

Prologue  
1970

I'm as good as dead.

On July first, in a shameful, and shameless, televised event, a bloodless bureaucrat from the Defense Department turned the crank on a translucent drum filled with 365 plastic balls, each inscribed with a day of the year. With the indifference of a bored bingo caller at a nursing home, he plucked balls from the drum and called out the dates. In living rooms across the country, nervous families waited in anticipation to hear their nineteen-year-old sons' birthdates and draft order.

The forty-second ball bore my birthday, June fourth, a draft number so low it left no room for hope or optimism. But I continued to watch, drawn to the drama like a rubbernecker passing a car wreck. I tried to imagine at what point in the drawings boys barely old enough to shave would feel safe. Signing off the program, the bureaucrat left no doubt. Like tuna snagged in a net, nineteen-year-olds with the first one hundred twenty-five birthdays drawn would be conscripted to fight a war in a third-world country few can find on a map.

Four days later, a terse draft notice—when and where to report—landed in my mailbox.

What had been a grassfire in 1966, when my brother was drafted, has become an inextinguishable conflagration now that I'm in the government's crosshairs. Nearly two million Americans have served in Vietnam and some fifty thousand have returned from the war in body bags, and yet more troops are needed because we are losing the war.

*Vietnamization* is a political PR stunt but not a reality in the jungles and valleys where more than 335,000 U.S. troops continue to fight. Nixon promised to withdraw 150,000 troops over the course of twelve months, which stoked some optimism among draft-aged men, then reversed himself a month later and terminated deferments for fatherhood, agriculture, and critical occupations, tightening the noose around young men's necks. In Paris, Kissinger conducts a futile

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negotiation with the North Vietnamese who refuse to bend to our will. I hope Henry enjoys the croissants and foie gras while America's innocent youth eat C-rations.

I had no money of my own for college and qualified for a mere pittance in financial aid as my family had the means to fund my education. Mom said Dad had mellowed, and encouraged me to ask for college tuition, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of denying me.

Desperate, I traipsed from one military recruiting office to another seeking a way to avoid the dehumanizing Army, jungle rot, and Viet Cong bullets. But the smart draft-dodgers had beaten me to the punch. The allotments for the National Guard, the Coast Guard, and the Navy were full for months to come. Thoughts of defecting to Canada crossed my mind, but I had neither the courage nor the conviction to become a political refugee.

My last hope for a reprieve was the Air Force, which I heard was still taking recruits. I arrived early and was second in line with no one behind me when the door opened. Accustomed to the routine, I filled out the application while the recruiter huddled with the other boy behind a cubicle privacy wall. Posters depicting smiling airmen lined the walls, and scale models of airplanes hung from the ceiling. When the boy left with a look of disappointment on his face, I took his seat across the gray metal desk from the Air Force recruiter.

In his sky-blue uniform, this recruiter appeared less formal and less pompous than the other recruiters, but like them, his job had become as easy as selling ice cubes in Hell.

"Look," he said, hands folded on my application papers stacked in front of him, "the only way you can avoid the Army, Eddie, is to be on active duty in another branch of service before your reporting date. That isn't going to happen in any routine way."

I wondered what he meant by "in any routine way." Was he looking for a bribe? I had some knowledge of bribes.

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“I always intended to join the Air Force after high school, but I waited too long. This next semester I was set to enroll in a college and join the Air Force ROTC program.” That was a lie.

Sighing, he reluctantly lifted my application off his desk and perused it.

“High school grades were great. You should be in college.”

“Long story.” With a hand gesture I urged the recruiter to keep reading.

He glanced at more pages and whistled. “Your IQ score of 143 is impressive. That’s genius territory.”

*A genius wouldn't make the mistakes I've made.*

Dad once told me wealthy men found substitutes to fight in the American Revolution. “Is there any way you could swap my entry date with one of your other enlistees who has more time?”

The recruiter leaned back and blew air, like a whale breaching. “No, everyone is in a crunch to get on active duty.” He tapped my application and raised his eyes to the ceiling. After a moment, he rose and peeked around the cubicle barrier to see if anyone else was in the office. Then he looked back at me as though he were sizing me up to marry his daughter. “I do have one trick up my sleeve, and you may be the first guy who is smart enough to make it work. It’s simple and yet the guys who’ve tried it, screwed it up.”

