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My Life in St. Anne's Orphanage (Worcester, Mass.)

I was a little boy in the 4th grade. I went to Middlesex Avenue School and lived on Gordon Street which was half way between Lake Quinsigamond and what we think of as "Grafton Hill". In the summer, we would wrap our bathing suit in a towel and walk to the lake with our friends to swim or go to Lake Park to play baseball. This was the year before I had a paper route that is, made money delivering the Worcester Evening Gazette. That had to wait until grade 5.

There was a young girl who lived at the top of Gordon Street by the name of Jeanny Benoit. Jeanny was from what we thought of as a very strict French-Canadian family. She went to Saint Joseph's parochial school and did not associate with the other kids although she was friendly enough. (The school she went to said, "Fils" on one side and "Garcons" on the other.) One day as Jeanny was walking up the hill I asked her where she disappeared to each summer because from June to September she was nowhere to be seen around the neighborhood. She stopped and replied, "Oh, I go up to St. Anne's Orphanage. It is great up there. You can play baseball, AND THEY GIVE YOU ORANGES!" "They give you ORANGES!" I was astounded. This was something I just had to tell my mother about. I could not remember when I had seen an ORANGE for some time. You must remember, there was a war on and fresh fruit was very hard to come by. Most of it was going to the troops, and we got what was left over. Rationing, ration books, and shortages were part of the culture. To a child, an ORANGE was pure joy. Now, my mother was working in a war factory named Cornell Dubilier making radio condensers for the war effort. I counted the minutes until she got home to tell her what I wanted to do and where I wanted to go.

When she got home, I related the story to my mother and she had a good laugh, but I would not relent. I teased and teased. Finally, she relented. Why in the world she ever did I will never know! I am glad she did because it turned out to be one of the great lessons of life. She sat me down at the kitchen table and explained the plot to me. She said she would try to get me into the orphanage for a period of two weeks and that she would come to visit me at the end of a week but I could not come home until the two weeks were up. I agreed immediately. My mother telephoned St. Anne's Orphanage and cooked up a story. She told them she was going into the hospital and had nobody to watch her little boy! They said they would do it for \$7.00 a week and a total of \$14.00. Good Lord. They took that \$14.00 back out of my hide. What an experience I had in front of me.

The die was cast. My mother packed my little suitcase and I was off to St. Anne's. I can't recall now but we must have gotten there by trolley because we had no car during the war with the gas rationing and all. We would have had to take two trolleys: one down to City Hall and the second one down through Kelly Square and up Vernon Hill to St Anne's Orphanage which was off in a field at that time. I recall seeing stern looking ladies, dressed all in black with "white bibs" and rosary beads (I knew what they were) dangling from their sides walking around the place. After my mother left, I was assigned a bed amidst a sea of beds in a dormitory. I had never seen a dormitory in my life and was scared to death that I wouldn't find it again. I can't recall now what happened to my suitcase of clothing, but my first memory after the dorm is being in a formation of children and marching off to supper. For the next two weeks, we MARCHED everywhere! I did not do anymore marching like this until I entered the United States Army 13 years later. We ate as I recall at rather long wooden tables with benches. The tables were covered with what we called "oilcloth" The nuns dished out the food to you. I do recall breakfast vividly because it was so different from what I was used to at home. We had corn flakes or something like that every day that I was there. There was no sugar bowl on the table. I thought that very odd at the time because I always put my own sugar in my cereal. However, I am sure the nuns did not want a bunch of kids spilling sugar all over the floor so they mixed the sugar in with the milk and put it in pitchers. As a kid, it took me a while to figure this out. There may have been

another explanation for no sugar on the table. We had "ration books" at home and you needed a ration book with a stamp to buy sugar when you could get sugar. It was very scarce. The nuns probably put Caro syrup into those pitchers.

After breakfast, a group of us all still dressed in pajamas were MARCHED with a lovely nun in front to a room that was quite large. The room had two prominent features that I can picture in my mind to this day: It had a highly polished parquet floor and a lovely statue of the Blessed Virgin at one end. The nun at the head of the line blocked the door and as each of us squeezed by her she handed us two small pieces of felt. I had no idea what I was supposed to do with these pieces of felt until I watched the other children who were well schooled in the routine. I soon found out why the parquet floor was so highly polished. It was because these children took these two pieces of felt and put them under their two feet and shuffled in a circular pattern around and around that room all the time polishing that floor!! This routine was done EVERY MORNING for the two weeks that I spent in the orphanage under the watchful eye of the Blessed Virgin!

