‘Tell Them I’m Not Home’ by Pete Byrne

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Sample Chapters

The Glory That Was Rome

In neighborhoods like Olney, people sorted themselves out along a variety of fault lines. Phillies fans versus those who allied themselves with Connie Mack’s pitiful Athletics, those with Lionel Electric trains against those with American Flyers, the cheaper Father and Son shoes against the pricier Flagg Brothers, Luckies or Camels, and on and on and on. But the defining separation among the people who populated the neighborhood of my childhood was the religious split between Catholics and the Protestants. Among Catholics like us, the prevailing interpretation of Protestantism encompassed anyone who wasn’t a Catholic.

The Catholicism of those years was reflexive, exclusionary and total. And it was Irish. It didn’t matter if your background was German, Italian or Polish, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia was Irish in its soul, and the brand of Catholicism we experienced reflected all of the increasingly irrelevant strengths of a national church standing valiantly against the oppression of a hostile occupying power. Muscular American Catholicism in the late 1940’s had an almost xenophobic defensiveness, a distrust of and a wariness toward all things not its own. The Church seemed to grudgingly acknowledge that the Wars of Religion had indeed ended in the Seventeenth Century; but still, you couldn’t be too careful. You certainly wouldn’t want to let your guard down by doing something dangerous like attending a wedding at an Episcopal church. The

Hungarian-born historian John Lukacs described Philadelphia upon his arrival in 1948 as a place where when an Irish boy from Frankford married a Polish girl from Bridesburg, it was considered a “mixed marriage.”

Catholics in Philadelphia were not encouraged to choose the church they would attend, and when moved to the 400 block of West Delphine Street in August 1945, we became de facto members of the parish of The Incarnation of Our Lord located at the corner of 5th Street and Lindley Avenue. There was only the formality of parish registration. My own first trip to Incarnation was not propitious. The Sunday after we moved into our new address, not yet eight years old and three days uprooted from everything familiar to me, I was sent to the 9:00 a.m. children’s Mass. The move from my aunt’s house in Wissinoming had left me feeling like Buck Rogers marooned on a distant asteroid. I dutifully went to the children’s Mass, asking an usher to point out the section reserved for the third-grade boys. Directed to a pew, I sat through Mass among what I thought were my peers. My shame and humiliation were total when meeting a cousin on the way out of church, I was told that I had been sitting among the youngsters in the second-grade section. I felt it was an embarrassment I would never get over.

To be enrolled in a Catholic school in the 1940’s was to be handed over to the care and authority of a uniformed organization of celibate women. At Incarnation, it was the Sisters of the Order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The good sisters of my experience were as devoted to the spiritual well-being of their charges as they were to the Savoir they had wed. Even among the least generous, the least broad-minded, and the most simplistically superstitious of the Order, they reflected the fact that they had offered their lives in the service of a higher calling. Considering the resources available to them, they did a

much better job than could have been reasonably expected in imparting to us the civilizing educational and ethical values of a benign Christianity. A few of them I would say could have been, under any criteria, candidates for sainthood. That's not to deny the victimization experienced by some of my contemporaries. Consideration for what we've come to call "learning disabilities" was noticeably absent. Some kids were OK; some were not. Some were smart; some were slow or even dumb. Some were bad, and often the lines got blurred. Little slack was granted to those who fell off the norm, even marginally. The nuns did beat kids. A boy from our street was so badly mistreated by a sixth-grade nun that his otherwise devout mother removed him from the Incarnation school and sent him to the local public school. He wasn't the only one. Despite the justification of their cases, the kids who left were always looked at like the guys in the army who didn't make it through basic training. By the time we reached puberty many of us, the boys anyway, were giving back as good or better than we got.

There is no discounting the horror stories recounted by adult Catholics and former Catholics of having been traumatized by what they remember as brutal nuns. What I do remember however was my own class of eighth-grade boys. At one end of the spectrum, we had among us the model Catholic boys; the altar boys, the kids who would go on to high school honors, to college and to graduate school. Also in our midst were more than a few my mother would have called "bad actors." Most of us, caught up as we were in the demonic thrall of puberty, were highly excitable and borderline unmanageable. The majority smoked cigarettes and many were already regular beer drinkers. While I don't recall any real thugs, there were several volatile types who required careful handling. Sister Mary Martin would prove to be no match for this crowd. I learned much later that she was only twenty-two years old and that we

were just her second teaching assignment. From the very first day of class she had trouble extending her span of control beyond the first row of desks. The sharks smelled blood. Early in the school year Father Buckley had been brought over from the rectory to restore order. Examples were made and there were threats of expulsions. The matter seemed settled, but with Sister's vulnerabilities exposed, the least civilized among us began a low intensity insurgency. The harder she tried to hold on to her authority, the worse things seemed to get. On many days we reduced Sister Mary Martin to tears. Our instinctive awareness that she had the full powers of the church behind her tempered some of our more outrageous impulses. But once we had her on the run, group solidarity or just the cowardly fear of being ridiculed by our peers kept some of us in the game long after we knew that she deserved better from us. I still get uneasy feelings about some of what went on in that classroom.

On another level, the recent revelations of horrendous sexual misconduct by members of a supposedly celibate male clergy lie beyond the denial of even the most ultra of Catholics. Yet with the exception of one genuinely harmless Christian Brother who exhibited an unseemly interest in young boys, I never encountered in all of my years of Catholic life, anything remotely like the evil and predatory clerical behavior that's surfaced of late. You don't have to be a church scholar to understand how and why so many sexually repressed or deformed people gravitated toward the priesthood. In my own time, boys as young as eleven or twelve years old were being identified for their piety and were spoken of as having a divinely inspired calling to the religious life.

