

WILKES
IN DUE SEASON

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A CATHOLIC LIFE



as I could in its telling. When people asked me what I was working on, I said, "the story of my days on this planet," not wanting to call it an autobiography—that sounded much too grand for such an ordinary life—or a memoir, which sounded far too self-conscious. So let it be what it is: a story, a true story, about an ordinary man's search for God and for life's meaning.

of poverty could erase. They were Catholic—and their new son would be soon baptized into this one true faith. Others might succeed in *this* world, but they were sure they would prevail in the next. Their Catholic Church in America was itself a magnificent, sprawling, and unified empire. While non-Catholic America still regarded their growth warily, working-class Catholics built schools and churches in great number. Devotions to the Blessed Mother were sung and uttered by churches full of the faithful, nuns wore distinctive garb, priests were never seen in public without a Roman collar. On the altar, the Mass was intoned in an unchanging Latin. Little had changed since the Council of Trent, the sixteenth-century response to Luther's heresies.

When asked what name should be written on the birth certificate of this, the latest member, Paul and Margaret looked at one another. They already had a Thomas and an Edward. The girls were Pauline, Marian, Francis, and Margaret. Without much further discussion, they simply named the child Paul, with no middle name, after his father.

And so my life began.



Before bedtime, my six sisters and brothers and I would kneel, in order, oldest to youngest, before my mother at the edge of our breakfast nook table to say our nightly prayers. It was here that my early relationship—as narrow and perhaps misguided as it then was—with God began. My father had covered the table's worn, wooden, cracked surface with yellow Formica, the newest modern rage, and we secretly imagined that its use surely marked us as true Americans. But of course, in almost every way, our outward lives were, like that Formica, very much a veneer on a much thicker piece of American life, of which we knew very little.

There were benches on either side of the table, and my mother, droopy-eyed from her work as a housekeeper up in Shaker Heights for the Chadwick family—they, the wealthy makers of the Chadwick automobile that had faded into history, but whose money remained quite plentiful and readily accessible—as well as from all the washing, cooking, baking, sewing, and mending that a large family required, would sit there to hear our various cries to heaven. My brothers and sisters knelt on the glistening linoleum floor, scrubbed bare and polished each Saturday afternoon. This was an accepted portion of self-inflicted pain, penance for sins; after all, prayer was magnified in direct proportion to the time spent and pain endured. God surely listened better if you were at least uncomfortable, preferably in agony. I, however, knelt on a grate that brought heat from

half million who had immigrated around the turn of the century. In crowded parish school classrooms we were kept apart from non-Catholic influences so that we might preserve our faith, under assault by a Protestant-dominated American culture. For we were a perfect society, the Church complete in itself, neither having nor needing nor seeking much of a relationship to the world. The Baltimore Catechism answered any question we might have, let us know exactly where we stood with God, when we were going astray, and how far. We were taught to "mortify" our senses, avoid temptation or even the "near occasion" of sin. It was incomprehensible that if we would marry—a state decidedly inferior to becoming a nun or priest, which only the holiest among us aspired to—we would not marry anyone other than another Catholic, preferably a Slovak one.



Although I was a member of this huge family, I always had the sense of being alone in the world. Perhaps I felt this way because my older siblings and parents seemed "the family" and then there was me, separated by four years and a chasm that only widened with time. It was not that I was unloved or uncared for. The one picture of me from my early years—taken by a professional at Woolworth's Five and Dime up on Buckeye Road—shows luxuriant, chin-length curls, held neatly back by a barrette, framing a chubby, smiling face. An obviously indulged, slightly petulant . . . little girl. Was it that my mother knew that girls were more malleable and hoped to reprogram my maleness as much or for as long as she could? Or had she already sensed in me—as mothers can do just by the tone of a child's cry or the way a breast is taken or the position while sleeping—that I would not be a cooperative crew member on this fragile family bark sailing stormy and uncharted American waters?

Because my siblings were older and my parents were working, I was something of a feral creature, raising myself, cautiously ranging out into the neighborhood that surrounded our one-and-a-half-story shingled house at 11412 Forest Avenue. I would follow the horse-drawn wagon with a man calling out "Paperricks, paperricks" (which only much later I would decode as a Yiddish plea for scrap "paper" and "rags") as it rattled over Forest Avenue's red bricks. I peered at women in babushkas as they hurried back from the crossroads of 116th and Buckeye Road, having stopped at fruit and vegetable markets, the butcher shop, the bakery, each its own province. Ours was more a medieval village than the result of modern city planning. The men were plumbers and lathe operators,

separated from its inner layer and annealed onto an ever-expanding ball in the pantry. No length of string was ever thrown away, no can not flattened, no glass jar ever discarded—for everything there was another season, another use. The war effort was really no effort at all for families like mine. Waste was unheard of, sinful in fact. Food was precious, a gift from the God who both provided and demanded careful accounting of its proper use. Even the cornmeal mush with browned butter that was our standard Friday night dinner was treasured down to the last congealed dollop. During the war, my mother always had extra ration stamps to give to other families. We would not consume more than our fair share. We would walk lightly on this earth, barely leaving a footprint. There was an ominous, unspoken sense that our life hung by a thread and that any false move could be disastrous.