I slid forward in my chair, willing to listen to any scheme that could keep me from carrying a rifle.

The recruiter explained that there are 120 questions on the Armed Forces Qualification Test, and I would need a score between thirty-one and forty to be a Cat IV, a category of marginal draftees who get spread around the four branches of service. “The Army will take some Cat IVs and dump the rest on the Marines unless the Navy or Air Force wants a particular draftee.” He promised to pick me off the pile if I was willing to engage in a little subterfuge.

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“I should be able to find forty questions I can answer.”

“Good luck.”

No trick, no ruse, no lie is too shameful or unpatriotic a tactic to avoid this war. I'll try the recruiter's scheme to wiggle out of Nixon's noose—I call it the do-or-die gambit—but, after arriving at the Armed Forces Entrance and Examining Station in Milwaukee today, doubt, fear, and anxiety have returned in full force. There are no identifying markings on this foreboding, low-slung brick building, and the windows are darkly tinted so the public can't witness what's done to boys as they become fungible government assets.

I should be at a college studying English Literature but instead, I'm standing in formation, naked, among twenty-odd white Wisconsin farm boys and a couple dozen Black city kids. The Black kids are defiant, slouching, eyes challenging, certain they're subjects of discrimination. The farm boys are stoic, shoulders back, eyes unblinking. I'm merely scared.

The white-coated medical staff measured our height and weight, checked our eyesight and hearing, listened to our hearts and lungs. Now a man I presume is a doctor makes his way down my line, cupping the genitals of each draftee in his latex-gloved hand, asking him to cough. Sometimes twice. The doctor spins each kid around, bends him over, and probes his anus. Like a blacksmith checking a horse's hoofs, the doctor lifts each leg and examines the arches of each foot.

A few kids are excused on the spot.

My heart races as I gulp air in anticipation of my turn. The one consolation is that it happens to all of us. After I'm prodded and poked, the doctor moves on with a grunt and a sigh. I'm healthy enough to die in combat.

An Army sergeant orders us to put our street clothes back on, then herds us into a large auditorium like cattle going to slaughter. We are told to sit at grammar school desks and ordered

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not to touch the written exam or the No. 2 pencils that have been positioned on each desktop. My co-conspirator, the Air Force recruiter, is in the room as promised.

If my gambit to evade the Army doesn't work, Dad will be relieved that I'll be sent far away, no longer a ghostly specter preening on the moral high ground, silently condemning his transgressions. When Dad heard of my draft notice, he called it karma, poetic justice for what I did to him and my brother in 1966.

More eloquently, T. S. Eliot said, "The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason."

Chapter One  
1966

“How do I look?” Mom spun around in the kitchen like a runway model. Tall and shapely, with dishwater blonde hair in a bouffant style, she wore a navy dress with large white buttons down the front, matching heels, and a coquettish smile.

Carla, my baby sister, jumped out of her chair and squealed with delight. Her blue eyes lit up as she lunged toward Mom with her gangly arms outstretched for a hug.

Mom held her away with both hands. “Don’t crush me. Just tell me how I look.”

Abashed, Carla stopped. “You’re pretty, Mama.” She sat back at the table where we’d been playing Fish because Carla had to be entertained twenty-four by seven.

“Eddie?” Mom cocked her head waiting for my assessment.

“Stunning, Mom. Dazzling. Absolutely ravishing.”

“I love being ravishing.” She chortled. “You always use big, sophisticated words. The best your father can say is ‘nice.’ Where’s Danny?”

As though she had conjured a rabbit from a hat, Danny burst into the kitchen and dodged Mom, heading for the back door. At six foot two, with an athletic build and curly black hair, Danny

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was a lady killer. In his Navy pictures, Dad's hair had been curly. Mine was straight and flat as a ironing board. Everything about Danny was carelessly, casually perfect from his hair to his teeth to his smile to his cheekbones and dimples. When Mom and Dad made Danny, they got it right, like a tastefully decorated room or an artfully arranged flower garden. They did well with Carla, too. She was cute now and later would be pretty. I was plain as white bread.

“Where are you going?” Mom asked Danny.

