

Some Things Aren't To Be

Chapter 1

April 1962

Sacred Heart Parish, Providence, Vermont

Father Amand Symanski stands in the main hallway pinning a message onto the bulletin board next to the principal's office. The message says, *ALTAR BOYS' PRACTICE TODAY - 3:30*. Yesterday, he told the boys there would not be practice but he has changed his mind. He will announce the same message on the school's PA system later this morning.

Father Symanski wears a black shirt with a white clerical collar, neatly-pressed black pants with a black belt, and black shoes that are so shiny the leather looks like plastic. The shoes cost more than most parishioners at Sacred Heart Church earn in a week. He checks his watch. The late bell rang five minutes ago. "Where is that boy?" he mumbles to himself.

The front door to the school bangs open and Patrick Colman bolts through. He trots by Father Symanski without seeing him. His eyes are still getting used to the darker inside of the building compared to the bright sunshine outside. He walks halfway to his locker, about twenty yards from the main door, and stops to scuff his right sneaker against the tile floor. The hard scuff produces a loud squeak. He repeats the squeak with every step from there to his locker.

Father Symanski follows Patrick. When he catches up to him, he grabs Patrick's right shoulder. Patrick is startled and drops his books to the floor with an echoing clatter.

"Mr. Colman, you're late," Father Symanski says.

Some Things Aren't To Be

“Yes, Father,” Patrick says, as he bends down to gather his books.

“Don’t be late again.”

“I won’t.”

“Patrick?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Do you love Jesus?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Mr. Colman, don’t lie to me. Do you love Jesus?”

“Yes, Father, I’ve already told you I love Jesus.”

“Where were you yesterday?”

“Um ...”

“You missed Latin. Boys who love Jesus don’t skip Latin practice. Where were you?”

“I was...”

“I know where you were, Mr. Colman. You were playing baseball with the boys from Providence Junior High.”

“No, I wasn’t, Father.” He looks at the immaculate floor and shuffles his feet.

“Don’t lie to me, Mr. Colman. I saw you. You still have mud on your sneakers.” Father Symanski’s eyes travel down to and back up from Patrick’s feet.

“I’m not lying, Father.” His voice cracks.

“Why did you miss Latin yesterday? All the other altar boys were there, all of them. Why weren’t you there?” His voice booms down to the far end of the hallway.

“Um....” Patrick mumbles.

Father Symanski can barely hear him. “Because you were playing baseball, that’s why, Mr. Colman. Do you love baseball more than Jesus?”

“No, Father.”

Some Things Aren't To Be

Two boys walking toward them stop to listen. Father Symanski waves them away. “Not your business, boys. Go back to class.”

“Father Symanski,” Monsignor John Gauthier yells from down the hall. He walks briskly toward Father Symanski and Patrick. His robe sways as he walks. “Patrick, I understand you missed Latin practice yesterday.”

Patrick’s eyes fill with tears.

“It was the first warm day of spring. I would have missed it too. It’s snowing now, snowing hard. You picked the perfect day,” Monsignor Gauthier says.

Father Symanski exhales deeply. “The Mass is sacred. The boys need to know their responses. They must pronounce the Latin words correctly. All of them should attend; no exceptions for baseball or for a warm spring day,” he says.

“Cut the boy some slack. He’s thirteen, I barely knew who Jesus was when I was thirteen.” Monsignor Gauthier coughs to clear his throat. “Patrick, do you love Jesus?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Good for you. I do too. Come with me, boy.” He places his right hand on Patrick’s left shoulder. “Father Symanski, tell Sister Ryan that Patrick is with me—he’ll be late for class.”

“How late?”

“I don’t know, just say late.”

Father Symanski leans toward Patrick. “Make sure you go to confession Saturday. Lying is a sin.” He lightly pokes Patrick’s shoulder, turns his back to Monsignor Gauthier, grimaces and shakes his head.

