TERRENCE

(November, 1952)

Maybe it was the ridiculously desperate way you spat it out-- “S’ter? S’ter? S’ter?”--your right arm spearing the air, your left hand supporting it as though it would fall off, your hand flapping at the wrist in Sister Rita-Marie’s face.

Maybe that was the reason.

Or maybe it was because it was already 3:17--two minutes past dismissal bell--and we just wanted to go home.

Maybe, Terrence, that was why Sister ignored you. Why all of us ignored you.

“Shut up, Terrence!” I heard from the back of the room.

“S’ter?” you persisted--as though you really believed she hadn’t seen or heard you. As though, even if the entire third and fourth grade class of Our Lady of Mercy School didn’t want to hear it because it was 80 friggin degrees in the room, your question was so God-Almighty important you had to ask it.

It was November, 1952. A cold day outside but, like I said, 80 something inside because we were on the third floor and that old radiator was working overtime, and what with the sunlight pouring through the back and side windows, we were sitting in an oven. Sister Rita-Marie--the fuzz above her lip sweaty and glistening, those black folds of cloth and white cardboard wimple wrapped tightly around her head--had to be roasting. 3:18 the clock said now.

Yeah, she ignored you. More so because it was you with the question, Terrence. You, whose questions were always unnecessary, downright stupid.

None of us wanted to hear it, Terrence.

I was 9 at the time. You were 11 and a grade ahead of me but a year behind where you should've been.

I was seated in my desk in the last seat of the second row on the third-grade side of the classroom, putting together my books and papers, just like everyone else, because, as I said, the dismissal bell had already sounded. You were seated way in the front of the room near the door, on the fourth-grade side, but I could tell it was you because your red hair was always sticking up like porcupine quills, and you always raised your hand that way, and when Sister called on you, you always said something that sounded really dumb--because you'd ask it with that red face and apologetic little giggle that was an invitation for all the other kids to start laughing.

They weren't laughing now, though--just exasperated.

"Shut up, Terrence!"

Sister--she was probably grateful for the help. She'd had a rough day and intoned pretty firm-like, "Whatever it is, Terrence, it can wait till tomorrow." She turned to the fourth-graders: "Remember to do problems 1-10 multiplication and read pages 24-27 the six cardinal virtues in your catechism." Then, glaring, at you, she added, "One of those six virtues is long-suffering."

You didn't give up though. "Just one question, S'ter."

I heard the impatient movement of desks, one of them complaining right into the back of your chair. You turned around to protest, and it was then I should've known --*that something about all this wasn't right*--because I could see your usual stupid grin flashing only briefly and then, unexpectedly, your lips pulling back tightly and your expression for the briefest moment conveying an anger from way down inside.

She gave in.

"For goodness sake, what is it, Terrence?"

What followed, I could see, took too long--like you had the words in the right order in your head before, but now couldn't sort them out. Still, I was listening--because I was really curious about what question could be so important to hold up everyone's leaving. No one else was. Robert--in the seat across from me--turned toward me, grimaced, raised his eyes and muttered across the aisle, "Jesus Christ! What a turd," then began knocking his forehead on his desk in a comical way--clunk, clunk--as though in despair. I ignored him and raised myself above him slightly in order to see you. You turned to your left and seemed to drag your eyes over the whole class now with some kind of undefined apprehension, your mouth wincing and wrenching into too many positions which were saying everything—humiliation, determination, defiance--as though you knew damn well every one of the third and fourth graders wished you *did* forget whatever you were going to ask.

You finally got started though. And what was it? Something like, "S'ter, you said just one mortal sin and . . . you know . . . like my mom . . . if she *did* commit one then died. . . you know like hit by a car crossing the street, you know, at just that moment, and went to hell, and

. . . you said forever so *suppose later I go to heaven . . . how can I be happy if I know my mother is in hell?"*

God, Terrence, what a question to ask then! Half the room was snickering, the other half bursting into open laughter before you finished. But maybe you didn't notice or you'd just gotten used to that kind of reaction or maybe you really didn't care because you just kept on that way:

"I mean because you said one mortal sin and you get an eternity of fire and swords . . ."

