



The Man Who Loved Too Much

Book 1: Archipelago

John Rachel



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Chapter One

[Sample Excerpt]

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Chapter One

THE EARLY YEARS

1986 – 1995

Balloons

It was an especially cold Thanksgiving on Woodward Avenue in Detroit. Today was the annual Thanksgiving Day Parade and the crowd alternated between shivering and cheering. People shuffled and stomped, attempting to keep their feet from freezing. Gusts of steamy cold blew from their dripping noses and through clenched teeth.

Suddenly Billy started screaming. “My balloon!! My Balloon!!”

“Harold, do something. His balloon!”

“Goddammit, Irene. Do I look like I have wings? It’s too late.”

Up up it went. The string had slipped from Billy’s grasp and the balloon was off to wherever balloons go. The stratosphere? Balloon heaven?

“You stupid little fuck. I told you to let me tie it to your wrist. But you’re so goddamn smart. See what happens when you don’t listen.”

Billy’s face instantly melted into a chastened mask of humiliation and defeat, as he started to cry like his puppy had been crushed under a bus.

“Nice work, Harold. Give the kid a complex. Let’s find a vendor and get him another one.”

“Over my dead body! He’ll learn something from this. Next time something is so goddamn important to him as that there balloon ...” Harold jerked his thumb skyward at the latex dot which was all but invisible by now. “... maybe he’ll take better care of it.”

“Jesus Christ, he’s only three. How could I have married such a heartless man? Come here, sweetheart.” She reached down and picked up the heartbroken and tremulously sobbing young boy, face streaked and blotchy, mittens wet with the fresh tears of tragedy.

Another parade float approached and would soon be right in front of them.

She pointed. “Look, Billy. Look at the dinosaur.”

Sure enough, big as a moving van, bloated with helium, tethered to the 8-wheel steel flatbed of a float frame covered with artificial turf, and looking about as realistic as cardboard and crayons, was a Tyrannosaurus Rex. Its mouth was agape in what was supposed to be a scary, imminent man-devouring chomp. Several repairs were visible on the rubber underside, patches which were poorly matched in color to the skin of the faux beast. To underscore the implausibility of the threat, eight baton twirlers circled around the float, dancing, kicking their bare legs high, tossing and twirling gleaming chrome batons in the clear November air.

“Grrr!! Grrr!! Careful he doesn’t eat you up.” She tickled his cheek with her wool-gloved finger and tried to elicit a smile.

Billy had already stopped crying and just looked confused. He seemed more interested in the baton twirlers than the gas bag monster.

Next came a landlocked riverboat float, bearing the Flint Banjo Club players. This was their historic parade debut and they enthusiastically picked and twanged their way through various Dixieland and bluegrass favorites to a crowd which almost seemed to notice. Two mounted policemen followed, their horses snorting and blowing foggy jets from their wet nostrils.

"Harold, I need to powder my nose. Can you take him?" Giving her husband no real choice in the matter, she abruptly reached over and pushed the boy up against his father's chest.

"Mommy, I have to—"

"Just sit tight, Billy. Mommy will be right back."

"But, Mom ..."

His father took Billy, obviously under protest, and slung him up on his shoulders. The boy completely caught off guard by the sudden and heavy-handed move, grabbed on desperately to keep from falling, wrapping his arms tightly around his father's neck.

"Easy! Easy! You don't have to choke me to death."

Billy knew better than to try to talk to him and just settled in an uncomfortable slump against his father's head. Before she had left, he was trying to tell his mom that he had to pee. But she was off to find a ladies room and it would have to wait until she got back.

He had to go. Really bad.

To make matters worse, his father was bouncing him. Whether this was to entertain Billy or just to try to stay warm was a moot point. The pressure of the full kidneys built quickly and all Billy could do was concentrate on holding it in. He couldn't even look at the parade floats. He closed his eyes and bit on his lower lip. The critical pressure in his groin quickly intensified. He clamped his legs together as hard as he could against the urgent and painful need for release.

"What the fuck are you doing up there? This ain't no wrestling match. Back off with the leg lock."

His dad reached up under Billy's arms and shook him to drive home his point. That was all it took for the dam to burst. Billy let out a tiny whimpering cry. Then silence. He tried to stop it but his urethral valve was open and it wasn't about to be turned off until the job was done.

At first Billy's father only noticed a slight increase in the temperature around and below the collar of his coat. Then he felt the wetness and sensed the faint odor of the boy's young discharge.

"Is that what I think it is? You little shit!"

Billy was swallowed whole by shame and fear. He fought desperately to keep from crying and covered his face with both hands as his father roughly lifted him off and held him out in front of him to confirm his worst suspicions. Billy was still going. Pee dripped from the bottom of his wet trousers, past his shoes, onto the pavement.

Billy's father was fast to act. Still holding Billy at arms length, he turned around and headed away from the street, towards the public restrooms, just as

Billy's mom was making her way back to join them.

At first she was puzzled at the way Harold was carrying the boy, then terrified by the look on her husband's face. Obviously something had gone very wrong.

"I asked for a son and you gave me this piece of trash."

She tried to grab for Billy, both to rescue him from his father's rage and offer him whatever comfort might be needed. But Harold was too quick. He muscled past her and walked over to a large wire trash basket, already nearly full of newspapers, crumpled lunch bags and food wrappings.

He dropped Billy in head first and stormed away.

"Billy! Billy!"

She was there within seconds.

"Are you all right? My poor little boy! My poor little boy!" She fought back her tears and tried to hide her anger, though the back of her eyes were angry hot embers and an ache for her abused little boy filled her chest with sulfurous pangs. As she reached down and uprighted Billy, she saw his wet pants and realized what had happened. She immediately drew him into the kind of hug that only a mother can provide a frightened child, covering his cheeks and head with kisses.

"It's alright. It's alright, my sweet handsome young man."

The cushioning of the paper refuse already stuffed in the wastebasket had broken Billy's plunge. He wasn't hurt. No bruises. No scratches. Surprisingly, he wasn't crying. He just blinked and stared off in the direction his father had taken.

Then he turned and whispered. "Can we watch the parade?"

"We probably should get you some new pants. Looks like you ran through the lawn sprinklers while I was gone."

To take advantage of the masses of people attending the event, several stores were open for business, though it was a national holiday. His mom carried Billy into two clothing shops and they found some jeans he really liked. The new pants were a little big on him but at least they were warm and dry.

By the time they returned to the parade route, things were reaching a climactic conclusion. This, of course, was the arrival of none other than Santa Claus himself, on a motorized sled drawn by unmoving reindeer figures, deer-in-the-headlights gazes epoxied into their eyes, with the biggest reindeer celebrity of them all, red-nosed Rudolph himself, in the lead.

Billy's eyes widened as the Santa float approached. Within minutes, there he was right in front of them, the man with the giant belly, rosy cheeks, red and white fur-trimmed suit, and a huge white beard which flowed down on his chest like angel hair. Santa laughed his deep, sonorous 'ho ho ho' and waved like a prom queen to the excited children and conspiratorial adults who were bonded together in a special covenant to perpetuate and promote the Santa myth, just as their parents had done before them.

When Santa had passed and only the top of his waving arm could be seen over the high back of his red and gold sled, Billy finally lowered his own tiny hand and let it hang at his side.

Lost in thought, Billy watched his own fidgeting hands, then looked up at his mom.

“Mommy. Can Santa bring me a new dad?”

The Boy in the Bubble

Billy didn't get his Christmas wish. Harold was there to stay.

Irene realized that as a companion and father, her husband lacked everything. On the other hand, he was a good provider, something Irene's generation and someone from her working class background valued a great deal. She couldn't remember the Harold who had courted her, the young man she had fallen in love with. The Harold she ended up with was certainly not what she had bargained for. But he did provide a decent house to live in and kept food on the table. She had cast her lot with him and that was that. She would stand by him and stick it out till the bitter end.

That's what you did.

Billy was an only child. Small favors from a busy God. Of course, it probably had more to do with the fact that Harold and Irene never had sex anymore, and hadn't from the time they found out she was pregnant with Billy, than with intervention at a divine level.

The good news was that, lacking any other children and anything other than a token presence by her mate, Irene could lavish all of her attention on her beautiful young boy, carving out a protective cocoon, and creating a world in their home within which Billy could grow up and, if her maternal fantasies were fully realized, blossom into a sensitive, loving person.

That's exactly what she did.

However he turned out, Irene was determined that Billy would be a much more fully functioning human being than his father, which admittedly wasn't setting the bar very high. In point of fact, she looked far beyond the Neanderthal benchmark set by her husband, and had rather ambitious and idealized notions of how she wanted her son to turn out.

Billy seemed to have a good head start from the get-go. He came out of the womb with his eyes open and was too busy gawking at a nurse to cry when the obstetrician whacked him on the butt. He just stretched his arms and gave a what's-the-big-deal yawn as they cut the umbilical cord and de-slimed him. The doctor said it was just a gas bubble coming out of his empty little tummy, but Irene swears to this day that Billy smiled at her the instant he laid his eyes on her. Closer observation would have noted it was the instant he laid eyes on her breasts. Whatever the key aspect of his enchantment, it was obvious he loved his mom.

As a baby, he rarely fussed and was delightfully easy to take care of. Irene could never remember Billy having a tantrum, and even his “terrible twos” were more tender than trying. On the whole, Billy was remote and pensive, never demanding, seeming to always either be daydreaming or completely and curiously fixated on some activity of the moment. Irene surely couldn't complain. Billy was a better companion in these pre-school years than her husband was in these middle years or, for that matter, most of their marriage.

During these early years, she got the greatest satisfaction in coddling and cuddling her boy, watching him grow day by day, becoming a “little person”. He

was a very quick learner, and by the time he was four was reading at the level of a 2nd or 3rd grader. Billy also could add and subtract, was already starting to learn to multiply and divide, and could even count up beyond a thousand. He had a good sense of humor and caught most adults off guard with quirky come-backs when they patronizingly talked to him as they typically would a 4-year old.

Billy became fascinated with playing cards and loved to watch when his mom had friends over in the afternoon to play Euchre, their favorite card game. One day he asked if he could play.

Betty Buskirk, a matronly blimp of an ex-nurse from across the street was utterly charmed. "Isn't that cute? Let the little tyke play, Irene. Has he got any money?"

They all clucked and smiled.

But by the end of two weeks, the smiles became a little bit forced, as he methodically cleaned them all out of their precious pennies. Billy just kept on winning and grinning.

"Is it my deal, mom?"

Despite the commonly heard mantra that winning isn't everything, that it's playing the game that's the fun, the joys of their daily Euchre games started to dwindle along with their reserves of pocket change. The chuckling waned and conversations became thin. Gradually, as their losses mounted, the damage this "high-stakes gambling" might be doing to the development of this precocious boy became the new urgent concern and replaced their long-vanished delight in letting Billy participate in grown-up fun.

Farrah the anorexic cat woman: "I'm wondering, Irene, if this is good for him."

Billy: "Trump."

Carol who had lost both of her ovaries and her uterus to cancer: "This could make him an addict, a compulsive gambler. It's how it starts, you know."

Billy: "King takes it."

Lucia in the middle of her third divorce: "Doesn't he have a cartoon show to watch?"

Billy: "My hand."

Irene: "He's just having fun. Don't be such sore losers."

Even at four, Billy could take a hint. He sensed in his precocious little mind that his card-playing days with mom and her friends had now come to an end. He gathered his coins and put them in a little leather pouch he had found in his father's toolbox.

"Thanks so much for letting me play. Aunt Lucia, Aunt Carol, Auntie Farrah and Aunt Betty. I think I'm going to go now. I really want to ride my bike."

His mom looked at him puzzled.

"Billy, you don't have a bike."

Holding up the pouch. "I will soon, mom. Maybe later we could go to the bike shop to have a look."

He beat a quick retreat to his room.

"You're son is a goddamn hustler, Irene."

"I'm so proud of him."

So proud that her eyes twinkled when she watched him play in the back yard.
So proud that she gleefully dressed him like little Charlie McCarthy every Sunday for mass.

So proud that she more often than not let Billy get away with just about anything and everything.

For example ... when Billy was five.

It was the big day. The crossing of a threshold from which there was no return. A passage through the portal which held all of the possibilities of the future. A life-altering migration towards independence. The laying of a basic foundation for the self-reliance that would buttress the entirety of his adult life. One small step for a child, one big leap for Billy Green.

Today was the first day of kindergarten.

At breakfast, even Harold acknowledged there was something very special about today.

“So the big boy is going to school, eh? Good luck, Billy. Try not to shit your pants.”

As Irene watched him conquer the tall steps of the school bus, she tried her best to hide her maternal anxiety and only let her excitement show.

The entire time he was at school, she was distracted and did everything she could to keep herself busy. By noon the house had never been so clean. She kept reassuring herself that he was alright and nothing could possibly go wrong. After all, this was as normal as the sunrise. Kids all over the world went to school everyday. What could she possibly have to worry about?

