

Pinewood

by [Buddfred Levi](#) (February 2025)



Difficult Decision (Aleksandr Deyneka, 1966)

“What do you want to talk about tonight?” Father Jerome asked during their Friday discussion.

Kyler wondered if he wanted to remain in the seminary. “I’m still disquieted.” He didn’t mind the daily chores or the regimented prayer time or the physical mortification. He had completed the month-long retreat of silence. He didn’t know what he expected when he joined the order, but he was getting bored with the repetition, and he was questioning some of his

beliefs.

"I know you smoke. Do you want a cigarette?"

Kyler had been sneaking out for a smoke at night through the laundry room for the last several months. He'd lifted a carton of Camels from the storage room. He would walk out into the woods and smoke for an hour or two.

"Sure. I'd appreciate that."

Father Jerome handed Kyler a cigarette, then a lighter. "I'm here to help you sort out your thoughts. What's bothering you?"

"I'm having dreams."

"Nightmares?"

"Just disturbing."

"In what way?"

"Sexual."

"You're scheduled to take your chastity vows on Sunday."

"I'm not sure I want to. And I'm questioning the existence of hell."

"What about the existence of heaven?"

"I don't think that's relevant."

Father Jerome was silent. He wasn't in the mood for an argument. It was late in the evening and he was tired.

"I think I have a vocation, but vowing chastity is a big step. I'm not ready to make such a lifetime decision."

"You've coped very well the last year."

“It wasn’t easy. And lifetime vows are a serious step.”

“They are. Why don’t you spend tonight and tomorrow isolating yourself in the infirmary. That way you can collect your thoughts without distractions and we can talk again tomorrow after dinner. It’s been a long day. You can move there tonight.”

Kyler thought that a good idea. He returned to the dorm, packed up a few clothes and took the flagellator. Father Jerome had told him to keep the lighter so he took a pack of cigarettes from under his mattress. The night medic settled him in the infirmary. Besides the twin bed in the room, there was a desk and chair, and a small dresser.

He wasn’t sleepy. He walked down to the laundry room in the basement and slipped out the back door into the night. The full moon lighted the path through the woods and he continued up the mountain until he came to his favorite smoking spot—a large flat rock in the middle of the trail. Kyler settled down and lit up. There was no wind and no sound in the stillness.

Kyler’s habit was to go over some of the day’s activities here in the solitude of the night; it was a way of cataloging each day as positive or negative, as a success or failure.

That morning, in his room, kneeling in meditation, Kyler had considered his daily riddle—how could a loving God damn sinners to eternal hell? It was like a ping pong match in his brain. He wrestled with it for half an hour.

Then he decided to take a cold shower. Kyler always whipped the knotted flagellator over his shoulder onto his back for several minutes first. The stinging welts kept him from concentrating on the sensual urges of cleansing, which were strong in him.

Kyler pushed off the rock and lay down on his back on the ground. He pondered the infinite sky pulsating with stars.

These were magical minutes of solitude. He treasured them.

He retraced his steps back to the infirmary. Suddenly he was exhausted. He fell asleep.

He was breakfasting in silence in the refectory. It was crowded with the weekend retreat group who had checked in Friday night to join in Saturday meditations, as well as a Saturday of silence. They would leave after Mass on Sunday.

Kyler returned to the infirmary instead of joining the group gathering in the meditation room. He changed into a clean robe, then moved the desk chair over to the window so he could sit and watch the scud clouds float down over the trees.

Pinewood had been constructed on the side of a small mountain range. After a while he pulled on a sweatshirt and headed toward the basement exit. He struck out on the same uphill trail he took at night. The woods were colorful in the autumn daytime and there was a sense of freedom in the air. He could smell the dry fall leaves. He continued up until he found the rock, where he sat. He let his mind wander.

He was startled by a sudden shadow which came up behind him. "Don't mean to interrupt," said a mellow voice, a backpacker coming down from the top.

"You're not," Kyler said. "I'm just resting."

"It's quite a haul up to the top," the backpacker said. "I started up at dawn, just after waking. It's worth the effort. From the top of this path, you can see down to the lake and a lot of the town." He unslung his pack, pushed aside leaves and pine needles to open a space on the path, and sat down. "I stayed last night at the seminary down the path for a personal retreat."

"I'm a resident down there," Kyler said. "I'm on a short sabbatical or I'd be meditating with your group."

"I figured from your robe. What a great place to live! All this space and raw nature. It's awesome."

"It is pretty cool. Did you come with the tour group?"

"Yes. But I decided to hike while they're meditating. My brain meditates better when I'm active. I came for the experience."

"The experience?"

"Yes. What it's like to live in a religious community."

"But you're outside here with me. You're not invested in the experience."

"I meditated with the group last night. That was enough of that."

Kyler reached into his robe. "I'm going to light up a cigarette. Do you want one?"

