

The Unoriginal Sinner and the Ice-Cream God— Excerpt

ONE

Alone.

Sitting in parlor number three of Collier's Funeral Home. Remembering the first time I was in this room.

Thirteen years old. My parents and all of us older kids in the family were attending my Great Uncle Elmer's funeral. He wasn't great. My mother, whose uncle he really was, didn't like him. The rest of my family barely knew him. No matter. There is a magnetic force between the Irish and open coffins.

I had only a flashing memory of the man from when I was three or four years old. Hats and coats already on, my parents were standing at Uncle Elmer's door saying their good-byes. My Uncle Elmer picked me up and began playfully tossing me high into the air. Each time, as I hung momentarily suspended just before the downfall, I scanned my choices: going higher and smashing into the ceiling or falling back down to Uncle Elmer's bad breath and dirty hands. Discovering at an early age that gravity makes all the important decisions.

As they were getting ready to close Uncle Elmer's casket, the funeral director stood beside it and gestured toward the hallway as he talked. "Will everyone please come up and take a last look at Mr. Elmer Keegan and then pass out."

Giggles began gurgling in my throat. My father, sitting in the next chair, turned and threw his most ferocious frown at me. Despite my father's glare, and even my own feeble attempt to move it along, my mind remained riveted on the moment that was continuing to combust my laughter. I didn't realize it then, but I was a victim of my age. The younger ones didn't get it and the older ones didn't care to.

Still attempting to suppress a smirk, I whispered to my father that I had to go to the washroom. He gave me one of his patented pathetic nods.

Fully clothed, sitting in the only stall, laughing hysterically. When the laughter began subsiding, I would reignite it by thinking of the situation again, like an addict reaching for the needle to postpone that drop to ground level.

I heard the washroom door open. Silence, as I held my breath to choke off the laughter. He turned on the faucet. A geyser of pent-up laughs erupted out of me. The faucet was turned off. Still laughing, I began furiously flushing the toilet. It was a hydraulic flushing system so it gave off quite a whoosh.

“Are you all right in there?” he asked.

“Oh, yes sir, I’m fine, fine.” Still laughing and flushing. I wondered if he thought I was hysterical with grief over losing old Uncle Elmer the tosser.

“You sure?”

“Yes sir, I’m sure.”

The water was turned on again. A few seconds later, I heard the washroom door open and close.

I came out of the stall and went over to the mirror. My eyes were red and glistening with tears. When I walked back into parlor number three, everyone, including Uncle Elmer, was gone. I imagined my parents and my brothers and sisters sitting in the car waiting for me, my mother’s lecture already loaded and ready to be fired. “Now you’ve really fixed yourself. This is the last funeral you’ll be going to for a long, long time.”

An old lady toddled back into the parlor and picked up a pair of black gloves that she had apparently forgotten on the folding chair. She scowled at me, “I hope someone laughs at your funeral.” As she spoke, a slight but sharp sneer slid across her wrinkled, riddled face. I thought it but I didn’t say it. I hope everyone laughs at my funeral.

Later that afternoon, I went over to Caepan’s apartment and, using the key he gave me, opened his mailbox and put in a note:

Dear God:

Why do people die?

Signed: Conroy

I wasn't sure myself if it was a silly question or a serious one.

Early the next morning, I went back to Caepan's mailbox and retrieved the reply:

Conroy:

Most people do not die. They cease to exist. In order to die, you first have to live. Don't forget, you owe me for two Cokes including deposits if you don't bring the bottles back.

Signed: God

I glance at my watch. Only five o'clock. Still a few hours to wait. Why not? No hurry.

Listening to the pattern of rush-hour traffic outside the walls of parlor number three. Every few moments, the purr of motors permeates the darkened room with a slight grumble and quickly swells into a muffled roar. Shortly, the shouts of traffic are turned off by the traffic light at the corner.

I remember reading somewhere that the song "Moon River" was written in twelve minutes. The next time the traffic is forced to hold its breath, I watch the second hand on my watch. Thirty seconds. Catching the red twenty-four times. Not that many. Wondering how many "Moon Rivers" have been lost at traffic lights.

Almost everyone in the neighborhood stops at Collier's Funeral Home for two or three days before leaving for good.

