

The Machineries of Joy, Ray Bradbury

The Machineries of Joy

Father Brian delayed going below to breakfast because he thought he heard Father Vittorini down there, laughing. Vittorini, as usual, was dining alone. So who was there to laugh with, or at?

Us, thought Father Brian, that's who.

He listened again.

Across the hall Father Kelly too was hiding, or meditating, rather, in his room.

They never let Vittorini finish breakfast, no, they always managed to join him as he chewed his last bit of toast. Otherwise they could not have borne their guilt through the day.

Still, that was laughter, was it not, belowstairs? Father Vittorini had ferreted out something in the morning Times.

Or, worse, had he stayed up half the night with the unholy ghost, that television set which stood in the entry like an unwelcome guest, one foot in whimsy, the other in the doldrums?

And, his mind bleached by the electronic beast, was Vittorini now planning some bright fine new devilment, the cogs wheeling in his soundless mind, seated and deliberately fasting, hoping to lure them down curious at the sound of his Italian humors?

"Ah, God." Father Brian sighed and fingered the envelope he had prepared the previous night. He had tucked it in his coat as a protective measure should he decide to hand it to Pastor Sheldon. Would Father Vittorini detect it through the cloth with his quick dark X-ray vision?

Father Brian pressed his hand firmly along his lapel to squash any merest outline of his request for transferral to another parish.
“Here goes.”

And, breathing a prayer, Father Brian went downstairs.
“Ah, Father Brian!”

Vittorini looked up from his still full cereal bowl. The brute had not even so much as sugared his corn flakes yet.
Father Brian felt as if he had stepped into an empty elevator shaft.

Impulsively he put out a hand to save himself. It touched the top of the television set. The set was warm. He could not help saying, “Did you have a séance here last night?”
“I sat up with the set, yes.”

“Sat up is right!” snorted Father Brian. “One does sit up, doesn’t one, with the sick, or the dead? I used to be handy with the ouija board myself. There was more brains in that.” He turned from the electrical moron to survey Vittorini. “And did you hear far cries and banshee wails from, what is it? Canaveral?”
“They called off the shot at three A.M.”

“And you here now, looking daisy-fresh.” Father Brian advanced, shaking his head. “What’s true is not always what’s fair.”
Vittorini now vigorously doused his flakes with milk. “But you, Father Brian, you look as if you made the grand tour of Hell during the night.”

Fortunately, at this point Father Kelly entered. He froze when he too saw how little along Vittorini was with his fortifiers. He muttered to both priests, seated himself, and glanced over at the perturbed Father Brian.

“True, William, you look half gone. Insomnia?”
“A touch.”

Father Kelly eyed both men, his head to one side. "What goes on here? Did something happen while I was out last night?"

"We had a small discussion," said Father Brian, toying with the dread flakes of corn.

"Small discussion!" said Father Vittorini. He might have laughed, but caught himself and said simply, "The Irish priest is worried by the Italian Pope."

"Now, Father Vittorini," said Kelly.

"Let him run on," said Father Brian.

"Thank you for your permission," said Vittorini, very politely and with a friendly nod. "Il Papa is a constant source of reverent irritation to at least some if not all of the Irish clergy.

Why not a pope named Nolan? Why not a green instead of a red hat? Why not, for that matter, move Saint Peter's Cathedral to Cork or Dublin, come the twenty-fifth century?"

"I hope nobody said that," said Father Kelly.

"I am an angry man," said Father Brian. "In my anger I might have inferred it."

"Angry, why? And inferred for what reason?"

"Did you hear what he just said about the twenty-fifth century?" asked Father Brian. "Well, it's when Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers fly in through the baptistery transom that yours truly hunts for the exits."

Father Kelly sighed. "Ah, God, is it that joke again?"

Father Brian felt the blood burn his cheeks, but fought to send it back to cooler regions of his body.

"Joke? It's off and beyond that. For a month now it's Canaveral this and trajectories and astronauts that. You'd think it was Fourth of July, he's up half each night with the rockets. I mean, now, what kind of life is it, from midnight on, carousing about the entryway with that Medusa

machine which freezes your intellect if ever you stare at it? I cannot sleep for feeling the whole rectory will blast off any minute.”

“Yes, yes,” said Father Kelly. “But what’s all this about the Pope?”

“Not the new one, the one before the last,” said Brian wearily. “Show him the clipping, Father Vittorini.”

Vittorini hesitated.

“Show it,” insisted Brian, firmly.

Father Vittorini brought forth a small press clipping and put it on the table.

Upside down, even, Father Brian could read the bad news: “POPE BLESSES ASSAULT ON SPACE.”

