

The Old Priest

I

THE OLD PRIEST IS A JESUIT, BRAINY AND fey. He smokes Pall Malls fixed bayonet-style in an onyx and silver cigarette holder and crosses his legs at the knee. He tells stories as if he is being interviewed for a public television special on old priests. A small, guttural chuckle serves to launch one of his very interesting anecdotes: it's a kind of punctuation that serves as transition, like a colon or dash. You bring your latest girl to see the old priest, you always bring your latest girl to see the old priest.

"Mildred, what are you doing with this rascal?" asks the old priest, ordering a Tanqueray martini "standing up."

Mildred squeals at the idea of you as a rascal. Everything is very jolly. The old priest's hair is the same shade of silver as the end of his cigarette holder, a prop that fascinates Mildred.

"This cigarette holder was given to me by the mother of one of my students," explains the old priest. "She didn't think priests should smoke non-filtered cigarettes, and she objected to the bit of tobacco that became occasionally lodged in the corner of my mouth. Later that same mother, emboldened by one too many grappas, tried to seduce me in the sitting room of the country house where I was to spend the weekend."

Your latest girl is rapt at the stories of the old priest, they are always rapt, the old priest does half the seducing for you.

I

Back in the room Mildred says, “That’s some old priest. Is he gay?”

“What do you think?”

“I think all you Catholic school boys seem gay.”

Another girl and the old priest, always ready to be bought lunch or dinner. He smokes, drinks, laughs, tells stories—makes people feel as though they are participating in the history of their own time. The old priest is a monologist of the old school, tossing brightly colored balls into the air and keeping them aloft.

“Another time, we were in Madrid and wanted to get out and see the night life,” recalls the old priest. “We concocted a story that the American ambassador had invited us to dinner, but the prefect said that in order to receive permission to leave the house after nine we’d need the permission of the provincial. The provincial said, ‘If the American ambassador really wants to see you, he’ll invite you to lunch.’ My friend Arthur Ramsay thought we were sunk right then and there, but I convinced him that we should go through with it anyway, even though it was against the rules. We danced the flamenco till three.”

Everything is very jolly. Your girl is from the South this time and refers to the old priest as a “sexy old queen.”

Time and again you meet the old priest. Years fly by the way they used to mark time in the movies: wind and leaves, the corny tearing of the calendar page, the plangent tolling of Time’s own iron bell. You either bring a girl along or, if you’re depressed, you go by yourself and expect to be consoled.

“I want to write but I can’t write,” you say.

“It will come,” says the old priest. “Give it time. But the pattern is that you should have written your first stories by now. You’re a bit behind schedule, you know.”

You can almost convince yourself that he knows what he's talking about. He speaks with the authority of a grammar book and is relentlessly optimistic.

2

Life takes you through a couple of twists and turns, you do things you never thought you'd be doing. You live in a rooming house, you drink a lot in the evening, you work a day job as a blackjack dealer in Atlantic City. You wear a white tuxedo, red bow tie and matching red buttons, which your fellow croupiers refer to as "the clown suit." Nobody, not even you, can believe it.

In summer the old priest comes for a visit. You shake martinis in your third floor efficiency. The heat is stifling, oppressive. Through the walls wafts the scent of frying meat, and a loud conversation that goes on and on.

"This is a house of failure," the old priest says, jaunty in his white polo shirt and Madras shorts.

"It's experience."

"So is being bitten by a shark."

"I need a membership card that provides entrée into the historical moment."

"Dear child, I have no idea what you're talking about," the old priest says, pausing for the transitional laugh. "When I was your age I was going to the bullfights in Spain. We actually saw Ava Gardner one time. I went beforehand to ask for permission but the prefect said, 'Jesuits don't go to bullfights.' When we got there the place was crawling with Jesuits in mufti."

In your spare time you read Rimbaud and crave poetry, mystery, illumination. You find an old fish tank somebody has left at the curb and in it, according to the directions of a mail order

kit, you raise a crop of hallucinogenic mushrooms. Two weeks before Christmas you visit the old priest at his sister's house on Cape Cod, in Wellfleet, where you plan to spend the weekend breaking into the ancient mysteries. Poetry, mystery, illumination: you'd like to get to the bottom of it.

