

THE THIRD ACOLYTE READER

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Leonard Taft takes us on a delightful tour of parochial boarding school passions and plots...

Small Blessings

Leonard Taft

The New York Cathedral Choir was finishing rehearsal for the Sanctus of the Mass. Their voices, bass to treble, blended beautifully, no one line outweighing another; the choristers' lips were poised, breathing exact. Most of their minds were fixed upon the task at hand, but the mind of Andy Cox was somewhere

He was twelve and newly aware of his own body, or rather aware in a different way than ever before. He had always been comfortable with his own lithe, compact physique. Lately he had come to love it, thought there was good fun in it, and wanted to share. Even now, dressed in the white surplice of the chorister's trade, even as his eyes were locked on the downbeat of the director, one hand held the music, the other his small cock. Beneath his robes and the white cloth pants he wore, inside dingy briefs, it was his own hand which provided the comfort and the salvation that others were feeling in music. Sex was his Sanctus.

Just now his eye was straying to the fifteen-year-old named Nathan across the chapel from him. Nathan was twice as shy as Andy; Nathan's hair was dark and full, he was not aggressive or proud; he just sang, then in school he did his studies like an obedient son. Once Andy saw him with his parents at a special service and Nathan was polite and servile to them as well. He was always like that.

At the beginning of the year Andy was assigned to Nathan as his charge and, although Andy was always the louder, faster, funnier of the two, he had learned a lot from Nathan and wanted to do more with him. Lately all the twelve-year-olds had been trading sex play in the gym class at school, sometimes with friends in the dorm, comparing their bodies, wrestling more than their interest in that sport would explain, rubbing, stretching, stroking, pummelling, giggling, and loving it.

For most of them, doing that with their class-mates was enough, but Andy Cox wanted to get Nathan to play around with him, too. He would have asked the patron saint of their church to bless their friendship, but he wasn't sure she would be fooled by the piety of his prayer, nor sanction the sex he had in mind. Sure, he wanted praise and blessing, but right now he wanted play more than anything else.

When the director dismissed them (commenting that one of the voices seemed flat though he could not yet tell which boy it was), Andy went immediately to the changing rooms and, still in his robes, stood waiting by Nathan's locker.

At first Nathan was puzzled by Andy's presence in the row where only the older kids changed. The shower after Mass rehearsal was supposed to be some kind of cleansing ritual, but it always developed into more of a sports-orgy. The boys would strip down to their underwear, someone would find a football, and a fast-paced, careless impromptu game would begin in the locker aisles. The priests and janitors were all getting ready to go home, for it was the last period in the day. Such a postponement of the boys' afternoon studies was tacitly accepted.

Nathan was not a joiner in that scene, but he was tolerated by the rest of the high-schoolers if he at least threw the ball back when it bounced near him. And now, as Andy was talking to Nathan about getting together that weekend to mess around, a game began. Nathan told Andy he had better change and get out of there, but Andy didn't want to leave. He was too excited. He followed Nathan as far as the shower door and kept talking even after Nathan went inside.

It was at that moment, as a football pass bounded near Andy, that a classmate of Nathan's, catching it, first noticed the youngster: still robed, obviously misplaced among the upper schoolers. A randy group of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds gathered around him, beginning to laugh. Andy called for Nathan, although choked with laughter himself, especially when they turned him upside down and shook him as one would stand a mop on end. Then they began mockingly calling for Nathan too, then set Andy upright again, then pushed him in after Nathan. It took three high-schoolers to hold Andy under the soaking shower. Nathan, naked and astonished at the sight, looked across at Andy, who grinned up at him, hair plastered down in his his eyes, white robe clinging to his frame like a collapsed parachute, prim black shoes standing in an inch of water. Andy gave a big shrug. "Your place or mine?" he said.

Nathan ushered Andy out of the showers and back to the younger kids' lockers. There he wiped him off with his own robes and a shirt. Half stripped and listening to Nathan's mild scolding Andy looked at him carefully. It was the first time he had seen Nathan undressed, his fine white shoulders and smooth back, the dark hair around his cock

and the big balls underneath. The penis itself was long and straight; when Nathan leaned near to whisper advice about keeping out of trouble lest he be sent down from the choir, it rubbed close to Andy's bare belly.

"Mine gets almost as big as yours now," Andy said cheerfully.

Nathan didn't immediately make the connection.

"If I rub it," Andy went on, then pointed to Nathan's partial erection. "Almost as straight. Want to see?"

The bell rang. Nathan had to go.

"When can we play?" Andy called after him.