One morning in the sixth-grade, Father Smith knocked on our classroom door. After some whispering in the hall, Sister Mary Gregory returned and announced for all to hear that I was to come to school the next day dressed

appropriately for a visit to the seminary. All eyes in the class were on me. Whatever was going on, I certainly didn't know. Unquestioningly, my mother sent me off the next day in my Sunday best. Just after the start of class, Father Smith came to the door and motioned me to come out into the hall. With him was a kid a year behind me, a fifth grader named Robert Groban, with whom several years later I was to have one of my very few fistfights. Father Smith was an old friend of my father's, and at the time the most popular priest at Incarnation. Bing Crosby's success a few years earlier in "Going My Way" and in "The Bells of Saint Mary's" had put a premium on young, good-looking, regular-guy kinds of priests. That was Father Smith. He drove us out to Saint Charles Borremeo Seminary, on the grounds of a sprawling, wooded estate just off City Line Avenue. A ride in a car was a big enough deal for me. We were taken on a tour, told and shown what it was like to be a seminarian. By the end of the morning nothing had been clarified, but being a kid I went with the flow. I wasn't all that impressed. Becoming a priest certainly didn't measure up to being an Indian scout or a commando. Leaving the seminary, we drove into downtown Philadelphia for lunch at Bookbinders, a seafood house then regarded among Philadelphia's best eating-places. I could count the number of times I'd been in a restaurant in single digits, and never anything on the scale of a Bookbinders. We were near the end of our lunch, my mother's repeated warnings about me minding my table manners still playing in my head. The dessert I'd ordered, a gigantic chocolate éclair, had just arrived at the table. As I began to dive into the éclair, I must have said something to make Father Smith realize that a mix-up had taken place. I was not the sixth-grade boy he had been instructed to take to the seminary. I was not the boy that the nuns had reported as showing signs of having a vocation to the religious life. He had brought the wrong kid. To his credit, he burst out laughing, and I continued working away on my éclair. My other companion for the seminary tour, Robert

Groban, if he ever had a vocation, soon got rid of it. The fistfight he and I had as paperboys several years later had to do with the affections of an eighth-grade girl.

My own seminary visit highlighted the pressures applied in a recruiting system that targeted young boys for a life of priestly celibacy. There were other pressures as well, mothers proud and pious, and nuns making a fuss over the religious devotion of such good boys. Small wonder some of these guys ended up confused; or worse, twisted. I would offer that no one should be allowed to consider becoming a celibate cleric until they've figured out their own lives, maybe not until they've passed the age of thirty or forty, if even then.

Too many memoirs of Catholic childhoods fall to either innocent comic nostalgia or to dark recountings of the wounds suffered at the hands of sadistic nuns and brothers. Like any larger reality, the truth is often more complex. The context of the archdiocesan educational system in Philadelphia in the late 1940's was that it provided a basic education funded by the contributions, however meager, of its mostly working class parishioners. We had no gymnasiums, no science labs, no lunchrooms; nothing but the four fundamentals: Reading, Writing, Arithmetic and of course, Religion. As the product of twelve years of intensive religious education I remain confounded that the Conservative Right in America, a movement supposedly characterized by hardheaded realism, has devoted so much of its energies to the issue of school prayer. Like so many veterans of a religious education, I can bear witness to the doubtful efficacy of prayer in the classroom. Enforced piety often creates something very different than its intended results.

Catholics, as everyone seems to know, are or were required, on pain of mortal sin, to attend Mass on Sundays and on designated holy days of obligation.

There is also the business of one's "Easter Duty," the specifics of which I no longer recall. What I do recall is that a preponderant amount of my time as a Catholic elementary school pupil was devoted to the prayers and rituals of the Faith, both in the classroom and in the church. I was never an altar boy. My daily afternoon newspaper route precluded the after-school Latin classes required of altar boys. Until my voice changed, I did spend a couple of years as a choirboy, a role that didn't have quite the status of being on the altar. As a choirboy I was in church for all of the attendant command performances; singing at High Mass, at first mass on holy days, at funerals and at other forgotten liturgical functions. In addition I was, like all of my peers, required to attend children's Mass on Sunday, mass on holy days, 7:00 a.m. Mass and communion on the first Friday of each month and Mass every day in October, something to do with the Blessed Mother. In December, there was pressure to go to Mass during Advent before Christmas, but that was like a pro team's optional practice. If we didn't have to do it, we slept in. And there was more, Mass every day during Lent, and more Blessed Mother stuff, Mass every day in May.

Attending Mass was not the end of it. There was confession on Saturday afternoon. And there were novenas and there were missions. Novenas were prayer sessions held over a period of several days and missions were conducted by visiting clergy, usually something exotic like Franciscans in brown robes with ropes around their waists. Missions were the only time I can recall the forbidden topic of sex coming up. Mid-week of the mission, there was the big night with separate sessions for the men and for the women of the parish. Usually it was Wednesday night and everybody knew that "you know what" was going to be the topic. While the mission priests were capable of thundering and shouting, their allusions to sex were always circumspect and veiled. The

mission preachers relied on phrases like respect for the sanctity of life, and references to our bodies as temples of the Holy Ghost. With all references to sexual acts so sanitized, I could never quite understand what they talking about. Later at an all-boys high school, mission week sermons were more direct. We knew exactly what they were talking about; making out with girls and playing with yourself.

There were other things I never quite got the drift of. One was called Forty Hours and it took place in the Autumn, usually in November. Forty Hours was a series of evening services that, like most Catholic services, were wrapped up with Benediction. Benediction was a relatively short form ritual, with smoking incense, ringing bells, no sermons, and a couple of hymns that imbedded themselves forever in the psyche. "Oh Holy Gooooddd, we praise thy name. Lord of all…;" and "*Tantum ergo sacramentum, vene remur cere nui*."
A *Momento Mori* is in order. Lest anyone ever forget, the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church of my experience was conducted almost entirely in Latin. Virtually every utterance from the altar, everything other than the sermons and homilies, was in a language entirely incomprehensible to the overwhelming majority of the congregation. We were told by one of our nuns that the Christmas Carol, "Oh Come All Ye Faithful" was of suspect, read Protestant, origins. If the song were to be sung, we should, as Good Catholics, be careful to sing it only in the Latin version of "*Adeste Fidelis*."

