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Bless Me, Father

By HAL ELLSON

IT WAS June. The sky was squared in the frames of the windows of the schoolroom, blue and speckless. The pens were scratching on the papers. Up and down the rows heads were bent over the old desks that were scarred and carved with initials and dates of former school boys. Brother Bruno walked back and forth in the room. He had taken his glasses off. His head was bent. Softer yet, than the scratching of the pens, was the sound of his black cassock swishing. He went to the window and looked out. A flock of pigeons wheeled in the sky. The whistle of the owner on a rooftop came faintly into the room. A bumble-bee, jacketed yellow and ominously black, droned by outside, scouting.

Finnegan stopped writing and put the end of his pen into his mouth; his teeth sunk into the soft wood. He stared up at the black crucifix on the wall at the head of the class. He kept staring. The pens went on scratching in the room. The clock ticked louder now on Brother Bruno's desk and on the wall.

Sister Mary walked in the shade of the wall as if afraid of the sun. Her face was as white as the communion wafer and long and thin as if it had been set that way, cast in plaster. She carried the long thin switch in her left hand. Brother Gabriel passed her and nodded but Sister Mary went by him as if he were a stranger.

Finnegan put his pen to the paper and began to write again.

Brother Bruno moved from the window and went to his desk and glanced at the clock. "Time's up!" he said. A few pens still scratched. "Pass your papers forward!" There was a flutter and movement of yellow papers going forward over shoulders, toward the front of the room.

Finnegan still stared at the crucifix. Though it was so warm outside it was cool in the room.

Brother Bruno collected the papers from each row and put them on his desk. He looked about the room and his eyes rested on Finnegan who was still staring at the crucifix. Brother Bruno went to the board and wrote in big letters in chalk—*What are you now thinking about? Finnegan?*

All the heads turned toward Finnegan. There were grinning faces; someone tittered. Finnegan's mouth was open and a fly winged about his head. His eyes then followed the fly until it flew off toward the front of the room. There he saw Brother Bruno looking at him.

"Finnegan, what is it you're thinking of now? I could tell by your face that it's a grand invention you would be making."

The class laughed.

Brother Bruno picked up his ruler and slapped his own palm with it. "Come up, Finnegan!"

Finnegan was already halfway out of his seat. He knew what was coming. He went to the front of the room and stood there before the Brother and put both hands out to be struck.

Brother Bruno raised the ruler. Then he turned away from Finnegan and went to the window. As if talking to the yard outside, he said, with lowered head, contemplating the flagstones, "Beating the devil does not hurt him. Come to the chapel this afternoon. Maybe you can pray the devil out of you."

Finnegan still held his hands up. He would rather have been hit with the ruler across the palms than spend the afternoon in the gloomy chapel. Finally, he dropped his hands and went back to his seat and sat down.

Brother Bruno turned around and looked at the clock on the wall that was tocking away dismally. It was five minutes to twelve. Brother Bruno clapped his hands and went to the window again.

"Our Father," he intoned.

"Our Father," the class said.

"Who art in Heaven."

"Who art in Heaven."

"Hallowed be Thy name."

"Hallowed be Thy name," they repeated after him.

The fly came back from the blackboard where it had gone before and circled about Finnegan's head, landed on his forehead and went off and came back again. Finnegan slapped at the fly and missed. He followed it with his eyes.

"Thy Kingdom come."

"Thy Kingdom come," the class intoned after Brother Bruno.

The fly came circling back through the air.

"Thy will be done on earth—as it is in heaven."

Finnegan hardly moved his lips and followed the line of the prayer with the rest of the class.

"Give us this day."

"Give us this day," they all said.

The fly came to rest on Finnegan's desk and took a little walk around the place. Then it stopped and rubbed its two forelegs together like a man sharpening knives.

"Our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those—"

"Our daily bread, *and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those—*"

Finnegan unclasped his hand and cupping it swept the top of the desk. The fly was in his palm and then out before he could close his fingers.

"Who trespass against us."

"Who trespass against us."

The fly zoomed over Leahy's head in the seat in front of Finnegan.

"And deliver us from all evil."

Now the fly shot between them over the middle of Finnegan's desk. He cupped his hand again and swung.

"Amen!"

"Amen!"

"Amens" came from all the other rooms along the hallway.

Finnegan put his closed fist below his desk and held it there.