In the Gloria of the Mass, the older choristers traditionally took the whole middle section and the juniors were left to hum in harmony. The director faced away from Andy's side then, and Andy was free to make all manner of signals and try to distract Nathan from his singing. He had done it before, and Nathan, although stern immediately afterwards, had joked about it later.

Today, Andy had prepared his fun and even told the two boys next to him. Nathan's side was well into the Gloria when Andy stuck his hand up to get his friend's attention. Nathan kept losing eye-contact with the director and looking over at Andy. It was Andy's grin that caught him at first. Then the slow motions of his hand, as he laid his music book down (how did he dare!), then teasingly, with walking fingers, began to raise his robe, gathering it up at mid-chest so that the lifting hem gradually revealed that he had nothing on underneath. The boys closest to him doubled over with stifled laughter. Andy's bare legs, then his flanks, then his thin stomach were all slowly uncovered behind the carved alter railing where the choir stood.

When he raised on tip-toe, his penis just reached, and for a moment dangled loosely over, the bar.

Nathan reddened and averted his gaze to the director. "Someone's out of tune," the director called over the music.

Andy's side burst out laughing, and the director whipped around on them, just as Andy's gown resumed its full length. The junior boys quieted quickly. Andy's eyebrows lifted over a serious face, absorbed in the music, betraying nothing. Nathan stared at him. Rehearsal ended early.

Andy and Nathan were studying partners. They would meet once

a week in their assigned cubicle in the library where the elder partner was supposed to go over the younger's worst-graded subject.

They were sitting at a single desk with a dim yellow light over head, two chairs brought close for low-voiced lessons. There was the smell of old church wood. Once an hour an elderly priest walked by.

Andy broke their concentration on geography and sat back, playing with his zipper. Nathan told him to sit up. Andy looked over with his grin, just his eyes moving. Nathan noticed his lap: Andy brought out his little uncut penis and sort of petted it. Nathan tried to cover him, but Andy laughingly avoided him, stood up before his chair and unbuttoned his pants, pulled them and his under-drawers down and sat again on the cool wood chair. Nathan was astonished, but Andy assured him that they always could hear the priest's footsteps long before he passed their cubicle. Andy rubbed himself; Nathan stared. Andy took an ink pen and drew on himself: two eyes on his belly and elephant ears, so that his cock appeared as the trunk. Now they both were laughing behind their hands.

Suddenly the priest was coming. He was closer than he ought to be, and Andy was still playing, stalling, courting disaster, still half bare. It was only at the last moment, when Nathan was frantic, that Andy coolly took the large fold-out map of Afghanistan and spread it out across their laps. The priest walked by, saw them bent forward, praise worthily, over their longitudes and latitudes, and walked on. The two boys sat back in relief and couldn't help share another laugh. Nathan reached down under-neath the Arabian Sea, along Andy's smooth thigh, and closed his fingers around Andy's penis. He just held it there in his own shy hand.

“You're going to get me in trouble,” he whispered.

Andy flapped his legs open and shut, trapping Nathan's grasp. “Trouble is fun,” he said, flashing his famous smile.

The sweet, innocent melody of the Pie Jesu in the Requiem Mass was being taken by the fat and imperious treble Rouse - no one knew his other name. Since the director was turned toward the junior section, Andy couldn't fool around - but Nathan could watch him from his own place.

How pure was Andy's face! How perfectly his mouth moved around the syllables of the Latin, how gently his dark hair fell across

his brow, how well he concealed his mischief!

Or was he really hearing the words of the Mass? Was he serious?

Nathan looked for the intimate side of others. He had loved Andy from the start. Now, the boisterous boy was introducing bodily contact between them. He looked at Andy, small and perfect, and he tightened inside. But it was time already for the *Agnus Dei*, the part where the choir sings *Dona nobis pacem*, "Let us rest."

Deep night, Andy out of bed. He sneaked into the older boys' dormitory, crept down the aisle of snoring high schoolers (sound sleepers not to have noticed Andy's squeaky slippers on the polished floor!) looking for Nathan. He recognized Nathan's shoes at the foot of his bed and turned in there.

Nathan was sleeping on his side, facing Andy. His hair was all up on the pillow, one leg drawn up, the other outstretched. His palms were together underneath his cheek, his lips slightly parted.

Andy silently stepped out of his slippers, pushed his shorts down and stripped off his shirt. It was then that Nathan opened his eyes. He saw the ghostly figure of a twelve-year-old boy wearing nothing but briefs, and he lifted his head from the pillow.

"What?" he barely breathed.

"Shhhh," Andy said and climbed up onto, then into, the bed with him.

