

Once Upon A Time

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: A “fictional” account of priests and workers, those who find the way and those who are led astray, all figure in this story of “all of us. . . myself and you.” There is Father Joy who dislikes mortification and detachment. Father Cross speaks of the daily cross and the text “He who says he has done enough has already perished.” We meet Minimus the drunk, Fabiola, a woman who enjoys find things, and Lefty who gives up everything for Christ. (DDLW #403).

Once upon a time there was a House of Hospitality in a big city. Such a House is a hospice to care for the poor, the unemployed, the unemployable, the derelict, the refugee from class war, race war, and other kinds of war. Once a Bishop gave such a house to a group of lay people to run, and even a priest to be in charge. Maybe sometime this will happen again. There are ten or so such houses now and after the war there will be many more. Before the war, for a time, there were thirty-two. Many of the men on the present breadlines run by the existing houses, are left over from the last war. Priests come to these houses to give instruction, and sometimes give whole courses of lectures.

Concerning Priests

This story is about two priests and about some people. One might say that these two priests are samples of many priests and the people are like all of us, in one way or another. So it is no use in trying to identify them, or to say—this is me. I am writing about all of us, about myself and you.

Father Cross is half a dozen priests we know. Father Joy is another half dozen. Minimus is all of us, and so is Fabiola. I use these names because I do not know anyone by them and neither do you.

One hot summer night, Father Joy and Father Cross were giving lectures in the house of hospitality.

Father Joy was saying, “we must think in terms of the liberty of the spirit. Away with this petty counting up of sacrifices, this talk of *self* sanctification. *Self*, *self*sanctification!Bah! Emphasis on*self*. Let us look towards God who is infinitely merciful. Let Him take care of the whole matter for us. We do not depend enough on grace. We lay too much emphasis on our own puny efforts. Let us look towards God instead of inwards towards ourselves. Let us concentrate on the glory of god. There is a tendency these days to talk about *self-denial*, *mortification*, *detachment from creatures*. There is a great deal of modern piety which is neither Deocentric nor Christcentric, but egocentric. St. John of the Cross, St. Bernard, both in a way show this tendency which is dangerous. And

there is that very dangerous chapter in the *Following of Christ*, on nature and grace,” etc., etc.

As Father Joy, who was an earnest, serious, saintly priest, tried to talk of enjoying creatures, increasing our love for all creatures in God, Minimus staggered through the meeting room, so far gone in drink that he had to crawl up the stairs to the dormitory on his hands and knees. He had been greatly enjoying Creature Beer. “There was no harm in it. Take a little wine for your belly’s sake. No sin in one beer. God put these creatures here for us to enjoy.” he murmured to himself as he heard Father Joy talking so earnestly that he did not even see Minimus’s dejected rear as he fell up the first steps outside the meeting room.

Raised Eyebrows

Some of the good visitors who liked to come to meetings at the House of Hospitality, and always brought food and clothing with them for the poor, looked at each other, raised their eyebrows and sighed. “What noble people these are,” one was saying to herself, “to take care of these repulsive human beings, though of course they are Christ (in his most repulsive guise).”

And still others thought bitterly, “What stupid fools to waste their time on drunks. That’s where my money goes. To the corner tap room. They contribute to their delinquency by caring for them. Those who do not work should not eat.”

Meanwhile, Minimus, not able to sleep and thinking another drink might help, stole the suit of a dying man who had just been taken to the hospital that morning, and staggered out again down the back stairs and out the side door.

Father Cross was speaking not long after, of the need to deny ones self. “Take up your cross daily, deny yourself and follow me,” “He who says he has done enough has already perished.” These were his texts. “You who run these houses are in greater danger than others—danger of self-glorification, giving your alms before men, praying publicly by going to daily Mass and communion (and do you correspond to the graces you receive? If not they will be taken from you.) And I don’t see much fasting. Those who waste hours in idle talk, smoke, enjoy a beer now and then, recreate themselves by going to the theatre and movies, using cosmetics, reading magazines and newspapers—these are not fasting. They are contributing to the sum total of self-indulgence in the world and the corporations grow rich and think up more and more ways to enslave the proletariat.”

Fabiola’s Penance

While he talked, Fabiola took another cigarette (yes, she knew all about child labor in Connecticut tobacco fields, and the ruin of the soil in the south) crossed her long slender legs, bare and colored with tan makeup, and leaned back against the wall and sighed. “So much emphasis on petty things—chocolates, cigarettes,

cosmetics, modesty in dress. And meanwhile the world was falling apart and women and children were at that moment perhaps running through the streets of a city like flaming torches, or being smothered in air raid shelters, cremated, their screams choked in their throats.” She shuddered as she thought of a broadcast she had just listened to, of fighting in Normandy, the sound of the guns which had all but drowned out the sound of the announcer’s voice. Every now and then, at such a broadcast, or when she saw a parade, a band, a handsome figure in uniform, she felt a mounting sense of horror and together with it an appreciative sense of her own suffering. “If I were any more sensitive I could not stand it,” she often thought. She shuddered as she saw a cockroach crawl down the wall. “Well, I am bearing something of the poverty and dirt and vermin—some little share of the world’s sufferings,” she thought.