Father Kelly reached one finger out to touch the cutting gingerly. He intoned the news story half aloud, underlining each word with his fingernail:

CASTEL GANDOLFO, ITALY, SEPT. 20—Pope Pius XII gave his blessing today to mankind’s efforts to conquer space.

The Pontiff told delegates to the International Astronautical Congress, “God has no intention of setting a limit to the efforts of man to conquer space.”

The 400 delegates to the 22-nation congress were received by the Pope at his summer residence here.

“This Astronautic Congress has become one of great importance at this time of man’s exploration of outer space,” the Pope said. “It should concern all humanity. . . . Man has to make the effort to put himself in new orientation with God and his universe.”

Father Kelly’s voice trailed off.

“When did this story appear?”

“In 1956.”

“That long back?” Father Kelly laid the thing down. “I didn’t read it.”

“It seems,” said Father Brian, “you and I, Father, don’t read much of anything.”

“Anyone could overlook it,” said Kelly. “It’s a teeny-weeny article.”

“With a very large idea in it,” added Father Vittorini, his good humor prevailing.

“The point is—”

“The point is,” said Vittorini, “when first I spoke of this piece, grave doubts were cast on my veracity. Now we see I have cleaved close by the truth.”

“Sure,” said Father Brian quickly, “but as our poet William Blake put it, ‘A truth that’s told with bad intent beats all the lies you can invent.’”

“Yes.” Vittorini relaxed further into his amiability. “And didn’t Blake also write.

He who doubts from what he sees,
Will ne’er believe, do what you please.

If the Sun and Moon should doubt
They’d immediately go out.

Most appropriate,” added the Italian priest, “for the Space Age.”

Father Brian stared at the outrageous man.

“I’ll thank you not to quote our Blake at us.”

“Your Blake?” said the slender pale man with the softly glowing dark hair. “Strange, I’d always thought him English.”

“The poetry of Blake,” said Father Brian, “was always a great comfort to my mother. It was she told me there was Irish blood on his maternal side.”

“I will graciously accept that,” said Father Vittorini. “But back to the newspaper story. Now that we’ve found it, it seems a good time to do some research on Pius the Twelfth’s encyclical.”

Father Brian's wariness, which was a second set of nerves under his skin, prickled alert.

"What encyclical is that?"

"Why, the one on space travel."

"He didn't do that?"

"He did."

"On space travel, a special encyclical?"

"A special one."

Both Irish priests were near onto being flung back in their chairs by the blast.

Father Vittorini made the picky motions of a man cleaning up after a detonation, finding lint on his coat sleeve, a crumb or two of toast on the tablecloth.

"Wasn't it enough," said Brian, in a dying voice, "he shook hands with the astronaut bunch and told them well done and all that, but he had to go on and write at length about it?"

"It was not enough," said Father Vittorini. "He wished, I hear, to comment further on the problems of life on other worlds, and its effect on Christian thinking."

Each of these words, precisely spoken, drove the two other men farther back in their chairs.

"You hear?" said Father Brian. "You haven't read it yourself yet?"

"No, but I intend—"

"You intend everything and mean worse. Sometimes, Father Vittorini, you do not talk, and I hate to say this, like a priest of the Mother Church at all."

"I talk," replied Vittorini, "like an Italian priest somehow caught and trying to preserve surface tension treading an ecclesiastical bog where I am outnumbered by a great herd of clerics named Shaughnessy and

Nulty and Flannery that mill and stampede like caribou or bison every time I so much as whisper ‘papal bull.’”

“There is no doubt in my mind”—and here Father Brian squinted off in the general direction of the Vatican, itself—“that it was you, if you could’ve been there, might’ve put the Holy Father up to this whole space-travel monkeyshines.”

“I?”

“You! It’s you, is it not, certainly not us, that lugs in the magazines by the carload with the rocket ships on the shiny covers and the filthy green monsters with six eyes and seventeen gadgets chasing after half-draped females on some moon or other?”

You I hear late nights doing the countdowns from ten, nine, eight on down to one, in tandem with the beast TV, so we lie aching for the dread concussions to knock the fillings from our teeth. Between one Italian here and another at Castel Gandolfo, may God forgive me, you’ve managed to depress the entire Irish clergy!”

“Peace,” said Father Kelly at last, “both of you.”

“And peace it is, one way or another I’ll have it,” said Father Brian, taking the envelope from his pocket.

“Put that away,” said Father Kelly, sensing what must be in the envelope.

“Please give this to Pastor Sheldon for me.”

Father Brian rose heavily and peered about to find the door and some way out of the room. He was suddenly gone.

“Now see what you’ve done!” said Father Kelly.