You didn't have a chance to finish because Sister Rita, looking 800 mortal sin hell-fires at you, her long black robe flowing like she was the wrath of God, lunged toward you and brought her arithmetic book, Cardinal's imprimatur and all, on your head, punctuating that little bit of made-to-order violence with "Read your catechism, boy, and you won't have to ask blasphemous questions like that!" [All of the nuns liked to use the word "blasphemous," remember? Great word. It filled in all the cracks to make everything in the catechism fit just right.] Then, mustering her composure, she turned to the rest of the class and called out wearily, "Fourth graders, dismissed! Third graders, wait," and fussed with her arithmetic book. "Problems 1 to 5, page 83 in your arithmetic book. Dismissed."

The rest jumped up. I didn't. I sat there gazing at you. Even then--at age 9--I knew that the question you'd asked wasn't stupid. What was stupid was *asking* it. That day in 1952, for me, the reason was: it was 3:18 p.m. and time to go home. Today, years later, the reason is you never ask authority figures questions they don't have an answer to.

So whatever cosmic common sense there was in your question, Terrence, you never got it answered that day. We all ignored you.

Well, except me.

It's true I didn't help you. I could've raised my hand . . . or better yet, stood up . . . and said, "Yeah, Sister, how can that be? Terrence here has a point." After all, I was one of the good students. They were grooming me for the priesthood.

I didn't, but then again, I didn't bolt for the door either. I couldn't. So not all was lost that day, Terrence. You didn't get an answer to your question, but you got something else that afternoon. Me—Colin Gervasi.

In the months leading up to that day, Terrence, I'd started getting what I called "spells." The first time was when, to escape from an ugly argument between my parents, I'd gone for a walk. A block from home, I got this strange sensation--like something was going to happen. Seconds later, beginning to feel dizzy, lightheaded, and even little nauseous, I stopped, waiting for it to go away. But it didn't, so, spotting a small drugstore off to my right, I walked over to it, sat down against the outside brick wall, closed my eyes, put my head into my hands, and let the darkness enfold me. I sat there for some 10 minutes that way, needing not only what had overtaken me to settle, but also the comfort and peace of a solitude away from my parents' argument. Oddly though, after a while, a restlessness rose up from within me. A need to break free of something, or maybe reach out for something, though I wasn't sure what. Confused, I just smothered it in my hands and the darkness. Finally, I got up, went on walking.

The second time it happened I was eating at the school cafeteria table, and two of the fourth-grade boys were making fun of a girl named Norma who happened to be seated across from me. Do you remember Norma, Terrence? She had that kind of cerebral palsy that wasn't

very severe or obvious but even so left her with a sickly expression that some of your classmates—in not-so-subtle ways—reminded her of when it suited them. And this particular day, they were mocking me for sitting across from her: “Look who has a new girlfriend. Figures, cuz she can only get the third-graders.” The cruelty this time was directed at both her and me, and the disgust I felt triggered the same sort of spell that had overtaken me on the sidewalk. Dizziness. Lightheadedness. Nausea. A need to close my eyes and put my head down. A temporary peace from the painful comments, but, again, followed by a need to suppress something growing within me that needed to be let out.

Over the weeks the spells would overtake me again and again, and always in situations when I was fending off the stress of some ugly behavior and at the same time smothering a need to strike out against it.

Anyway, here it was again, Terrence. In the classroom this time. Right at that moment when you’d just asked your “mother in hell” question. While the other kids were racing from the room--two of them taking time to bang their books against their desks, pretending it was your head, Terrence, and calling out, mocking-like and strident, “Read your catechism, Terrence!”-- I couldn’t get up from my seat.

I’d tried to--raised the lid on my heavy oaken desk, names carved into it going back some twenty years probably (I still remember the “TK loves ER” because it was one of the largest and clearly etched, like it had been cut out with a Bowie knife and someone had poured ink into it, and because everyone said the TK was for you, Terrence Kitterson, and the ER Eleanor

Roosevelt), and had taken out my word problem papers and jammed them into my arithmetic book in the same place I'd been jamming them since the week before.