In the Church of my childhood, forty days and forty nights didn't reference the biblical flood, but rather the holy season of Lent. We were expected to offer up sacrifices in recognition of the coming Passion of Jesus Christ, not entirely a bad idea. Translating the spiritual concept of the mortification of the flesh into practice in our neighborhood usually came down to giving something up for

Lent, something like not going to the movies or not eating candy or not drinking sodas. By eighth grade, we were trying to give up cigarettes for Lent. Lenten scorekeeping and rule bending took on Byzantine complexities. If you could break your pledge on Sundays in Lent, then what about holy days? Did St. Patrick's Day count as a holy day, or St. Joseph's Day? While the voluntary nature of Lenten sacrifice was conceded, good luck to you if the word got out that you'd been seen going into a matinee at the Colney or the Lindley on a Saturday afternoon during the Lenten season.

There were dietary rules that further complicated our lives. Friday's of course were meatless. Fried flounder, codfish cakes and oyster stew were the Friday staples in our house. My father got the oysters and we got what was known as blind oyster stew, or the flavored broth, not that we would have eaten anything that looked like an oyster. During Lent, the rules on what could be eaten and when it could be eaten got problematic. Once in high school, when my mother ran out of lunchmeat and sent me off with a cheese sandwich, I was told it was the Octave of Donut Day, a day of fast and abstinence.

On top of having to attend Mass every day during Lent, there were the Stations of the Cross each Friday after school. By seventh grade, half of our class had Evening Bulletin newspaper routes and there would be trouble every week when we bagged Stations to serve papers. "Young man, what is more important, serving newspapers or the state of your immortal soul?" During Holy Week, the week ahead of Easter, the church functions reached a frenzy level that included having to visit three different Catholic churches on Holy Thursday. As a kid coerced into spending three hours in church on a Good Friday afternoon, I gained a fuller appreciation of the concept of agony.

In May, over half of our school days were spent in the church practicing for the parish equivalent of the Super Bowl, the May Procession. We practiced lining up by height and by class. We practiced walking the route around the parish property and inside the church. We stood and we knelt, and we practiced the hymns, over and over and over. The May Procession also incorporated the graduation for that year's eighth-grade class, and one of the eighth-grade girls would be selected in advance by the nuns as May Queen. The May Queen would march in a long white gown, holding a large floral bouquet and wearing a crown. We were never informed of what the criteria were for the picking of the May Queen, but by the eighth-grade, we had our own picks for May Queen. Everyone in the parish held their breath hoping for good weather on the Sunday chosen for the procession. Women would make novenas, praying for a sunny Sunday.

A little known talent found among many Catholics of a certain age, lapsed or active, is an ability to zone out, to trip off into a dreamlike state while giving all the appearances of engagement and attentiveness. I know. As a veteran corporate bureaucrat, I cruised my way through endless rounds of mind-numbing meetings by employing the secret skills I'd honed as a Catholic schoolboy. Forced to sit through and chant the repetitive decades of the Rosary, I had learned to compartmentalize my mind. The call of "Hail Mary Full of Grace…" followed by the rote response of "Holy Mary, Mother of God…" quickly lost any semblance of meaning. A kind of imaginative multi-tasking took over during so many of those long mornings, evenings, and afternoons spent drifting along in a fog of incense and Latin. With the good nuns ever watchful for slackness, it took subtle adaptive skills to pass muster while you went off into your head to help Randolph Scott battle Comanches at a desert waterhole. Dreams of toys you knew you'd never get, of heroics you'd never

perform, of revenge you'd never taste; the fantasies to be explored and manipulated were limitless. Once you'd mastered this Zen-like art and discipline of advanced day-dreaming under pressure, a universe of pleasure became yours. The risks of the endeavor only added to the pleasure. A shrill "Young man! What are you doing?" would jolt you awake to the moment. Or worse, a hard wallop upside the head that would snap you back to the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary. It took skill and daring to pull off these escapes, but the rewards of spending the afternoon with Zorro fighting the evil Mexican soldiers seemed well worth the risks. It certainly beat the dreadful tedium of a drowsy classroom after lunch, being read a story about some pious kids in Latin America "who were known throughout the region for their devotion to the Blessed Virgin. One day the soldiers came for them and …"

In their zeal to make us saintly children of our Holy Father, the good sisters all too often made us complicit in our own sinfulness. "I'm sure that tonight, after dinner, when you kneel down in your living room with the rest of your good Catholic family to say the Rosary..." Say what? The only time my father ever got on his knees in our living room was to tack down an unruly carpet edge. Or, "I'm sure no one in this room has ever risked the immortal souls of their family by allowing a book to come into the house that didn't contain the Imprimatur of our Holy Mother Church." I looked across the aisle and caught the expression of incredulity on the face of Louie Carr. I doubt there were books of any sort in the Carr household. It got worse. Standing up at the end of 10:15 mass to take the Pledge of the Legion of Decency, promising I'd boycott all movies condemned by the Church, knowing even at the age of thirteen that I'd do no such thing. I never did see "The Moon is Blue," a tame piece of fluff that precipitated the 1950's clash between Hollywood and Rome. In fifth-grade, we had been told that we were not to attend the Lindley Theater on Saturday

afternoons while it was running a fifteen-part serial called “The Curse of the Purple Phantom.” At this point, I’d seen the first four chapters. Each cheap, innocuous, twenty-minute episode that preceded the feature films would end with a cliffhanger designed to get you back in your seat for next week’s resolution. If you got your card punched for attending the first fourteen chapters, you’d get in for free for the final episode. Somehow someone had told someone that in some way this stuff was injurious to young minds, and Sister Mary Gregory issued a fatwa on “The Curse of the Purple Phantom.” Now it just so happened that during that very week, every afternoon when we returned to school from lunch, the same Sister Mary Gregory would read aloud to us for at least a half hour from a book on the sufferings of the North American Martyrs. While the Campbell’s Cream of Tomato soup, baloney sandwiches, milk and cookies of our lunches digested, we listened to detailed, grisly descriptions of the tortures and slow deaths inflicted by the savage Iroquois upon Saint Isaac Jogues and the Jesuit missionaries to the Hurons.