Monsignor gently pushes Patrick toward the main entrance to the school. “Come. I’ve got a job for you, Mr. Colman. One I’ve been meaning to do for months.” He walks Patrick to the rectory and up to his second-floor apartment, which smells like pipe tobacco. A black-

Some Things Aren't To Be

and-white photo of the Taj Mahal in a walnut frame is mounted on the wall to the left of the door.

“Is that in India?” Patrick asks.

“Yes, it is. I took that picture when I was twenty-two years old, just out of college, 1924—thirty-eight years ago this summer. Seems like it was just yesterday. Best two years of my life. I thought I was going to be the next Theodore Dreiser. I went to India to create an adventure and then write a novel. I found my story and wrote my novel, but I learned I couldn't write worth beans. I've written three novels and at least a hundred short stories, all of them pretty terrible. I've tried hard, Mr. Colman, but I failed. Ever heard of Theodore Dreiser?”

Patrick shakes his head.

“You're too young. When you're older, promise me you'll read *Sister Carrie*.”

Patrick mumbles, “Yes, sir.”

Monsignor Gauthier guides Patrick through the living room to the den. Bookshelves are mounted along each side wall from one end of the room to the other, from the floor to the ceiling. Two maple bookcases, each five foot tall, are flush against the back wall, jammed with record albums. Half a dozen albums are scattered on top of a large, maple desk. A pipe rack with four pipes, a green desk lamp, a notepad, a dictionary, a pocket watch, a set of keys, and a thesaurus are also on the desktop.

“I want you to make sure all the albums are in alphabetical order. You do know the alphabet?” Monsignor smiles.

“Yes, Father.” Patrick's words tremble.

“Patrick, relax, that was a joke. You're in seventh grade. If you don't know the alphabet by now, we're doing something terribly wrong here at good old Sacred Heart School.” He points to the record albums. “Start with the Bs—I don't have any As—on the left bookcase, top shelf, left side, and work your way down the bookcase. Sort by

Some Things Aren't To Be

composer, not by the title of the album. Pull out any album that's out of order and stack it on the desk. Can you do that?"

"Composer?" Patrick asks.

"Bach, Beethoven, Mozart. Have you heard of them?"

Patrick nods.

"Good. Most of the albums will say music by whomever. If you're not sure, leave it where it is."

"Yes, Father."

"Patrick, this is an easy task and it gets you out of class. What could be better?"

Patrick smiles. "What if there's more than one composer on the album?"

"That always screws me up." He thinks for a second. "If there is more than one, leave it where it is."

"Yes, sir."

"It should take you about two hours, maybe less. I'm going downtown, so I'll leave you here on your own." He grabs a piece of paper from the notepad on the desk and writes a note. "When you get back to class, give this to Sister Ryan." He folds the paper and hands the note to Patrick. "If you get hungry, there's food in the refrigerator and cookies in the breadbox. Just don't drink the beer." He chuckles.

Patrick starts where he was told, at the top shelf, left side. Bach, Beethoven, I've heard of them. Irving Berlin, no clue. Georges Bizet, nope. Brahms, "Lullaby and Goodnight," I know that song. Chopin, I know him, I saw the movie. He dies. He pulls the Chopin record from the sleeve. It slips from his hand, bounces off the desk, hits the floor, and cracks. "Fuck. Oh fuck, oh fuck. Oh no, no, no, no, no," he says.

He picks the record off the floor. The crack is three inches long. He searches the desk. He finds a bottle of Elmer's glue and spreads the glue on the crack, presses the vinyl together, wipes away the excess glue with his finger, shoves the record into the paper sleeve, the sleeve

Some Things Aren't To Be

into the cardboard cover, and places the record on the last shelf after Wagner.

“How are you doing, Patrick?” Monsignor Gauthier says, startling Patrick.

“Fine, Father.” He can barely speak. His pulse is so strong he is sure Gauthier can see the veins on his neck throb.

“Good. Forgot my car keys, always forgetting my keys.” He walks to the desk and spots the open drawer and the bottle of glue. “Did you glue something, Patrick?”

