

## 1        **The Accident**

It was late in the day.

Sissy St. Hilaire did not know it was Ash Wednesday as she sat on her king-sized bed in her home on Ginger Snap Lane, listening to her husband George beat the bedroom wall with a titanium tennis racket. He had already smashed through the plaster. Bits and chunks swirled through plaster-dust clouds to land on the Vicuna carpet, the velvet brocade bedspread, and to float in Sissy's afternoon cocktail. At one point she reached up to brush back her bangs and came back with pieces of the wall.

"I'm through putting up with you jumping into bed with anything - with - anything..."

"Anything in pants?" Sissy suggested.

He bashed the wall with a good forehand while she searched for her vintage 1960's Playboy Club cigarette lighter. She was fond of this lighter.

"You have no proof of anything," Sissy said.

"Everyone at the club is talking about you!"

"Oh, no - not the club," she said. "They're not talking at the office?"

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"They're all afraid of me at the office. Temple Locke told me after squash today, for my own good, he said. It was humiliating. You're a disgrace. You don't even have the integrity to admit you're cheating on me."

She did, actually, but simply didn't want to. She had been having affairs for years, brief and loveless. She was aware of herself becoming a parody of the bored, rich, alcoholic, adulteress wife. The prospect of divorce filled her with a mild excitement.

George continued to beat the wall a few more moments, wailed once like a banshee, then slammed out. Sissy heard his car fire up and screech away.

She still had a mild hangover that her noon wine had done little to alleviate. She had had an easy morning. She counted her blessings regarding breakfast. Her teenaged son and daughter, Thatcher and Buffy, dependably ate microwave pizza and burrito offal, washed down with Cokes. Her husband George insisted on an elaborate morning meal that had to be prepared reverently by his hands alone. She would not be going to her real estate office, and Sittina, her Sudanese cleaning woman, spent five hours working on the large house, picking up after Sissy's slob family

without complaint, and additionally doing dishes, windows, and ironing. Sissy regularly had attacks of guilt and would increase Sittina's undeclared pay.

Sissy needed to think about getting rid of her current lover, also named George. She could do this while she nursed her hangover and savored her loneliness. Then George came home from squash.

Obviously something had been said to him by one of the holograms, as she called them, at the club, who knew no greater delight than to fill in the small space in George's imagination with rumors of his wife's latest rollick. George had started their talk all testy and clumsy. When Sissy's well-built firewall of responses sapped his patience, he went for the racket.

After George's abrupt fit and exit, she took a Valium and a nap. At six in the evening she awoke to the sounds of her children downstairs. She took a long, restorative hot, then cold shower, and was standing naked when her cell phone rang. It was her sister-in-law, an RN at Vermont-Green Mountain Hospital.

"Sissy, they just brought George in. He's in a coma. He was in a car accident."

## **2           The Priest**

Father Brendan Malcolm O'Toole finished conducting the daily Mass. He had lobbied for the elimination of morning Mass on Ash Wednesday, as there were two additional Masses on this Holy Day. O'Toole's superior, Bishop Reed at the diocese in Burlington, said no. His argument was based solely on considering the two dozen or so misfits, obsessives, frightened ill, and elderly women who attended at eight each morning. O'Toole was tempted to suggest the diocese pay to relocate these unfortunates to a rural Irish village. Instead he countered with the convenience of two other Masses on this very same day. Reed, imported from Ulster, brogued that the early morning Mass was more convenient to the old ladies. Unassailable Irish logic.

O'Toole was thirty-eight, and looked a decade younger. When he exited his church, St. Helena, to cross to the rectory, he saw that Neith Boyce, the pretty blonde

featured singer for the choir, was waiting for him near the statue of Saint Anthony in the gardens. He felt that singular sense of vitality only danger could bring. She asked him flirtatiously what kind of priest wore Louis Vuitton sunglasses.

### **3            Prognosis**

Sissy was waiting impatiently with her assembled family in the warm décor of the hospital's third floor lounge.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, stop crying, Belinda," Sissy said to her daughter. "He's not dead or seriously injured."

