

# T H E S Y S T E M



J E A N M c G A R R Y

They were not married, but they were part of a system. In it, a certain freedom; outside, nothing. One was built low to the ground, chopped-off black hair, glasses, round face; the other, tall and seedy, a tea drinker and lover of ancient texts. Fatty lived in the present, patrolled the school with a raggedy hemline and clunky shoes. She was brilliant, and a fine singer, with an easy reach to high C.

Betty and Boris, we called them, thrilled to see their command, in old days when two women were too many for one house and one bed. Not enough of something, and too much of something else. They had their routines, and never shared an office or a lunch where people could see.

The nuns didn't seem to mind. How could they, living the way they did, in twos and threes with wedding rings and Jesus as their bridegroom? They looked the other way; the spiciness came from us, although they tried to thin it out with vinegar and water, a panful of Ivory flakes, and rafts of Modess ". . . because."

Because why? Just because. And we were satisfied. The system made us strong.

There wasn't much room for speculation. There was fact: a joint

car and a house far enough away from campus, and from snoopy neighbors, to elude detection. For holidays with a religious note, each went home alone to a houseful of Catholic brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, grandmas and kids. Boris was born with a face of crumbly plaster and a wall eye. Even as a baby, never smiled, and grew her body into a barrel, whose hoops would last as long as she did. The “hand grenade,” boys her age had called her, but they liked her. Everyone liked her, or was it fear? She had a mind of her own and an appetite – not just for food, which, in those days, was plentiful, coarse, and styled to fatten the best of the herd.

She was secretive and lived inside her head, stocked with whatever she could find to read. She also liked gaping into front windows, eavesdropping in rude cafés and diners, hiding in the card section of the drugstore to hear what people were demanding, with or without a doctor’s order. Boris knew everything there was to know about the neighborhood, the parish, and the precinct by sixth grade, which she skipped. And suddenly, in junior high, having no boys to pal around with, her view darkened, and she spent more time on her knees in front of Our Lady of Fatima. That was the name of her church. In some ways, she was a boy, forced to be a girl, with a widowed mother and older brother studying to be a priest – and more than a priest, because already in Rome. So it was just mother and Boris at home. Her given name was Mary.

Betty was born into a family of eleven boys. She was the baby, and lugging her home in a taxi, her mother took a spill on the ice, cracked her skull, broke her arm, and baby blue, for she was a blue baby, the first to survive, caught a cold and lived her first year in the hospital, an asylum, really, for the blind, the deaf, the retarded, the crippled, the defective at birth, the injured, and the sick. As soon as Betty could put two and two together – early, because she was a genius – she was a baby to watch. The nuns wanted to keep her for their own, for many of the surviving inmates joined their order the first day they could do it, at age fourteen, by the bishop’s special dispensation, because staff was needed and vocations to that servile order rare, and because their mother house was in the far reaches of Canada, and no one had heard of them.

But Betty’s mother, never too hale and now off in different ways (always wore a hat, even in bed, and went to all the masses on

Sunday, confessing her sins in each confessional box on Saturday), wanted her back, her only girl. But Betty was formed by her first birthday, and never bonded with her mother, although they went everywhere together, Betty tied by a harness to her mother's wrist or shopping cart. She was even manacled to the back seat of the car when the uncle offered his sister and a handful of her children a Sunday drive.

Time passed, as it does, and the girls met in college. Betty was fifteen and Boris sixteen, each alienated in a different way. Boris was all business, a math major, with a twenty-five-hour-a-week job at the doughnut shop, where they made doughnuts from dough that Boris learned to mix in the long nights alone and locked in, because it was in a dicey part of town: red-light, pool, card parlors, and Sons of Italy. Boris was sending part of her salary to Rome, so Billy could buy himself a silk chasuble as a newly fledged deacon, and saving part of it so mother and she could sail to Rome for his ordination one year hence. She was double-majoring in classics because the old stories appealed to her native valor and bossiness. She liked college no better than high school, but toed the line, even attending daily mass, although her faith was long gone, disappeared in grade 7, when she saw through the pretense of a One True Faith smacked onto every odd religion. That alone would have done it, but other things had intervened. Her best friend, Bruno, a German police dog, was beaten to death by neighborhood toughs, all Catholics and one destined for the priesthood. Add to that the misery, the stupidity, the drunkenness, squalor, tedium of life everywhere but in God's house, a castle, a theater, a place that made no difference. People went in, and came out to business as usual. Her confessor told her to slow down, take it easy on herself and on the slobs around her. That's what he said. She laughed — a rarity — and came back to chew the fat with Father Mike, soon to depart for the missions, but the damage was done, or enlightenment, which is how Boris saw it. Life was work, study, effort to crawl out of the hole fate had put her in, and she was digging from that moment on.