“No, Father.”

“I must have left it out. My memory is slipping. Next thing you know, I’ll be in a home for forgetful old priests.” He smiles and tosses the glue bottle into the drawer and closes it with his right knee. “What time is it?”

“I don’t know, Father. There’s a watch right there.” He points to the pocket watch on the desk.

“That old thing? Hasn’t worked in years.”

“Why do you keep it?”

“Just do.” He grabs the car keys and pocket watch from the desktop, steps to the bookshelf, searches for a few seconds, and pulls a paperback book from the third shelf. “I want you to read this book, *A Separate Peace*. Wonderful book. High school level, but you can handle it.”

“I don’t know, Father, I got a C in English. Maybe it would be a better book for somebody else.”

“You can do it, I’m sure. I’ve seen your essays, you’re the best writer in this school, the best since I’ve been here. No one else is even a close second.”

Monsignor Gauthier reads the first paragraph. “I went back to Devon School not long ago, and found it looking oddly newer than when I was a student there fifteen years before. It seemed more

Some Things Aren't To Be

sedate than I remembered it, more perpendicular and straight-laced, with narrower windows and shinier woodwork, as though a coat of varnish had been put over everything for better preservation.” He closes the book and hands it to Patrick. “Make sure you remember this scene. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Father.”

“I’m going to test you, so pay attention to what you read.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Three weeks, I’ll test you in three weeks.” He jingles his car keys as he walks toward the door. “Three weeks, Mr. Colman.”

“Yes, sir.”

Gauthier exits the building. Patrick’s heart is still beating hard. He considers removing the Chopin record and taking it with him, but he leaves it on the shelf.

Some Things Aren't To Be

Chapter 2

August 1928

Doty Farm, East Providence, Vermont

“Gauthier, what the hell are you doing?” dairy farmer Charles Doty says. He hacks a wad of mucus from the back of his throat and spits it to the ground. He wears denim pants, brown leather work boots, and a red-and-black flannel shirt and is holding a lighted kerosene lantern in his left hand. He is tall, six-foot-four. His shoulders are broad and his arms are strong. His blond hair is a rumpled mess. A golden retriever leans against his legs, growling at his farmhand, John Gauthier. Charles swats the dog’s nose. “Butch, stop it.”

John is standing at the hind end of a Holstein cow, trying to push it to the middle of the barn. His right side, from his head to his shoes, is covered with cow manure. He digs manure out of his ear. “I’m trying to get this cow out of her stall so I can milk her. She won’t budge,” he says.

Charles shakes his head and grins. “First off, Gauthier, it ain’t a stall, it’s a stanchion. Stalls are for horses. And second, we milk the cows in the stanchions, not in the middle of the goddamn barn. If we did that, it would take all day. We’d never get nothing done.”

“There’s not enough room in here,” John says. He pounds the side walls to prove what he just said.

“There’s plenty of room. Plus, that’s Cow Fifty, she gets milked last.” He grabs a towel hanging from a nail on the right wall and tosses it to John. “Clean yourself up.”

John wipes his hair, shoulder, side, and pant leg. “That’s not Cow Fifty. You’ve got only thirty-one cows, I counted.”

Some Things Aren't To Be

"I didn't say she were the fiftieth cow, I said she were Cow Fifty. She lives in stanchion fifty."

"How do you know which stanchion is which? They're not marked."

"Gauthier, use your head. There are fifty stanchions in the barn, twenty-five along the left wall and twenty-five on the right wall. Stanchion one is over there." He points to the left wall. He walks through the barn and hangs the lantern on a wire hook dangling from the ceiling. "We milk 'em in two shifts. We milk the first sixteen cows, Cow One through Cow Thirty-four, then we take a break and stretch our arms and legs and backs, and then we milk the next eight cows."

"That's only twenty-four. What about the other seven cows?"

