

# Three Stories from the Same Day

*Joe Colicchio*

When I left the house this morning it seemed a lot earlier than what it really was, 9:30. Things usually start getting hot and white around here by then, but this morning had the kind of coolness that's usually gone by eight. Mrs. Finzini was just hanging out her clothes. Over her hedges the sheets and towels were rocking back and forth, and the pulley was squeaking so you could hear it a block away. Things were slow. There was a breeze rustling the trees and there was lots of shade. Normally, it would have been a perfect morning for sitting out in front of Clyde's with Franny and Mo, reading the sports, drinking a container of juice, talking and wrestling and waiting around.

Even though we're a lot closer to the fall, it was almost like spring, and as I walked towards church, it seemed more like Easter than anything else.

After the funeral, I took the silver incense burner and the incense out to the yard behind the rectory, something the altar boy always does, and I was kneeling down, burying the incense in the incense-burying dirt, looking up through the alleyway between the rectory and the church at all the people, kids I was in school with as well as adults, all of them milling around out front like cattle. I was thinking very sad thoughts about Jeannie. I was picturing the way she looked not long ago when she was alive, and picturing what she would have looked like in her school uniform this year. I was feeling lucky, too, about being here in back where I could think by myself and put things where they belonged instead of being out in front milling with the millers when I felt someone tapping me on the shoulder. I looked up and there was Mr. Simmons, all red around the nose and eyes, standing over me about to hand me a five dollar

bill because that's something he thought you always gave to the altar boy after a funeral. I said, Mr. Simmons, thanks but I can't take the five dollars. It's not allowed. Take the money, Monk, split it with Chuck. I said, I can't, they stopped giving money out at funerals a year ago. We only get money for weddings. He knelt right down beside me even though he was in his black suit. Okay, then, think of this as your wedding, he said and when he couldn't find anywhere to stick the fiver in among all my altar boy robes he wedged it down my shoe.

I could hear him sobbing and see the trembling in his back, but I couldn't see his face because of the way he had his chin tucked in against his chest. He put his hand into the hole I'd been digging in and he started digging. He reached into the burner and pulled some incense out and started burying it, hiding his face all the while.

There was something about it that kept me from feeling anything. You'd think I would at least have felt this way or that, sad for Jeannie or Mr. Simmons, or even plain scared or upset, something. But all I could do was lean away and watch. First at Mr. Simmons, red and trembling and digging so carefully when there was no reason to be. Then I looked up and through the alleyway again, at all the people dressed up in front of church, in groups talking or drying their eyes or walking in circles, but they weren't like they were real people at all—they were like they were made of thin air.

I jumped up when I heard Father Vincent calling me from the sacristy. I stood to go over there but didn't know what to do with Mr. Simmons and the burner he was still playing around with and the five dollar bill in my shoe. I made like I had forgotten about the money. I tapped Mr. Simmons on the shoulder. I've got to go, I said, can I have the incense thing? He put his hand on my shoulder and stood up. Don't forget your wedding money, he said and pointed down at the bit of green sprouting between my black shoe and white sock. I pulled it out all folded like it was and put it in my pocket. Mr. Simmons put his hand on my shoulder. Yeah, yeah, oh, yeah. My girl is dead, he said. He put the cap on the burner and handed it to me. I guess I should be out front, he said. I guess that's where I should be. What am I supposed to say to them, what? I'm sad but relieved in a way. Wouldn't it be truer to say I'm relieved but sad in a way? You think that's what I should say, Monk? What do you think I should say? I thought a minute. I said, I don't think there is much to say. Truer words were never spoken, he said.

Father Vincent called me again and Mr. Simmons told me I better get going before I got thrown off the force. And then he told

me that he felt sick like there was the poison of sin all through him and he told me that he was going out front with the mourners because he more than anyone needed their prayers.

As I was hurrying up the steps to the sacristy, very carefully holding onto the silver burner, Mr. Simmons yelled to me. If you notice any more mistakes that the Good Lord's made, Monk, you just let me know, okay, and I'll see what me and my man can do about fixing them.