While there was pro-forma respect for and deference to the priests and the nuns, no one was exempt from being tagged by the parish wise guys. There were no dispensations for position. One of the priests at the rectory, a strange bird, gaunt and ascetic, almost devoid of people skills and given to stalking about the parish grounds in a pom-pommed baretta and a cape-like cloak, was known as “Black Bart.” The wonderfully gentle Mother Superior at the convent and principal of the parish school, all four feet, five inches of her, got nailed with the name of a diminutive Indian chief in the Red Ryder comic strip, “Little Moose.” The perennial terror of seventh grade boys, Sister Mary Agnes, was less creatively capped with “Aching Aggie.” For reasons I don’t recall, my seventh grade wasn’t assigned to get Aggie, although her replacement, Sister Mary Matthew was another intimidating bruiser.

Late on a warm September afternoon, early in the school year, with classroom windows open to the street, a passing Route "J" bus on Lindley Avenue delivered a chorus of adolescent male laughter and the chant of "Aching Aggie, stick your feet out the window." As freshmen at Northeast Catholic High School for Boys, these imaginative young men believed they had finally moved beyond the authority of mere elementary school nuns. Every kid and every nun in the school heard the challenge gleefully blasted from the passing bus. The next day there was more of the same, but louder. By the third afternoon, everyone was waiting. Before the laughing and yelling had died down, the bus came to a sudden stop. Father Buckley, standing on the corner at Fourth and Lindley, had flagged the bus down, and stormed aboard. The culprits were marched off the bus and down Lindley Avenue to the school hall where Sister Mary Agnes awaited their arrival. I'm still not sure they all weren't executed.

By seventh-grade, too many years of total immersion in mandatory religious rituals and practices coupled with the onset of puberty would create a volatile, combustible mix. For many of us, the routines of spirituality, the liturgy of transcendence had become an increasingly irrelevant background noise to the more pressing realities of our lives. We were long past hearing the message and we began to find ways, not always as passive as daydreaming, to get us through the tedium. In church, we'd try to steal glances at the girls across the aisle. A few of the more daring even laid out and read comic books on the seats of the pews in front of them. The most memorable, most spontaneous and most dangerous of our rebellions against the light was the great eight-o-clock Mass farting contest. It began with one slight buzz from Ray Feldmeyer that set off some stifled giggling. Then seconds later Bobby Yanks tilted to one side and ripped a moderately robust one. That produced audible guffaws reaching all the

way back to the formidable seventh-grade boys nun, Sister Mary Matthew. She left her place, and marching up the aisle, cuffed a couple of the gigglers on their heads. For a few minutes, order was restored. Then "A-Bomb" Tommy Leary, so-named for his ability to fart on cue, fired a moist, rubbery arpeggio that sent even the devout Martin Ecsterowitz into a choking fit. As an outraged Sister again got to her feet, already swinging at the heads of the guys in the pew just in front of her, Eddie Quires then cut a killer. Sounding like the call of some large animal in heat, it bounced audibly off the hard wooden surface of the pew, echoing and reverberating against the stone arches and gothic balustrades of the sacristy. An old woman in an adjacent pew shook her beads at us and stage-whispered the word "sacrilege." Even the priest at the altar seemed to realize that something was going on. Unable to identify the culprits, and on the verge of making a scandalous scene, Sister Mary Matthew ordered our entire class out of church and on to the 5th Street sidewalk. Those who continued to find the situation amusing were severely thrashed, and we were marched to the school auditorium where we were threatened with everything from school expulsion to eternal damnation. Father Boyle was brought over to read an ecclesiastical riot act. Since no one would or could admit to being the perpetrators, the entire class was punished collectively. I think we had to write out decades of the rosary and were told we'd be staying after school forever, or for weeks anyway. We were a disgrace to our parents, to the church and to respectable humankind. We knew we had crossed a line. At least some of us did.

After all those years of intensive religious education, I felt that I never really "got it." That I went on to lose my faith or lapse wasn't the case. I don't remember ever having felt any of the things I was supposed to feel about God, about spirituality, about my eternal salvation. I just never understood it, never

grasped it. Who's to blame? Certainly not the system nor the people who did their very best to turn me into a good son of the church, certainly not my parents, who dutifully sent me off every day to be educated by the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Blame isn't even a consideration. At age seven, I made my First Holy Communion and thought, "O.K. Now what?" No bells, no clouds parting, nothing. Life went on the next day as it has every day since. Nothing or nobody I could call God has yet to reveal himself, herself, or itself in my life.

While the relevance of the church on my conscious mind seems to have been reduced to a level comparable to my choice of socks, I can remember the sense of betrayal that I felt when a guy I hardly knew changed his religious affiliation and anglicized his family name, all done to facilitate taking his place among those he seemed to believe were his betters. Why would someone ever do something like that? As a non-observant Jewish friend remarked in regard to his own identity, "who's going to let me be anything else?" Imagine my shock, my repressed fury in the mid 1950's, when as the first of my kind working in the heart of an old WASPy business establishment, I found myself being patronized not for who I was, but for what I was. It was the old business of, "you know you're really O.K., not like some of the others that we wouldn't want working here." Now in what seems like the blink of an eye, the near infinity of distinctions that went with a name, face and a background like mine have disappeared. But like Popeye, "I yam what I yam" and I was what I was. Although there were times when I tried very hard not to be.

I often feel something like envy when I meet people who can believe they have a transcendent place and purpose in what appears to me a starkly indifferent universe. But irony abides. On some unconscious functional level, in some

essential form, much of it did stick. No one could have entirely escaped the effects of twelve years of total and intensive indoctrination in a closed system that now seems utterly surreal; an arcane subculture of vestments, rituals, pagan babies, fish on Fridays and Bless me Father for I have sinned – In my first confession, I owned up to an overdue library book. Given everything and given even my utter incomprehension in the face of anything almighty, I do in fact remain, and will remain always, in the depth of my soul, in the marrow of my bones, an Irish-American, Roman Catholic, ever the product of my time and of my place.

