



A Lucky Break

The summer I broke my arm, I was ten years old, on a day-camp outing at St. Louis Park, and full of confidence after an Eskimo Pie. It was a poor combination.

The park's picnic area sat below the surrounding grounds, enclosed by a stone wall. From where I stood, the wall was about five feet high. On the other side, it dropped twelve feet to gravel. I assumed the ground would be the same height on both sides—a theory I neglected to investigate before vaulting over.

I tumbled headfirst into the picnic area and landed with my right arm beneath my chest. When I got up, my lower arm resembled the letter W. I had also scraped my upper arm and bashed my chin, where I still carry a scar shaped like an upside-down smile.

The pain was spectacular. My pride wasn't doing well either.

At City Hospital, the doctors began setting the bone while I screamed. Eventually, someone gave me an injection—I've always assumed it was morphine—and the pain stopped almost at once. They fitted me with a heavy plaster cast and put me in a recovery bed. As the medication wore off, thirst and nausea competed with the returning pain.

The cast stayed on for about three months, carrying me through the summer and into fifth grade. It also brought certain privileges.

At day camp, I became a minor celebrity. The bigger boys left me alone, and I was excused from various chores, especially those involving water. Unfortunately, the exemption extended to swimming. I wouldn't learn until the following year.

My celebrity tour continued that fall at Catholic school. Being left-handed, I could still do my schoolwork, and the nuns seemed to treat me with a little more kindness—or at least a little less severity.

Father Aloysius Ripper was another matter. Yes, that was really his name. He was a loud, bombastic priest who gave little indication of liking children. You could hear him coming like a freight train under a full head of steam. Angry or cheerful, he was equally frightening.

One Thursday morning, still wearing my cast, I stood in line for First Friday confession. We boys waited one to a pew end, preparing to say, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.” How many sins could a ten-year-old have committed? I had my usual inventory ready: disobeyed my parents twice, and so forth.

Then something made us snigger. I no longer remember what it was. I remember what followed.

Father Ripper burst from the confessional like a whirling dust devil and began slapping boys down the line. I was about fourth. The three ahead of me went to the floor under the force of his blows. When he reached me, the slap stung, but I stayed standing. I have always believed it was the cast that stayed his hand.

All these years later, I can’t help wondering whether my foolish leap at St. Louis Park was God’s way of protecting me from the wrath of one of His most demented disciples.