And yet to walk as a visitor through the back door on Forest Avenue, onto the scrubbed, waxed linoleum, was to be treated royally. Whatever food that was already prepared was yours, and if a serving bowl was emptied, it was an embarrassment, for you may have wanted a bit more. Our humble icebox became a cornucopia of delights, our stove forever burning bright. Stuffed cabbage, chicken soup with my mother's homemade noodles, perogi, garlic sausage, huge loaves of Martinovic's Bakery rye bread with caraway seeds. If family members knew not to ask for another slice of bread or not to tarry during mealtime lest that errant piece of meatloaf or pork chop be snapped up by someone else, ours was a house in which the visitor never felt any want.

Strangely enough, I never felt poor—there always was enough to go around, enough for anyone who would walk through our doors. Even a pathetic pots-and-pans salesman would get a sale if he looked as though he needed it.

Those who came to our house were neighbors and relatives mostly. Sit, have a "biffer," as my father called it—the boilermaker, the Slovak's cocktail, aphrodisiac, anesthetic. Corby's was the whiskey, preferably a double shot. P.O.C. (Pride of Cleveland) or Erin Brew was the beer, and that was the order in which you drank, the whiskey warm and the beer at the temperature of our fruit cellar in the basement, the icebox considered far too aggressively chilly for something as savory as this.

The men's talk—which I listened to as I took their empty glasses away with the drop or two remaining as my reward—was of hard work, unfair bosses, and low pay. The shots and beers made the men stronger and wiser on those Sundays, which began with Mass and ended, by early afternoon, in an alcoholic haze. But instead of planning the revolution that would free them from these bonds, taking on roles in their unions or otherwise plotting a way out of the indentured servitude their own grandfathers

Although America was involved in this war, and such places as Europe and Japan actually must have existed, it was the squarish red brick building of St. Benedict's four blocks away on the corner of Lamontier and East Boulevard that was truly the focal point of our lives. From an early age, I understood that God was the proper center of our lives, all life, in good times and bad. If you asked Cleveland ethnics where they lived, it was always their parish, not their street address, they gave. St. Benedict's was administered by Benedictine monks, every one of them a Slovak and—so it was hoped—role models for us, this cowlicked horde of boys at the parish grade school. There, class by class, we lined up for daily Mass, with a Notre Dame sister in her distinctive horseshoe-shaped headpiece to synchronize our choreographed genuflections with a clicker folded into her smooth hand.

Some of those nuns were no more than children themselves, having ardently joined directly from grade school and, because of the burgeoning numbers of children in Catholic schools, quickly returned to the classroom after but a year or two of college. Nonetheless, they were superb teachers in their fifty-student classrooms, explaining how letters were formed; sentences diagrammed; numbers added, subtracted, multiplied, and divided. How little I knew of their secret, quiet life, shoe-horned as they were, fifteen of them, into a tiny convent adjoining the school. They were so restrained, so regimented. They never perspired, even on the hottest day. Their skin was a uniform pale color. They would wipe a table, tuck their handkerchief into their billowing sleeve, enter a room, or sit down in precisely the same way. Their novitiate was a holy uniformity, instilling in them a mentality of seeking perfection, being part of something far bigger than themselves. The best girls from each eighth-grade class would be honored when they were asked to follow in these soft footsteps.

Our four priests presided as lords of the Slovak manor, still at the time when the parish priest was educated far better than anyone in the flock and his authority was unquestioned. Empty liquor cases (not cheap Corby's, to be sure) on their back porch (built by my father, who was rewarded with two holy pictures for his work) told of a far different life than that of the sisters. On those rare occasions when I went to the priests' spacious house with my mother to obtain *oplatki*, the Christmas wafer, and give our offering, it smelled of cigar smoke. Our pastor, Father Leo, was not a man to smile, and his priests took the cue that a stern face and stern penances in the confessional booth were needed to keep these uneducated masses in check.

There were novenas, stations of the cross, Christmas pageants as we moved through the mandala of the church year. There was but a narrow gate to heaven. Because of our many hours of prayer and ritual each week, we would be granted entrance, while the weak-willed so-called Christians—what a sadly anemic word, I thought—and especially those stiff-necked Jews, would be turned aside to burn forever.