"We got seven dry cows, Gauthier, I told you that yesterday. Didn't you hear a good goddamn thing I said?"

"How do you know which cow is which? They all look alike to me?"

"They're all different. You'll figure that out soon enough. Don't matter if you do or don't, cause cows are creatures of habit, they'll go in the same stanchion every time, whether you guide them there or not. Most cows are pretty docile, sweet creatures who can be encouraged to go where they're used ta goin'. Encouraged, Gauthier, not forced. Cow Fifty, she's different, she's as stubborn as a mule."

He pulls a cigarette from the top of his left ear, lights it, and blows the smoke toward John. He spits into the dirt and rubs the spit with the toe of his left boot, walks to the sink at the back wall, fills a five-gallon wooden bucket with soapy water and iodine and another bucket with water, wets two rags, and grabs two empty milk buckets from under the sink. He hands John a milk bucket, the damp cloths, and the two cleaning buckets. "You start here with Cow Thirty-two and I'll start with Cow One. The stools are over there." He points to the back wall, where several stools are hanging from long nails. John tosses the damp cloths onto his right shoulder, retrieves a stool, walks to

Some Things Aren't To Be

stanchion thirty-two, places the stool next to the cow, sets the milk bucket under the udder, and grabs the front two teats.

“Gauthier, wash your goddamn hands and cover them with Vaseline,” Charles says.

“Sorry, forgot.”

John washes and lubricates his hands. He returns to the cow, sits on the stool, and tugs on the teats.

“You didn’t hear a damn thing I said yesterday, did ya? Use the damp cloth with the soap and iodine and wipe the mud and manure off the udder before ya start milkin’. We don’t want no cow shit in our milk. Then wipe with the wet cloth with no soap. It ain’t that hard. Use the soapy cloth to get the shit off and the wet cloth to get the soap off. When your milk bucket’s full, dump the milk into one of them milk cans.” He points to the cans at the far end of the barn. “And make sure you use a goddamn filter. Once the milk can is filled, secure the top and place it in the concrete tub in the milk room. There’s cold spring water running through the tub. Gotta keep the milk cold.

“After we finish milkin’, we guide the cows to the field, feed the horses, and eat breakfast. After breakfast, I’ll hitch the horses and we’ll load the cans. I’ll take the milk to the creamery in Providence, seven miles from here. Takes about two hours and a half to get there. You’ll clean the barn and put down new wood shavings and feed the calves and the heifers. After that, if you’re smart, you’ll take a nap, an hour or so, so you can be ready for the next round of chores. If you don’t take a nap, Gauthier, you ain’t gonna make it long, that’s for sure.”

John cleans the udder, grabs a teat with his right hand, and tugs on it. Charles shakes his head, grabs John’s shoulders, easily lifts him off the stool, and places him next to the cow. Charles is a much bigger man than John—taller, wider, and stronger. John is five eight, thin but not skinny, one hundred forty solid pounds. He has ink-black hair, thick

Some Things Aren't To Be

eyebrows, large brown eyes, and long eyelashes. He could pass for a teenager.

“Stop. Don’t do anything till I get back,” Charles says. He walks to the sink and washes and lubricates his hands. “You went to college, right?”

“Yup—got a BA in American literature. Graduated third in my class.”

“Sure as hell didn’t get no degree in common sense.”

“Nope. I did not.”

Charles sits on the stool and pulls the bucket out from under the cow. “Here’s what you do. Can you remember this?”

“Yes, sir.” John nods and salutes him as if Charles were his drill sergeant.

“Don’t call me sir, I’m just four years older than you. I’m Charles, not Mr. Doty.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Charles, sir.” he says and grins.

“You gotta massage the udder when you clean it. That relaxes the muscles. You wiped it like you was wipin’ snot off your nose. Then grab the teat like this.” He places his right thumb and forefinger at the base of one of the teats. “Curl your fingers around the teat and squeeze it downward against the palm of your hand.” He squeezes the teat twice. A splat of milk squirts to the ground with each squeeze. “Always squirt the first few ounces to the ground to make sure there ain’t no dirt or shit still on the teat.” He replaces the bucket under the udder and squirts several ounces of milk into the bucket. “Got it?”

