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CRYPTOGRAM

When they sauntered past the house, oh christ, both of them noisy as sun-fevered demons in this afternoon August heat, they were forcing him to watch. Not so young, the pair of them. Fourteen? Fifteen? Not so young. The random noisiness of teenagers. Rude laughter, pointless whooping, one of them yelling "fuckin' asshole" at a passing car just to hear himself cuss.

Country road, not much traffic, the boys kicking at gravel along the shoulder as they sauntered past on their way to the bridge. Fourteen, fifteen years old, might as well have been twins in their white T-shirts long as tunics and their baggy denim shorts, only a few inches of pale bare leg between those baggy shorts and their hightop sneakers. Short hair probably crewcut beneath baseball caps pulled low above their eyes. One of them glanced left and the man cringed in his upstairs window as if ducking a drive-by shooter.

Just a glimpse of his face, that boy, when he turned. Pug-nosed and red-cheeked and sweaty. Who was he? Who was his friend? They were already past the house, crunch crunch of gravel beneath their Nikes or Reeboks or whatever as they headed for the bridge just beyond. Looking from his bedroom window, the man could see the creek and the bridge and the two boys scrambling down the weedy hill where boys have always gone. Shady and cool beneath the bridge. Concrete slabs at the foundation slanted steeply but not too steeply for someone to sit, feet pointed at the brown water just below, dim and damp as a cave there in the bridge's concrete underbelly. Graffiti like Paleolithic cryptograms on every accessible surface. A shower of powdery fine dust each time a car passed

overhead.

No way to see these details from his window, but the man knew them. Memory was where he lived. A thousand summer days spent beneath that bridge and beneath an even older bridge now forty years gone. A fishing pole, a can of worms, afternoons like drowsy eternities. Blond-haired boy alone, learning the habits of solitude. Wooden bridge now forty years gone, no one but the man to remember it, his first of many hideaways and maybe the best. Wooden bridge, concrete bridge, boys then and boys now seeking sanctuary from the same enemies.

The man spoke these thoughts to himself. Aloud, at the window, he spoke these incantatory thoughts. Boys then, boys now. Afternoons like drowsy eternities. With a pair of binoculars he could watch the boys lazily killing time at the water's edge. Tossing rocks. Smoking cigarettes. Not even sure, at this distance, which of them had startled him earlier by glancing at the house, so cunningly identical these male teenagers in their baggy uniforms. Like refugees from some joyless and beaten army. One of them visible, then both, then again only one and then only his legs and shoes as he sat on the outer edge of the concrete slab beside his friend. His friend farther in below the bridge, impossible to see except in eager imagination.

Smoke drifted from them in sporadic puffs, as if they meant to send the man these primitive signals from their distant lair. Smoking cigarettes. Probably Marlboros. And what else? What else was happening that he couldn't see? How were these boys spending their secluded moments together beneath that country bridge? Free of parents and girls and all sensible restraints, what did they do? What did they become?

The man watched, a patient observer, for any movement or activity that might betray them. He watched that one boy's legs, a simple bending of his knees enough to make the man wonder. Imagining the boy's shorts suddenly pushed down. Shorts and underpants around his ankles. The revealed randiness of his body. The body of his friend. Pale skin and sweaty pubic hair. Were they seeing each other naked for the first time? Each other's erections? Were they jerking off right now in this refuge where no one could witness or intrude?

Finally they roused themselves like indolent tomcats in this summer heat, first one then the other reemerging into sunlight after their interlude beneath the bridge. Up the weedy hill. Back to the road. The man didn't need binoculars now to see them scuffling along the shoulder, kicking at the gravel. That same one, yes him, cast another lingering glance at the house as he passed. Red-cheeked and pug-nosed boy. Dark hair beneath his Cubs baseball cap. Why did he keep looking? The man decided that his name should be Jason. Or Chris. Where did he live? And his friend? Why had they never strolled this way before?

