

SHEPHERD EXPRESS

BULK RATE
U. S. POSTAGE
PAID
MILWAUKEE, WI
PERMIT NO. 2096

FREE



METRO MILWAUKEE'S WEEKLY NEWSPAPER ☆ 45,000 PRESS RUN ☆

DECEMBER 30, 1993—JANUARY 6, 1994 — Vol. 13, No. 52

A Christmas Story

An old priest finds new religion

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

In the 30 years since his ordination, Al Kuharski had never seriously questioned his calling to the priesthood, had never questioned his life's work, had never questioned his Holy Mother Church.

Then three months ago a boy named Lamont was gunned down in a drive-by shooting, and everything changed for Father Al Kuharski. He had trouble sleeping, and, as he had done all his life, he turned on the bed light and got a book, but he couldn't concentrate and he got up and drank brandy by himself and tried not to wake up Father Lucius, although that wasn't a big problem because Lucius could shut everything out. Lucius could sleep right through the drunken yelling and fighting in the streets and the gunshots and the screaming sirens of squad cars and ambulances and, sometimes, fire trucks.

"If you'd grown up in the projects," Lucius laughed, "you would know this is the minor leagues, Al. If somebody needs the last rites, the cops will call us. Sometimes."

Al Kuharski had not been raised in Chicago's projects. He had been raised right here in Milwaukee. He had been baptized in this very parish, had made his First Communion here and his Confirmation. He had sung soprano in the boys' choir and served Mass here when the Mass was in Latin and the congregation was mostly Polish.

In those days, the bishop preferred that the priests assigned to the parish be proficient in Polish—"if not fluent, at least proficient," the bishop had told him—in order to understand the old bushas when those ancient black-clad Polish grandmas from the old country came to have their confessions heard every Saturday afternoon.

"We do the same for our Italian parishes," the bishop smiled. "You want to keep the old women happy because they keep the faith. At 5 o'clock Mass, it's just you and the old bushas, Father."

At his first 5 a.m. Mass, with only the sanctuary lighted and the main church in darkness to save on the electricity, Al Kuharski had peered into the gloom, and sure enough, there they were in the back pews as the bishop said they would be, the faithful bushas, cowled like nuns, a broken line of shadowy gargoyles somehow menacing in the gloom.

It was only when the old women scurried up to the communion rail and knelt in the light of the sanctuary and he placed the white wafers on their tongues, that he could see the beauty in their faces. It was the beauty that dried flowers have, pressed flat in a book, the fragrance and the color faded, the residue of young beauty still to be sensed in some mysterious way. No, not the residue of beauty. It was beauty. A beauty of the old. Old rocks. Old trees. Old cathedrals. Old women.

And their eyes! When the old Polish women opened their eyes, the wisdom he saw in them frightened him. The women

knew something he did not know. They knew something that no priest could know, no bishop, no pope, no man. The old bushas smiled their Mona Lisa smiles at him and turned and scuttled back into their protective darkness.

Over the years, one by one, the bushas died off. He buried most of them, and by that time the sons and daughters of the bushas were fleeing to the suburbs and the neighborhood was turning black and the congregation was turning black and a black priest who had been born in the Chicago ghetto came to minister to a black flock in the Milwaukee ghetto.

Al Kuharski stayed on because he didn't want to go where the old priests went, and with his family dead and buried he really had no place to go. The parish was his home, and here he would stay until the end, which sure as hell, he thought, couldn't be too far off.

**It was all a mistake—
Lamont had been in the
wrong place.
In front of a church.**



—illustration by Rob Franks

"Al," Lucius marveled. "You are like an old ballplayer, man. They're gonna have to cut the uniform right off you."

Lucius ran the church because he was the pastor. The choir sang gospel now, and there were adults, mostly women, and kids mixed in together. They clapped and rocked and swayed a lot, "like Baptists," Lucius smiled. Lucius let him preach—"to show we're not prejudiced"—and Al got to like the Amens that came from the scattered communicants. Lucius got the two of them working with the neighborhood center kids—not just Catholics, because they were precious few—but with all the kids who came to the center.

"I'll be pops," Lucius said. "You be grandpops."

They were tough kids. They asked him to his face what the hell a honky was doing in their center. Some thought he was a cop. Some had been busted for being runners, some for stealing. It didn't faze Lucius. "I see myself," he said. "But I was worse."

Al began to like the kids, all of them. Lucius said they all knew it was stacked against them down here, but what the

continued on page 7

CHRISTMAS STORY continued from cover

hell? "We have a high murder rate, but a low suicide rate," Lucius said. "That tells you something."

Lucius also told him to just be "grandpops." That means you listen more than you talk. "And if they need a hug, it's okay to hug."

Al really loved being with the kids. Especially the young ones. He loved the innocence in their eyes. Of course, Lucius had that same innocence in his own way, and how did you explain that?