“Got it.” John nods.

“Start with the front teats and alternate from teat to teat. Squeeze until each teat is empty. The milk should stream into the bucket. Use both your hands, otherwise your fingers and wrist will get too sore.”

“I’ve got it.”

Some Things Aren't To Be

“You got it all right, and Calvin Coolidge is gonna start babbling like a teenage girl. Gabby Cal.” He scratches his nose. “One more thing, Gauthier, you’re likely ta get swatted in the face with the cow’s tail, a wet, urine-, and shit-soaked tail. Just be ready, happens every day.”

“Can’t wait.”

The two men milk for an hour. John stands up, rubs his hands together, and stretches his back. Charles stands up from his stool, stretches his back, and walks toward John. “Gauthier, you’ve only milked three cows. Yesterday, the wife milked twice as fast and she’s seven months pregnant. At this rate, we’ll be here milkin’ till it’s time for the second milkin’ tonight.”

“A second milking?”

“I told you that yesterday. You didn’t listen much, did ya? Two milkin’s a day, five thirty in the mornin’ and five thirty at night, seven days a week, three hundred sixty-five days a year, three hundred sixty-six on leap year. These ain’t no bankers’ hours.”

The men finish milking at ten. Charles looks at his watch. “Not too bad. Coulda been a hell of a lot worse.” He tosses the wiping cloths into a bucket next to the sink, washes his hands, and kicks cow manure off his boots. “Let’s go get sumthin’ to eat, I’m starved.”

John starts to walk out of the barn. “Gauthier, never, never, never leave lanterns on in the barn, you could burn the whole goddamn place down. Thirty-one burnt cows would really stink.” When Charles says “cows” the word sounds like “kayows.” He extinguishes the flames from all three lanterns and points toward the house. “Time to eat.”

The Doty farmhouse is two separate buildings connected by a common wall. The front section, built in 1853, is a one-story brick house with six rooms. All the windows rattle in the wind and the roof leaks during a heavy rain. The back, a two-story wood building, has

Some Things Aren't To Be

seven rooms, including a kitchen no one has used since Charles's mother died twenty years ago and a bathroom. It is very cold when the temperature dips below zero. John's bedroom is in the back section.

The house smells like bacon, coffee, and fried onions, which Charles's wife, Audrey, has cooked, along with eggs, oatmeal, hash brown potatoes, and toast. Sliced apples and pears round out the spread. She grabs three plates from the cupboard next to the sink and waddles to the kitchen table, her left hand pushing against her back. She is nearly as wide as she is tall. "You're a total mess, looks like somebody dipped you in manure," she says to John. She laughs so hard she has to sit down. "I hope I don't pee my pants." She smiles and composes herself. "How's day one going?" She chuckles as she speaks.

"I don't know, I'm still half asleep. Charles got me up at four thirty. That's crazy. I've never gotten up that early in my entire life." He tries to make a fist with both hands, but he can't close his fingers on either hand. "I can barely move my fingers." The two men wash their hands at the kitchen sink.

Charles grabs a washcloth from under the sink and wipes cow manure off the back of John's shirt. "You missed a spot." He bends down and wipes John's pants. "It gets easier. Either that or you'll quit."

"I'm not a quitter," John says.

"That's what the last guy said. Quit after three days. Didn't show up for the mornin' milkin'. I went to his room to get him, and he was gone. Slipped out sometime in the middle of the night. Didn't even hear him leave. Never came back, not even for his pay. Are you gonna slip out in the middle of the night, Gauthier?"

"Don't plan to."

"Good."

Charles and John sit at the kitchen table. "John, just so you know, nobody covered with manure sits at this kitchen table to eat," Audrey says.

"Sorry," he says, as he stands and starts toward his room.

