The Story Knife

After Skagway in Alaska, in the long arctic light of the last summer solstice of the millennium, Brian Kelly, heading north, heading toward true north, realized the twilight of the gods must not be desperate. On his American cruise ship, docked against the granite mountains of the North Pacific, he had caught himself catching the eye of a cabin boy from Genoa.

The boy was, in fact, freshly tipped over the cusp of adolescence, a young man, the Italian kind who gives occasion to sonnets, whose innocence beguiles, whose dark curls and darker eyes and supple-shouldered body cause notes of invitation, of assignation, accompanied by a cabin number and a hundred dollar bill, to be written in hope and then crumpled and thrown away in confusion.

Sex was not the quest.

Beauty was.

Love was on dangerous times.

To touch a stranger put life at risk, but the need to touch beauty, to trace the curling hair of the head and thigh and foot, even more than the groin, bit into his fifty-year-old heart.

He himself had always worshiped beauty.

Never was sex itself his purpose. Sex was the hook to distract beauties in their own tracks long enough to savor beauty itself incarnate. Brian Kelly, Chicago-born out of a Dublin Dempsey come over to marry a Boston Kelly, was not some feckless rover traveling ignorant through the world. He knew what some people are for. The young man from Genoa may have hired on as ship's crew. But he was not for that. His beauty was his true vocation.

Daily, the cruise ship, which had embarked from Vancouver, swirling in colorful serpentines of merriment, heading north up the waters of the Inland Passage, washed away the anxiety which had become Brian's habit at home. He traveled alone. He was happy keeping to himself. In San Francisco, at the jammed Bloomsday Fleadh Festival in Golden Gate Park, he had stood separate from the sunburnt crowd cheering Van Morrison and Elvis Costello singing out the anthem of the "thousand miles of the long journey home." On the cruise ship, he gladly avoided the endless programs of entertainment and distraction. He made himself invisible.

As the ship cruised northwards, he walked the wooden decks, sometimes warm with June sun, sometimes cold with pelting arctic rain, purposely neither smoking his cigarettes nor saying his rosary, leaving himself open to what flow of smell or thought or feeling might come from the sea, the passing blue ice, the mountains.

Always his *Daybook*, full of scribbled notes, was in the pocket of his long Australian slicker that flapped like a cassock around his ankles.

Always he carried his Camcorder, shooting with exotic angles the wake of the ship, the rain dripping on the decks, and the empty chairs and empty tables of the piano salon.

The Reverend Brian Kelly purposely kept people out of his rectangular video frame. His footage, viewed and re-viewed alone in his cabin, made the classic ship, built in 1957 and never done up for disco, look empty of the present, and so reminiscent of romance he wondered that no Hollywood location scout had exploited its varnished wood decks and steep stairs and vintage carpet in the long hallways below that led to the perfectly preserved period staterooms and cabins.

Films, he mused, because films had been his late-night refuge alone, lonely, celibate, in the rectory, were no longer about romance on the high seas. Hollywood had turned to crash-and-burn adventures with action scripts that would have no use for the venerable ship but to blow it up.

His camera zoomed in on the ship's nooks and doors and rails, and tracked down the gangways, with an aching nostalgia. His blazing blue eyes searched for imagined forbidden trysts of sophisticated passion from those romantic times past when, as a young priest sitting in the dark confessional, whispered sin had once been interesting, before the limp whinings of neurotics, seeking reconciliation face-to-face, had caused him to laugh out loud, because he was only a priest, not a psychiatrist.

Other passengers nodded to his head of red hair haloed by the bright summer sun, nearing solstice, but could not penetrate his aura of privacy. He protected himself from the presumptuous privilege of strangers thrown together for a week, eager to make new acquaintances, and tell their life stories.

His cabin stewardess, a worldly little blonde from Strathchyde, Scotland, hardly surprised him with her openness. At first he had been uncomfortable with her constant attentions, making up his room, turning down his bed covers. He felt viscerally the class distinctions of the world. He, no aristocrat, had never felt comfortable with the parish housekeeper, because he always empathized with the people who cleaned other people's bathrooms. But his stewardess put him at ease. She was on top of the roles acted out on shipboard.

She too knew what people were for.

He figured she knew what he was for.

