UNHOLY ENCOUNTER

by

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Inspired by a True Event

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EXT. ST. JOSEPH'S ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH - NIGHT

A few people are ascending and descending the wide steps on a cold November evening.

EXT. CHURCH SIGN - NIGHT

It reads: ST. JOSEPH'S ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

INT. CHURCH FOYER - NIGHT

A woman approaches a priest and speaks to him in confidence. We do not hear what she is saying.

The priest's face lights up.

We hold on his beaming face while Narrator SAL MILANO speaks.

MILANO (V. O.) There is probably no phrase in any language that will do more to put a glitter in the eyes of a Catholic priest and galvanize him into instant euphoria than the words, "Father, I have a confession to make."

Milano is an important character in the story, and his narrating voice is that of an elderly man recalling events of the late 1930's in which he has participated.

INT. CHURCH NAVE - NIGHT

The priest leads the woman to a confessional, and she enters.

INT. CHURCH FOYER - NIGHT - ON SIDE DOOR

The sign on the door reads RECEPTION ROOM DOWNSTAIRS. Beneath is a large card reading, NEWMAN CLUB MEETING.

From below we hear the sound of BIG-BAND MUSIC.

INT. MEETING ROOM - NIGHT

It is a spacious room in the basement for meetings, banquets, and receptions, now enlivened by exuberant high school students getting ready for the social hour following a meeting of the Newman Club.

Several boys and girls are folding chairs and moving them against a wall to make room for dancing.

The DANCE-BAND MUSIC is coming from a phonograph operated by a girl who is in charge of playing records.

A few boys and girls are jitterbugging to the music.

Near the phonograph, others look over a stack of 78-inch records. One of the girls selects a record and screams with delight.

GIRL Artie Shaw! Begin the Beguine! Oh, please, please! Play this! I'll die if you don't play it!

On the dance floor, ANNA MUZIO, 14, is trying to teach the Lindy Hop to TONY PERELLI, 13. whose stubborn feet present a formidable challenge.

He trips, then hangs on to her. She sighs stoically.

ANNA Just relax and watch what I do, Tony. It's not that hard, really

TONY I'll try, Anna.

Anna continues struggling to prevent Tony's blundering feet from getting out of sync with the music.

ON ANNA AND TONY

MILANO (V. O.) The boy with the fumbling feet is my old school buddy, Tony Perelli, getting dancing lessons from Anna Muzio, the patient, persevering, and very pretty Anna Muzio. CLOSE ON TONY

MILANO (V. O.) (continued) Many of us remember the time Tony ignited a glitter in the eyes of a priest, a glitter that nearly turned into a raging inferno. (a beat) I'm Sal Milano. I was there the night it happened. Tony was thirteen, and had joined our Newman Club right after entering high school

INT. MEETING ROOM - NIGHT (PAST)

A meeting of the Newman Club is in progress. FATHER GUILFOYLE, sixtyish, is reciting from the Catholic Catechism, and the boys and girls are reciting in unison.

> FATHER GUILFOYLE AND GROUP Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Although man can forget God or reject him, He never ceases to call every man to seek him.

CLOSE ON TONY

He is reciting along with everyone else.

TONY For you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rest in you.

EXT. ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH - DAY

Dressed in their Sunday best, SAL MILANO, 14, his parents, and two sisters are ascending the steps of the church.

MILANO (V. O.) Mostly Italians attended Saint Joseph's, like my family, as well as Tony's friends and classmates, and most of his father's relatives. INT. MEETING ROOM - NIGHT (PRESENT)

More boys and girls are dancing to the BIG-BAND NUSIC.

ON TONY AND ANNA MUZIO

Anna is giving Tony more pointers on how to dance the Lindy Hop.

MILANO (V. O.) But Tony joined the club under outrageously false pretenses. His primary reason was highly unorthodox, to say the least.

Tony is dancing exuberantly but clumsily as Anna Muzio rolls her eyes.