It was approaching one o'clock. School would be letting out. She rushed out to the school bus stop a half-hour early, then paced like caged snow leopard.

Finally, the bus arrived and Billy was the last of eight kids to step out.

He ambled down the three tall steps and the pneumatic door closed behind him.

“How did it go Billy?”

“Fine.”

“Tell me about it.”

“It was fine.”

“Aren't you excited? Your first day at school!”

“I'm fine.”

That was it. That's all he had to say about it.

Next morning, Billy didn't get right up when his mother called. Harold had left an hour earlier and she was busy fixing eggs and cereal for Billy's breakfast. But when it was ready, no Billy.

She called again. “Come on, Billy. Time to eat. You don't want to be late.”

After a few minutes, still no Billy. So she went and peeked his room. There he was in bed, still in his pajamas, the clothes she had laid out for him on the chair untouched.

He heard her tiptoe in.

“Can't go to school today, mom. Don't feel so good.”

“Oh Billy, are you alright? Do you have a fever?” She checked his forehead and face with the back of her hand. “You don't have a fever, hon.”

“Can’t go to school today. I’ll be okay.”

“Alright. Just rest. I’ll check on you in a while. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Breakfast.”

“I’ll bring it up to you. Eggs and cereal. Your favorite.”

And so it went every day for the rest of the kindergarten year. Breakfast in bed. Hooky from school.

After a few weeks, they skipped the ritualistic feigning of illness and maternal concern. Irene was clueless as to why Billy refused to go back. Still, she never pressed the matter. Truthfully, she was pretty darn glad to have him at home. At least she didn’t have to worry about what potential evil or harm lurked out there, ready to inflict itself on her precious boy. And frankly, she really loved his company. The house had seemed abysmally empty the five hours he was in school that first day.

Billy never told his mom what had happened. He was a little embarrassed about the whole thing and just decided it was best to keep it to himself.

That one single day that Billy attended kindergarten had turned out to be a colossal disaster. The bus ride there was fun but as soon as he stepped off the bus, a miniature replica of the Incredible Hulk, who called himself The Fist, walked right up to Billy and punched him squarely in the face. Blood started gushing from his nose and Billy just lay face down in the spreading crimson puddle crying, until a teacher finally came over and rescued him. It happened to be the very same teacher who was assigned to teach Billy’s kindergarten class — Mrs. Stephens — who took him sympathetically under her wing. While her teaching assistant rounded up the rest of the wide-eyed students and gave them crayons and paper to draw, Mrs. Stephens took Billy to a small room right off the classroom where they kept supplies, books and toys. Without missing a beat, she grabbed a towel and a couple blankets.

“Here, just lie down and you’ll be alright. What’s your name?”

“Billy Green.”

“Well, Billy Green. I don’t know how this happened but let me clean you up a little bit and then we’ll take you down to see the school nurse. Okay?”

She wetted the towel and carefully and gently cleaned his face. The bleeding had stopped and fortunately none had splattered on his clothing.

“Just rest here for now. I’m going to call the school nurse. But if you feel like it, you can come out and join us. We’re drawing pictures of our favorite animals. Sound like fun?”

Actually it didn’t sound like fun. And Billy had no desire to go out there and be laughed at by all the other kids. He just stayed put and closed his eyes, imagining he was someplace else. Anywhere else would do.

Fifteen minutes went by. He heard the door open. He expected either Mrs. Stephens or a woman dressed in white with a stethoscope dangling from her neck. It turned out to be neither. It was one of his new fellow kindergarteners.

“Hi. I’m Veronica. I’m a nurse.”

“No you’re not.”

“Well, let’s make-believe then. Me and my friends play doctor-nurse all the

time. Want to?"

"I guess. I'm not doing anything right now. How do you play?"

"First, I need to examine you. Take off your pants."

"Take off my pants? Are you sure?"

"That's how we play. Now take them off."

Billy timidly did as he was instructed, then lay back down. Veronica reached over and tugged at his underpants.

"These too. Take them off. Come on."

Billy very slowly slid his J. C. Penney undies down to his knees. Veronica started giggling. Then she reached over and held Billy's penis delicately between her thumb and index finger.

"I don't have one of these. Wanna see?"

Billy had never given the matter any thought. Ever before. Not even once. But for some reason, right now, he *did* want to see. He really *really* wanted to see. It seemed as urgent as life and death.

"Okay."

First Veronica reached under her little play dress and removed her panties. Then very slowly and with a mixture of shyness and double-double-dare-me teasing, started to lift her dress.

"What's going on in here!!" Mrs. Stephens stood aghast at the spectacle of a boy with his pants down, willy hanging out, and a little female playmate doing a striptease right before her eyes, in the sanctity of her kindergarten school.

"He made me do it. He dared me, after he showed me his ... you know." Veronica started crying but it was really a stretch to believe these were real tears.

Billy was mortified, embarrassed, ashamed, angry and wishing he was invisible all at once. Now he really had a good reason for imagining he were anywhere else, in the hope he might magically be transported there.

Veronica ran out of the storeroom, leaving her little girl panties on the floor, while Billy scrambled to get decent.

Mrs. Stephens seemed confused. She looked to be in her early twenties. This had to be her first teaching job. She seemed to be weighing her options — what she should do next.

"Please get dressed. Curiosity is natural. I just wished this hadn't happened here. First day of school. Hopefully, young man, you will not in the future be making a regular habit of this. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now, why don't you come and join class and try not to cause any trouble. The nurse is not in today. You feel okay?"

"I'm fine. Thank you. You're very pretty, you know."

She wasn't. But she'd take what she could get, even if it was from a difficult 5-year old boy. She took Billy's hand and led him to his seat. He sat down and proceeded to draw his favorite animal.

It was a naked little girl.

That was Billy's first day of kindergarten.

By the time he got home, the dull pain in his face and the events in the store room weighed heavily on him. He couldn't tell his mom what had happened to

see what she thought. Definitely not an option.

What should he do? It was a tough call.

Of course, he wanted to see what the little girl had under her skirt. But by the same token, he didn't need his nose bashed in again. Billy felt confident that the ease with which the bully had used his face as a punching bag that first day had set a dangerous and easily repeated precedent. Moreover, considering how Veronica turned on him and lied, prospects of seeing "hers" were probably pretty remote.

That night after dinner, Billy went to his room and made a decision. No way was he going back to that school. He would do whatever he needed to do to avoid it. But he wasn't going back. No way José!

His mom went right along. She ended up being a complicit co-conspirator to a 5-year-old skipping the entire first year of his formal education.

She knew, of course, that something had happened that first day. Frankly, it didn't matter to her what it was. She didn't have to know. What had occurred had upset Billy tremendously. A good mother trusts her child. Especially one as special and wonderful as her little Billy.

He was her beautiful blind spot.

As it turned out, Billy's kindergarten year was hardly wasted. He continued studying on his own, assisted by the tutoring of his mom. Natural curiosity and a gift for applying himself — which was way beyond his five years — meant that he never needed to be coaxed or bribed to study, or to pick up a book, or to play instructive games. Irene made regular trips to Northland, a suburban mall on the north side of Detroit, to buy every educational game, book, puzzle, toy, science kit, map, and learning aid she could afford on her limited allowance from Harold. Billy plowed through them like he was studying for the bar exam.

The upshot of all this home schooling was that by the time Billy was ready for the first grade, he probably could have taught it.

When Billy turned six, Irene was now faced with the tough decision as to where he would be attending first grade. The inner city schools in Detroit were glorified prison camps and babysitting services. The working class suburban public schools weren't much better. While she and Harold were far from devout Catholics, it looked like a good parochial school might be the best route. Catholic schools were by all accounts tough, no-nonsense institutions, staffed by serious educators. So while they did perform a lot of religious indoctrination, they had excellent reputations academically, from elementary grades through high school.

Harold's job at the Chrysler truck assembly plant in Warren had settled them, at least for the foreseeable future, in Troy, a nearby suburb on the north side of Detroit. There they were buying a modest two-bedroom tract house on a land contract. In terms of choice of parochial schools in the area, there wasn't any — unless Billy were each and every day to commute quite a distance. Just one Catholic school a little over three miles up the road, in the adjacent community of Madison Heights, was all there was. As far as Irene was concerned, there wasn't much more to think about. The decision had been made.

Starting in September, Billy would be attending St. Jerome Catholic Elementary School.

Let the Light of God Shine on the Children

“I don’t give a rat’s ass where you send him. Just as long as he gets educated so he don’t end up a bum like me.” Harold slugged down the rest of his beer. “I need a chaser for that. More suds here, woman.”

Irene had, of course, already made up her own mind to send Billy to Catholic school. But since it involved a substantial outlay of money for tuition, books and other school supplies, she thought she had better bring Harold on board. As she had in the past when confronted with difficult family decisions, she would fabricate the illusion that Harold himself actually played some important role in the decision making process. Usually after five or six beers, he was pretty pliable. After seven or eight, he could be convinced he wrote the Magna Carta.

Obviously, this time around that wouldn’t be necessary.

The more Irene learned about Billy’s new elementary school, the more excited she became.

St. Jerome’s was the jewel of the Archdiocese of Detroit, unique even among schools nationwide. It was headed up by a Father Bartholomew McAllister, a priest already in his late seventies but still energetically devoting his all to the parish, concentrating particularly on shaping its school and instructional program to conform to the strict principles he originally learned in his preparation for Jesuit priesthood at College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Father Bartholomew was “old school” in the purest sense. While most other Catholic schools across America, from the 1970s forward, had bent to the social, economic and utilitarian pressures to modernize and streamline their educational environment, it was his stated objective to keep St. Jerome’s running the way Catholic schools ran in the good old days. He believed that abandoning the foundation laid by Paul and the Byzantine Popes, meaning surrendering to the contemporary rush to modernize the Church, did not necessarily make it more relevant, only more user-friendly, and regrettably more compatible with some of the very things which Catholicism in principle should oppose — rampant materialism, easy sex, instant gratification, despiritualization, idolatry, falseness, frivolousness, and the heretical notion that God was a lifestyle choice. In his view, the Church started to wander from its spiritual center somewhere around 1600. If he could have had his way and could somehow justify it, he would have built catacombs in the subterranean strata under St. Jerome Catholic Church.

Much of his fanaticism sprung from his involvement in the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter, the extremely conservative clerical society of apostolic life founded at the Abbey of Hauterive, Switzerland in 1988. He joined them a year after its inception. This fanatical coterie of ultra-orthodox priests promoted such legacy practices as performing the Tridentine Mass which was in Latin, using the Roman Missal in church services, and administering the sacraments in accordance with the Roman Rite. Basically their agenda was a call to ignore all of the reforms instituted by the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican — which had met for over three years and concluded its work in 1965 — and just keep things the way they had been for centuries.

Though in the back corridors of church high command he was viewed as a bit

extreme, the Archdiocese gave him their full support. They were especially gratified to have his unique and precious school as a noble example of Catholic pedagogy at its traditional best, even if it was an anachronism. It was a chronic drain on their coffers, since they had to subsidize the school in ways that others didn't require, but it was worth it, as a sort of living historical monument and as public relations ammunition against accusations that the Catholic Church was selling out to populism and modernity in order to survive. Even the Pope had given his nod of recognition and approval. An effusive letter of praise from His Eminence was framed and hung on the wall of Father Bartholomew's office.

Father Bartholomew's most conspicuous nod to traditional orthodoxy was the presence of eleven nuns who were all of the Dominican Sisters of St. Mary. They were housed in a convent which sat between the rectory and the school itself. This was viewed as both bold and improvident because nuns had long ago been almost totally phased out as teachers in America and Canada, as their numbers had dwindled and it became impossible to fully staff schools with them. One by one lay teachers were hired to replace them, these aging women of God who after giving their whole lives to the church and to the instruction of its youth, retired or passed away. When a parish school got down to only a few of the sanctified ladies, it became impractical to house them. Those last few remaining nuns, usually older but not yet retirement age, were quietly reassigned to do overseas missionary work or perform as support staff in hospitals and other Catholic service facilities. The convents then were either torn down, or more often than not, turned into administrative offices or community outreach centers.

Similarly anachronistic but consistent with his conservatism, Father Bartholomew also required that all students wear uniforms, in order to avoid the risk of immodesty and nip in the bud the prospect of turning the school into a runway competition for the latest fad clothing. He also reinstituted the tradition of requiring daily attendance at mass, something which proved less than popular, to put it mildly. Even the nuns were on occasion heard grumbling about it.

His only concession to the stark realities of contemporary life was a high fence around the entire school grounds, topped with razor-sharp barbwire, and a security guard posted at the entrance. People often speculated as to whether this was to keep the kids in or child molesters out. But these were not the safest of times in the greater Detroit metropolitan area, and though located in the suburban white north, the school wasn't situated in the best of neighborhoods.

Billy's arrival his first day of 1st grade at St. Jerome's, and in fact his steady attendance over the next two years there, were entirely uneventful. No bullies. No show-me-yours, I'll-show-you-mine.

