

Imprudent Zeal
by Alec Clayton

Excerpt from opening chapter
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Smoke hung head high in the auditorium. Chair legs grated the hardwood floor. Men coughed, laughed, shouted across the room at friends. They fidgeted in their seats and crushed cigar and cigarette butts underfoot. As if attached by wires, every head turned when a door in back opened and Scully McDonald stepped out and jogged down the aisle to the boxing ring. Father O'Day followed close behind, his hands kneading Scully's shoulders, man and boy bobbing like marionettes.

Scully heard shouts of encouragement but could not make out the words. He felt hands reach out to pat him on the back. He scurried up the three steps to the ring, bent through the ropes and stepped in. He grabbed the top rope and did two quick knee bends. Deep breaths, loud on the exhale. He dropped to one knee and crossed himself, closed his eyes tight and whispered, "Our Father who art in heaven, forgive me, Lord. I know this is just a sporting event and you have more important things on your mind, but please please be with me now. Your will be done, amen."

He stood up and thrust out his hands to Father O'Day, who shoved the old gloves on his big hands and laced them tight and slipped the little plastic mouthpiece between his lips. Scully bit down on the cold plastic and turned to face his opponent in the opposite corner, a skinny guy, but much taller than Scully. Scully eyed him as he scissored his feet in a dance step that indicated a quickness that would surely give him fits. He looked out over the audience but could not recognize faces. Somewhere out there on one of those hard slat chairs sat Scully's father. Somewhere in Scully's mind his father's voice was droning, "Don't come crying to me, boy. You gotta take up for your own self" —saying, "You pitch like a girl" —saying, "Don't be a cry baby."

Scully's father had left for the war in forty-one when Scully was a chubby eleven-year-old, so shy that pulling words from his mouth was like yanking a Band Aid off a hairy arm and as awkward as a colt learning to walk. He hardly knew his father. Now, taller than his father and no longer so shy and clumsy as he had been then, he still felt that he didn't know the old man, and he knew he didn't measure up to his expectations. Since coming back from the war in forty-five, his father had hardly ever been at home. He worked long hours at the packing plant, pulling in overtime whenever possible, and spent most of his off time hanging out at Clancy's Pub. He was almost a stranger to Scully, yet Scully couldn't help wanting to show him a thing or two. Show him he could hold his own in at least this one manly arena.

He rolled his head and looked out at the spectators, and he felt dizzy. The crowd seemed to be circling him as if they were on a merry-go-round and he was stationary in the middle. Maybe he should have eaten something this afternoon. What else could account for this touch of faintness? Surely not fear. He would not let himself believe he could be afraid. Everything was spinning. It

reminded him of a day long ago when a group of boys on bicycles had surrounded him and pedaled round and round in a tightening circle while he turned in place to keep a wary eye on them. It had happened when he was in the seventh grade at St. Bridget's School. He had stayed late after school for a meeting of the Sock and Buskin Club, planning decorations for the homecoming dance. He had joined the group because Sister Donovan had said everybody had to join some extracurricular activity and Sock and Buskin seemed as good as any. Besides, Annie McCarthy was in the club, the only other seventh grader, and he had had a crush on Annie McCarthy since fourth grade. She was the only friend he had in school. All the other kids made fun of him, calling him Blubber Boy because he was a big, fat crybaby whose pudgy cheeks would begin to quiver before he burst into tears.

Through the mere process of growing up, he had learned to control his tears. But the cruel nickname stuck. The other kids didn't see him as he was, but as they remembered him, and that was how he saw himself, too. Annie understood how he felt, because she had also been teased throughout most of her early years. She had red hair and freckles, and she wore glasses. The kids called her Freckle Four Eyes. But Annie had a sharp tongue and knew how to take up for herself. The other kids had long since quit teasing Annie, not so much because she was able to defend herself, but because in the sixth grade she blossomed into a beautiful young woman who seemed to have a natural ability to make friends, and in the seventh grade she became the first girl ever elected class president. Her newly gained popularity began to rub off—just a little—on her friend Scully. Scully was beginning to develop a few rudimentary social skills. Gradually. And even a hint of confidence. But he could not completely break the habit of thinking of himself as the friendless fat boy who broke into tears at the drop of an insult.

He was carrying a stack of books and walking as fast as he could, because he knew he'd be in trouble if he didn't get home soon. It was Wednesday, bridge day, and his mother always expected him to fix dinner on bridge day. He could imagine his old man saying, "Your mama said you didn't get home till nearly dark. Whaddaya think? You're some kind of society kid that can run around all hours without even thinking about your poor old mama sick in her bed?" Why? Scully asked himself over and over again. Why does the old man always say she's sick in bed, even when he knows she's up and about preparing for her bridge club? The fact was, both Scully and his father thought of her as sickly, even during her better days. She complained of headaches and mysterious female problems, of sweats and nausea, and many days she would not get dressed until late afternoon. Sickly or not, she never failed to complete a seemingly endless list of household chores—washing her men's clothes and neatly folding each and every item, even handkerchiefs and underwear; scrubbing floors, washing the blinds, pushing her old shopping cart six blocks to the store, and putting a hot dinner on the table every night but Wednesday when it was Scully's turn to cook the family dinner.

