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THE HERMIT OF TERRIBLE MOUNTAIN OR "THE STREET PRIEST"*

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

This is a simple story written by a simple priest about the least, the very least in the Kingdom of God -- runaways, street people, drug addicts, children of the night, prostitutes, hustlers, psychotics -- these were my people for the last few years. Because my parish was the street, the media came to call me "The Street Priest." So far as I know, I was the only diocesan priest in America assigned by his Bishop to work full time on the streets. My story is brief as were the lives of these often desperate friends of mine. 140,000 of my people are now dead of drug-related causes. (Perhaps many times that number, since medical examiners often report the cause of death as cardiac arrest to save embarrassment to parents and siblings. Even so, that is three times the number dead in Vietnam.) One in six street people in my area (Boston - Cambridge) is now a heroin addict. So you see, my poor mistaken suburban adults, you were wrong when you insisted: "Leave them alone and they'll go home." They didn't -- but I have. And, therein lies my story.

This book is dedicated to Eileen Mulcahy who backed me up with a fierce love for these kids whom she could hardly understand at her age; who did all the desk work that freed me; and whose love for me cost her dearly

and to

my mother who must have heard the rumors, who must have wondered as my hair got longer, old friends ceased to come around, my critics became more numerous and more vicious, when even some of my priest classmates refused to go to the class reunion if I went, when the obscene phone calls to my little nieces began and letters to the editor poured venom, but whose only and constant concern was my health and safety

and to

my new father who married my widowed mother in the midst of this turmoil but never wavered in his support and encouragement

and to

my dead, yet well remembered young friends whose faces still haunt my sleep. "I always thought that I'd see you one more time again."

*Other titles suggested: Lonely Nights - The Wanderers - The New Nigger's Priest - The Street or Freak Priest - Children of Clay - Whose Child is This? - Nobody Says Goodbye - Leave Them Alone or They'll Go Home.

It is damn cold at 3 A.M. in January around the Boston Public Gardens. I am standing outside the all-night Waldorf when a freak from Los Angeles comes up and announces: "Father Paul, you better get over to the bridge near the swan boats. There's a little chick freaking out there." One of 40,000 kids under seventeen who ran away to Boston in 1970.

As I hurried over, I remembered my early days of innocence on the street. The first night I left a group of street kids to wander through the Common and the Gardens, I was amazed to find at every turn one of the very group I had just left. They were too solicitous to let me go in alone and too respectful to tell me to smarten up. Boston after dark is a dangerous place. But you learn the signs, and you can't always wait for company.

There she was! What would you do if you were me -- I mean if you were a priest assigned by Cardinal Cushing to "The Ministry to Alienated Youth on the Street in Boston?" Here's a 14 year old (average age of runaways is 15) teeny-bopper from Frisco, hasn't eaten in two days, been speeding for three days, never a thought for warm clothes when she split the Coast, probably has VD, mono, hep, strep, malnutrition or is pregnant. No, I'm wrong -- this one's been beaten. Not too badly. Nothing broken and no blood. So, what would you do? The law says -- walk away from her. If you harbor her overnight, you'll be contributing to the delinquency of a minor (in Massachusetts you are a juvenile until 17, a minor until 21).

The general adult population whom I've been haranguing for five years, insists, "If you do-gooders would go home and leave them alone, they would go home." It was true when today's adults were kids. In twenty years of youth work, I knew only one kid who made it for any appreciable amount of time. (A group of Catholic Monks took him in thinking his parents had died.) Five years ago two things changed: the type of kid who was running and the environment to which he could run. The stereotype runaway, the one most people have in mind when they hear that word, is still with us and comprises perhaps 50% of runaways. He is the kid from a problem home, the home with the traditional alcoholism, promiscuity, divorce, desertion, etc. He used to be the only kind and soon enough was caught or returned. It is amazing how many drug abusing runaways of this type are from parents who abuse another drug -- alcohol.

Four summers ago we began to get another type of kid from homes which appeared to have none of these problems. Investigation disclosed problems of a new type. These kids had parents who were hawks, racists, haters of the poor "because they are lazy." These parents were more concerned about the effect of the length of their son's hair upon the neighbors or grandma than of the psychological effect upon him of forced cutting.

