

FRITZ FINDS HIS VOICE

A Christmas Story

Here he was where he never thought he would ever have to be again — in the rear pew of a small church on Christmas Eve holding hands with a woman he wasn't sure he loved by the name of Ms. Vickie. She wanted to sit in the front pew. He demurred and won a concession from Ms. Vickie to park in the last pew.

The newly retired judge felt nude without his dark robe. His only survival strategy was to clear his throat and cough as often as he could without becoming too obvious. It was a cough and throat clearing that resonated throughout the small church and attracted much attention. This technique prompted Ms. Vickie to scold him with a sideways glance through her oversized, trapezoid shaped, gold speckled and, he thought, dime store glasses.

Thirty years on the bench, he spent his days now walking: how far, how long, he had no idea. He mulled his judgments, sentences, concepts of right and wrong, his thirty years presiding. Had he been too tough, too lenient? Once his retirement was finalized, Eleanor Crocket, his secretary of many years, turned in her resignation with only two weeks notice, leaving him with boxes of files, well ordered to be sure, but Judge "Fritz" Fitzgerald, was left to sit in an office not knowing where to begin. Glad, though, he didn't have to meet mule-mug Crocket anymore in the hall in the early morning with oatmeal on her cheek.

The temporary employment service sent Ms. Vickie to help him untangle the mess. At first sight, the judge was relieved. She was not a typical employment agency floozie, the kind with half a brain and low-cut blouse. In fact, she resembled an older version of Orphan Annie with her telescopic eyeglasses, pure sheep thick curly white hair and dumpy figure. To a man who still used terms such as "top drawer," "sterling qualities," and "thank you kindly," the only quality that mattered to the judge was that Ms. Vickie was competent.

She got right to work. Given Crocket's gift for organization, Ms. Vickie was able to get the judge's files in order in several weeks. During this time, he walked and walked. He sat in his makeshift office adjusting his eyeglasses, clearing his throat, hacking, and

squirming in his old leather office chair while Ms. Vickie paged through his files. This continued from July into the middle of autumn. He lost weight uniformly and could wear his old clothes: left over slacks from his pin striped suits, and scuffed tennis shoes. He had accepted having little hair, wearing Hubble strength spectacles and carrying a balloon sculpted abdomen which, much to his befuddlement, resisted the persistent efforts of his walking regimen.

As he walked the neighborhood and the hiking paths of nearby parks, memories of eager days of law school pecked at the edges of his neglected feet.

The judge had been married once, no children. That was a long time ago. His wife insisted they go to church, not once but twice a week, and accused him of keeping his nose in his files and ignoring her. When she left, he was glad to be rid of her harping, of the ice cream socials, the Bible study groups at their apartment, the praying, all the religious magazines they received, the Christian music she liked to play on her white spinet piano that made him want to run away. At that time, they hadn't accumulated any wealth but what they did have, and what he, and he alone, had slaved for, she snatched with the artistry of a pickpocket. She insisted too on alimony, but he had none to give. He was just a kid clerking for a judge. After five years his financial obligations expired and he was free again to chase another life with another woman but he never did. Didn't have the interest or energy for it. As a result of his single marital experience, the judge became bitter towards women, a practicing misogynist, and happy to be one.

His early days as a tax attorney quickly soured him on the world in general and he found himself unable to kiss his clients' asses, money or no money. After amassing enough conservative investments to pay his way, he snapped at a friend's offer to accept a judgeship and move up the courtroom ladder. His ambitions there waned the more he observed the venality of human nature.

Once appointed judge, his days mainly consisted of reading briefs, studying law books and presiding over criminal cases. One of his few pleasures was to leave his office and make his way to a steak house downtown, relish two double martinis, chat with Angelo, the bartender, who had more news savvy than Ted Koppel, and devour the same cut of porterhouse steak, medium rare.

After dining, he returned to his comfortable, but monkish apartment, poured a glass of red wine, settled into the generous plush arms of an aged easy chair from a thrift store and read cheap detective novels that he called, “little stinkers.” Now and then he would go to a movie or a ball game with his only friend, Judge Duncan, a man of his ilk, long retired.

Before he knew it, it was time for his own mandatory retirement. Judge Duncan died the year before. Pancreatic cancer. Came up fast. Two sons Old Duncan never saw. As for himself, he was certain the young attorneys and other judges would remember old Fritz as being dour and dull, though sometimes he would catch them off guard with a sudden wisecrack, usually at the expense of a bumbling prosecutor or their own stupidity, reddening their faces or sending them and defense attorneys alike heehawing together uncontrollably out the courtroom doors.

