

I Only Am Escaped Alone

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If you are one of the few cock-eyed optimists remaining on the planet who has yet to embrace the utter absurdity of existence, consider the following irrefutable fact: I am alive today because on February 4, 1966, as a frightened and pathetic second grader at the Academy of the Holy Child in Rochester, New York, I pissed in my pants.

My own cowardice saved me. I survived because I was afraid to ask the acerbic and foreboding Sister Beatrice Marie for a hall pass. I was afraid to admit the unpardonable offense of neglecting to “go” at lunch recess. And I was afraid most of all to interrupt that most sacred of parochial school rituals, the Friday afternoon spelling test.

We’d heard the stories of Sr. Beatrice Marie’s legendary Spelling Test of Terror, circa 1957. It was told to us by the same fifth graders who stole our lunch money and threw our homework in the toilet when we dared to use “their” boy’s room—the one nearest to the playground, the one that, as the oldest kids, the Lords of the Lower School, they had commandeered from the rest of us. And they, in turn, had heard it from fifth graders when they were lowly eight-year-olds. Otherwise our sworn enemies, these pubescent Goliaths allied with us in our dreadful awe of Sr. Beatrice Marie, having lived themselves through second grade hell under her George S. Patton-inspired tutelage. They related with horror and undisguised relish the story of how—while administering the weekly spelling test, while stalking the narrow aisles of the classroom and menacingly tapping each desk with her well-worn ruler, vigilant against the slightest glance across aisle or over shoulder—how she suddenly missed her step, fell, shattered her hip, and lay struggling like a beetle on its back on the second grade classroom’s worn wood floor.

The legend held that she winced but did not cry out. She flailed clumsily in a few excruciating but futile attempts to rise. When she found herself unable to regain her feet she curtly instructed Victor Mancini (who by the time we heard the story was already a junior in the High School and a starting forward on the basketball team) to go to the office and summon help. We all pictured a diminutive, second-grade version of Victor, running wide-eyed from the room while the rest of the class gaped, unmoving, from their perfect formation of desks—four rows, three columns, twelve students as there were in every class of the lower school. (“Twelve Apostles were enough for Our Lord to teach, and we believe twelve is the optimal number of students for our less divine efforts,” Mother Margaret Ann, the principal, would dimple at parents during orientation meetings and application interviews. Of course by middle school, economic concerns outstripped inspirational ideals; grades six through twelve of the Academy had 36 to 40 students each.)

When Miss Mavis, the plump blue-haired secretary, rushed in to offer comfort while awaiting the ambulance’s arrival, Sr. Beatrice Marie waved her ministrations off impatiently and snapped at her to bring over the desk chair. Thereupon the steely Bride of Christ clamped her teeth into her lower lip, braced her meaty forearms against the seat, and dragged herself, leg flopping horribly, up and into her chair. Without further comment, she turned her attention back to her terrified class. She administered the remaining words while sprawled across her makeshift throne, as the sound of the approaching siren rose in the distance, growing ever louder until it wailed into the schoolyard.

Was it any wonder, then, that I was afraid to interrupt the spelling test ritual for something so trivial, so venal as a full bladder? I wriggled in miserable silence and twined my legs as I listened to Sr. Beatrice Marie intone our words with sacramental severity: brief, thief, mischief, relief. She pronounced each word in the litany with the same solemnity that Father O’Shea used from the altar at every First Friday Mass as he held the hosts aloft: The body of Christ...the body of Christ...the body of Chrisssssssst....

All these years later, I still remember with a kind of hypnotic clarity. The day of the spelling test was unseasonably warm—above freezing, unheard of for February in Rochester. The sunny afternoon came on the heels of a four-day blizzard that had dumped almost five feet of snow on the region over the previous weekend. So relentless had the storm been that even our veteran city services couldn’t keep ahead of the wall of

snow. The news was peppered with accounts of families unable to dig out of their own front doors, and plow drivers freezing to death overnight behind the wheels of their stalled trucks. Occasional television updates showed children gleefully leaping from second story windows to land, laughing and unharmed, in enormous drifts that covered their yards.