His stewardess, pretending the black-and-white roman collar that tucked out of his suitcase was for the final night's costume party, told him what no one else would tell. She told him how passengers, perhaps pursuing some metaphor of life's voyage in a ship, boarded to die, how one or two each trip died, how they were quietly taken away to refrigeration below decks. Old people, ancient ones, and sickly people, terminal ones, invisible among the fiercely robust breeders and feeders determined to have the good time they had paid for, had boarded the ship to die. That was not what the cruise ship's frenetic television commercials had promised, not the way they promised shipboard partying, sports, and fun.

Father Brian Kelly, after twenty-five years in the confessional, was not surprised at her tale.

But he had not expected the dark surprise of the cabin boy from Genoa.

He'd thought he was beyond temptation.

The young man slept well below the passenger decks with the crew. Brian's stewardess told him of their small rooms with no windows. "This is a prison for us, it is," she said. His own cabin had a porthole whose three brass bolts he had unscrewed to let in the cool North Pacific air. Small icebergs flowed south past his porthole north of Ketchikan in the Inland Passage. He kept to his cabin surrounded by his books and papers and cameras.

The other passengers feasted, gorging themselves from breakfast to midnight buffets, orgying through croissants and custards, each day appearing in new clothes brought on board in incrementally larger sizes as they ate their way northward, intent on getting their money's worth. The wives of businessmen and contractors and doctors were continents unto themselves: plump, pink, bejeweled members of the charge-card classes, cruise-ship women, towing what was left of their silent husbands, impatient wives of living male mutes, waiting for the man they had married to collapse leaving them at last free to enjoy all the riches of insurance dividends that funded the cruises of the real widows on board.

None of them, old or young, husband or wife, bothered him, because, between the fat and the dead, he found the silent thin thread of his own individual life so sweetly unlike their straight coupled contempt for each other. Anyone who thought priests should marry could be cured listening to the confessions of married people. Their marital boredom rather amused him. They had replaced athletic lust with guileless gluttony, but they seemed so ordinary, so harmless, so nice, he wondered if sins any longer actually existed, because God could hardly take offense from such poor creatures. If the old traditions and taboos had evaporated, was he himself, as a priest, irrelevant?

The ship, mercifully, and mercy was all he found himself wanting at home in Chicago, from where he'd fled, was carrying him away from his daily life, his daily things, his daily routines of Mass and prayer and counseling. No priests of his acquaintance could telephone him from the Archbishop's office with gossipy updates on who was doing what to whom, on who was drunk or dying or dead. He read no news. He watched no television. He attended no films. The less he saw and heard, the more visible he became to himself.

In his *Daybook*, he wrote: "Zen and the Art of the Priesthood." His Jesuit spiritual director had warned him he read too much for his own good. Reading had colored his thinking.

He stood naked alone in his cabin with the sea breeze from the open porthole cooling his athletic body and his Camcorder recording his solo movements. Once, after a port-of-call at a lake where he had helped row a canoe with twenty other passengers, picnicking on Tlingit reindeer sandwiches, he returned to his cabin and danced for his camera, a slow undulating male dance to ancient music no one but he himself could hear. The hypnotic rhythm of the ship's engines, way below decks, was a white noise broken only by the splash of waves against the ship.

He was more than naked.

He was not his telephone ringing. He was not his car driving. He was not his Roman collar. Not his sermons. Not his books. Not his face smiling kindly at the sick, blessing the children, comforting the widows.

He was, stripped clean in the cold North, becoming himself behind his smile, behind what breezy conversation he sometimes felt impelled to make as a reality check, behind his gentlemanly stroll among strangers quietly, expectantly, waiting to be spoken to, eager to be ignited by someone who had not yet heard the story about themselves they had told a million times.

He was himself in his cabin. Despite his abiding grief that his priestly life had turned into a disaster, because no one needed priests

anymore, he was overflowing with ironic energy, laughing at the ship taking the sick and the old from his tribe into the ark sailing toward the ice floes. He admired their bravery. They no longer bothered to ask any priests for Last Rites. They sailed free-choice straight into Death's cold waiting embrace.

Love and death.

The death of love.

The love of death.

He had fled everything familiar at home because his personal telephone Roladex of priests who were friends read like the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*. He could no longer cry when a classmate from the old seminary died. His grieving had run out of tears. So many priests died so young. He had bought passage on the cruise to be alone for healing.

He had to think over his Jewish doctor's advice. Was it cynical or not?

"Father Brian," Dr. Bernie Wiegand had said. "When your test comes out negative and you know what *safe* is, then the plague is over for you. Keep safe. Keep your act together."

What act he had was driven by beauty more than lust, but driven all the same.