Some of the fellows at the meeting that night kept stealing glances at Fabiola’s trim figure. She had a lovely ivory pallor, a sweet turn of the neck, and her dress was low enough to show a slight swell of breast. The sight of the soft forearm, the bend of the elbow, the rounded knee, the curved thigh, outlined so softly and smoothly, all this oppressed the breathing of Minimus.

“Why did God give me these desires? Why did He give me free will? Why did He make me so that I long for the comfort of a woman’s arms?”

If anyone mentioned the Pope and his talks on dress to Fabiola (and she had heard many an exhortation from the pulpit) she thought to herself, “How petty of him. These days too! To the pure all things are pure.”)

The Joy of Life

Minimus had recovered from his drinking, he had gone to confession (there was no talk of restitution as to what he had stolen). Absolution was easy. Every now and then he doubted whether it was possible for God to forgive him over and over again, for these thirty years of his life. He put these doubts far from him, however, because he was a good Catholic, and doubts of God’s goodness were a sin against faith.

After one of these storms of temptation and sin, repentance, absolution and Communion, he was unusually sensitive to the joy and sensuous thrill of life. If he could only always live in this state. He trembled at the beauty, the goodness of life. He had been lifted up out of the depths of hell. He was safe. He was not alone. He had companionship in his sin, in his repentance, in his temptations and weaknesses, joys and sorrows.

“These priests are men just like me,” he thought. “They smoke, lots of them. They drink. They enjoy the comforts of life. And yet God miraculously preserves them from sin. I wish He’d do the same for me. If I keep praying hard enough, maybe He will.”

Outside in the warm night the children of the slums were dancing in the streets to the tune of a juke box in the corner saloon. **“Take care of yourself—you belong to me,”** the song pierced the night over and over and made the heart ache with longing.

Chinese Charlie was doing a rushing business. Every minute children ran in for penny candy, for ice cream, for pepsi-cola, for toys, for gadgets the other children had. “I want, mama, gimme—I must have—mama, a penny.”

Down at the parish church a novena to St. Ann was going on. “I want, I want. Oh, my God, I want—I long for—I am in need of. . . I want love, a job that will get me good clothes, a good time, a car. I want to escape the penalty of this theft, of this fornication. Oh, God, don’t let me be caught. I’ll never do it again. Oh, God, don’t let this happen to me. Oh, God, take care of me. I promise—” Inside the church, outside in the street, it was the same.

“The mind is darkened and the will is weakened,” Father Cross was saying. “All creation travaileth and groaneth even until now. In us reason is always out of line.”

Lefty’s Leftovers

Lefty gazed with rapt eyes on the round figure of Father Cross. He loved him and was grateful to him. He had led him out of the land of Egypt and out of the house of bondage. At one time he used to drive a truck, sell sandwiches and coffee and doughnuts to the night-shift at the shipyards. That’s how he came across the House of Hospitality. Someone told him to dump his left-overs there. Always a breadline. At the house he had met Father Cross with his good news. “Sell all that you have and give to the poor. Dump out the world and fill yourself with Christ. Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. Sow abundantly and you will reap abundantly. Whoever gives up house and land and father, mother or wife for My sake shall receive a hundred fold.”

Lefty was a literal soul. In spite of the thanks of the House he knew he wasn’t giving much. He would have had to dump the stale stuff anyway, wouldn’t he? And who wants a hundred fold of sandwiches and doughnuts? His stomach turned over at the thought. He had nothing else to give, so he gave himself and his truck. But no thanks, mind you, or you would be depriving him of his reward in heaven.

Thereafter Lefty slept on an old mattress in the cellar. The rats scrambled around at night and even occasionally played leapfrog over his head. He was put in charge of the clothes room and was reviled and cursed every day by the poor. “He sells the stuff, he does,” they whispered to each other. “He sells it for drink. He gives it to his pets.” When they were in liquor they shouted this to the housetops and once in a while he was belabored by some longshoreman.

Once when he had a fairly decent suit on himself, he took it off and exchanged it for the clothes of a man who said he could get a decent job if he had clothes. The clothes he put on were “walking” and everyone around the house shunned Lefty for some time. “The poor can at least keep clean,” some of them murmured. “After all, no use going to extremes. We have to think of the common good.” They were just as glad he stayed in the cellar. For a time he was put on the fifth floor, which was crowded with twenty men, black and white, young and old, sick and well.