“Let us pray for heretics and schismatics . . . to call them back to our holy Mother the Catholic and Apostolic Church. . . . Let us pray for the Jews. May the Lord our God tear the veil from their hearts. . . . Let us pray also for the pagans . . . May they give up their idols and be converted.”

up, ever so slowly, to the two shafts of fleshly perfection. My eyes ventured no higher than the woman's two exquisitely conformed knees that almost, but not quite, touched each other, a tantalizing fraction of an inch apart. There was no need to look further. I was breathless, my mouth dry. I had seen enough for one day.

We emerged from the bowels of the Terminal Tower into the blinding sunlight and the calamity of downtown. Cars were stopped, honking their horns; rolls of toilet paper streamed down from the buildings along Euclid Avenue. My mother held my hand tightly as I gawked at people kissing, toasting each other with paper cups they filled from tall green bottles of champagne. They formed little circles and danced around and around, stumbling, falling, always laughing. I was beginning to realize that this war of blue and gold stars had ended. To celebrate this special day, we went to the Forum Cafeteria on Ninth Street. As we slowly pushed our trays along the smooth chrome tubes, I was confronted with an array of amazing foods I had never seen before. Quivering bowls of Jell-O in a dizzying array of colors. French fried, not only mashed, potatoes. Chocolate meringue pie, its tufts perfectly bronzed. All just an arm's length away.

I rested dreamily on my mother's arm on the way home, but it was not the war's end or those delicacies that floated through my mind as I traveled back to my secure, small world. I closed my eyes. Those legs, those shoes! I was too young for lust. But not for questioning. What kind of person could this be? Where did she live? Was her house like mine?



In second grade, I received my first Holy Communion in a wool blue suit so scratchy that I had to wear my pajama bottoms underneath to stave off the itching. In sixth grade, an unsmiling, somewhat distracted Bishop Edward Hoban placed a dripping cross of oil upon my forehead, confirming me as "Louis," a name carefully chosen, my homage to Cleveland Indians' player-manager Lou Boudreau. In later grades, Sister Leah and Sister Augustine found my knuckles with their rulers and Sister Florentine my heart with the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, which I could repeat from memory and tried diligently to practice in my daily life. Clothe the naked. Oh, if only I could have found such a person. Shelter the homeless. I would have given my own bed. Bury the dead. I just never saw any as I walked up and down Forest Avenue to and from St. Benedict's school.

Instead of saintly actions, I stole pennies from the change I was supposed to bring home from Bill's, the little grocery store up the street, and

bought candy. I even stole some when he was behind the counter. I peed down the furnace grate in my bedroom one summer night after drinking plenty of soda at a cousin's wedding, too lazy or too afraid to go back downstairs through the scary, dark attic. That winter, when the heat came up, my sin was revealed. I lied about doing my homework, shoveling snow, sweeping the front walk. I always had a full laundry list to report each Saturday at Confession. After all, I had only to look at the cross to see what real sacrifice meant. I was trying to please God, and I was failing most of the time. I secretly reveled in the stinging pain when my mother would slap my face for a smart remark. I deserved that, and more.

If those marvelous ankles and shoes offered a sliver-thin peek into another world, a world apart from the one my family knew here in America and my people had known for centuries, then a green plastic box twelve inches long, six inches wide, and no more than six inches high flung open the window. My Admiral clock radio, a Christmas present in my eighth-grade year, was a magic carpet on which I could soar out my second-floor bedroom window to exotic places of new and forbidden sounds. This was not Fibber Magee and Molly or the Grand Ole Opry or a Gabriel Heater newscast I had heard from the wooden-cased radio downstairs as I sat there with my father. Not The Shadow or Jack Armstrong, All American Boy. No, this was Moondog Allen Freed, the howl of werewolves at midnight heralding his throaty voice. "Ladies and gentlemen . . . the latest from the Penguins." *Earth Angel, Earth Angel, will you be mine, my darling dear, love you all the time.* "Now, mister lovebird out there, is this your song tonight." *I Got a Woman, way cross town, she's good to me.* . . . "And you sweet thang out there, this one's for you, a new one heading to the top of the charts called 'You're So Fine.'"