I look around parlor number three and imagine the pockets of laughter and sorrow that inevitably fester in such places. Hearing the litany of unfinished sentences. "I'm sorry . . ." The last few words not being verbalized perhaps because even the speakers are unaware of them. "I'm sorry I had to come."

When I was an altar boy, funerals were supposed to be a good deal. They got you out of at least an hour and a half of school. But in all the years I was an altar boy, I only got four funerals and two of them were on Saturdays. How rotten can a guy be that he'd allow himself to be buried on a Saturday? Not only do none of his friends get the day off, but he ruins the weekend for them besides.

The last time I was in this room was eight years ago, just before I started college. A neighbor, Mr. Kearney, had died. He had a cute niece. I was talking to her when I saw Father Kepp, one of the parish priests, walk in. I knew what was coming next; a request for everyone to drop to their knees for a half-dozen Our Fathers, Hail Marys, and Glory Be's. I wanted to get the niece out to the lobby so that I could talk to her for a few more minutes.

“We can go this way,” I said to her. Although my body had already turned around to head for the lobby, my eyes were still looking at the niece when I felt myself doing a somersault over somebody’s shoulder. When I got up, I realized that I had flattened some neighborhood woman as she was kneeling to pray along with Father Kepp. They almost had to pry the rosary out of her chest. It was very embarrassing. The niece told me to do what her uncle had just done. Almost everybody in the place stoned me with dirty looks, but a few people thought it was funny.

Tonight, no laughs.

TWO

Mine was a family of practicing Catholics and though I practiced constantly I never got any better. When I got older, much older, people would sometimes ask me, “Are you still a Catholic?” Like asking a black person, “Well, I know you were raised black, but what are you today?”

Straight lines of bulky bungalows and square-shouldered apartment buildings ran through my neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side. Often, their march was capped at the corner by a ma-and-pa food store, a gas station, or a “You can pick it up next Tuesday” twenty-four-hour cleaner. It was the kind of neighborhood where fathers never went to stores to buy bikes for their children. Your father would always know somebody who knew somebody who knew somebody. Or maybe he’d find it in the alley, with a kid on it. In my neighborhood, if you left the house in the morning without a lunch pail, then you couldn’t be going to work.

For the first part of my life, I served the sentence of childhood for the crime of growing up. Never was I able to discover any advantages to being little. My parents told me when to eat and sleep and what I couldn’t do, which was everything I wanted to do. Teachers told me what to learn and when to learn it. Every kid in the neighborhood had enough muscle to tell me where to go.

Each afternoon after school, I was allowed to play outside for two hours. I was a small, weak child with a big, strong mouth. Where other children had tongues, I had a razor, and where they had fists, I had wet palms.

I did a lot of running, mostly in a state of terror. When you’re scared you run hard. I could wear out a pair of gym shoes in a block.

During a science class, the nun told us that over 90 percent of our body weight was liquids. I wasn’t surprised. She had merely confirmed what I already knew; I was mostly adrenaline and sweat.

One afternoon, I went to a neighborhood barbershop, to my favorite barber, Mario, to get a haircut. Mario could not only cut hair, he also played a great second base for a local park team. A true Renaissance man. Some kids came to my house after I left and asked my mother if I could come out and play. She was delighted that I had finally found some friends and told them where I was. Those kids were out to get me. I had to run home from the barbershop. As I ran by a neighbor who was holding a struggling baby, she smiled and said, “You sure are lucky to be a kid.”

My father was from a family of fifteen children. He fought World War II and won. My mother came from a family of eleven. There were seven children in mine. When I was very young, there was a cartoon character on a lunchtime television show named “Uncle Danny Duck.” One of my older sisters convinced me that Uncle Danny Duck was really one of my uncles that I just hadn’t met yet.

Throughout my growing up years, I was often accused of having a “smart mouth.” But apparently, my intelligence went no further than the roof of it. I did rotten in school. For twelve straight years, my teachers told my parents that I wasn’t applying myself. The first time I heard that, I thought they were talking about a paintbrush.

I went to a Catholic school where we were taught that our bodies lived in a democracy but our souls lived in a kingdom. Nobody elected God.