Then, three summers ago, came the most perplexing kids: those from what we still consider good homes. Their parents, far from having any of the problems just mentioned, were great. The kid

would say: "My old man's outa sight. My old lady's a dynamite chick" -- which is to say "far out." These parents were progressive, relevant, compassionate people. Often they were involved in fair housing, civil rights, human rights commissions, peace movements. It was heart-rending to have them come to the street with pictures and descriptions and begging to be told what they had done wrong and what they should do differently if they found him. My conclusion was: "Nothing! Your son is not running from his family but from his society which, rightly or wrongly, he considers immoral, unjust and hypocritical." Usually this type of kid had done just what adults are always preaching: "Get in there and try to change it." Numberless kids like this find the etiology of their alienation traced directly back to the Chicago police riot. (The Commission, you will recall, said the police, not the kids, rioted.) They were there or watched it on TV. Others go back to a few months later when in a national survey 85% of Americans said: "Nice going, Chicago police." At any rate, they all became disabused of the American myth that channels are set up to facilitate change. Quite the contrary: to obstruct change.

The fourth and hardest type to deal with are the runaways from "reform" schools. As destructive as the street is, it is my opinion that nothing is more debilitating than the reform schools of this country. More about this later. There can be no thought than of attempting to reconcile them with the guardians whence they had run. Naturally these kids were more fearful of apprehension. They tended to stay indoors, were more susceptible to drug abuse, sickness, fits of anger, suicidal depression, malnutrition and all the rest that comes with a hunted, unnatural way of life.

So, there she is under the bridge, and you're supposed to help. I wish I had the collar on. But, I stopped wearing the Roman collar a long time ago, for a lot of reasons: I don't know what little old ladies are doing out at 3 A.M., but inevitably they would see me, the collar and some little chick, and fire off a letter to my superiors about the dirty old priest. It may be true, as we were told in the Seminary that "no work of God is done after nine at night!" But, my people are night people and since that's when they are out, so was I. Why adults presumed the worst when they would see my collar in a bunch of freaks, or an alley or a tenement hallway, I don't know. But, they did, and they were infuriated (especially some cops). Maybe it is because we have come to expect to see priests only with "respectable" people. Unlike Jesus who was crucified because he ate and drank with sinners. My friends used to fend off the subsequent criticism of my "naked throat" by explaining that it was the only way I could reach the kids. Sorry, not true. In the beginning, if you would like the genesis of this interesting adult schizophrenia, I wore no collar, no one knew I was a priest, not even the kids. I spent one whole year mingling with, listening to, talking with street kids trying to get the answer to that formidable question, "will my assistance encourage kids to run away or remain away from home?" With all my training, education and experience, it took me a year before I was certain that the answer was no. Yet the average suburban housewife is glibly and adamantly certain that the answer is yes. Until, of

course, it is her kid who has run. Then she's damn glad there is a priest on the street, hopes the kid heads for Boston and prays I find her child before the predators do.

Another reason I shed the collar in the beginning was that I would have been transferred to the other end of the Archdiocese if my superiors knew. In those days I was in a suburban parish going to the street on my nights and days off and vacations. Remember, it took several years of badgering the Priests Senate and the Cardinal before I could convince them that this was a Christian Apostolate! Obviously, most of the Bishops of America still remain unconvinced. Years later when finally Cardinal Cushing saw the disaster that was afoot and assigned me full time, he became a staunch supporter. Six months before he died, he sent me \$500 and the admonition: "Take good care of your health, Paul. If anything happens to you, I don't think there is anyone who wants your job."

Once, at Thanksgiving, I invited him to our dinner for street kids. To my amazement he came, spoke to each girl, "How are you, my dear?" to each boy, "How are you, son?" (except he called several of the long-haired boys "my dear!"). Meals at holidays were not really for nutrition or even sociability. It was because I had learned that the self-destruction mechanism was at its peak at those times. With the Cardinal came a slew of reporters and photographers. While a black, a Chinese, a throwaway, a Vietnam veteran and a runaway showed him how to make the peace sign, a picture was snapped that went around the world. The resulting scurrilous clerical talk prompted a Monsignor to write to the Editor of the Diocesan paper:

"Heartwarming Event"

To the Editor:
Boston Pilot
Dec. 6, 1969

The Thanksgiving Day story of "Father Paul's Restaurant" was a heartwarming event. Since then, snide criticism of the happening, the sponsors and the guests is truly unchristian. Nearly 2,000 years ago, Christ experienced similar hypocrisy of Pharisees who self-righteously attacked Him for visiting, sitting down and eating with "sinners." The evangelists tell us that when the young man asked, "When did I visit you in prison, fed you when you were hungry, sheltered you when you were homeless, etc?" -- Christ replied, "As often as you did this to the least of mine, you did it to me." This is our beautiful and generous heritage of the Christian social charter. The answer to the first Pharisee still re-echoes 2,000 years later. Why is it that Christians enthusiastically accept the fact that Christ died for all men but find it so difficult to accept the fact that He also lived for all men?