"No, I don't smoke anymore. Is it a good idea out here. Aren't you afraid of starting a fire?"

"Haven't so far, and I come up here a lot. I'm Kyler, by the way."

"I'm Josh. What do you guys do besides meditate?"

"Prayer and chores. This is fall so there's a lot of harvesting to be done. We rotate weeks on kitchen duty. Sundays a lot of us go down to the lake to play soccer on the shore. Or go canoeing."

"You know, I think I'll head down to the lake myself. I feel like a swim."

"The water's chilly this time of year."

"Won't bother me. I like cold water."

"I'll lead the way down and show you around. My schedule is

open today.”

“That would be great!”

Tyler snuffed out the cigarette and stuffed the stub into his pocket.

The trip was downhill. After they passed by the seminary, Kyler followed a gravel road down toward the water.

“In the winter,” Kyler said, “on weekends after a snow, we can ski down to the water’s edge from the main building. We set up a rope tow to take us back up the hill.”

When they reached the water, Josh shed his backpack and took off his clothes. Kyler noticed his toenails were painted blue when he ran into the water.

“A chilly treat,” Josh said,

Kyler tugged a canoe into the water. “Go ahead and swim out in the lake. I’ll keep close beside in case you get a cramp from the cold.”

Josh swam out. “There’s a sandy beach over to the left. What’s that?” he asked Kyler.

“Pinewood borders the local village beach. Behind it is the town’s activity park.”

“Where they have the music festivals? I read about them in the Pinewood brochure.”

“Nights when they hold the concerts, we listen to them from the hill. Or walk along the shore and listen to them from the town beach.”

“Unbelievable. How cool! You guys really have it made.” Josh turned and headed back to the shore. He lay down naked and let the sun dry him off.

Kyler asked him why he painted his toenails blue. "Because I want to," Josh answered.

Kyler woke up. "'*Because I want to.*' Another weird dream," he thought. Josh had been his best friend in high school.

"What do I want?" Kyler wondered. He knew what everyone else wanted him to do, for sure.

It was Saturday morning. He headed down to the lake. There was no one on the shore. The novices were still in meditation.

"Why not," he thought and stripped off his clothes. He stepped into the brisk water and shivered. He swam out into the lake until he tired. He turned around and swam back..

Already he felt better—refreshed. He lay down and let the morning sun dry his body.

Instead of returning to the seminary, he walked the shore until he came to the municipal beach. He turned toward the concert area and walked onto its grassy field. He walked by a large wooden stage. He wondered if they'd be a concert that evening and determined to return if there was. He continued to the road bordering the park and turned to the town.

In the year he had spent in the religious compound, he had never been to the village. On the right was a three-story apartment building. It's ground floors were a collection of small shops—a dry cleaner, a bookstore, a liquor store, a barber shop. On the opposite side was a large grocery store and a restaurant. He crossed to the restaurant and looked inside. There were a few patrons enjoying a late breakfast or early lunch.

"Come on in," said a woman behind a counter. "We don't get a lot of visitors in Pinewood robes."

Kyler smiled. "Thanks. I was just passing by. I've never been through the village and thought I'd take a look about."

"How about a quick cup of coffee?"

"I don't keep any money with me."

"That's ok. Sit here at the counter and I'll treat you to a cup. And you can tell me what brings you by today."

Kyler sat down. "That's great. I could use a cup about now."

"I'm Nellie," she said as she poured the coffee into a cup. She put it down in front of him and said, "This is my place. So, what brings you to the village?"

"I have a free day today and decided to come over and take a look around. I'm Kyler."

"I didn't know you got free days up there, Kyler."

"Well," he said, "it's more like a working vacation. I'm wandering around while I decide if I want to take final vows at Pinewood."

"What's your alternative?"

"I don't know. That's what I have until tomorrow to figure out."

"How old are you?"

"Just turned nineteen."

"Where are you from?"

"South Boston."

"So ... a short train ride. The mainline station is just a stone's throw up the road. Why not go home on a vacation? Take a break."

"Actually, that's a good idea. I'd like to do that! But I'm not sure we get to take vacations."

“Only one way to find out.”

After a while, Kyler stood up. “Thanks for the coffee and the chat.”

“Have fun on your vacation!”

“I will.”

There was a sign just outside the café which advertised the concert dates. There was one scheduled for the evening.

Kyler was in a good mood when he retraced his tracks back to Pinewood. He’d take a short nap, shower, change and eat supper; he’d discuss the vacation plan with Father Jerome and then return to the town for the concert.

The nap was a bust. He was too excited about the prospect of a short vacation with his parents and friends.

He was so agitated he flagellated for fifteen minutes to get his emotions under control. He showered, shaved and got dressed. He sat by the window and meditated for an hour and then repaired to the refectory for dinner.

After dinner, Kyler returned to Father Jerome’s room for a final chat before vows.