Father Vittorini, truly shocked, had stopped eating. “But, Father, all along I thought it was an amiable squabble, with him putting on and me putting on, him playing it loud and me soft.”

“Well, you’ve played it too long, and the blasted fun turned serious!” said Kelly. “Ah, you don’t know William like I do. You’ve really torn him.”

“I’ll do my best to mend—”

“You’ll mend the seat of your pants! Get out of the way, this is my job now.” Father Kelly grabbed the envelope off the table and held it up to the light, “The X ray of a poor man’s soul. Ah, God.”

He hurried upstairs. “Father Brian?” he called. He slowed. “Father?” He tapped at the door. “William?”

In the breakfast room, alone once more, Father Vittorini remembered the last few flakes in his mouth. They now had no taste. It took him a long slow while to get them down.

It was only after lunch that Father Kelly cornered Father Brian in the dreary little garden behind the rectory and handed back the envelope.

“Willy, I want you to tear this up. I won’t have you quitting in the middle of the game. How long has all this gone on between you two?”

Father Brian sighed and held but did not rip the envelope. “It sort of crept upon us. It was me at first spelling the Irish writers and him pronouncing the Italian operas. Then me describing the Book of Kells in Dublin and him touring me through the Renaissance.

Thank God for small favors, he didn’t discover the papal encyclical on the blasted space traveling sooner, or I’d have transferred my self to a monkery where the fathers keep silence as a vow. But even there, I fear, he’d follow and count down the Canaveral blastoffs in sign language. What a Devil’s advocate that man would make!”

“Father!”

“I’ll do penance for that later. It’s just this dark otter, this seal, he frolics with Church dogma as if it was a candy-striped bouncy ball. It’s all very well to have seals cavorting, but I say don’t mix them with the true fanatics, such as you and me! Excuse the pride, Father, but there does

seem to be a variation on the true theme every time you get them piccolo players in among us harpers, and don't you agree?"

"What an enigma, Will. We of the Church should be examples for others on how to get along."

"Has anyone told Father Vittorini that? Let's face it, the Italians are the Rotary of the Church. You couldn't have trusted one of them to stay sober during the Last Supper."

"I wonder if we Irish could?" mused Father Kelly.
"We'd wait until it was over, at least!"

"Well, now, are we priests or barbers? Do we stand here splitting hairs, or do we shave Vittorini close with his own razor? William, have you no plan?"

"Perhaps to call in a Baptist to mediate."

"Be off with your Baptist! Have you researched the encyclical?"
"The encyclical?"

"Have you let grass grow since breakfast between your toes? You have! Let's read that space-travel edict! Memorize it, get it pat, then counterattack the rocket man in his own territory! This way, to the library. What is it the youngsters cry these days? Five, four, three, two, one, blast off?"

"Or the rough equivalent."

"Well, say the rough equivalent, then, man. And follow me!"
They met Pastor Sheldon, going into the library as he was coming out.

"It's no use," said the pastor, smiling, as he examined the fever in their faces. "You won't find it in there."

"Won't find what in there?" Father Brian saw the pastor looking at the letter which was still glued to his fingers, and hid it away, fast. "Won't find what, sir?"

“A rocket ship is a trifle too large for our small quarters,” said the pastor in a poor try at the enigmatic.

“Has the Italian bent your ear, then?” cried Father Kelly in dismay.

“No, but echoes have a way of ricocheting about the place. I came to do some checking myself.”

“Then,” gasped Brian with relief, “you’re on our side?”

Pastor Sheldon’s eyes became somewhat sad. “Is there a side to this, Fathers?”

They all moved into the little library room, where Father Brian and Father Kelly sat uncomfortably on the edges of the hard chairs. Pastor Sheldon remained standing, watchful of their discomfort.

“Now. Why are you afraid of Father Vittorini?”

“Afraid?” Father Brian seemed surprised at the word and cried softly, “It’s more like angry.”

“One leads to the other,” admitted Kelly. He continued, “You see, Pastor, it’s mostly a small town in Tuscany shunting stones at Meynooth, which is, as you know, a few miles out from Dublin.”

“I’m Irish,” said the pastor, patiently.

“So you are, Pastor, and all the more reason we can’t figure your great calm in this disaster,” said Father Brian.

“I’m California Irish,” said the pastor.

He let this sink in. When it had gone to the bottom, Father Brian groaned miserably. “Ah. We forgot.”

And he looked at the pastor and saw there the recent dark, the tan complexion of one who walked with his face like a sunflower to the sky, even here in Chicago, taking what little light and heat he could to sustain his color and being.