This time around, from the very start, he loved school. At least he loved the schooling aspects of it. Studying at home with his mom as his own personal tutor was comfortable. But at school they had all of these *great things* — workbooks, teaching aids, world maps, textbooks, artist brushes and drawing paper, clay and sculpting wax, alphabet and arithmetic games, videos, story books, and on and on. His school was a Toys 'R Us to make you smart.

Yes, they definitely had all this great stuff.

Best of all they had the nuns!

Granted, sometimes they were cranky and mean. However, most of the time — whether they meant to be or not — they were incredibly funny. They took everything so seriously and they tried so hard.

They would pace back and forth at the front of class, pointing at this or that with their long pointers, writing frantically on the blackboard, or reciting from their teachers texts — brows furrowed and voices rising in pitch as they tried to pound some apparently amazing, crucial, earthshattering fact or idea into the impregnable, distracted, television-saturated minds of the young bodies lazily propped up at their desks.

Yes, how they tried! They sure deserved a lot of credit.

Billy truly respected the ladies in black. They took their jobs very seriously.

But more to the point, he was incredibly fascinated by them.

He had never seen or imagined anything like them.

He spent hours wondering about them. Why did they choose to become nuns? It sure didn't look like much fun. They had to wear those weird habits, holy gowns which pinched their faces into tight inexpressive masks. All their physical movement and freedom was imprisoned in casements of bulky black bed sheets. Their feet were bound in ugly orthopedic clodhoppers, probably left over from an Amish turn-of-the-century barn sale.

He wondered what they did in the convent at night. Did they watch TV? Play cards? Maybe they played Euchre! Did they sit around in their underwear? Or did they still have those infernal habits on? Did they gossip? Tell secrets? Eat junk food? Paint their toenails? Brush their hair? Did they even have hair?

It was baffling, mysterious, magical — the pure stuff of boy wonderment and fantasy — to think about what went on behind those locked doors and drawn drapes in the dim evening candlelight of the convent. Oh! To be a fly on the wall!

At first he was extremely shy around them. Their medieval gowns, accessorized with rosaries and crucifixes and other ecumenical whatnot, their mystifying choice to never marry or have children, the special bond they shared among themselves which so thoroughly insulated them from the rest of society, plus the mystery and magic which Billy had actively conjured in his own imagination, all conspired to make them almost totally unapproachable. But very slowly as time went on, some of this mystique gave way to familiarity, and he started feeling a little more at ease.

This was toward the end of 3rd grade.

By now, his obsession with them had built to unbearable levels, and though his courage was nearly sufficient for him to begin to actively engage them, his mind was still fuzzy as to how to approach it. His initial terror had evolved into a mild and amenable shyness. It was now a tactical issue. He wanted to get inside their world. He just needed to find a way.

Finally, one day he did.

On an impulse — abandoning all of the forethought and fastidious mulling that until then had absorbed so many days and nights and taxed his immature mind — Billy plunged through the imaginary glass wall, and signed on to a game that would establish the ground rules for his next couple years at St. Jerome's.

Every day in 3rd grade, one full hour of instruction was devoted to religion.

Typically, Sister Grace — his 3rd grade home room teacher — would pound away at the commandments and church rules which the students were expected to memorize, and then throughout their lives adhere to with unerring obedience. Or she would read selections from the official Catechism of the Catholic Church, which was as interesting as listening to transcripts from probate court hearings.

But one day, as a special treat intended to inspire their highly impressionable young minds, and to give them an appreciation of the glorious history of the Catholic Church, Billy's class got to watch three short videos. One was on the extraordinary life of St. Francis of Assisi, another on St. Dominic, and finally one on Blessed Mary, Mother of Jesus — aka the Virgin Mary.

Each video in storybook fashion presented the biographical details of the holy celebrity, citing the powerful spiritual lessons epitomized by the beautiful and exemplary lives they lived.

The first video romped through the high points of the life of St. Francis — the fasting and visions, the alms to the poor and abandonment of worldly things, his pilgrimage to Rome and preaching a life of repentance, and his founding of the Order of Franciscan Friars. There were dramatic sequences of St. Francis shedding his clothes and giving them to a beggars, his kindnesses to lepers, and his surreal visions at the Church of San Damiano in his hometown of Assisi, of a bloody and dying Christ speaking parliamentary English to him from the crucifix. It was a top notch production. The special effects were great.

According to the second video, the mother of St. Dominic just before giving birth to him had a dream in which a dog came leaping out of her womb carrying the torch in its mouth that would “set the world on fire”. This bizarre imagery was apparently a prophecy of his creation a few decades later of the Dominican Order of Priests. The narrator also explained that early in his twenties, he had set up a monastic community for women near Carcassonne, France. This became the foundation for the Order of Dominican Sisterhood, to which Sister Grace and the other nuns at the school belonged. St. Dominic also advocated the theological precedent of praying directly to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary, as the Mother of God, was the most famous Mary on the planet and understandably the iconic patron for most nuns, whatever their order. But order of the nuns at St. Jerome's combined the punching power of both Dominic and Mary — hence the name, the Dominican Sisters of Mary. The video, with solemn choir music swelling in the background, used an actor who looked a lot like George Clooney, in compelling scenes of St. Dominic proselytizing for the austere life of humility and self-denial. It portrayed his passion for tracking down heretics and other enemies of the church, eradicating heretical beliefs, and vanquishing pagan rituals. It brushed off — in fact didn't bring up at all — the Inquisition, a dark side of Dominic's fanaticism which historically had cast the Church in a very sinister light.

The final video was the showstopper.

Virgin Mary, as the sacred vessel who brought Jesus into the world, was the rock star of Catholicism. The eager faces of Billy's classmates lit up, as familiar scenes unfolded before them. Her early chaste years of marriage with Joseph. Their long trek in escaping from the terrifying edicts of Herod. The birth of the Christ child in a manger in Bethlehem. Mary watching her Son being tried and

condemned to die. Her praying and looking up at the dying Jesus on the crucifix, blood trickling down his face and body from the crown of thorns on His head and the sword gash in His ribcage. Then finally her in the tomb with a ghostly pale and very dead Jesus draped across her lap. It was a moving and macabre journey — gory and glorious. By the conclusion, most of the young girls in Billy’s class were crying. It was a slobbering sob fest.

But never accuse the Catholic Church of wasting an opportunity for some no-holds-barred exploitation. These kids had now been rendered defenseless, whimpering receptacles of piteous longing, most definitely ripe for the picking! Time to go to work on them.

In a jolting leap to the present day, at the very end of each video, a Cardinal Józef Szoka — young by Cardinal standards but clearly chosen for his paternalistic charisma and videogenic good looks — gave a short but highly persuasive talk on the virtues of priesthood or committing one’s life to being a nun. A phone number and mailing address were provided, but more ingratiatingly, the children were encouraged to come forth and talk to their own priests and nuns about any calling they were now experiencing, toward committing their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ. While maybe not perceived as such by the kids, it was clear that these videos were in the final analysis cleverly-wrought recruiting tools, each an unapologetic sales pitch for a lifetime of servitude to the Church.

After the closing choral music and production credits for the final video — the one on the life of the Virgin Mary — faded to black, the classroom lights were switched back on. Sister Grace had an uncharacteristic glint in her eyes.

“Okay! Lois? What would you like to be when you grow up?”

“Why, Sister Grace, I think I want to be a nun.”

“That’s wonderful, Lois. Peter? Peter Hill? How about you? What would you like to be?”

“I really want to be a priest. Do you think I could?”

“I don’t see why not. Just be a good boy and you can enter the seminary to become a priest. Mary Lou? How about you? What do you want to be when you grow up?”

“I want to be a nun. That would be so great.”

“Wonderful. Wonderful. And Billy Green? What about you?”

“I really think I want to be a nun.”

There was some giggling and whispering about what an idiot Billy was.

“Now Billy, don’t you mean a priest?”

“No, Sister Grace. I want to be a nun.”

Now the class was laughing and getting boisterous.

“Class, calm down. Billy, listen to me. You are a boy. You can’t be a nun. Nuns are girls.”

“But I want to be a nun. I really want to be a nun.”

A boy in the back started it and soon the whole class was chanting.

He wants to be a nun.

He wants to be a nun.

He wants to be a nun.

Billy, buoyed and emboldened by the reaction of the other kids — and

certainly enjoying the limelight — started insistently repeating his own stated intention, and didn't stop.

"I want to be a nun. I want to be a nun. I want to be a nun ... "

Sister Grace's mood instantly turned foul. She had lost control of the class. Billy was being an upstart and setting a horrible example to the rest of the kids. She knew what she had to do. She had to shut him up. Immediately!

She marched over to Billy's desk and grabbed him by the back of his neck. She gripped him hard, sinking her fingernails deep, then shouted at the top of her lungs.

"Billy, you can't be a nun!!"

Despite the pain of her surprisingly strong grip, Billy forged ahead.

"I want to be a nun. I want to be a nun. I want to be a nun ... "

Desperate now, she took her other hand and clamped it over his mouth. Billy could still be heard but it was muffled.

"I want to be a nun. I want to be a nun. I want to be a nun."

Suddenly he stopped and with a single big wet slobbering sweep of his tongue licked the inside of her palm. She pulled her hand away and looked at it in disgust.

"Ugh!"

Sister Grace was livid. She grabbed his ear with her dry hand and twisting it violently made him stand up. This really hurt. Billy now stopped insisting on nunhood but instead gave voice to his pain.

"Ow! Ow! Ow! You're hurting me."

"You are coming with me. And if you give me any more grief, I'll rip your ear off!"

She took Billy to the administrative area and deposited him in the office of Mother Superior.

"This is Billy Green. He is a troublemaker and a sinner and I think you should talk to him. Thank you very much, blessed Mother. May God be with you. You'll need it with this child of the Devil."

After discussions with Billy and protracted negotiations with Sister Grace, Billy was reinstated in her class. But a pattern had been established. He continued to toy with Sister Grace and she continued to march him down to the office for the apparently ineffective counseling of Mother Superior.

None of the subsequent incidents were as overtly confrontational as the I-want-to-be-a-nun skirmish. Billy adopted a lower profile — polite and demure at least on the surface — but kept up a steady barrage of needling and subtle harassment. He would demonstrate implausible levels of enthusiasm for bland and monotonous subject matter. He would raise his hand to get permission to go to the bathroom. Then when it was granted would just sit there looking pained, like any minute he would explode. One of his favorites was when called on to provide an answer on the blackboard to write it backwards.

It was low-level guerrilla warfare, which invariably kept his fellow students laughing but on the downside fostered his bad reputation among the nuns. He was a frequent and hot topic of conversation in the convent after school hours.

This adversarial relationship, which Billy thrived on as much as Sister Grace

resented, was finally terminated by the routine predetermined order of events of an elementary school. June arrived and Billy moved on to the next grade, perhaps no wiser as to what made these nuns tick, but with a reputation among his peers for knowing how to push their holy buttons.

His new teacher nun wielded some notoriety herself. Everyone knew about Sister Bernadette. The kids about to enter the 4th grade approached it with fear and trembling. The kids who had made it through a year with her, left with a enormous sigh of relief and pride, as if they were one of the surviving troops in the World War II storming of the beach at Normandy.

She was a cranky old woman — estimates ran in the 80s and 90s — who even if just waiting around to soon die, wouldn't be exiting the battle grounds of parochial education without inflicting as much pain and guilt as possible on the 9-year olds who would quake and cower in her classroom over her remaining years. Her store of patience in the warehouse of her pedagogical assets had long ago been permanently depleted. Her love of children and for teaching them — if she had ever had any — was a forgotten memory buried under decades of unconcealed animus, going in both directions. After more than fifty years in the classroom, all of their faces looked the same, she expected the worst, and usually getting it, responded accordingly.

Nobody messed with her.

She had heard about this Billy Green and she was ready for him.

Of course he knew about her.

The stage was set for an epic battle.

For the first few weeks, during which Billy tried to size up his new adversary and gauge if there was any maneuvering room to initiate his finely-tuned bag of tricks, he and the formidable Sister Bernadette seemed to be honoring some manner of understood but unspoken detente. They kept their wary eyes on one another. The peaceful calm of a tightly run prison camp prevailed.

Then Billy gradually, in almost imperceptible increments, notched up his campaign of subdued sedition. He started with bits of guarded irony. Little flecks of patronizing flattery, which the other students saw for what they were but were on the surface innocent enough that the good nun really couldn't call his bluff.

"Sister Bernadette, you're the best teacher I ever had."

"It's *I've ever had* ... *I've*. But thank you, Billy."

"I just wish I could be in the 4th grade next year too. And the year after."

"If you don't study harder, Billy, you might be."

Nobody was fooled. It was obvious Billy was at it again.

Still there were no signs of open conflict. No blood spilled. No body bags. So far so good. Billy decided to ratchet things up a bit more.

It was a big mistake.