That one boy (Jason? Chris?) lifted his T-shirt from the bottom and used it to wipe the sweat from his face. The man saw the smoothness of his belly and ribcage exposed, shorts way down on his hips, loose enough to fall off, the top half of his underpants showing white above the saggy blue denim. Another minute, no more, and he was gone. Both of them were gone.

The man grabbed a pair of shoes and put them on and hurried outside where the heat, even now, surprised him. A short hike through the yard and then down the hill, wading through waist-high thistles and burdock, brought him to the boys' shoeprints in the muddy bank of the

creek. He searched for anything they might have left behind. The shoeprints. Cigarette butts. All the stray evidence telling a story. Head down, eyes on the ground, he moved under the bridge and into the welcome shade, the damp coolness, crawfishy smell of creek water and mud.

He crouched and steadied himself with one hand against the slanted concrete. A dark stain near the bottom, at the water's edge, where one or both of the boys must have taken a piss. And here, here where they'd been sitting, five or six small wet spots that quickened the man's pulse. He needed to know what they were, these spots, so he leaned closer and touched one with cautious fingertips. The slightest residue of foam at the center of each spot, no stickiness when he touched it, watery instead, a disappointment. He smelled his fingers. Reeky odor of tobacco. Boyspit. The two of them had been sitting here and smoking and spitting. Nothing more. Smoking, spitting, peeing. Tom and Huck on a sweltering August afternoon.

The man dabbed at each of the foamy spots of saliva, sniffing his fingers, reluctant to accept anything so ordinary, so dismally mundane. Graffiti everywhere around him. He searched for messages somehow significant in the garish slapdash of obscenities and drawings. Spray-painted tits, vaginas, hard-ons, balls. SUCK MY COCK. EAT ME. SANDBURG HIGH RULES. BC LOVES JH. Most of them splotchy with dirt and bits of moss, months old, years old, nothing to help the man bring an end to this day's tale.

He left the bridge and climbed back to the heat-shimmery road and walked past his own house where the boys had recently strolled. Gravel freshly scuffed where

they had kicked. He came to the little road that branched off left into an area of quiet woods and small old homes. A dog woofing in the distance. A shout—young male voice—from an even farther remoteness. Like a lonesome call unanswered. Then nothing but the afternoon reverie of birdsong from the trees all around.

Back the way he'd come, the man just now noticed a roadkill possum beginning to rot, beginning to stink. How could he not have seen it before? Smelled it before? Like some infernal thing suddenly conjured. He wrinkled his nose at it and passed on and came once again to his own house, pausing there in front. A flash of light catching his eye. Downstairs window. At this time of day, at this angle, the sunlight was hitting the window glass and reflecting back. The window itself like a bright mirror just level with the road, easy for the man to see himself as he stood there staring.

He realized now why that pug-nosed boy had twice glanced at the house. He'd seen himself in the window. In the bright glass. Of course. His own reflection. The boy had been watching himself come, and then go.



CONFIRMATION

Big day, the biggest day, finally here after so many months of waiting and wondering and happy anticipation. No way to sleep a moment longer on the morning of such a day, anxious dreams all night and now a nervous bellyful of butterflies driving the boy out of bed by seven o'clock, drizzly gray light outside the window of his room.

He stripped off his underwear and scurried naked to the bathroom for a quick shower, then dried himself and decided to wash his face one more time at the sink. Medicated soap for his complexion. He studied himself in the mirror, not so bad, just two small pimples on his forehead. Stupid chipmunk, he muttered at himself. Chipmunk face. Round cheeks and no chin, just a weak nothing chin and big wide mouth, big lips. Pushed-up nose. Squinty eyes. The boy scowled at his own reflection and brushed his hair, still wet from the shower, careful to part it neatly in the middle, long hair that covered his ears and covered his neck. Hippie hair, his Uncle Frank always said, teasing him. Old-fashioned hippie hair. Woodstock hair.