Brother Bruno stared at Finnegan. There was silence in the room again. The last belated *amen* had died away. The clock ticked on the wall. The pendulum swung back and forth in its regular path without a break in speed or rhythm. Finnegan dropped his eyes to his pencil which lay on his desk. He squirmed uneasily in his seat. Brother Bruno turned away and then looked back at him again. "Is it the St. Vitus dance, you have, Finnegan?" he said.

Finnegan did not answer.

A bell clanged at the end of the hallway outside. Brother Gabriel was swinging the brass bell.

The class got up and filed out of the room. Finnegan pushed himself among the thickest of the students and kept his eyes to the floor avoiding Brother Bruno's. As soon as he got out in the hall he began to run as fast as he could down the crowded hallway. He made for the front door.

Brother Gabriel put down the bell and folded his arms across his chest and nodded and smiled at the students as they filed past him. Finnegan ran past and Brother Gabriel's long arm shot out and grabbed him by the neck. "Come back," he said. "What's up? Where are you going? Is it the devil after you?"

Finnegan looked into Brother Gabriel's eyes. Then he brought his fist up slowly before Brother Gabriel's face. Brother Gabriel focused his eyes on the fist. Finnegan opened his fist quickly. The fly flew out under Brother Gabriel's nose.

Brother Gabriel frowned; then a smile formed slowly at his mouth and spread over his face. He began to laugh. "Be off with you, Finnegan. No hooky this afternoon, remember!"

Out beyond the wall that surrounded the schoolyard, Finnegan slowed down to a walk. It was too warm to run.

Some one whistled behind him and he turned. It was Jimmy Dalton and Thomas McMurray.

"Where you going in such a hurry?" Jimmy said.

"I'm going to eat, where do you think I'm going?"

"We're not going to eat."

"No?"

They shook their heads. "No."

"Why not?"

"We're going hunting in the woods. We'll have time to get back at one o'clock. We'll each take turns at the gun."

Finnegan's eyes widened.

"Want to come?" Jimmy said.

Finnegan looked at them. He did not answer. He knew what would happen if he were late for Brother Bruno's class.

"Come on, Finnegan."

He shook his head.

"You can take every third shot."

Finnegan shook his head again. He was wavering but every time he was about to say, yes, Brother Bruno's face came to his mind and he held the word back.

"We'll show you how to aim."

Finnegan snickered. "You show me. I'm the best bb. shot in the school."

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "You have to show me."

Finnegan did not go for the bait. He won over himself again.

"Yeah, you're afraid," Jimmy said. "You're getting to be a sissy. You're mother washes your ears for you."

"Who's afraid?" Finnegan said.

"You are. You've got a yellow streak a mile wide up your back. You're yellow."

Finnegan stared at them.

"Come on," Jimmy said. "We can have more shots for ourselves." They turned and went down the block.

Finnegan stood there and watched them go, his mouth agape, his grey-green eyes wide with surprise. He opened

his mouth wider and caught the words and stopped himself. He turned toward the school but Brother Gabriel was gone. There were no other brothers to be seen. Jim and Tommy were just turning the corner. They did not even look back. Finnegan waited until they rounded the corner. Then his mind was made up. He started to run after them and went down the block with his heels flying and turned the corner at full speed and hailed them. They waited, talking to each other as he came running up breathlessly. "All right," he said, when he reached them, "I'll go. I'm not yellow."

"We were only kidding," Jimmy said.

"That's all right," Finnegan said. "I'm not yellow, I'll tell you that."

On the way they stopped at Jimmy's house and got his bb. gun and went on to Farragut Woods.

They walked by the water-works this time and went on down the dirt road shaded over by the great old yellowed sycamores and crossed the wooden bridge at the hot water stream where great goldfish finned slowly through the green water or floated stationary close to the bottom of the shallow furrow that the stream had dug for itself there in the woods.

They stood on the bridge and looked down into the quiet water. Not even a ripple stirred the surface. They stared at themselves mirrored below. The shadow of a bird flitted across their images and was gone. From the distance the raucous cry of a jay came, its challenge softened by its faintness. Downstream farther, close to the pipe where the water steamed from the water-works, a willow leaned over the stream and hung its long green strands of hair and wept. On the other side of the bridge the land rose into the rolling green voluptuous breast of a hill. The shade was deep and cool there beneath the old black oaks that grew upon it. Down stream the trees thinned out until they stopped abruptly at the border of the swamp where here and there the grotesque rotting of a stump reared its ugly head.