I need a single room, she told the admissions at Angels and Martyrs: I snore, sleepwalk, have insomnia, a weak heart from rheumatic fever, night terrors and 'mares, allergies, stomach trouble, and I have to use the bathroom a dozen times a night and sleep

with the light on. There was only one such room, a closet with no window, and Boris took it and installed a lock on her own dime. Betty was on full scholarship to become a teacher, but no sooner arrived with a cardboard suitcase than she changed course, standing in line to get a beanie, yellow and navy-blue with a '59. Four dollars she had (she had fifty, saved from babysitting and light housework), but not for a beanie. "You can't enroll without one," the proctor said. Standing right behind her, putting away the five she was ready to hand over, no questions asked, was Teresa, soon to become Betty's roommate and fast friend. She paid for two beanies with a ten, saying, "Just take it. You can give it back later. Put it on your head," only noticing that Betty had three times the hair, untamed, curly like an unshorn sheep. "Here," she said, pulling a bobby pin from her own head with its fine and thin blond hair, so blond it was almost white. She was hauling a red, round suitcase that matched her shoulder bag. "Teresa," she said, "but everyone calls me TT. My middle name is Tomassina. I'm Italian." With that, she pulled a gaping Betty, so tall and so thin, out of the line of matriculating freshman. "Pleased to meetcha."

Betty knew she was in love, but so unfamiliar was the sensation that what she experienced was choking suffocation, heartburn, cramps, and a spiking fever. Next thing, she was crying.

She stuck to TT like glue, but also like snaps, belt, and a zipper. She even pushed her single bed next to her savior's (that's the word she used) and held her hand at night, gripping it until TT said, "Take it easy, I'm not going anywhere." Didn't matter. Betty changed her major to French and Italian, where TT was, and already fluent. TT was a generous soul, sure, but there was more to it.

For two years, Betty and Boris cycled under the same roofs and in some of the same classrooms. All were required to take theology, church history, and needlework. They met at "Tea and Sherry" for a visiting archbishop, brother of the president, Sister Joseph of Arimethea. "Wear your beanies," the proctor said, and poor Boris, as we called her, had chewed hers in night sweats, because it was wool, tasty, and sewed, not glued. She'd bitten off the button, and the topper came apart in four triangles, two yellow, two blue. She was saving the blue, but the yellow wedges were threadbare, ratty, you wouldn't give them to a dog. She still had them, stuck in a

frame somewhere with feathers and trinkets, part of her love history with Betty, whom she met that night, hatless. The proctor pulled her out to ask, “Where is it, honey, where’s your cover?” The nuns called it cover, which is what they called their own lids and cowls. Boris was a born liar, and practiced, too. “Lost it,” she said, “gave it up for Lent.” Shaking her head, the proctor forced her to pin a hankie to her head. When Boris asked why, since they weren’t in church, the proctor put a finger over her lips. “Silence,” she said. His Excellency had taken the podium.

And he had.

TT had lent Betty a set of clothes, because she had nothing but tents and shrouds. She was, that afternoon, clad in a bright plaid pleated skirt that showed her knees over knee socks, a red cardigan, and gold scarf. TT had helped her part and braid the wild tresses, and then wrapped them around her head like a wondrous pinwheel or maze. All eyes were on the hair, upon which the pristine beanie rested like a cherry atop a sundae. When Archbishop Peter Fogarty’s eye scanned the room and spotted it, he laughed out loud, covering his mouth and turning bright red. Then they all laughed, even the nuns. The ice was broken, and next thing you know, Boris had planted herself in her paltry headgear next to Betty.

“Brethren,” the archbishop was finally ready to say, “and sisters,” he added, closing his eyes to remember where he was – and his script, which was always the same mummary, but delivered with different tones and ornaments according to the sex, the age, the site, class, occasion, and looks on their faces. “I come to deliver the word of God, the good news of the gospel, and the message from His Holiness in his encyclical on marriage, the family, the apostolate, and holy church.” And every ear closed with the faces, opening only when, changing course, he disclosed instead the system, its articles and entry point, and what should come out at the end because “we are not monkeys,” he said.

This was a message meant to stay in Rome, in Vatican City, with its color guard and special army and conveyances, a fortress and dark hole. But out it came, because the arch had seen the head-dress of a goddess, something from the other side of Rome, on a mortal and pasty-faced beanpole. He was distracted, inspired, some say, and spilled the beans.

“Brethren,” he said, “listen up, whoever you are.” Luckily, the sisterhood, a teaching order, had fled the room, except for the president. For those who had ears and the Latin to parse it, the system came through; for the rabblement, it was just a different kind of mumbo-jumbo.

Boris, who, as we said, was in classics, and in possession of a secular dictionary, scribbled away on a blank page, because the arch was a fast talker and a mumblor. TT and Betty were all ears, too, when they saw the new girl taking notes with flaming ears and knocking knees.