Father Jerome offered Kyler a can of cola which he accepted as he reached into his robe and extracted a cigarette. “Okay if I smoke?”

Father Jerome nodded. “I’ll join you.” He reached into his own robe and pulled out a cigar. “We stock these in the storeroom for the few of us who still smoke. Havanas”

“I’ve been to the village today,”

“Have you now! You know the village is off-limits.”

“I just went into a restaurant. Got a free cup of coffee. I

chatted with the owner. She seemed a nice sort.”

Father Jerome spoke: “Self-awareness is a long journey. It’s not beneficial to interrupt it.”

Kyler sipped his cola.

Father Jerome continued. “Distractions interrupt and they only delay awareness.”

Kyler was lost in thought.

Father Jerome added, “This is a decision for your eternal soul.”

Kyler was startled. “What do you mean? I’m only going to ask if I can return home for a short sabbatical before final vows.”

“Oh! That’s what’s going on. I wouldn’t advise that. There should be no interruptions to your term in the novitiate.”

“Just for a few days?”

“No.”

“So, I’m sort of a prisoner?”

“No, you can leave, but I don’t recommend you do that.”

“Why?”

“It’s a deviation from the process. Sabbaticals are a distraction from your spiritual flow and detrimental to your vocation. There’s a possibility you won’t return.”

“But I’m questioning the reality of my vocation.”

“The choice is yours—continue in your spiritual progress or tempt your vocation to other pursuits.”

“I don’t want to go to hell.”

“Then persist in your vocation.”

“I just want a break.”

“It’s your decision. If you want to leave, I’ll drive you to the train station tomorrow afternoon. Otherwise, take your vows during the morning ceremony.”

Kyler was irritated. He had enjoyed his day. The swim, the visit in the restaurant were simple interactions. Maybe they weren’t as complex as his meditations, but they were enlightening in their own way. They had been decisions.

He left Father Jerome’s quarters, returned to the infirmary and took off his robe. He decided to just wear slacks and a tee shirt to the concert. He added a sweater from his room and headed down toward the lake. Maybe it was a time for change.

The park was already filled with families, many with blankets, others with camp chairs, when Kyler arrived. He noticed kids swinging and climbing on the gym equipment constructed at the back of the area. Kyler settled on the grass right at the front before the stage while the band assembled the equipment in the approaching dusk.

Once the guitars swung into action, Kyler was transfixed. He enjoyed the record collection at the novitiate, but he hadn’t attended any live concerts since checking into Pinewood. Metal hadn’t been his thing, but he was drawn in by its power as the band played. He felt empowered. Much better than listening from the novitiate.

When the neighboring family passed him a joint, he took a long toke, and then another, before he passed it back. He suspected he had moved into hell territory; he liked the freedom of these choices.

At the halftime break, he got up and wandered onto the stage. “Great concert!”

"You're that guy out front zoning out," said the drummer. "I've had my eye on you."

"Guilty. I'm floating."

"Here, try this, it'll keep you mellow." He handed Kyler a blue pill. "And hang out after the show and help us pack up. You can bus with me back to our house if you want to have some fun."

After the concert, Kyler helped the group repack all the equipment and climbed onto the bus. After driving through several modern suburban streets, the neighborhoods darkened under mature trees. They parked and the group walked up a high porch to an old three-storied house. There was a party going on in the main room. Kyler knew he'd had enough, but he decided not to care. He was floating steady. A cloud in a no wind sky. There was loud music with some dancing. He looked around the room at pockets of energy and saw shapes and colors twinning together. He sat on a raggedy armchair in a corner and watched the action. The drummer came over and tried to rouse him: "Come upstairs with me." Kyler was not rousable. He closed his eyes and travelled into a half sleep.

He remembered the last time he had met with Josh. They were walking home across Boston Commons from a movie.

"I got an acceptance letter from Northeastern this afternoon."

Kyler stopped. "That's great."

"And a scholarship," Josh said.

"Terrific."

"Don't go to Pinewood. Stay with me—we'll get an apartment."

"Last Friday was a mistake, Josh. At Church they teach it's a mortal sin. And you go to hell."

“There is no hell,” Josh said.

Kyler was startled awake by this memory. There is no hell. This was the meditation he’d been wrestling. Was it just a choice?

The living room had emptied except for a couple of bodies sprawled across the floor. He got up and stumbled over them to the bathroom for a piss. He puked into the sink and washed it clean. He filled the tub and took off his clothes. After bathing, he emptied the tub and dried off with a damp towel he found hanging on the door. He dressed and left the house by the front door. He wandered to the highway. He hitchhiked down to Boston.

[Table of Contents](#)

Buddfred Levi is an octogenarian living in Wichita, KS. He is in the graduate program at Wichita State University and has had several stories published in *Mikrokosmos*, the WSU literary annual.

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