"What do I know?" he wrote in his *Daybook*, "I'm a burnt-out case."

The third night, his stewardess pulled him aside. "A man must have jumped overboard."

He was as fascinated to listen to her as she was insistent to prove to him what she had said was true.

"Overboard. Many do," she said. "They come up here to die." Her Scottish burr gave a credible chill to her voice somewhat the way his Dublin-born mother's soft lilt still entertained him with conversation. "He's nowhere on ship. The crew's looked everywhere. It's not unusual. Jumping is better, for me, it is. Better than finding them in the morning lying their in their beds. I leave them till last. The dead ones. Clean the other rooms first, I do."

She was certainly progressive enough, and Protestant to boot, not caring a fig for priests, but he could not bring himself to ask her about the cabin boy from Genoa. He could not profane to a woman the secret way the young man's eyes met his own, the way the young man smiled knowing full well what was wanted, and what he was for.

Remembering their first exchange of looks, that first look, Brian could not deny the rush in himself. He had no poker face. He knew the boy recognized the look.

The boy knew what the man was for.

Brian could not tell the stewardess about the looks men sometimes exchange. He was confused, unfamiliar with shipboard etiquette, uncomfortable with the pinched confines of class distinction that made the boy and him virtually inaccessible to each other.

Was the boy's look really beauty smiling back?

Did the boy really know what he was for?

Or was his the coined smile of a Mediterranean hustler, hot for business in the North Pacific?

On the fourth morning, the ship docked at Skagway. The other passengers stampeded for the curio shops that were the same as all the other curio shops in all the other ports.

Brian, instead, stood quietly in the center of the village to listen for the sound of hammers, following the sound, finding the local men, talking with them, telling lies, pretending he was a teacher, saying his principal had made him promise to bring back to his students some documentary truth about the people of Alaska.

The men, accustomed to cruise ship tourists, chatted easily and kept working as the priest knelt before them recording them with his Camcorder.

Only minutes before returning to the ship, he approached a mountainman sitting in a beat-up van with a canoe strapped on top, a stove pipe jutting through the rear roof, and a large Husky panting on the passenger seat. The mountainman talked angrily about big government and oil companies and clear-cutting and how

stupid the voters of Ketchikan had been to allow a nuclear warship to homeport in their fishing waters.

His Camcorder worked like a magic confessional.

The lens sucked in people eager to spill their opinions and their secrets.

Everyone wanted to be on television.

The mountainman, shilling into the Camcorder like a TV commercial, showed him, through the driver's window, objects he had crafted while snowed in the previous winter.

Brian was fascinated by a small knife, its blade an ancient smooth mammoth tooth, its six-inch handle a beautifully burnished willow twig, honey-colored, accented with dark woodknots. He instantly liked the delicate object held in the mountainman's hand.

"It's a story knife," the mountainman said. "When the Tlingit or the Eskimo elders tell a story, they use this knife. They smooth out the snow and with the knife they draw a rectangle. The children watch the knife draw the story in the snow. They understand better when the knife draws the image of one person or two in the rectangle. As the story moves on, the storyteller wipes out the drawing, smoothing the snow, drawing a new rectangle for the next part of the story."

Brian turned his Camcorder off, hung it from his shoulder, and reached into his deep oiled canvas pocket where he kept his money in the flap of his *Daybook*. "I'd like to buy it."

"You want to know how much?"

"You made it. You tell me."

"At those shops over there, it'd cost you twice as much. Me? I don't have any overhead. I can let you have it for a hundred."

Brian wondered how people arrived at a price for beauty.

"I'll take it," the man said.

"No haggling?"

"I don't know how to haggle," Brian said. "I don't usually shop at all."

"Then I should've said two hundred."

"Okay. I'll haggle. Here's a hundred."

That easily, he bought the story knife which he planned to keep next to his laptop computer. He imagined himself teaching *Bible* stories and *Catechism* and the *Lives of the Saints* to children in a whole new way. He'd tried everything else.

The fourth night at sea, the evening of the day at Skagway where he had videotaped the men building fences, he stood in the lobby outside the main dining room, purposely leaving the table a bit hungry, smiling at a group of Australian doctors who were inviting everyone to come hear the papers each had written prior to sailing.

"We'll give any other health professionals on board a letter saying you attended our seminar. For tax purposes."