Nathan, whose arms stayed apart against the cool sheets, could feel Andy unbuttoning his pajama shirt under the covers, then Andy's own smooth body rubbing his chest, nuzzling, probably grinning (although he couldn't see the younger boy's face) as he rubbed his cock up and down Nathan's stomach.

Andy released a sigh and Nathan's arms went involuntarily around him. Andy pushed himself forward a bit and kissed him. Nathan was melting fast: his own body, except for his cold feet, warmed to the younger boy. He wanted to lie there and hold Andy all night, and pet his bare back, and explore his ass, the warm, sweaty, scented crease he had dreamed about so incessantly of late but had never yet probed, even with a fingertip.

But Andy was only playing around under there. He sat up on Nathan's legs and, still under the covers, began to tug Nathan's pajama

pants down, drawing them past his increasing penis, his hips, his thighs.

Nathan made some guttural sound of half-protest, but Andy only laughed and threw back the covers to expose them both: the bare-skinned junior chorister sitting astride the nude corpus of his tutor.

A bed creaked nearby. Nathan sat up fast and pulled the covers over them again. He found his own pants somewhere under the sheet, under Andy, and drew them on.

“You've got to go!” he whispered madly. “They'll find you here.”

“Where I should be.” Andy had found the opening in Nathan's pants and was feeling his penis.

“Go now. They'll arrest us.”

“Naw, they'll probably join us.” And Andy leaned over and kissed Nathan on the chest and rubbed him there.

“Please,” Nathan said again, grasping Andy by the bare shoulders. “Go.”

Andy raised up, looked at him a moment, then, seeing that Nathan was serious, took his hands away. He leaned forward to kiss him on the mouth, then climbed off the bed. Nathan watched him dress, the covering up again of that beautiful body. Andy didn't put on his slippers but crept away in silence, turning back one time and offering a tiny wave from the wrist and one grin as he disappeared into the dark.

Nathan, still bare-chested, although it was against dormitory rules, lay back, staring at the ceiling. How could he sleep now? Deo Gracias!

Andy was in trouble. Rouse, his nemesis, had reported his absence from the dorm last night. He had to explain his whereabouts. Nathan had already heard about the crisis, and now he was talking to Rouse, who was sitting up on his dorm bunk bed eating a chocolate bar that he had stolen from a smaller boy.

“Why are you being so mean to Andy?” Nathan asked, watching the fat lips get covered more and more with candy and hoping the boy wouldn't touch anything with his smeary fingers.

“I'm just reporting what I saw. Andy was gone. Don't know where but I'll bet it's some bad secret.”

“Tell them you were wrong.” “No. Why should I?”

“Were you awake all night? How do you know if he was there or not?”

“He was gone when I got up to pee. He was still gone when I woke up later . Now he's got to answer for it.”

For Nathan, confronting even a younger boy like this was a major test of will against his natural reserve. He tried an appeal to Rouse's better instincts: “He could get dropped from the choir.”

“Let him.”

“He's a good kid, Rouse. Why make trouble?”

But Rouse's better instincts were still rather rudimentary. He turned a surly, chocolatey grin on Nathan. “Trouble is fun,” he said.

Nathan stood before the school principal dressed in his best suit and tie.

“Andrew was with me last night,” he confessed, keeping his eyes straight ahead like a monk.

“With you?” The principal eased back in his spring-loaded chair. “Why was he with you in the middle of the night?”

“Because we were doing something unauthorized.”

A moment of silence, as comes before the Dies Irae of the requiem - the Day of Wrath.

“What were you doing, boy?”

He stood even straighter. “Sir, I was coaching him for the solo in the requiem.”

The principal adjusted his glasses and thought for a moment.

“But the solo is taken by another boy, I believe. It always is. And how are you a coach all of a sudden?”

“Sir, the boy wished it so badly but was not given the chance. I am his tutor in other things...” (He should have put that differently!) “...and we thought that if he could practice and then show the director that he might be given a chance to understudy the solo part - sir.”

“This is most irregular,” the principal said. “And you both deserve punishment for the breaking of the rules.”

“Yes, sir. Of course, sir.”

“Twenty Hail Marys and two weeks of kitchen duty. Each.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I'm glad I was able to clear the matter up, sir.”

The principal waved him off, then seemed to remember. “Oh, and confession to Father Fry, both of you, this instant.”

“Yes, sir. Shall I fetch the other boy, Andy, sir?”

“What? I don't care. Yes, do. And here, take this note.”