There were only four cars in the processional that went from Saint Paul's to the Holy Name Cemetery in Harrison. In the first car were Jeannie and the four men in black uniforms who carried her casket. In the second car, a long, silver-grey Chevy, the only one that wasn't black, was Mr. and Mrs. Simmons. In the third car was Father Vincent and Chuck and me. And in the fourth car, a station wagon they got when I was in second grade, were seven nuns, including Sister Ellen.

As we pulled up to the gates of the cemetery, the first car stopped and the driver spoke to a man in a pale blue uniform inside a white booth who gave him directions. The driver made a left onto a winding road, Jeremy Lane, and we followed. A minute later we made another left onto Saint James Place. I thought it was odd that they put names on all the roads like that and wouldn't have been surprised if they put addresses on all the tombstones—in a way it reminded me of a time we went to visit friends of my mother's in Bergen County.

We drove off the road and onto a field in back which was less crowded than the other areas since it hadn't been lined with rows and rows of gravestones yet. There were two men in tan uniforms with shovels, waiting.

The four men in black—one of who I recognized as Joe McGill's drunk nephew—got out of Jeannie's long car and moved around to the back without saying a word. They opened up the back part and grabbed the handles of the short casket and slid Jeannie out. They carried her over to the two men with shovels and placed her down next to the hole there. Nobody said anything. In slow motion, everybody gathered around and folded their hands on their bellies—except for Sister Angela Thomas and Sister John who folded them right up under their chins. Father Vincent told Chuck to grab the gold bucket with the Holy Water and he cupped the back of our heads in his hands and led us to where we should be, right behind the casket.

The seven nuns stood across the hole from us. Up at the head of the hole were Mr. and Mrs. Simmons with their hands folded but

with their bodies pushed up against one another. They'd look at the sky and huff, then straight ahead and huff, then down to the ground and whisper or pray. But they'd never look at the same place at the same time. It was as though their heads were on some kind of hinge which made one move up as the other moved down.

Just as Father Vincent was about to start, another car pulled up, a beat-up little Dodge, and out came Wake Parish looking like hell on a bad night's sleep—which was very unusual for Wake who most of the time looked more like an altar boy than an altar boy does. He hadn't shaved and he must have showered and gotten his hair wet but not shampooed because it was all greasy and shiny without being clean. He had his hands in his pockets and the collar of his shirt turned up like he was chilly even though it must have been near eighty degrees by then. He was wearing a red arm band, not a black one like you'd expect he might. You could see that Mr. Simmons was upset about his being there.

Wake didn't look at anyone when he came over. He stood at the empty side of the grave, opposite the nuns, and hung his head so we'd ignore him and continue. But as much as I tried not to think of Wake in any bad way, there was something about him. Not that he reminded me of an evil man on the loose, more that he reminded me of an evil man on his way to the gallows. But I knew Wake wasn't evil—if anything he was too wound up about good and right.

Father Vincent opened his prayer book and nodded at the four men from Jeannie's car who picked her up and laid her in the hole. Father Vincent began the prayers. Sometimes he'd look in the book and read Latin and sometimes he'd look up and around and talk in English. He nudged Chuck to hand him the Holy Water sprinkler, but Chuck was too stiff to move. Chuck was even more of a nervous wreck than usual. His face and neck had turned shining red. His sideburns were all wet and came to a point, and a stream of sweat ran down his cheek through the little bit of blonde peach fuzz that was all glowing and swept in the same direction. Father Vincent had to reach over and take the bucket out of Chuck's hand and give it to me. He held the sprinkler up in his right hand and was about to spray the casket when he caught himself and put it back in the bucket. He made me and Chuck switch sides and started over again because you're supposed to take the Holy Water from the altar boy on the right side, and I guess he didn't want to take any chances for Jeannie's sake.

We all stood there watching and listening as Father Vincent talked and sprinkled. Hands in his pockets, Mr. Simmons turned and walked away, toward the woods. Wake Parish watched him. He

brushed something from his eyes and straightened the sleeve of his shirt. He turned and, the same way Mr. Simmons had, started walking towards the opposite woods.

They both got back a few minutes later. Mr. Simmons took up his position next to his wife. Wake stood behind the nuns, rocking side to side, every once in a while his red armband shining from between their black shoulders.