Baby you're so fine
 Oh I'm so glad you're mine
 Baby you're so fine, oh
 Baby you're so fine
 Oh how I love you baby
 Baby you're so fine

My St. Benedict's classmates were humming Patti Page tunes, and here I was, listening to music that sounded as if it had been recorded in somebody's garage—some of which had been—with a beat that didn't so much set my polished oxfords to tapping as my groin to pulsing. The beat, the rhythm, was so primitive, so in sync with whatever was coming alive in my young body. Etta James, Chuck Willis, Clyde McPhatter, Big Joe Turner, Ruth Brown, B. B. King. This was "black" music—therefore, in

my world, bad music, sinful music. I kept the radio low, and when my brothers were asleep in the beds across the room, I would creep over and slip from beneath their beds one of the tattered magazines they had brought back from a trip to Chicago. In the dim light of the street lamp, I could see mountainous breasts, eyes outlined in mascara, black garter belts. No, I would not do what George Pezo demonstrated with a grin on his face as he massaged his huge penis and spattered my whitewashed basement wall with a wad of mucus. No, I had to be strong. My impure thoughts were already enough for Saturday Confession, and I knew Father Louis or Father Michael would howl through the screen loud enough for the entire church to know what I had done.

Eighth-grade graduation was nearing, and I was finally allowed to attend a Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) canteen on a Thursday night in May 1952. I tamed my cowlicky hair with my sister's Jergen's hand lotion, paid my fifteen cents, and slipped into our parish hall. The air was moist with teenage sweat and suffused with the dime-store perfume the girls had clandestinely splashed on themselves after they left home.

As I scanned the dimly lit dance floor, I saw her, one hand poised saucily on her hip. Her white sweater seemed etched on her body. Her legs were apart, stretching the already tight skirt even tighter. Her bobby socks were swollen white blobs just above her penny loafers. The rotating globe overhead sent quivery beams of colored light across the floor, revealing her, then concealing, revealing. I felt as if I could pass out at any minute. I finally got up the nerve. No, not to dance with her. I could never be that bold, although we had learned the box step in Miss Minch's gym class. I finally got up the nerve to look directly at her.

And she looked right back at me. Was that a smile? The light, the light! I couldn't tell. I felt a pain rising low in my groin, the same wonderful pain I could feel, listening to that music after midnight in the quiet of my bedroom. I turned away immediately. Was it showing?

Where had my innocence gone? Was this any way for a budding saint to be?

AT SEA

COURTESY OF MY NEW EMPLOYER, THE U.S. GOVERNMENT, a complimentary airplane ticket from my "Residence of Record" whisked me to the Providence, Rhode Island, airport and from there to the U.S. Navy's Officer Candidate School (OCS) at Newport. I had never been treated so well in any of my many employments. In the early morning hours of a bitterly cold January night, with a fierce wind howling off nearby Narragansett Bay, I was delivered to the darkened World War II-era Kilo Company barracks.

It was 1961, and the draft was on. If you were classified 1-A, as I was, and chose to wait to be summoned, you would be assigned to the Army, most likely to an infantry unit. Although I didn't know how to swim, in fact was terrified of the water, I volunteered for the Navy. Being a college graduate—though barely—I would serve as an officer.

I was not the model officer candidate, but there was something about the regimented life that felt strangely right to this rebel without a cause. I finally had a purpose. A place. I was provided with clothes, shelter, three square meals a day, and \$44 every two weeks. The pay was enough for a Saturday night drunk at the Viking Hotel's Skoal Room in Newport as I tried to convince one of the dark-eyed Portuguese girls—the crucifix-wearing, hard-working textile mill workers we so crassly called the Fall River Debutantes—to come off the dance floor and into the winter's darkness where we could be alone for just a few moments.

The blur of my four years at Marquette behind me, I was now on a trajectory to be an officer and gentleman. All American young men served in those days—except those so sickly or cunning or gay—millions of us around the globe, needed to keep the Communists at bay. Little did any of us expect that, over in a tiny country no one then could easily locate

vest. Checkered jacket, checkered trousers. I was surely ready for anything in the days ahead.

When I walked into that school building, I found a Catholic environment so totally alien to me that I don't think I so much as uttered a word to any of the other boys in the first weeks of school. Engulfed in such rarefied air, I found myself overwhelmed with a strange narcosis. I surely said nothing about it at home. What could I say? How could I explain to my mother and father, brothers and sisters that there was a world outside St. Benedict's? There was a Catholicism that went beyond the rote answers to the Baltimore Catechism. A Catholicism that even in the 1950s invited at least a modicum of discussion and was not offended by questions, at least those properly phrased. This Catholicism transcended not only our ethnic group—embracing Irish, Italian, Polish, German—but economics as well. Some of the fathers of my classmates actually wore to work each day what my father reserved for Sunday use only. I saw them as they dropped their sons off at school at a time when my father had already been pounding nails for an hour. They laughed so easily; they seemed in no hurry; worries were for others, not them.