The snow had started falling around dusk the previous Friday. It came down hard, right from the start, but at first there was no biting wind, no sense of the enormity of the arriving storm. When my mother and I went to bed that night, a deep, silent snow already blanketed the campus. (Because my mother was the cook and housekeeper for the nuns at Holy Child—how else could a poor, fatherless, Shanty-Irish kid afford to attend an exclusive private academy?—we lived in the caretaker's cottage, right on the grounds of the old estate-turned-school). There was no moon in evidence, but lights from our own cottage and from the convent further up the drive shimmered off soft white hills unfurling across the expansive lawns.

By Sunday the city was buried. Monday was my birthday, the day I turned seven. (To add to the deep humiliation I felt as a consequence of my dubious social status, I was a year younger and nearly a head shorter than everyone else in my class.) My mother had arranged a party, my first ever. The boys in my class were to walk over to our cramped little cottage immediately after school for balloons, cake and ice cream, pin the tail on the donkey. Modest, certainly; pathetic, in fact, compared to the pony rides and magician-clowns featured in similar celebrations held for my classmates. (I was only infrequently invited to these festivities, but I always listened hungrily while feigning indifference, as delighted party-goers post-mortemed the excitement in school the next day).

My party—without carousels or swimming pools, but a birthday party nonetheless—would be my chance to expunge those humiliations. I'd asked for a pirate theme, and for weeks my mother had spent long evenings planning activities and working on crafts and costumes. While she drilled me on subtraction or listened to me read aloud, her hands were busy constructing a parrot piñata, decorating a gaudy treasure chest and drawing maps for our treasure hunt, or fashioning broadswords and eye patches from cardboard and rag scraps and string. I believed that on the day of the party, my mother would work some sort of magic with balloons and crepe paper to transform our drab, claustrophobic parlor into a treasure-filled pirate's cave. She would make my party spectacular enough to dazzle the most hardened and villainous blackguard in the second grade.

By Sunday, several feet of snow had accumulated and the blizzard still howled. My mother tried to tell me—gently, tentatively—that the unexpected severity of the winter weather, which had kept us from attending Mass that morning for the first time in my memory, might put an end to the party. But I couldn't listen. So obsessed was I with my fantasies of triumph and the popularity that I believed my party would afford that her words simply failed to make an impression on me.

I needed her to get started on my cake, which I anticipated would be the crowning achievement of the celebration. Sighing in resignation, my mother set about constructing a confection depicting a genuine Spanish galleon. I'd stubbornly insisted on this design, in spite of my mother's pleading that she had no suitably shaped pans. Leaving her to agonize over the relevant geometry—a trapezoid for the hull, squares and triangles to represent sails—I spent the afternoon absorbed in daydreams of exaltation that I, the Birthday Buccaneer, would enjoy the following afternoon.

The next day I awoke before light. I pressed my face to the still-black window and was devastated to discover a steady snow still falling. I tried to convince myself that all was not lost, and dragged myself downstairs.

My mother had draped the entire cottage in streamers and balloons, and pasted up handmade cutouts of sailing ships, sea captains, and treasure chests spilling glittering jewels. The table was set with bandanas, eye-patches, and foil-wrapped chocolate coins. And my mother's masterpiece, the splendid sailing-vessel cake, occupied a place of honor as the centerpiece.

I wonder now what she could have been thinking, working late into the night when she surely must have known that school would be cancelled. It seemed she was unable to extract herself from the insistent fantasy I had wrapped around both of us. Or maybe she didn't have the requisite spine to deliver the heartbreak in this

little domestic drama. Maybe at the ripe old age of twenty-two, my mother simply wasn't grown up enough to be the grown-up.

I ate my breakfast oatmeal sitting cross-legged on the cold kitchen floor, so as not to disturb the decorations that ornamented our kitchen table. Mom didn't mention the snow; she simply switched on the radio and we listened to the endless litany of school and business closings. I think I must have been the only kid in America who ever prayed for his school to stay open on a snowy day.

But of course, the announcement came: The Academy of the Holy Child was closed.