Sister Bernadette was uncanny. She missed her calling when she became a nun. She should have worked for the CIA. Everything Billy tried, no matter how innocuous, stealthy or cleverly covert, ended up having the lid blown off by this preternatural robocop nun. Passing notes that said *At 10:15 everybody start whispering*. Coming to class early and drawing funny pictures on the blackboard — usually involving a nun in some humiliating pose or embarrassing activity.

Dusting Sister Bernadette's chair with a fine layer of white chalk. Gluing all of the pages of her catechism book together so that it was a fused clump of fireplace kindling. Dropping a pencil and bending down so that he could look up Janet LaFleur's skirt — an exercise he found increasingly captivating for reasons he didn't understand. Busted every time!

"Billy, you can do that after you and Janet get married, not before."

Reichführer Bernadette was all over him and it always ended the same way, with him standing in the hall all alone, no books, no games, no nothing, for at least an hour. Later in life he would maintain that all he did for the entire fourth year of his schooling was stare at a polished linoleum hallway and metal student lockers.

With failures mounting, he decided to ease off for a while and bide his time. Sister Bernadette was out of his league. At least for now.

His self-discipline and patience was finally rewarded toward the end of the school year. Time was running out. But Billy had been ready to spring, like a tree monkey or Australian dingo, given the right opportunity.

It was video day again. Today's featured short movie was on Bernadette Soubirous, better known as St. Bernadette of Lourdes.

This clearly had very special meaning for Sister Bernadette. She had originally been inspired to join a religious order and take her vows of celibacy, upon learning as a young girl about the miraculous story of St. Bernadette. Even before she became a novice, there was no doubt in her mind who her namesake would be for her ordination.

The story of Bernadette was indeed amazing and magical. The video captured it well.

She was born in 1844 to a poor family in Lourdes, a small town in southern France. When she turned 14, she started having visions of "a small young lady". The apparition was later given the official imprimatur of the Church and dubbed The Lady of Lourdes. Lady of Lourdes told Bernadette, *"Please go to the priests and tell them that a chapel is to be built here. Let processions come hither."* Her local priest and many of the townspeople were initially skeptical, until the small young lady appeared again and instructed Bernadette to dig in the ground at her feet until she found a spring, then drink the water from the spring. Others drank the water and claimed that as a result they had been cured of their illnesses. When these inexplicable cures were verified, chapels and churches were built at the site and over the years thousands of people made a pilgrimage to Lourdes to seek miracle cures from their maladies. There was a generous amount of footage in the video of people in the recent past making such visits, splashing the holy water on themselves and praying at the grotto.

Another powerful moment in the video dramatized one of the miracles visited upon the young Bernadette herself. It showed her clutching a candle until it burned all the way down into the hand she was using to hold it. The flames licked at her flesh and should have seared her and caused excruciating pain. But Bernadette just sat in calm contemplation, displaying no signs of discomfort or injury. Billy's classmates at first groaned in empathetic agony, then beamed with awe and delight as the miracle unfolded before their eyes. It was an intense few

moments.

Predictably, there was the signature infotainment advertisement tagged on at the end, yet another shameless pitch by Cardinal Józef Szoka for turning one's life over lock-stock-and-barrel to the Holy Catholic Church.

After the video finished, the deep acidic lines of ill-temper in the face of Sister Bernadette seemed a little softer, the normally hard furrow of her brow a little more relaxed, the guttural tone of her voice a little lighter and more melodious.

It was a kinder, gentler Sister Bernadette than the children had ever seen.

"Class. Is there anything you'd like to say? Are there any questions? Margie? Yes?"

"Sister Bernadette, do you have to go to Lourdes? Or can you just pray directly to St. Bernadette for her help and blessings?"

"It's best to go there. But you certainly can pray to her. I myself say a special prayer every day to St. Bernadette. She's my patron saint and very special to me. Who else now? Carlos? Did you have a question?"

"I just wanted to say that I really liked the movie. St. Bernadette is the best saint of all. Someday I hope I can go there myself and pray for my sick grandmother."

"I hope you get that opportunity as well, Carlos. Yes, it is a wonderful story, isn't it. Billy? You have a question?"

Billy took a deep breath, then spoke in a clear voice.

"Yes, Sister ... I do. My father is a fat pig and a drunken asshole. Do you think if we took him to Lourdes he could be cured?"

All of the saint-in-training feel-good vibes instantly vacated the room. The other students tensed as soon as they heard the "bad word", one which they used regularly on their own time but would never let drop in school. All eyes turned to the front of the class, like the viewing gallery at an execution.

Sister Bernadette became rigid from head to toe, and her face returned to its shrunken-head wrathfulness — the bitter cup they had had to swallow every day of class now for almost nine months.

From this normal rest state of routine virulence, she then quickly plunged into the deep caverns of stored ire.

It was an awesome, if terrifying, thing to watch.

She seemed to be spontaneously combusting from the inside out. Her face was red with rage and she was panting. Each sharp breath seemed to deepen the crimson tone of her skin. Her eyes bulged and became wrath-of-God guns of malignant fury. Slowly she raised her trembling hand and pointed her finger at Billy, ready to deliver a lethal blow of denunciation and rebuke.

But before anything resembling the expected torrent of vilification came out of her twitching, contorted mouth, her eyes suddenly rolled back in her head. Sister Bernadette suddenly keeled over and collapsed on the floor.

The boys sat in paralyzed silence. The girls simultaneously inhaled a gasp of shock and disbelief. Three goody-goody girls then quickly jumped up from their desks. Alicia Parks ran out of the classroom presumably to get some help. Margie Keeler and Sue Majzarski knelt down next to the recumbent body of the nun, and

made disconnected, confused and frantic gestures in an obviously futile effort to do something-anything.

Margie started crying, then snapped her head around, pointed at Billy, and screamed a vituperative volley.

“You’ve killed her! You’ve killed Sister Bernadette, Billy Green!”

Moments later, Mother Superior came running into class, then an ambulance arrived. Two paramedics carted the unconscious nun away on a gurney, rushed her into their vehicle to be taken sirens-blaring to the emergency room of a local hospital. That much information was easily available.

Killed her?

Billy was certain he hadn’t.

Billy reasoned that they wouldn’t be taking her to emergency if she were dead. They’d take her to a funeral home. Or wherever they take dead people. So she must still be alive.

This was later confirmed by Billy’s mom after repeated telephone calls to Mother Superior at the convent’s main number and to the St. Jerome rectory business line.

Sister Bernadette was indeed alive, conscious, and responding well to the excellent care she was getting. There would be no homicide charges.

It was also relayed in very discrete hushed tones to Billy’s mom, that the good sister couldn’t remember anything — at least at this point — about why she was in the hospital and what had triggered her collapse.

Billy felt very relieved.

Billy also felt bad. But not that bad. The cranky old witch had it coming. Someone had to put the ornery old witch in her place and deep down he harbored not a little pride that he was the one to do it.

Of course, his public face painted a different picture.

“I don’t know what happened, mom. I just asked her a simple question.”

“Billy, Mother Superior wasn’t there and still hasn’t gotten the whole story. But she gets the impression that what you said was more the equivalent of dropping a bowling ball on her head.”

Taken at face value, despite the foul language, his question did have some merit, and at some level was certainly heartfelt. After all, Billy’s father fit the description and Billy for as long as he could remember had wished something could be done about it. If a little Lourdes holy water could do the trick, why not?

But in the sacrosanct environment of a Catholic elementary school, especially with the remark coming from a student who was already a known troublemaker with a solid aptitude for pushing the wrong buttons, what happened was regarded as a gross effrontery, a harsh bit of misconduct which had to be punished. He had *almost* killed the poor nun, after all. That was the version of the story that had gotten some traction anyway.

It turned out that, according to the doctors, she hadn’t had a heart attack or anything serious. She had probably hyperventilated, fainted, or collapsed from overexcitement. Her attending physician recommended some bed rest, while they further monitored her. She would be unavailable for the last few days of the current school year, but would no doubt be back on the job after summer vacation,

striking terror into the hearts of a brand new batch of 4th graders.

Despite feverish circulation of rumors that Billy had tried to kill a nun — mainly among the school kids themselves who were ecstatic over the idea of such a sensational event happening in *their school* — the situation was pretty straightforward and unlikely to result in any highly serious repercussions.

Nobody could really pin anything on him. Billy had said something off-color. She blew a gasket. Considering she was old-going-on-ancient, her gaskets were probably already worn pretty thin. She was a sturdy old antique, hadn't come close to dying, but had most probably experienced some manner of fainting attack. It would be a long stretch to charge him with attempted murder or accuse him of anything other than a spontaneous act of mischief. Boys will be boys.

But Billy would not get off scot-free. His assigned judge and jury, Mother Superior, called him into her office with the job of meting out some order of appropriate punishment. Despite his tenable innocence, Billy feared the worst. He hoped he would get off with life and not have to face the electric chair. Paranoia running deep, he was willing to plea-bargain.

"What do you have to say for yourself, young man?"

"I'm sorry. Is Sister Bernadette alright?"

"She will be fine. She's getting some rest. Young man, I know exactly what you said and I don't approve of your language. But I met your father."

"You met my father?"

"Your parents came in yesterday. Your mother loves you very much, Billy. You shouldn't embarrass her. She was very upset."

"And my father?"

"Generally men don't drink beer in my office when they come to talk to me. That and put their feet up on my desk. Have a nice summer. Next year, *please* try to behave yourself."

The Secret Life of Penguins

Word continued to spread. Billy was a local legend. The kids loved both his real and imagined antics. The false rumor of his attempted if unsuccessful murder continued to be viral in his school. He was a 10-year old anti-hero.

The nuns also talked and commiserated among themselves.

Judgment was passed. The verdict was in.

The nuns didn't like this little smart aleck at all.

Except for one.

That was his new 5th grade teacher Sister Mary Felicia.

As the new school year began, Billy conscientiously heeded Mother Superior's suggestion. He actually behaved himself.

It wasn't nearly as much fun, but he wanted to avoid at all costs the possibility of his parents being called in again. Not for his own sake. But for the sake of anyone who might end up having to meet his father.

No one deserved that.

Not hardened gang leaders and drug pushers.

Not bank robbers and child molesters.

Not even Nazi war criminals.

Certainly not these innocent if ridiculous women of the cloth.

It was a matter of conscience, a moral choice for the ethical treatment of penguins.

He was at last beginning to understand them. He understood they meant well. It really blew his mind that they had sacrificed the chance to get married and have children in order to serve God. At the same time, the whole proposition of dressing up the way they did and wasting their lives trying to teach someone like himself seemed silly and masochistic — not that he knew the word masochistic. He decided that whatever was going on, he could respect it even if he couldn't relate to it.

This meant that even if he didn't feel their pain, he didn't want to feed it. Subjecting them to his father would be like throwing gasoline on the fires of their self-inflicted suffering.

He wanted no part of it.

Maybe he was getting soft in his old age. Gosh, he was 10! Where did all those years go?

The immediate upshot was that he wasn't at all tempted to run Sister Mary Felicia through the usual Billy Green gauntlet of amusing stunts and games.

Plus, there was something very different about her. He actually found it easy to behave himself with her.

Right off, she was very young, especially compared to all of the other nuns who appeared in his pre-pubescent eyes to be well beyond the century mark. Her youth was a surprise bonus.

But that wasn't the whole story. It wasn't just her age. While that set her apart, it didn't account for the enormous, growing fascination he was feeling.

Though he couldn't quite put it into words, he eventually sensed what made her so unique. And why he didn't need to be a 'bad boy' in her class to enjoy it. Why he never got bored or restless. Why his mind didn't wander and a need to be funny rush in to fill the vacuum of airless pedagogy his prior teacher nuns dully exuded into the classroom.

What Billy started to notice was that there was always a *certain something* in the way Sister Mary said and explained things — some little twist, some quirky nuance, some tongue-in-cheek, subtle hint of an inside joke — that he had never encountered before. It was as refreshing as it was a strange new experience.

He was intrigued.

He wanted to know more.

One day after the final bell had rung and it was time to go home, Billy remained in his seat after the other kids had cleared the room.

"Yes, Billy. Do you have something on your mind?"

"Sister Mary, I was wondering ... are you sure there's a God?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Well ..." Billy gestured with both hands and head in a sweep that took in the school and church grounds. "... there's all this here. Isn't it kind of pointless if there isn't a God?"

"All of this doesn't need God to exist. It only needs a church. The Catholic

Church.”

“So do you believe in God?”

“You’re a very smart little boy. Maybe too smart. Look at me Billy. I am wearing a habit, this is my crucifix, and here at my waist is the rosary given to me the day I took my vows, consecrating my life as a bride of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. What do you think?”

“All of that doesn’t need a God. It just needs a church. Just like you said.”

Sister Mary Felicia smiled. It wasn’t the contrived, patronizing, or manipulative smile of the other nuns. It was the sweet smile of a young lady enjoying herself because she had stumbled on a 10-year old boy with a bright, inquisitive, combative mind. The smile of a young lady who maybe had met her match.