At Cathedral Latin, there was none of the coarseness of the overweight, dull-eyed parish priests of St. Benedict's, the only representatives of the male religious life I'd then witnessed. These Marianist priests and brothers carried books and magazines in their arms, and had obviously read them. They talked about world affairs and Senator Joseph McCarthy, new treatments for cancer, and banished European theologians who would later emerge as the true lights of the Second Vatican Council. Thomas Aquinas, neo-scholasticism, apologetics. Latin phrases succinctly summarized their points and rolled easily off their tongues. I went from class to class, fascinated with the echo of my heels resounding from the polished marble hallways, as if magically, mystically, my steps, my very self were being magnified by the place. I sat attentively in my alphabetically assigned seat and did my homework as if it were a divine summons. I don't remember ever being so happy in my life.

I and my ten-way suit had negotiated Cleveland Transit bus route 107 so adroitly, so successfully. I was on my way—to where and to do what I didn't have the slightest idea.



Midway through my freshman year, a tall priest with sunken eyes came into my religion class. He was a Maryknoll missionary just back from China, a place of dysentery, hepatitis, dengue fever, malaria. He stood

TRACY

IT WASN'T REALLY LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT. IT WAS LUST. I joke about it to this day, but it happens to be true.

At the epochal Halloween party, I was decked out in my nattily nipped-at-waist, midnight blue blazer; tailor-made, monogrammed mauve shirt; well-cut jeans; and a pair of custom-made, oh-so-supple, John Travolta *Saturday Night Fever* shoes. And there she was, whirling about on the smooth parquet floor of Cathy George's very uptown East Side apartment. The "perfect woman" had a great, alive face; radiant skin; lipstick just the right crimson shade applied to luscious, very kissable lips. Try as I might to make chitchat with other guests, I couldn't keep my eyes off her form-fitting slacks as she twirled around and around to the thumping beat of whatever was that moment's hottest disco hit.

Her name was Tracy Gochberg; she worked in advertising. I would find out only later, but Cathy George had made the same "perfect girl" pitch to two of us, so Barry Fox, whom I knew from the Hamptons summers, was also interested. Tracy had come with a date, so she must have had her hands full that night, juggling the attentions of three of us. I danced a few times with her, probably making inane patter over the many decibels of music and the voices of a couple dozen ever more imbibed, boisterous partygoers.

When I got home early the next morning, I stopped just inside my apartment door, closed it quietly behind me, and leaned my head back. I peered past my darkened living room, past the glassy leaves of my schefflera plant, to the flood of streetlight that suffused my small dining area. To the marble table, glistening and bare, to the leather chairs on either side. They stood there so alertly, with their elegant, designer profile and clean-cut chrome lines. So starkly alone. So empty. I went to the window and looked out onto West Tenth Street. What was it about her? Why was I standing here dumbly, staring out the window?

was signaling my interest in becoming a Maryknoll priest. When asked what I did on those Sundays at Cathedral Latin, I told my mother and father that it was a school meeting, and because the very word "meeting" had such an alien and exotic sound to them, they questioned me no further. I had no close friends, so there was no one who was privy to the details of my small life. I prayed on my knees each night that I would hear God's call, yet had I been asked directly, I would have vehemently denied any interest in becoming a priest. This thorough mental bifurcation prepared me well for a Thursday night at the CYO canteen and a life hardly compatible with that of a celibate soldier of Christ.



Steam rose from the hissing radiators that flanked the dance floor; the air was thick with the suppression of young lust; you could almost sense it just walking through the doors. It was a volatile combination, ignitable at the slightest stare, nod, or smile. Overhead, the ball of tiny mirrors lazily spun on its axis, sending shivering beams of colored lights into the damp darkness. At the weekly CYO canteen, the hope was that good Catholic boys and girls would chastely meet each other, dance without actually touching more than the palms of their hands, and eventually go on to present their virginal selves to each other in marriage. There were those boys—Joe Semancik, Joe Kolenic, Paul Forgach, Bob Estvander, and others—who seemed to have gotten that message. And girls like Marilyn Ungarsky, Mary Jo Sotak, Martha Balash, and Joanne Kovats, who were models of youthful Catholic purity. But, of course, those were not the girls who made the hair on the back of my neck bristle, who caused my mouth to turn dry just looking at them.