Here stood a man with the figure, still, of a badminton and tennis player under his tunic, and with the firm lean hands of the handball

expert. In the pulpit, by the look of his arms moving in the air, you could see him swimming under warm California skies.

Father Kelly let forth one sound of laughter.

“Oh, the gentle ironies, the simple fates. Father Brian, here is our Baptist!”

“Baptist?” asked Pastor Sheldon.

“No offense, Pastor, but we were off to find a mediator, and here you are, an Irishman from California, who has known the wintry blows of Illinois so short a time, you’ve still the look of rolled lawns and January sunburn.

We, we were born and raised as lumps in Cork and Kilcock, Pastor. Twenty years in Hollywood would not thaw us out. And now, well, they do say, don’t they, that California is much . . .” here he paused, “like Italy?”

“I see where you’re driving,” mumbled Father Brian.

Pastor Sheldon nodded, his face both warm and gently sad. “My blood is like your own. But the climate I was shaped in is like Rome’s. So you see, Father Brian, when I asked are there any sides, I spoke from my heart.”

“Irish yet not Irish,” mourned Father Brian. “Almost but not quite Italian. Oh, the world’s played tricks with our flesh.”

“Only if we let it, William, Patrick.”

Both men started a bit at the sound of their Christian names.

“You still haven’t answered: Why are you afraid?”

Father Brian watched his hands fumble like two bewildered wrestlers for a moment. “Why, it’s because just when we get things settled on Earth, just when it looks like victory’s in sight, the Church on a good footing, along comes Father Vittorini—”

“Forgive me, Father,” said the pastor. “Along comes reality. Along comes space, time, entropy, progress, along come a million things, always. Father Vittorini didn’t invent space travel.”

“No, but he makes a good thing of it.

With him ‘everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics.’ Well, no matter. I’ll stash my shillelagh if he’ll put away his rockets.”

“No, let’s leave them out in the open,” replied the pastor. “Best not to hide violence or special forms of travel. Best to work with them. Why don’t we climb in that rocket, Father, and learn from it?”

“Learn what? That most of the things we’ve taught in the past on Earth don’t fit out there on Mars or Venus or wherever in hell Vittorini would push us? Drive Adam and Eve out of some new Garden, on Jupiter, with our very own rocket fires?

Or worse, find there’s no Eden, no Adam, no Eve, no damned Apple nor Serpent, no Fall, no Original Sin, no Annunciation, no Birth, no Son, you go on with the list, no nothing at all! on one blasted world tailing another? Is that what we must learn, Pastor?”

“If need be, yes,” said Pastor Sheldon. “It’s the Lord’s space and the Lord’s worlds in space, Father. We must not try to take our cathedrals with us, when all we need is an overnight case.

The Church can be packed in a box no larger than is needed for the articles of the Mass, as much as these hands can carry. Allow Father Vittorini this, the people of the southern climes learned long ago to build in wax which melts and takes its shape in harmony with the motion and need of man.

William, William, if you insist on building in hard ice, it will shatter when we break the sound barrier or melt and leave you nothing in the fire of the rocket blast.”

“That,” said Father Brian, “is a hard thing to learn at fifty years, Pastor.”

“But learn, I know you will,” said the pastor, touching his shoulder. “I set you a task: to make peace with the Italian priest. Find some way tonight for a meeting of minds. Sweat at it, Father. And, first off, since our library is meager, hunt for and find the space encyclical, so we’ll know what we’re yelling about.”

A moment later the pastor was gone.

Father Brian listened to the dying sound of those swift feet—as if a white ball were flying high in the sweet blue air and the pastor were hurrying in for a fine volley.

“Irish but not Irish,” he said. “Almost but not quite Italian. And now what are we, Patrick?”

“I begin to wonder,” was the reply.

And they went away to a larger library wherein might be hid the grander thoughts of a Pope on a bigger space.

A long while after supper that night, in fact almost at bedtime, Father Kelly, sent on his mission, moved about the rectory tapping on doors and whispering.

Shortly before ten o’clock, Father Vittorini came down the stairs and gasped with surprise.

Father Brian, at the unused fireplace, warming himself at the small gas heater which stood on the hearth, did not turn for a moment.

A space had been cleared and the brute television set moved forward into a circle of four chairs, among which stood two small taborettes on which stood two bottles and four glasses. Father Brian had done it all, allowing Kelly to do nothing. Now he turned, for Kelly and Pastor Sheldon were arriving.

The pastor stood in the entryway and surveyed the room. “Splendid.” He paused and added, “I think. Let me see now . . .” He read the label on one bottle. “Father Vittorini is to sit here.”

“By the Irish Moss?” asked Vittorini.