I went to bed that first night in that gigantic room full of boys with that nun sitting in a chair under that dim light at the end of the room. I remember how strange it felt to sleep in a bed by myself because at home I had to sleep with one of my brothers. This was indeed scary--too many people, and all strangers. I remember thinking that I had not seen hide nor hair of Jeanny Benoit or an ORANGE. I was also hoping that my mother would come and get me out of this place. I finally fell asleep. The next morning I woke up before anyone else. I got out of bed and the lady in black way across the room motioned to me with her arm. I thought she was telling me TO KNEEL AND SAY MY PRAYERS! So, I knelt beside the bed and started to pray! The lady in black made a beeline for me! I could see her coming! I prayed faster! When she got to me, she told me to get back in bed; it was too early to get up. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as my mother used to say, this was only one day into my ordeal and how in the world was I going to make two weeks!! The hell with the oranges. Right now, I didn't care if I ever saw another orange. I just wanted OUT. (The next time I felt like this was my first day in the Army so this was great training at age 9.) I felt a little better once I was into the routine: the MARCH to breakfast with the other boys, the cereal with no sugar except mixed in the milk, the pieces of felt and the catatonic shuffle under the stare of the Blessed Virgin....and then a change. Do you know what? The ladies in black took us to Mass....but not without a little instruction for me first... (Hail Holy Queen Mother of Mercy, our life, our sweetness, and our hope).

I used to love the smell of bacon and eggs or griddle cakes cooking in that ageless black frying pan and that even older black Glenwood stove with the crack in it at home, BUT THERE WERE NO SUCH SMELLS IN THIS PLACE! It was corn flakes and with milk from the steel pot with the sugar mixed in and passed down from a silent nameless kid sitting in a long line of nameless kids, every day! Oh, it was nutritious enough, but I still had not seen that ORANGE that Jeanny had talked about! It was now the second day. After breakfast at that long, long table we marched to the Blessed Virgin Room and got our two pieces of felt. Then the "catatonic shuffle" around and around and around, under the watchful eye of the unsmiling plaster Madonna. (I have often wondered in later years whether this "playroom" could ever have been used for what it was intended for. It would have been such a shame to make any marks with toys on that magnificently polished floor.)

How long did we spend each morning on the "catatonic shuffle"? It has been so many years that I cannot recall now, but I am sure we were not overworked, but I do know that every minute was taken up doing something. As they said then, "Idle hands made work for the devil." We did not go to Mass every day as some people might think, but we did go and when we did, we naturally MARCHED there. Our lovely Sister in black used her "clackers" as signals for all us children to signal us as to when to move: "CLACK", Kneel, "CLACK, CLACK-CLACK", stand up. These "claps" of these black pieces of wood held by the nun in charge were all that we children needed to act in unison: "kneel", "Stand", "sit". However, Mass was not a daily function as I recall. One other thing that was a daily function, at least now, was SEWING MATTRESSES. Why we did this I have no idea even now. Perhaps it had something to do with the war effort. Perhaps someone will read this and tell me now. But, here I was as a little boy knowing nothing about sewing and being handed a needle and thread and a bunch of rags to stuff

mattresses! We children had a regular mattress stuffing assembly line. After a while my fingers were full of holes from sticking myself with the needle. You can imagine! Half of the rags were sticking out the end, but somehow the darned mattress got stuffed. Whoever slept on the bed I will never know. We did this every day for two weeks. I didn't care if I ever saw another needle and thread after I got out of there for the rest of my life!

My mother came to see me on the Saturday night of the first week that I was there. I was surprised that nobody asked her about her hospital stay. I begged her desperately to get me out of this Godforsaken place but she would not relent. She said she had made a bargain with me that I would stay for TWO weeks. Besides, she had already PAID for the TWO weeks and I was going to stay come hell or highwater! That was that--end of discussion! (Hail holy queen Mother of Mercy our life our sweetness. I stood there as I watched my mother depart the premises. My mother was teaching one heck of a lesson to a little boy. Half of the time was up but it felt like an eternity to me at that age. I had not set eyes on Jeanny Benoit nor an ORANGE and I still faced another week of "the catatonic shuffle", sewing mattresses, marching, "clack, clack", and God knows what other adventures the ladies in black could dream up for me.

It wasn't all "life by the numbers" so to speak; that is, corn flakes, march, march, "the catatonic shuffle", sew the mattresses, "clack-clack, the sea of bunk beds. If I had to go to the bathroom at night, I would look over to the lady in black sitting under the dim light and think, "Well, I could get up. But, what would she do then?" "I could walk over to her, but I would never be able to find my way back to my bed in the dark, so I better just forget about it and go to sleep." Also, she might start waving her arms at me again! I also used to lie awake and wonder what they ever did with Jeanny Benoit and all the other girls. It couldn't be that there were only boy orphans, could there? I NEVER saw Jeanny nor ANY girl the entire two weeks that I was there. Where they hid the girls, I will never know.

