

David Huddle

an excerpt of

Volunteer

WHEN Sonny starts to enter a room, kids begin streaming out of it. When he tries to leave a room, kids on their way in jam the doorway. Murmuring, “Excuse me,” “Oops,” and “I’m sorry,” Sonny moves against the flow, his arms slightly lifted, his eyes looking down into upturned faces and onto the tops of amazing heads of hair. Who knew the hairstyles of children were miracles of cosmetic engineering? And their voices make a high-pitched, fast-cadenced music Sonny can’t imagine ever getting used to. This is his first day at the King Street Youth Center. He’s sixty-one. He’s never before volunteered. He hopes he’ll get through the afternoon.

No children of his own, Sonny fought his first two wives to keep from having them. It’s not an issue with Louise, his third. And anyway she has two by her ex, both grown and keeping their distance. Today he realizes he’s underestimated his ignorance of children.

So far, Sonny hasn’t found a way to get a kid to speak to him. Or even to stand still and look directly at him. “Hi,” he says as he approaches one sitting at a computer off by himself. The boy glances up at him, stands up, and walks out of the room. Sonny hopes no one has seen his first exchange with a King Street youth. He sits down at the kid’s machine. The boy had been playing something called “Love Hina Sim Date RPG.” Sonny blinks at the screen. A retired professor of computer technology at St. Michael’s College, he hasn’t encountered anything like this. He’s being advised to “GO TO THE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL AND HIT ON HOT CHICKS THERE GET TO KNOW THEM AND FIGHT THEM.” He’s tempted to put his hand on the mouse, move the cursor, and click on the button.

When Sonny was a boy, he couldn’t have imagined a world where he might face a machine like this. The most exciting thing in his life at that age

was Father Hirschfield. Father James. Jim Hirschfield is probably the reason Sonny's sitting in this too-small chair right at this moment.

Sonny grew up in Queens about as Catholic as you could get. German on one side, Irish on the other, and both sides what Sonny privately terms "heavy Catholics," meaning that as a kid he felt like he carried a weighty chunk of the church on his back, all day every day. Meaning that Father James constantly whispered in his ear: *You must be kinder than your friends. You must take care of your sister. Each day is a chance to do some good. Everyone suffers—remember that before you speak in anger. Harm no one.*

Fifty years later, Father James still whispers to him on a daily basis.

With this remembrance of Jim Hirschfield, the basic complication of Sonny's life comes back as well—his old flasher grandmother. Whenever she comes to mind—though she died when Sonny was nineteen—the old woman makes him shake his head. Grandma Baumen was like the family's own personal representative of the devil. Hated Protestants, hated Jews, hated all persons of color and most especially hated Blacks, hated Italians, hated Roosevelt, hated Truman, and hated Eisenhower. Also wore no underwear. Or wore it only once a year, when she attended Easter Mass at St. Patrick's Old Cathedral.

Sonny shakes his head. Grandma Baumen and Father James made him what he is today, a man sitting in a child's chair in a room as alien to him as a spaceship. A man shaking his head to clear it, even as he knows these voices and demons are with him for the long haul.