Jimmy Dalton raised the bb. gun to his shoulder and sighted at the goldfish. The sun swept the length of the

barrel. He pulled slowly with his forefinger. There was a "put" as the bee-bee hit the water. A tiny ripple flowered upon the surface and grew wider and wider. The fat goldfish in the green depths stirred and then lay still again. Another one moved slowly and went by. It came slowly to the surface and opened its mouth wide and turned and went down again, the gold fading in the green darkness. A minute bubble lay on the top of the water. Pricked by death, it burst and was gone. The water lay flat and still again. A yellowed willow leaf floated slowly down-stream and disappeared beneath the bridge. Unseen, a green frog blinked his gold-ringed eyes above the rim of water and flicked his tongue at a tiny gnat as it passed.

The three boys went on and up the slow slope of the hill within the deep cooling shade of the black oaks. A squirrel performed his nimble acrobatics for them. Tommy carried the bb. gun now. When they reached the top of the hill they stopped and looked down at the bridge and the quiet water glinting with sunlight. A breath of air stirred the tops of the oaks. The jay called again, farther away now, faint. The three boys listened until the last call echoed and died. A silence swept through the shadow cast over the hill by the oaks; nothing stirred. Yet, there seemed to be music playing there, and magic whispers and laughter. The rich perfume of the dark wet earth rose to them.

Finally Finnegan moved. "What time is it?" he said.

"Aw, it's early yet," Jimmy answered.

"Yeah," Tommy said. "We haven't even done anything yet. It can't be late." Then he climbed on an old rotten stump and raised the gun over his head and looking down, cried, "I am master of all I survey!"

The cry echoed down near the bridge and fled through the grove of sycamores.

Tommy jumped down and said, "Come on."

They followed the path along the top of the hill out toward the swamp. Tommy led the way carrying the gun in readiness. They walked in silence, watching among the

trees. Then they came to an opening among the trees. In an oak a squirrel was doing a trapeze act from limb to limb. Tommy raised his hand and they stopped and looked up into the tree. He put his gun up and pulled the trigger. There was a slight "ping!" and Tommy missed. The squirrel leaped to another tree.

"What did you shoot at the squirrel for?" Finnegan said.

Tommy turned. "I can shoot at what I want."

"You're not supposed to shoot at squirrels."

"I thought you were tough, Finnegan?" Tommy said.

"What did you come for? What about the birds?"

"They're different," Finnegan said.

"Aw," Tommy waved his hand at him. "Different my neck."

They began to walk along again. All three of them were silent now. Tommy stopped and handed Finnegan the gun. "Carry it, it's your shot!"

Just as Finnegan took the gun a whistle blew in the distance. "It's one o'clock," he said. He looked back and hesitated. It was his shot. He was late anyhow. Time had run swiftly through the quiet peacefulness of Farragut Woods.

"It's your shot," Jimmy said.

Finnegan looked in the direction of the school. Then he turned away and led them on over the hard-beaten path of the hill. Now the trees began to thin out and in the distance they could see the smaller trees and the shrubs that bordered the swamp. The hill sloped downward gently until it was no more. They went on treading silently, watching among the limbs for a bird and listening. They reached the swamp and the mound that covered the runway of the sewer. They climbed the mound and walked along it on the path. On both sides of the path small wild cherry trees grew and blackberry and elderberry bushes. It was quiet here, too, but hot. Still pools of water with rotten vegetation lay putrescent in the sunlight. Farther off a

patch of tall green reeds swept toward the salt marshes where the tidal streams meandered through the dark wiry grass. Beyond that was the bay, grey-blue, and bordered by a white strip of beach that fitted about it like a yoke.

Finnegan stopped suddenly. Jimmy and Tommy came to a halt behind him. Finnegan pointed. On a level with his shoulder a thrush with spotted breast and throat perched on a wild cherry branch. Close to its head a cluster of wild cherries hung, no longer red but not yet black and ripe. Finnegan raised the bb. gun. The thrush hopped to another limb and faced them again. He turned the barrel, sighted, and pulled the trigger. In a flutter of feathers the thrush fell to the grass below. They leaned forward as if surprised; then they ran toward the thrush. It lay still in the grass. Finnegan dropped the bb. gun and stooped and picked up the thrush. It was warm in his hand, but its last heart-beat had fled. Its neck hung and turned as if on a swivel and its eyelids closed halfway over the tiny orbs shutting away the light of day. Finnegan ran his fingers down the soft feathers of its back. He took it and held it up and there upon it, still wet yet, was the dark red stain of the wild cherry on its bill and on its breast among the dark spots there was a tiny red stain where the bee bee had entered. Finnegan held it close to him, to his face. The others stared. Finnegan choked but the sob burst from him anyhow. Tommy and Jimmy turned away. Their throats were dry. "I'm sorry I ever did it!" Finnegan said. "I didn't know. Look at him."