The boy was back in his bedroom, putting on his Confirmation clothes, when he heard his mother calling from downstairs, calling Kenneth, Kenny, come on! He grabbed his tie and his sweater and his shoes and took off running, skip-hopping down the steps in hopes of finding more cards or gifts from friends, from relatives—like Christmas in April, over a hundred dollars so far and plenty more still to come. But Kenny's mother was only calling him for breakfast, blueberry pancakes and bacon and glasses of milk already on the table, his father there reading the newspaper, smiling now at the boy, look at

you, all dressed up so fancy.

Aunt Rose came ringing at the front door a few minutes later, little gift-wrapped package in her hand for the Confirmation Boy. So handsome, she said, kissing his cheek, such a handsome young man you are, good enough to eat, using her free hand to brush that long brown hair away from either side of his eyes. She gave him the package. For the Confirmation Boy, she smiled again. Your Uncle Frank says that everything went well on Thursday. At the rehearsal. Just like clockwork. Kenny nodded as he finished his milk. The rehearsal had gone smoothly, true enough, all the boys and their sponsors at the church, Bishop McNamara in his everyday black suit and white collar acting as a friendly coach throughout, walk here and do this, stand there and do that, two hours and they were finished, Kenny and Uncle Frank, on their way back home.

Not really Kenny's uncle. Actually a great-uncle, patriarch to the whole extended Patallero family, Uncle Frank and his wife Aunt Rose. No one else could have been Kenny's Confirmation sponsor. Uncle Frank was the boy's first choice. Always his first and only choice.

After breakfast, Aunt Rose gave Kenny a ride to his school, all the boys congregating there for a class photo. No girls. A boys-only Catholic academy. That's OK, Uncle Frank always said, lots of time for girls later on. More fun now without them.

Kenny, one of the shorter boys, stood in the middle row for the photo, the row in front of him seated stiffly and properly on folding chairs, thirty boys altogether in their blue trousers and blue sweaters, white shirts, blue-and-red ties, shiny black shoes. Don't look so serious, the photographer told them, it's all right to smile! This is your

big day! Look happy!

Rain was falling harder when everyone left the school and made the six-block trip to St. Mary's Church, Aunt Rose once again providing the ride for Kenny and for three other boys who needed a lift, too rainy now even for a short walk. All of you look so handsome, she told them. Such gentlemen. So grown up. The boys looked at one another and tried not to laugh.

Inside, the church was festively decorated with extra candles and flowers. Colorful posters showing the Fruits and Gifts of the Holy Spirit had been hung on the pillars near the altar. Kenny's mother and father were already there—also Uncle Frank, waiting with the other sponsors to join their boys and take their places all together in the front pews. Into the valley of death, he murmured to Kenny in that funny way he had, his gray beard freshly washed and combed and bristly, his smile making Kenny smile, always able to make the boy feel better, more relaxed, giving him a quick hug now for reassurance and then holding his hand as they sat and listened to the pipe organ and waited for the Mass to begin.

Bishop McNamara appeared from the sacristy just then for a brief pep talk with the boys, joshing with them, let's not have any Y2K bugs today, everyone laughing, nice old man with silver hair and smooth pink cheeks. Probably even older than Uncle Frank. Then he returned to the sacristy for a last-minute change into his vestments, the church crammed full of people now and the organ booming like heaven's fury.

The boys and their sponsors had been well prepared, well rehearsed, no problems at all once the Mass got underway, the hymns and the prayers and the readings performed flawlessly one after another, the Bishop's

sermon, the Communion, finally the Confirmation ritual itself, all thirty boys and their sponsors shuffling two-by-two up the aisle to the altar. Kenny and Uncle Frank were near the back of the queue as the organ once again thundered around them and above them, Bishop McNamara waiting to anoint each of the boys with chrism. Funny word. Chrism. Christ's jism. That was Uncle Frank's joke. The jism of Christ. He'd had Kenny laughing out of control Thursday night after the rehearsal. Holy chrism, Batman, that's really slippery stuff! Laughing out of control.