It was then, just as I'd taken one last glance over at you, Terrence, grinning stupidly again, your face red, all trace of the determined anger I'd seen earlier gone now apparently, that I got the spell. Felt a quiet thud. It was a thud, for sure, and then a sudden rush of . . . cool water through my brain. I didn't know what it was except it was followed by a lightness that became a heaviness, then a nausea, and I felt an immediate need to sit down again. I resisted, but it was getting stronger now, and with a quick glance around to see if anyone was looking at me, I slid back into my seat and put my head down on my arms, feeling that for some reason, not just physical, I had to do that. I had to sit down.

In the darkness of my mind, that need to let out something, break free, was pushing from within me again. It was for sure an anger. At something bigger than that moment.

When I finally raised my head it must've been at least a couple minutes later because the room was empty except for you, Terrence.

That "spell" of mine would be the first of two "spells" I would have that day—both of them for you, Terrence. You--Terrence J. Kitterson--who wanted to be known as "T.J." because the other kids hurled "Terrence" at you like the name itself was a weapon of ridicule. That first one at my desk had been sudden, overwhelming, but very quiet. The second would be sudden, explosive, exhilarating, like the beginning of a Russian dance. That's the one you'd see--the one where I'd smash my head into a world I didn't know I was so mad at till then.

You didn't seem to be aware of me, and you finally got up and shuffled toward the door, screwing up your lips as though they were a knot holding something tightly within. I remember that part very clearly. I stood up, but immediately the dizziness or whatever it was clouded my consciousness and I plopped right back down--smiling, embarrassed about my confusion at Sister Rita who'd just reentered the room as you left.

She asked me if I was okay. Remember, Terrence, in her brain I was the "other" kind of student. I was a good student--in my class the next candidate for canonization--St. Colin of Ohio.

At this moment, however, I was feeling more like a fool because the spell had left me feeling disoriented, and I couldn't think how to answer her. I was saved though--mercifully--because just then we both heard outside someone shouting at you, "Hey, Terrence, you turd, does your father still play for the Phillies?" so that Sister Rita--I mean she'd had enough of the heat and the smart remarks for one day--was exploding back through the doorway like the Madwoman in Black, her tongue cutting like a whip, and screaming, "Who said that?" followed by the bang of locker doors and the not-so-metallic sound of the crush of bodies against those lockers and then the crackling and squeaking echoes of different kinds of shoes pounding in haste down the hardwood floors of the main hallway.

I wanted to get up before she returned. I was bewildered, almost frightened. I lay my head on my desk, and whatever it was began slowly settling about me, then . . . falling off me, dissipating. I got up quickly, grabbed my book and papers, and rushed to get outside to the fresh air to see if that would help. Sister Rita's voice followed me down the hallway: "All right, Colin?"

I turned, nodded. That was all I could do because my tongue still wasn't working right and my "yeah" wasn't loud enough.

On the playground outside, my older brother Timmy was practicing dribbling behind-the-back with Johnny Mack who saw me coming and hollered out, "Oh, shit, here's your little brother. Tell him to get lost." Timmy, instead, said nothing, and I really wasn't feeling up to a basketball game anyway, at least one in which I could do my best and show up smart-ass fifth-graders like Johnny Mack--which I could do because Johnny Mack couldn't dribble more than once and usually just elbowed his way to the basket till he finally managed to get a wild shot up.

I sat myself on a window ledge of the school basement and watched for a while, but I was feeling really weak and still somewhat bewildered by the powerful effect of the spell, so I put my head down on my lap and closed my eyes.

When I heard the sound of Timmy's voice above me, it was as though I'd been "away" longer than I'd realized.

"What a shmoo. Let's go, Col."

The shmoo--remember them, Terrence? Those little stupid-grinning, seal-like dummy-bags that everybody had then? Well, the real shmoo was Johnny Mack.

I got up and followed sluggishly behind Timmy because he was still dribbling between his legs and behind his back, before finally tossing it back to the shmoo Johnny Mack, who just walked off without a word.

"D'ja beat 'im?" I asked.

"20 to 4," he laughed. Then he said something like, "What an ass. He sticks his elbow in you all the way to the hoop, double dribbles a couple of times, and doesn't even know where he's at. Jeez, he was behind the board a couple times when he shot the ball."