The school was extremely overcrowded. There were at least eighty-five kids in a classroom. We often had to share textbooks. The nuns were tyrants. A former graduate of my grammar school, who happened to end up in the state prison a few years later, told kids in the neighborhood that the prison was easier.

Many of the nuns had no more than two years of college. A state educator once came to the school and spent the day observing various classrooms. He told the principal that, of all the nuns he observed, not one of them used modern educational methods or had any idea of proper teaching techniques. If those nuns couldn’t teach, they were very good at working miracles. We learned to read and write better than most.

In first grade, we were told that we were made in the image and likeness of God. I found it difficult to imagine a god that weighed thirty-seven pounds, had suspenders that wouldn’t stay clamped to his pants, and had to force his feet into shoes already tied because he was afraid he wouldn’t remember how to knot a bow.

We were also informed that we had, as infants, been baptized because we had come into this world with original sin, the sin of Adam and Eve eating the apple. The moment we were born, God was already ticked off at us.

I received my sex education from rumors, innuendos, paperback books that I was too young to buy, library books with titles that I couldn’t pronounce, and observations of the most elementary kind.

Even when I was very young, it was common knowledge that women went to the hospital to have babies. But I had noticed they bloated up before they went. I was still at that age where ignorance blinded me to embarrassment so I asked my mother if there was any connection.

“Why do women get big before they go to a hospital for their babies?”

“You mean ‘swell up?’”

“I guess.”

“Oh,” she said nonchalantly, “Everyone’s stomach swells when they get nervous.”

“Does mine?”

“Sure,” she replied, “but only a little so you can’t notice. But women who are going to get a baby worry a lot about whether the baby is going to be healthy.”

When I was in second grade, and doing very badly at the blackboard, I waited for my navel to start pushing out over the top of my pants.

Wayne Leker was a good friend of mine. When he was a little kid, his mother told him that babies came from seeds. One day, Wayne’s mother told him that there was soon going to be a new baby in the house. For the next few weeks, every morning, Wayne got up and checked to see if there was one growing in the backyard.

On a Monday afternoon, when we were both about thirteen years old, we went to the public library. Wayne was always interested in how things worked. His father had spent the entire weekend working on the furnace so Wayne was now looking for a book on furnaces. As his eyes skimmed along the shelves, they were grabbed by the title of a thin green book, *Female Anatomy*. Unlike the house furnace, Wayne’s was just beginning to heat up.

We sat hunched over at a corner table as Wayne read in a whisper. “Among other sexual functions, the female breasts are used to offer security and comfort to the husband. . . .”

So that’s what they’re for, I thought to myself. The book read like the pamphlet the family had received with the new television set. “The dial on the upper right is for fine-tuning and contrast while the lower dial is used to control volume. . . .”

In eighth grade, after the boys had been segregated from the girls, the priest told us that sports was an excellent way to burn up the “excess energy” that gave us impure thoughts. “No, no, Frank, you dribble the ball, you don’t make love to it.”

We were repeatedly told that sex belonged only in marriage and that, if we were lucky, we did not. The priests constantly told us to search our consciences to see if we had a “vocation.” In other words, was God calling us to the priesthood? After all, Christ never married. He was the original Lone Ranger.

Like probably every other generation that has ever or will ever live, including the one that we have yet to raise, we young men were taught that women were made to worship, despise, humiliate, and fear. Millions of *me* grew up and made Hugh Hefner a rich man. And he never even bothered to send the church a thank-you note.

Life was a test, we were told, and God was the judge. If we played by his rules, the church's rules actually, we would go to heaven. They were kind of vague about what heaven was. They did say we'd be able to look at God for eternity, which didn't sound too thrilling. But they were very specific about hell. We would literally burn forever.

Like a test, life wasn't to be enjoyed but sweated out. And praying on your deathbed that the verdict was in your favor. For this kind of life we were expected to constantly give thanks to God for being alive. We were also supposed to love him.

One day, in third grade, the nun had us discuss what we wanted to be when we grew up. No one showed any inclination to be an electrical engineer, a biochemist, or anthropologist. Our dreams of the future were reasonable and easy to pronounce. Most of my classmates wanted to be priests, firemen, policemen, doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, and mothers. Not me. I didn't know what else there was, but I knew I wanted it.

One of the nuns had told the class that you had to go to school for twenty years before you could be a doctor or a lawyer, so those two were out.