In the same year of his retirement, after Ms. Vickie helped him dispose of years of files and move his law books to his apartment, toss out the rest, and finally close the door of his office, a remarkable thing happened. A month after his move, Ms. Vickie called and invited him to dinner. Stunned, he slumped a moment in his easy chair, bristled, slumped again. After taking in the lilt of her voice and a brief, fierce internal debate, he didn’t see how he could refuse her invitation. After all he reasoned, he wasn’t completely heartless – was he? -- and she had made a formidable case based on the principle that she noticed — “forgive my intruding” — he seemed to be somewhat lost now that he was without a regular job — was she right? — and, well, she had been feeling lonely lately, and could use some decent, intelligent company, which was hard to come by these days. Caught off guard, he found himself blurting out a “Yes, that would be nice” making a date, followed by a “Thank you kindly,” before hanging up the phone.

Thinking over the impending occasion, he supposed he ought to bring some flowers from the grocery store and two bottles of wine, one red, one white. That’s the way people did it when he was still on the social circuit.

On the agreed evening, he began to get cold feet. His hands became sweaty, his heart pounded and his forehead ached. He forced himself out the door with a small supermarket bouquet wrapped in crinkled, clear paper and the two bottles of wine. He waved down a taxi and slumped mysteriously in the back seat, like a CIA agent, hands shaking, not wanting to be recognized.

Once out of the taxi he stood on the sidewalk, hands still shaking. Had he got the address right? What would she think of the bouquet? After a few minutes of standing mute, he felt he had gained enough resolve to move forward. “For chrissakes, get a hold of yourself,” he said out loud. He took the stairway to the third floor and found himself in front of her door. After a few additional seconds of hesitation, he used the brass knocker to give notice that he had arrived. He felt he knew Ms. Vickie well enough to assume she was spying on him through the little glass door hole to confirm that it was him.

She opened the door with a flourish and smiled, her eyeballs bulging with thyroidal enthusiasm.

“I’m so glad you could come,” she said, taking him by the hand and leading him into her apartment. A very delicious smell of a meal in the oven made his mouth water.

He instantly liked her apartment. Nothing like his. Very warm and tastefully done. She even had a gas fireplace. Why hadn’t he thought of that? His building had gas. Make a note of it, he dashed off in his head. He, who made a point of speaking in understatement, was astonished to hear superlatives shouting themselves out of his mouth. “A brilliant apartment,” he said.

“Oh, you brought some flowers,” Ms. Vickie gushed. “How lovely. And wine. I keep several bottles in stock but it’s very thoughtful of you.”

In fact, her table was flush with flowers. His wretched bramble bush, still in its sheet of clear plastic wrap, resembled early spring flowers cowed by a late frost. Ms. Vickie put his sad, sleepy flowers in a small vase and centered them on her coffee table.

He heard her pop a cork and she delivered two glasses of a very fine, lively Champayne brut.

“I’ve cooked us my specialty – chicken pot pie.”

What? No porterhouse? he thought. Later, on some evenings when they had become more familiar, both pooped, they would dine at his downtown dive. She stuck to slowly, very slowly, chewing fresh spinach leaves sprinkled with blue cheese crumbles and bacon bits, while watching him gnaw chunks of semi-raw beef and suck the bone of his porterhouse this way and that.

“First, we have my own Caesar salad. It’s very low fat. I make it with egg substitute and, well, I hope you can taste the rest of my concoction. Actually, a waiter at one of those fancy restaurants made a Caesar at table side and walked me through it. That was when I was married. My husband was a stock broker. Oh, well.”

The judge, always observant, mentally scribbled down that “Oh well” was her signature *repondez-vous*.

So that’s why she’s living in such a fancy place, the judge thought, a taste of bile up his throat. A shifty stock broker for an ex-husband.

“On the side, I’ll be fixing some fresh asparagus.”

The judge liked asparagus, especially if it was buttered. He hoped she wouldn’t slop it over with hollandaise sauce.

“Now, tell me about your life.”

The judge was wordless.

“Well, I...I...I have just been a judge.”

“I figured that. Never married?”

“Once. It didn’t worked out. She got tired of me beating her up,” he grinned.

“Oh, well,” Ms. Vickie said, using her favorite expression, ignoring his joke.

The judge thought the salad was delicious. The pot pie was the best he’d ever devoured. Filled with a thick chicken gravy, lots of moist bites of white and dark pulled chicken, peas, carrots, small chunks of potatoes, all served within a lightly browned, doughy crust that hung together. The asparagus was brushed with butter and salt and peppered to a tee. For desert, she served a slice of homemade cherry pie with a dollop of whipped cream.

“It’s the low fat kind,” she was proud to say. Then, she served a cognac on the coffee table in front of the sofa and that’s when the evening became bizarre, at least to the judge's forensic recall. They had another and another. Before he knew it they were kissing. He hadn’t kissed a woman in years. Ms. Vickie was a good kisser with a wonderfully soft, wavering tongue.