He stopped, a dumbfounded look on his face, no excuse on the tip of his tongue. It took him a minute to come up with, “Jimmy is picking me up on the corner.”

“On the corner? He can't come to our house?”

“Faster this way.” He reached for the back door handle.

“Can you at least comment on how I look?”

Turning back, he said, “You look nice, Mom.” He dashed out the door.

Mom sighed. “Oh, well, I'll knock 'em dead tonight.”

Dad emerged from the bathroom with his black hair slicked back like Jimmy Cagney. His cardigan sweater and dress shirt made him look friendly and casually superior. In her heels, Mom stood a bit taller than Dad. My siblings and I got our height from Mom's side of the family.

Dad grabbed Mom's elbow and shepherded her toward the back door. “We're running late, Kat.” Mom's full name was Abigail Katherine Jaeger Kovacs but Dad called her “Kat” when he was feeling lovey-dovey. Or irritated. Otherwise, he and everyone else called her “Gail.”

Two Saturdays a month, Dad and Mom went barhopping at the places where mill workers did their drinking. He called it a date night. Mom complained that Dad ignored her as he discussed union politics and contracts to win the workers' votes. But the nights on the town gave Mom a chance to primp and flirt and drink as much as she could get away with. Dad's Saturday night

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campaigning had propelled him from union secretary to vice president and then to president of the union. I wondered how many drinks he bought to get the votes.

As they left by the backdoor, Dad shouted, "I'll drive you home when we get back, Abby."

Last I knew, my maternal grandmother was snoozing in the living room recliner. Whenever my parents were away, Gram—that's what Carla and I called her—stayed with us. She could have played Mrs. Santa Claus in TV commercials. Pleasingly plump with permed gray hair, a round face and a jolly disposition, she was my favorite person on earth. I didn't need babysitting, but Carla was only eight and a handful. Gram spent those nights getting up to change the television channels for Carla, adjusting the rabbit ears for Carla, refilling Carla's soda, and prodding Carla to take a bath. Mom spoiled Carla so she was a silly little brat.

After finishing my favorite Saturday night dinner of hotdogs and potato chips that Gram always prepared, I retreated to my bedroom. Originally, our house was a two-bedroom, one-bath house, in a tract of cheap starter homes built on farmland south of the Fox River. Over the years Dad finished both the upstairs and the basement, walling off a den and a space for a pool table in the basement, and installing a Jack-and-Jill bathroom between two bedrooms upstairs in what had been intended to be an attic. I had the first bedroom at the top of the stairs, so I could always hear Danny tromping past my room after a night out with friends who had cars.

I grabbed *To Kill a Mockingbird* off my bedside table and sat in my ratty easy chair under a photo of John, Paul, George, and Ringo. The novel was required reading for my advanced English class. If my book report knocked the socks off Sister Mary Clare, I could finish first in the program, ahead of the weird girl in the other eighth-grade classroom.



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Our house was set deep in our lot, back from the street, so the window beside my chair offered a view of half-a-dozen neighboring backyards. As the sun set, shadows grew behind the houses and the neighbors headed indoors.

To get in the mood to read, I tuned my transistor radio to WOKY in Milwaukee to listen to the British rock bands that dominated the Billboard charts. I loved growing up in Appleton, a city big enough to have one of everything, yet small enough and safe enough to be navigated by teenagers on bicycles. Our bikes were our license to roam the city, free of our parents' supervision, but learning to ride a bike had been a harrowing experience. Holding onto my seat, Dad tugged left and right throwing me off balance and held me back when he couldn't keep up with me. My elbows and knees bore the scars of many falls. Danny hadn't required any help when he got his first bike, so Dad blamed my lack of athletic coordination and threatened to return my bike to the store. When our cousin Louie came to visit and heard the story he volunteered to do the teaching and within minutes, I was riding like a pro. Cousin Louie never let my dad forget his failure.

When Gram gave me the radio for my tenth birthday, I was introduced to a huge and vibrant new world that someday I wanted to experience firsthand and riding a bike around town became a temporary pastime.

I adjusted the antenna and set the radio on the windowsill for better reception. While Dad read the local newspaper to keep up with the news, I listened to far-flung radio stations to learn the happenings in the rest of the world. Most nights I fell asleep with the radio pinned between my ear and the pillow.