One more hymn, pipe organ climactically booming, and then the Mass was finished, smiles and high-fives among the boys as they filed back down the aisle and out the front doors, gray skies but no rain now to dampen the celebration outside the church. Both Aunt Rose and Kenny's father had cameras and spent the next several minutes snapping picture after picture, getting the boy with other of his aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents, with best friends from school, even with Bishop McNamara himself, old man and young boy standing side-by-side in the cool gray light of midday. Also some pictures with Uncle Frank—of course with Uncle Frank—his beefy carpenter's arm around Kenny's shoulders, the boy grinning his biggest, happiest, squintiest grin.

The entire party of family and friends, about twenty people, ended up at the nearby Old Country Buffet for lunch. More cards and gifts for Kenny. More snapshots and home videos of the celebration. Kenny had never been the center of so much attention, not even on his birthdays or on the day of his First Communion. No, this was special, this day of his Becoming, this bold step into

manhood, everyone congratulating him as if he'd graduated to some higher, finer state of being. A true soldier for Christ, someone called him. Not a little child anymore, someone else said. Uncle Frank, beside him at the table, just kept nodding and smiling at the conversation and eating his spaghetti and meatballs and garlic bread.

Such a day, so much joyful activity, finally a chance after lunch for everyone to go home and rest and look forward to that evening's fancy dinner at the downtown Sheraton. Actually more than just dinner. Kenny and his parents and Aunt Rose and Uncle Frank all had reservations at the hotel for Saturday night, big plans for the whole weekend in Chicago, something extra-special for the boy to remember, to cherish.

They used Uncle Frank's huge old Lincoln Continental for the trip, dark green four-door sedan that cruised like some powerful ship-of-war along the freeways into the city. Kenny's father did the driving, the boy in back between Aunt Rose and Uncle Frank, so sleepy halfway there that he rested his head on Uncle Frank's shoulder and dozed off, the cozy scent of tobacco and Aqua Velva lulling him into half-dreams of midnight churches, midnight ceremonies, you'll be late, get dressed, get ready, all the boys in black robes waiting for Kenny to show up, candles and flowers in the school hallways as everyone lined up to be blessed by some stranger who looked like a priest and spoke in odd words, funny words, chrism, Christ's jism, Kenny just had to laugh standing there wet from his shower, look at you, little monkey, Uncle Frank teasing him and drying him with the big white towel, funny-lookin' critter, some kind of oil on Kenny's forehead, slippery chrism, two little pimples on his forehead that he could see in the mirror, Uncle Frank

drying him, that scent of tobacco, of Aqua Velva, slippery chrism, they just had to laugh and laugh, shhh, not so loud, it's a church after all, it's a church, so funny to be naked in church, another of Uncle Frank's jokes, Kenny turning and turning himself barefoot on the cold floor, funny-lookin' critter, showing himself to Uncle Frank and to the altar boys also watching, altar boys wearing white towels and warning shhh, quiet, don't let them hear us, Kenny showing all of them his penis in that room of candles and flowers and bright mirrors, the shower nozzle going drip drip drip as Uncle Frank kept drying him and smiling at him, look at this big old thing, holy cow, where'd all this hair come from down here, all this new hair down here, think you're pretty tough now all grown up, both of them together in that room of candles and flowers and mirrors and cool sheets, slippery chrism and cool sheets, Kenny trying not to laugh, shhh, trying not to laugh, slippery on his fingers, slippery on his belly, trying so hard not to laugh out loud.

The boy woke to evening dimness and the fuddled notion that he was still in that room, still in that bed with cool sheets and his head resting on Uncle Frank's shoulder, that scent of tobacco and Aqua Velva so familiar from so many days and nights spent together, so many nights in those sheets that smelled like the man himself, like the body of a grown-up man, strong and safe. My little sleepover buddy, that's what Uncle Frank always called him, his bedroom way down the hall from Aunt Rose's, years since those two had slept together, years and years, just fine with Aunt Rose, never could get a good night's rest with that big oaf tossing and turning and snoring like an old bear. If Kenny can put up with him, then they deserve each other, God love 'em.