I stopped eating. My mouth still yawned open, but my brain failed to instruct my hand to deliver oatmeal. Willing myself not to understand the announcement, I blinked. My mother stared at me, crumpling and twisting a plaid dishtowel in her hands. She looked like she was trying to think of something to say. And to my surprise, she looked as if she might cry.

"Joey..."

"No!" I said, loud. I let the spoon clatter into the bowl, and glared at her. I knew if she started talking I'd cry, and then she'd probably hug me. And then, I was afraid, I'd completely lose control. I might even die. I had long believed that the expression "dying of a broken heart" was a literal danger, since my mother had told me many times that my grandparents had died that way, before I was even born. I imagined that if people were sad or hurt or disappointed enough, they cried until their tears corroded their skin, and they split open. Their heart—not to mention their stomachs and livers and assorted guts—all spilled out and stopped working, and they died. I knew I was capable of crying that hard. So I just said, "No."

I looked out the window. For the first time in four days, the snow seemed to be tapering off. A miracle! I knew, I was certain, the storm was ending. I would have my party after all! I imagined first that Mother Margaret Ann would call the radio station and reverse her decision. Even after my mother patiently explained that such a reprieve would be impossible, I insisted. The snow would stop, the roads would be cleared, and the children in my class would arrive.

The storm didn't end until almost noon; when it did, I pointed to the clear skies as the ultimate evidence that my party would, indeed, take place. My mother tried to persuade me that the roads were still impassible, tried to gently deflate the fantastic expectations I was recklessly rebuilding. The truth, which I'm convinced she knew perfectly well but was too afraid to point out, was that the weather was largely irrelevant. My classmates were almost certainly donning boots and snowpants, and frolicking merrily in their enormous yards, without a thought to my party or to me. But at three-twenty exactly I sat down in the front window of the parlor and waited for my guests to arrive.

By four even I couldn't pretend any more. Thankfully my mother, who had initially hovered apprehensively, left me to my brooding and retreated upstairs. Though I struggled valiantly against my shameful tears, I finally did cry, just for a minute. Like all good Irishmen, though, I quickly contrived to transform anguish into anger, and thus managed to contain the potentially fatal saline before it scalded off my dermis and laid bare my rapidly disintegrating internal organs.

I was furious with God. How dare He demolish my birthday with this petty little tempest of His? What exactly was He trying to prove? What had I ever done to Him? Well, see if I ever put another dime in the collection plate!

I was enraged with Mother Margaret Ann. At the Academy of the Holy Child snow holidays were, after all, as rare as Virgin births. Why did she have to pick today to close the school? Clearly she had it in for me, too. All her smiling and handing out butterscotch candies on the playground was just part of some diabolical scheme to make this ultimate treachery all the more sadistic.

And my mother! Looking around the parlor, I decided my mother's betrayal was the cruelest of them all. Those cheap homemade decorations! That chintzy, lopsided piñata! No wonder none of my classmates bothered to show up. Who would want to go to a stupid party in my crummy, stupid house and play stupid games and eat that stupid cake made by my stupid, stupid mother? I yanked down the piñata by its hateful, twisted beak and jumped on it viciously until Chiclets and penny candy poured from its decimated guts.

The spectacle of several pounds of sugar in brightly-colored wrappers distracted me from my rampage. I fell upon the loot and began devouring candies as quickly as I could unwrap them, delighting not only in their cloying sweetness but also in the knowledge that it would devastate my treacherous mother to see what I had done to her handiwork—and what I was doing to my teeth. Intoxicated by my audacious plundering—I was a pirate! A ruthless picaroon!—I dared myself to make the most brazen trespass of all. I listened at the door to make sure my piñata pillaging hadn't been overheard. Reassured that my mother was still somewhere upstairs, I slipped soundlessly across the parlor. And then—without permission or supervision—I turned on the television.