Soon they were drinking tea and sherry and had the holy man pushed into a corner, savagely and greedily sucking in his every word, but further about the system – if he knew it – was denied them. Meantime, the sisterhood, the black flock, had returned, and wanted their share of His Excellency; and so the trio, with Boris in the middle, departed and didn’t show for the concelebrated mass the next day. Part of the three-day festival of the holy man’s visit to Angels and Martyrs. Purpose: vocations. Peter Fogarty was making the rounds for the sake of a declining sisterhood.

“Do you smell a rat?” was the first thing out of Boris’s mouth. The two didn’t know her name, but they had seen her squat form barreling around, and there was an occasional offering of doughnuts on a Sunday morning, when she took the subway home for a day of rest. Betty had put two and two together, as she was known to do, signaling to TT to listen up.

They shook their heads and opened their ears, and the system, point by point, poured in.

“That explains it,” Betty said, but TT was still puzzled, because she was an only child from a mixed marriage, her father a traveling salesman, a Protestant, who’d seen something of the world and refused to convert, although he’d agreed, by canon law, to raise his young in the faith. TT had kept her eyes fixed on him when he was around, before the heart attack took him away to wherever they go, the ones who hear the Word and deny it entry. In her grief, TT’s mother lapsed, returning to the fold upon the girl’s departure. So TT was, some would say, a free agent.

“That explains what?” the girl said.

With that, Boris and Betty became a unit, with TT revolving

around them, because, as they knew by heart, no one can catch up if they miss the steady drilling, day by day and week by week, all and everywhere, of the Word.

“Too late,” Boris said to her new pal, Betty. But they kept her on, as a cleansing breath of fresh air, there when they needed it.

Days passed. Other visitors darkened the doorstep of Angels and Martyrs. The young men of Troy, of the Catholic school there, full of bursting seed and gumption to spread it. They piled out of a bus, or dribbled out, because A&M was known as the “stoup,” where the frumps and hens gunked the stone bowl in oily algae and furry moss before being scooped out to collect again at the nunnery. The bus filled with dread and reluctance and spilled in rage, with forethoughts of mischief. They were, in fact, a scraggly, meatless bunch, overgrown altar boys, runts and rejects, fodder for the army and pay-your-way clerical schools, mean, luckless, belligerent, and unripe.

No one met the bus. It was a first Friday, and the girls were still at a late-afternoon service, for making nine of these shaved-off ten or twenty years’ penal in Purgatory. The bargain, even for an old pagan like Boris, was worth it. Who knew the true outcome to the ancient question? No one they knew came back to tell, but rumors abounded, and the news wasn’t good, no matter what the archbishop had said. The “cloth” were talking through their hats most of the time, whistling in the dark.

The trio, by then, went everywhere together, from the moment Boris rolled out of bed and trudged down the corridor to pound on their door. They rose when all were asleep, the black flock and the ninnies in their charge. In the dark, the trio made their rounds, tracking the length of the four-building campus, and ending up under the statue of the BVM, source of the system, virgin, goddess, author of the divine and its consort. That day, the day the first bus came, the statue, a cold gray and gritty stone, was covered in snow, and they boosted up TT to dust off her head and put a little color on her cheeks with a Crayola, kiss them, and whisper a word of praise and thanks, and then TT jumped down. They liked to be around the BVM, all stiff and perfect, inert and impassive, but during the day they stayed away. She was a magnet, and lines of

force bled inward. You could feel it, if you weren't thinking or just lolling about, which most of the girls were. Not the trio – they stayed awake.

The boys flooded in, or wept in, for it was the end of the day, and a collation was laid for the purpose of regulated and patrolled mingling: deviled eggs dusted with fiery paprika, celery spears gorged with cream cheese and stinging capers, date-nut bread with bitter walnuts, blood-colored punch with floating splinters of ice and daggers of mint.

The ungainly youths circled around, their fingers grubby with tobacco and smears of shoe polish. First in was Tubby, a mama's boy as round and sweet as a doughnut hole. With swift hand, he gobbled, and soon his mates had stuffed, burned, and choked, and were slaked with drafts of the blood-and-water punch, and restored to infantine satiation, becoming, in short, a different breed. Full, on this collation that was better and finer than their grub, they made as a body for the rickety metal chairs set out around a patch of beeswax floor that was the site for dancing, as the sister-servitor set the needle on the record, and the scratchy pulse of an inane waltz tickled their ears and excited them. The girls, too. Music – any kind – was an intoxicant in this scanted and stinted tribe.