"He's in a coma!"

"Buffy's right. I think that's a pretty good reason to be upset, Mom," said her brother Thatcher.

"Stop posturing," said Hobart, an accomplished posturer. Hobart was the oldest, a senior at Bennington, whence he had rushed to his father's bedside.

"The doctor said we can assume neither the best nor the worst at this point. Let's just stay rational and deal with the facts," he said.

"Thank you, Robot Man," Thatcher said. Buffy choked on another wet sob.

"I'm going out for a cigarette," Sissy said.

"Again?" Thatcher said.

Dr. Fangmeyer headed her off as Sissy rose to go.

"Good news!" he said. "He's conscious!"

The children exclaimed in loud delight, then Buffy sobbed. Dr. Fangmeyer was pummeled with questions and waited for quiet.

"He seems fine. He's speaking without difficulty, no slurring or aphasia. His vision is focused, sense of hearing, sense of smell are fine. His thought progression appears linear."

"So what is the extent of his physical damage, Doctor?" Hobart said, stepping forward as the heir apparent and tallest child.

"Hematoma from the concussion, which was neither mild nor severe, but middling. Spontaneous pneumothorax."

"English," Sissy said.

"A collapsed lung," Hobart said.

"That's right," said Dr. Fangmeyer.

"The prognosis, Doctor?" said Hobart.

"Oh, knock it off, will ya?" Thatcher said.

Fangmeyer said, "We need to keep him here for awhile - observation for the brain injury, but primarily for the lung to heal. Right now he's got a chest-tube intercalated with the ribcage for inflation, plus a drainage-hose for fluid depletion."

Buffy produced a gagging sob.

"Thatcher," Sissy said, "Why don't you take your sister to the snack bar for a Coke?"

"You mean the Dietary Kitchen?" he said.

"Beat it."

The two teenagers scowled off. Fangmeyer cleared his throat. "Shouldn't be more than a few days -- the forearm is in a cast, a small cast - he won't be playing squash or tennis for awhile. Some nasty cuts and contusions -- it's quite remarkable he's not more seriously injured."

"Or dead."

"Hobart."

"I'm grateful, Mother, as we should all be."

"Go get a Coke, Hobart."

They watched him walk off with hurt dignity.

Sissy addressed Dr. Fangmeyer. "So I can expect a complete recovery?"

"I should think so, yes. There's no indication of any serious or permanent damage." While he paused, Sissy could practically taste one of her unfiltered Nat Sherman Havana Oval cigarettes. "Still, there's always the possibility of...." The doctor trailed off.

"What? There's always the possibility of what?"

"All kinds of things."

Sissy stared.

"I'm going to get a Coke."

"You can see your husband right away if you'd like. Just don't tire him out."

Sissy proceeded to her husband's private room without gathering her children. When she arrived, George looked up from the remains of a snack of cottage cheese and pineapple on a tray angled in front of him. His head was bandaged, his right arm in plaster. The gurgling, bubbling electronic pump on a wheeled stand near the bed disturbed her the most. Two tubes snaked from it under her husband's



blue hospital gown - one thick and yellow, one clear, through which bloody fluid was visibly coursing. The television played with the volume low.

"Boy, was I hungry!" he said.

She thought this an odd greeting. Odd, but charming. She went to him and kissed his cheek. He smiled up at her.

"I'm happy you're alive," she said.

"I'm happy you're alive," he replied.

She moved the tray, smoothed down the blanket, and sat on the bed.

"How are you feeling, George?"

"Never better." He smiled and patted her hand. In over twenty years of marriage he had never once patted her hand.

Sissy was puzzled. She noticed her three offspring, slighted and sulking in the doorway.

"Are you up for seeing the kids, George?"

"Oh, I love kids."

"I mean our kids."

"Heck, yeah!"

Sissy looked to her progeny and raised her eyebrows. They knew this as the signal to enter. George beamed.

"What a great-looking family," he said.