Standing in the midst of their lucrative laughter, in that carpeted lobby, on the main deck outside the Purser's Office, surrounded by the tax-evading doctors and their cheerio wives, he saw the cabin boy, all innocence, so dark and young, come passing toward him, his angel's face smiling a smile more genuine than the polite smile crews thrive on.

Brian smiled.

Their eyes locked.

The boy cut courteously through the clutch of doctors straight toward him.

Face to face, neither having spoken to the other, the young man crossed all bounds. He placed his right hand on Brian's left shoulder in a quick flowing gesture noticed by no one but Brian himself who said nothing in his flush of surprise.

It was the boy who spoke.

He used his deep voice lightly, as if the upper register of speech would promise more than threaten: "How are you this evening, sir?"

Brian Kelly, born with the gift of gab, could say nothing. His fair skin blushed red as his hair.

As fast as he had appeared, the boy was gone down the stairs.

In years past, before the world was scared sexless, Brian might have dared follow the boy down the stairs to some private place.

Pacific whales would have spouted in the northern sea.

Brian, that night, could not, would not, by a conscious act of will, follow. Assignation required discussion. A thousand doubts of language and reason and vexed passion sent him careening down the long, carpeted, sloping passageway to his cabin.

In the long-ago Dreamtime, on one of his trips to the Greek isles, before the viral horror, this boy could have made his heart sing. He threw open his porthole to the cold midnight air. He braced himself against the force of the wind.

Desire beat his brain with lust for the boy's beauty.

He had been careful so long, he would be safe if he continued his care, but the only care he knew for himself, because he had taken vows he had only rarely broken, was abstinence.

He loathed his own self-discipline.

He raged against the circumstances of contagion.

He sat at his desk writing furiously in his *Daybook*.

His face grew hard as his groin.

He slammed the book shut and wrote three notes, throwing all three away, not knowing how to gain access to the young man.

He walked from his desk to the open porthole. The June night-wind below the Arctic Circle blew silken and silent around him.

The Alaska midnight, at this longest daylight, was the constant twilight his life had become.

He slept fitfully.

The ship cruised northward fast.

He rose early for the docking at the village of Sitka. A Russian Church, filled with gold icons, sat in the town center. He hadn't come to Newcastle for the coal. He pulled away from the crowd of passengers flocking into the church and headed to the combustion-engine sounds of a hundred small fishing boats bobbing at moor-ing. The crews of one or two men in rubber waders, heavy jackets, and watch caps, smoking and talking, drinking their coffee from steaming paper cups, paid him no attention as he shot them close-up with his Camcorder's telephoto lens.

He could look and long for everything, but he could not touch.

How had he become so dead?

He was beside himself.

He became himself watching himself.

How had he become a voyeur of his own life?

At Juneau, Brian boarded the helicopter tour which set him down on top of the windswept ice desert of the Mendenhall Glacier. The tiny chopper lifted off leaving him and three strangers alone to wander for an hour.

He set his Camcorder down firmly on the ice, recording, in the distance, the mountains, and, in the bottom of the frame, the glacial ice running a rivulet of topaz blue water.

He walked into focus in front of his own camera.

He was his own best director.

Who else would bother shooting his private dances?

Who else would shoot his private rituals?

He was a lone pilgrim kneeling on the ice-cap at the top of the world.

He reached into his pockets for the dozen healing-crystal rosaries he had brought from his previous pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Knock in Ireland. He immersed the clear-cut beads into the freezing blue trickle where they became indistinguishable from the ice of the glacier itself. If his priest friends believed the crystals to be curative, then his submerging them into the ancient arctic ice, melding them with the clear water in the bright light, might empower all the more the crystal rosaries he took back to the ones desperate for any hope.

Later, in his cabin, watching himself on screen, he realized his hands—the anointed hands of a priest empowered to call down the Body and Blood and Soul and Divinity of Christ under the appearances of Bread and Wine—looked very young for a man his age.

After Sitka, on the fifth night, heading from the smooth flow of the Inland Passage, out to the open sea, northwest, hundreds of nautical miles towards Anchorage, he realized the cruise was passing him by.

Only two nights remained. He had to decide.

He wrote lists in his *Daybook*.

If the young man found him a fool wanting to discuss safety, he would not have too long a time onboard to be embarrassed.

He was overheated and underventilated.

He felt unreasonable being safer than safe.

Was his life reduced to a search for safety?

What was living without risk?

He had always, almost always, disciplined his passion with absolute purity.

Had he no trust in his reason to govern his lust?

If alone with the young man, would absolute abstinence explode to absolute abandon?