Happy Birthday Patsy Mullins

I was coming down 5th Street when I met Eddie Matthews who was coming the other way. In the course of the kind of conversations that twelve-year-olds, newly minted twelve-year-olds, carry on, Eddie asked if I were going to Patsy Mullins' birthday party. The question kind of bounced off me. Like what birthday party, and why would Patsy Mullins invite me to her birthday party? In the sexually segregated Irish, Latin, Roman Catholic world of late 1940's Philadelphia where this conversation was taking place, I was very much aware of young Ms. Mullins. But although we were in the same grade in the same parish school, we had never exchanged more than a "Hi" when passing on the street. Seventh grade boys were on one floor of the school building and girls on the other. In all the years I had spent in the Incarnation of Our Lord parish school, I couldn't remember any interaction between them and us. The seventh-grade girls could have been Albanians or Martians.

Eddie Matthews' question didn't quite register with me until he said that he was going to the birthday party, and that Mary Ann Brophy had invited him. Wait a minute. Let me get this straight. It's Patsy Mullins' birthday party, but Mary Ann Brophy invited you? I was missing something here. I had no idea that I was being introduced for the very first time into the arena of boy/girl, man/woman interaction, and that missing something, of not really understanding what was happening, was to be the hallmark, the critical element, of every such encounter to follow for the rest of my life.

Here was the deal. Patsy Mullins was having a party to celebrate her twelfth birthday on the Friday night after next. For a boy to be invited to the party, he had to be invited by one of the girls that Patsy had invited to her party. "Oh, that makes sense," I might have thought, had it made sense to me. But it didn't.

Three days later, a shock wave hit. Sally McCauley who lived across the street and was a foot taller than me, so she didn't really count as a girl, called over to me from her porch. In a sour sing-song chant, Sally cried, "Oh there he is. All the girls want to take him to Patsy's party." I had never ever been mean to Sally, never called her "bag of bones" or any of the other unflattering references to her less than meaty physique. Sally, I found out, had not been invited to Patsy's party, hence the edge.

The next day at recess, Margie Cullen walks up to me in the schoolyard. I don't think I had ever spoken a word to Margie Cullen, a nod maybe in the candy store at the corner of her street where I stopped for sodas. As she approached me, the boys I had been with began to go into wide withdrawal patterns. Something is going on here. On the other side of the yard, a circle of seventh-grade girls was staring at Margie and at me with a serious intensity. Margie Cullen didn't feint, jab or weave. It was right to the point. "Regina Zelinski wants to know if you want to go to Patsy Mullins' party with her." One of the girls in the group across the yard had to be Regina Zelinski. Easy to identify, she was the only one who turned away when I looked over. I had no idea who Regina Zelinski was, and until that moment, even what she looked like. Margie could have been asking my acceptance on behalf of Eleanor Roosevelt. In a pattern that would repeat itself endlessly over the coming years, I smiled and said "sure." It took me a long time to learn, painfully in too many cases, that I was just about congenitally incapable of saying no to a girl.

I felt good. I didn't know why, but I did. And every day at school I kept trying, without much success, to get a closer look at this Regina Zelinski person, this girl person. On the Wednesday before the Friday of the party, I remembered to tell my mother that I had a social engagement. My mother's aunt, the one I

called Aunt Anne Marie, was in our living room at the time. She and a whole cluster of my mother's family lived a couple of streets away. I learned another hard lesson that afternoon. Keep your mouth shut in front of adults. My mother, who I suppose was much amused by this my first excursion into the wider world of boy-girl relationships, managed to maintain a disinterested facade as she pumped me for details. Aunt Anne Marie, a large rump-sprung, good-natured maiden lady couldn't contain herself. "A girl friend! And a Polack too. Now you be careful when you go to her house. They'll try to give you bread with lard on it. They'll try to make a little hunky out of you." When she stopped guffawing, she did give me a half a dollar to buy myself something for my "little lardhead girlfriend." In 1950, in Olney, in North Philadelphia, ethnic sensitivity was relatively unknown. The playground separating our neighborhood from Logan, a heavily Jewish enclave, was known to all simply as the "Jew lot." Black people didn't exist in our world. On those rare occasions when they did intrude into our consciousness, they were never referred to as anything other than by the now unthinkable "N" word. I took the half a buck from my aunt, but I spent the next couple of years dodging her in public. When Regina Zelinski had long since become ancient history, my Aunt Anne Marie was still making loud, public inquiries on the subject of my "little Polack girlfriend."

It was my mother who informed me that by accepting the invitation to the party, I was obligated to bring Patsy Mullins a suitable birthday gift. What did I want to bring? Huh? I was being toyed with, but on Friday night when I was getting ready to walk the two blocks to Patsy's house, my mother handed me a gift-wrapped package the contents of which were a mystery to me. My father, who could barely contain himself, started hinting about the package containing girl's underwear. Even at twelve, I couldn't be caught on something

like that. I as yet had no consciousness of style and allowed my mother to dress me up for the occasion. What I remember was a brown gabardine Norfolk style jacket with plaid insets on the front, a hand-me-down from an older cousin, but cool. Birthday present in hand, I walked bravely up 5th Street to Patsy Mullins' house. I was excited about having been included, and I was excited about what would take place at this, my very first boy-girl party. I had heard about some things.

Patsy Mullin's mother opened the front door and asked me my name. I told her and handed her the gift. She told me to come into the living room and sit down. Oh no! I was the first boy to arrive. On the sofa and on one of the chairs were four girls, four girls whose names I knew and had seen in the schoolyard, seen on 5th Street and around the neighborhood for most of the years of my life, but to whom I had probably never so much as said hello. They couldn't be the same girls I thought I knew. I had only seen them in church, or in play clothes or in their school uniforms. Here they were all dressed up in party clothes. They looked like real girls, almost grownup girls and I was thoroughly intimidated. I sat silently on the chair furthest from the girls and tried to make myself invisible. But in the confidence given them by numbers, and since I was the only game then in town, they began whispering, giggling and darting looks in my direction. If I thought I could have gotten away with it, I would have been out the door, down 5th Street and safely at home browbeating my little brother. At that critical moment the front door chimes rang. Mrs. Mullins sailed through the living room giving me her best "I understand" smile. When she opened the door, six of the leading lights of my seventh-grade boys' class came pouring into the living room. The fact that they were six together allowed them a swagger that had been denied me. And worse, they had agreed to meet and come in together without including me in their plans. Within seconds my

resentments faded in the relief that I now had a herd within which to lose myself.