One night Lefty woke up and thought suddenly, “No one has prayed in this place. They pray in Church, they pray in the dining room, they pray in the office, but no one ever prays here.” So he got up out of bed and shook his dormitory mates, one by one. “Get up,” he kept saying tensely. “We gotta pray.”

His voice was so insistent that most of them tumbled out of bed thinking submarine torpedoes had at last hit New York, or that poison gas was stealing over the city. All but Minimus who had fallen into bed, drunk again, a few hours before. When the others realized that no disaster was impending they ceased their “Hail Mary’s” and tumbled back into bed, growling. “Screw-Ball—you had me scared for a minute,” and the next day they complained to the head of the house. “If I gotta pray for a flop and a bowl of soup, I’ll take to a park bench. Religion is the opium of the people.”

Lefty stayed up the rest of the night for the others. And not long after, considering that he had found the pearl of great price, he joined the Trappists.

The Temptations

Father Cross, not many evenings after, had been talking about doing things for the love of God. “How can we show our love of God except by preference? It’s not a matter of sense, of emotion, though it is true that the best analogy used in holy scripture is the love of a man and wife. Yes, we can show our love for our fellows, by not only loving them as ourselves (that is the old law) but as Christ loved them. How dearly we love ourselves! From the time we get up in the morning we think of nothing but of making ourselves comfortable. Heat and cold, pampering the senses, eyes, ears, newspapers, radios; the nose with cosmetics and lotions; the taste with cigarettes, candies, delicate foods, ‘taste sensations,’ a few beers. No sin in it, they all say as they drink the 365th beer that year, or smoke the 3,650th cigarette (that is if they are extremely moderate in their use of cocktails, beer and cigarettes). And as to where imperfection stops and venial sin begins, and venial sin stops and mortal sin begins, who can tell? We all intend to stop. But suppose a man wants a thrill (he has gotten a taste for it by jumping out of aeroplanes in this war) and says, I think I’ll jump out of the Empire State building and stop at the 22d floor. Do you think he can stop when he wants to?”

Down the street, in a little park, Fabiola was sitting on a bench with a young

army man that she was not at all sure she wanted to marry. He had a bold arrogance and a gentle, insistent hand. He pulled her head down on his shoulder and with his lips pressed against her hair, he told her all sorts of things she loved to hear, and his human warmth comforted that universal sense of loneliness we all feel. The sycamore trees stirred in the August night, the city sounds seemed far away, a cat crouched in the grass, a soft, tense shadow, and the street lamps glowed like moons among the trees. And Fabiola, her senses stirring, her heart warmed with pity for the youth who was about to go out and meet a foul death, was in the position of that man who was perched on the top of the Empire State building. She did not know Father Cross was talking about her. It was easier to listen to Father Joy, who talked about how hard life was these modern days! It was mortification just to live. Just stay in the state of grace; just avoid mortal sin; just make the morning offering and it would cover everything. And if you fell, well, God loved sinners. There was always confession. It made her feel comfortable just to think about it.

But before the night was over her soul was as dead as the man at the foot of the Empire State building. And she felt dead too, sad and dead, and she wondered how it had all come about.

Just a Bad Break

Minimus too, was dead, in the same fashion. One of his fellow-workers who had gotten a good paying job, had returned to the House to regale his former companions with his good fortune. He had left Minimus ten dollars to give to the head of the House, and Minimus, well started by the “treats” of his generous friend, had continued on his way. The early part of the evening he had spent with a blonde, in her room, and later, in an argument in a tavern he had gotten into a fight. Someone had insulted the Church. Someone had insulted the Blessed Mother. Minimus had a brawny arm and in the twinkling of an eye, he had laid his adversary flat. Who falling, hit his head on the corner of the bar rail and was killed instantly.

Minimus has come alive again, temporarily, in the state penitentiary and in the interminable hours in his cell, he often wonders how it all came about. Say what they may, innocently as he had been carried along by little and by little, he could not feel like a sinner. He had just had a bad break. He had just happened to be caught.

Of course such a story as this could go on and on. It is the story we are all writing, joyful and sorrowful, comic and tragic. It is the story of how we are all ensnared, in tiny subtle ways, so that we are not free to do what we would and we seem to do nothing to help the world in its agony. We can do so little with ourselves, God help us! Lord, that I may see!

When I write such tales as this, I write from the depths of my own experience. This is me, and this is you. We are all guilty of each others’ sins. This is literally

true. Living as we do, in Houses of Hospitality, and farms, we know all about each other, and what we don't know we imagine. It does not matter. There is in all of us the grotesque missionary in Tobacco Road and there is also Mary Magdalene. There is Judas and there is Peter. We are of dust, and we are also a little less than the angels.

And there is Christ in us all!