To his surprise, he found himself undressed and in bed with her. It took a while, but after some help from Ms. Vickie, he felt his aging body infused with new hope and a resolve that had been long absent. It was the first semester of law

school again, his studio apartment, her name was Cynthia from the pharmacy down the street, but no, it was not Cynthia, it was Ms. Vickie this time, and the time was now.

So that's how the judge and Ms. Vickie became a couple, sort of. Well, the judge thought the next morning, all of that was fine and good but where would it lead? Would she become a bother? Before he had even finished the thought, his phone rang. Other than calls from young lawyers wanting advice on this or that, he seldom heard his rotary telephone ring, especially since Judge Duncan died and he had retired. Oh no, it was Ms. Vickie.

"Hi darling. What a wonderful night! How is the state of jurisprudence this fine morning?"

The judge shuddered. She sounded a bit too peppy so early in the a.m. Not much of a looker, but she was kind. Probably that stock broker was an obnoxious jerk, he speculated, like most of them are.

"I have an idea," she said, following up quickly.

This also set him back. Sure, they'd had a fine night, but it was a first date and he felt embarrassed. Here it was, only the day after, and she was in hot pursuit. Besides, his head hurt. Too much cognac. He had taken two aspirin.

"I was thinking," she said, "there's a movie I'd like to see and I wondered if we could go together."

After she named the movie, the judge recognized it as a suspense film he also had wanted to see. Nothing fancy for him. He hadn't been to a movie since Judge Duncan died. Never wanted to go alone.

"I've heard of it," the judge said, grumpily, rubbing the back of his neck. Why? Why do I do these things? "I have been wanting to see it. Maybe..."

In a couple of weeks is what he thought. A body needs a day or two to recover from these kinds of physical and emotional shocks.

"There's a five o'clock showing at The Unique. We could take it in and catch a bite."

Though his stomach felt bloated and was making grumbling noises, the judge knew that by late afternoon he would be drooling for a porterhouse and martinis shaken by Angelo and would want to catch up on the latest goings on at the courthouse. He didn't

know whether he wanted the martinis first, then the movie, more martinis, then dinner, or what. Better do the movie first, he decided, lest he nod off during the build up to the good parts.

“Okay. Let’s do the five o’clock thing.”

“Hooray!”

Hooray? the judge thought. What am I getting myself into?

That was the first of many movies. The judge even took Ms. Vickie to two football games. It was still early in the season. Football games like most of life's events had some merit but nothing was worth freezing your ass over. Miss Vickie turned out to be the cheerleader type and, frankly, he had the urge to yank her back down in her seat but considered appropriate courtroom demeanor and deep breathed himself through it.

They created a routine of walking together. (Turned out Ms. Vickie didn’t have to work. She just liked to.). They walked everywhere, often in silence. Ms. Vickie would suddenly burst out with some story about her life, such as her foreshortened college career (she had wanted to be a pediatrician), that always ended with her characteristic, “Oh, well.”

The judge invited her over for dinner. Other than a porterhouse steak, he occasionally enjoyed his own pasta pomodoro. He began with olive oil and seared chopped onion. He added chopped tomatoes and separately prepared the angel hair, sprinkled it with a little salt and pepper, mixed it all up and topped it with parmesan cheese. Simple but delicious. He wasn’t nervous as he served a mixed salad with his own vinegar and oil recipe. Ms. Vickie loved it. On the side he provided a platter of lightly flavored garlic toast.

The sommelier at the wine shop in his neighborhood advised him to purchase a fine merlot. The judge had whipped out his well-worn leather wallet from a back pocket, then chafed when the cashier nonchalantly stated the amount with tax and asked for payment in either cash or credit card.

“Thank you kindly,” the judge said, carefully lifting the paper bag off the counter. He turned quickly so the cashier could not see his face. “Should be kissing my ass at this price,” he muttered.

“Sir?”

“Must be good stuff.”

“Indeed.”

He came to call Ms. Vickie “Vick” unless he was peeved with her. She had already begun calling him “Fritz.”

She took him to the ballet — free tickets from a coupon book. He had already had his requisite double martinis, medium rare porterhouse, glass of red wine, and quickly fell asleep — all those teenagers jumping around, pretending to be artistic, he later confessed.

One Saturday afternoon she coaxed him to the art gallery to enjoy a traveling impressionistic exhibit, a rather famous one, including a Renoir and Monet. Within an hour, she could sense his restlessness, so she let him take her to a favorite hamburger joint housed in a rusting streetcar. The guy was a crabby “horse meat flipper,” the judge's words for the proprietor and only cook. “Crippled with osteoarthritis by all his meanness,” Ms. Vickie juried. Yelled at his customers for keeping the odd shaped door open. She had to agree, though — the judge had his burgers medium well — as the old guy perfectly grilled “his greasy pies,” the burgers were the best she'd ever had, and, oh, the accompaniments, fresh tomatoes, lettuce, real sliced deli pickles, NY style, crisp, salty chips (“Where in the hell does he find them?” She asked). “Get the hell outta here,” the old guy shouted to customers if they lingered too long after they finished. The French fries seemed greaseless, onion rings to die for. A Ms. Vickie cliché.