So one Thursday night, there stood my temptress, staring right at me from the dim shadows directly across the floor, daring me with her parted lips to stride across the floor and ask her to dance. She was fast, that much I knew from her "reputation"—ah, that damning word. She went to public school, already marking her as off-limits. Not even Catholic. A gypsy, so the word had it; whatever "gypsy" meant I didn't know, but I knew it was forbidden. I had to—I must—resist this "direct occasion of sin" that Brother Behringer had so carefully covered in religion class, a direct occasion clearly demarcated by the outer reaches of those ample breasts, straining beneath what appeared to be her single white sweater, and by the smooth expanse of her tight skirt, stretched ever more tautly as she impatiently shifted her weight, spreading her legs still further apart. For weeks I had seen her and knew that she had seen me, but my resolve

University Circle. That illusion was shattered that September morning as I was getting some books out of my locker. I heard the voices behind me, barely audible, speaking in that sotto voce used so deftly by adolescents to both reveal and mask their cruelty. "Wonderboy. Wondersuit. Look, today I'm blue and checked. Blue and blue tomorrow. Stand by for our favorite: checked and checked coming up!" I turned to face my Greek chorus. Before me were the rightful occupiers of Cathedral Latin's pantheon, boys I had watched and secretly wanted to be exactly like. Their hair was short and flawlessly parted, their shoulders thrown back with that sense of entitlement I so admired and could never hope to ape. Their penny loafers were shined, chinos starched, the sleeves of letter sweaters pushed midway up their forearms. Captain of the golf team; sodality president; yearbook editor; king of the Purple and Gold Ball, our biggest social event and one I was certainly not worthy to attend. Their smug smiles ripened into demonic grins. They didn't need to whisper anymore; the entire corridor was in on the good fun. "Tune in tomorrow to see what Wonderhunky will wear. It's a bird, it's a plane, it's Wonderhunky and his magic suit!" They burst into laughter that spread in resounding waves down the hall.

I closed my locker slowly. I walked down the hallway to the bathroom. I went inside one of the stalls and pressed my forehead to the cool metal. How could I have been so foolish to think I could be just like them? I was, and would always be, from Forest Avenue.

Lotion from my sister's humble shelf in the medicine cabinet provided its discipline. No, I would not be like the clean-cut boys with penny loafers. I could never be one of them, in their insufferable smugness.

I had new role models: tough Italian kids from Murray Hill, with their swagger and glistening pompadours, body hair, and bravado; their pointed shoes; their trousers, with white stitching down the side, swooping down to thirteen inches at the cuff, the absolute minimum if you expected to actually get your foot past. With fathers in jail for running numbers and other American avocations that in their native Sicily would be regarded as perfectly legitimate. Their snarling, angry faces—this I could bring off. This was the real me. Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*, Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*, and yes, I convinced myself, the rebel without a cause, James Dean. Alienation was in the air as the sleepy 1950s were preparing a way to the tumultuous 1960s, but of course I knew nothing about the cultural upheavals that were afoot. All I knew for sure was the profound distance—in fact, the ever-widening chasm, even after my valiant efforts to fit in—between me and the rest of the world. There was a new pop star, Elvis Presley, but he looked like a veritable choirboy compared to what I became.

The gypsy girl liked the new me just fine. She ran her fingers through the smooth, Jerger's-tamed "fenders" that met in the back of my head in a perfect DA, "duck's ass." She played with the casual curls that tumbled onto my pimpled forehead. My clothes, my sullenness, my inability to express anything beyond a grunt were perfect. And no longer was there any hesitation on Thursday night, no moral dissection. I followed her home, pinned her against the garbage cans in the alley behind the tenement where she lived near the Cleveland Transit car barns off Woodland Avenue, and plunged my tongue so deep into her mouth that it ached. Yes, I would have a woman like this, who would melt with my passion. A real woman, none of those fancy Beaumont or Marymount girls in carefully pleated plaid skirts and oversize cotton blouses. Tight sweater, real woman. I could be perennially angry with the unjust world. I'd get a job down at one of the steel mills in the Flats along the Cuyahoga River, work like an animal all week long and then live like royalty, if only for those few glorious hours on Friday afternoon. Steady work, that was always the highest priority in my family. School? Nobody was pushing this. Who needed it? I would have a house of my own someday on Forest Avenue. Why had I ever thought life could be—should be—anything else? This is exactly who I was and would always be. I was my father's son, the latest in a long line of Slovak serfs who would work hard, sing loud, and drink well and long. Keep your head down; don't reach beyond your grasp, because surely you will fail.

desire to understand his place before God. And here he was, a man of my own time, a bon vivant who lived a dissolute life in England, even made a girl pregnant, came to Columbia University and then turned his back on a budding literary life to join the Trappists, the most austere order of the Catholic Church. I began to have this fantasy that I would, on the spur of the moment, go to see him. He was at a monastery in Kentucky, just one state south. I would ask him how he prayed, how he could forgive himself when he sinned or failed. I would ask him how he knew what to do with his life, what it felt like—in those fleeting moments of total abandonment and awareness—to be close to God. And then I would ask him what I should do with my life, what path I should take. I vowed, if that day ever came, to do exactly what he told me.