"Hi, Daddy," Buffy said.

"Dad," Hobart said.

Thatcher smiled close-mouthed, more of a grimace.

"Don't look so grim and determined," Sissy said to him. "We're trying to cheer your father up."

"No need," said George. "I'm lucky to be alive. I'm banged up, but I'll heal. No permanent damage." He tried to hail them with his broken arm, but stopped, wincing.

"You're only supposed to be here a few days," said Buffy. "Then you can come home. We miss you."

Sissy checked an impulse to point out that her father had only been a patient for a few hours. And that an ugly argument had preceded the crash.

"So, Dad," Hobart said. "How did you crash the car?"

"A deer. A little doe. I jerked the wheel at sixty-five, spun out and flipped." He grinned.

"Did your life flash before your eyes?"

George looked stumped. "I don't think so."

"How about when you were unconscious? See any bright lights or welcoming dead relatives?"

"Hobart," said Sissy.

"I just had a Coke," said Hobart.

"No," said George. "Nothing like that." He had, however, a thoughtful frown that was lingering.

"Dad," said Thatcher. "Can I look at those tubes stuck in your chest?"

"Thatcher," said Sissy.

"Sure," said George.

Before Sissy could stop him, the boy had skipped to the other side of the bed, gently moved the sleeve of George's gown and peered in. He whistled. "Wow! Looks like a gun-shot blast!"

Buffy moaned.

"That's it," said Sissy, standing. "Your father needs some rest. Say goodnight and get out."

Partings were exchanged, with Thatcher, the last, inquiring about saving any extra pain killers before being

pushed out by his mother. She returned to the bedside.

George was still lost in thought.

"You sure you're okay, George?"

He didn't look up immediately, but then noticed her. "Hmm? Oh, yes - I'm fine, Cecelia."

She stared at him for some time. "You never call me that, George."

"Call you what?"

"Cecelia."

He smiled. "Well, I should start."

She smiled back uncertainly.

#### **4            George the Second**

While her husband slipped in and out of drugged sleep in the early hours, Sissy had awakened in their king-sized bed next to George Humphreys, who was sleeping soundly.

Humphreys was one of her husband's senior vice presidents, and Sissy joked sourly to herself that she, a very vocal lover, chose him for the convenience of his Christian name.

George Humphreys had made it plain from the moment he had joined Kukol that he was hot for Sissy.

"He's always snuffling around me like a pig," she complained once to her husband.

"You're quite the truffle," said George.

Sissy found her husband's flattery disarming. George St. Hilaire was certainly more charming than George Humphreys. He was also funnier, sweeter, better looking and a superior lover. George Humphreys had once again confirmed this last fact only a few hours before. So why was she with George Humphreys, or any of her meaningless extramarital partners? She searched for an answer as others might look for God.

Sissy heard a noise. All three children seemed concerned about their father, and had chosen to distract themselves by spending the night with friends. None would return home unexpectedly, especially at this hour. Still, Sissy was nervous. Humphreys never came to the house, and here he was sleeping in her marriage bed.

Sissy heard the sound again, and identified it as her two fat Persians, Augustus and Fluff Ball, flinging

each other around the hallway. She decided to use the bathroom down the hall, wanting distance from Humphreys. She slipped from beneath the quilts and stood, suddenly aware of the asinine pink baby-doll nightie she was wearing, a gift from her now snoring swain. She pooled it to her ankles, kicked it aside and entered the hall. The clawless cats batted each other, collided, then disappeared into the darkness, devoted to Sissy only in the daylight.

Sissy reached the bathroom, flicked on the light, squinted, and seated herself. She was considering the cover of a National Geographic ("How Planets Mate") when the usually dormant landline telephone jangled on the wall two feet from her.

"Yes?"

"Cecelia?"

"Yes?"

"It's George."

"Yes?"

"Stop saying yes." A pause, then he chuckled. "I'm sorry. I know it's early, but I couldn't sleep. I wanted to hear your voice."