The next opening of the door brought four more dressed-up girls into the Mullins' living room, one of whom was none other than the much awaited Regina Zelinski. She was a small girl, but she seemed to me very self-assured. She never so much as looked at me. Soon there were a dozen or more boys and an equal number of girls, including the birthday girl, Patsy Mullins. I think I had a thing, an utterly vague and innocent thing, for Patsy Mullins. Before my remaining years of elementary school were to pass, I would have had things, some of them not so innocent, for just about every girl who had been in Patsy Mullins' living room that night.

There were sodas and paper plates with pretzels and cookies. The boys took up one side of the room and the girls the other, the boys doing the expected goofy twelve-year old boy things, with the girls looking on, pretending not to notice. Patsy Mullins' high school aged sister, almost a grownup to us, and her girlfriend came into the living room and began taking charge. We were assigned seating in a circle on the floor, boy-girl-boy-girl. The room wasn't big enough for everybody so two circles were set up, one in the living room and one in the dining room. There was lots of shuffling and switching of places that resulted in the girls who had invited the boys positioned in the same circles with those boys. I found myself seated directly across from Regina Zelinski who had yet to acknowledge my existence. Patsy's sister's friend came into the dining room and laid a glass milk bottle on the floor in the center of our circle. "We're going to play," a pause, "spin the bottle." Has anyone ever played spin the bottle? I knew, or I had heard about spin the bottle, but like everyone else in the circle, I wasn't volunteering anything.

Our facilitator as she'd be called today, said, "OK Barbara." That was Barbara Murray. She was as big as the biggest boy in the group who happened to be Ritchie Reardon, who she had invited to the party. "Spin the bottle." She did, and it stopped pointing to Johnnie Donahue. That meant Barbara had to kiss Johnnie. The sheer randomness of the outcome and the public nature of the game kept the kissing on an academic level. These were birthday kisses, the kind you had to give your cousin when she graduated from St. Martin's last year. Once or twice there was the desired outcome when the bottle matched the invitation list. But even then, in the full glare of the dining room chandelier, the intensity of the kissing didn't reach much beyond the perfunctory. I got to kiss Margie Cullen, which was kind of neat. But I also had to kiss Barbara Murray and Mary White. In terms of excitement, that didn't seem much of an improvement over bobbing for apples or pinning the tail on the donkey. The game went on for about a half-hour without ever bringing me into lip contact with Regina Zelinski.

Next came a really awful game where a blindfolded kid pointed at random and the person who was pointed out had to tell a joke, sing a song or do something to amuse the group. I was terrified that I would be selected and was trying to figure out how I could escape. But that game, like spin the bottle concluded with my continuing to dodge the bullet. "Now," said Patsy's big sister. "We're going to play Post Office." Post Office offered two variations on spin the bottle that pushed it into another dimension. First, the person in the Post Office got to select who had mail and second, deliveries took place in the now darkened dining room behind a closed closet door. Something told me that things were now of a different order. I forget how the first person was chosen, but it was Kay Riley who of course called with a letter for Eddie Poulton. There was a lot of hooting as a blushing Eddie got up and went into the darkened

dining room. After a few seconds, the whistling and yelling began again in earnest. The door opened and a visibly flustered Eddie Poulton attempted to make his way back to the safety of the boys' side of the living room. Kay came out smiling and looking utterly in charge of the whole situation. "No, No Eddie," Shouted the two high school girls. "You have to go back in and call mail for someone else."

"Aha," I thought. You get called in, do whatever, and then you call somebody else in and do it again, before you're free to come back out. Another revelation, your choice of calls could be used as an exercise in power. The loudest hooter at Eddie Poulton's discomfiture had been Eddie Matthews. Mary Ellen Bowden had invited Eddie Matthews. From what little had been said, Eddie Matthews wanted no parts of Mary Ellen Bowden. Eddie Matthews was actually the kid I knew best in the entire crowd. Like a chess master, Eddie Poulton didn't even hesitate. "Mail for Mary Ellen Bowden." So, he had to kiss Mary Ellen. Big deal. He didn't care as long as it meant that Eddie Matthews also had to do the same and that everyone knew Mary Ellen was after Eddie. "Hmmmm," I thought.

But wait a minute. Mary Ellen Bowden, I had been told was Regina Zelinski's best friend. I should have seen what was coming next. Mary Ellen exited the darkened room with a knowing smile and Eddie Matthews in a completely disinterested voice announced, "Mail for Regina Zelinski." In the ten seconds or so that elapsed between Eddie's call and his coming back out of the dining room, I think I experienced every known form of panic humanly possible. My Norfolk jacket began to itch, furiously. I could feel my face getting hot and I wished desperately to somehow disappear from the face of the earth. "Mail for …." And my name was spoken across the now absolutely silent living room.

Eddie Matthew's was grinning as I stood up and walked the long miles to the dining room door. In the half darkness of the closet doorway, I could see through into the lighted kitchen where Mrs. Mullins was preparing the cake and ice cream portion of the party yet to come. Maybe she doesn't know what's going on. Maybe she'll turn around, see us and put a stop to this before it goes any further. But no, she just continued sticking candles in a decorated cake while Regina Zelinski waited silently in the total darkness behind the closet door.