Father Vincent ended the service with a moment of silence followed by the sign of the cross. As soon as it was over the four men in their black suits, Joe McGill's drunk nephew leading the way, hustled over to their car like there was some place they had to go to in a hurry. The seven nuns moved right up to the edge of the hole and knelt down. They pulled out their rosary beads and went at it. Wake threw his arm band in the grave then genuflected and left. Mr. and Mrs. Simmons came over to Father Vincent and they all stood there talking, both of Father Vincent's hands and one each of theirs together in the same grip. While they were doing that, me and Chuck wandered around reading the gravestones looking for the ones with our own or our parents' first names. Chuck was doing a little better than before, but every once in a while he'd get these terrible shivers—like you sometimes get when you're taking a pee, but worse—that would almost throw him to the grass. The first time he did it, I shivered too, cause I was embarrassed for him, but it must have been contagious because after a couple on purpose I wound up shivering even without trying.

When we came back they'd all left, the seven nuns and Mr. and Mrs. Simmons, and, except for the corpse of Jeannie and the ghost of Wake Parish who I felt would never leave these woods, all who were left standing around the hole that was going to be 10 Saint James Place were me and Chuck and Father Vincent and the two men in their tan uniforms leaning on their shovels.

### Breakfast in Donutland

Every Tuesday morning for her sanity, instead of making it herself, my mother lets me go down to Donutland for breakfast. It works out good for both of us because it's a change for me, coming in the middle of the week like that, and it's a change for her, too, and keeps me from getting on her nerves too much. The only rules were No Coffee, No Coke, and if I was late for school, even once, the whole thing was off.

Yesterday morning was Tuesday morning. I had to bring the milk bottles down so I went the back way and was cutting through

B&J's when I bumped into Cotton Parish, Wake's brother, at the door. Even though him and Wake are brothers, they're like day and night. Cotton got his nickname because of his hair, like cotton candy only not so pink. He said he was glad to see me and said Where are you going, Monk? To Donutland for breakfast, I said. And he said Let's run. That's another thing about Cotton. He always runs. Not very fast and not because he's in a hurry, but just because he likes to. You know he's not in a hurry because if he sees you on the avenue or something he'll always stop to talk. And once he gets your ear like that you might as well forget it for the next fifteen minutes, because, my father says, all the while he's running with no one to talk to he's thinking up things for the next person he meets. When he leaves he turns and says Solong like it's one word and gives a little kind of flip wave and within five steps he's off running like he's run since he was a kid playing over in the courts, his hands bouncing up and down in front of his chest and his head bobbing like the fake poodle in the back of the Caruso's car.

We didn't say a word to one another all along our run to Donutland, not until we sat down and each ordered our muffins. Behind the counter was Mrs. Gullace, Franny's mother. She's a widow and even though I wonder about it a lot I've never figured out why.

Dave the owner of Dolph's came busting in through the door like a cold white wind, his coat still half on him and half already hung up, and him huffing and puffing and coughing and bent over trying to rub the stain out of his pants. How is it all this morning, Dave? asked Mrs. Gullace. Yes, it's fine. Coffee, said Dave, skim, no sugar, and a jelly and would you please, please, Terry, give me extra napkins this morning, all in one breath.

I tapped Cotton on the shoulder and nodded my head towards Dave to make sure he knew what I thought was so funny. So anyway, Cotton said, how's Wake been, Monk? I said I don't know, he doesn't come in as much anymore. You're his brother. Cotton laughed and raised his bushy eyebrows at that and the hairs on his head seemed to stretch out a little as though they were laughing, too. He said Well, how was he the last time you saw him? When I said I couldn't recall in particular, Cotton split his muffin and said Think, Monk, it's important. No, he said. I mean, well, it's not important, don't think about it or worry about it or anything, it's just for my own information. Well, I said, I guess the last time I saw him was about a month ago and he got real mad at me for scattng some dumb dog. Yeah, I know, said Cotton, your dad told me. What did you think about that? he asked. To tell the truth, I said, you don't

mind my saying so, do you? No, he said, I'm asking, ain't I? First, when Wake got so steaming mad, I was afraid he might wack me. Then when he started running down the street chasing after the dog I thought maybe I really had done something awful like he'd said. But ever since, whenever I think about it mostly it just makes me worry about Wake.