"Oh, yes, yes - sorry - no. No, I mean, no, it's fine you called! I wasn't asleep." Sissy was flustered, and she hated being flustered.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

*I'm taking a piss naked. I just stripped off a Victoria's Secret valentine that your idiot business partner had me wear while he fucked me. What are you up to?*

The imagined reply was not meant sardonically. She was insulting herself.

"Nothing, darling," she said. "I couldn't sleep either." There was silence on George's end. "George?"

"I'm here. That was really nice."

"What was?"

"I can't remember the last time you called me darling."

She felt a pang of embarrassment, even guilt. He was right. She was surprised to hear herself murmur, "I miss you. I wish you were here."

"I'll be home soon."

"Do you think you can sleep, darling?" The word slipped out again.

"Maybe. You?"

"Maybe."

"Okay, Pumpkin. Good night. God bless you."

He waited for her to say good night, but she was speechless at his unprecedented pet-name and remark. After a moment, he hung up. She kept the dead receiver to her ear for a half-minute before hanging up.

She returned to bed and sleep, waking with Humphreys beside her three hours later.

"How 'bout I make us some breakfast?" he said eagerly. "You haven't tasted my *huevos rancheros* yet. Best in the goddamned world, if I say so myself, and others have said so, too." He grinned at her. She was naked, but the covers were pulled to her neck. He was naked, but he had tossed the quilts and sheets aside to display his body in a pose from a gay skin magazine. His cock was neither limp nor tumescent, but in an indistinct state like its indistinct owner. Sissy regarded both with a disdain reserved for the irritating but utilitarian.

"One of the kids might come back - you know - unexpectedly? Take a quick shower and we'll breakfast out."



He studied her expression and realized there would be no morning sex to get his blood pumping. He sighed and got up. "Yes, Ma'am. We shall breakfast *out*."

"And not at IHOP, either. There's a new place on the lake. I don't think we'll bump into any snobs or woodchucks down there."

*Woodchucks* was the upscale snob, derisive term for backward Vermonsters, country folk lacking gentry charm.

Humphreys turned on the shower, tested the water, then abruptly turned it off. Wiping his hand on his bare thigh, he returned to the bedroom.

"Would you please put something on?" she said.

"When you say we won't bump into anyone, you mean we won't be spotted together first thing in the morning?"

"That's what I mean, yes."

He leaned against the doorframe and crossed one leg behind the other. It struck Sissy that now he looked like a gay pick-up in a bus station.

"I have a problem with that," he said.

She glanced at her watch. "Can you make it fast?" She wanted a cigarette, but would not smoke in the house.

"And put on some pants?"

He smirked, but pulled a purple bathrobe from a hook on the door. Sissy almost objected that it was George's robe, but stopped herself. This was George's bed, house, and wife, after all. Giving status to his robe would be silly. Humphreys cinched the belt at his waist.

"Sissy, do you realize how many people in this town already know we're having it off?"

"I couldn't care less."

"That's hard to believe."

"Those people don't pay my bills."

"You really don't care what they think of you?"

"Or think of you? You're married and cheating, too, remember? What's the point of this?"

"If you don't care what people say or think, why the low profile?"

"Because the less they have to talk about, the better, obviously."

He crossed to the bed and sat down, which annoyed her. "Listen, Sis -- "

"Don't call me Sis."

"Your schematic says we screw and get out of here to avoid the children and eat some place with low visibility."

Sissy looked into her lover's eyes, and asked, "George, what are you trying to say?"

He sat for a moment, shuffling his hand of possibilities.

"Leave George and I'll leave Helen. We can move to California..."

His pipe dream again. What was he going to say next - *I feel cheap*? She felt like the man in this tawdry situation. She would not leave her family, loved them, despite her ambivalence. She was living a wealthy, more than comfortable life-style thanks to George's salary, inheritance, and investments, but she also enjoyed a good income from the small real estate agency she had built on her own. She had earned two degrees. She was aware of her sophisticated sense of style and good looks. She could live independent of George, and had walked that tightrope for several years.