In fact, the judge admired his attitude, the way he ordered newer impatient customers to “wait your goddamn turn.”

“Why does he even have the place?” Ms. Vickie complained, “if he can’t be kind to his customers.”

“The guy’s retired,” Judge Fitzgerald replied. “He doesn’t need customers. He just enjoys frying great hamburgers. The kind you hunger for if you want to have a great, greasy hamburger. It's his baby.”

“Oh, well,” Ms. Vickie sadly smiled, as she often did, not expecting much but hoping for a little. “Okay.”

Ms. Vickie was one who liked her morning paper of a home town variety and took advantage of free offerings in the city. (“Oh brother,” the judge rolled his eyes, once he became aware of her interest in local flavor, “dragging me to another one of those poorly organized affairs to mingle with flea market types hawking junk and infected homemade

foods, stirred drinks out of jugs, sloppy water color paintings, and bad poetry readings”). He accompanied her anyway, dressed now in one of his older white shirts stuffed into a pair of denims urged upon him by Ms. Vickie on a day trip to a factory store offering cheap, irregular brands.

“I’m a Wall Street Journal man,” he sniffed at the envelope of clippings she mongered through over coffee and pastries in her favorite cafeteria. She eyeballed him.

“What does that get you, Fritz? Who cares what General Motors or Microsoft does on a given day? That’s not life. That’s way out there, in Detroit or Seattle or some other stupid place. This is real close to home stuff. My newspapers. You can put your hands on it. Well, look around. Here, for free. A miniature railroad fair.”

“Whoooo. Whoooo,” the judge hooted.

“You old grump. Have a chocolate donut.”

“You know I prefer cinnamon rolls with lots of vanilla frosting.”

“And never the twain shall meet. Oh, well. Have one anyway.”

“They’ll make me fat.”

“You’re already fat.”

“Enough said.”

All right, he’d go. At that moment he’d agree to just about wherever and whatever she wanted to drag him to. As much as he disliked associating with dingalings, he trailed along.

He went with her, hand in hand, clearing his throat all the way, to a yarn festival, an origami lecture, a dog show (“of all things”), “Look at that schnauzer. Cute,” a reading by a Romanian poet in a used book store (“a screaming idiot in need of a shave and clean sneakers”). “Opportunities galore, Fritz, for those of us with a willingness to open our minds and hearts.”

“Sure.” (“Blah, blah, blah.”) .

Then came the nuclear blast.

One Saturday night in early December, she called.

“Fritz, we’re having a pot luck and Christmas carols at our church tomorrow and I thought you might like to come. I’m making a great chicken and noodle casserole.”

The judge sat upright on the sloping edge of his easy chair. He was halfway through a page turner. He choked and coughed. Scowled. Thoughts of his wife, Bible studies, prayer groups. Church. No. No. No. He coughed and cleared his throat.

“Are you okay?” Ms. Vickie asked.

“No,” the judge rasped.

“What’s the matter?”

The judge decided to measure his words. He could go over the whole story or make it brief.

“Ms. Vickie,” he said. “I am not fond of religion, to put it mildly. All that cruelty, gossip and violence.”

“Oh,” she said. “I didn’t know. You hadn’t said. I mean we’ve never talked...”

“It goes back a long way. Childhood. That kind of thing.”

“Not negotiable, I suppose.”

“Non-negotiable.”

Though she didn’t answer immediately, he felt her voice drop. Then she said:

“It was just an idea. I’ve always been a church person. I always will be.

We’ve just haven’t discussed religion, I guess.”

“No, we haven’t.” The judge could feel the power leaving his voice too and the book he had been reading, a little stinker, held open with his thumb, began to quiver slightly.

“Is this going to be a problem between us?”

“Could be. But I hope not. The wife, you see...And then, as a boy...”

“Well, I’m sorry I brought it up.”

“I’m sorry too,” the judge said.

“Another time, then.”

“Another time,” the judge echoed.

At that, Ms. Vickie, hung up with a brisk click. His body, on automatic, responded with a defiant flicker of his upper lip. Bitch. He poured himself a rather strong Scotch.