But I only managed to enjoy a few minutes of the expressly forbidden and deliciously terrifying “Dark Shadows.” A fatherly anchor from the local news broke in with a “storm update” that consisted primarily of reporting, with sedately mournful voice, that the blizzard had “tragically claimed another life.” It seemed that a young boy, a four-year-old from the other side of town, had been playing in the snow. He and several neighborhood friends had constructed a slide, a tunnel that propelled them down through the center of a massive snowdrift and dumped them out a small opening at its base into the snow-covered street. According to the children who were playing with him, this little boy—who I recall had the unlikely name of Jonah Debbs—was taking his turn in the slide just as the long-overdue snowplow trudged onto their block. The plow rumbled along, scooping snow from the street and depositing it along the curb in hard-packed walls. As the plow passed the children it pressed an enormous shovel-load against the slide's opening, catching Jonah mid-descent and sealing him into the icy drift.

Here I imagined Jonah's playmates shouting after the plow, which disappeared around the corner, continuing to scrape aside snow and slush as it went. When they failed to attract the driver's attention, they scrambled to the top of the slide themselves and called down to Jonah, who had disappeared entirely. I supposed that they could hear him wailing in panic from down the icy rabbit hole, but couldn't catch sight of so much as the top of his parka hood. They tried in vain to coax him up to them; he was too confined to turn and crawl, and the walls of the icy slide were too slick for him to inch up backwards.

The children would have clambered over the drift, digging frantically with their wet, numb hands. They would have made little headway except to further agitate Jonah, who now must have been screaming, “Mama, Mama, Mommy...” When the children realized that they couldn't free Jonah they scrambled for their homes, calling assurances that they would soon return.

The anchorman's voice quavered self-consciously as he reported that “no one can say exactly what happened next, but help arrived too late for little Jonah Debbs.” Did the snowplow return for a second, more devastating pass at Jonah's icy cocoon? Had his friends' efforts to free him dangerously weakened the structure of the slide? For whatever reason, the snow collapsed on top of him. When help arrived minutes later—here I imagined that the children had been hysterical, incoherent, that precious time was lost as they tried to make their parents understand the peril—Jonah was dead.

I don't know when my mother came into the room. I only know that as I imagined Jonah's claustrophobic terror—the pressure of frozen rubble on his chest, the icy bite of snow filling his mouth and nose—she was suddenly there. The eviscerated piñata, the piles of wrappers attesting to my gluttony must have appalled her. I thought she would be as angry with me as I had been with her. But she didn't seem to notice. She knelt beside me and put her arms around my shoulders. She said, “You're all I have. I couldn't lose you.” She pulled my face into her neck and then we were both crying, not even caring if our faces corroded.

It turned out we had not one snow holiday, but two, while the city dug out. My mother let me take my birthday cake to school on Wednesday, where Sr. Beatrice Marie cut it up and served it to the class after lunch recess.

But after three days in the pantry, it was stale and dry. A couple of kids pretended to choke on it; the rest just snickered to each other a little and threw it away.

By Friday, both the birthday and the blizzard were forgotten. After a few sunny days, the snow was steadily dissolving. Throughout that afternoon we'd heard the constant drip of icicles outside the classroom windows, punctuated by occasional thunks and crashes as the enormous overhanging pines and sycamores dumped piles of melting snow on the already-laden roof.

These trickling sounds, of course, only added to my particular torture during that excruciating spelling test. I'm certain that I knew the words cold, as I did every week; my mother always saw to it that I memorized them perfectly, drilling me over supper and breakfast until I could run the list without a single error. I could have written all twenty words, in their proper order, without a single cue—and gladly would have, if only it would have released me from my seat even a moment sooner. As it was I carefully inscribed my paper with my name, the date, and the obligatory cross labeled "JMJ". And I rocked, and writhed, and prayed for her to for God's sake hurry.

But of course her slow, ceremonial pace never changed as she doled out each separate word like communion. I remember the sinking horror I felt around the fourteenth—achieve—when I confronted the certain realization that I would not be able to "hold it" until we passed in our tests and filed to the studio building for art class. I can feel today the scalding humiliation I knew as, at the announcement of word seventeen—reprieve—my bladder simply let go.

Warm urine darkened my gray wool trousers, soaking my lap and running down both my legs to drench my socks and trickle onto my scuffed black loafers. I sat miserably, resolutely immobile, determined not to leave my chair nor stare at the puddle forming under my desk as I carefully printed the last three words: believe, relieve, grieve.

