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Cold Comfort

by MaryPat Campbell

When Jim was seven and in the First Holy Communion class, Miss McSweeney taught by rote and schooled them well. The children knew, not only how to recite the correct prayers but the attitude they needed to have behind the prayers; respectful, devout and unquestioning. Jim absorbed it all, drank it in like mother's milk. It all sounded mysterious, magical and at the same time reliable, and as the grown-ups at school and at home didn't question it, he saw no good reason to either.

At home his mum was extra kind and thoughtful towards him, she would ruffle his hair again distractedly like she used to do when he was little. She promised him they would go shopping for a special outfit for him to wear on the day of his First Communion, and he would be allowed to choose the shoes to go with his new clothes. Jim's brother Tom and his sister Milly had both gone through this rite of passage before him, and both had told him of the financial rewards to be had. He could expect generous donations from the aunts and uncles, if he was lucky even some of the neighbours might chip in.

"If you're canny Jim," Milly said, "you'll be able to save up for a brand new BMX Shockwave in no time."

When it was her turn and she was seven, Milly had saved up her communion money and bought herself a pink mermaid bike with fourteen inch wheels, she sighed with pleasure as she remembered it.

Being a serious boy, Jim thought deeply about the ceremony he and his classmates were being prepared for. Sitting with the other children in the fragrant church with its smell of incense and shiny floor polish he learned to recite, join his hands in prayer, and believe that God, who was all-knowing, was looking down on him from heaven.

But he worried about having a sacred sliver of white bread in his mouth when the priest laid it on his tongue, and wondered if he should just chew it up like any other bread. Or should he hold it carefully in his mouth and wait until it melted away? These were questions the children were allowed to ask, and Miss McSweeney had all the correct reassuring answers.

They say that memory believes before knowing remembers, and Jim believed everything he was taught back then, he felt comforted and in the presence of mystery all at once and felt genuinely sorry for people who didn't believe.

Much later, when he grew into a skinny fifteen year old, Jim started to remember things differently. The magic and comfort had disappeared, he had stopped praying and going to church and instead he was left with lots of questions that never occurred to him when he was younger, and which weren't allowed in those times in any case. He didn't know if anyone could answer his questions, and so far he had not dared to voice them out loud, but they became so important that they replaced any comfort, which had been planted in him when he was a child.

Questions like, why did Tom wake in the night sweating and shouting, and sometimes crying, and then brushed it off when Jim told him at breakfast time that this is what happened most nights? Why did his father drink so much whiskey and curse the priests under his breath when he thought no one was listening? Why did his mother switch the TV channel over when those stories came on the news about what priests had done to children as young as seven, in all parts of the country?

Jim began to wonder what belief was really about, and what learning meant, and if they were different. It confused him no end. There was no one to ask. Perhaps no one knew, and this was a shocking new thought for Jim, who when he was young relied on the grown-ups to know what was what. Now he was discovering that not only did they not know, but that they dared not to find out.

More people were asking now, all sorts of angry and awkward and embarrassing questions. It began to dawn on Jim that his parents were not very brave, not courageous like the people who had begun to ask the questions in public and dared to learn the answers.