

Fire Call

On a crisp fall day just before Halloween, we sat in school on the edge of our seats, watching the clock. The Utica firemen were due to arrive at 10:00 a.m. for their annual visit. Sister Majestyria worked her way down my aisle, asking questions from the Baltimore Catechism, the answers to which I was supposed to have memorized the evening before. If Sparky the Fire Dog and the men and from the Engine Company Number 4 didn't arrive soon to save my sorry little ass, I'd have to fake an answer to question number 374, "Why must we take more care of our soul than of our body?"

Just two seats in front of me, Mary Ellen McMeany parroted a perfect answer to question number 372. In her deadly serious ten year old voice, she intoned, "The sixth commandment forbids all unchaste freedom with another's wife or husband." I couldn't imagine what my Mom would do with another lady's husband, but this thought was interrupted when outside our second floor window a sixty decibel siren blast rattled the window panes and sent 52 highly strung fifth graders right off the top of the excitement scale. Literally blown out of our seats, we practically mowed down the screeching nun as she futilely attempted to restore order. She now had to get us down the stairs and out the door without injury into the arms of Sister Saint Buonfiglio of Monaldo, known to us as Sister Bunny. The old Italian nun would perform the minor miracle of ensuring we behaved like little scholars instead of howling chimpanzees.

As the firemen set up the truck and microphone and speaker, the entire student body somehow became arranged on the grass strip between the school building and the parking lot. Nuns moved among us like Chain Gang deputies, but without the whips and shotguns. Soon we were ready for the two smartest kids in eighth grade to deliver their "Fire

Safety" talks. The thirteen year olds were cousins, a girl and boy from a family that had been saddled with high IQ's ever since their great grandparents began a dynasty of wizards in the last century. Each of the family's generations played a role in the great affairs of our fair city. Daniel and Kathleen would in the coming years continue their family tradition by running for office and becoming our rulers, judging our legal transgressions and prosecuting the worst of us. These kids were so eloquent, they'd been on the speaking circuit since third grade. Neither had many friends. Daniel had begun to read Tolstoy and was a rather cold young man. Kathleen evinced warmth and compassion, but she was rather needy and could be quite adamant. When her mother didn't produce the requested baby sister, the girl asked for a dog and named it Mary Margaret.

Daniel's speech, "Fire Safety in the Home, School, Church and Beyond," treated the specter of accidental fires breaking out in your kitchen, in the school's lunch room, and on our church's candle-lit altar. This last possibility jarred me, frankly. I had never considered the inherent danger of attending Mass, especially a high mass, when candle lighting shifted into high gear. I made a mental note to spend some time thinking about balancing the need for liturgy and the sin of putting myself in the way of mortal jeopardy. I reasoned it was an apt topic for consideration. Too bad it wasn't spring, when I always began a list of interesting topics to ponder while imprisoned at The Stations Of The Cross after school each Friday afternoon during Lent. The year before, I spent Friday afternoons between stanzas of Stabat Mater trying to recall every line in the film, "The Glenn Miller Story." By Good Friday, I was two thirds of the way through the script. I saw the movie four times. I was in love with June Allyson.



Kathleen's talk began on a light note, with babies and young children playing and laughing, tumbling down the hills in the back yards of cute little white

houses on tree-lined streets, populated with the homes of attorneys and senior level bank employees. In one such house dwelled Billy and Mary Magdalen and Mom and Dad. The little family lived an exemplary life and prayed the rosary each evening, before watching the News with John Cameron Swayze. But Dad forgot to have the furnace maintained one year and the house blew up.

“Ka-BOOM!!” shouted Kathleen into the microphone, as she stood on a makeshift pulpit just aft of the fire truck’s cab. The Lieutenant, leaning against the fire engine’s intake valve, jumped when the girl bellowed. She was a hefty young lady and had a prodigious voice that would have eventually served her well as a fifth grade teacher, had she not become the District Attorney. The girl followed her exploding sound effects with the whooshing noises of debris flying through the air. Some of the younger children in the crowd began to look frightened..

Kathleen continued her parable. The young boy and girl arrived home from school on that cold and snowy winter afternoon to find pieces of their life all over the neighborhood. As brother and sister made their way along the familiar streets, they first spied Mary Magdalen’s doll up in a tree on Bonnie Brae Place, and then the twisted remains of Billy’s bicycle over on Ferris Avenue. Dad was still at work. Mom had been in the basement doing the laundry, but now pieces of her were arriving steadily in heaven. The children sat down in a snow bank (this was Utica, after all) and cried their little eyes out, knowing Dad would be angry when he finally arrived to find a 30 foot crater where his home once stood. All this grief was the consequence of not keeping a list of home maintenance reminders. “And by the way,” Kathleen said as she slapped her forehead a little too forcefully, “where would they eat supper tonight? How terribly, terribly sad,” she said.

Sparky, the Dalmatian, was apparently quite touched by Kathleen’s tale. He began wailing and whimpering and snuffling until the Lieutenant lovingly took hold of the dog’s collar. It could have been my imagination, but the man seemed to twist the choker rather tightly. Sparky’s crying stopped abruptly, but he soon got loose and jumped off the truck into the crowd of children. Our cries of surprise and delight quickly turned to disgust and laughter when Sparky lifted his leg against the black skirts of Sister Bunny. You really couldn’t blame the dog. The nun indeed resembled

a street lamp, with her jet black attire and the bursting white “flying nun” hat on top. Billy and Mary Magdalen were taken off to an orphanage that definitely did not serve desserts. At that point in her talk, Kathleen smiled broadly, looked around the crowd and said, “Thank you all very much for coming to see me. I am extremely grateful to have been chosen from among hundreds of children (true, if you counted everyone all the way down to kindergarten) to deliver The Distinguished Annual Fire Safety Lecture at this prestigious institution.” (That would be our elementary school.) With that, she jumped from the truck, alarming the Lieutenant, who was now holding on to Sparky for dear life.

The students began to grow restless as their minds turned to warm baloney sandwiches and government subsidized milk in tiny bottles ... 2 cents for white, 3 cents for chocolate. Even the nuns looked tired. The firemen reminded us once more not to play with matches. They revved up the siren one last time as we all held our hands over our ears. Another successful visit from the Utica Fire Department came to a close.

My mind turned from the fire trucks to other topics. Question No. 372 had begun to bother me a little and I wondered why Mom seemed so pleasant to that man in Woolworth’s last week. She told me he was a friend of Dad’s. Ah well, it was my favorite time of year and I tried not to ruminate so much in good weather. Later that morning, I wrote a note about the Woolworth’s incident on a candy wrapper and stuck it in between the pages toward the back of my catechism. We wouldn’t get there until March, and that was an eternity of time, far away into the future. Who could guess? By then, anything might happen. The church could go up in smoke, Mom could run off with the milkman and Sparky could get accidentally strangled.

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