She glanced over at Humphreys, who was babbling about buying a marina in Southern California.

She was reminded of President Clinton's remark that he had cheated largely because he could. The thought that the president was as much of a shit-heel as she was remained reassuring.

She would compartmentalize. She had been well-practiced in this approach since adolescence, when in the space of one month both her divorced parents remarried, her college football star brother died from a head injury, and her 18-year-old sister married a washed-up writer forty years her senior.

"We'll talk about this later," she said. "I'm hungry."

"That's what you always say."

## **5      Released**

George St. Hilaire stayed in Vermont-Green Mountain for five days. When the gurgling of his pump diminished, the tubes were removed and his raw incision was finally stitched. Sissy and Buffy planned to collect him the morning he was discharged. Sissy offered Thatcher the chance to skip school to pick up Dad, but he argued he had

an in-class presentation and couldn't let down his Intro to Economics partners. His mother doubted his sincerity.

Sissy was seated on Buffy's bed as her youngest decided what to wear.

"It doesn't have to be anything special," Sissy said.

"But it's a special occasion. Isn't it?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"What about my green sweater and the flowered skirt?"

"The one with the palm trees? No."

"Okay."

"How about your little blue and purple dress?"

"Okay."

"But you hate that dress," Sissy said.

Buffy glanced sideways, wary and confused, at her mother. "I don't understand," Buffy said.

The girl was on her way to becoming a permanent doormat, and Sissy was playing games. Still, the mother felt she had shared a pleasant morning with her daughter, with no arguments.

When they arrived at the hospital, George was already in the lobby, seated in a wheelchair, his two bags next to him.

"Did they evict you?" Sissy asked.

"No. I wanted to get up and get going, and somebody was ready to move in, so I moved out. The wheelchair's just hospital policy. I feel tee-rific."

Sissy went to the business office to confirm that an itemized list of costs would be mailed to her as well as their insurance company. When she returned to the lobby, she was astonished to see George with a loudly giggling Buffy on his lap. He was twirling and running the wheelchair, his plastered arm and violated chest seemingly oblivious.

"What the hell are you doing?" Sissy yelled.

"Taking Buffy for a spin!" His daughter was laughing so hard she was spluttering, her arm clutching her father's shoulder.

"You're wearing a skirt, Belinda. Every guy in the place is getting a free show," Sissy said.

"Lucky guys!" said George. Buffy convulsed again, trying to cross her legs and pulling down her skirt.

"We're leaving," said Sissy sharply.

As they packed up on of their two SUVs and helped the patient from the wheelchair into the vehicle, a nurse in greens and a cartoon character smock ran out to them.

"I forgot to pack your book, George! My fault - sorry!"

"Don't be sorry, Dear Prudence," George said.

Sissy intercepted the battered hard cover that looked like something bought at a yard sale. *Seeds of Contemplation*, by Thomas Merton. She had a vague recollection of the name -- a priest or mystic? -- and an early, bad death.

"Where'd you get this?"

"A Catholic priest visited, and he had it with him and gave it to me."

"Just like that?"

"Yeah."

Sissy slid the door on her husband holding his book, and her daughter already tooling her BlackBerry, and slipped behind the wheel.

"'Dear Prudence'," said George from the backseat.

"Remember that Beatles song from the White Album?"

George had a tin ear and no interest in music.

Sissy was aware of an uneasy feeling.

## **6            God's Grace**

When George got home, he was so animated he made Sissy nervous.

"George, you're supposed to take it easy. That lung has knit itself back to your rib-cage, and the doctors said you need to take it easy. No sudden moves or heavy lifting or golf or tennis or anything."

"I understand."

"Good. I want you moving like you're made out of blown glass for the next few weeks. No stress, either. Got that?"

"Cicelia, I feel completely at peace."

"Really? Why is that?"

"I know why." He had an expression like a boy hiding a frog.

"Why, George?"



"God's grace."

She stared for a moment, and heard herself say,  
"Huh?"