“The same,” said Father Brian.

Vittorini, much pleased, sat.

“And the rest of us will sit by the Lachryma Christi, I take it?” said the pastor.

“An Italian drink, Pastor.”

“I think I’ve heard of it,” said the pastor, and sat.

“Here.” Father Brian hurried over and, without looking at Vittorini, poured his glass a good way up with the Moss. “An Irish transfusion.” “Allow me.” Vittorini nodded his thanks and arose, in turn, to pour the others’ drinks. “The tears of Christ and the sunlight of Italy,” he said. “And now, before we drink, I have something to say.”

The others waited, looking at him.

“The papal encyclical on space travel,” he said at last, “does not exist.”

“We discovered that,” said Kelly, “a few hours ago.”

“Forgive me, Fathers,” said Vittorini. “I am like the fisherman on the bank who, seeing fish, throws out more bait. I suspected, all along, there was no encyclical. But every time it was brought up, about town, I heard so many priests from Dublin deny it existed, I came to think it must!

They would not go check the item, for they feared it existed. I would not, in my pride, do research, for I feared it did not exist.

So Roman pride or Cork pride, it’s all the same. I shall go on retreat soon and be silent for a week, Pastor, and do penance.”

“Good, Father, good.” Pastor Sheldon rose. “Now I’ve a small announcement. A new priest arrives here next month. I’ve thought long on it. The man is Italian, born and raised in Montreal.”

Vittorini closed one eye and tried to picture this man to himself.

“If the Church must be all things to all people,” said the pastor, “I am intrigued with the thought of hot blood raised in a cold climate, as this new Italian was, even as I find it fascinating to consider myself, cold blood raised in California. We’ve needed another Italian here to shake things up, and this Latin looks to be the sort will shake even Father Vittorini. Now will someone offer a toast?”

“May I, Pastor?” Father Vittorini rose again, smiling gently, his eyes darkly aglow, looking at this one and now that of the three. He raised his glass. “Somewhere did Blake not speak of the Machineries of Joy?”

That is, did not God promote environments, then intimidate those Natures by provoking the existence of flesh, toy men and women, such as are we all? And thus happily sent forth, at our best, with good grace and fine wit, on calm noons, in fair climes, are we not God’s Machineries of Joy?”

“If Blake said that,” said Father Brian, “I take it all back. He never lived in Dublin!”

All laughed together.

Vittorini drank the Irish Moss and was duly speechless.

The others drank the Italian wine and grew mellow, and in his mellowness Father Brian cried softly, “Vittorini, now, will you, unholy as it is, tune on the ghost?”

“Channel Nine?”

“Nine it is!”

And while Vittorini dialed the knobs Father Brian mused over his drink, “Did Blake really say that?”

“The fact is, Father,” said Vittorini, bent to the phantoms coming and going on the screen, “he might have, if he’d lived today. I wrote it down myself tonight.”

All watched the Italian with some awe. Then the TV gave a hum and came clear, showing a rocket, a long way off, getting ready.

“The machineries of joy,” said Father Brian. “Is that one of them you’re tuning in? And is that another sitting there, the rocket on its stand?”

“It could be, tonight,” murmured Vittorini. “If the thing goes up, and a man in it, all around the world, and him still alive, and us with him, though we just sit here. That would be joyful indeed.”

The rocket was getting ready, and Father Brian shut his eyes for a moment. Forgive me, Jesus, he thought, forgive an old man his prides, and forgive Vittorini his spites, and help me to understand what I see here tonight, and let me stay awake if need be, in good humor, until dawn, and let the thing go well, going up and coming down, and think of the man in that contraption, Jesus, think of and be with him.

And help me, God, when the summer is young, for, sure as fate on Fourth of July evening there will be Vittorini and the kids from around the block, on the rectory lawn, lighting skyrockets.

All them there watching the sky, like the morn of the Redemption, and help me, O Lord, to be as those children before the great night of time and void where you abide.

And help me to walk forward, Lord, to light the next rocket Independence Night, and stand with the Latin father, my face suffused with that same look of the delighted child in the face of the burning glories you put near our hand and bid us savor.

He opened his eyes.

Voices from far Canaveral were crying in a wind of time. Strange phantom powers loomed upon the screen. He was drinking the last of the wine when someone touched his elbow gently.

“Father,” said Vittorini, near. “Fasten your seat belt.”

“I will,” said Father Brian. “I will. And many thanks.”

He sat back in his chair. He closed his eyes. He waited for the thunder. He waited for the fire. He waited for the concussion and the voice that would teach a silly, a strange, a wild and miraculous thing: How to count back, ever backward . . . to zero.

The End