Probably the brightest kid in the group was Lamont. He was 14 and, like some of the others, was bused cross-town to a white school. He told Al it was harder there than it was here. Lamont didn't play sports at all. He wanted to be a filmmaker like Spike Lee. Everyone knew Lamont was a brain.

"The kind we need," Lucius said. "To keep the books."

"I'd keep two sets," Lamont laughed.

Al let Lamont use his old Canon 35mm. Lucius got some downtown money to set up a darkroom in the center and buy some used, but good, cameras. More kids got interested, but none of them like Lamont. He shot pictures all over the neighborhood. He was all over, and the dealers warned him not to shoot them or they would shoot him. When the center put on a show of the kids' photographs the dealers came to look, but they weren't in the photos. Lucius thought they were a little disappointed, because the photos were very good.

Al's favorite was Lamont's photograph titled "The Old Neighborhood." It was the church cemetery in the gray winter fog with all those Polish names on the gravestones. The broken line of gravestones reminded Al

of that broken line of gargoyles who used to sit in the back pews in the gloom of the 5 o'clock Mass. The names of the bushas were on the stones, and he told Lamont that. After the show, Lamont gave him the print. He had signed it: For Grandpops, from Lamont.

Al drank his brandy. Yah, yah, he thought. The old bushas were better off where they were. They never knew about rapes up in the choir loft. They never knew about addicts shooting up in their sacristy. They never knew about their beloved church locked up and bolted like a bank every night and most of the day now. They never saw the gang wars and the drive-by senseless killings, the senseless violence.

He always got this way at a child's funeral. He could never get used to it. He put himself in the family's shoes and the grief was just too much.

They never saw Lamont Jackson, his precious Canon camera in his hands, his body torn by bullets and bleeding to death in front of their beloved locked church.

They never saw the cops come and ask their questions. The cops hadn't seemed too concerned. Blacks killing blacks, they said to Al—and he knew they said it because he was white—who knows? Could be a drug deal gone bad. Could be money. Could be women. Who knows?

Father Al put on his collar and said the rosary for Lamont at the funeral home. Then he sat with Lamont's mother, Bettye, and Lamont's four sisters and two brothers, and they talked. Shawn, the oldest boy, said somebody called the house and said it was all a mistake. He said he didn't do it, but he knew it was a mistake. Lamont was in the wrong place.

The wrong place, Al marveled. In front of a church.

He said the funeral Mass for Lamont because Lucius wanted him to. "This will be good, Al," Lucius reassured him. "This is a good way." Lucius stood with the tall crucifix at the head of Lamont's casket all during the service. As Al came to speak at the foot of the casket, he looked into the stricken faces of Lamont's family and Lamont's friends, and the sadness just welled up inside him. He always got this way at a child's funeral. He could never get used to it. He put himself in the family's shoes and the grief was just too much. "Be cool," Lucius always said.

It was then he realized that he was the only white person at this funeral. Actually, something whispered inside him, you are the only old white person here.

There were some white kids sitting way back where the bushas used to sit. Probably kids from Lamont's school. Maybe six, seven kids. They didn't seem to know anybody.

But everyone else was black. For a moment, it made him feel strange, out of place. The family. The friends. The pallbearers. Lucius, standing with the crucifix.

They all belonged here now, and he suddenly felt he didn't belong here, in his church. How many times had he stood with the crucifix where Lucius stood with it now? And why was an old priest the only white person here now? A broken-down old man in a broken-down old church.

He looked, feeling his age, clearing his throat. Well, no, not exactly the only old white. The plaster statues on their pedestals—the Blessed virgin, St. Joseph, Jesus Christ crucified above the altar—they were white. Also, old.

As he spoke of Lamont, Al kept his eyes on Lucius because Lucius was as solemn and dignified as all those long-dead immigrants who had preceded him in this place. Lucius was born and raised up in the real world. Lucius was the real priest here. Al felt like an

impostor.

On the ride to the cemetery, thinking of Lamont and the cops and the bushas and just everything, he turned his face so Lucius couldn't see, but Lucius reached over and patted him.

"It's not only Lamont," Al sniffed.

"I know," Lucius said. "It's everything."

After the burial, they went to be with Lamont's family. The little house was full of people. Some of them Al had never seen in the neighborhood, people he didn't know at all, people who looked at him with hard eyes.

He had seen that same look just weeks ago a block from here when he walked past the house where people said some dealers had moved in. There was a big man standing on the cluttered porch, and Al had smiled up at him.

"What the fuck you lookin' at?" the big man had said. There had been anger in that voice. Anger and cold, cold rage.

"I'm cool," Al had told him. "I'm cool."

He kept walking and didn't look back for fear of what he would see. Involuntarily, he felt his shoulders hunch to ward off a blow, a bullet, he didn't know what. God, he was afraid the man would shoot him.

When he told Lucius, the young priest had laughed.

"My, yes," he had said. "Now the old father knows how the young brothers feel."

