

The Catholic 'Young Lords' from St. George's

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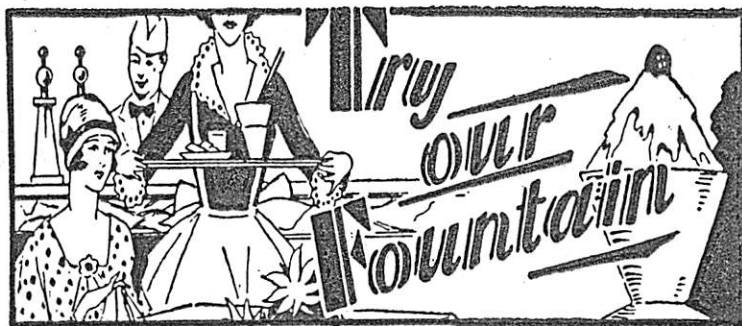
Most of the students at St. George's School, in Middletown, were Episcopalian, except for the handful of us who were taken into Newport on Sundays for church. This was something the school had an obligation to do and presumably it gratified our parents to think that we were getting our dose of Catholicism.

There was me, of course. And there were Chris, Robby, Tim, Billy and one related to Rutherford B. Hayes, the 19th president of the United States. We were the core, and there were two or three others, depending on events, but they didn't regularly join us. Nonetheless, they knew to keep their mouths shut. Naturally, I've changed the names to protect the guilty, and there was plenty of guilt to go around.

While the rest of the students were tucked into the school's magnificent Gothic chapel overlooking the Atlantic, we, the Catholic boys, were taken by Mr. Fricker into Newport in the school's red Ford Econoline van and dropped off in front of St. Mary's Church, on Spring Street; the very same church where John and Jackie Kennedy were married.

Fricker was Catholic too — one of those early-riser types who went to 6 a.m. Mass so he could get a jump on bothering people. He taught history and coached the football team.

We'd thank Fricker for the ride and climb out onto the sidewalk and straighten our ties and pull ourselves together, long enough to watch the van disappear around the corner, or if Fricker was packing his pipe with tobacco or otherwise not getting out of there fast enough, we'd walk up the steps into the church and mill around the



banks of red votive candles for a few minutes, then check that the coast was clear before walking down Spring Street to the Franklin Spa for a nice breakfast and to drink coffee and smoke cigarettes.

The Franklin Spa had a counter and tables and we commandeered a couple tables and pushed them together. It was just the freest, outlaw feeling, leaning over the juke box and smelling the sausages cooking and the toast toasting and smoking a cigarette, knowing the rest of your classmates were locked down in the chapel back at school, singing hymns and listening to the sermon and going through all the rigmarole.

There was a clock on the back wall behind the counter, and at 9:55, we'd pay up and air ourselves out walking with alacrity back down Spring Street, to be in front of St. Mary's before Fricker and the van came around the corner.

Even though skipping chapel at school was a serious offense (and therefore, so would be skipping church) we were as blasé as Martha Stewart using insider info to trade stocks, or Bill Clinton and Jack Kennedy shuttling girls in and out of the White House. Most of us, the core, were seniors and had been pulling this for more than three years now. It felt as if it could almost be in the school catalogue.

There were two waitresses, an older one who might have been the mother, and a pretty girl our age, who went to Rogers High. They were really nice to us and we flirted with the younger one, but nothing serious. The cook who worked the grill behind the counter was probably related to both of them. He was skinny as hell and able to maintain a consistent unshavenness, and he could be surly, but, after all, we were regulars so he wasn't that bad.

"Breakfast is ready for the young lords," he announced, putting the plates down on the counter.

Easter Sunday, we were truly grateful they were open. Otherwise we'd have to spend that special day just walking around, probably without any breakfast. Afterwards, we scooted back to the church and waited for Fricker to come around the corner and pick us up.

Fricker was what you might call a bluff sort of guy, and he'd ask us how the sermon was and we'd say okay. He looked to be in a particularly good mood Easter morning and with a big smile breaking across his face, as if he was chewing some tasty nails, he asked, "So how was the sermon today, boys?"

"Good, good," we answered.

And then he asked something he'd never asked before: "What was it about?"

One of us, I think it was Robby, said, "About Easter, and Jesus and all."

"What about Jesus and Easter?" asked Fricker.

"Um, you know," continued Robby. "How Jesus rose from the dead."

"That's all the priest said? Jesus rose from the dead?"

I nudged Tim Cunningham, the smartest of us, and Tim said, "He talked about how Jesus was resurrected for us. That Jesus died and rose from the dead to pay for our sins."

"And is one of your sins not going to church?"

We were stunned and just froze up.

Fricker pulled sharply over into the lot at Easton's Beach and threw the shifter into park.

"You boys are lying to me. I went to 9 o'clock Mass and you weren't there. Where were you?"

"We walked down to Thames Street," blurted Kim. "We heard there was a big yacht down there."

"You're lying," said Fricker. "Where did you go?"

We all sat there like glum statues, hoping for a miracle, such as maybe Fricker would have a stroke.

"I know where you boys go, and I could have you all expelled!"

Billy Blank, who would one day become a pretty big movie star, said, "But I thought Jesus died for our sins?"

"There's a limit!" roared Fricker.

I wanted to say, "That's rich!" but I didn't. So it ended, our happy times at the Franklin Spa, and we returned to a life of regimentation and good behavior.

But we had tasted evil and were forever tainted, thank God.

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