However, by midweek I did get my one and only ORANGE! Jeanny, if you ever became a nun and you read this, I know you did not lie to me. They really did give oranges to kids at St. Anne's Orphanage. (It's a long time ago now, but I think they had seeds in them. (In fact, I don't think the seedless orange was invented yet.) This is how I got my orange: It was about midweek. We had finished sewing some mattresses and they probably ran out of rags or something because we were lined up and marched out to a field with what I could recognize as a baseball diamond carved into it. I remember playing the outfield and if one of the kids hit a flyball you had to keep your eye carefully on the ball if it fell on the ground because the grass was rather high and it was easy to lose the ball, but I didn't care one bit. It sure beat sewing mattresses, and when I came in from my stint in the outfield. There it was...THAT BEAUTIFUL ORANGE, Jeanny or Sister Jeanny, probably of the Sisters of Saint Josephs! I savored every segment and spit out the seeds, but what a PRICE! That was the most expensive orange of all time. A price cannot be put on it. I wish now that I could have waxed it or put it in a glass case and preserved it. It is possible that at the time I might have wanted to stuff Jeanny...and my mother...with a few of those oranges but the moment passed.... I don't remember who won the game.

I do remember one other athletic contest at St Anne's very well though because I won the contest. It was also outdoors and it was a swimming contest. It is strange but after all these years I still remember the names of three boys that I competed against in a swimming race. These boys were REAL orphans and their last name was BULLARD. The thing that made them stand out was the fact that they were triplets. After I won the race, we became friends for the rest of the few days that I stayed at the orphanage. I was not sad to leave that place, far from it, but I was sad to leave my three new friends. I thought that I was leaving there but they would be there until they were adopted or grew into adulthood. Years later as a teacher teaching GED preparation (I was not always teaching English as a Second Language) I had a young lady in class whose last name was BULLARD. I asked her if her father had two brothers and was a triplet. I did not tell her why I was asking, but she apparently did not know the answer. She went home and asked. She came back and told me, "Yes." I simply said that I knew someone one time by that name. I did not pursue it with the young lady nor did that one brother. I think I did the right thing to just leave it there.

I am almost at the end of the week. I had almost forgotten what it was like to sleep in my own bed. I didn't know it at the time, but the training I was getting was excellent introductory training for the Army. The last adventure I can recall was the one with those hogs! You know, everybody thinks nuns are delicate creatures. Forget it. They can raise the biggest HOGS you ever saw! As a city kid, I had never seen a HOG. I don't know what they did with these hogs. You cannot milk a hog, but they kept them in a pen with a fence around it. Well, let me tell you what happened: late in the week, probably Friday or Saturday, (I was scheduled to go home on Sunday and I was counting the hours!) somehow these HUGE HOGS ESCAPED INTO THE WOODS AROUND THE ORPHANAGE. Well, the nuns were in a panic. They got all the kids out and handed each of us a two by four piece of wood that was about as big as I was. Now you must remember that I was a little skinny kid weighing about 75 pounds soaking wet; it was about 7:30P.M on a July summer evening and just starting to get dark and here I was out in the woods with a two by four listening to the God awful "OINK-OINK" of these HUGE HOGS roaming the woods and the nuns screaming. Suddenly there he was right in front of me about 30 yards, the BIGGEST HOG YOU EVER SAW! He came crashing through the trees straight at me! I was scared out of my mind! I can see those mean eyes right now, just as he was going to trample me into human sausage, I stepped aside a WHACKED HIM ON THE DERRIERE as he crashed by. This sort of gave me courage and I chased along after him. One way or another the nuns and all the kids corralled those hogs back into the pen and our work was done for the night. When my own children were small and we went to visit an animal farm, I think back with fondness about the hogs of St. Anne's Orphanage.

Sunday night FINALLY came. I finally came together again with that little cardboard suitcase my mother had given me two weeks previous when she faked her trip to the hospital. Now I anxiously awaited her arrival to take me home. I had secretly made my goodbyes already. I had said goodbye to the Blessed Virgin in the "catatonic shuffle" room on Saturday morning (No shuffle on Sundays), a secret goodbye to that lovely nun who poured the sugared milk each morning, another one to "clack-clack", and to the lady in the chair at night who gave hand signals, another goodbye to the three Bullard boys, and good riddance to the tasks of sewing mattresses and chasing hogs. I thought of all those things as I waited for my mother and then there she was. After a few formalities, she took me by the hand and we started out the door. I turned around and took one last look and there was that nun, the one in charge whom I met the first night, with that "Mona Lisa look" on her face. It seemed as though she might be thinking, "WHAT DO YOU THINK, YOU'RE GOING TO GET AN ORANGE FOR NOTHING? DON'T YOU KNOW THERE'S A WAR ON?"