Father Al was still drinking brandy when the rectory clock struck 12 and a quiet snow began to cover the harshness of the inner city. In the old days, the radio crooners were always dreaming of a white Christmas. Some people, including his own sisters, actually prayed to God for a white Christmas. If it wasn't white, they wrote him in the seminary, it really wouldn't be Christmas.

When he finally slept, he dreamed that the Statue of Liberty was walking on the water like Jesus at Galilee and scattering sacks of

continued on page 8

Spends

NEW YEARS EVE at

MAY PLANET

533 E. CENTER
263-4555

FREE:

- LATE NITE FOOD
- CHAMPAGNE ^{toasts}
- PARTY FAVORS

only \$7 cover

PROGRESSIVE DANCE
music all night!
from 10pm til?

**\$1 taps • \$1.50 rails
until midnight**

CHRISTMAS STORY continued from page 7

flour and sugar to millions of people on the land, and the people were starving and crying for manna! manna from Heaven! and the sugar and the flour came swirling down on them in clouds. The white clouds were clouds of cocaine, and suddenly there was Jesus, walking on the water, and on one side of him was the pope and on the other side of him was the bishop, and right behind them came the Reverend Martin Luther King and the Reverend Jesse Jackson, and they were all walking on the water. Right behind them the water was filled with people who were struggling and drowning and sinking out of sight.

"If God created people in His image, and the people in His church here are black, then doesn't it seem logical that God must be black?"

The Reverend Jesse Jackson had turned to them and was throwing out life jackets and yelling at them to grab on, hold on. He was practically screaming: "BLACKS ARE KILLING BLACKS! THE KU KLUX KLAN IS NOT MARCHING IN HARLEM OR BROWNSVILLE OR EAST NEW YORK! WE ARE MORE THREATENED BY THE DOPE THAN THE ROPE!" Then the people in the water started yelling too, and then it was all bedlam and confusion and swirling seas, and then all the people vanished, and only Jesus was walking on the water, alone.

Then Jesus vanished, too, and it was all silence as the waters became still and something rose to the surface. At first it looked to be some kind of fish, but then he saw it was a body, naked and white as plaster, with a cord, no, a collar around its neck, and he knew before he looked into its dead open eyes that the white body was his.

He did it on December 24, the morning of the day before Christmas. He called a local TV station and told them he was a priest and he had a Christmas story for them. Then he told them what it was. When the news van came, he led them inside the church and locked the door behind them. He knew the crew must be thinking he was nuts.

The camerawoman shot footage of the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph and Jesus Christ crucified on the cross. She got nice, tight closeups of the faces and turned off the camera when he got his stepladder set up in front of the Blessed Virgin.

"This is really bizarre," the camerawoman said.

"This is Christmas," Al told her. "In the year of our Lord, 1993."

He started painting the Blessed Virgin's face, and the camerawoman started shooting. She shot his face, too. Then he painted St. Joseph's face, and the camerawoman did her closeups. Finally, he painted the face of Jesus Christ. The camerawoman did a final pan of the three shining faces and then came to rest on him. He wiped his hands, and the anchor woman asked her first question. Actually, two.

"What does all this mean, Father? Why all this?"

"Well," he began. "In the old days when a priest named Martin Luther was unhappy with what his church was doing, he nailed his theses to the front door. I've sort of nailed mine to the front altar. Different strokes for different folks."

The anchor woman reminded herself to keep that in.

"The white church fled to the suburbs," Al Kuharski said. "No secret. The people, the

priests. They abandoned this place. To black people. Well, if God created people in His image, and the people in His church here are black, then doesn't it seem logical that God must be black?"

"You're saying," the anchor woman said, "God is black?"

"Well," Al Kuharski said, "She could be."

The TV station played the tape all Christmas Day. By nightfall, all the networks had it on their news. There was one suggestion that the good Catholic father had been hanging out with the good Christian Brothers. There was another that the church should lock up priests like this or wine like that. The church was filled all day as curiosity seekers came and went, came and went and took pictures.

"But Al," Lucius lamented, "it's gonna be your ass. If there was no TV, the church could think it was vandals."

"This church made a statement," Al said.

"You made the statement," Lucius said. "What the hell is going on with you, Al?"

When the bishop called, he more or less asked the same thing.

The question made Al pause. He wanted to say what Louie Satchmo Armstrong had once said in another context: "If you have to ask, you never get to know." But he knew that would be construed as arrogance or sarcasm or disrespect.

"It's a Christmas present," he told his bishop. Lucius rolled his eyes.

Al never said a word while the bishop, in his very nice way, suggested that Al was among other things a troublemaker, a lunatic, a drunk and a senile old man.

Father Al Kuharski listened and looked at the black spots on his painting hand and knew that what the bishop was saying was all true. When the bishop was all talked out, Father Al thanked him and wished him a blessed Christmas. Then, as requested, he put Father Lucius on the phone.

The above is a fictional story culled from real characters.