In the days that followed, the judge did what judges do. He adjudicated their relationship. Hadn’t he had paid for everything? The dinners. The movies. The museums. The art fairs. The groceries for her dinners, albeit all well done, gourmet, wine more

expensive by far than what he would normally have bought for himself. True, he had not paid for their moments in her bedroom or his, but she was a lady, not a concubine nor a geisha (not qualified). Secretly, he had paid for those new wonders of science that enable men of his age to score. (“Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus”). On the other hand, as predicted, she had made something of a pest of herself. He weighed the evidence, found the scales leaning overwhelmingly in his direction and waited for her to call back in tears and apologize for her sophomoric behavior of hanging up on him.

No redress. She did not.

Defrocked, bereft his perch of power, his walks without Ms. Vickie grew longer in the December cold. None of the little stinkers held his interest. He sunk into his easy chair and growled lowly at the vapidness of the television screen and, one evening dressed in overcoat, scarf and fedora walked to a movie by himself. He stopped at the bar but Angelo was off. No one to trade barbs with. After two doubles that tasted rough, he nearly froze going home.

Finally, he grabbed the phone and called Ms Vickie. No answer. He called again and again.

An old timer like himself, she neither owned a computer nor an answering machine. “Probably at a church get together,” he snapped at the wall. “Punch, cookies, that kinda crap.”

He walked by himself, walked more, and then some more. Christmas was coming. Jesus, it was getting pretty damn close. Trees, lights, all that monkey business, discounts, lies, stuffed animals, Baby Jesus this, Baby Jesus that. How many baby Jesuses were there for Christ sakes, how many cribs, how many red, blue and green lights?

The judge stood on the street of his retirement from the judiciary, hands in the pockets of his long, blue overcoat and wept.

Shit, he didn’t want to spend Christmas alone this year. He hadn’t been invited to one damn Christmas party at the courthouse. How soon they forget. Haven’t been retired a year yet.

He tried to call her again.

“Hello?”

Got her! A hot erp-up followed the word and a coughing fit ensued. His large hiatal hernia. Once he gained control, he cleared his throat and said:

“Vick. It’s me. Fritz.”

“Oh?”

(“Fuck you, bitch”).

“Vick, I’ve called to apologize, I mean, I’m certain I must have sounded brusque on the phone. In fact, I must have sounded rude.”

“What you? Brusque? Rude?”

“Damn you anyway, Vickie” he coughed, hacked and hoo-hawed.

They laughed and got to giggling and hee-hawing, and it took a while.

“Vick, I am sorry.”

“I know you are, and so am I. Hanging up like that was so....so sophomoric.”

The judge didn’t dance but he would have if only he knew how.

“I was just trying to say it’s a matter of some past experiences involving my ex-wife that were extremely painful — boring too, I might add — not to mention my Catholic upbringing. All that meanness. I think the nuns studied the Inquisition and the priests didn’t have work enough to keep them busy.”

A long pause. He heard water running and dishes clinking. This irritated him. Though retired, he still was The Honorable Judge Fitzgerald. All rise. He commanded full attention.

“Look,” she said. “I’m making ornaments for the assisted living center down the street. Why not come over and help me?”

Okay. All right, the judge mediated. When he arrived, earlier rather than later, he found her apartment dazzling with a well-lit Christmas tree, joyful music, a nice fire and the smell of a succulent dish in the oven. A pot roast? Yes it was, served with potatoes, carrots and green beans. He didn’t mind the glue on his fingertips nor the luminous glitter that adhered to his fingers and pin striped suit pants. He spent the night snuggling again with Vick.

The reunion was not without cost. Ms. Vickie offered additional invitations and the judge accepted them without hesitation. People of all kinds. None that he wanted to

attend to. The events included serendipitous Christmas get-togethers clipped from newspaper announcements, telephone pole posters and supermarket handouts. The judge shivered wrapped in his long black overcoat meant to last a lifetime and neck scarf at a Christmas tree lighting, and much too long strolls and window gazing along shopping mall displays. While the lamb led, the lion growled not far behind.

Even so, as extra measure, one evening after an extra glass of Merlot, he magnanimously offered to do her taxes.

And those damned double martinis. They'd be the undoing of him yet. In another inexplicable moment, after a toxic third martini ("just a single olive this time, Angelo"), magnanimous to a fault, after hearing all Ms. Vickie's blah blah blah about girlhood memories of pine wreath scents and bell ringers, be damned if he didn't volunteer to take her to Christmas Eve services at her church.

So, here he was. Okay, he had to admit she was aglow and all that. But so were a lot of people on such blubbering occasions like this. So was the church for that matter — aglow. It had been decorated with garland, holly and poinsettias. In the subdued light, the candles burst forth in unearthly brightness.