Tubby, pushed out by his mates, picked TT, just picked up her hand in wordless invitation or command, and the two made their way to the beeswax circle. "Get ready," he said, and TT responded in an Italian dialect that Tubby shook out of his ears, making a face, which made TT laugh, so he laughed, and an ease came over them, enough to shuffle into the box step and stay there, moving their legs in place, so not moving at all. Seeing it, the nun clapped her hands to command them, then shook her finger. The sisterhood was not stupid for being hors de combat, and they knew that standing in place – even marching in place – was too close for comfort. Things could happen, things that would lead to other things. But the couple stayed in their box, and the sister had naught to do but pull them apart. The music stopped first, and each of the pair headed out at cross-purposes, and the beeswax circle was once again empty.

Tubby was dispatched again, pushed out, and made the rounds of girls in sprigged frocks and velvet vests, silky dresses, twin sets,

gored skirts. All shook their heads, and one actually pushed Tub away, brushing her hands and sniffing them, flicking her fingers and reaching for a hankie to rub them clean of contact. Two choices were left, but Tubby returned to his side of the room, only to be driven back by the tide. He went for Betty, changed his mind, and went for Boris; changed his mind, and back to Betty. By then, the sister-custodian had clapped her hands, pulled the needle off the vinyl, and chased the boys out of the room, herding them back to their bus, where they sat until out they all came in again to start over. By then, the parlor was empty, so they sat on the chairs and waited for the bus driver to haul them home, never to return, with Tubby praised, mocked, vilified, and scapegoated, when the priest-brothers back at Troy heard of the escapade and grounded the bus boys, when the next college on their dance card was the delectable Tiffany School, charm and business, like an ice-cream shop of sweetness and delight.

The trio was left with much to ponder. Something had happened to break the bond, disturb the peace and plans. Wounds had been inflicted, along with shame and festering. For a while, nothing was said. Boris went back to work, TT and Betty resumed their communal life, but lifeless and pondering.

The custodial nun had a bee in her bonnet and passed it on to her pal, the portress, who passed it on. The archbishop's sister was last to know, but first to act. She talked to God, preferring the father to the son, for this kind of interlocution. The three persons were men; even the bird was male, so something was lost in the message, which required much repetition, expansion, illustration, and compaction, nut-shelling, but Sister President was a skilled rhetorician.

"Dearest," she said, kneeling in the front pew of the college chapel, looking straight at the altar and the tabernacle, where the son resided as bread. Over the altar in fresco was a super-sized image of the father as an old man opening his arms to enclose the son and the bird, one on top of the other in a spangle of golden rays. Sister lifted up her eyes to this large, manly figure in a white robe.

"Yes, my child," she said, because she did both voices.

“Here’s the problem,” and Sister President sat back down on the pew and crossed her legs.

The flock was dividing between the chosen and the rejects, or set-asides. This was nature, but God was still God, and he came first, or so she said, in her flattering tones. “You come first, but we’re second, after your lady wife, whom we resemble, being virgins and mothers, staying out of the fray, as you, or thee, and your two confreres did, since the beginning of time, and before.

“Not confreres,” she said for him.

“Right, but let’s not get into that. Think of the centuries wasted on that debate on who was who, who came first, and what linked the parts.”

“Don’t back talk me, Sister Sue. Don’t tell me what to think.”

The sister was breathless, talking so fast and so loud, and throwing her voice into registers too far apart. Her throat was parched, too, so she stepped into the sacristy for a sip of water, and decided to mix in a little wine, although the convent priests were misers and bought the cheapest altar wine, a scandal, really, considering what it was used for. She took out a gold cup and drank a couple of glasses to calm herself for the dialogue to come.

Back in the pew, she started again, talking to Number 2, this time.

“Jesus,” she said, “can you hear me from there?”

“Yes, my daughter,” said the bread, channeled by the nun in a mumbly, yeasty voice.

“Now is the time for all good men,” she said, “to come to the aid of the party. Remember that one?”

“Speak your part, and cut the comedy,” said the bread.

“It’s a cryin’ shame,” the nun said, dropping her face into her hands. “They’re ready for harvest, these girls, and what’s in it for them? It’s bad if they’re picked, and it’s bad if they’re not.”

“Not my problem,” said the bread, echoed by the old man and the twittering bird.

“That’s what I thought you’d say.”

So the sister, a little tipsy, dropped by to see the roommates, of whom the cute one, an Italian, was picked. She found the girl lying on her bed, reading something that she’d hidden under the pillow, when the black-clad creature – familiar, but not in this intimate context – darkened the doorway.

Betty was reading charts of verbs, with their chains of tenses and irregularities, at her most frustrated.

The nun sat down on Betty's bed and patted the place next to her. "Come sit by me, my lambs," she said; "I've got bad news."

The girls were glum. Not a word had been spoken since the evil day of choice, when the apple of discord was awarded to the cutie.

The nun understood. One benefit of marriage to Jesus was he's a polygamist and all are welcome to wear his ring and take his name, or one of his courtier's, mate's, or family, ancestor, or precursor, martyr, angel, saint, his mother and her family, to their heart's content, all the same, no one left out. It was a good deal, it cost nothing. Your ducks were lined up for now and forever. Take it or leave it.