He stepped off the sidewalk and onto a field where boys from the neighborhood often played ball. Crossing the field was a quicker way home. He broke into a run, leaning forward with that awkward gait of his that made him look as if he was going to take a nose dive any moment, which he did all too often. He saw the boys coming on their bikes, three of them cutting across the field toward him in a sweeping arc. They were Carson Culpepper and Ray Goodnight and Rodney Laughlin, local toughs who called themselves the Mohawks. Culpepper was in the lead. He was pedaling hard in a red and white blur on one of those Arnold Schwinn Streamline

Aerocycles, steamers flying from the handle bars and bits of cardboard stuck in the spokes going blip-blip-blip-blip-blip like a taunt. Culpepper cut in front of Scully and hit his brakes, going into a skid. Goodnight and Laughlin followed close behind. They might have smashed into Scully if Scully had not tripped and splashed head first to the ground with a scattering of books.

They circled him on their bikes, leaning hard with feet scraping the ground on the turns. Scully pushed himself up and brushed off his pants. There was a bloody scrape on his elbow with dirt ground in. Grass stains on his white shirt. He picked up his books and began to turn in place, looking for a way to break free of the circle of bikes. Nobody said anything. They kept circling and circling. Going slow now and half pushing their bikes with their feet, then speeding up whenever Scully made a move to break free.

It happened that Annie McCarthy was passing by about then on the sidewalk that fronted the field. She saw the Mohawks tormenting Scully, and she cut across the grass, picking up a large stick and wielding it as a weapon as she approached them. She stopped outside the circle for a moment, waiting for an opening to jump inside. Culpepper skidded within inches of her. "Stay out of this, Annie," he shouted.

She darted behind him and rushed to Scully's side. "Stay close to me," she said, "and we'll get out of here. They wouldn't dare hurt a girl."

Culpepper braked to a full stop. Goodnight and Laughlin piled up behind him, a full accordion stop of three boys on bikes. They stood each with one foot on the ground and one foot on a pedal, and they didn't say anything when Scully and Annie slowly walked between them. They kept a wary eye on her because she was gripping a weapon, and they couldn't attack her because ... well, because she was a girl. You don't hit girls. They never meant to hurt Scully either; they just wanted to scare him.

Goodnight stuck out his tongue. Annie held Scully's right hand with her left and clutched the stick in her other hand, tapping the ground with it as they walked to the sidewalk. Culpepper shouted, "Watch out Blubber Boy! You ain't gonna always have a girl to hide behind." Then they remounted their bikes and took off across the field.

Scully said, "Thanks, Annie. I'm OK Now. I think you can let go my hand if you want to."

"Well I think I might just want to hold on for a while if you don't mind. It feels kind of nice. Your hand is so warm and soft."

"Yeah, that's the problem. Everything about me's soft. I'm just a big sissy, and those guys won't ever leave me alone." He tried to hold back the tears, but without much success.

"Don't you fret about that," she said. "I like you just the way you are."

"Even if I'm a crybaby?"

"It's OK to cry, even for boys. My daddy said he cried lots during the war, and he was a hero." He looked down at her and smiled. He was so much bigger than she was and he felt so clumsy.

He didn't know what to say, but holding her hand felt really nice and he didn't want to ever let go.

The next day in English class she passed him a note. It said, "I like you."

He tore a little slip off the bottom edge of notebook paper and scribbled on it, "I like you too." He held the note folded in his palm until Sister Donovan turned her back to the class to write on the board, and then he tossed it across the aisle to Annie. The note clipped the edge of her desk and fell to the floor. When she leaned over to pick it up, he caught a glimpse of her yellow brassiere. The shape of her budding breasts made him think of two scoops of vanilla ice cream.

Annie straightened up, smiling at him. An electric jolt connected them as their eyes met, and in that moment they each knew exactly what the other was thinking. Annie confirmed it. She unfolded the note, she read it, and she blew him a kiss. Then she passed him another note that said, "Meet me behind the cafeteria at recess."

The school grounds behind the cafeteria were bordered by a hedge abutting the street, which shielded Annie from view of the rest of the kids on the playground as she waited for Scully. He was slow to get there because he had had to go to the boy's room. Rushing out of the restroom, he almost ran into Sister Julian. "Whoa there, young man," she cautioned. "You know running in the halls is not allowed."

"Yes, ma'am."

He walked out deliberately, then ran across the playground. Breathlessly he rushed to Annie. Impulsively he grabbed both of her hands and held them for a few seconds, and then let go, and they faced each other not knowing what to do or say. At last she asked, "Do you really like me like ... you know, like a girlfriend? Or do you just like me?"

"I really like you like everything," he said. Scully bobbed on the balls of his feet.

"Does that mean you want to be my boyfriend?" She tilted her head to look up at him, sunlight making semaphore flashes on the lens of her glasses.

"Well, yeah," he said, "if I could."

"OK then, you can be my boyfriend. We can go steady."

"Really?" Scully felt a flush of fire in his face, and he kicked a little at the ground to draw attention away from his blush.

"Yeah. Really," she said. Then she asked him if he wanted to kiss her.

"Oh, more than anything," he said. "Can we do it right here? Now?"

"Yes. Nobody will see us."

He put his arms around her and she stretched up on tip-toes and reached to circle her arms around his neck, and he leaned down and they kissed on the lips, and they held it a long, long time without moving and hardly breathing, and their eyes were closed and they did not part their lips, and he could feel the softness of her breasts pressing against his chest, and then they backed apart and she said, "I'm the happiest girl in New York State."