I found myself trying to miss the sidewalk cracks as I walked. I used to do that a lot. But I guess I was too quiet because Timmy who was usually the one content to just say, "yeah" and "sure" all the way home, suddenly said, "D'ja hear Father Phillips caught Raymond sneaking into the girls' john today and writing `Norma' under a drawing of some kinda head with a spring coming out of it? He's gotta clean the whole wall and paint it, he told me."

I didn't feel like responding. I didn't like Raymond and could care less if he got caught. Raymond was almost as much a jerk as Johnny Mack. They were worse than you, Terrence. You just thought you were a jerk. They really were.

It was about then we heard the sound and stopped. Riveted to the pavement there.

It was the sound of a whine, which gave the impression of having already been in the air and just now got wafted to us. Loud, strident, desperate, unintelligible. Not an everyday street sound. We stood there listening, and we could now hear fainter voices, almost cheering, but sharp, cruel, monosyllabic, and smothering that more desperate cry.

"Go home to Mommy!"

"What, you turd!"

I stared off into the distance from where those words were coming, but I couldn't see anything. I whispered to Timmy: "Hey, Timmy, what's that?" I really did whisper it because the sounds were too eerie to be from Andover and 13th streets. Timmy shrugged, then started

running in the direction of the voices. I followed, but even then, you know, I was experiencing a sense of having been overwhelmed and weakened in some way by that "spell" that started in the classroom.

One street over and behind some parked cars, just where the houses gave way to an abandoned service station, we could see seven or eight boys, only two or three which I recognized as from my class, the rest older, encircling some other kid and pushing him toward the street.

Almost before I knew why, I was sure it was you, Terrence.

That lingering sense of heaviness that was in me from before was now sickness as I took in the spectacle: your fists upraised in a ridiculous, ineffectual fashion--like a boxer . . . and I mean in the old bare-knuckled John L. Sullivan pictures. . . *boxing* these other kids who were only pushing with open hands and jeering, pushes so quick and unexpected from all sides that your phony look of composure wrenched itself into a whine, a baby cry. Still, thrusting your bottom lip out and in that manner blowing the hair from your eyes, which were glistening, you found you could muster some semblance of defiance:

"Shitfaces! You're full of shit, you guys!" you whined.

But now it was like that taunt was too much for one of your tormentors--I only knew him as "Nick." Later I learned his full name was Nick Crowder, and he came at you, Terrence, relentlessly, like his contempt for you was more than he could keep inside any longer.

Nick started pushing and jabbing you with remarks like, "Your old man ain't no cop, and you don't even know where he is!" and you whimpered, trying to hold up your one fist, your other hand beginning to flail in all directions as though trying to grab onto something. Then in a

quaver so low I doubt anyone heard it except me, you asked, as though it was the most sensible thing in the world, “Cut it out, will ya, come on, cut it out!”

Nick, though, he apparently took your whimpering as a signal to become more aggressive and he grabbed at your shirt and tore the sleeve when you tried to pull free.

I was weak before, but now I was feeling so sick and empty I was unable to move.

Timmy *was* moving though, drifting to my left to find an adequate opening in the ring of shouting kids, and he was now in fact edging into it. Remember, some of those boys in that circle were his classmates even though every other year they were your classmates as well--because of the way we were taught two grades to a room in that school.

Timmy could stop them, I decided.

And he was--at least he was slowly trying to get between you and Nick, and started saying, like a lawyer presenting a case, as though all the others must’ve thought as he did and of course it was only common sense that there was no need to go on with it now: “Leave him alone, you guys, will ya? Why don’t you just leave him alone?”

But it was too timid--almost the way you’d said it earlier.

Two of the more passive ones did back off--still jeering at you so they wouldn’t look like cowards in doing so. Not Nick though. He and some other kid were still on you in the middle of the street where you were down and sitting up and half-covering your face and bawling loudly and stupidly--much to the delight of the others, of course, because it justified everything they were doing. Nick was kicking you--I think with more mental than physical brutality, punctuating his taunts with sudden thrusts to your ankle each time.

"Tell us about your Philadelphia Philly father and your Los Angeles Ram father and your flatfoot father!"