The old priest says to you as you're unpacking: "Be careful not to leave anything behind. A friend of mine left a pair of black briefs in the guest bed and now my sister says she is beginning to believe everything she reads in the papers."

"Just from a pair of black briefs?"

"Well, apparently he had *Booty on Board* embroidered into the rather narrow seat. Oh dear heavens!"

You drink a pitcher of martinis accompanied by three slices of American cheese and a box of stale Ritz crackers. For dessert you chew the mushrooms, one or two at a time, unsure of the proper dosage.

"This is a fine delicacy," the old priest says. "It's a first-rate cocktail snack."

You nibble the mushrooms, dried and crumbling in your fingertips. The pattern and texture of the desiccated stems and tiny caps become increasingly interesting until, without much warning, the old priest has sprouted tufts of white hair on his face, and his pinkish hands also have sprouted coarse white hair and the hard dull grayish-black points of two cleft hooves.

"Don't look now, but you've turned into a goat-man," you say to the old priest.

"Is that true?" wonders the old priest, lighting a cigarette. Even as a goat-man the old priest has not lost his taste for tobacco.

"Just look for yourself in the mirror."

The old priest stands to look into the gilt-framed mirror that hangs full length above the red velvet sofa.

"I suppose I have," remarks the old priest, vaguely amused. "Is it permanent, do you think?"

"For the next eight hours or so, anyway." You laugh. The idea of the old priest transformed into a goat-man is hilarious.

He examines himself in the glass, puffing his cheeks and shaking his oversized head. When the cigarette is finished he shakes the cigarette holder and the final few filaments of burning tobacco fall to the floor. He stands before the glass with the empty cigarette holder and begins to wave it in front of him in frantic, cross-like motions.

You take life, but you can't give it," says the old priest, his hand trembling but his eyes fixed steadily forward. "Gangsters," he says, "Cosmic bully-boys—"

"Who are you talking to?" you ask.

"I have to chase these demons away," is his response, but after a few more swipes he sits down on the sofa, places the cigarette holder in his shirt pocket, and laces his fingers together. "We're not supposed to see this," says the old priest, plainly worried. "This is a sin we're committing."

"It's just in our heads," you laugh. "It's the power of the human imagination."

That's what you intend to say but it comes out, *It's the power of the fungus humungination.*

"Oh no it's not," is his answer. "It's even worse for you if you think it is."

He gets down on all fours and in the process the cigarette holder drops suddenly to the ground. He clatters goat-like back and forth in front of you on his knuckles and knees, shaking the walls and knocking his sister's knick-knacks from the mildewed shelves.

"Look what you've done to me now," says the old priest,

goat-like and forlorn. "Look what you've done to me now."

"Where's your God now?" you say, laughing, in your best Edward G. Robinson, then are immediately sorry to have said it. You are sorry to have turned the old priest into a goat-man. You are sorry to have spoiled his religion, to have brought him pagan-low. You are sorry for everything. This is something you've been taught, something that will not go away. You are sorry for *everything*.

The Baltimore Catechism: "O my God I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins, because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin."

"This is a bad trip," you say, then add that it is his religion, not a handful of dried mushrooms, that makes one sorry about everything. Then you are sorry for that, too.

3

You find a new girl, it's been awhile, things have cooled a bit between you and the old priest since the magic mushroom incident. The three of you get dressed up and go to the best French restaurant in Boston, where the old priest is taking a year's sabbatical at a Jesuit house in Cambridge. He is wearing his Roman collar and all signs of the goat-man have vanished. He looks a bit less puffed around the edges, and his sea-glass eyes are sparkling. It occurs to you that the old priest has been consigned to a drying-out facility.

"Wine," the old priest says, lifting a full glass of Nuits-Saint-Georges. "Bringer of *ekstasis* to pagans and Christians alike."

"What's *ekstasis*?" your new girl Ruthie wants to know.