The boy yawned and wiped his eyes and mumbled wow, I forgot where I was, the Sears Tower and the other bright ziggurats of the Chicago skyline looming now through the Lincoln's broad windshield. Are we almost there? I'm starving, he said. The adults looked at him and smiled and said yeah, we're almost there, not long now, look at all those skyscrapers, aren't they somethin'?

The eager group checked into their hotel by six o'clock, Kenny's parents sharing a room with Aunt Rose, Kenny himself with Uncle Frank. Kenny's choice, rooming with Uncle Frank, no one surprised by the arrangement—like a couple of best pals, those two, everyone always fondly teasing them, especially Kenny's father, perhaps recalling his own boyhood as Uncle Frank's best pal, those long-ago days, those comfortable memories.

Kenny had his all-time favorite, lobster with drawn butter, for dinner, then coconut cream pie for dessert. Everyone kept praising the restaurant, how beautiful it was, and the food, how delicious it was—Kenny's lobster, Aunt Rose's shrimp, Uncle Frank's porterhouse, on and on, everything so delicious, so perfect.

It was getting late by the time dinner ended, the adults happy to settle into their rooms afterwards and prepare for bed, another full day tomorrow with sight-seeing and museums and, if they had time, a trip to the Brookfield Zoo just west of the city. But Kenny was only thirteen and had energy to spare, so many fun things to do and enjoy at the hotel, too early for bed. He finally persuaded his father and Uncle Frank to join him in a trip downstairs to the pool. Boys will be boys, Aunt Rose laughed at them as they changed into their swim trunks and gathered their towels and ventured off.

They had the pool, at that hour, mostly to themselves. Kenny, on the swim team at school, showed off his mastery of various strokes and styles, then showed off his speed by beating both men in a race across the pool and back. Some splashing and horseplay after that, but not much, only a few minutes before a polite member of the hotel staff arrived to announce that the pool was closed, sorry, no more for tonight, sorry, time to go. Kenny's father, worn out, took his towel and headed back to his room upstairs, enough for one day. But the boy convinced Uncle Frank to stay and play a game or two of miniature golf before calling it quits, then even some pinball, an entire amusement complex there at the Sheraton for guests to enjoy, everything but the pool open all night.

Listen up, Uncle Frank finally said, I'm beat, I'm exhausted, let's go back to the room before you have to carry me. Kenny, finishing his Road Show pinball game, grinned OK, OK, towel draped around his neck, baggy yellow swim trunks low and loose on his thin hips. That nervous bellyful of butterflies suddenly back stronger than ever. So many months of waiting and wondering and happy anticipation. He kept bouncing on his toes in the elevator up to the sixth floor, then jogged slightly ahead of Uncle Frank down the hallway to their room, almost dancing as he led the way. Should we tell my mom and dad that we're back? No, Uncle Frank said, no need to bother. He glanced at his wristwatch with the big gold band. It's late. They're probably asleep by now.

Kenny, inside the room, switched on the television and inspected the unfamiliar cable stations. He decided, not really interested anyway, on HBO, one of the Die Hard movies, the volume up just loud enough to provide some reassuring background noise. Uncle Frank was in the

bathroom, the door half-shut as he peed and then brushed his teeth, easy to hear those familiar sounds of his nightly routine, always at the very end that he finally flushed the toilet. He reappeared in his usual ready-for-bed boxer shorts, running a comb through his short gray hair and his gray beard. Shower tomorrow morning, he said. Too late now. Agreed? Showers tomorrow for both of us.

Kenny looked around, nodding, sure, that's a good idea. His hair, untended since being in the pool, was a shaggy and ruffled mess that made Uncle Frank smile and call him a funny-lookin' critter. The boy glanced at himself in the mirror next to the TV and had to laugh. Uncle Frank stepped behind him and used his own comb for the job of tidying and untangling that long brown hair. The boy watched himself in the mirror, small and slender against the man's muscular bulk.