Timmy wasn't getting anywhere with him, and his "I said what's the reason you gotta keep it up?" was sounding real timid now, and because of that the guys who really needed to hear it weren't.

Mike, a fourth-grader, called back, "Anyway got it comin! The shithead braggin and whinin all the time . . . `How'm I gonna be happy in heaven if my old lady's in hell?'"

You'd turned over on your stomach by now, your expression telling me you were beaten more psychologically than physically. Some of them were finally withdrawing and just standing by watching now, and you . . . your eyes staring blankly . . . you must've waited what you thought was a sufficient time and probably heard some of their shoes moving away, so you started to get up, but then comes Nick's sweeping foot, coming at you from behind, ambush-like and as a "last word," flipping you clumsily to the ground on one elbow, which must've hurt, and you . . . you let out a wail of anguish. That's what you did. I stood there gazing at you, Terrence, as you nursed your bleeding elbow, not really seeing you because. . . I'd closed my eyes.

I was only a lousy third grader, Terrence, what else was I to do?

When I looked up, thinking it was over, I saw that, no, three or four others had closed in around you again.

That's when it happened.

I felt that sudden thud again—the spell--just like earlier in the classroom. But this time it was different. It wasn't quiet but rather a rush of something through me, *tearing* through me

almost, Terrence, so that I honest-to-God grabbed tightly at myself to keep from reeling noticeably and shook my head to free myself from whatever it was. My knees began buckling, but I didn't fall because falling wasn't the relief I needed. I needed instead to ride some force bursting from within me, and I found myself propelled forward into that circle of kids, driving my head into someone's flabby yielding muscle and flesh, the impact in some way perfect, warm, comforting, my right arm flailing out delicious and vicious into another body next to the first, both of those bodies sprawling backwards onto the pavement from the jolt of the unexpected blows from an unexpected source--a little guy two or three years younger than most of them who until that explosive moment had just been a spectator. I looked up from the pavement to see that one of my two victims was actually catapulted into the curb, and then I heard from somewhere, "Who's that little creep?" and "Hey, Tim's brother, you'd better watch out." Then I felt Timmy's arm roughly hook under mine in a way that allowed no resistance. Problem was he was only pulling me free from my precarious position, not from whatever had overtaken me, which, I discovered, was still ripping through me, and I half whispered, half cried, "No!" and convulsed and swung an entire 360 degrees, spinning free from Timmy, and threw myself at Nick, who even if he was ready for the thrust, wasn't ready for its force and found himself knocked backward on his heels and then onto the pavement and into a fire hydrant where--screaming out "God!"--I dove wildly at him a second time with hardly a breath between the two thrusts.

"Jesus, Col." Timmy was saying--sounding real confused--from some far-off place.

Nick was holding his rib cage, which had taken most of the force of my lowered head and when he called out it was more like he was trying to breathe than speak, "What the fuck . . .?"

I was on one knee again, glaring fiercely, wildly at the circle of boys backing off, a couple looking like they were frightened at what I'd become, and then I kind of slipped into some other place for a few seconds . . . the darkness . . . and it must've seemed to Tim I'd gone unconscious because I suddenly heard his voice sounding alarmed --"You okay, you out or something?"-- and only then let Timmy pull me away because his yank was a lot more insistent than his words had been earlier.

"Come on, let's go," Timmy was urging me, and pushing me around to the other side of a parked car and then, more gently, down the street from where all these guys had just come.

"Where's Terrence?" I asked--not so much for an answer--though yeah, I did want to know where you'd gone--but more to bring myself back into what I was now thinking of as the normal world of Timmy and sidewalks and walking home from school.

Timmy responded without turning around. "Damned if I know," he said. "He musta took off the other way. Probably deserved it anyway always tryin' to talk tough like that and everything."

"Yeah," I aspirated.

We were silent for some time until Timmy spoke. And I know what it was. It was like he was speaking to himself, still sorting out the strangeness of all this--of consoling a younger brother who did what perhaps he himself should have done. "You're going to have to watch yourself with those guys from now on . . . that's for sure," he said finally. But he didn't care and he even flashed a smile. Perplexed and excited all at the same time. "My God, you should've seen the way those guys went flyin' . . . bang! Like Kid Gavilan or Joe Louis hisself hit em!. . . pow! What the hell happened to you anyway? My God!"