Behind the railing on the right side was a crèche. The statues weren't life sized but they looked so to him. He disliked anything half assed. The paint on the statues was bold, adding to the crèches' unrealistic but festive faces. ("Whatever happened to calling them plain old cribs?"). Once upon a time in a cold stone church with hard wooden pews...the judge began telling himself, before his storytelling voice caught a hitch. He swallowed, then proceeded. Once upon a time there was a boy named Fritz in a cold stone church who crawled inside a crib stuffed with straw and sheep, a donkey and a cow breathing over baby Jesus. A shepherd boy stood outside with a grown-up shepherd carrying a lamb over his shoulder. There was a drummer boy and another lad with a turban leading a camel by its reins and behind them walked the three kings. The judge had wanted to be that drummer boy, his king to be the king holding out the gold. "To heck with the frankincense. To heck with the myrrh. Give me the gold," he thought at the time.

Tonight, on the other side of the communion rail, choir boys were forming in two rows. They wore their red cassocks and white surpluses well.

The judge had been in a choir once. He felt a minor sting. He could hear that moment.

Ten years old then. The music director, a Catholic priest, had been in a boy's choir in Vienna. Before the Nazis had taken over completely, the priest's father snuck the family to England, then America. The music director was nothing short of a perfectionist. He wanted to fill the bleachers with choir boys but he only wanted boys who could sing like angels. The boys who could not be robed in cassocks and surpluses but they were only allowed to move their lips and mouth the words to the hymns. They were not allowed to sing. Those boys who could not sing were called the Old Crow Section. Fritz was among them. A member of the Old Crow Section. He had not tried to sing since.

In his fright on entering the church with Ms. Vickie— the “old lightning strikes syndrome” came into effect. Was god real after all, and a merciless one at that, like Father Jacobowski? The judge had forgotten to check out the sign in front of the church.

“What kind of a church is this anyway,” he barked in his loud, dour voice.

Shhhh! Ms. Vickie said, an index finger to her lips. She looked around to see if anyone had noticed. “It 's Episcopalian,” she said.

“Oh good,” the judge said. “I thought maybe it was Roman Catholic or one of those crazy Pentecostal cults.” What had triggered his concern was the communion rail. He had forgotten that Episcopalians took communion too.

Possibly to change the subject, Ms. Vickie quickly turned to look to the rear of the church. In the small narthex, four acolytes were shuffling into a military entourage. This led the judge to another time and place many years ago when he was in sixth grade.

He, too, had been an altar boy, as the Catholics called their acolytes. At first, he had enjoyed donning the cassock and surplis, the pomp of the ceremony, the smell of incense, the esteem of carrying the gold cross. Some of the other boys clowned around in the sacristy, pinching the noses of other altar boys with the charcoal tongs, tying a surplis to the back of another so the unwitting newcomer would drag it behind him onto the altar like a white tail. Not Fritz. He wanted to be a Knight of the Altar and he studied the manual as often as he could.

But glory was not his only incentive. His family, though not poor, was not rich. He very shortly discovered there was more gold to be had in the church than the

gold found in a chalice. A Knight of the Altar could be called upon to serve at weddings and funerals. Usually the groom at weddings or a member of the aggrieved family at funerals would slip a half dollar or even a dollar bill into Fritz's palm. Not gold exactly, but silver, or green at least. Funerals, many held during the week, added a bonus – time off from school. Once Fritz learned the ropes, looking solemn during the service, bowing his head at graveside as the priest did, he was called on more than the others to ride in the hearse to the cemetery. Often, as a judge, daydreaming during lulls in trials, it occurred to him that priests too, given their meager pence, milked guilt money from the aggrieved or from the relieved parents of wayward children who tied the knot just in time. Besides, Fritz reasoned, it was tough on a little kid to hear, “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” over and over without it taking a toll. An altar boy, the judge often speculated, just like any other professional, deserved recompense.

His profit-making approach to funerals and weddings came to a close when Sister Angelica was forced to retire because she had gotten old. She had directed the altar boys for many years. A kindly soul, she taught altar boys the ropes with a soft hand. One afternoon after her abrupt retirement, the altar boys were summoned to the sacristy. Where Sister Angelica had once stood, now stood a tall, malevolent form in a Benedictine habit, resembling a black praying mantis. She almost called them to attention, the judge recalled.

Her name was Sister Ermaline. Even at his young age, he could smell a skunk. Right then, he pegged her. Like most of the other nuns, she had been well trained in the art of inflicting pain. Fritz could sense this expertise in her thin smile. (“Hold out your palms.” Whack! Whack! went the ruler.) Young Fritz always refused to cry though the pain was excruciating. One of her other tortures was to punish the offender by having him kneel on pencils. One poor lad, Tommy Lynch, son of an alcoholic and beat-‘em-up father, probably a kid with attention deficit disorder who couldn’t sit still, always fainted during her torture.

Sister Ermaline went through the usual rules: be in the sacristy fifteen minutes before the service, no monkey business, that kind of thing. Young Fritz could handle all that. It’s when she came to the part about stipends that he gritted his teeth.