“It’s very difficult to explain. There are things and we can’t imagine how they got here — planets, stars, animals, ourselves. So we say God created the world. There are mysteries which we can never solve. So we say God knows all and works in mysterious ways. There are times when we feel isolated, unclaimed, unloved. So we say God protects and loves us — we who live out the mysteries of Heaven and Earth, who wander through the world he has created.”

“Sister. When I go home and look at my father, I find it hard to believe there is a God.”

“Billy. I want you to know that you are always welcome to talk to me. Perhaps ... perhaps as we eventually get to know one another better, I can answer your questions more freely.”

“I would like that, Sister Mary.”

Billy left feeling like he had a friend.

And talk again they did.

The months rolled by and they talked and talked. There was no particular order or agenda. But nothing was off-limits. They would discuss whatever Billy wished to talk about.

Usually, he just remained in his seat after the last school period bell. Sister Mary would continue sitting at the table at the front of her classroom, making a few final class notes.

“Yes, Billy?”

“I’ve been reading about the Crusades.”

“So what do you think?”

“I think they really sucked!”

She couldn’t help but let out a giggle.

“The Popes said they were going to war to convert the pagans. But that wasn’t it at all.”

“That’s very true. They wanted to reclaim some of the holy sites that had been taken over by the Muslims. Places like Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Gethsemane. The Holy Lands.”

“Then they were no different than the Romans. The Popes just wanted land, more power. I don’t think it had anything to do with God or religion. They killed thousands of innocent people. They chopped off heads. They hung their naked bodies like slaughtered cattle. They even ate some of them. The people they

killed weren't all pagans. Most were Muslims and Jews, people that believed in God. Christians were Jews before they became Christians."

"Awful things happen, Billy. Even in the name of God."

"But there were over twenty crusades. Millions died. Many of them women and children. Most of the warriors went into it blindly, just wanting to serve God and the Church. Thousands of soldiers were slaughtered. Sacrificed for nothing."

"They gave their lives for what they believed in. Only God can judge right and wrong."

"How did God feel about the Children's Crusades? 30,000 children out of France and 50,000 out of Germany. A lot of them were sold as slaves in the lands they were trying to liberate, all in the name of the Church. Many starved to death along the way. 3,000 drowned when their ships sank. They were my age. Not just boys. Little girls too. I read all about it."

"Sometimes, you have to look at the whole picture. Over many centuries. Over many lives. It's about the greater good. The total good far outweighing the total bad."

"It's kind of hard to think about anything but the blood and the suffering and the deaths."

"Most of the nuns here have never thought about any of this. But I have. I know all about it. It's horrible. It makes me feel ashamed, Billy. At the same time I also know the Church does some wonderful and amazing things."

"But it does really terrible things."

"The Church saved me, Billy."

"You're only one person."

"That's not enough for you?"

His mini-rant came to an abrupt halt.

He was embarrassed and trapped by what must have appeared as callousness. He didn't want to have to answer her. No, in truth it wasn't enough. One person versus millions?

At the same time, he was sure glad that she was there with him. However the Church had saved her and made this new exciting friendship possible, he was grateful. Maybe he couldn't put it into words but the feeling was certainly there. How incredibly important this renegade nun had become to him! Thank God for this quirky woman dressed like a penguin who was taking the time to talk to him, be with him, and actually let him be himself, say what was on his mind.

"I'm really glad you're here."

"And I'm glad you're here too, Billy. God bless you."

One time they went to a city park not far from the school. As now was the established routine, Billy had remained after the last bell. But it was such a beautiful day, Sister Mary suggested they go for a walk and enjoy the new spring air and listen to songs of the birds which had been silent over the winter months.

They ended up playing on the swings, then sitting under a maple tree which was showing the first few buds of the new season.

"Sister Mary, I don't get the whole Pope thing. He just seems like an regular man to me. And some of the things he says sound pretty stupid."

"Yet we are supposed to believe he speaks directly with God and we should

listen to every word he says as if it was spoken by God Himself. Right? Is that what bothers you?"

"Not only that. But some of the Popes were horrible men. They were serious sinners."

"My goodness! What've I been teaching you?" She laughed at her own joke.

"This is just some stuff I found out on my own. I don't think you want to hear this."

"Like Pope John XII? The Catholic Church's own 10th Century Hugh Hefner?"

Billy looked confused. "Who's that?"

"The Playboy Magazine guy."

"My dad used to drool over that magazine. Right in front of my mom. Probably still does."

"Horrible Popes. Hmm? I could probably name a few more."

"Do you know about Pope Clement VI? He had mistresses and prostitutes."

"Billy! What do you know about these things?"

"Only what I read about, Sister Mary. But it's pretty easy now to find out about this stuff. It's on television. In magazines. My dad rents these movies, too. I'm not supposed to know. But I do. I read that Pope John XIII had a daughter and he raped her."

"I think it was John XII that was the rapist. He did that to a lot of very young girls including his sisters. It gets confusing because he was John XIII's father. But John XIII killed most of his relatives, including his mom. And he had 45,000 prostitutes working for him in Rome. He made an enormous fortune that way. Finally, some jealous husband killed him after he found out that John XIII had slept with his wife."

"See, Sister Mary. Thirteen is a very unlucky number. Even for the Catholic Church!"

"The point is, Billy — and you have to promise you will never tell anyone I said this ..."

"I promise."

"The point is that I too think they are just men. They do the same stupid things men do all of the time everywhere. They succumb to temptation. They sin. I especially don't believe they are any different than any of the rest of us in terms of talking directly to God."

"Do you talk to God?"

"We don't seem to be on speaking terms. He must be very busy. I don't hear from Him."

"I take that as a 'no'."

"You may take that as a 'no'. I do not talk to God personally. But neither does the Pope. And in terms of their infallibility, I seriously doubt it."

"What's infalli ... I don't know that word."

"Infallibility. It means they can't make mistakes, at least in terms of Church doctrine. It's all tied together. They get the word directly from God. God does not lie or play games. Therefore what the Pope says is absolutely true. That's infallibility. Like I told you, Billy. You never heard me say this. But I don't

believe it for a minute. The Popes have made countless bad calls and they still do. They may be even more fallible than the rest of us, since they believe they're actually talking to God on high. That would make anyone crazy."

"Sister Mary. When I grow up, could you stop being a nun so I can marry you?"

"Are you proposing to me, Billy Green? Let me think about it. How old are you?"

"Ten."

"Okay. So I have a few years. I'll let you know. Promise. That is, assuming you don't meet some beautiful girl who steals your heart and breaks mine."

They both started giggling. Sister Mary was laughing so hard she pulled a handkerchief from the long sleeve of her habit and wiped her eyes. Or maybe she was actually crying.

"Like the adults always say on TV, I can't believe we're having this conversation."

"I can't either, Billy. I can't either."

Finally one day, Sister Mary came around to answering the very first question Billy had asked her. The one that had initiated their special friendship. The one about whether she believed in God. It certainly took quite a bit of doing. But Sister Mary Felicia in the end finally admitted she was an atheist.

This was a secret she had promised herself she never could or would divulge. It was too shocking and totally against everything which she symbolized as a nun. Obviously, if anyone in the ranks of the Church itself found out, that would be the end of her sacred vocation. She would be immediately booted out and would probably face excommunication by Papal edict. It had taken many months of after-school chats for her to finally feel comfortable enough to open up to Billy and for him to finally find out what she really believed and exactly what made her tick.

What a story!

She had started her preparation to become a nun right out of high school. The bitter truth was, Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, CA — where she received her degree — and the Dominican Nuns of Corpus Christi Monastery — the novitiate where she eventually took her vows — were battered-woman shelters for her. She had nowhere else to turn.

Sister Mary Felicia back then was Anna Marie Fontana. And her father beat and raped her from the time she reached puberty. She had to have three abortions by the time she finished high school. No matter how much she pleaded with her counselors at school, no one listened. No one would believe her. Her father was a rich entrepreneur, a magnate in the garment import business, the highly regarded CEO and Chairman of the Board for three different privately-held corporations, supplying chain stores and malls across America with fad teenwear manufactured in China, India, Italy, Greece and Turkey. More importantly, he was a generous benefactor for the elite private school that Anna attended in their hometown of Greensboro, North Carolina. There was even a building named for him on campus — the Fontana Home Economics Building.

Anna couldn't even look to her mother for protection. Her mom had to have

known what was going on. But she turned the blind eye of an alcoholic society woman, who could not risk the possibility of a scandal tarnishing the queenly status and high-society prestige she enjoyed in her country club circle.

Finally Anna found asylum. From the day she began college at Loyola Marymount till the present, the comforting arms of the Catholic Church became Anna's surrogate mother and a safe refuge from her father's carnal rampages.

Anna's parents on the surface were extremely proud. They milked the fact among their upper crust friends, many of whom were Catholic, that their daughter had chosen to walk a sacred path of spiritual dedication.

Under the sugar-coating and saccharine smiles, it was another story. Her mother was just plain glad to get rid of her, deeply relieved she would no longer be in the house, having long feared it was just a matter of time before the lid blew on her husband's incestuous behavior. Her father was really pissed that the tight, clean little cunt he had come to relish was no longer his for the taking. He'd probably have to go back to tracking down underage teen prostitutes.

To Anna's immense relief, her parents never attempted to visit her during her preparation for nunhood, or her two years as a novice. Now they had no idea where she was or what she was doing. Sister Mary requested that her location be kept secret.

"Now you know things about me that no one else in the world knows, Billy."

Billy then likewise opened up and finally shared all the gory details of living with his own bloated, belching, farting, beer gulping, whale carcass of a father. Sister Mary always listened with concern and a compassionate glint in her eyes. This time as Billy talked about his dad, she deferred to his painful candor with a knowing and sympathetic silence.

"So now, Sister Mary, you also know all about me. But there's still one thing I'm very curious about. I think it's the very first question I ever asked you."

"About whether I think there's a God? That one?"

"Yes, Sister. That's the one."

"Billy. If there were a God, things wouldn't be this way for us, now would they?"

"Sister Mary, you are cooler than Madonna. Way cooler."

Billy's year with Sister Mary as his teacher finally ended, but after he had moved on to the 6th grade he still regularly went back and visited her. At least once a week. Often more. Their conversations ranged from the philosophical to the bizarre to the silly.

"What if there is life on other planets? But the aliens are nothing like us."

"Have you looked around? There seem to be some right in this school. And I don't just mean the students."

She was as unflappable as he was persistent in his pursuit of an intimate knowledge and thorough understanding of all things nun — and all things Sister Mary.

"Sister, what do you wear under your habit?"

"A neoprene wetsuit. You can't be too careful. There is always the possibility of a tsunami wiping out all of North America."

They met on the spontaneous playground of their imaginations.

“Hey Sister Mary, do you ever want to climb Mount Everest?”

“Why Billy, I already have.”

“Wow! Was it hard?”

“The tough part was swimming from here to India, then walking 4000 miles in a two-piece bathing suit to get to Nepal. After that, Everest was a snap.”

“I know what you mean. Holding my breath all the way to the moon was pretty tough. Then I get there and find out there’s no air up there. I thought I was going to blow a holy gasket getting back.”

Often their discussions still got very heavy. One day — this was the final month of his 6th grade, after which he would no longer be attending St. Jerome’s, though he didn’t know that at the time — they talked for over two hours about all of the innocent people who had recently died in the bombing of Iraq by the U. S. under the leadership of President George H. W. Bush, then about the millions of innocent people who had died in the two World Wars many years prior. Somehow that segued into reiterating how unconditionally they both hated their respective fathers. Perhaps they held their fathers responsible, each in his own distinctly cruel way, for selfishly wreaking so much havoc on the lives of others, just like the men who waged wars and slaughtered so many defenseless civilians. They sat and cried for the longest time.

It never failed to astonish Billy how close they had become, how easy it was to talk to Sister Mary, how open they had become with one another. After all, he was just going on twelve. And she was ... well, he had never asked her. But she was a lot older. At least twenty. Twenty five? Wow!

Billy had over the last couple years developed an innocent but deep affection for this strange and wonderful woman of God. It was his first schoolboy crush. Except it went way beyond a crush, which is usually as meteoric in its onset as it is in its plunge to the dull ennui of fling burnout. Billy felt feelings he had never felt before. Not mother love. Not pet love. Not bicycle love or superhero love. Not a love anyone else had probably ever felt before.

What Billy felt was nun love. For one very special nun.

Though it was well beyond the grasp of his socially immature mind, if he were a little older and if she didn’t dress so funny, he might ask her out for a date, whatever that was. And do whatever you did on dates. Sounded like a good idea.

It didn’t escape notice that Sister Mary was spending a lot of time with Billy. She was in due course called in by Father Bartholomew McAllister himself, to explain and account for her actions.

“Now it’s my understanding that the boy’s not even in your class now.”

“I had him in my class last year.”

“Isn’t this kind of unusual then, Sister?”