As my classmates passed in their papers and lined up at the door, I lingered in my seat, pretending to arrange some papers that I had contrived to half-spill from my desk. It was an easy matter to hang behind the rest of the class as we glided through the halls and down the wide marble staircase of the enormous old Victorian that was our school. It was equally simple to peel off from the end of the line as they crossed under the enormous chandelier in the main hallway. I slipped into the boys' bathroom—as it happened, the forbidden fifth grade bathroom, the one I should have used at recess. The rest of the class continued out the side door and across the narrow walkway to the converted greenhouse that housed the art studio.

It was not so easy to decide what to do next. I had thought only to sneak away to the bathroom to "clean myself up", but once inside I realized the enormity of the challenge. I was soaked, and without any hope of drying myself convincingly before Ms. Picot, the art teacher, dispatched a class member to check on my whereabouts with Sister Beatrice Marie. (She would have returned to our classroom to grade our spelling tests and prepare for our catechism lesson.) I was sniffing to myself and mopping rather dispiritedly at my trousers with a fist full of crumpled paper towels when the rumbling started.

From inside the bathroom, I heard but didn't understand the rapid succession of muffled crashes. I recall the sounds that ensued were unusual—running feet, a chorus of raised voices—but not particularly alarming to me. I didn't register any screams, no loud cries, nothing to alert me that something was terribly, tragically wrong.

And I confess I was too absorbed with my own drama to pay much attention to the chaos. I knew once I was discovered I'd be in terrible trouble. My mother would be summoned from her housekeeping duties in the convent for a glum meeting in Mother Margaret Ann's office. I would have to offer some excuse for sloughing class, and the excuse would not be accepted. There would be lectures and detention. Sr. Beatrice Marie would undoubtedly choose a relevant Bible verse, and I would be forced to write a thoughtful, contrite, and crushingly lengthy theme.

But I did begin to hope that maybe, just maybe, I could be spared the additional humiliation of their disappointed scrutiny focused on my toileting failure. Incredibly, I found I had time to remove my pants and

discard my underwear, burying it deep in the gray trash barrel. I had time to soap my socks and wring them out, and then fit them one after another over the hand-dryer, slapping the big metal button repeatedly and blowing hot air into them over and over until they were nearly dry. I had time to rinse my loafers under the tap and buff them dry with paper towels. I put my wet pants back on and sat down in front of the roaring radiator on a mountain of paper towels, blotting the backside of my trousers while I scoured at my lap. Realizing that most of the heat poured out from the bottom of the ancient radiator, I stretched out on the floor to expose the length of my wet pants to the blasting hot air. The continuing noise and confusion out in the school was no more than a miraculous mayhem, a distraction that bought me precious minutes to dry my shameful, pissy pants.

What turned out to be nearly two hours later, a uniformed policeman wandered into the lavatory to relieve himself. I woke up on a pile of damp paper towels to find him looming above me. In my sleepy confusion and overwhelming shame, I believed he was there to arrest me. For what, I don't know: Felonious art-skipping? Unlawful discharge of urine? Whatever the charge might be, I was surely guilty. I started to cry.

He asked me what grade I was in and, when I told him "second", his face turned very white and serious. He caught me up and carried me, almost running, the length of two hallways to Sr. Margaret Ann's office. I'm sure my pants were still damp, and I must have reeked of urine, but all he said was, "You're going to be all right son, everything's fine." It was then that I realized something beyond my laundry problems was engaging his attention.

There were adults everywhere in the halls—faculty and administrators who should have been teaching in classrooms or working mysteriously in their offices, uniformed police and firefighters, men who didn't belong in our school at all. And there were parents; parents seemed to be pouring into the building and racing around the hallways at an alarming clip, swarming toward the main office like ants.

In the office, Sister Margaret Ann and Sister Beatrice Marie were sitting at the big conference table with perhaps a dozen adults, parents of my classmates. I recognized Mr. and Mrs. Kennelworth, and Adam Carlino's mother. My mother was at the far end of the table. To my shock, everyone in the room seemed to be in tears.