Now I was ready to dig into the assignment. I'm a fast reader, so I quickly devoured the first half of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. We weren't rich like some people on the north side of our town; we were on the dividing line between poor and middle-class, like the Finch family in the

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novel. Jem was about my age and his sister, Scout, was close to Carla's age, but I identified with Scout and thought she was a lot like me. I admired Atticus. If I hadn't planned to be a priest, I'd have wanted to be a lawyer.

I stood and stretched and moved around my room to get the circulation going. I had a lot left to read in a book Mom thought offensive.

"I can't believe they make you read a book with the word "nigger" on every page. In a Catholic school, for Christ's sake."

"That's the way they talk down there," Dad had said. "You saw the demonstrations in Selma on the news."

"They attacked the Negroes with dogs and fire hoses. What kind of animals are those Southerners? We should have let those states secede."

I stifled a laugh at Mom's simplistic solution; had the states seceded the plight of the Negro would be even worse. "Sister Mary Clare says her advanced class is mature enough to read classic literature." I was proud to be trusted with a book that had been banned in some schools. I shouldn't have bragged about it to my parents.

"We should control what the teachers assign," Dad said.

"They're not real teachers," Mom snapped. "They're just nuns."

I was accustomed to my parents' occasional railing against the Catholic school. They felt the tuition they paid was both exorbitant and a license to criticize the school.

I sat back down in my chair and picked up where I left off. As I read the part where Tom the Negro was to be put on trial, I feared his predictable conviction. I laid my head back and imagined the various ways in which this story might end. I liked to do that—guess the ending before the author unveiled it—and I was often right.

In my peripheral vision I sensed motion, something outside in the dark. I switched off the lamp for better night vision and waited for my eyes to adjust. There! A man crept through the nearest neighbor's backyard. Comically bent at the waist, he took long, slow strides toward our house, bobbing up and down like an overgrown insect. He stopped and peeked around the side of the neighbor's house, then broke into a run and leaped over the hedges lining our driveway. I lost sight of him as he moved toward the house and then I heard the screen door squeak. No longer a laughing matter, I grabbed a baseball bat and moved to the top of the stairs.

My heart pounding in my chest, I was ready to dash down the stairs to protect Gram.

"You're home early," Gram said.

"Not much going on tonight." I recognized Danny's voice and relief washed over me.

Danny was the giant insect.

"How did you get home?"

"Jimmy dropped me off."

*He's lying*, I wanted to yell.

"I didn't hear a car."

"Been sayin' it for a while, Gram. You're losin' it. Jimmy's car is noisy as hell."

Danny hadn't been out with Jimmy. As Danny hurried up the stairs, I hustled back into my room. Soon, I heard the water run in our shared bathroom, Danny washing away the evidence of his secret activities.

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Danny slept in most Sunday mornings, so I had the bathroom to myself. After showering, I worked Brylcreem into my hair—a little dab'll do ya—and styled it. I wanted to imitate the lead singer of Jay and the Americans, so I parted my hair on the left, built a small pompadour in front, and swept

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both sides back. A square face with high cheekbones and a slight Asian tilt to the eyes nodded its approval in the mirror. Danny and I inherited Dad's brown eyes and facial features while Mom had blessed Carla with an egg-shaped face and blue eyes. We could have been mistaken for two different families.

I slipped into my gray flannel dress slacks, a checked shirt, and black penny loafers. I was ready for church. Dad was ready for church, too. He owned two suits and wore them on alternating Sundays. This Sunday he wore the charcoal gray tweed over a white shirt and a flashy red tie that looked like an impressionist painting. He handed Carla the two pancakes he had cooked for her and passed her the Aunt Jemima syrup.

"I'm running late," Dad said to me. "You'll have to fend for yourself."

"Don't worry about me, Dad. I'm self-sufficient."

"Don't burn the house down."

He grabbed his black fedora, the one with the red feather in the band, and left through the back door.

I moved to the front room and watched him prance down the street, head high, a proud grin on his face. He wanted the neighbors to know he was somebody important but his black, grease-encrusted nail beds belied his social status. His desperate, almost pathetic hunger for admiration made me feel sorry for him.