Which is what the sister told the roommates, a contract in hand — just a sample, because don't overdo it or lay it on too thick was the way things were done.

So what do you think? she was about to say, when the Italian flopped back on her bed, pulling out the book tucked away from prying eyes. "See this," she said. *The Marriage Act*, read the yellow cover, and Betty covered her eyes, just as Boris was battering on the door.

"Mum's the word," said the nun — she didn't like Boris; few did. "To be continued. Can I borrow this?" she added, plucking the book from TT's fists.

"Give it back!"

"All in the fullness of time," said the nun. This was the kind of book, a handbook or glossary, that laid things out for the catechumens, those still outside, curious, but blocked from entry. "You don't need this. Hold your horses," said the nun, "and wait your turn," closing the door to the three. Boris was in, smelling a rat. "What's up?" she said.

A tear was opening between the original pair, Boris and Betty, because Tubby had balked at Betty, while he'd choked in the face of Boris, and these girls were not stupid. Plus there was a third, and that third linked tighter to Betty, so Boris was twice out, picked last and left out.

The air was electric with desire and strife because the book had inflamed TT. One of those nasty bus boys had dropped it behind a bush, and from there it circulated, made the rounds, and now the

nuns'd have a crack at it, but they wouldn't get it, if TT barely did, because it was coated with science and tricked out with line drawings of tubes, globes, hoses, bottlenecks, drains, arrows, and water-spouts. The terms were dry, even bitter. But TT was a born luster and could read between the lines to the succulence within.

"See you," said Boris to the supine Italian, drawing Betty away by the arm. The two took a turn around the campus, avoiding — a first! — the BVM. Why? They didn't know why, but something was different. What was clockwise was now counter. They left the campus, tramping into town and on until they landed in front of the doughnut shop, where the air was sweet with fat and dough, glaze, chocolate, and jelly. "I'm treating," said Boris, and in they went. The wife of the baker was there, biting her nails. She was their age, but married five years with five brats.

"What's eating you?" was the first thing out of her mouth, spotting the assistant on an off day. "Have a doughnut?" she said. "Who's your friend?" She offered a tray of rejects; each had something wrong: misshapen, no hole, burnt, bald, yesterday's, exploded, too flat, leaden, raw, gunky, crumbly, sodden.

"No thanks," said Boris. "I've got cash. Show me the glory holes, the five-in-ones, the two-sided, the crowns and castles."

And she did. And Boris paid for three, offering the slattern wife her pick. Boris had learned from her insult, and Betty was the first to notice the change.

"Okay," said Boris. "We've eaten our fill, and the baker's off-site, so tell us, Monty, what it's like, the marriage bed? A bed of roses, or something else? Speak up."

"Why are you asking me?" was first out of her mouth, still chewing, but one thing they already knew was this: even here, married to the boss, was no free lunch because look at the size of her — a pick-up stick — and working in a doughnut shop. Didn't she like doughnuts?

She did. Of course she did, Monty said, but how many can you eat in one day, and they saved the rejects for the babies, sopped in milk, or straight up. This was point one.

A dreamy look came into the baker's wife's eyes, not quite the same color, which is why he'd married her, Boris suspected. You could never get bored looking at that face with one eye a clear spring and the other mud. It divided her in two and made her seem a system complete in itself.

“Tell us the story,” said Betty, sitting on the bench for those awaiting a fresh batch. The smell could knock you out; and Betty, almost as skinny as the wife, was lightheaded.

“And don’t skip the good parts,” said Boris, licking her fingers.

Monty leaned on the counter, scratching her head with a pencil, adjusting her white cap, and organizing her waistband and apron strings.

“I didn’t go to college like you girls,” she said. “I wasn’t what you’d call college material, and neither was Mr. Hook.”

“Why do you call him mister?”

“That’s my way. My Mam called my Pa mister every day of his life, no matter what.”

“And *no matter what* means?”

“Drunk or on the wagon, making it or on the skids, playing the horses or bringing home the bacon, here today or gone tomorrow, he was always mister, Mister Tar, his name was. And he called her the missus, when he called her anything.”

The friends were not encouraged by this.

“Did you have a nice wedding?”

“Beautiful.”

“Meaning a cake, throw the bouquet, white dress, dancing at the K of C, or what?” asked Betty, the dreamer.

“Sort of,” said the wife, dabbing her eyes with the apron.

“Why the waterworks?” asked Boris.

“I had to get married with little Mickey on the way, so plain as plain can be. Collation in the backyard of tea and doughnuts and lemonade, and a trip to Niagara for just the two of us, overnight and on the train. I still remember it, the best day of my life. I had a box of chocolates on my lap, and Mr. Hook ate every one. He loves chocolates, and these were good ones, not seconds.”