MILANO (V. O.) (continued) He needed dancing lessons. And fast!

WIDER VIEW

Anna Muzio is doing her best to control the over exuberant Tony.

Some of the other girls are also instructing their partners, among them Sal Milano.

MILANO (V. O.) During the social hour after each meeting, the girls would play the popular dance-band recordings of the day and try to teach us clodhoppers the intricacies of the Fox Trot and Lindy Hop. Dancing came easily to girls. Not to some of us klutzy guys, though.

MOVIE CLIPS OR STILL PHOTOS

Mickey Rooney dancing with Ann Rutherford and other starlets in ANDY HARDY MOVIES to match Narrator's commentary.

MILANO (V. O.) Dancing. Jitterbugging. These were our rites of passage into the magical adolescent world of that hyperkinetic movie teen-ager, Andy Hardy,

ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE

Film clips from the late 1930's and early 1940's of young and older people dancing to live music.

MILANO(V. O.) Dancing was everything in those big-band days. The high point of everyone's social life was a Saturday-night shindig or a high school prom. And if you had two left feet, not only were you out of tune with the times, but out of step with your classmates, and most of all, out of touch with the opposite sex.

INT. MEETING ROOM - NIGHT

Tony is now Fox-trotting with GINA ROSETTI, 14, and quite close. Soon, he begins bear-hugging her. She and Anna Muzio exchange glances and giggle.

MILANO (V. O.) Learning how to shimmy like Sister Kate in that jazz tune was not Tony's aim. His sole objective was to snuggle up close and personal, and as often as possible, to his favorite young ladies, like Gina Rosetti, without pulverizing their toes or bulldozing into the chaperones at upcoming dances like the Freshman Frolic and Sophomore Hop.

Gina pulls away from Tony's bear hug.

GINA Tony, we're supposed to be dancing, not smooching. Tony responds by swinging Gina around with a great flourish. He is quite pleased with himself and his maneuver. Gina smiles indulgently.

MILANO (V. O.) So the quicker Tony's pedal extremities could do their stuff, and the faster he got on the school dance floor, the better. (a beat) There was just one hitch, however.

ON SAL MILANO AND NOOTSY TEZZZONI

Sal and NOOTSY TEZZZONI, 14, are observing the dancers. Nootsy is eyeing Tony sullenly.

NOOTSY I can't believe they let Perelli in the club, Sal. You guys sneaked him in, didn't you? For that you should all go to confession every day for a month.

SAL MILANO Tony's a good kid, Nootsy. He's just a little different, but he's got a good heart, and everybody likes him. And all his friends in the club agreed not to tell the priests. Isn't that what friends are for?

Nootsy continues to eye Tony with suspicion.

ON TONY AND GINA

Tony is thoroughly enjoying his turn with Gina.

MILANO (V. O.) The hitch I mentioned was that my friend, Tony, was about as Catholic as Al Jolson, the Marx Brothers, and the Archbishop of Canterbury. He barely had credentials for walking by a Catholic Church let alone being inside one. Gina now seems to be enjoying herself with Tony.

MILANO (V. O.) The less the priests knew about Tony, the better. So for weeks, with the help of conniving friends, whose lips were sealed, he somehow managed to remain reasonably invisible to prying ecclesiastical eyes. His anonymity seemed secure.

CLOSE ON NOOTSY TEZZZONI

His disapproving eye is riveted on Tony.

MILANO (V. O.) Or so Tony thought.

ON NOOTSY TEZZONI AND FATHER MULLIGAN

On the other side of the room, Nootsy Tezzoni is standing next to FATHER MULLIGAN and pointing to Tony.

MILANO (V. O.) On this particular night, Father Mulligan was filling in for Father Guilfoyle, who was ill. We weren't too happy about that.

CLOSE ON GIRL OPERATING THE PHONOGRAPH

She selects a recording from a stack of records.