“He’s a very unusual boy.”

“That’s what I hear.”

“None of the other sisters like him. I don’t know why. But they seem to think he’s trouble. He likes to ask a lot of questions. He’s very bright ... and ... and challenging. No one else seems to understand Billy.”

“And you do? You’ve decided to take him under your wing.”

“I have, your blessed Grace. He’s very special and I try to give him ... I give

him ... he's my little friend and as I have watched him grow and blossom academically, I have shared with him all that I can as a teacher, to foster the development of his beautiful mind."

"Just be careful, Sister Mary. Make sure that it is just his soul you nurture. To walk the path of our Savior and to understand and honor the divine laws of the Holy See, that is your main function here, you know."

"I understand, your Grace. You would be proud."

It was a sad day when Billy had to leave St. Jerome's. He wanted to continue on to the Jr. High School there, but times were getting tough in the auto industry. His father had been laid off sporadically over the past couple years, and in contract negotiations, at the behest of the Big 3 corporate chiefs the union had succumbed to sob stories of market loss to the Japanese and agreed to significant wage cuts. Moreover, the cost of school tuition and supplies at St. Jerome's had gone up almost every year he had attended. The simple fact was, Harold and Irene just couldn't afford for Billy to keep going to a private parochial school. Next year it was off to Troy Jr.-Sr. High.

Billy would miss St. Jerome's. He had excelled academically even as his notoriety had built to critical mass among the less-than-amused nuns. Billy felt it had been a sporting good time but unfortunately now it would end.

Most of all, he would miss Sister Mary Felicia and all the special attention she had given him over the past three years. He would dearly miss their rare and extraordinary friendship.

He finally told her the last time they had met, just a few days ago, that he wouldn't be coming back. Today was the final day of school and time to say good-bye.

He waited outside her classroom and when he was sure all of her students were gone, entered. She was sitting at the table in the front of the class staring at her hands, which appeared to be folded in prayer. It was obvious that she was expecting him.

"So young man ... summer vacation and then off to the big public school."

"Yes. That's it. I just wanted to thank you. You're my best friend ... ever."

"Would you come with me, Billy? Just for a minute."

Sister Mary stood up and they walked out of her classroom down two doors to a small combination office and library, used for parent-teacher conferences and special meetings. All of the walls were lined with shelves of books and there were no windows. She closed and locked the door, then switched on a small desk lamp. It shined brightly on the desk but lit the rest of the room with only a soft subtle ambient glow.

Sister Mary Felicia turned, then put her hands squarely on Billy's shoulders and ... kissed him.

He stood there, arms at his side, rigidly upright, at a loss what to do next.

His first impulse was to pull away. But a little voice in his head told him to just go with it. So their lips remained pressed together. Then he started to feel, very slowly at first, the soft, luxuriant caress of her tongue against his lips. He allowed them to part a bit and now she gently explored his tongue with hers. Then he felt the delicate wet pleasure of her mouth drawing on his with a

beautiful caressing motion that he wished could go on forever.

Something else completely unprecedented happened in that moment.

A warm firm urge built in his pants. He was not old enough for a solid erection but what he did feel was a gentle hardening which spread a pleasurable longing from between his legs through his entire body, a longing which begged for something more, a nebulous urge he could not even begin to grasp. It was a warm, agreeable, anxious but unsatisfied craving, a promise of secret delicacies.

It felt really good.

Finally, Sister Mary pulled away. Her eyes were still closed. She opened them and smiled. A single tiny tear ran down her left cheek.

“Good-bye, Billy.”

And that was Billy Green’s first kiss.

Mom and Apple Pie

Billy’s mom couldn’t believe how fast her little boy was growing up. It only seemed like yesterday that she had brought him home from the hospital and lay him down in his bassinet for his first night at home.

She loved him as only a mother could love a child and then some. Billy was the most important thing in her life. Whereas so much of her tedious, lackluster days as a housewife and as the spouse of an ignorant, indifferent man gave her no satisfaction or joy, her son gave her hope and the promise of making a difference in the world. Maybe reaping some small rewards during her time here on Earth. While she was not fanatically religious, she did attend mass every Sunday, so there was also the expectation that being a good mother would be viewed favorably by God and she might achieve good standing in the afterlife as well.

So while Harold plodded absentmindedly and mechanically down the flat narrow path of his empty routine life, almost completely oblivious to her and Billy, Irene devoted her days and her life to safeguarding and nurturing her one and only child.

Even as a toddler, she constantly talked to him, read him stories, taught him songs, danced little awkward dances with him, and bought him toys, books, games, and little mister clothes.

Now that Billy had become a teenager — only a few months ago he had turned thirteen — the challenges were entirely different, but she was there, up to the task. Within the limits of her imagination and the family budget, Billy had all that she could provide.

Not that Harold understood or approved.

“What is all this crap? Do I look like a fucking millionaire?”

“Harold, don’t be a curmudgeon. He’s our son. You want the best for him, don’t you?”

“I didn’t have any of this and I turned out just fine. You’re spoiling him rotten. He’s going to grow up thinking the world owes him a favor.”

“Yes, Harold. You turned out to be a real gem.”

“Fuck you, Irene.”

To his credit, Billy was quite the opposite of his father’s scurrilous depiction.

He always let his mom know how much he appreciated her attention and generosity. He never displayed one iota of that sense of entitlement that seems to plague children from toddling to late adolescence, often right on into adulthood. The linguistic transition from ‘mommy mommy’ and ‘daddy daddy’ to ‘gimme gimme’ never happened. Billy never asked for *anything*, which only increased the pleasure his mother got from giving to him.

Irene always tried her best to be a devoted wife and homemaker, but lacking even the barest appreciation or even acknowledgement by her husband for all the time she spent keeping the house tidy, his clothes neat and clean, preparing the meals, paying the bills, bringing him his beers in the evening as he lay slumped in the La-Z-Boy in front of the TV — lacking any sign other than an occasional grunt that he was aware she even existed — each and every morning she knelt down and said a prayer of thanks that she had a son like Billy.

Of course, during the weekdays while Billy was at school, she had the house to herself. Then, maybe around 3 or 4 o’clock Billy would come home and they would talk, go over his schoolwork, sometimes go to the park or the zoo, go bowling or ice skating. Or she would take him to a department store and they would shop.

It was quite remarkable that Billy and his mom spent so much time together, considering that most boys his age were typically hanging out with their friends, playing pickup games of baseball or basketball, skateboarding or riding their bikes around town.

In the evenings and on weekends, they worked around Harold, like you would a big box of old discarded clothes that was on its way to the Salvation Army. Usually ornery and mute, he would flop down, sitting for hours in a pose of dull complacency, a blob of blank isolation, glazed eyes locked on the TV screen, sucking on a Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, more often than not cramming handfuls of barbecue potato chips or Cheetos into his mouth. Except for the gruff recurrent *“Irene, need some more suds here”*, usually the only sounds that issued from him were the sputtering butt-flapping honks of him flatulating.

Sunday evening was special and the occasion of Irene’s big, entirely futile, attempt to get them to resemble and act like a real family. She always prepared what was by their standards a great dinner, usually consisting of a tossed salad, meatloaf, mashed potatoes with lots of butter and gravy, and then dessert. The meal always opened and closed with two of Billy’s favorites. For starters, Irene prepared deep fried chicken wings with spicy barbecue sauce on the side. Then to close out the meal in grand style, she baked her own custom deep-dish apple pie. The upper crust was sprinkled with brown sugar and raisins, and as a bonus treat she dished out huge slices of the magnificent pie with scoops of caramel-vanilla ice cream melting on top.

There was always plenty for second helpings.

“More pie, Harold?”

He patted the mucilaginous bloated belly of a man-pregnant-with-child, hovering above his belt like a massive lard-filled beach ball.

“I’m on a diet, Irene. You know that. I’m gonna look like Brad Pitt any day now.”

His horse laugh sputtered raucously, then mutated into a deep lung-purging cough, replete with oyster-sized gobs of mucous, which he unceremoniously wiped on the table cloth.

“Can I have some more, mom? You make the best apple pie in the world.”

Harold sneered and then gave Billy a sharp but painless slap on the head.

“You’ve really turned into a brown-nosing little shit, you know that?”

“Mom makes good apple pie, dad.”

“But she fucks like Grandma Moses.”

Billy sat silently. He couldn’t let his father get to him. Nor could he let the vile man get the last word. He didn’t quite understand what his father had just said. But he knew it was cruel and meant to hurt his mom.

“You know what Sister Mary Felicia used to tell me at school?”

Billy held up in front of him the last forkful of apple pie from his plate.

“Always count your blessings.”

Billy’s father stood straight up from his chair, and with one burly shove upended the table, strewing the dishes and silverware across the room and sending Billy sprawling. Then he went into the living room, grabbed the remote and tuned in to the tail end of a baseball game. The Tigers were playing the White Sox at Comiskey Park.

Irene was leaning against the kitchen counter with her face in her hands, quietly crying.

Billy started picking up the broken dishes.

Sunday evening dinner was always very special.

Tonight was no exception.

The apple pie was excellent.

Mr. Rogers and His Dancing Puppets

There was one thing Irene couldn’t provide for Billy.

That was a real father.

A father that loved his son.

A father that took joy in his son.

A father that was proud to be a father.

A father that took time to do father-son things.

A father who Billy could look up to as someone special.

Mr. Rogers had lived in the neighborhood for as long as anyone could remember. He was in his early fifties and had worked as a union electrician on commercial buildings his entire life. He was a model neighbor, kept his house in tip top shape, and was often seen working on his yard during the spring and summer months, keeping his perfect lawn trimmed and free of weeds, planting and tending to the copious flowers and several fruit trees in his yard. Anyone on a stroll by his property was greeted with a charming smile and a tip of his Detroit Tigers baseball cap, or a friendly wave. He was an avid bowler and could be seen returning every Friday night, dressed in his yellow electrician’s union league shirt, a bowling bag in one hand and his bowling shoes swinging in the other.

In some ways, he was a very typical man, blending in and not particularly

distinctive in appearance, working class bland in his styleless clothes and bargain haircut. He was of average height and build, had grayish eyes, gray-flecked brown hair, thinning enough to hint at the onset of male-pattern baldness, and was certainly cordial, but not overly gregarious.

There was one thing, however, that set Mr. Rogers uniquely apart from just about anyone in the suburb of Troy and probably all of Detroit itself, something which made him a popular, if not legendary figure among all of the children who knew about it. Mr. Rogers was a master puppet maker, and on his basement walls hung a fairytale cast of perfectly crafted characters from all of the stories the children had grown up hearing. Of course, there was Pinocchio and Howdy Doody, superstars of puppetry who were actually puppets. But also looking down from their respective places on the long wall above Mr. Rogers' workbench were Mickey and Minnie Mouse; the Lion, Tinman and Scarecrow from Wizard of Oz; Hansel and Gretel; the Three Little Pigs; Aladdin; Daffy Duck; the Three Musketeers; Snow White and her Seven Dwarfs; Robin Hood; Santa Claus; even Superman, Batman, the Marlboro Man, and Winston Churchill. It was a dazzling display, and frankly most all the kids found it almost disconcerting to stand there as the audience for such an eclectic array of realistic-looking fairy tale, cartoon, iconic, and comic book characters.

Only on rare occasions did Mr. Rogers invite anyone into the sacred chamber of his woodworking shop. But when he did, it was a very special occasion indeed. The by-invitation-only, hand-picked children, at most three or four at a time, would be treated to a show they would talk about for months.

Mr. Rogers, applying his vast knowledge of everything electrical, had put together a complex motor-driven robotic array, which he could manipulate with a set of levers and switches giving him total control of the puppets. He could have them perform intricate synchronous movements, could entirely by himself make them gesture, dance, and even do acrobatics more convincingly and with greater precision than any team of the best puppeteers could manage.

Mr. Rogers and his dancing puppets. That's what the kids would talk about for hours on end.

Billy had actually seen one of Mr. Rogers' shows once, but that was several years ago and his memory of the occasion, while still precious, had blurred with time. He was maybe six at the time, so it had been almost seven years ago.

Because of a teacher conference, school let out early today, and Billy was on his way home. He took the long way, taking a lazy stroll through the park with its adjoining baseball diamond, where eight or nine of his schoolmates had met to scrub together an impromptu game. As he approached the yard of the Rogers house, he was surprised to see Mr. Rogers standing near the front edge of his lawn, looking at a curbside tree which had fallen on bad times and appeared to be nearly dead.

"Hello, Mr. Rogers. You're home from work early today."

"And it looks like you're home early from school, young man. Or are you playing hooky?"

"I burned the school down. The heat was too intense to roast marshmallows. So here I am."

“A little joker, you are. Looks like this tree has had it. Time to bring out the chain saw.”

“Looks like it.”

“I could use some lemonade. You want to join me? Do you like lemonade?”

They went to the screened porch. Billy sat down. Mr. Rogers went inside, then returned with two glasses of the icy drink in hand.