“And after little Mickey, the other four. Why?” asked Boris.

“One thing leads to another,” said the baker’s wife with a smirk.

“That’s what we’re here for. What’s the thing that leads to the other things? Can you say it in a way that we’ll get it, and not speak in tongues?” asked Boris.

Mrs. Hook blushed to her hairline. “You don’t want to know,” she said. And then, “Wait your turn.”

They’d heard that before, but they didn’t want to wait, so Boris started pacing, and Betty biting her nails.

“Well,” said Boris. “Let’s start with brass tacks. Is it worth it?”

“Is it worth what?”

Boris looked at Betty, and Betty looked back. Here was the heart of the matter. Worth what? They had been told by the nuns the four good things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell, but weren’t buying it, or not yet. They were calculating because isn’t youth calculation? Gimme this, but none of that. Were they young? Had they ever been? Boris was a calculator. Betty was still bathing in the waters of charity, TT’s, but those waters were drying up by the raw sight of injustice. Was it her fault that she was tall and stringy with a hair mass like a Medusa’s? Or, Boris’s – that she was a little mountain with a bulldog’s mug? Was this destiny, this piece of rotten luck? Or was it – seen upside-down or inside-out – a piece of good luck? That’s where the system came in, although Betty still knew only its outline. Boris had the guts of it.

“Talk to the rooster,” the baker’s wife said, and she was speaking in tongues, because this slipped out without her knowing, or even grasping.

The duo grabbed at it. “Talk to the rooster,” they said. But did they know why? Boris’s sire was dead, as was Betty’s. No rooster came to the campus that wasn’t ordained, dried and pickled in his boyhood chastity, or the runts who’d never come back. And how would they find one and get it to crow?

But in turning tail, they were stymied by the baker’s wife, who had a million other things she wanted to tell them.

Household: the chairs and tables she bought on installment, curtains and curtain rods, braided rugs, things, things, and things, because the kids broke a lot of things and wrecked others, so the stream of things went in two directions, and where to put them, and what it was like to dust them, and wipe them, and brush them, and spot-clean. The torment of it, and the fiery joy of having and keeping. But she was expecting again, too bad. Before she could rewind to talk about washing the clothes and hanging them on the line, and hanging the cups on hooks, and shaking the rugs, Betty and Boris were out the door, slipping out as a customer walked in, a truck driver, who ordered a baker’s dozen, jelly. Here was a rooster, a fine bantam, and Monty’s face lit up. “Come back, girls,” she said. “This is Mr. Hook’s brother, Angelo Hook. Shake hands.”

The duo shook the trucker's hand, first one, then the other, and looked into his face. This dodo bird would tell them nothing they didn't already know. They needed a wise cock, but Monty was already saying, "Stay a minute. Cool your heels. Ange, tell these girls if it's worth it, and worth what."

"Huh?"

"Do I have to spell it out, you big lug?" said Monty, punching her brother-in-law in the arm.

That gave him the hint, so he punched her back, nearly toppling her.

"Is it worth it," he repeated in a dreamy voice, deep and husky, "and worth what? Geez," he said, "What can I say? What else is there?"

He was still a bachelor, but he'd been around. He broke out in a sweat, he laughed, cleared his throat a dozen times, and whistled. "Was it ever!" were his last words.

As they walked out, Betty and Boris were silent. What did they know now that they didn't know before? One thing they knew — who'd ever jump in the sack with that Palooka. And yet . . .

Just saying it gave them an idea. It mattered to pick or be picked by the right one, and where was the right one? Where did you find him in an all-girls school? The bussed-in Trojans were not to their taste. Not enough manliness. They laughed to use the word, but use it they did. And the trucker, he was cooked, but made of shoddy stuff, and they knew shoddy because they'd been born to it, and were not only plain and ugly, depending on the day and whether there was enough hot water to shampoo the mops, but plenty shoddy. Nothing they had was good except their headpieces. So even though they were shoddy, and knew it by sight, they were aiming higher, if they aimed at all, so the field of dreams suddenly shrank down to nothing.

Was it true?

Manliness was something to be tested, but who would do it? Who was up to it? Who had the goods? They nominated TT, who'd nominated herself, and who was fuming and boiling from the contents of the yellow book, purloined by the convent, and would they get it back?

Boris and Betty, drained, deflated, returned to campus, each to her own lair, and face down on their canoes, dreaming, hoping,

offering up a day of prayer and sacrifice to the baby Jesus, just for a lick or taste. TT, sitting up straight, had her own idea.