Dad was an usher who escorted the elderly and the infirm to their pews, and later, at the designated time during the Mass, he and the other ushers prowled the aisles and stretched their long-handled wicker baskets down each row collecting the parishioners' contributions. The peer pressure to place hard-earned cash in the basket caused everyone to cough up a couple of bucks.

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The money piled up fast since St. Catherine's Catholic Church conducted six Sunday Masses, standing room only.

There were four Catholic parishes in Appleton and more in the surrounding towns of Menasha and Little Chute so I had the impression that most everyone was Catholic. When John F. Kennedy ran for President, I was surprised to learn that Catholics were a minority in America and regarded as strange and perhaps dangerous. Nixon supporters warned voters the Pope would rule America if JFK were elected. That's funny. I never once heard the Pope mentioned in our house. I doubt Mom and Dad knew the Pope's name was Paul VI. When Kennedy was assassinated, the pride we had felt over the ascension of a Catholic to the White House was vanquished, and I wondered if he had been murdered because he was a Catholic.

In the kitchen Carla was eating a frosted doughnut from the dozen Mom had bought on Saturday. She hadn't eaten the pancakes Dad made for her. "You're going to get fat," I chided her.

"Like you?"

I sucked in my stomach. "I'm not a shrimp like you. Where's Mom?"

Her mouth full, Carla jerked a thumb toward the window that overlooked the backyard.

Mom was at the picnic table, still in her bathrobe, drinking coffee and smoking a Winston.

"I don't suppose Mom would go to church with me."

"She never goes the morning after date night." Carla had the insight of a precocious child.

"You should come to church with me."

"I only go when Mom goes. You know that."

Carla attended the public grammar school rather than the Catholic school where I was a student so she was in danger of growing up without any religious training at all.

"We can only afford one privileged child," Mom had said about my Catholic schooling.

Out the back door I walked around the stacks of Sunday newspapers, tied with twine, lying in our driveway. Usually, I delivered papers before serving as an altar boy at a later Mass, but this Sunday I had a special role to play in an earlier Mass. The papers would have to wait.

After months of frigid temperatures and calf-deep snow, I basked in the gentle sunshine as I paused in front of our house. In a neighborhood of wood frame houses, our faux brick exterior, accented by brown and yellow shutters, was distinctive, but not as impressive as the eggshell white, two-story home beside us. That house sat on Danny's side of our house and blocked the view from his single window and provided the seclusion he wanted in the back bedroom. That house marked the boundary of my parents' neighborhood. They did not associate with the Lutherans who lived farther north.

Five blocks later, I passed the elementary school with its black-topped playground, the rectory where the priests lived, and the wood-frame convent that housed our nuns. Around the corner, I reached the front of the church. Like the rectory and the school, the church was constructed of near-white limestone bricks, and stood two stories tall, topped by a masonry cross. Beneath the cross, four large stained-glass windows rose above two massive brown oaken doors that might have dated to Medieval times. I went into the vestibule and up to a marble font. I pressed my fingers to a sponge to release holy water and made the sign of the cross.

The 8:45 Mass was nearly over. The choir in the loft above me was singing a final hymn. To the right, I entered a small office.

"You're not allowed in here." Dad sat at a table, covered in collection money. He stacked the coins and bills according to denomination and recorded the amounts on a white tablet. As the parish treasurer, Dad collected, counted, recorded, and eventually deposited the Sunday collections. The Sunday collections were the lifeblood of the church.

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“Sorry, just wanted to let you know I’m playing a special part in the next Mass. In case you want to watch.”

“I know what altar boys do.” He didn’t look up as he tossed bills onto their proper stacks, like a Blackjack dealer distributing cards.

“Today is different, I’m giving the sermon.” I waited for some sign of pride in his son.

His head jerked up in surprise. “You’re giving a sermon?”

My face flushed with heat. I had overstated my role. “I’m reading a script. Only about five minutes long.”

“Doesn’t sound like a big deal.” He shooed me away with a backhanded wave.

*I’ll bet he’d drop everything and drive a hundred miles to watch Danny take one swing at a baseball.*

Like a salmon swimming upstream, I wound my way up the broad center aisle, against the flow of modestly dressed neighbors who had done their Sunday duty. I marveled at the beauty of our stained-glass windows, the stations of the cross down the outside aisles, the hand-carved wooden doors on the confessionals, and the twenty-foot-tall sculpture of Christ on a cross above our altar. I felt at home in my church.