“Well, it’s a bit different than ecstasy as you probably know the definition of that word,” explains the old priest, and it occurs to you that he is making a pronounced effort not to leer. “It’s the state, literally, of standing outside oneself. Of being able to step outside the prison of one’s own body, if only for a moment or two. Isn’t that what everybody wants, after all?”

“I guess I’ve never thought about it that way,” your new girl admits, leaning in.

“I dined with a Swiss Jesuit one time,” the old priest chuckles, passing Ruthie a bite of his Veal Oscar. “He ordered beef and I ordered duck. I wanted a taste of his beef and do you know what he said? He said, ‘If you wanted beef, you should have ordered it, and if I wanted duck, I would have ordered it.’ Oh dear heavens! The Swiss, well, you know what Harry Lime says: the great product of their civilization, the cuckoo clock!”

“Were you in Europe a long time?” Ruthie asks.

“Seven years. I wanted to stay and earn a doctorate at the Sorbonne, but the Society of Jesus had other plans for me. I came back to Washington just in time for the Kennedy years, which was quite a spectacle.”

“What do you know about anti-Semitism in Europe?” Ruthie asks, a bit pointedly.

“The place is crawling with it, I know that much.” He puts down his knife and fork. “Once, during my novitiate, I stayed for a time in a Jesuit house in Vienna. This was in the early fifties, not even ten years after the war, and the city looked it, too. The Jesuit house where I was to spend the summer was an old castle with parapets and ramparts, battlements and what-have-you. In the first few weeks of my stay I made friends with a Jesuit from Argentina. He liked to joke that so many people from this part of the world had relocated to Argentina that he

had to come to Vienna for a while, just to balance things out a bit. Father Madero hated the Viennese Jesuits, though. In the evening after supper we used to go up on the roof to smoke and watch the sky change colors, flocks of swallows darting and diving among the chimneys, and one night he pointed down to a side street—I suppose we were up about eight stories—and said, ‘There used to be a synagogue down there, where that kiosk is now standing. One night we were all gathered out here after dinner, smoking cigarettes and chatting, and from this roof we watched a group of men come down the street with sticks and bats. They broke every window in that synagogue, then beat the Jews as they tried to run away. And do you know what your fellow Jesuits did?’ asked Father Madero. ‘Well, I don’t suppose there was much they could do,’ I offered, for I knew by then that Father Madero hated the Society of Jesus. ‘They cheered,’ was his reply, and he began clapping and whistling. Dear sweet Jesus.”

“An honest man,” Ruthie says, and for a few moments nobody says anything.

“An honest man,” Ruthie says once more, reaching with her fork for another bite of his Veal Oscar.

The old priest, it seems, will stop at nothing to impress one of your girlfriends.

You go back up to Boston, this time alone. The new girl once again has not worked out and you are feeling depressed, ahistorical.

“I’m feeling depressed, ahistorical,” you tell the old priest.

“Well, so you’re making a pile of money, anyway,” the old priest says, exhaling cigarette smoke.

“Not a pile, exactly.”

“If you’re not making a really large sum of money, then I don’t get it.”

“It’s a job to do like any job. I’m not writing anything, so what’s the difference?”

“What’s the difference with anything?” the old priest wants to know. “Are you living your life or are you not?”

“I have no sense of my life as a part of the historical moment.”

“*Idiot*,” he says, as if the French pronunciation will soften the blow.

“Maybe I should go to graduate school.”

“I was a contrary student myself,” the old priest says, though you were in fact a very good student, bursting with promise and the will to please. “If they told me to read *Hamlet* I’d read *Macbeth*, and if they told me to read *Macbeth* then I’d read *Hamlet*. My junior year in high school I despised my English teacher. One time I handed in an E. B. White essay on skating in Central Park, except that I changed it to Boston Common. I got a C. I wanted to write E. B. White and tell him he’d gotten a C in high school composition. They kept me back a year, and I started to wise up.”

“They kept you back with Cs?”

“There were other factors.”

“Such as?”

“Unbridled contempt. They told me I’d never be accepted at an accredited university, so one day at the end of my senior year, only a couple of weeks before graduation, I walked over to Boston College. They asked me where I was going to high school, and when I told them they simply had me sign the forms and I was admitted at once.”