I had no desire to be a fireman. Even as a kid, I realized that running into burning buildings was not a very sane way to make a living.

I could never be a policeman. When I was younger and we used to play "cops and robbers," I was the only robber who always chose to plea-bargain rather than shoot it out.

Before I was nine, I didn't want to be anything in particular. But that summer, my grandfather took me to a White Sox–Yankee doubleheader, and from that day I dreamed of becoming a Major League Baseball player.

Baseball was the perfect career for me. Not only did I love playing the game but I also figured that, since I could already count up to nine innings, I didn't need another day of education to be a major league ballplayer. For the rest of my grammar school years, and all of my high-school years, I could fake it, which was exactly what I did. And had been doing.

I became convinced that when God thought up me, he created the perfect baseball player. Within my body, he had installed the confidence of Henry Aaron, the arrogance of Babe Ruth, the desire of Ty Cobb, and the canniness of Casey Stengel. It took me years to discover the only thing that God had forgotten—talent.

In sixth grade, I read in a magazine that the chances of a kid eventually making it to the major leagues were one in ten thousand. At that age, I weighed less than the wind, had the complexion of a bedsheet, and possessed eyes that looked like they lived at the end of a tunnel. I wondered what the other 9,999 were going to do for a living.

In many ways, my childhood was the same as a Jersey cow's. Whenever I got the chance, I stood in an empty field and waited for something to happen. I was a baseball fanatic and living proof that you don't have to be good to be obsessed.

When I managed to get into a neighborhood game, I would always be relegated to right field, the graveyard of baseball. Every few hours, a ground ball would plod toward me through the long grass. No matter how fast I ran, the ball would always have stopped by the time I got to it. Regardless, I would pick it up and heave it in the general direction of the infield to whichever kid was yelling loudest at me. Once or twice a week, a fly ball would float out to right field. On good days, I would almost catch it.

I spent most of my time in right field performing such traditional trivia as pounding my fist into my glove and chewing a huge wad of gum. Actually, I daydreamed a lot out there. I imagined myself racing deep into center field for a long fly ball. I would feel my spikes biting into the grass as I sprinted toward the wall. Glove outstretched, my head looking back over my shoulder to watch the flight of the ball, I would suddenly realize that my spikes were now digging into the dirt on the warning track. The wall was only a few feet away. Fearlessly, I would take one more long stride and leap high, my glove snaring the ball as I simultaneously slammed into the wall.

After collapsing to the ground, I would struggle to my feet and, although still dazed, I would throw the ball to second base, cutting down the runner who was trying to advance on the out. The rows of fans above the wall would madly cheer my efforts, but I'd ignore them.

I would walk around in a small circle, my glove hanging limply in my throwing hand while the other hand wiped the sweat from my brow and readjusted my cap. Coaches and players would come running out to me, but I'd wave them back. Quickly then I'd rub the crux of my neck and twist my head back and forth a few times so that the more astute fans would realize that I had, indeed, nearly broken my neck running into that wall.

Across the alley from my house, more specifically my garage, was the mammoth back wall of the Methodist Church. In the top center section of the wall was a large stained glass window, which contained an image of Jesus Christ.

Some Protestant friends of mine had told me that the stained glass Jesus overlooked their altar on the other side. Maybe. Being Catholic, I had to take their word for it. I wasn't allowed to go into churches other than my own. At that time, the Catholic Church felt that if you did something like that, you were admitting to the possibility that God actually had some use for Methodists or whatever.

I considered it a personal favor of God's that I had been born in a house that had such a huge wall in the alley for my private use. None of that bouncing the ball off the front steps stuff for me.

Although no one ever said so, I was sure that a lot of the neighborhood kids were jealous of my wall. And it was hardly the kind of thing you could ask your parents to get you for Christmas. Of course, any kid could have come along and used the wall, but no one ever did. Either you have a Methodist Church wall behind your garage or you don't. It's not the same when you have to walk somewhere to use it.

Behind my garage and in my mind existed the entire National and American leagues. A major league game was played almost every night off the church wall. Rules, known only to me, were strictly enforced. ("A ball caught as it bounces off the garage wall is a single. But if it hits the ground after bouncing off the garage then it's a double.") The box scores of one season would often fill three spiral notebooks. Periodically, I'd get bored with the whole scene and I'd throw all the spiral notebooks away. But within a few weeks, I'd be back in the alley with a new rubber ball and a new spiral notebook.