The policeman set me down and we stood in the doorway, side by side. He didn't say anything right away, so neither did I. All the adults' heads came swiveling toward us, and most of them opened their mouths, but still no one spoke. After a long second my mother jumped up from the conference table, so fast that her chair toppled over and klunked to the floor. She yelled "Joey!" and came running for me, and then everyone started talking at once:

"My God, how..."

"...thought you said they were all..."

"What about Billy? Where's my Billy?"

My mom hugged me hard in her arms, crying against my neck and saying over and over, "Joey, Jesus Joey, Sweet Jesus, Jesus Joey..." I held onto her neck and looked over her shoulder at everyone staring at us. I had never once heard my mother taking the Lord's name in vain, and now here she was doing it at a rate of thirty or forty blasphemies per minute. And in front of the nuns, no less. We were both going to hell for sure.

I'd never seen so many adults cry. Even Sr. Beatrice Marie, scowling at me from over my mother's shoulder, had swimmy, red-rimmed eyes. I wanted to know what happened but I thought if I started asking questions, I'd have to explain how I'd come to fall asleep in the boys' lavatory. I held on to my mother and held my peace.

The policeman bent down next to my mother and put an enormous hand on her shoulder. "Ma'am," he said, gentle as a lover. "I think it's best we get you and your boy home." Without another word to the gaping assemblage, he led us back down the hall and out the front door, down the imposing stone steps. Ambulances,

fire engines, and rescue personnel in uniform, even a photographer snapping pictures, crowded in front of the building. The policeman, suddenly self-consciously cheerful (“Call me Officer Jim!”) loaded us into a squad car. It was the first and only time I’d ever had a ride for the quarter-mile trip around the side of the school, past the convent, and down the dirt drive to our cottage.

As we swung around the side of the building, I looked over toward the commotion around the art studio. My mother encircled me with a protective arm and pulled my head away. But in that single glance I saw a sizeable crowd of rescue workers, men in hard hats and fire coats and heavy boots. They were picking and sorting through a tree-tall mound of snow, from which protruded all manner of splintered wood, twisted metal, and other dangerous-looking debris. I couldn’t quite make sense of what I was seeing, but my mouth went dry and the inside of my stomach felt cold. The art building was just...gone.

For some reason the fate of my classmates didn’t occur to me. I thought about Jonah Debbs: the weight of snow, his terrified screams, the fatherly newsman pronouncing the word “cave-in.” I struggled against my mother’s shoulder. As the squad car curved around the convent I caught a glimpse of the road through the rear windshield. Father O’Shea, clutching a prayer book and hunching miserably in his heavy black overcoat, stared back at me from beside a row of ambulances. At his feet, what looked like big black plastic garbage bags were laid out beside the wreckage. Before the curve cut off my view of the scene, I saw two paramedics load one of the oversized bags onto a wheeled gurney and roll it toward the open doors of an awaiting ambulance.

Officer Jim stood awkwardly, just inches inside our front door, passing his hat from hand to hand and hurriedly refusing my mother’s persistent offers of tea and cookies? Something stronger? Perhaps he’d care to sit down? He kept glancing at me and then away; I could tell he wanted to ask me something but he couldn’t seem to say it. He addressed himself to my mother instead, in steady counterpoint to her yammering hospitality: Do you think he understands what happened? What do you suppose he was doing, even, asleep like that in the bathroom?

To my great relief neither seemed too concerned with that particular puzzle. Officer Jim was simply using this nervous talk to fend off my mother’s relentless hostessing. As soon as she had shed her coat and boots (mine had been forgotten in the classroom in our hasty departure from the school), he affected his escape: “Well ma’am, I should be getting back up there ...”

I thought at the time he must have wanted to flee our shabby home—the embarrassing wreckage of party decorations still strewn around the parlor, the springs poking through our threadbare couch, most of all my mother’s oppressive fawning. But I realize now that he was simply hell-bent on achieving escape velocity before I snapped out of my shocked stupor and began asking some questions of my own: What the hell had happened? How could God let all those children die? And most haunting of all—why was I alive?