She boarded the bus the next Friday bound for St. Sebastian, the pin-cushion martyr, where the boys of Boston enrolled, sons of doctors and lawyers, different – better? TT wore her cutest rig – a felt skirt with a poodle on it, pretty pumps, a pink sweater with a cut-down neckline she cloaked under a velvet cape. Betty and Boris loaded themselves in the back, dressed worse than usual because they were the scientist and TT the rat. TT had her own ideas, and planned to dodge them as soon as her dancing feet hit the ground. The bus filled with eau de cologne and powdery smells, the stink of drying nail polish and hair spray, and something else the duo inhaled with interest. They got it, but didn't partake of it. It excited them, and they grabbed for each other's hands, squeezing and letting go, and things only got worse as the bus, full of feminine flavors gone wild, hit the Mass Pike, and off-ramped to the woods of St. Sebastian's.

The air was thick with sighs and gulps of air. The bus driver laughed. He was a grandfather, but he remembered.

Off-loading, the posses wavered and wobbled. No collation, but straight in the darkening dusk to the gym, a dance floor, and amplified tunes, jazz and jitterbug, tango and samba. The Bostons had snuck in their own LPs and locked the sound room behind them. Two fathers were on duty, but Jesuits, who'd seen everything, left the boys to themselves, go in peace.

TT stood by a pillar with tilted head and a three-quarters pose, so the suitors could see her in the round. She slipped off the cape and arranged her lips in a pout studied in *Photoplay*. Her lips were chapped and puffy from biting and licking. Her front teeth protruded and made the lips even fuller. They were a perfect bow. She had large, glossy eyes, a bit popped, and she'd ringed them in black, larding the lashes with midnight-blue mascara. Her eyebrows nearly met over the Roman nose. Her eyes were like fiery pools, netted in vines, and her lips overripe plums, stinging from the cheap lipstick. She'd rouged and powdered her cheeks. The face presented at an angle was a mask of inexhaustible vitality. Every male eye was gripped – even the priests', before they left the field.

“Oh my!” Betty had said, when she saw the project complete in the dorm’s laboratory light. “Yikes!” said Boris, as the makeup started to settle, harden, and perfect.

TT had found a pillar far from the beam of athletic light and sidelit by a rosy exit sign. Under the warlike face was a cute body in trendy togs, items these boys would recognize as part of teen-dom.

Four males ambled over in a loose line, but in pecking order, headed by a golfer and tennis star whose banker father supplied the corridor with scotch, beer, and cigarettes.

He stood before this binary marvel (cute teen and Fury) and plucked her hand from the skirt pocket, where the poodle was stitched in powder-puff pink.

“Put it back,” she said. (Betty and Boris were stationed behind the pillar, covering their chortling yaps.)

“Are you talking to me?” said the lad.

“Stand down.”

Here was a linebacker with a big rack of meat for shoulders. TT pulled out a hand to touch the meat, and squeeze it. It wasn’t fully cooked, but almost. She sniffed the boy’s face and neck, and measured the meaty wrist with her own skimpy paw. Two of hers for one of his.

Placing one mitt around her waist and ducking under the other, she arranged him for the dance floor, for the meeting of her body with his, “testing,” she said.

And so it went, and after testing each, TT picked her sample by a different measure, because she’d spotted through an open window the slender, purposeful key the male hid between his thighs. What it unlocked, she wasn’t sure, and it was a crude-looking gadget, so nothing too fancy or elaborate. Through zippers and over layers of cloth, she took the measure.

Then retreated to consult with the scientists. They went to the soda and cookies room, where the herd stood around ready to doctor the drinks with spirits, but the rough beasts shouldered off these invaders with their shiny flasks.

Part two was trying it out, and part two unfolded after refreshments were taken.

TT filled up on a bubbly drink and a handful of ladyfingers. “Take and eat,” Boris said, but no one laughed or finished the line.

Fortified, TT smoothed her felt skirt and tightened her sash. She jiggled, head to toe, like a soaking wet dog. The dancing lads had skinned out the door. TT entered and selected number three, a rufous with a stocky build and saddle shoes. A '45 was spinning on the turntable; rockabilly, we now know, had found its way into the air space. The boy was a Billy, and after he and TT had danced a little, the three-minute hustle, heel, toe, and twirl, TT led him to the school chapel, open, dimly lit, and fertilized with frankincense, a ripe and gummy place. The altar steps were padded by a thick rug, so TT rolled on him, hitting the altar rail at the bottom. In that half-crib, she unpacked the key and studied it in the red glow of the lamp. It was small, it was big. When he stripped her of her garments, peeling off her stockings to suck on a garter, big it grew, strong as marble, It was red and alive. The Billy's eyes had rolled back in his head.

He was gone, but the machine was awake, geared to cool the marble, konk it, then fire it, until it was just another grub. The machine rolled over TT, delving and drilling on TT's delicate trellis of bones. What can it be?, she asked herself as she was torpedoed.

"Get offa me now," she said to the panting lad, who flopped over on his back. "Get dressed, march!" she said, watching as he hauled his spent body into his clothes, and scuffled out on untied saddle shoes, stopping to stick his hand in the holy-water font and make the cross. Was he now a man?