Mr. Knopf hasn't been in yet, has he, Terry? asked Dave, patting the jelly off his mouth with such precision you would have thought he had a mirror and could see just where the little red balls were. No, no, relax, Dave. Have more coffee. Here, have more coffee. Thank you, he said. And give me some more napkins, too, please, thank you. Mrs. Gullace did that and came back over to Dave with a wet cloth and dabbed jelly off his shirt collar while Dave sat there like nothing was going on, drinking his coffee on the other side of her two arms.

What do you think about Wake, I said to Cotton. I worry about him sometimes, too, he said and his head started bobbing just like it did when he ran. Has he yelled at you, too? I asked. Oh, yeah, he said and looked at the front window. We've been yelling at one another. Well and what do you think? I asked. His chest flattened out and he said Just finish the chocolate milk, Monk, and this surprised me because I had gotten the idea that the whole reason for him coming with me here was to talk about Wake, and we had started to, and pretty well, I thought, and now all of a sudden, he didn't want to. He just raised his eyebrows and It's not your worry, Monk, he said.

So how is it, Dave? asked Mrs. Gullace. I haven't seen you all week. Oh, very bad, he said. We should be doing fifty-percent better this time of year what with school back in. We've got a new style of Chino slack, all sizes, men and boys, four colors, he said and held up four fat, white fingers. I'm selling them cheaper than anybody else in the city. He looked at me and Cotton and said, Nine-ninety-five and looked back at Mrs. Gullace who just leaned on her elbow and grinned. And Fruit of the Loom underwear, Terry. Nobody wears Fruit of the Loom underwear, anymore. What's the matter, Fruit of the Loom gives you plague? he asked and looked over at me. I wear Fruit of the Loom, he said, so do my boys. I wasn't asking about the business, Dave, said Mrs. Gullace. How are you, Dave, that's what I meant. How's the heart. It's not good. I saw the doctor. I'll need another operation, soon, he said, but he's very young, I want a second opinion. I trusted his father, I don't necessarily trust him. We used to do much better, Terry. You remember. This avenue used to be as good as New York. When the hell is Mr. Knopf going to get here?

It was 8:30. I said Oh boy, Cotton, I got to get going. Fine, he said, let's blow. Cotton paid for mine and I thanked him and wished Mrs. Gullace a Good morning and nodded my head at Dave who made a dirty face when he looked at my black pants that had Woolworth's written all over them.

Outside, Cotton said I'm going this way, Monk, down to the A&P. Now don't worry about Wake. He'll be okay. Just keep an eye out, though, and let me know. If I had a couple of minutes I would have asked him what he meant because I got the feeling he thought I understood something that I didn't, but I didn't ask because minutes I didn't have. I said Sure, Cotton, see ya, and we turned in opposite directions and started running off.

### Catch with my Mother

Tuesday was my birthday. I was eleven. I got a pair of Converse, a football, a globe with tan oceans, and clothes. Not bad. Getting presents is still fun and I have a feeling it will always be, but the adding on a year part all of a sudden doesn't do much for me anymore.

I came home from the courts early today. I was all excited about playing with my new ball and breaking it in, but it was one of those days when all anybody wanted to do was fight. It must have been a full moon. I was going to head right upstairs but to my surprise my mother and Mrs. Simmons were sitting on the top one of the concrete steps that led into the house. It was a nice day for late October. The temperature must have hit sixty during the afternoon, but by five o'clock it had cooled off pretty good. There'd been lots of lazy, white clouds floating around all day, but now with the sun getting low over the three stories on the Central Avenue side, all the clouds in that direction had pink bellies, and their higher parts—which climbed straight up like rocky mountains—had turned a more wintry grey shade.

My mother and Mrs. Simmons sat there in their sweaters, both of them with their hair pulled back. They were eating from Mrs. Simmons' bag of pistachios and all around their lips and all on their fingers had turned red and so had the lap of Mrs. Simmons' dress where they were putting the shells. They were talking but not really doing their usual gabbing. Talking slowly. I figured it wouldn't hurt to stay down for a while.