(Signed) Msgr. John F. X. Harney, Rector
St. Sebastian's Country Day School, Newton

When the photographers arrived, I gathered them together and suggested "don't take pictures without first warning the subjects. I have no desire to be a censor. I'm simply concerned for your safety." The last time my advice was ignored was during a TV taping in the Gardens. I told the crew to wait until I got there. I was late. They hadn't waited. It took me a half hour to calm down the jittery, belligerent "hot" kids whose pictures they had snapped and another 20 minutes to pry out of hiding the frightened cameraman who had been properly intimidated in the direct way so common on the street. Here, all agreed but one. Later, when the Cardinal and press had left, a kid came dashing up: "Better get out to the parking lot before Ivan kills one of those guys." I flew out to find Ivan, a pusher, a wanted man and dangerous, with his arm half in a car window which the photographer was struggling desperately to close. "If you print that picture, I'll kill you." A few months later Ivan was arrested for shooting several people including a no-knock police raider. After that, the press solicited my suggestions and abided by them.

I was dragged kicking and screaming into this. As local kids in my parish began to have drug problems, go to Boston for buys, get arrested or beaten while being ripped off, I had to go to visit them, or even to find a doctor who would handle "bad trips." In this way, I began to meet and talk with Boston's street people. And blew my mind at the scope of the problem.

About my beard! I have one now. I had one during Woodstock. But I had to shave it off because adults simply would not listen. They have a thing on beards, you know. In shaving, I reduced my efficiency by one-half. Kids would come off the Pike, out of Trailways or Greyhound, past nine beardless people and up to me to ask, "Where can I crash?" Without the beard, I had to use intermediaries -- a sheer waste. Now if I had joined the Capuchin Franciscans, grown a beard, put on coarse brown clothes and gone to work with pagans in Africa, people would have thrown parties for the "holy Priest." Well, I grew a beard, donned coarse blue denim and went to work with kids far more strung out than African pagan, and they called me less -- much less than holy.

Some thought the collar was chucked because it was a hindrance in relating to kids. That might have been true in the beginning. Certainly it represents authority; indeed an authority which was all too unconcerned about the problems and the people most dear to the hearts of street people. Too, it conjured up visions of repression, punishment, fear. It was a symbol of some of the very things they hated. But once the kids got to know me, they couldn't have cared less how I dressed. Once they had accepted me as a human being and then discovered I was a priest, it was too late to reject me. They are less hung upon externals than adults. In fact, the last time I wore the collar illustrates this:

It was my custom (until it became too dangerous for them) to invite street kids to accompany me whenever I talked in suburbia. I wanted them to know that I was not talking out of both sides of my mouth; one thing to them, another to the adults. They loved to

come. Though I became tired of listening to myself, they clamored to go again and again. I would pick them up, myself in full regimentals, and deposit them again at the end of the night, go home, change and hit the street. As I pulled in at 10 P.M. one night to drop the kids off, the manager of the local deli ran out to the car and excitedly said: "You're just five minutes too late. A cop (one of the few friendlies) was holding a 12 year old runaway boy here for an hour waiting to turn him over to you. They just took him in the wagon. Come in and I'll get you his name and station." Foolishly and against my judgment, I went in. Of course, the kids were delighted to see me in the black suit and proud of having their own priest, had to show me off and introduce me to all their friends. When I finally got the information and started out the door, the doubleheader at Fenway Park was breaking. As the crowds streamed by me, quizzically and disapprovingly eyeing the long hair in a Roman collar, I sensed something was very wrong. I can't really explain how you develop this sixth sense on the street, but it is a valuable asset. Perhaps I saw trouble reflected in the eyes of the passing straights. Finally, one man stepped out of the throng and hesitatingly, almost contemptuously, announced, "If you're one of them, you better get up behind the bank fast." I did, and found Brian, 17 years old, a little, sensitive kid bent over, back to two big hulking, Irish-Catholic drunks who were working him over. "Brian, what's up?" "Nothing, Father, these friends and I were just talking. You go along." "Brian, I'm not leaving until you give it to me straight." "Well, Father, these two guys saw your long hair and collar and said that when you came out, they were going to beat the shit out of you. So, I told them if they came out to the parking lot, they could do it to me instead." And, they were doing it!

In the name of God, they were doing it! I ask you, which went away justified?

I never wore the colar again on the street!

As I started under the bridge to reach her, I'm in blue denim, no beard, no collar.