So, Uncle Frank said, you've had a big day. Confirmation Boy. All grown up. Feel any different? Way different, Kenny joked, way older, like about forty or fifty. Uncle Frank laughed along with him. So you had fun today, big man? Oh yeah, the boy said, totally, it was awesome! He waited until his hair had been neatly combed before taking his own turn in the bathroom, Uncle Frank yelling after him to hang his damp swim trunks over the tub, right next to mine, they'll be dry by morning. Kenny quickly stripped and then stood naked at the toilet to pee, the door still open beside him, such a difference recently in this boy, this bashful boy who'd always kept the bathroom door locked and his body covered, who'd always worn pajamas at bedtime, such a difference recently, bolder about showing himself, even asking Uncle Frank to dry him after his baths, laughing at those dirty jokes, Christ's jism, a sexy excitement now whenever he

and Uncle Frank were together at night, something crazy and reckless that felt as new as the frizzy hair between his own legs and the startling ability to ejaculate whenever he rubbed himself or had a weird dream, all somehow more exciting and crazy and reckless on this special night of his Confirmation, so many months of waiting and wondering, not a little child anymore, not a child, all grown up, ready for those grown-up secrets, ready now, eager now.

He finished peeing and then grabbed a white SHERATON towel and wrapped it around his middle, using one hand to hold it loosely closed as he came back into the room to rejoin Uncle Frank. Carpet thick and plush beneath his bare feet. Muffled gunshots and explosions from the TV. Kenny tucked the towel more securely to free both hands while he puttered around the room— checking the locks on the door to the hallway, also on the door that led to the adjoining room where his parents and Aunt Rose were staying, everything safe and secure, then back across the room to pour himself a soda, Mountain Dew with plenty of ice. Uncle Frank was watching from his place on the wide double bed, smoking one of his unfiltered Camels. That's got caffeine in it, he said. You'll be awake all night. No, Kenny grinned, it doesn't bother me, taking an icy gulp, wiping his mouth with a backhanded swipe.

He wandered to that big mirror beside the television and started posing, the glass of Mountain Dew still in one hand, muscle-posing and making tough-guy faces at himself. He took another gulp of his soda and then set it down to allow for more serious flexing, showing off his scrawny biceps and turning himself from side to side, then backwards to flex his shoulders, twin scapulas protruding. Uncle Frank laughed and called him Mister Universe.

They could see each other in the mirror. Kenny said yeah, that's me, I'm Hercules, smiling back at Uncle Frank's reflection. The Mighty Hercules, he said again, funny attempt at a baritone voice, then suddenly removed the white towel from around himself and draped it, for now, over his left shoulder. He glanced once more at Uncle Frank's reflection, waiting for some word of reproof that never came, the man just watching and smiling, puffing on his Camel, Kenny also smiling again and calling himself The Mighty Hercules in that same silly baritone, flexing both biceps and swelling his chest until his bony ribcage appeared ready to burst.

Quite a show, Uncle Frank finally said. The boy kept turning and posing, turning and posing, making those goofy he-man faces while trying not to laugh at his own antics, at his own comical body-building performance, flexing every one of his muscles—even the cheeks of his bare butt—for the mirror and for Uncle Frank to see. The Mighty Hercules, he declared one more time, strongest man in the world! His performance had aroused him to a waggly half-stiffness that he made no effort to hide, same thing always happening lately whenever Uncle Frank dried him after his baths, always that waggly bit of stiffness in his dick—never a full erection, but sort of embarrassing anyway, Uncle Frank telling him right off, that first time, not to worry, it's OK, it's natural, look at this big old thing, holy cow.

Kenny took the towel from his shoulder and wrapped it once more around his middle. I think I'll sleep in the nude tonight, he announced, grabbing his drink, crossing to the bed. Uncle Frank nodded. I was wondering, he said. No underwear even? Nope, the boy said, not tonight. Uncle Frank nodded again and lit another cigarette,

unusual for him, smoking so much. Whatever you want, Kenny. It's your big day.

His big day. His big night. He plopped himself onto the bed—a little clumsily, spilling some Mountain Dew onto his own hand. Jeez, he laughed at himself, what a spaz! He touched the few drops that had splashed onto the mattress near his hip. Oops, looks like I had a wet dream! Uncle Frank chuckled at him, listen to you, I must be a bad influence. Yep, that's right, Kenny joked, it's all your fault.