“Yessiree. Lemonade sure hits the spot.”

“Thanks, Mr. Rogers.”

They sipped in silence. Mr. Rogers emptied his glass first.

“So, have you ever seen what I have in my workroom down in my basement, uh ... I don’t think I know your name.”

“Billy. Billy Green. My mom is Irene and we live in that blue house at the end of the street. You can see it from here.”

“You don’t have a father?”

“Oh right. Sometimes I forget. His name is Harold. But you probably have never seen him. He works a lot and when he’s at home doesn’t come out much. Our yard is a mess. Not like yours. You really take nice care of your place. You must really like gardening, Mr. Rogers.”

“I do I do. But getting back to—”

“Your puppets? Oh yes, I saw them a long time ago. Maybe I was six or seven. Don’t you remember me?”

“Of course. Yes, I do.” Looking up and down Billy’s still-growing body. “You’ve changed a lot. You’re becoming a young man.”

“Do you still make them dance?”

“Yes, I still make them dance. Many other things, too. I’ve taught them lots of new tricks. Say, I’m just guessing, but I’ll bet you’d like to see for yourself. Come on. Just bring your lemonade and follow me. I haven’t been down there for a couple weeks. It’ll be fun.”

Mr. Rogers led Billy through the kitchen and down the steep stairs to the basement. He unlocked a door at the bottom and turned on the lights. Billy’s eyes widened as he took in the sights. It was more spectacular than he remembered.

Mr. Rogers went to the far end of the room, flipped a couple switches and simultaneously the cast of twelve or so puppets which were slumped in a line the length of the workbench, sprung to attention. An array of small powerful stage lamps, pointing from a rack hung on the ceiling, also came to life and flooded the puppets with light.

Mr. Rogers then started playing with the levers and pushing the buttons on a control box, and the puppets responded accordingly. Soon they were leapfrogging back and forth, performing somersaults, and stacking themselves in a cheerleader pyramid. The brief show climaxed with the collapse of the pyramid and the puppets rolling back to an upright position, all at attention, saluting.

Billy was awe-struck.

Mr. Rogers quietly laughed — apparently he still got quite a bang out of seeing the show, though he himself had created it — then pulled up a stool and sat next to Billy. Mr. Rogers put his arm around him and beamed a friendly, paternal smile.

“You liked that, eh? Pretty good, if I do say so myself. More lemonade, Billy?”

“No thanks, Mr. Rogers. That was amazing! Really amazing!”

That sat in silence for a few minutes, Billy studying the puppets, Mr. Rogers with his hand still on Billy’s shoulder.

“You know the legend of King Arthur and his knights, don’t you, Billy?”

“The Knights of the Roundtable? Sure I do. We had them a little in school. But I’ve read a lot about them.”

“The Knights loved King Arthur. They were very loyal to their king.”

“They fought and died for him.”

Mr. Rogers got up and moved several of the puppets out of the way. Then he flipped a few switches dimming all of the stage spots but two, which continued illuminating the very center section of the bench.

“I have a very special show that no one else has ever seen, Billy. Would you like to see it?”

“Wow! I sure would.”

From a cabinet off to the side of the workbench, Mr. Rogers took out two incredibly lifelike figures. One puppet already sitting on a throne, and another standing upright. It was King Arthur and a very handsome knight, both dressed elegantly in their dress armor.

He then stood on a stool and pulled down some custom pulleys and wiring that had been tucked up in the rigging on the ceiling. These he attached to King Arthur and the Knight, then sat back down on his stool.

“I think you’re really going to enjoy this, Billy.”

When he flipped a few more switches, the two figures came to life and medieval music started playing over the speakers — formal processional music with recorders and a pianette.

The knight circled with courtly grace, stopping periodically to bow to the king. The king formally bowed back and smiled from his throne — actually smiled! Billy had no idea puppets could do that.

The knight then came over at the feet of King Arthur, genuflected and bent forward in a very deep reverential bow. This brought his face directly into the lap of the king. He remained there for a minute or two as King Arthur with two smooth opposing circular motions, ran his hands over the knight’s head and shoulders.

Billy was mesmerized and wondered if King Arthur was bestowing some special blessing on a knight for displaying such humility and loyalty.

When the knight brought himself back upright, Billy saw something but wasn’t quite sure what he was looking at. There was now some sort of shaft protruding from King Arthur’s lap, a long slender pipe-like shape, the color of flesh.

“The knights loved to show their king how much they admired him and always wanted him to be proud and happy.”

Billy was confused.

“But what ... what was that ... uh ...?”

He turned to Mr. Rogers and his face flushed with shock.

Billy had never seen an erect penis before, not even a picture of one. Mr. Rogers was slowly and smoothly stroking what appeared to be a long sausage which was sticking out of the front of his pants. He turned to face Billy, reaching with his free hand for the back of Billy's neck.

"Show me, Billy. Just like the knight. Show me how much you love me and my puppets. Come here, now. Put this in your mouth."

Mr. Rogers started to pull Billy's head down into his lap.

"Come on, Billy. Just lick this like it's a delicious lollipop."

Billy swung his arm and broke the grip Mr. Rogers had on the back of his neck, but before he could turn to run, the stronger man's arms instantly sprang back attempting to reassert control. Billy ducked and with his face sickeningly close to Mr. Rogers' pulsing erect penis, shoved at the man's chest as hard as he could. Mr. Rogers went over backwards and Billy heard him groan in pain as he hit the floor. Mr. Rogers then yelled, "You little cocksucker! Come back here!"

Billy was up the stairs, through the kitchen and out the door, faster than he had ever run in his life. He didn't stop to look back until he got out to the street. He still kept running as fast as he could, though there was no sign of Mr. Rogers at the swinging screen door of the porch.

When Billy got home, his mom was in the kitchen. He was still a little out of breath.

"Billy! You're sweating up a storm. How about some lemonade?"

"Not really in the mood for lemonade, mom. I think I'll just lay down for a while and read."

"Suit yourself. I'm off to the supermarket. Homemade pepperoni pizza for dinner tonight!"

Billy spent the rest of the afternoon in his room. Reading was out of the question. He barely noticed the new Xitizen Cain CD that he had playing in repeat-mode on his stereo system.

He couldn't sort it all out. He knew that adults did a lot of things kids didn't do. Things he didn't yet know about. His parents were total prudes when it came to anything about sex. So he really knew very little about it. His mom read a Catholic publication called *Listen, My Son* which was supposed to give him some fundamental insights into the miracle of creation. While it had an abundance of vague and high-sounding language about God's glory and wisdom in creating the special love that is shared by a man and a woman — a special love which Billy sensed would litter the planet with more snotty-nosed Catholic kids — it completely lacked any nuts-and-bolts details about what actually took place. Everything Billy knew about sex he got from the other misinformed kids around him. That usually entailed a lot of snickering and very little useful information.

Nevertheless, what little he did know didn't jibe with what had just happened. The memory of Mr. Rogers' swollen blue-veined member almost made Billy puke. His gut told him there was something very wrong about the whole thing.

Then again, he was just a boy. Maybe this is one of those grown-up secrets which adults finally share with you when you're old enough. Mr. Rogers — at least until today — seemed like a very nice man.

Billy heard his mother call up the stairs. "Billy, time for dinner."

Apparently, the pizza would have to wait for another evening. When Billy came down and took his seat at the table, he discovered his father had nixed the idea and demanded his own preferred grease-soaked fare of pork sausage and fried potatoes with gravy.

Billy didn't have much of an appetite and just pushed the food around on his plate.

"I have a question."

Billy's father didn't seem to hear and just kept on noisily chomping on his sausage and fried potatoes, his mouth wide open for all to see the masticating mulch. But his mom perked up instantly.

"Of course, Billy. You can ask us anything. Is this for school?"

"No, not really. Just something that came up. So ... I was wondering ... well ... uh ..."

"For fucks sake, spit it out or shut up." Harold downed almost a whole glass of beer in one huge gulp, wiping his foamy lips and chin on the back of his shirt sleeve. "More suds here while you're up, Irene."

Billy's mom got up and headed to the fridge.

"Well, I was wondering if a boy should ever let a man, you know, an older person, put his, uh ... thing ... his pee pee thing, like, you know, his penis ... uh ... in the boy's mouth."

Billy's father was in the midst of fork-lifting a huge helping of fatty pork into his cavernous tongue hangar. At first he choked, then gagged, then splooped the entire mouthful of unchewed mushy contents onto his plate and the area of the tablecloth immediately in front of him. He threw his hands into the sky and rolled his head back as if to beseech the Lord for His assistance. Then in one continuous motion he suddenly dropped his chin back on his chest and belched like a walrus. Finally lowering his hands back to the table, he turned and stared at Billy as if he were looking at a disemboweled sheep.

"You want to know if you should ever let a man stick his dick in your mouth? Like sucking his cock? Christ, you're one for the books. Where the fuck did you come up with that?"

"I can't say. It's—"

"You can suck my dick if you want to. Since your mother is too high-falutin. Too prissy and pure to slick lick a little happiness into your father's miserable fucking life. I think you and I can do some business. We'll keep it in the family."

Billy had never ever seen his mother really angry. She was always supremely patient and pathetically submissive. But tonight would make up for hundreds of missed opportunities.

"Harold, you will not talk to our son like that! You are never to use that language again, in my presence or in front of Billy!"

"I say whatever I please, exactly how I feel like saying it." Shaking his head. "Whiny bitch."

He went back to stuffing his face.

Irene started screaming at the top of her lungs.

"No you won't! Never again! Did you hear me, Harold? Never again."

"Whaddya gonna do about it, you feeble-minded cunt? Pee your panties?"

For the first time Billy could remember, his mother made a decision and stood her ground.

She rushed upstairs, hurriedly threw handfuls of hers and Billy's clothes into a suitcase, adding some toiletries, their tooth brushes, and a couple of magazines, then jammed it shut. She grabbed Billy and led him out the door.

"What the fuck! Goddammit Irene! Just where do you think you're going?"

She didn't answer him. She didn't look back. She kept right on going.

Too lazy to bother coming after them or too indifferent to care, Harold just stood in the doorway until they were two houses down the street, then turned and went back in the house, locking the door behind him.

It was a warm night and when they weren't under a streetlight, Billy could see stars.

"Where are we going, mom?"

"I don't know yet, Billy. Don't worry. I'll find us a place to stay."

They stopped at a 7-11 fairly close by. She bought Billy two hot dogs, a bag of Frito's, and a slurpy, then used the coin phone to call a lady she knew from church. They had become pretty close friends and the woman had both an older son in college and a girl two years older than Billy who went to the same school.

"You remember Mrs. Maddox? Suzanna Maddox? She's coming to pick us up."

Mrs. Maddox pulled up in the rescue vehicle, a 1993 Oldsmobile Bravada SUV.

She turned out to be a very kind and accommodating host. Not only did she carry Irene's bag into the house but seemed genuinely pleased to be able to help out in a time of need.

Mr. Maddox was an aerospace engineer at a military tank plant in the nearby town of Warren. He was on travel the majority of time Billy and his mom were there, but the few times he was around, he greeted them with a cordial smile and friendly small talk. Overall he seemed fine with having them as guests.

They ended up staying almost a full week. Irene slept comfortably on a rollaway in the den. Billy was given the vacated room of Daniel, the college boy.

In the next room was Jackie. He had noticed her at school. Who couldn't? She spent more time being counseled and reprimanded for her appearance than the rest of the student body combined. Ratted bleached and dyed hair, ablaze in bold shades of shocking pink and hazardous-material-warning yellow. Thick punked out makeup. Torn, fashionably tattered clothing, all black. Miniskirts over patterned tights or skin-clinging leather jeans. Spiky Barbarella boots. Shiny metal chains dangling everywhere. Walking the halls of Troy Jr.-Sr. High School, she looked like the schizophrenic step-sister of Wendy O. Williams.

Billy spotted her frequently over the short time he stayed with the Maddox's. But it was brief glimpses more like seeing a shooting star than a harvest moon. Usually Jackie was in a hurry, going somewhere, coming from somewhere. Without fail, on the rare occasions she spent any time at home, immediately after arriving she slammed and locked her bedroom door. On would come her stereo and their shared wall would vibrate with the pounding, riot-grrrrl screaming of Bikini Kill or the mad fuzz-bomb guitars of Seven-Year Bitch.

He instantly became a fan. Both of the music and of the girl.

The girl particularly fascinated him. He obsessed over getting to know her. Seeing what made her tick. He finally decided he'd even settle for talking to her just once, merely to say that he had. It was a groupie thing. He was the groupie.

He thought long and hard, then initiated a carefully calculated strategy of charm, which he was positive would kindle an irresistible curiosity in her and get her to open up to him.

It consisted of his smiling cheerfully at her on every possible occasion — passing on the stairs to their rooms, trading places with her to brush his teeth at the bathroom sink, at the kitchen table in the morning where every day she sat carving her omelet into a swastika. He even grinned invitingly at her in the hallway at school on the rare occasions she whipped past him.

