-minute voyage to Whitehall Terminal in Lower Manhattan.

I felt the way Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* might have felt when she took in her first view of the Emerald City. New York City, with its well-lit skyscrapers and all the other things that my eleven-year-old brain couldn't even imagine, beckoned with the possibilities of fulfilling desires I couldn't yet articulate.

I remember feeling weirdly alive and excited, as though my life wouldn't be the same after this night. And we hadn't even gotten off the ferry yet.

About halfway into the ride, Father Duncanson pointed to the horizon and the dim lights of a chapel or church of some kind that we could visit when we got off the ferry in Manhattan. He said it was where sailors would go to worship when their boats docked after being out at sea for God only knows how long.

I remember getting off the boat and making the short walk

to the steps of the church, but I don't remember going in. We probably didn't have time before boarding the next ferry back to Staten Island, then crossing the Bayonne Bridge again to our home sweaty home on Thirty-Third Street.

That was my first experience with New York City, Dad, and the first time I felt teased—and slightly tempted, as much as was possible for an eleven-year-old—into returning to explore more of its wonders.

We got back home to our house. My brothers and I went to our hot rooms to get ready for bed while you and Father Duncanson sat at our kitchen table and smoked your cigarettes and talked.

I came out to the kitchen a few minutes later unable to sleep because it was just too hot. I was sweaty and tired from our ferry adventure and wanted to sleep in coolness. I noticed a haze of smoke in the white, fluorescent halo of the ceiling light, and an open bottle of Seagram's Seven whiskey on the table between you and Father Duncanson. An empty shot glass in front of each of you.

(I remembered it was Seagram's because it was the same

bottle you had hidden in the way back of the top shelf of your bedroom closet, the one you brought out on Christmas and New Year's and other special occasions, like tonight's visit from Father Duncanson.)

I asked if I could sleep in your room in the air conditioning until Mom got home after work. Sure, you said, and waved me away while grabbing the bottle and pouring another shot for you and the blessed priest.

I was hot and tired, so I paid no mind as I headed down the hall and opened the door to the cool world of air-conditioned luxury that was your bedroom. I felt my way to Mom's side of the bed—she always slept on the left side, remember, Dad?—curled up on my left side under a single sheet, buried my face in the coolness of her down pillow, and eased into a deep and beautiful sleep.

I woke with a sensation in my groin. I had to pee but didn't want to leave Mom's cool, comfortable spot in your bed. I hadn't moved since I'd lain down hours ago, but as I shifted, I felt another sensation, that of a smooth hand in my underwear and delicate fingers lightly fondling me.

What the hell, Dad! My sleepy brain snapped awake as I tried to figure out what was happening. I'm in Mom's spot

in bed, aren't I? But whose is the long body spooning mine? And whose warm, moist whiskey breath is that on my bare shoulder?

I quickly "connected the dots" and panicked: Father Duncanson was in your spot in your bed and sexually molesting your oldest son who had been sleeping in your wife's spot in your bed.

I'm going to let you absorb that memory of mine for a minute, Dad. Or maybe I'll give you an hour or maybe a year or maybe even fifty-one years, which is about how long I've been replaying that incident in my now sixty-two-year-old brain.

In reality, it's been a lifetime since this incident happened. Did I mention it happened on your watch, in your bed, with our parish priest, the lovely and almighty Father Duncanson?

Oh yeah, I think I just did. But it still feels like it happened just last night! And the more I sit with the memory, the more I feel as violated, betrayed, and angry as I did when the magnitude of the event first gripped me.

Hold on, not entirely true, Dad. I feel more violated, betrayed, and angry because I've been carrying this secret around for five decades, and you didn't, wouldn't, or couldn't ever acknowledge that it happened at all.

So, you may have wondered, what happened next? I rolled to my left, Father Duncanson's hand fell out of my underwear, and I slipped out of your bed. I tiptoed in still coolness to your bedroom door, opened it, slipped out, and closed it with barely a click.

I remembered hoping I could get out of the room without waking Father Duncanson or, if he was already awake, get out of the room without him grabbing me and pulling me back into his grip, covering my mouth with his soft hand to stifle my scream, and pulling me back into your darkened bedroom to have his way with me, like a scene out of a horror movie, which come to think of it, this was.

The oppressive heat that enveloped me as I escaped your bedroom into the safety of our living room never felt so refreshing. I could see the brightness of dawn creeping in through the sheer curtains.

I tiptoed the dozen or so carpeted steps to my closed

bedroom door and quietly opened it. Mom was sleeping in my bed. Always a light sleeper because she was a self-admitted, lifelong worrier, she awoke with a start.

"What's the matter, what's going on? Is everything all right?" she asked.

"No," I said in a whisper. "Father Duncanson put his hand in my underwear and was, um, playing with me."

That was all I said, Dad, promise. Mom said nothing, promptly got up, brushed a clump of hair back from her face, gave me a quick hug, helped me into my bed, and covered me with a sheet.

"Go back to sleep," she whispered and left.

I tried to do as she said, but it wasn't easy as I was already replaying in my confused mind what had just happened to me. I was still tired, so I closed my eyes and fell asleep. I remember waking a few hours later in the full light of morning, still thinking about the incident, wondering if it might have been a dream.

I rubbed my eyes as I walked into the kitchen. You and Mom stopped talking about whatever you were talking

about, and I looked around and asked where Father Duncanson was.

He'd already gone home, back to the rectory, priest business and all, Mom had said. You said nothing, stayed silent, as you stared down into the kitchen sink and washed dishes.

"Okay," was all I remember saying and thinking, waiting for you or Mom to speak up about the big black-and-white elephant in the room. But you two were never ones for real communication about serious things, especially something as important as this, so you said nothing.

I also said nothing, as I grappled with feelings of I didn't know what. Confusion? Guilt? Shame? Sadness? All of those? Something else? Whatever it may have been, you two never asked me any questions, so I didn't have to answer.

On the other hand, I had a lot of questions but didn't have the sense, wherewithal, or the nerve to ask them. Nothing more to talk about here, right, Dad? Let's just keep our heads down and carry on.

Summer was almost over, and there was another stickball game against the kids around the corner on Willow Street. I'd be going into eighth grade in a few weeks.

Len Prazych has been a professional writer for most of his adult life, first as a freelancer, then as owner of his public relations, marketing and advertising company, then as editor-in-chief of a weekly trade magazine. My Fathers: Letters of Healing on a Quest for the Truth is his first book.

This article is an extract from My Fathers: Letters of Healing on a Quest for the Truth.

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