“Any money,” she snarked, “given to you at weddings and funerals shall be

turned over to me. That money belongs to the church. Is that understood? If I catch any of you pocketing that money, you will no longer be an altar boy.” (“Probably had her private stash for cigarettes and booze,” the older Fritz often thought.).

Young Fritz looked at the marble floor. Perhaps by impulse or some other inner cry calling for justice he took one step forward and said, “I quit.”

Sister Ermaline’s face colored and veins showed in her face and neck.

“You little smart aleck,” she said. As she approached him, she swung her right arm back, palm open, in a slapping mode. Aware of what she intended, since he had experienced this maneuver many times, he ducked and she missed which infuriated her more.

“I quit. I’m not working free for nobody,” he said. He didn’t know where that line had originated. Maybe from an uncle at a family gathering.

“Okay, young man. Make true your boast. Tonight I shall give your father a call.”

She followed up with her threat. His father talked with her for a half hour.

When they were finished, his father, a humble man in a knit sweater his grandmother made for him, walked into Fritz’s bedroom.

“I agree with you” was all he said.

Not many days later, Sister Ermaline dismissed Fritz as an altar boy in the same sacristy where he had once felt himself to be a priest or a bishop, perhaps a pope, even a saint.

Sister Ermaline never spoke to him again. Fritz, walking away from her, talking over his shoulder, only said, “I’m never working for free.”

Back in the present in the tiny church, the judge mumbled aloud,

“I’ll never work for free. Never. Never.”

“What?” Ms. Vickie asked equally loudly, and she crumpled her forehead into an all too familiar frown.

“Oh. Oh, nothing. When is this shindig going to get underway anyhow?”

“Right now. Look.”

The acolytes had aligned in formation in the rear of the small church. Ms. Vickie straightened herself, pushed her eyeglasses into place and split open a hymnal. A priest in an alb and white stole stood behind the acolytes. The priest, with his gray hair

and unlined face, carried an other-worldly aura. He reached up and clasped a rope. Pulling it up and down, he rang the church bell heartily several times. "Hark the Herald!" broke out, echoing off the crossbeams of the church ceiling, and the sound of a powerful organ startled the judge. Until then, he had not noticed the organist seated behind the youth choir. The priest and his entourage processed slowly and solemnly down the short aisle. The congregation stood and sang in a seamless voice.

The faithful had hardly begun singing before a substantial woman in a full-length raccoon coat just two pews to the front of the judge spontaneously bellowed and hooted in full vibrato showboating herself into the merriment.

("Oh brother," the judge thought, rolling his eyes. "A hooter. One in every church"). Involuntarily, he shook so hard trying to contain his giggling, he snorted, earning an elbow from Ms. Vickie in his flabby side. In altar boy style he just couldn't stop giggling, so he coughed and swallowed, coughed and swallowed, until he thought he might vomit into the pew ahead of him. Ms. Vickie sang louder to cover his contentiousness. ("So what," he rationalized). Yet, he couldn't help himself, but a fiery minor burp up followed by a gulp brought him back into judicial decorum.

During the service, the judge glazed into unbearable boredom, just as he had as a youngster. His stomach churned as he plead to whatever god there was for some excuse for a hasty exit. He felt jittery and claustrophobic, hemmed in, imprisoned. He remembered all those mornings in grade school when he was forced to attend an eight o'clock Latin mass. He conspired within himself to develop a believable escape plan. Perhaps he could go into another loud coughing spell or tell Ms. Vickie he was about to throw up. After he looked into her inspired face, though, he decided to defer to her joy. He couldn't, just couldn't. After all he'd put himself through, he just had to hold on a bit longer. Otherwise, all of this agony would be have been for naught. Plus, the homily was coming and maybe he might hear a story that would distract him from his uneasiness.

The homily was quite disappointing. The same old party line: salvation, the kid in the manger, and so on.

They passed a woven straw collection basket. ("Fake poverty," the judged thought). Feeling holiday largess, he pulled a twenty out of his pocket and dropped it next

to one dollar bills and folded checks. Ms. Vickie, he noticed, used the check approach. (“Tax deduction, more than likely”, he speculated).

During the collection, the youth choir sang, “Still.” At one point, a boy took a step forward and sang a solo in one of the purest voices Fritz had ever heard. A pang shot through him knowing he was never allowed to sing and to his surprise a tear or two streaked the shaven but coarse white stubbles of his cheeks and chin. The communion hymn was, “O Little Town Of Bethlehem,” led by the youth choir, but everyone joined in, some carrying their hymnals to the altar. He could have gone to the railing with Ms. Vickie. She tugged lightly at his sleeve, but he nodded in the negative. “All baptized Christians are welcome at the Lord’s table,” the minister said. He had been baptized and confirmed but thought as a non-believer he shouldn’t pretend to be one. Ms. Vickie returned to their pew, knelt and bowed her head for the longest time. He sat back in the pew, arms folded across his chest.