Am I another dirty old man? I quickly check out the predators. Remember the bumper-sticker: If you outlaw guns, only outlaws will have them? Well, if you make it a crime to harbor runaways, only criminals will harbor them. There's no problem for a chick (over one half of the runaways are girls) to get a pad. There are thousands of predatory adults in Boston ready to oblige. But, what a cost in pride, in values, in self-esteem, in psychic trauma. One half dozen individual men are within earshot. They will wait for me to split and do their thing. Fortunately, none has yet approached her. That gets real sticky when I interrupt a seduction scene.

So, tell me friend, what would you do? When I began, there was no one who could tell me the right way. When I ended, there were hundreds who knew I was doing everything wrong. Even being there seemed wrong. How am I to achieve in five minutes on a cold night in a public park what everyone else has failed to do?

Usually before running, a kid's parents have tried -- guidance counselors, uncles, shrinks, probation officers -- without success. No matter how good you are at counseling, you have to fill that basic primary need -- get her inside. A pad! Simple? Read on.

The Hostel

For years we have tried to talk officialdom into giving us an old beat-up second-hand building. Not a hotel, mind you, with rooms where a kid can get in, shoot up and O.D. An open dormitory type. An old garage. Anything. Boston Redevelopment Authority (urban renewal) had hundreds. Five years ago we pleaded for this. Canada alone heard us. This summer when a freak crossed the border, he was given a list of three hundred hostels subsidized by the Government. No matter where he was in the country, he was within a day's journey of a shower, a pad to get in out of the hassles and a cup of coffee in the morning -- all for a quarter. They treated them as adventurers or travelers much in the tradition of frontier days. America treated them as criminals and that initial violence towards them explains a lot of the responsive violence now burgeoning. In Europe it has long been acceptable to "run away." A kid packs his bag, jumps on his bike and is off hostelling.

At the beginning of the summer of 1970, all I needed was a building. I had a \$32,000 grant, one thousand volunteers ranging from shrinks, nurses, teachers, lawyers, doctors, to nuns and street workers. Just a building! We even had a precedent. A few years back, after strenuous haggling, Massachusetts Council of Churches procured a building at Mass. Avenue and St. Botolph Street, one of the most dangerous areas of town. Until the cold weather came and we had to close for want of a furnace, we had eight weeks of incident-free nights (despite nightly investigations by the cops). In eight weeks those 35 beds were occupied by 400 different kids from 28 states and 12 foreign countries. Since every night we had to turn many away (except girls - that section, curiously, was never filled despite the fact they make up more than half the street population), there is no telling what the figures might have been. But there was the proof how national, indeed international, in scope was the problem. The hostel really is a "come-on!" Once rested, if a kid wanted it, we provided counseling, medical assistance, job placement, pad counseling, legal assistance -- a host of services.

All this was for kids over 17. Under 17 is jail bait. They differ in many ways, too. Older kids are more mobile, less heavily into drugs, more studious (all time favorite, the Bible; second, Walden by Thoreau; and third, Herman Hesse), in better health, more able to work. Younger kids being more conspicuous don't travel as much, tend to stay in one city, get deeper into drugs, more likely end up prostituting (boys as well as girls). And, of course, this chick under the bridge is not 17 even if I had a hostel. For young runaways, there was a small place, but it had a bad name among street kids, was sometimes so mismanaged that it was hurting instead of helping. I don't knock it. It was all we had. But they required that a kid call her parents. This chick

was not into that, nor are most. If she had been, then a big decision for me: Do I leave her to be balled by a dirty old man on the Common, or take her there to be balled by a dirty young man? I sometimes chose the latter. Imagine? Much of my life these last few years has been choosing not twixt good and evil but the lesser of two evils. My God, I've even taught kids how to shoot up properly! How to double sterilize your works; how to avoid a hot shot. Not very pretty. But, you see, they die. One a day in New York City under 16. You have epidemics. We have pandemics.

So what did I do? I walked away from her. In shame I tell you so, I often walked away. I suggested she meet me at 11 the next day in front of Arlington Street Church (those Unitarian non-christians whose love for these kids has cost them so much), and I left her among the predators.

Why did I leave her? Because scandal-hungry adults were ever at my side waiting for me to do anything illegal. And then, the slam. And be assured, no righteous indignation from my colleagues. I'd rot.

Of course, she didn't show up the next day. It was three weeks later when I received a call from a kid -- "Father Paul, you better get down to Chandler Street. You did me a favor a few years back and I'm paying off. This chick has slept with a different guy each night."

In fifteen minutes she was in my car and on the way to the Square where kids hang out, far from the violent South End.

Father Paul

Jeannie's story continued in next mailing.

Thanks to those who have sent \$1.00 for mailing.
If you have not written, this will have to be the last mailing.