The others looked.

"I'm going to bury him here," he said. He knelt and scooped out a tiny grave where the thrush had fallen and took two twigs from the cherry tree and broke them off and lay them like a cross over the small black mound of soil. All three of them stood above it in silence; then they turned and went back the way they had come.

The sun had passed its zenith and had swung downward toward the west. They walked along without speaking.

The black oak woods were still quiet and cool, their great branches spread high and wide. Finnegan felt as if he were walking down the aisle of the church. There was that same peaceful coolness and here and there a shaft of sunlight shot through an opening in the branches, just as in church in the late afternoon, the beams of light angled down from the high colored windows of Holy Cross and broke upon brown empty pews.

When they reached the waterworks, Jimmy said, "I think we're late."

No one answered him. They increased their pace and lengthened their strides. Finnegan could see the red spire of Holy Cross in the distance and the cross against the blue. In his mind he saw Brother Bruno's face.

They left the woods and the waterworks behind and went up the avenue toward the school. One side was shaded now and they knew it was very late. They stopped a moment at Jimmy's house and he left his bb. gun in the areaway. Then they went on.

Finnegan remembered the thrush. He was twice sorry he had gone with them.

Two blocks away they could see the clock on the church, its hands pointing to the time and to their doom. As if it still mattered that they should get there, they hurried and turned in at a side street and went down it to the back of the school. As they reached the corner they heard the joyous shouts of other kids and saw them come running from the gates of the school yard. School was over. Brother Bruno stood at the main doors of the school with Brother Gabriel. The three boys on the corner watched them. Then Brother Bruno went down the steps and crossed the pavement. The great wall hid him from sight but they knew he was going to the chapel to see to it that his group of penitents were there.

The three boys stood on the corner and looked at each other. It was too late to go to class. The hands on the clock were moving swiftly. It was Friday. At four o'clock confession would be heard.

Tommy and Jimmy looked at Finnegan.

"What are you going to do?" Jimmy said.

Finnegan shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm going home," Jimmy said.

"So am I," Tommy added.

The two of them left him standing there on the corner.

Finnegan kept looking up at the clock. He knew the penitents were already at prayer in the chapel. They were the ones whom Brother Bruno had caught throwing spitballs, or talking, or other such things, in class. Each day he held his class there in the chapel. Finnegan was due among the penitents, yet, he still stood there looking up at the clock now and then. He thought of the thrush again, lying under the earth now. He was sorry he had ever gone. Now he knew it was a sin. The thrush would sing no more.

The hands on the clock moved slowly until at last they pointed to four o'clock. Father Flaherty with his red berette cocked on his head came from the priests' house and went toward the chapel; Father Gilligan followed him. They were going to hear confession.

Finnegan waited until Father Flaherty entered the chapel, and then he walked slowly toward it. He entered the sudden shadow of the vestibule. Inside he could hear the penitents intoning, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou." He touched the cold holy water with the tips of his fingers and blessed himself as he stepped within the chapel. It was dark. The red sanctuary light flickered above the altar. He heard the penitents louder now as they continued, "Amongst women and blessed is the fruit of—." He saw them now in the pews kneeling with their heads down over their clasped hands. Brother Bruno arose from his knees and stepped into the aisle. Finnegan looked at him and clasped his hands and went right past Brother Bruno without a word and knelt in a pew close to Father Flaherty's box.

Brother Bruno opened his mouth and closed it without saying a word. Then he went back to the pew and knelt

again and caught the word and went on with the penitents, "Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen!"

Finnegan arose and went to the confession box. He pulled the black curtain behind him and knelt again. "The thrush!" he thought, and then the grating opened between Father Flaherty and himself. Finnegan made the sign of the cross and said, "Bless me, Father . . ."

In Oregon

By ALAN SWALLOW

Where sea beats
where waves break
here is an end to land

Here gulls surge
not caustic as the hawk
drifting over Wyoming

Here where trails halt
wheels must cease
continual turning

Here at last the West
and plows must feed
man must breed