Some Things Aren't To Be

“He’s fine, I wiped him clean,” Charles says.

“You did not.” She points to the door to the back building. “Go to your room and change.” She sounds like a teacher scolding a naughty child.

“Yes, Mom,” Charles says and laughs.

••••

Charles and Audrey eat so fast, it surprises John. “Eat up,” Audrey says to John.

“Want to hear sumthin’ funny?” Charles says to Audrey. “Gauthier, how much you weigh?” “I don’t know, one hundred thirty pounds, maybe one forty, not sure.”

“And you got a college degree, right?” John nods.

Charles chortles as if he were telling a funny joke and he can’t wait to get to the punchline. “So this one-hundred-forty-pound, skinny college man, flatlander, city boy, tries to push a thirteen-hundred-pound cow to the middle of the barn. Can you believe that?”

“Cow Fifty?” Audrey says.

“Yup, Cow Fifty.” He smiles and shakes his head. “So, Gauthier, what made you think you could push a thirteen-hundred-pound cow across the barn?” Both he and Audrey smile.

“I don’t know, seemed like the right thing to do at the time.”

Audrey stands up and grabs her belly. She is John’s age, possibly a year or two younger. She has shoulder-length red hair, piercing blue eyes, a face full of freckles, a dimple on her right cheek, and a warm smile. “She’s kicking really hard this morning. I don’t think I’m gonna make it nine months.”

The baby kicks her. She grabs John’s right hand and places it on her bulging stomach. “Can you feel that?”

“Yes, I can. I’ve never felt anything like that before. How do you know it’s a girl?”

“I was sick early in the pregnancy. That means she’s a girl.”

Some Things Aren't To Be

"I don't think that's true," John says.

"It's true all right," Charles says. He gathers the dishes and places them in the sink. He wipes his face dry with his shirtsleeve. "Gauthier, why the hell are you here?"

"I'm eating breakfast."

"Not here in the kitchen, dumbass, here in Vermont?"

"I answered your ad. I'm here to work for you, to work on your farm."

"I know that, but why are you here, in East Providence, in the middle of frickin' nowhere? You got a college degree. You're gonna work fifty hours a week for what, twenty-five bucks? I'm paying you next to nothin'. You could do a hell of a lot better. You're not hidin' out from the law are ya, Gauthier?"

"Nope, I'm hiding from my father, not the law."

"Why you hidin' from him?"

"He wants me to join his business. He runs a construction company in Connecticut, and he builds skyscrapers in New York City and Boston. He says I've got to stop wasting my life and join his company."

"Gauthier, use your head for something besides a hat rack. He's right. Why work here, fifty hours a week, when you could be making ten times what you're making for half the work?"

"My father works plenty hard. He's never home."

"Maybe so, but I bet at the end of the day he can open and shut his hands without pain. This ain't no life for you Gauthier. You can do better."

"Maybe I don't want to do better."

"Suit yourself."

Audrey lumbers to the sink, swatting flies as she walks. She fills a glass with water and hands it to John. "If you're going to work here and last more than three days, you need to drink lots of water." He takes the glass from her and empties it in three loud gulps.

Some Things Aren't To Be

“Time to get the girls to the field,” Charles says. He points to the front door. John rises from his seat and rubs his sore hands against his thighs.

“It’ll get easier, it really will,” Audrey says.

“I hope so. I’ve worked only five hours and I can hardly move. I don’t know what’s more sore, my hands or my back.”

“Farming ain’t for sissies, that’s for sure,” Charles says. He gently tugs on John’s right arm and then exits the house.

“Thanks for making me laugh. Haven’t laughed that hard in years.” Audrey gives him a broad smile. “Used to the smell of cow manure yet?”

“Not yet.”

“You’ll get used to it, I did.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the flies.”

She swats a fly away from her face. “What flies?”

They both laugh.

“Don’t worry, they’ll be gone by November.”

“Looking forward to it. Hard to sleep with the constant buzzing.”