I took the steps up to the sacristy where the priests and altar boys dressed in their vestments. The two altar boys from the previous Mass smiled as they scurried out the side door. Monsignor Muller, a grumpy old man, and the senior pastor for our parish, was disrobing. *Good*, I thought, *I won’t have to deal with that curmudgeon*. A sixth grader named Kenny filled wine cruets. He would be my assistant altar boy.

“After you take those cruets out to the sanctuary, you can light the altar candles,” I told Kenny. He nodded and went about his business.

As I dressed in a red cassock and white surplice, Sister Mary Alice and Father Ronald Bauer entered the sacristy.

“Ready for your big day?” The priest’s cheeks were rosy-red, as though he’d just run a mile.

“Yes, Father.”

He handed me three typed pages. “That’s what you’ll read for the sermon today. I’ll introduce you and then let you have the pulpit.”

I was excited about speaking to the audience but butterflies stirred in my stomach. “Thanks, Father.” I moved out of his way and had a look at what I would read.

Sister Mary Alice helped Father Bauer into a white and gold chasuble and stole. I had never seen a nun help a priest before, and Father Bauer certainly didn’t need help. He was the youngest and “coolest” of our priests, blond and blue-eyed with the body of a football running back, and Sister Mary Alice, who taught second grade, was the youngest and “coolest” of our nuns. My friends and I often speculated about what Sister Mary Alice looked like under her black tunic and veil. All we could see were laughing green eyes and smooth, clear skin, but she was often the subject of young boys’ fantasies.

While Father Bauer polished the bejeweled, gold chalice, and loaded a silver platter with round, white wafers, I read the speech I was to give. The point of the sermon was clear—the church needed more money to fund the food bank. Every Tuesday, poor parishioners stood in line to get a box of food.

At precisely 10:00, Kenny and I led Father Bauer to the altar and Mass began. At the point where the priest normally spoke to the congregants, Father Bauer escorted me to the pulpit.



“Today, the sermon will be given by our senior altar boy, Eddie Kovacs. This is good practice for Eddie as he is going to the seminary this fall to start his journey to become a priest.”

Murmurs rose from the crowd; welcoming smiles and positive nods greeted me. Father Bauer had advised me to look directly at the clock above the rear doors of the church rather than at the parishioners, to keep from getting nervous. I didn't look at the clock. I searched the crowd for Dad but he was nowhere in sight.

Bennie, the biggest boy in my class, and his sidekick, scrawny Jerry, stood behind the last pew. Jerry stuck out his tongue at me. Bennie stuck his thumbs in his ears and wagged his fingers.

After the “sermon,” I bowed my head. “Let us pray.” The parishioners bowed their heads as I read a preprinted prayer. Leading six hundred people in prayer produced a powerful jolt of pride within me. “Stick to praying, Eddie. It's what you're good at,” Dad had said. For thirty seconds I felt as important as him.

Back in the sacristy, Father Bauer patted Kenny and me on our shoulders. “Good job, boys.”

I told Kenny he could go. I returned to the sanctuary to extinguish the altar candles and saw that Bennie and Jerry were loitering in the vestibule.

As Father Bauer and I disrobed, he said, “Monsignor Muller wants to see you once a week until you leave for the seminary. His idea is sort of a class to prepare you for the priesthood.”

*Oh, no.* “Thank you, Father. How will I know when he wants to see me?”

“We'll let your father know.”

Two more altar boys and Father MacMillan entered the sacristy to dress for the next Mass, and Father Bauer hurried away. I made sure these boys knew their roles and that everything was set for the next Mass. To evade Bennie and Jerry, I left through the side door that led to a path

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between the convent and the rectory. In the garden behind the convent, Father Bauer and Sister Mary Alice strolled shoulder-to-shoulder, deep in conversation. When I stepped into view, they separated in haste and their clasped hands, hidden by the folds of her habit and his cassock, parted in midair. Sister Mary Alice looked like a doe caught unawares in the forest, ready to bolt for cover. Father Bauer sheepishly waved.