One of the innovations at Cathedral Latin in my senior year was to appoint Brother Kenneth Sommer—who taught religion and, as a former football player, was known to make his displeasure with rowdy students known by putting their heads as far through the mesh window of a classroom door as he could—as something called a guidance counselor. We had never heard of such a thing. We were to see him in alphabetical order, so, late in the fall semester when he reached the W's and my turn came, I sauntered into his office, twirled my lotioned curls around my index finger, and plopped into the appointed chair, adopting the very worst posture I could muster.

He opened the small folder in front of him. "Hmmm." I slouched further into my chair as he continued. "Grades a little uneven, but you still made National Honor Society. Three years with the newspaper. Hmmm. And these?" He held up a thick wad of yellow detention sheets. "Your first book?" He plucked a single light green sheet from the folder and ran his finger over its face as if it were Braille. I assumed I was in even more trouble. He scanned the sheet once again and looked up at me squarely, his eyes eerily magnified by his thick glasses. "You know you did pretty well on these IQ tests, Wilkes," he said somewhat incredulously. "You know you could go to college?"

"Been thinking of Republic Steel. Steady work. Good benefits. I hear they're hiring."

"It's up to you, but why not just apply? I'm pretty sure you'd be accepted. Even with all your disciplinary problems, you still managed a pretty good average. Let's see, where should you go?" he said, going back to folder. "You were on the newspaper. You could study journalism. Marquette

a pair of charcoal gray slacks, a pale blue oxford shirt set off with a striped rep tie, and a three-button herringbone jacket. The penny loafers were too big, but small wads of toilet paper filled out the toes. My hair was rakishly parted on the side and slicked back, making me look (in my mind's eye) like a jaded Gatsbyesque character who just couldn't be bothered with regular haircuts. Ethnic bumpkin turned mobster manqué had now gone preppy.

Just as Cathedral Latin had introduced me to another way of life, so too did this group and their parties. None of them appeared to have parents who ever seemed to be around. Curfew? Really. Shamus had a very good phony ID, which passed muster even at the state liquor stores. The Shaker Heights and Cleveland Heights girls who came to the parties laughed easily and smoked cigarettes. As the night wore on and lights dimmed, we paired off. The younger sister of one of my Latin classmates wore perfume so intoxicating and cashmere sweaters so soft to the touch that I couldn't wait to get her onto a sofa or, if unoccupied, a bedroom. No one would actually think of having sex; everything was done fully clothed, but that didn't prevent "getting your rocks off," as we used to say. I lived for those Saturday nights. There was no future, but what a wonderful present.

I thought that I had arrived, but of course I was more lost than ever before, living life at its shallowest. Yet even as I was enshrouded in a fog of alcohol and perfume and testosterone, God would not leave me to my own worst instincts. He waited patiently in the wings. I rarely missed kneeling down before I went to bed and saying my prayers; it was bred into me. Sometimes I would recite rote prayers I knew, but more and more often, I found my mind wandering, recapping the day's activities, a sort of examination of conscience. I was ashamed of my sins and vowed to do better the next day. I repeated the words of Confession: "I firmly resolve, with the help of thy grace, to confess my sins, do penance, and to amend my life. Amen." But the next day dawned, and my best intentions were so much fragile dew, quickly vaporized. I never missed Sunday Mass, at times stumbling into St. Benedict's in the morning with a terrific hang-over. Or, after our debauchery at Shamus's apartment or in the backseat of a car parked at the Lover's Lane at Shaker Lake, we would travel downtown to the 2 AM Mass at St. John's Cathedral. There I was, drunk, with lipstick smudges on my collar and dried semen on my shorts, praying that God would forgive me and show me the right path for my life. Caught up in the orbit of Shamus and his merry companions, I was extremely careful not to let them even glimpse my own life. When they

rows of tonsured heads standing before their choir stalls. They all seemed lost in another world, a world at once appealing in its simplicity and obvious sanctity, yet alien from my own tiny universe.

It was here that Merton, who first arrived as a jaded, lonesome, directionless pilgrim just as I was, had famously written a line I could quote word for word: "As soon as I got inside, I knew I was home where I never had been or would be a stranger." I yearned for such a home, for certitude and peace. But I knew that jumping into the Ford convertible for a visit was a very far cry from making this kind of statement with my young life. Finally I got up the courage to ask the priest who was in charge of the weekend retreatants—a group we were swept into—and he smiled. "Father Louis?" Oh, yes, he's here someplace," he said as he kindly added my request, one of perhaps hundreds he received, to meet the great man.

Perhaps I actually saw Merton during that visit in 1956; I do not know. But he would walk with me through life, and we would meet again and again on the pages of his books in the years to come and in a very special way many years later.