The rest of the service was unremarkable and after the final blessing he thought maybe he was home free, and more than overdue for a midnight snorf. But no, the lost and lonely just hadn’t had enough practiced merriment. The youth choir and the congregation had prepared a Christmas carol “hootenanny,” he thought they called it. Oh, brother, he thought. We’ll be here all night. After four or five hymns, the minister announced they would finish with “Silent Night.” A hymnal had been placed in a slot before him. Out of boredom, Fritz picked it up and turned to the designated hymn number. The youth choir led the congregation with their (“obviously phony”) angelic voices. No doubt anticipating a visit from Santa or a wealthy Uncle Roy. That was his take. Would they get that new computer game they’d begged for? He sensed from the excitement flushing their faces; they certainly had paid for it, having to endure all this folderol.

Yet, the sound of children singing had always made him teary eyed. And to his surprise, his eyes watered now. A carol he heard in a Paris cathedral when he was on a college escapade came to mind. So was the raven-haired beauty who took him there. The choir sang, “Trois Anges Sont Venus Ce Soir”:

“Trois anges sont venus ce soir
M’apporter de bien belle choses;
L’un d’eau avait un encensoir

L'autre avait un chapeau de roses..."

("Three angels came tonight
To bring me very beautiful things
One of them had a censer
Another had a bouquet of roses...")

He found himself humming along to the hymn the young choir was singing in Ms. Vickie's church, not paying attention to the lyrics. He closed his eyes and sensed a melody leaving his chest and throat. Somewhere from deep down, he felt a rising. His mouth soon found words in the melody and the words and the melody departed from him. Later, in detached, objective analysis, he deduced it could have been the organ, the sentimentality of the moment, the skin of Miss Vickie's arm against his, her holiday perfume, the children singing. Who knows about these things? Somewhere from within the church he heard a voice singing the sacred hymn in an old ancient way of innocence and mystery as when he could first reach the back of the pew in front of him and taste the worn varnish of it with his teeth in the cold stone church where he had wished himself a drummer boy.

The hymn ended and the organ subsided peacefully. He opened his eyes. The entire congregation, standing, had turned towards him. He blinked. Ms. Vickie whispered in his ear. "I didn't know you could sing," she said.

"Neither did I," he said, embarrassed by all the attention being given to him by people he didn't know.

The congregation turned to face the altar again. He felt himself in a sweat. His armpits were wet and gave off the sharp smell of a barnyard on a summer morning.

The organist fired up some hopping dismissal music and the minister led by his acolytes proceeded jauntily up the aisle to the rear of the church. Fritz and Ms. Vickie stood in line with the others to shake the minister's hand. Fritz didn't know what to say because the sermon had been so crappy. The judge, still in disbelief at what had occurred, shook the minister's hand but the minister would not let him go.

"Sir, you have one of the finest baritone voices I've ever heard. You certainly

crowned the evening. The Lord has given you quite a gift. We're glad you came tonight to share it with us."

"Thank you kindly," the judge whispered, hardly hearing himself. His voice, he reckoned, had already returned to its hiding place.

Ms. Vickie took him by the hand and led him outside. It had begun snowing as it should, Fritz thought, in any Christmas story.

"What happened in there?" he asked.

"I don't know exactly," Ms. Vickie said. "You closed your eyes and this huge voice came out of you. Everyone else stopped singing. The organist stopped playing. Didn't you notice? You were suddenly singing a solo in this bold, operatic voice. You were simply amazing. Frankly, you scared the shit out of me."

The judge cleared his throat.

"Did I embarrass you?"

Miss Vickie giggled, then covered her mouth.

"A little. But by the looks of you when you opened your eyes, you embarrassed yourself. As red as a beet. Oh, well."

Fritz stood with Ms. Vickie watching the snow fall. Members of the congregation passed by, stopped and congratulated him.

"What a treat," one older lady said. "I've never heard anything like it. Where did you go to school?"

"Georgetown law school. Lower third of my class."

"I mean the voice training."

"Fourth grade. A weirdo. Father Jacobowski. I think he was a Nazi. A voluntary Nazi."

The elderly lady moved on.

Still stunned, the judge thought, "Maybe I should enroll in classes at the Conservatory. I could start a whole new career."

Of course, he had a lot to learn about his voice and where it had been hiding, he reckoned. He'd have to find some way to get around Ms. Vickie taking him to church to sing. Who knows? He could become a celebrity and meet some younger women.

At the least, he thought, I have been given a gift. At least, I have been given something I didn't have to pay for. Got me a bargain. And I didn't even have to clip it out of a newspaper.