

Letter #4

THROWAWAYS

Her Story -

Jeannie came from the West Coast. Both parents were professional people. One night at a party, she had her first drink, got drunk, passed out, was raped. Next day, like any 14 year old girl, she assumed relations equalled pregnancy. She couldn't tell Ma, so ran. She didn't want sex, she wanted only a pad, but how else to get it? We talked of rabbit tests and I filled in a few lacunae in her sex education. Three weeks later as I entered a long narrow pizzeria at 1 A.M., all the booths on both sides filled with late-nighters, I spotted her way at the other end. She was racing towards me hollering: "Father Paul, Father Paul, I'm not pregnant!!!" All heads turned and there was the dirty old man - the Street Priest. We rejoiced together and I suggested: "Now you can call your old lady." "Dynamite". Off to a phone booth where at her request, I ran interference. "I'm a priest in Boston, in good standing, assigned by the Cardinal to work with runaways, etc." The whole bit. Response: "I never want to see her again." Disconnect. It is 2 A.M., a cold night and I'm on a sidewalk with a broken-hearted, non-pregnant chick. Cops keep coming by ordering: "Move on". If we sit in a booth, we have to reorder every fifteen minutes. There's no place - no way. The juke box was playing Jimmy Rogers' "Child of Clay"*. Her mother called back next day to apologize. "That's nice Mrs. M. but you're telling the wrong person." You tell her." "It's not that easy." I'll have to find her." Among 40,000 kids a year under 17 who come to Boston, finding one is a task. I didn't see Jeannie again for three days. Again a helpful kid's tip. She had mainlined scag 19 times in the interval. I got her cleaned up and an old family friend agreed to take her. Weeks later, she found me. "My folks reneged", she said. "Told my friend they would sue if he kept me."

Next night I was finishing up exhausted (actually you never finish, you just leave when you can't continue) but as I headed for Roxbury and home, I saw her standing talking to a 25 year-old straight guy. Now, maybe you would have interjected yourself. The most I do is throw a frosty glare. She caught it, but didn't break. Two-thirty in the morning, an hour later, the phone wakened me: "Get down quickly", a streetworker orders, "Jeannie's been raped by five guys." Trying to calm her hysteria, dodge cops and restaurant managers, I finally got her under control. Police? She can't. She's a runaway. She'd be arrested herself. So they still ply their trade, these hippie-hunters, plucking little sisters off the streets.

Next time I saw Jeannie, she didn't recognize me. I had been at a trashing in Harvard Square. The cops gave me safe passage to lead a crowd of kids from a church. They didn't want to crack a church and the kids didn't dare come out. As I led the retreat at 4 A.M. down Mass. Avenue to Boston, eyes smarting from tear gas, there she was in Central Square sitting disoriented on a wall. I pulled up her sleeves and wordlessly led her away to Boston, both of us in tears, her arms a mass of punctures and broken down veins. A speed freak! Next time our paths crossed, it was my turn not to recognize her. She'd been badly beaten by a couple of guys in the South End. Right - the very Chandler Street I took her off of months before. "Leave them alone and they'll go home? The bastards! Jeannie is still there.

I used to cry a lot, back in these early days, when I went home to sleep after a night on the street. Then I gave that up. I guess I became inured to it or else realized it would incapacitate me to think too much about what was happening. But, these days I've noticed myself into it again: a song is playing Fire and Rain and the tears come as I recall those beautiful kids we buried while singing - "I always thought that I'd see you one more time again." I meet a kid all screwed up in his head and remember his authentic, earthy, up front ingenuity of a few years back and I dissolve again.

"He's just bitter." a woman said after a recent talk I gave. At first I denied it but when I looked it up in the dictionary, decided she was right "marked by anguish, resentment or rancor... which is further defined as long lasting resentment"... I guess maybe I have got that. "Is this not the fast that pleases me... to share your bread with the hungry, to shelter the homeless poor, to clothe the man you see naked. When you do this then will your light shine like the dawn... your goodness will go before you. God will always guide you" Isaiah 58. I can accept the world not doing these things. What is so hard, so shocking to my original naivete is the refusal of Christians to do them. There is a type of person - church going, pure, family centered, upright, who can in the Name of God and the right stand by determinedly and watch excruciating suffering and say through thin lips: "It's his own doing"... and I think of Yeats, "the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity", and I am led to eschew the company of such as were once my "kind" for I know now too well what lurks beneath the surface of their largesse to the Negro and Indian Missions, their concern for parochial schools for their own brood. How they frighten me. As I "sank deeper" into freaky life styles and friends and clothes, I watched their "love" for me turn first to shock, then urgings to be reasonable and finally ill-disguised enmity and disgust. Timothy Foote in a review of Herman Wouk's new novel, "The Winds of War", describes one of the characters as: "God-fearing, highly disciplined, pragmatic, undemonstrative, scrupulous, brilliant but unimaginative -- the best we had in a time when that best seemed more adequate to deal with the world than it does today." Some times we tend to think that the virtues we espouse were always the favored virtues. Not so. As the world has changed, so have the virtues of our kids and none of those on the above list appear among their choices.

Literature has always been laced with the compassionate prostitute, the good thief, the whiskey priest. Graham Green's novels wrestled with the very things now part of my life: I can no longer abide the "good people" having seen what they do to the off-scourings of society, and I have fallen in love with the evil-doers. But then I am told that Jesus was crucified because he ate and drank with sinners. No Roman-collared priest ever sets foot on the streets or in the houses I frequent. If he did, he would no more know how to act or talk than if he encountered moonmen, so wide has the gulf become.

Catholics have come to expect their priests to be seen in the right places, with the right people at the right times. In my early days when I wore the collar, it was not unusual for a woman who saw me at 3 A.M. in the Public Gardens with a teeny bopper, or a cop who saw me at 2 A.M. on dangerous St. Botolph Street, or a priest who saw me lolling on the grass of the Common at dusk in the company of a band of hippies, to fire off a letter to the Cardinal protesting. In some way, I was degrading the Priesthood by being seen in such places with such people. They were right, in a way. You don't see priests in those circumstances, do you? God help us! Where else would Jesus be?

Father Paul

CHILD OF CLAY

Into the darkness he was sent by parents who were ignorant
Tied down to his mother's strings unable to be anything
Puzzled by the things he hears his questions fall on their deaf ears
And the father thinking work comes first ain't got the time
To quench his thirsts
No no no no no no no

(Chorus)

Once he was a child, a beautiful child, a child of clay
Shaped and molded into what he is today
But who's to blame for this child of clay?

And going out into the street at night the answers he may meet
With sick and twisted minds he shares the searching questions
His mind bears
And from the dregs the answers find their way into his supple mind
In time the planted seeds will grow into a twisted vine below
No no no no no no no

(Chorus)

And now his aimless days begin to drift into sordid sin
And soon his life turns to hate and the staff of life seals his fate
And so the night conceals his name and the day sleeps off his shame
Deprived of love and rocked by fear of feeling that the end is near
No no no no no no no

(Chorus)