My final days in Cleveland saw the good fortune of a college acceptance and the worst event of my young life.

In the week that I was going down to the steel mills to apply for work, I received an astonishing letter in the mail, advising me that I had been accepted into a college to which I couldn't remember submitting an application and that I had never seen. As of September, I would be in the incoming freshman class at Marquette University; my intended major, journalism.

Then came the day that would forever divide my life into a before and after: May 1, 1956.

My mother had been having medical problems. Her skin had turned a jaundiced yellow. A woman who had always had boundless energy, then fifty-six years old, who had raised seven children while working another twenty to thirty hours a week outside the house, had shrunk inside a shell of constant fatigue. The diagnosis was possible cirrhosis of the liver, which is usually brought on by hepatitis or excessive drinking. A third, less-known reason is malnutrition. It is entirely possible that my mother had for years been starving herself to feed her children.

She had an appointment with a liver specialist in Akron, forty miles south of Cleveland, and so that my father wouldn't have to take a day off

town to another high school, since reading of Thomas Merton's hunger to know God. There was an incontrovertible force pushing me away from a place that had given me such a firm grounding yet would, I sensed, eventually extract its due, holding me fast.

So, on a September morning, I stood with my father deep in the bowels of Cleveland's Terminal Tower as a mighty Nickel Plate Road steam engine hissed and trembled in its real and metaphysical readiness to take its cargo of dreamers and pragmatists first to destinations stamped on their tickets—but then where? All my belongings were packed in a single large cardboard box, which rested between us. In it, I had a new pair of white buckskin shoes, three fresh pairs of Wigwam woolen socks, some shirts, sweaters, khaki trousers, underwear, a heavy winter coat, and my beloved clock radio. The Cleveland Trust banker's check in my pocket, representing all my savings from my *Plain Dealer* paper route and caddying at the Pepper Pike Country Club, was in the amount of \$450. The conductor called for all aboard.

"Good luck, Butch," my father said. He never called me Paul. Since his cry of grief at my bedside, he had never brought up the accident again. This good man, who had worked so hard all his life and who could not understand where I was going or why, was wise and generous enough not to stand in my way. And not to add to the burden he knew I was already bearing.

school, now on his path to a bachelor's degree and the Montgomery Ward training program or some other equally high calling. I would marry a nice Catholic girl—a certified virgin for sure—and settle down in one of those three-bedroom split-level homes with attached garage that were the ultimate American dream.

I adroitly fabricated a new persona and began to envision quite clearly my place in the world as an educated, thinking, middle-class college student. When other students said their fathers were “in” real estate or insurance or manufacturing, suddenly Paul Wilkes Sr., a workaday carpenter, was “in” construction. I hadn’t been raised in the Slovak ghetto of St. Benedict’s parish, but in “the Shaker Square area,” which, although it was only eight-tenths of a mile away from our proletariat crossroads of East 116th and Buckeye Road, could just as well have been on another planet. I talked about summer vacations I had never taken, food I had never tasted, cars never driven, a circle of friends I never had. It was a thin and fragile—a much too thin and fragile—patina of deceit.

I soon realized that the economics of college life for someone like me were brutal. This was not a case of having to get a little part-time job to buy life’s niceties or to pay for a spring break visit to the beach at Fort Lauderdale. This was about the primitive need for shelter and food. I had just turned eighteen years old, and I was on my own. The early days of my “Student Social Calendar” are filled with notations of college mixers, visits to women’s dorm open houses, a picnic, and a “Variety Show.” Then the boxes go blank, except for where I proclaimed how drunk I got, followed the next day by the triumphal hangover I had earned.

In the afternoons, as my fellow students drank cherry Cokes and listened to Pat Boone in the student union, reliving the weekend past and planning the next, I got on the bus, traveling to another Milwaukee that few of them knew, or cared to know. It was the Milwaukee of grit and belching chimneys, sweat and steel-roed boots. In one of my classes, I was reading Zola’s *Germinal*, and I realized that was exactly the world I was entering. A common laborer with no skills, I was offering my back and my hands to any bidder.

There was no clamoring for the likes of me, so I took the lowest-paying jobs, stocking shelves at a Wells Street grocery store for minimum wage, \$1.00 an hour; emptying bedpans and mopping floors as an orderly at St. Joseph’s Hospital for \$1.25; running a drill press at Milwaukee Electric Tool, hour after hour, efficiently turning out the same casing, my mind anaesthetized with the dullness. But for \$1.60 an hour, I wasn’t complaining. With strips of leather lashed to the palms of my hands to prevent them from being shredded by the razor-sharp edges of fifty-pound