Someone pushed the door closed behind me. There had been some light hooting and wolf whistling when I stood up. Now the noise was rising from behind me. It seemed that everyone but me had known that this was something preordained, something inexorable to be consummated in a darkened dining room closet of a house on North 5th Street. I don't know exactly how it came off, but Regina Zelinski never said a word to me. She took a step toward me, threw her arms around my neck and my arms moved instinctively around her. There wasn't anything else to do with them. Our faces came together and my first sensation was olfactory. She smelled wonderful. It wasn't like the stuff my Mom used, "Evening in Paris." This was different. And her hair smelled nice, strands of it brushing against my face. Our lips came together and I think she must have been practicing because she kissed me with a purposefulness that sent a powerful surge through my entire being. I had never ever experienced anything like this. We were hugging. In our family nobody ever touched each other let alone hugged. Here was this girl. That's right, a girl, a real girl and she was hugging me and kissing me and it was the most wonderful moment of my then seemingly long, long twelve-year-old life. I ceased hearing the shouting, the whistles and the catcalls coming from the living room. Regina Zelinski and I were welded together, neither of us with any intention of being the first to

break the lockup. Only the sharp rapping on the door and Patsy Mullins sister's voice saying "C'mon you guys. Break it up in there."

With my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I looked into the face of Regina Zelinski with whom I had yet to exchange one word, and decided that she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. This would happen again and again with every girl I was to kiss over too many of the coming years. In fact there would be times in the hormonally-charged teenaged years to come, when my falling in love would occur more than once on a single day. But that's another story. In those one or two minutes in Patsy Mullins' dining room in October 1949, I had discovered the meaning of life. Regina Zelinski and I went on to become an item that lasted well into eighth grade, until the moment she unceremoniously ditched me for a more sophisticated high school sophomore.

I didn't see Regina nee Zelinski again until an Incarnation Elementary School 50th reunion. Now a woman well into her sixties, she still looked pretty good to me. Leaving the reunion, and giving each of the attendant ladies the pro-forma hug and peck, I bent down to say my goodbyes to Regina. It was hard not to try and leave a little something more behind, nothing noticeable, but something appropriate to what I hoped were our shared memories of Patsy Mullins' twelfth birthday party.

Kenny Bergman

On Christmas Day, 1950, Kenny Bergman and I sat on his living room sofa smoking cigarettes. I was thirteen. Kenny's mother was visible, working away in the kitchen. The house smelled of roasting turkey and the radio was on, Bing Crosby singing carols. On the other side of the room under the Christmas tree a set of American Flyer electric trains moved slowly around a platform filled with little houses, cars and mountain-paper tunnels. Each time the train emerged from the nearest tunnel, Kenny or I would raise his Daisy Targeteer BB pistol and aim for one of the glass Christmas tree ornaments he'd placed in a gondola or on a flat car. Several times, a smiling Mrs. Bergman walked through the living room. She never said a word. I thought I was in heaven.

Today, Kenny Bergman would be called a nerd. He didn't fit into any category. He wasn't a goody-goody nor did he hang out. He kept to himself and what company he accepted he did so on his own arbitrary, unfathomable terms. Kenny was two years older than me and lived up near the end of the block on the other side of the street. His father, known as "Pat," was Jewish and worked shifts at the Sun Oil Refinery in South Philadelphia. The family was nominally Catholic but Kenny and his younger sister Julie, both went to public school. His mother had a full time job, one of the few married women on our street of thirty or so row houses who went out to work.

Kenny was a tall, gangly kid who wore glasses with smeared, dirty lenses. While he could be off-putting and uncongenial, he was able to do things no one else could do. He could build models. He knew how things worked. More importantly, his mother seemed to sense that Kenny was different and left him alone to develop in his own time and in his own way. For years I had given Kenny a wide berth. When we moved to Delphine Street five years earlier, he

had contemptuously rebuffed my casual overtures to friendship. With my feelings hurt, I decided that I didn't like Kenny Bergman. But in that period between childhood and early adolescence, twelve, thirteen years old, I came to learn that Kenny Bergman's indifference to me wasn't about me. Kenny treated everyone the same. When he walked down the street, or if his name came up in conversation, my mother would say, "that's the most disagreeable kid I've ever seen."

On a spring afternoon after school, Bobby Yanks, Brian Dailey and I were goofing around on the railroad lot behind Brian's house. The houses on the other side of our street backed up to the Reading Railroad's Trenton cut-off and those homeowners had dollar-a-year leases on the sixteen-foot strips of ground between their houses and the beginnings of the railroad embankment. Kenny Bergman lived next door to Brian. Without a word to any of us Kenny came out of his back door and climbed the steps up to their yard carrying a large, bright-yellow model airplane, a flying model. The idea now of kids building flying models is as removed from contemporary culture as scrimshaw, the study of Latin, or the illumination of manuscripts. Flying models were made from blueprints and plans that required the assembly of three-dimensional aircraft skeletons using thin strips of balsa wood. The completed airframe then would be covered with fine tissue paper and painted with a clear "dope" that would dry and pull taunt to create a stiff, but feather-light, skin for the aircraft. A flying model was powered by a long internal rubber band that hung loosely from the back of the propeller to the tail section of the plane. When the rubber band was wound tightly, but not so tightly as to overstress the balsa wood and tissue frame, the plane would be hand-launched in the hope that it would pick up a thermal current before the propeller lost power. A successful flight meant a chase, following the plane until it would glide back to earth, blocks or even

miles from the launch point. Most flying models were inscribed with the name, address and telephone number of the builder so that it could be retrieved if lost. I was in awe of such creations. Kenny Bergman built flying models.

My own attempts at model building had been disasters. And I was trying to make the relatively simple solid models, not the complex, delicate work required to finish a flying model. My efforts always ended with misshapen chunks of balsa wood, bleeding fingers from exacto-knife blunders, and spilled bottles of Testor's dope that filled the house with noxious odors. As Kenny Bergman placed his large flying model on the ground and began winding the propeller, I lost all of my caution and jumped the hedge separating his yard from Brian's. I wanted a closer look. I tried not to let my enthusiasm spill out by asking the obvious questions that were flooding my brain. "Did you build that? How high will it go? Are you going to fly it now?" Kenny Bergman might have looked up at me from his propeller winding or he may not have. Either way he would have dismissed my presence. I held myself in check and just watched.