TIGHT ON HER HANDS

She places the record on the turntable. We can read the label. It is Cole Porter's BEGIN THE BEGUINE by the Artie Shaw band.

ON SCENE

Responding to the first few notes of the song, almost all the boys and girls begin dancing.

CLOSE ON NOOTSY AND FATHER MULLIGAN

Nootsy whispers into Father Mulligan's ear while pointing to Tony.

WIDER VIEW

With his eye on Tony, Father Mulligan moves closer to the edge of the dance floor. He signals to Tony.

ON TONY AND GINA

Tony, oblivious to Father Mulligan's signaling, continues dancing.

ON FATHER MULLIGAN

He waves his arm and signals again. When there is no response, he signals to those close to Tony and Gina.

ON SCENE

One of the girls taps Tony's shoulder and points to Father Mulligan on the other side.

Tony turns to the priest and responds with a "who-me?" look.

Father Mulligan nods and motions Tony to join him.

Most of the boys and girls have stopped dancing. Tony scans their silent faces. They avoid eye contact with him.

ON GROUP OF BOYS AND GIRLS

BOY What's going on?

GIRL

(shrugging) Looks like Father Mulligan wants to speak to Tony Perelli.

SAL MILANO

Oh, oh!

GIRL

Too bad Father Guilfoyle's out sick tonight. I like it better when he's in charge. Father Mulligan's too strict. I don't think he even likes these dances.

SAL MILANO Remember, our lips are sealed. about Tony. ON SCENE

Tony slowly shuffles across the floor toward Father Mulligan.

ON FATHER MULLIGAN

He is 50, big, burly, and built like an NFL lineman. He is wearing a black cassock and biretta.

> MILANO (V. O.) In those pre-ecumenical days, even if you were Catholic any brush with the wrong priest could be a memorable encounter. If he was a cantankerous one, it could be a near catastrophe. And if he was an ex-college football lineman of sizable proportions, you said a dozen Hail Marys and prayed without ceasing for Divine deliverance.

ON SCENE

All eyes are on Tony as he approaches Father Mulligan.

ON FATHER MULLIGAN

He stares at the group and speaks sharply, like a drill sergeant with an Irish brogue.

FATHER MULLIGAN All right, everyone. Go back to your light fantastickS. I have business with this boy.

ON GROUP

The boys and girls glance at each other, then resume dancing.

INT. MEETING ROOM - NIGHT

Father Guilfoyle is conducting a Newman Club meeting.

MILANO (V. O.) We all preferred Father Guilfoyle, our regular priest at Newman Club meetings.

MILANO (V. O.) (continued) He was like the old priest in that Bing Crosby movie, Going My Way. The one played by Barry Fitzgerald. You know, the kind dear to the hearts of Hollywood producers who liked their Irish priests to have a touch of the leprechaun about them. We could always joke and trade blarney with Father Guilfoyle.

TIGHT ON FATHER MULLIGAN

MILANO (V. O.) (continued) But Father Mulligan. Well, you couldn't blarney him. He was absolutely blarney-proof. To put it charitably, he was definitely not your Barry Fitzgerald kind of padre. No one but his sainted mother would have dared to croon him to sleep with a chorus or two of Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ra.

ON TONY AND FATHER MULLIGAN

Tony arrives in front of Father Mulligan and glances up at his imposing figure.

Father Mulligan's arms are folded ominously and his biretta seems to extend his height by half a foot.

Tony's eyes shift unsurely up and down. The priest guides him to a far corner of the room and skewers him with a long, hard stare. Finally, he speaks

> FATHER MULLIGAN I've never laid eyes on you before. You're not of this parish, I'm told. Pray, may I ask what you're doing here?

MILANO (V. O.) Not of this parish? Tony wasn't even within a celestial mile of Father Mulligan's persuasion.

MILANO (V. O.)

(continued) The jig was up. The dreaded hour of exposure had finally arrived. It was time For Tony to own up to his little stratagem.