He was wrong, though, Terrence. Gavilan and Louis were boxers. I wasn't a boxer--more a marionette . . . of a dancer . . . or one of those guys with the white on their faces who don't talk—mimes . . . a marionette of a mime dancer gone crazy.

Still, in that string of words Timmy'd gone from astonishment and concern to appreciation and laughter, and I can't say as I didn't feel a glow inside.

Shit! I was excited--my blood was still pumping from that superman spell--and I was relishing that appreciative smile of my brother's, and I couldn't immediately figure any of it out --what had overtaken me. For those few seconds that afternoon, while you were suffering the humiliation of weakness before other guys, I was a weapon--even if maybe someone else was wielding it. So quickly had I sucked up the power within myself--hurtling my body, arms flailing, into that circle, hurtling my mind too, a sweetness, a beauty, almost sacred--a power I couldn't explain to my brother. "You know, Timmy, you know . . . " I searched for the moment I wanted to describe, and discovered I didn't know how. "I just . . . you know . . ."

I took so long to say what I was going to say, he just cut me off again. "Shit, Colin. Nick, he looked like he was gonna bawl."

I didn't listen much after that.

Terrence, you see, I was trying to tell my brother something. My exploding like I did into that circle of boys tormenting you, it had been driven, as I said, by that need to let out something, to break free, like in my other spells. A need I'd suppressed until that moment. What I'd broken through to, I didn't know, but I had a clear sense of actually having *torn through*. To some other place where . . . I was supposed to be . . . or where all of us are supposed to be because it felt so comfortable to be there. On the other side I was all-powerful. And so in reply

to Timmy I said only, “It was a crazy feeling. I don’t know.” And then I smiled, because whatever power I’d felt *within,* it was the power *without* that had impressed my brother.

Twenty minutes later, Timmy was unwrapping his Clark bar and me my Three Musketeers bar we got from Helcht’s Drug, and we saw you again, Terrence: walking toward us. You were about fifty paces away, and we could see your face clearly red from crying, and your shirt and pants dirty and torn. To avoid us, you rushed to get to the walkway which veered to your left and up to one of the Eddington apartments. Remember, there were eight of them, red-brick, and they must’ve looked cheap even when they were new five years earlier, but now so obviously cheap with the rusted screening dangling out of the dark green door frames, and the brown, dead shrubbery--what little there was--the grass long since vanished from between the walkways with all those little kids playing on it. And seconds later we heard your mother screaming at you from within about “my first week at the bakery” and “four o’clock” and you bawling and the bang of the screen door slamming and all quiet after that, and then your mother rushing behind us with her head down and her brown purse knocking against her arm, and just as she was passing us in her rush to get to work or wherever, Timmy said meekly, “Mrs. Kitterson, did you know? Terrence . . . he got beat up.”

For many years it was in my mind that when she stopped and turned what she said was something like, “Thank you, but I’m late now.” I remember now, though, for sure, she paused, opened her mouth as though to speak, then rushed on her way.

Yeah, Timmy had failed with the kids that had stomped on you with everything they had --feet, hands, those ugly looks and shouts--and now he failed with her, but this time there was no “spell” propelling me to come to his aid, to speak in the way she’d have to listen to.

Still I know now it doesn't matter. Nick Crowder and those other boys weren't changed by any blow I might have struck for universal justice, and she wouldn't have either, that's for sure.

That summer you moved to somewhere in Indiana, and none of us knew where or why.

You know, Terrence, as I think back on that day, it seems to me it wasn't so much what Nick and those boys were doing to you in the street. It was what that same mother you worried about being in hell while you were in heaven--it was what *she* did. Christ, she only had time to scream at you before taking off for work.

That afternoon we watched your mother walk away without a word--you were 11. Timmy was 12. I was 9. But something in me was just being born. In those few seconds when Timmy thought I'd gone unconscious.

The feeling I could be my own interpreter.

Of what to reach for. And who to swing out against.