He sat on his side of the bed, watching the end of the Die Hard movie, finishing his drink. His mom and dad and Aunt Rose all in the next room, so close, strange, exciting, Kenny's head buzzing after seventeen hours of this hectic day, hard to relax or think about sleep even now, especially now, too many months of waiting for this night, imagining it, afraid it might never happen.

You must be exhausted, Uncle Frank finally told him. You've been going nonstop all day. He rested his hand on the back of Kenny's head. My best pal, he smiled, petting that long hair. The boy nestled closer. Is it OK if I sleep in the nude? Uncle Frank put an arm around him. We already agreed on that, I thought. Oh yeah, Kenny said, that's right, we did, forcing a strange laugh while loosening the towel from around his middle, opening it, letting Uncle Frank see the randy thing inside. A real boner this time, all the way up, eagerly erect. Feels more comfortable this way, the boy said, another of those strange little laughs, almost like clearing his throat. Uncle Frank laughed in an easier way and called him a young monkey and then kissed the top of his head. You look plenty comfortable, that's for sure.

Music was playing over the final credits of the movie.

Kenny lifted his hips to pull the towel out and leave himself truly naked—nothing to cover him, nothing to hide him, truly and totally naked now on that big honeymoon bed—a tight shakiness in his gut, heart pounding. His mom and dad and Aunt Rose right there in the next room. So strange, so exciting. Uncle Frank called him a young monkey once more and then did it, finally did it, actually did it—slipped one hand boldly between the boy's legs. No way to get any sleep until we take care of this, I guess.

It was past midnight by then. Kenny laughed like someone being tickled as Uncle Frank kept feeling him, playing with his testicles. Full enough to burst, these things. Kenny laughed harder. Shhh, not so loud, it's late, Uncle Frank soothed him, smiling at him, kissing that shaggy brown hair. You make this much noise at home next time, Aunt Rose will skin both of us alive. OK, the boy laughed more softly, I'll be good, I'll be good, spreading his legs. That cozy scent of tobacco and Aqua Velva. Strong, callused fingers feeling him, playing with him, surprisingly gentle. Uncle Frank's voice against his ear, warm breath, you've been planning this all along, you little scoundrel, I could tell, waiting for your big day, your special day, sneaky critter.

Kenny, still grinning and laughing softly to himself, listened to Uncle Frank's mumbly voice and let his eyes close. Little scoundrel, I knew you'd be planning this, didn't want to spoil your fun, waiting all these months. Tobacco and Aqua Velva. Warm breath against Kenny's ear. Then the warmth of lips and tongue against his chest, his stomach, his balls, a wet feast of licking between his legs, oh my god, unbearable, like a dream, a dream, some kind of sublime and endless torture, almost one o'clock

before Kenny lost control and started moaning, too loud, shhh, his whole body shivering, good boy, shhh, good boy, semen on his belly, slimy on his belly, holy cow, I'm impressed, no kidding, very impressive, so much stuff for a little monkey like you.

The boy opened his eyes and looked at himself. Wow, he agreed, that's really excellent, just now catching his breath, grinning again. Really excellent chrism! Uncle Frank had to laugh. You sure like that corny joke, don't you? Funny guy. Both of them laughing now, trying to keep the noise down, Kenny holding one hand over his own mouth to muffle the sound. He felt like crying and giggling at the same time, so happy, wishing that this day could somehow begin again and replay itself and never, never end.

Uncle Frank was still smiling at him, you and your messy chrism, wiping some of it off the boy's belly with his own thumb and then smearing it, a slippery sign of the cross, onto the boy's forehead. Kenny, that one hand still over his mouth, that devilish laughter still like rapid hiccuping in his throat, cheerfully allowed himself to be anointed with his own semen. A second Confirmation.

Kenny couldn't stop laughing. The best joke yet. So funny. That spermy sign of the cross. Slippery on his own forehead. He just couldn't stop laughing.