I thought that if it was anything worth listening in on my mother wouldn't let me hear, so I had to figure out a way to do it



without her noticing. I started playing football with myself. I'd start at the Nelson's gate, about five yards to their right, then toss the ball high up in the air, run after it and catch it five yards to their left. Once I caught it, I'd turn back upfield, I'd fake and I'd juke, jig, mister, and jag, once in a while throw a lateral to myself, spin and jump, break a couple of tackles and eventually wind up in the end zone to their right where I'd catch my wind and start right over again. I know this all sounds pretty easy, but I'm not such a good catcher that I didn't miss any, and I spent more time crawling under cars than I did zigging and zagging, juking and jaggung.

As the breeze picked up and kept getting cooler, they got closer and closer, talked softer and softer. They leaned their heads in and down like a pair of birds with their eyes on the same bit of food, once in a while bobbing in agreement. I kept running back and forth, and even though I was spinning real close to them and lateraled to that side every time, I wasn't having much luck picking up any information.

By twenty past five I had been under the LoBue's pick-up four times, under Dick's station wagon three, and over B&J's garbage barrels into the Pavone's backyard twice. I smelled like a quart of Seagrams and felt as grimey as the half a grocery bag trapped under Dick's front tire. One time I spun too close and tripped over the bottom step. I waved to my mother and Mrs. Simmons as I flew by and scraped my knee when I landed. My mother said What in the world are you doing, mister? Come over here and take a rest. Oh, I was just practicing, I said, there's a game Saturday. Hate to, mom, but, yeah, you're right, a rest might do me good.

No sooner did I sit down than Mrs. Simmons got up to leave. I said to my mother So what were you and Mrs. Simmons talking about? Without blinking an eye, she told me. The Simmonses are going to be moving, she said to me like I was a five year old. I said Oh, yeah? She said Mr. and Mrs. Simmons, Mr. Simmons especially, are too broken up about what happened to Jeannie. I said So they want to get away from here. Exactly, she said. There's too many reminders in the neighborhood. It hurts too much. They want to put it behind them if they can.

I felt real sorry for them. Mrs. Simmons didn't look all that bad, but Mr. Simmons had become a real wreck. He looked dirty and grubby half the time, and sad or bewildered all the time. He looked like a man who you'd read about had just died. My mother said They're moving far, far away so there aren't reminders about it all the time. You can understand that, can't you? Oh, yeah, I said, I can understand it. But something seemed not so kosher to me. She was

talking to me like I was too much of a little kid, being too willing and agreeable about the whole thing, like this was her way to get me to pull my sniffing nose out of her grown-up business.

By this time the temperature must have been down in the forties. The pink had turned to purple and there was less of it and more of the grey. My mother sat there hunched up with her grey sweater buttoned all the way to the top. Her arms were crossed and her hands were up inside her sleeves holding her elbows. She sat like that, rocking back and forth, a chilly red in her cheeks, her hands cold and old and red-looking, too—but smiling a smile that made her mouth tighter instead of wider, like a smile is supposed to.

So I said What are you smiling about? She said Are you looking forward to Halloween? I said Yeah, sort of. What's it to you. She didn't bother to answer. What are you smiling about, I repeated. She said Let's play catch. I said You can't catch. She said I can so. I'm quite a good catcher, she said. She lied. In a pig's eye, I said.

She wasn't a good catcher and she wasn't a good thrower, either, which meant I spent more time than ever crawling under cars. But my mother just kept flinging the ball and smiling like she was a little simple. Whether she threw it ten feet away or right to me, whether she caught it or just watched it sail past her head, she kept smiling the same simple smile. She said Go deep, so I went deep and she threw the ball clean over the Hoenikker's milk truck. The ball landed in the middle of the street. Just as I got to it, it took one slow tumble right under another car and I had to go crawling again which she seemed to get quite a kick out of, even though normally she would have been very upset about how dirty I was getting.

As she saw the ball tumble under the car, her smile switched from being a simple one to being a wise-guy one, to being a typical mother's smile. Like she had known all along about my sneaky little ways and thought they were very cute. As she kept throwing and smiling and just having a fine old time, I kept getting more and more suspicious because she always thinks I'm at my cutest when she's just gotten one over on me.□