Kenny's notoriety had increased just a few months earlier. For his fifteenth birthday he had gotten the ultimate in boy toys, a Daisy Pump Gun, a further addition to Kenny's BB-gun arsenal. A Pump Gun was reputed to be powerful enough to put a clean hole in the thick brown glass of a quart beer bottle, and do so from across the width of a city street. With the Bergman house, backing up to the embankment of the Reading Railroad's tracks, it took the railroad police less than two weeks from Kenny's birthday to calculate the exact window the shots were coming from. In exchange for Kenny's mother surrendering the pump gun, no charges were filed.

I watched as Kenny began winding the propeller. The plane was a beauty. Its wingspan was at least three feet and the wings themselves must have been eight or nine inches wide. The late afternoon sunlight pierced the semi-opaque, coated tissue of the fuselage and wings, lighting up the delicate structure of the framework. Before I could reveal my ignorance with a dumb question, Brian Dailey had jumped the hedge and asked excitedly, "you gonna fly it? You gonna fly it now?" Kenny looked up with a sneer of condescension, mumbled something about "not with all the fucking trees and wires around here," and went back to his winding. I thought to myself, "why's he out here then. If he just wanted to wind that propeller, he could have done that inside." It seemed that the inscrutable Kenneth Bergman had wanted our attention. That's why he carried the big amazing airplane outside. He wanted us to see it and to marvel at what he'd done. As causally as I could, I asked, "when are you gonna fly it, Kenny."

The following Saturday I was at Kenny's front door just before noon. His mother shouted up the stairs, "Kenny, Pete from down the street is here for you." "Tell him to come up," was the reply. Kenny's room was every kid's dream come true. He had a bike, and he was allowed to keep it in his bedroom. He even had bunk beds, the top one piled high with empty model boxes, a half assembled HO gauge railroad layout, ice skates, and several weeks of dirty laundry. From the ceiling, strung at varying lengths was a maze of model airplanes that almost filled the upper half of the room. A half dozen fishing rods stood in one corner, and a lethal looking bow with a quiver full of feathered arrows hung from the wall along with a Daisy Red Ryder BB gun, still there even after *L'Affaire* Pump Gun. Along one entire wall ran a brightly lit workbench that held a far better selection of hand tools than my father possessed. Kenny was seated on a stool hunched over the big yellow flying

model doing something that involved a magnifying glass and a tiny screwdriver. A Pall Mall burned in the ashtray next to him. I sat down on the unmade bottom bunk bed, lit a cigarette and waited to see what would come next.

We followed the railroad tracks for about a half-mile to the baseball fields at "B" Street and Olney Avenue, Kenny carrying the airplane and me an army bag he had filled with tools, parts and two bottles of beer he had snitched from the refrigerator. I don't think we exchanged a word the entire time. The playground was nearly empty as we squatted and Kenny began winding the propeller. Standing up, one hand restraining the prop, he threw the plane into the stillness of the afternoon. The freed propeller bit the air and the plane began to climb. In a wide upward arc it rose until the rubber band powering the prop went slack. There was no lucky thermal to lift the plane further, and while Kenny's craftsmanship in the construction of the plane had been flawless, the same standards didn't hold for his knowledge of aerodynamics. When the propeller stalled, the plane, instead of leveling off into a graceful spiraling glide back to earth, pitched over onto its nose and corkscrewed straight down. One of those meticulously crafted wings tore itself free, flipping the plane end over end until it met the ground with a splintering of small sticks of wood, and the tearing open of that beautifully taunt yellow skin that had covered the exterior of the airplane. Kenny's impassivity was broken by a softly muttered "shit."

After that afternoon's crash, Kenny moved on to building more sturdy, solid bodied flying models powered by small alcohol-fueled, glow-plug engines that were flown in screaming circles at the end of hand held cables. While Kenny's personality never encouraged friendship or hanging out, I would stop by his house occasionally to see what was going on. He neither encouraged nor

discouraged me. But by then, I knew it wasn't about me. The following summer, just after I had succumbed to the symbolic and vicarious attractions of the emerging California hot rod car culture, I returned to Kenny's room with a model kit I had purchased up 5th Street. The picture on the box showed a classic Deuce Roadster, a channeled, fenderless 1932 Ford with a chromed engine and exterior chromed exhaust pipes. In a fit of enthusiasm and mindless of my previous failures at model building, I had gone ahead and bought the kit.

Inside the box were the same unfinished blocks of balsa wood and the same undecipherable instructions that had made a hash of my earlier efforts. That might have been the end of it but then I thought of Kenny. His reaction was "what do you want to build that kind of crap for. It doesn't do anything." But he sort of agreed to help me, at least he said I could use his tools and work on it up in his room. My ineptitude must have driven him to distraction. No matter what I began doing, he would be right over next to me, irritably showing me how to do it the right way. I learned that balsa wood could, with patience, be transformed into looking like shiny metal. Numerous light coats of paint, and fine sanding between coats, then more of the same with sealers. Tiny engine parts could be crafted using an exacto knife, precise measurements, a magnifying glass, and great care. Over a two-week period, a dozen packs of cigarettes, a lot of sodas and a few beers, my fantasy of a miniature candy-coated, cherry red street rod became a reality, a thing of pride and beauty. I carried my completed trophy home and installed it on my mother's living room coffee table for all to see and admire. I astounded my friends and neighbors. A predictable reaction soon set in among those who knew me. The buzz on the street was "he didn't build that. Kenny Bergman built it." My protestations of "I did too" did nothing to make my case. Only later did I learn that on several occasions Kenny had informed my detractors that no, he hadn't built it, that I

had built it, that he had only shown me how. Kenny Bergman let me go out a champion. I've never built another model since.

A postscript on Kenny is that he went on to become a builder of architectural models and that the quality of his work had earned him something of a national reputation. But unfortunately, Kenny hadn't been able to grow his business to the next level. It seems he had a problem keeping good help.