The Ceremony

Leslie Squires*

*Iowa State College
The Ceremony

Leslie Squires

Abstract

S T. PETERS, the boarding school outside Sidney, where my folks had sent rar. stood in a very provincial arrangement of eucalyptus trees. The ancient Gothic chapel was the largest building on the grounds.
ST. PETERS, the boarding school outside Sidney, where my folks had sent me, stood in a very provincial arrangement of eucalyptus trees. The ancient Gothic chapel was the largest building on the grounds.

Trees were spaced with precision along the many sidewalks running from one door to the next, but well-worn paths broke off from the cement and ran across the lawn in freedom. The dining hall was stashed between the chapel and one of the classroom buildings. It was in this hall the incident occurred, two days after my arrival. The hall was a grim place with dark beams criss-crossing a ceiling supported by large stone columns in the walls. Four electric chandeliers tried to give off enough light, but failed miserably. I felt like a Lombardian who had wandered into Charlemagne's court. The brautwurst lying on my plate in front of me was cold. I had forked it over for the hundredth time. I sipped at my glass of milk continuously throughout the meal, stalling for time. The level was going down dangerously fast, so that soon it would be empty and I would be left with nothing to do until the others had finished.
The starched collar of my blue uniform rasped my neck. I thought of home and New Guinea and Mom's proud face as I had boarded the plane alone and waved back to her. I had brought only a few clothes and the golden victory cup I'd won at the mile relay last year with the inscription on the base: Outstanding Freshman Competitor, Thomas Cook. I had kept it in my suitcase and had shown it to no one.

Today for the first time I had worked out on the track. The coach had pointed out the boy who was now sitting across from me in the dining hall as he was sprinting. His hair, blond in the dimly lit hall, had shone orange in the Australian sun, bouncing on top of his head in rhythm to his pace. He ran like a gazelle, and I could hear his laugh as I followed his heels past the finish line. My gut was hurting badly; I hoped his was also. Someday I would show him my trophy.

The thin fellow beside me was saying to the runner, "Greg, you want to hand me the bread again?"

The grinning, freckle-faced blond taunted, "And what if I don't?"

"Bugger you, fella. I reckon I can have it if I can get it."
The boy pulled his skinny legs out from under the bench and with his knife poised in the air challenged the other to a duel.

"On guard, heathen!" he warned, waving his left hand behind his head.

A smile broke below the young bones of Greg's cheeks, and in a moment he was on his feet, his knife tingling against the other in a series of clashes across the table.

"Touche!" exclaimed the thin lad, thrusting his dinner knife at Greg, who in jest deceptively squeezed it between his arm and chest. The young headmaster, Brian Overwich, had raised his acned face from his plate of bratwurst and, remaining in his chair on the platform behind us, glared at the two fencers. The two boys catching his glare, choked off their laughter and sat down together. After the table had quieted down Greg mockingly tugged at the knife, pulling it out with a loud sigh. He then passed the bread to the thin fellow.

"Gol durn, mate," the fellow said accepting the dish.
“Did you see the look on old Hatchet Face?” They turned and looked back at the headmaster who had started forking at his bratwurst again. “He ain’t gave us that bloody old stare since you ate those sixty-two prunes a while back!”

Puzzled and anxious to say anything, I asked in a tone louder than necessary, “Why do you call him Hatchet Face?”

Surprised at my existence the slender fellow turned to me and then to Greg, whispering to him and the others the question I had asked, “Because he sharpens his hatchet on his face.” The table broke up, though I suppose they had heard the joke many times before. Greg sat across from me smiling the same way he had smiled this afternoon.

“Do you remember the time Tuff drank all those glasses of that horrid tomato juice?” Greg asked the thin boy, turning to another chubby fellow at the other end of the table. “He dang near died. Oh, Tuff did!”

The chubby boy squirmed as the rest of the table chuckled over some past joke, and then said defensively, “Blast it, I reckon I didn’t barf all over this ruddy table!”

Something ran between these guys. Something great and dangerous. The time was ready. I looked around the table and saw my weapon standing between the glass salt and pepper shakers.

“I bet I could down that bottle of Worcestershire sauce,” I pronounced to everyone at the table. Their heads turned to me in wonder and surprise.

“You kiddin’ us?” Tuff urged. “Worcestershire sauce!”

“Yeh, have a go at it,” the voices were saying. “Do it! Do it!”

They stared at me, their mouths hanging open as Greg smiled faintly in acceptance of my bet, reached for the bottle and handed it to me.

“You don’t have to do this, you know. I ran you pretty hard this afternoon.”

“Yeh, I know,” I said faking a laugh.

“Well, here then.”

His fingers touched mine momentarily over the cool glass surface, then he snapped back in his chair, leaving the bottle in my right hand. The bottle was nearly full and the dark, caked-on sauce ringing the bottle’s mouth nauseated me as I
Spring, 1967

lifted it to my lips. Then down. In gulps. Not thinking. Seeing hot splashes of red and blue flash past. The globs of sauce bubbled over my throat, bursting before slithering down to my churning stomach.

The bottle felt empty now. I couldn't know for sure. I simply set it down slowly, got up from the table, started past the silent rows of stunned faces and made it to the door. When the air hit me, it came. It came and it came. And when I was empty it still felt like coming.

A thin fellow and the orange hair of another figure came running up to me as I writhed on the grass.

"Good show, mate," Greg was saying. "Come on now. Let's get him to the nurse. Take it easy. You okay mate?"

Hands were touching my body and arms fitted their way under my shoulders. Then they lifted me to my feet and led me away.

Me

by Charles Hoffman

Architecture, Sr.

I don't believe me
But
I'm not for real
anyway
I'm just a puff of smoke from my own pipe.