TONY Learning how to dance. That's why I come here, Father.

Father Mulligan's neck reddens, and he stares at Tony with Irish eyes that are not smiling.

FATHER MULLIGAN Dancing is it now? Maybe it's your soul and not your feet that needs instruction, I'm thinking.

MILANO (V. O.) Oh, oh! Father Mulligan was on to Tony, all right, thanks to that ratfink, Nootsy Tezzoni. But Nootsy didn't know the whole story about Tony. And Tony was too smart to spill all the beans about himself.

FATHER MULLIGAN You live in this neighborhood, I'm told. Your Italian relatives say Mass here, good Catholics every one. And you don't attend services here?

TONY

No, Father.

FATHER MULLIGAN What is your parish -- Saint Patrick's? Saint Mary's?

MILANO (V. O.) There was no escape, now. Father Mulligan's inquisitorial tone was forcing Tony into a fuller disclosure. It was much more than he had bargained for.

TONY (stammering) Well, Father I - I have a confession to make. MILANO (V. O.) There they were, those magic words guaranteed to put a sparkle in the eyes of any priest. Father Mulligan suddenly beams, his eyes glittering and sparkling with great expectations. FATHER MULLIGAN Yes, yes, go on. He is savoring every moment of this spiritual windfall. Tony hesitates and takes a deep breath before speaking. TONY You see, Father, I - I really don't belong to any parish. I'm - well, I'm not Catholic. Father Mulligan nearly chokes. FATHER MULLIGAN Not Catholic? And you with an Italian name and all. TONY I know, Father, but you see --Father Mulligan's eyes glitter even brighter than before. FATHER MULLIGAN If it's conversion and baptism you're needing, I can see to that. MILANO (V. O.) The dark night of Tony's unshriven soul was growing blacker.

> TONY I don't think so, Father. Because, well, because my Dad is Protestant. We go to the First Methodist Church.

Father Mulligan groans.

FATHER MULLIGAN Protestant? Methodist?

TONY

And all my aunts and uncles, my Dad's brothers and sisters, are Methodists, too.

Father Mulligan is dumbstruck and glassy-eyed.

TONY

(continued) It's because of my grandmother. When she and my grandfather came from Italy, they lived next door to a Methodist Church, and she kept hearing all the beautiful hymns the people sang. And she liked them so much she took my father and his brothers and sisters into that church, and they became Methodists from then on. She told my grandfather, this is America, not the Old Country.

FATHER MULLIGAN (groaning lugubriously) Italian Methodists!

MILANO (V. O.) That glitter in Father Mulligan's eyes was now doing a vanishing act.

Tony is unsure whether to continue. Finally, he speaks.

TONY Another thing, Father.

Father Mulligan's voice is a bare whisper.

FATHER MULLIGAN There's more?

TONY Yes. It's about My mother.

FATHER MULLIGAN What about your mother?

Father Mulligan winces. His jaw drops. His eyes search heavenward. His face is a study in utter disbelief.

FATHER MULLIGAN Jewish? JEWISH?

MILANO (V. O.) Whether from adolescent gall or a sense of guilt, Tony compulsively began spilling his guts. He was on an unholy roll, and his cup of confession was running overtime and every which way.

TONY

(breathlessly) And in September, I had my bar mitzvah because my Jewish grandfather asked my parents as a favor because there were no other boys my age on my mother's side of the family. And because he was getting pretty old and maybe he would never get to see another bar mitzvah in the family. And my parents said it was up to me, and I said yes I would, and I studied at the shul for months, And on the day of my bar mitzvah, my Catholic and Protestant friends and relatives all came to the synagogue, and --

MILANO (V. O.) Boy, was I wrong. Tony did spill the beans like they were shot out of a machine gun.

FATHER MULLIGAN (almost gagging) Bar Mitzvah? Bar Mitzvah?

Tony expects the priest's collar to ignite at any moment.