It was in the corridor outside the principal's office that Nathan got the idea. The note said only that confession was required immediately and had the principal's signature. There was no other name on it.

He went first to Andy's classroom and quietly stepped up to the teacher who was doing a formula on the board. Andy spotted him, grinned widely. The teacher, seeing the note and hearing Nathan's report, accepted without verification that Andy was being called to confession and so let him go.

Andy and Nathan hugged fiercely in the empty corridor.

“Now we really have to rehearse the Pie Jesu,” Nathan said. Then he told Andy the rest of the plan .

In Rouse's classroom, he again went up courteously, almost meekly, to the teacher, mentioned Rouse's name, showed him the note. Rouse had to go.

“Command appearance, eh, Rouse?” Nathan teased as they walked.

“Shut up. I ain't been in weeks. I'll just keep them busy for a while with a list of grievous sins, then kiss off.”

Nathan smiled at that and watched him be taken into the confession box. A priest emerged from a side room and Nathan handed him the note and, in hushed tones, told him, “Andy Cox, Father, from the principal, if you will hear his confession and absolve him.”

The priest disappeared behind the cloth.

Nathan arrived at the back door to the chamber of Holy Water. He opened it cautiously and peered in. There was the shallow pool, there the steps down into it, there Andy was waiting for him at the edge, shoes and socks off, dangling his feet in the water.

He rose, and they embraced.

“It is done?” Andy asked.

Nathan's answer echoed Judas' own.

But Andy's kiss purified them again. He was already unbuttoning Nathan's shirt when Nathan stopped him. “No,” he said, and put his hands on Andy, “it's my turn today.”

With that he pulled Andy's shirt out of his pants and flung it off over his head, rubbed Andy's small, smooth torso and scrambled his hair, then tore his pants down and tossed them far away across the chamber.

They hugged again, and Nathan let himself roam all over the younger boy's body before he himself undressed.

Together, at the edge of the pool, they embraced, toppling onto the tile floor, legs winding around one another. They were laughing at the accidental joy of it all and, truth to tell, feeling blessed.

It *was* a resurrection of a kind, for Nathan, the feelings he had kept inside for so many years now reborn through Andy's determined coaching. Hands and mouth working at the same time, he kissed and fondled the giggling child under him, licked his chin and down his neck onto the small shoulders, licked his whole chest, kissed the nipples and buried his face in the hot stomach. And this time he did explore the firm, rounded buttocks, so smooth and white, licked into the salty, musty crack between, ran his tongue over, then slightly into the boy's most secret pucker.

Andy had his eyes closed through all of this, dreaming of sunlight and water and still laughing, always laughing. With one foot over the edge of the pool he kicked water up, splashing it over them.

“Hey!” Nathan protested, backing off a bit.

Andy splashed again, raising an arc of holy water that soaked Nathan's back.

Nathan grabbed Andy, more aggressively this time, took the boy's penis into one hand (Andy gasped) and guided it up, as if it could already come, and sucked on it for all he was worth, his own cock at its limit.

Then he flipped the younger boy over and held his twelve-year-old buttocks up at an angle to meet him, inserting himself where his tongue had already led the way, and the two of them humped in perfect harmony there on the tiles, the water from the font being their only

lubricant and kisses their only prayer.

Ah, the liberty in sex! There is none other like it, except perhaps in music. And sex *is* music: the crescendo, accelerando, the release and resolution. And it is religion, too, the first and still foremost religion in the world: body worship. Gloria in Excelsis!

“Someone is off key again,” said the director. “Would it be you?”

He was pointing at Rouse.

“Me, sir?”

“You sir.”

“Well, I’ve had a bit of a cold lately.”

“Is that it or is your voice about to break?”

“Me, sir? No, sir.”

“Too much weightiness in the throat perhaps? Too many chocolate bars?”

The boys laughed.

“Can’t sing the Mass with a cold, Rouse. I want the sound of an angel, not the squawk of a crow.”

“You can’t fire me, sir. Nobody else knows the Pie Jesu.”

“Cox does, sir.”

For the first time in his life, Nathan had spoken up in chapel.

“What’s that? Cox?” the director said, peering over his glasses at the diminutive Andy. “Cox instead of Rouse? It would be a miracle if he could pull it off. Rouse, stand down.”

“But, sir... “

“Cox, when have you had time to learn the Pie Jesu? You can learn such a thing on your own?”

“Oh, but, sir,” Andy said, shining his grin across the altar at Nathan and rubbing with one hand somewhere under his robes, “I have a special tutor these days. I think I could surprise you, sir.”

Nathan smiled back with anew confidence he would keep all his life.

Amen.