Each and every time, his sunny overture received the same inauspicious response. She sneered, laughed, then scowled at him like he was a disease.

So much for making a new friend.

In sharp contrast to the arctic climate surrounding the mutant teenager in the family, the atmosphere of the rest of the Maddox household was thoroughly summery and upbeat. Whether this was normal or temporarily conjured up to lift the sagging spirits of their house guests, wasn't clear. In any case, both Billy and his mom were quite comfortable. They thoroughly enjoyed being there.

Of course, no matter how much they wished it could, this arrangement couldn't last forever. After only a couple days, guilt started to descend on Irene, both about imposing on the hospitality and kindness of the Maddox's, and for abandoning her Harold. She couldn't imagine how he was functioning. He wasn't marginally capable of cooking, doing laundry, setting out his clothes — none of the day-to-day things which keep a person going. His ability in the kitchen appeared to be limited to opening a bottle of beer, and he still relied on Irene to do that. What was going on with him? How was he holding up?

On the fourth day, Irene called him.

"Harold?"

From the instant he heard her voice, he unleashed a tirade of non-stop threats and obscenities.

She immediately hung up on him.

Next day it was the same thing.

On the following evening — their sixth at the Maddox's — Harold and Irene had "the talk".

When she opened the call with her usual "Harold?", instead of yelling, she heard silence. Irene went on to explain how she wanted to come home but there were some changes that had to be made. That she wasn't asking for a lot but what she was asking for was important. Eventually Harold himself started talking. They were on the phone for two hours.

Irene kept insisting that she would come back home under one condition. The condition was non-negotiable. It was that Harold would never ever use foul language in front of either her or Billy again.

It didn't seem like a lot to ask. But for a man who worked in an auto factory, where rarely anything was said which did not include a burst of expletives, for a

man who had been in the company of the surly, sordid, and vulgar his entire life, it was like asking him to become a ballet dancer.

"I'll try."

"Trying's not good enough. You have to promise."

"But Irene ..."

"If you want me back, you have to promise."

For the first and only time in their relationship, he relented.

Harold promised to clean up his mouth. Irene promised to come home the next day.

All was forgiven.

Returning home was strange. The contrast to the light and lively Maddox household was sharp and disheartening. Aside from the absence of Harold's usual barrage of expletives and crass sexual references, nothing had changed. They probably never would.

But true to his word, with monumental effort Harold sanitized his otherwise ungrammatical and coarse utterances, of any and all of his usual stock-and-trade profanities. In time he actually started to make light of the whole thing by turning it into a game, rendering the Herculean task a bit more bearable. He'd find both common and off-the-wall substitutions for the foul language he usually used.

"Dagnabbit!"

"Golldang!"

"Gosh darn!"

"Fudge it!!"

"Kiss my ash!"

"That son-of-a-barn."

The substitutions were so completely out of character for him, Harold felt awkward and ridiculous. But on the flip side, the effort brought out an antic side of him, a slight easing of the withdrawal pains he suffered not being able to cuss around the house any longer. It actually ended up providing some unexpected entertainment for the three of them.

It was the first time Billy could remember seeing the slightest hint of a sense of humor in his father. It was very slight but still suggested that under the elephant-thick skin of bitterness which had calloused Harold's heart and cocooned him in an impregnable shell of misery, there was the faint but flickering light of a man who could still feel something, maybe even occasionally smile again.

Sometimes he'd slip up.

"Fuck — I mean fungus — my balls itch."

"Can it, Harold!"

"You could show a little sympathy here. They feel like they've been soaking in taco sauce."

"Harold!!"

Such occasional relapses notwithstanding, the tiny but detectable change in the atmosphere of the Green household was refreshing, even if it offered little hope for any major overhaul of the relationships Irene and Billy had with Harold.

Truly gratifying was that Irene had stood her ground and asserted herself,

even if it was only this one time. Whether she would ever again summon the courage to hold Harold in check, and challenge his tyranny of the household, remained to be seen. But this was a good start and at the very least, Irene had discovered that deep inside her somewhere, she had a reserve of strength which she had never known existed.

Something else good came out of all of this.

Really good.

It happened during Billy's stay at the Maddox's. This was on the very last evening before they would end their six-day retreat and return to the bland hell of their own household.

It was a little after 11 pm and Billy was just getting ready to go to sleep. He heard a soft knock at his door but before he could get out of bed to answer, she slipped in and quietly closed the door behind him.

"Alright! A boy in his skivvies. Such a beautiful thing."

It was shocking to see her without her punk paraphernalia and Halloween makeup. She was a very pretty girl. Somehow the pink and yellow hair now just added a playfulness to the lovely features of her face. She was barefoot and only wearing pale blue boxer shorts and a simple white t-shirt, through which Billy could see the tips of her nipples, adding yet another layer to her appeal.

"Jackie ... "

"Call me Ripper."

She came over and sat down on the bed next to him. Slowly and delicately she removed his underpants. She reached over and switched off the reading lamp next to the bed stand.

Soon Billy was breathing hard and feeling sensations he had never felt before. He writhed. He pitched. He panted. He groaned. The world exploded.

It was over in less than two minutes.

His breathing calmed and his body relaxed.

"Is your name really Ripper?"

"Are you retarded?"

"I don't get it. Your parents call you Jackie. How many names do you have?"

"There is only one name. I am officially Jackie the Ripper. Don't you forget it! Family calls me Jackie. Friends call me Ripper. See, my fucking loser parents named me Agatha. Agatha! Can you believe it? What would *you* do, toilet breath, if you were named Agatha?"

"Does my breath really smell like a toilet?"

"My god! You are so clueless." She leaned over and licked his cheek and kissed the end of his nose. He detected what he would later in life recognize as the scent of his own semen. "I only said that because I like you so much. I better go before Fred and Wilma find me up here with you. Be a good boy."

"If I was named Agatha I would ... "

But she was gone. And tomorrow he would be gone too.

Billy had learned a lot in five or so minutes. For example, the whole thing with Mr. Rogers kind of gelled into some vague understanding of what the man was after. The thought of himself doing that to a man made his stomach queasy. But having it done to him, even by a seriously demented girl like Ripper, really

made sense. It truly rocked! His whole body still tingled with the aftershocks, and he felt — at least right now — a relief, a release, the long-awaited satisfying fulfillment of a warm pleasant longing that had been building in him all this time. Literally for over a year. From all the way back, when sensations he had never felt before spread from his partially erect penis throughout his whole body, as Sister Mary put her hands on his shoulders and leaned her lovely breasts against him — that unforgettable moment when she gave him his first kiss.

This too was another first. A really great first! The first of a lifetime of what would turn out to be thousands of repetitions of a very specific sexual act — one he most definitely would never tire of. Each occurrence perhaps might appear mechanically almost identical to all the others but each would be, in its own way, beautifully unique and without parallel. Each one would carve into his erotic psyche its own distinct and spectacular memory. As had tonight's ...

At age 13 — Billy's first blowjob.

“The Man Who Loved Too Much”

Trilogy



Billy Green is bright, enigmatic, and lost. He spent his first 28 years trying to figure out who he is and where he fits in. His life has been a wild, unpredictable quest to attach himself to some reality he can grasp and live with. He grew up in an abysmal suburb of Detroit, escaped to university life at Cornell, got married and divorced before being thrown headlong and entirely unprepared into the insanity and social chaos of New York City.

Book 1: Archipelago

Amazon (Kindle): [amzn.to/1tyIRiw](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B000APR004)

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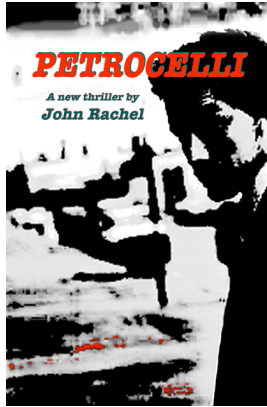
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Lenny Petrocelli had it made until his gangland bosses decided to set him up as the fall guy for a child prostitution ring. This crime thriller confronts the horrifying and taboo topic of sex slavery and human bondage. There are over 35 million slaves in the world today. It's a multi-billion dollar business, subjecting females, many of them barely in their teens, to the worst kind of savage exploitation. If this gritty novel rings true, it's for good reason. Petrocelli is based on actual stories from the violent and gruesome world of human trafficking.

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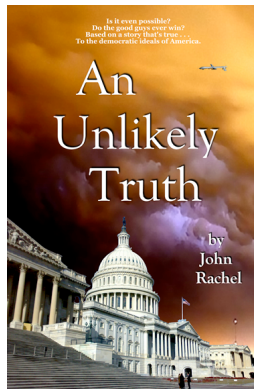
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“An Unlikely Truth”



In this political drama, a bright, young, idealistic, Green Party candidate in his bid for the congressional seat of a very conservative district in Ohio, teams with a beautiful, fiery African-American intern to combat the slick deceptions and ruthless tactics of a sweet-talking right wing incumbent.

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“Blinders Keepers”



In this dark comedy, a young man who escapes his hopelessly hayseed home town in Missouri is mistakenly labeled a terrorist and must survive a manhunt by government security agencies, as the President of an America in chaos and collapse perpetrates an end-of-the-world hoax, in a desperate attempt to regain control and get himself re-elected.

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[illegible]

Welcome to the parallel universe of "12-12-12". This not what actually happens during 2012. But what unfolds is not more implausible. Nor is it less implausible. It is dark satire, a portrayal of reality with healthy doses of surreality and comedy, spawned by the tragic absurdity of our times. One reviewer calls it "laugh-out-loud brain food for hungry minds."

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About The Author

John Rachel has a B.A. in Philosophy, has traveled extensively, been a songwriter and music producer, and is a bipolar humanist. He has spent his life trying to resolve the intrinsic clash between the metaphysical purity of Buddhism and the overwhelming appeal of narcissism.

In October of 2008, while living in Japan, he completed his first novel, which he prefers to no longer discuss. It fell into a legal black hole, the result of the naïve and trusting Rachel being conned by an unscrupulous publisher.

In November of 2009, he completed his second novel, *The Man Who Loved Too Much*, written over ten months, as he lived in and traveled through Japan, China, Nepal, India Thailand, and Malaysia. It follows the convoluted life of a young man from age 4 to 28, as he tries to find his place in the world. The story is set in Detroit, upstate New York, and New York City. At 800+ pages, it is an epic. This encyclopedia of white trash pulp fiction plotlines has been split into three volumes, the novel you have just read being the first book of the series.

While writing his third and fourth novels in 2010 and 2011 — *11-11-11* and *12-12-12* — which track two years in the life of a young man, a hapless victim born in a hopelessly hayseed town in Bible-belt Missouri, the author hopped around between Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, South Korea and the Philippines. Those two efforts evolved into the short and snappy adventure, *Blinders Keepers*, both as a novel and a screenplay. Combining plot elements from *11-11-11* and *12-12-12*, *Blinders Keepers* is social-political satire in the tradition of Jonathan Swift, Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, but revved up and spit-shined to take on the historical new levels of absurdity and dysfunction of the 21st Century. It was published in 2013, after which the author bounced between Japan, South Korea, the U.S., and nine countries in Europe.

He then became somewhat rooted in a small traditional farming village in

Japan near Osaka. It was there, immediately after poking himself in the forehead with chopsticks, that he was inspired to plant soybeans and sweet potatoes in his small but promising vegetable garden, and to write *An Unlikely Truth*, published March of 2014. In this political drama, a bright, young, idealistic, Green Party candidate, in his bid for the congressional seat of a very conservative district in Ohio, teams with a beautiful, fiery African-American intern to combat the slick deceptions and ruthless tactics of a sweet-talking right wing incumbent.

After the publication of the entire *The Man Who Loved Too Much* trilogy, he has two more novels in the pipeline: *Love Connection*, a drug-trafficking thriller set in Japan, and *The Last Giraffe*, an anthropological drama involving both the worship and devouring of giraffes. It unfolds in sub-Saharan Africa.

Also in the works is a creative non-fiction work, *The Naked American*. It is allegedly an account of his travels since leaving America August 2006, but more likely the product of the voices in his head which have plagued him since puberty. Several publishers have declared that they will do everything in their power to make sure this book never sees the light of day.

The author's last permanent residence in America was Portland, Oregon where he had a state-of-the-art ProTools recording studio, music production house, a radio promotion and music publishing company. He recorded and produced several artists in the Pacific Northwest, releasing and promoting their music on radio across the U.S.

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*You can follow John Rachel's adventures
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jdrachel.com

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*Since the open mind recognizes no borders, you are also
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Three adapted excerpts from *The Man Who Loved Too Much, Book 1: Archipelago* have appeared as short stories in online and print publications: "Just the Two of Us" was published in the Scottish print magazine *Ranfurly Review*, September 2010 issue; "Balloons" appeared in the American magazine *The Toucan*, the January 2011 issue; "Cream Colored Ponies and Crisp Apple Strudels" appeared in the *Midwest Literary Magazine*, November 2011.