And was he manly, the duo wanted to know, when TT shook herself loose. Boris laughed. The pretty skirt was twisted around with the zipper in front.

"Spit it out," Betty said.

The rufous was in the boys' room, gazing at the sinner his mother was sure he'd be if given half a chance. Did he look any different? Patting down his hair, he made his way to the statue of St. Sebastian, spotted in red like him by the hundred darts piercing his skin.

"Father, forgive me," the boy said, "for it wasn't my fault."

Sebastian, eyes raised to heaven, was as mute as he'd always been. He was just, after all, a plaster replica of a story. The rufous waited. His mates were looking for him, but didn't think to look

there. Something had happened, something good, and they were the first to sniff it out.

The Jesuit fathers returned, eventually, to the scene, feeling no pain. Entering the gym through the locker room, they spotted, behind a pillar, three girls huddled together, troublemakers, hiding something. The fathers made their way over, to be met by a scowl and a stuck-out tongue.

“Father,” said one Jesuit to the other.

“Yes, Father?”

“Do something.”

“Tell me, Father, what should I do?”

“Where’ve you been all this time!” Boris said.

TT was escorted to the bus, a friend on each side, with the other girls traipsing behind, as the boys watched in silence from the barred windows of the gym. The wheels were turning. “Up you go, Alley-ooop,” Boris said, speeding TT up the steps and pressing her into a seat, covering her shivering shoulders with the velvet cape.

Oftentimes, and en route to extracurriculars, the girls of Angels and Martyrs were urged to offer up their prayers for the conversion of the Jews. But this time, they set the petition aside. Someone of theirs had passed through to the other side. “Let us pray,” Betty said, but was it too late?

They stripped the Italian and washed her up, dabbing her with Jean Naté. They shrouded her in her nightie, a grandmother craft, a white sack that covered her, hem to throat, wrist to yoke; wound her Italian hair in spoolies, surrounding it with a net.

“Sleep now, my dear,” said Betty to the lamb, so peaceful now in her sleep.

“Death, judgment, heaven, and hell,” grumbled Betty. “Why does it have to be that way?”

They were talking over the still body.

Boris retired to her single room, kissing Betty on both cheeks, and shaking her hand. “I’ll sleep on it,” she said. “Keep an eye on our queen bee.”

So, where do we come in, we others? By the time we arrived on the scene, a couple of decades later, Betty and Boris were settled into place: Betty taught classics, and Boris physics. We were all going to

be married, the sooner the better, and we had no ears to hear, so what did we need of either? But to keep them busy, we all took a course called “The Science of Life,” with ancient texts from the Golden and Silver Ages, skipping over the middle two thousand years, then jumping to the latest thing. The in-between is, as you know, the Christian era, and we’d had enough of it. The race had gone downhill, and we were just nitwits. We waited upon their wisdom and they gave us what they had: nostrums, ambients, wherewithal, authority, expansion, and exploration in the two eras: way back then and now. We knew about relativity and the circulation of the blood, the nitrogen cycle and black holes. We knew the ins and outs of the Trojan War and aftermath, and the way the gods aggravated men and women, but not kids. Good thing, because that’s what we were – kids, yet under the tutelage of Doctors Betty and Boris.

One day, August first, our arrival on campus and day one, we were addressed in a hall of windows and beeswax floor by the nut-brown crone arrayed in the colors of a bluebird. This glowing but decrepit critter leapt onto the podium and stared at us.

“Devils,” she said, and we laughed, but it wasn’t all that funny. A chorus rose in the rafters of piped music – plainchant, anthems, unisons, and counterpoint.

“Devils,” she bellowed into her mike, and the music stopped, but something echoed in the hall’s wooden shell. We strained to hear it, because we were starting out, and nothing so odd would befall us again. The version of the system we heard, though, was only a crib, a digest, all dried up and neutralized. That’s what time will do – even in the small-time, small world we live in.

Betty and Boris and the black-robed faculty were in the front rows, belted off from the rest of us. They were holding a tea party in the hour after for the new girls, us. We sallied into the refectory, silent and brooding, already stamped, but with a weak antigen.

Betty was pouring coffee, and Boris tea. Half of us were chattering, the rest at sea. We had lost something, and we didn’t know quite what.

The crone in bird blues alighted in the doorway, and took the table’s place of honor.

I know you’ve guessed it by now, the art of the system: Stop

here, the crone said, rest here, like with like, and fatten yourselves on time.

It was raining that first of August and we carried this frail melody into the grayish, overgrown world. It was the system, devised by the Christian era, but never grasped: a tribal suicide, but with its own fluency and inner springs.

Good-bye for now to Betty and Boris, but see them on their own chosen path, away from us, always away, but never far.