

SATAN'S LITTLE HELPERS

1. The Aquinine Legacy

I remembered my brother Mark telling me the school's days were numbered, but I let it slip my mind. I had even forgotten the local paper reporting some months earlier that it was about to become a luxurious residential estate, to be crammed with fine homes only the rich could afford. Not so surprising. It was sold for a bundle of money, after being paid for by the sweat of thousands of parents who sacrificed a better life to give their children the opportunity of receiving what was perceived as a good Catholic education. But now, as I drove closer, it was actually happening.

It was a mild morning in September and I was on my way to an appointment. The sun was shining brightly in the east; the pale, grey moon setting in the west; the car was running smoothly, I was happily humming to the music on the cd player and it was one of those days when it felt good to be alive. As my car rounded the bend, trapped in a single line of traffic that snaked its way toward the city, something caught my eye. I stopped humming as I sensed a disturbance. As the traffic allowed me to inch closer, my eyes widened, my jaw dropped,

and the adrenalins began to flow freely. My mental reaction was, 'Jesus, can it be true?' As I came yet closer, a voice from within me asked, 'Is this a vision...am I dreaming?' It was the dust that caused my uncertainty. It covered almost half the property, and sat suspended about ten metres above the ground, spreading its wings as if about to take flight. However, there was no wind, so it sat there, hovering above.

Below the eerie mist, I beheld my old school, Placidus College, run by the Order of the Aquinine Brothers, founded by one Father Henri Aquinaux, a somewhat eccentric 19th Century French Aristocrat turned priest. He had an enthusiasm for Roman History, so the story went, and he encouraged his charges, at the time of their profession, to adopt a religious name consistent with his obsession. He showed the way by choosing for himself the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, who he wrote, 'ruled the Empire with integrity, morality and wisdom.' My old school however, was now the subject of a different kind of wisdom. It was being bulldozed and demolished with all the integrity and morality the wreckers could muster. I was listening to Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture, and the cannons were heralding the battle at Borodino, as the wreckers let loose with the great metal ball. As it thundered into its rendered brick target, the cannons fired yet again, and instinctively, I exclaimed, 'yes', delighted to see the wrecking ball crash its way through another external wall.

As I continued staring, my mind in a confused state of awe and delight, I failed to notice the amber light appear at the pedestrian crossing six or seven cars ahead of me. Suddenly my attention was drawn to the car in front of me braking. 'Jesus I'm going to hit him'. I slammed on the brakes, and stopped millimetres from its rear. The driver behind managed to respond in kind. I listened to the dreadful sound of brakes screeching behind me, but mercifully there was no sound of metal to metal. Time to exit. I could not let the moment pass that quickly. I made a left turn, hearing the protests manifested in the bleating of car horns, and one very audible, "You fucking idiot," coming from the driver of a blue holden utility. I ignored him, made a

three point turn and waited patiently for the traffic to pass. I decided my appointment could wait. The company's fortunes could wait. I longed to see more. From the intersection I could make out the mangled wreckage, the broken concrete, the twisted steel reinforcing mesh, and the bricks piled up in pyramids. My first thoughts were of the proceeds of the sale, which one could only surmise, would now be used to house these retired old men, these imitation Caesars, who taught me all those years ago.

Did I say taught? I am generous. For years, each time I drove past, I continued to feel the stress and sense of incrimination that long ago had become synonymous with this place; the desperation felt when you expected something bad to happen. It was a feeling of guilt. Someone had seen me, and was about to stop and interrogate me for something, only I didn't have a clue what it was. It's not that I was stupid. A bit simple maybe, but not stupid. One does not teach oneself to play the piano if one is stupid. However, being raised Catholic, seduced by the power of the pulpit, the Aquinine Brothers, and an ever-present fear that Satan would grab me by the balls and burn me alive, obviously did nothing for my confidence.

However, every cloud has a silver lining, as my mother used to say, and on this particular day the clouds were about to deliver. This day those negative memories gave way to sheer elation. There it was. Or more correctly, there it was not. All twisted and mangled in a cloud of dust that looked more like a bombsite than a school, it was in a state of partial demolition. *'Oh joy oh rapture.'* A feeling of utter delight shot through me. *'What a joy to behold. What poetic justice!'*

The line of traffic ended and I made quickly for the side street. Parking adjacent to the school, I slipped Tchaikovsky's Capriccio Italien into the CD player, and sat and watched those huge machines rip the place apart. It was better than sex. Well, almost. I stayed there for over an hour, watching classroom after classroom being reduced to rubble. The memories of my time spent sitting in those rooms,

listening to men in black cassocks fill my head with their peculiar, and narrow-minded attitude to life came flooding back.

As I sat, watched and silently cheered the school's demise, I recalled its only redeeming feature, the one positive reflection I could muster. It had been the common link that brought the three of us together. The three of us, all born within four hours of each other under the same roof, in the same hospital. Megan, Michelle and I. My name is Simon Hickey and, but for this school, the three of us might never have met. Suffice to say that although the place did have this redemptive side, my joy at watching its demise was absolute. Megan probably would not have agreed. She would have seen it differently; with more compassion and with the sentimentality only a woman can muster. Not for me however. Seeing it erased from the landscape was for me, ecstasy, and for the time I spent sitting and watching, no redemptive quality was going to interfere with my joy.

2. Men in Black Cassocks

Do I sound too harsh? Perhaps you think I am overstating my feelings. Perhaps you recall your own experiences at school and wonder if my negative recollections are exaggerated. It is possible that my view is distorted. However, first impressions are generally lasting impressions, especially when experienced at a very young age. I still see that frightening image today. That figure, in a black cassock, with a black cord around his waist knotted on the side leaving two ends that extended all the way down to his enormous black shoes. His big arms folded, partially concealing a crucifix hanging from his neck, he stared down on me, his eyes drooping, hair protruding from his nose and ears, and his smile exposing his yellow tobacco stained teeth.

Each day as I walked up the front driveway of the school, there he waited. I wanted to go left, toward my classroom only I could not,

because this great hulk was blocking my way, and forcing me to walk straight ahead to the big house, up a few stairs, and into the chapel.

He was known by a variety of names, Decius, Quintillus, Tiberius, Titus, but he did not speak, he just pointed. Only when you played dumb, pretending not to understand the very clear direction being given, did he deign to speak.

“Over to the chapel lad, and pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament lad, a short ejaculation before you go any further. Jesus Mary Joseph, I place my trust in thee.”

“Yes Brother.”

So I did his bidding, and visited the chapel. I splashed my forehead with holy water, genuflected, dropped to my knees in pretence of devout homage, ejaculated my most earnest prayer, *‘Please God don’t let them hit me today’*, waited a moment, then rose up to make a quick exit. Once released from duty, I was free to go to my classroom and try to be normal. The man in black would remain where he stood, on guard, waiting by the roadway for the next errant student, as if appointed by Marcus Aurelius Antoninus himself, to see that each and every boy who walked into that school would first pay homage to Caesar’s God in the big house. Caesar’s enforcer never liked me. Actually, he did not even know me, he just controlled me.

3. Elaine

I should have displayed more grit. I should have asserted myself as an equal member of the human race with certain rights. I should have demanded more respect, shown a greater degree of independence and self-assurance and told him *‘No Brother, I do not wish to ejaculate before the Blessed Sacrament today. I did that yesterday and the day before. I’m sick of it. Nothing ever happens when I ejaculate before the Blessed Sacrament. It’s like talking to a brick wall. The Blessed Sacrament never replies. When I ask that I not be given the strap today the Blessed Sacrament never listens’*...but I didn’t.