I could get all kinds of ground balls, line drives, and fly balls to bounce off that Methodist Church wall. There was also just the right amount of alley between the church and my family's garage. If I threw the rubber ball through the telephone wires up to the bricks just above the stained glass Jesus' head, I would get a fly ball whose arc would carry it to the top part of the garage wall. Timing my leap perfectly, I would, most of the time, grab the ball just as it was about to bounce off the garage wall for extra bases. The fans loved it.

By the time I was eleven or twelve, playing with a rubber ball became so blasé that I switched to using a golf ball. I quickly discovered that a golf ball never comes off a brick wall the same way twice. Sometimes, the golf ball would crawl off the Methodist Church wall with so little energy that the resulting ground ball would hardly reach me. Other times, the golf ball would careen off the wall with such force that it would rocket over the garage, the backyard and even the house, landing somewhere in the street.

Early one summer evening, right after supper, I went out to the alley to play a few games. Just warming up, I stood a few feet from the Methodist Church wall and casually tossed the golf ball at the bricks. It hit and floated

in a lazy lob over my head toward the garage wall. I turned and ran the few feet across the alley, hoping to catch the golf ball as it softly bounced off the wood of the garage. I was within a few feet of the wall when I noticed the protruding nail. The possibility had hardly formed in my mind when the golf ball hit the head of the nail and screamed back into my forehead.

Terror reigned inside my head. Everything was pushing to get out. For the first time in my life, I really thought I was dying. I could see my parents finding my body lying in the alley, a golf ball implanted in my forehead.

Struggling to open my eyes through the pain, I saw the stained glass Jesus, his colors alive with the rays of the setting sun, looking down at me. I began praying so intensely that the pain got even worse. Then I remembered that the stained glass Jesus was Methodist. My prayers would do no good. He was probably glad that his wall had nearly taken a Catholic's head off.

A few minutes later, propped up on my knees, I brushed the tear-dampened gravel and dirt from my face and felt for the lump on my forehead. It felt larger than the golf ball that had caused it. Gradually, I got up and looked around for my glove. I found it sprawled behind a garbage can.

Opening the back gate and walking through the yard, I wondered what I'd be doing now if that golf ball had actually killed me. If I was unlucky and had gone to hell, I'd be burning, that's all. In heaven, according to the nuns, the beatific vision—seeing God—was a very big deal, so that probably would have kept me busy for the night and the next couple of days. But what about after the novelty wore off?

Heaven was a totally spiritual world so there couldn't be any baseball. Then I realized that I wouldn't even be able to dream about baseball or anything at all. It wouldn't make sense for God to go through all the trouble of creating heaven and then allowing people to dream about something else.

I was getting very worked up about all of this. It's a very bad habit of mine; worrying terrifically over something that I don't even know is true or not. Even while I'm doing the worrying, I know it's dumb because I know I don't have any control over what I'm worrying about anyway.

Dying and not being able to dream.

It wasn't until I graduated from college that I discovered that I really had something to worry about.

During eight years of grammar school and four years of high school, I learned almost nothing. As I've already mentioned, I did learn to read and write. I also knew my basic colors and could recognize most numbers. That was it.

Despite my less-than-brilliant academic record, my parents constantly informed me that I was going to college. I never gave much thought to it. Like most kids, even though I wanted to grow up, I ignored all the obvious evidence that surrounded me and refused to believe that if I was a kid long enough, I would unavoidably become an adult. Besides, I was going to play baseball when I grew up. You don't hit home runs with a diploma.

But as I grew older, I discovered that it took more than desire, a garage, an alley, and a Methodist Church wall to become a Major League Baseball player.

During high school, I worked a number of part-time jobs and realized that the only thing I liked less than school was work. Upon graduating from high school, I chose the lesser of two evils. Having graduated in the bottom twentieth of my high-school class, yet still determined that I was not going to work for a living, I applied to and was rejected by over thirty-five colleges. Then someone told me to apply to Chicago's city college, Engrin University, because Engrin accepted just about anybody. I did. He was right. I was in.