It would be simpler to throw himself overboard.

He was not afraid to die quickly.

He was afraid to die slowly.

He felt sick.

He had not eaten all day.

He headed down the rolling corridors toward the main salons. He could not walk a straight line. He pitched from wall to wall.

The open sea of the North Pacific lifted, then dropped, the ship. The line at the buffet was short. *Mal de mer!* He fled back down the stairs to his deck. He skirted around two passengers with dangerously green faces. He noticed white paper bags had appeared, stuck every ten feet into the railings along the passageway going to all the cabins. He had willpower. He willed he would not be sick. He slammed his door behind him. His *Daybook* slid from the desk to the floor. The story knife flew through the air. The room was hot as a furnace. He pressed his hands to his temples. He was wet with sweat.

He opened his door to let the cold air blow through.

He was not prepared for the sudden spectacle.

There stood his stewardess. Her face wide-eyed in astonishment.

A gluttonously heavy woman, supported by two other women,

had just, as he opened the door to his cabin, thrown up on his stewardess's shoes.

"You bitch!" the stewardess screamed.

He ran past the four women, hitting first one wall, being tossed against the other wall, down the stairs to the Infirmary where the good ship's Doctor Marcello told him quickly of something new: "A shot of Promethazine will fix you in minutes."

He rolled up his shirt sleeve as three new patients arrived tossing at the tiny Infirmary door.

Calmed almost instantly by the injection, he felt suddenly superior to the rough seas. He lay on the gurney smiling, relaxed, freed, his blue eyes staring up into the bright light, feeling thoroughly himself, floating up, out of his body toward the light.

Always in his life he had decided what he would do; and what he had decided to do, he decided he could undo.

He returned through the deserted passageways to his cabin. He was no longer at sea. He was on the sea. The self he had felt the first days alone onboard seemed anemic in comparison to the sense of self-purpose he had suddenly gained.

He stripped off all his clothes.

He paused once, only briefly, to consider if the Promethazine might be affecting his judgment.

He opened his porthole, and thrust his slender upper body out into the air, a pink human torso with flaming red hair sticking out from the port side of the white ship. The waves made by the prow spread out on the topaz water like foaming epaulets into the never-ending summer twilight.

It was June 20, the solstice, the year's longest day.

He felt chilled by the wind. He could not afford to catch a cold. He pulled himself back into his cabin. His white teeth chattered. He had never intended to jump, but he laughed at how easily he could have flung himself into the freezing sea when he realized that many had made their exits through open portholes. The scenario

offered so perfect an exit it was ridiculous. He was getting pleased with himself. That was a good sign.

He had the luck, he did. His mother and father both told him so.

The ship's engine throbbed its white noise in backbeat to the sound of the waves. His senses, soothed by the injection, shook themselves out. The rhythms of the sea and the ship played bass line to the melodic flow of the ancient Irish blood-sea inside his body. He felt the ship roll, seeming so lightly a rocking cradle, back and forth. An ashtray slid across his desk to his laptop computer whose gray screen lit the cabin.

The story knife rolled into his hand.

At that moment, so abrupt, so crystalline, it surprised him, he knew what he would do, how he would make the best of times in the worst of times. It was not the twilight of the gods. He congratulated himself that he and his kind, sacred and profane, were always so goddam clever.

He sat down at his desk and wrote in his *Daybook* of himself that he who had told a mountainman he could not haggle had actually perfected the self-haggling of a scrupulous, oversensitive, outmoded conscience into a lifestyle.

He took the story knife into his consecrated hands and felt the power of its nature.

He reached for a sheet of ship's stationery and printed very clearly a message, saying "1 AM, Cabin 336," and stuck a precious hundred-dollar bill with the note inside the envelope.

He rang for his stewardess.

"Did you see what that pig did to my shoes? Now she's off already to the midnight buffet!"

He was glad she was madly distracted.

She took the envelope, glanced at the name of the young man from Genoa, and smiled.

It was not her first *billet-doux*.

He gave her ten dollars, shut the door, and carefully placed

the crystal-bead rosaries in the dob kit on the table next to the bed where he aimed his Camcorder into the soft light, framing the waiting rectangle of white sheet like a Tlingit elder smoothing snow for a story about to be told.

He sat in his chair, holding the delicate story knife, and waited.

His Camcorder hummed softly.

There were safe ways, ways as good if not better than the old ways, for savoring beauty and making it, always before so passionately fleeting, last forever.