MILANO (V. O.) That did it. The clincher, the crusher, the last straw, the final blow to Father Mulligan's unecumenical consciousness, which evidently had no room for spiritual enlightenment, perhaps in the way the inn in Bethlehem had no room for the Christ child.

Father Mulligan soundlessly points a foreboding finger toward the door, and the shadowy blackness of his cassock and biretta give him the appearance of the finger-pointing third apparition in Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol.

Tony's cup of revelations is still running over, however.

TONY Even so, Father, I'm still a Protestant and I --

Tony's voice trails off, snuffed out by the priest's purgatorial finger.

MILANO (V. O.) By this time, Tony was so intimidated by the priest, he was abandoning all hope of ever mastering the Lindy Hop. And as the Artie Shaw band began the final chorus of Begin the Beguine, Father Mulligan, nearly gagging and still pointing his finger toward the door, began a final chorus of his own.

FATHER MULLIGAN Begone with you, now! Begone! And may the Lord have mercy on your soul!

WIDER VIEW

As the other boys and girls look on, Tony heads toward the door leading upstairs to the church foyer and exit. MILANO (V. 0.) For Tony, it was a most inelegant dismissal on the heels of a most unholy encounter. Which later caused him to reflect that in the art of graceless ejection, the brusque, hidebound, and very autocratic Father Mulligan had no equal, and that rather than the priesthood, perhaps his true calling was barroom-bouncing,

INT. SYNAGOGUE - DAY

Wearing a yamulke, phylacteries, and prayer shawl, Tony recites in Hebrew during his bar mitzvah ceremony.

TONY Baruh atah adonay eloheynu meleh ha'olam --

MILANO (V. O.) That year, Tony's autumn season opened with a bar mitzvah --

INT. ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH MEETING ROOM - NIGHT

Tony is spilling his guts to Father Mulligan.

MILANO (V. O.) -- bombed with a confession --

ON FATHER MULLIGAN - ANOTHER ANGLE

Father Mulligan is brusquely dismissing Tony.

MILANO (V. O.) -- and closed with an excommunication. (a beat) They don't seem to make encounters like that anymore. EXT. ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH - NIGHT

Tony exits the church and heads toward home in the chilly November night. We follow him as Sal Milano resumes his narration.

> MILANO (V. O.) Tony's encounter with the priest became the talk of the neighborhood. People joked about who threw the chopped liver in Father Mulligan's catechism, a takeoff on one of his favorite Irish ditties -who threw the overalls in Missus Murphy's chowder? Nootsy Tezzoni didn't think it was so funny. But, then, to get a laugh out of Nootsy, you had to slip on a banana peel, preferably at the top of a long, steep stairway.

As Tony continues walking, he begins whistling Cole Porter's BEGIN THE BEGUINE,

MILANO (V. O.) (continued) Years later, Tony, who was always full of surprises, married a Catholic girl, the very same Gina Rosetti he once bear-hugged on the dance floor in Saint Joseph's Church. At their wedding reception, he told everyone it was the marriage of matzo balls and meatballs. Only in America, he said, quoting Jewish humorist, Harry Golden, and echoing the words of his Italian grandmother who fell madly in love with all those Methodist hymns.

Tony stops whistling and looks around cautiously to see if anyone is nearby that might be watching.

Feeling safe from prying eyes, Tony resumes whistling BEGIN THE BEGUINE.

MILANO (V. O.) (continued) Over the years, I've run into Tony every so often. We've talked about a lot of things, but never about religion. In fact, the older I get, the more I believe that religious and ethnic labels don't really matter much to God as long as you have a pure heart, something Tony has always had in abundance.

Tony stops walking, looks around again, then begins trying out his newly-learned dance steps. Soon, he is gliding and whirling around on the sidewalk with an imaginary partner.

He continues whistling, and his dancing becomes more animated and joyful.

FADE OUT

THE END