"I have a lot to explain, Pumpkin-Butt, and I'll be happy to do it. But first I want to sit in the Jacuzzi for a nice hot soak. Join me?"

Sissy declined, and when George left the room she pulled her phone from her purse and called the hospital.

The receptionist was unable to connect her to any of George's doctors, but managed to track down a physician's assistant familiar with his case. She waited while the P.A. retrieved his file. When she returned, Sissy asked, "What are the drugs prescribed for my husband?"

"Let's see." Pause. "Just Percocet. He can take Tylenol with codeine if he wants. Is he in pain?"

"Was he given anything unusual while he was in there?"

"Unusual? No. A Morphine derivative, Benzotriazipan, Sevoflurane with nitrous oxide - "

"Anything that would make him act weird?"

"Shouldn't, no. How weird is he acting?"

"He's not quite himself."

"Mood swings? Suicidal or violent?"

"No."

"Then let's put it down to the trauma of the accident and the shock of the concussion and collapsed lung."

Sissy was standing in the kitchen and watched George through the sliding glass doors. He had emerged from the first floor guest room, his white, hairless buttocks a vivid contrast to his tanned limbs and torso. He strolled nonchalantly across the deck towards the hot tub. He carried no towel or swimsuit, and was presumably in full view of the neighbors and his children, if any cared to look.

"Okay," said Sissy. "Let's do that."

## **7 Catholic School Girls**

Father O'Toole was having another bad day. He had taken to trying to drown out his professional and personal problems with music. He would withdraw into his office in the St. Helena's rectory and crank the volume on the

stereo, a top-shelf appliance he could not afford, but had purchased nonetheless.

Although his CD collection contained classical, jazz and rock - he liked to joke he had "very catholic tastes" -- he found himself lately listening to hypnotically low-key, soothing pieces, such as Bartok's austere opera *Bluebeard's Castle*.

He had reached for Led Zeppelin, to which he was extremely partial, but changed his mind at the last moment and grabbed Scriabin's *Poem of Ecstasy*, and was now playing it very loudly.

He had told the church secretary, Mrs. Page, to take messages. He had no appointments that day. He settled into an overstuffed recliner and closed his eyes. He was rubbing his forehead and eyes, his mind washed by the music, when a kick was delivered to the side of his chair.

"For Christ's sake, will you turn that down?"

O'Toole catapulted out of the chair, trotted to the stereo, and turned it off.

"I was pounding on the door, Brendan! What the hell are you doing listening to music mid-afternoon like some half-ass grand dame?"

O'Toole was unsettled. Bishop Reed never arrived unannounced. O'Toole liked and respected the short, stocky old man, who bore an uncanny resemblance to Winston Churchill. He felt genuine affection for the devout, strict, and foul-mouthed old boozier, but Reed always seemed irritated with the world in general and O'Toole in particular. O'Toole always seemed to say the wrong thing. A cradle Catholic, he seemed to take an unspoken, but clearly dim view of converts like O'Toole.

"I'm sorry, Oliver. I was trying to relax."

"Relax to that shit?" (He pronounced it *shite*.)

"How? And what business do you have relaxing at two o'clock of an afternoon?"

"Would you like a drink?" O'Toole asked.

"No. But I'll take one anyway."

O'Toole went off to the kitchen. He poured a tumbler from Reed's private reserve with a heavy hand. The Bishop didn't take ice in his tipple.

When he returned to the study, Reed was seated in the recliner, puffing on a fat, black cigar - a Punch. O'Toole had his suspicions that Reed smoked these simply to

enhance the Churchill resemblance. O'Toole rummaged in a drawer for a neglected ashtray.

"Where's yours?" said Reed.

Oh Christ, yes: the old priest wouldn't drink alone. How could he forget? Without a word he went back to the pantry, poured a glass of cheap merlot, and walked slowly back. He drew a chair up as Reed frowned at the wine.

"Your health," toasted Reed, and slugged. "Took you by surprise, my visit?"

O'Toole nodded. Reed smiled.

"We need to talk, Brendan."

Oh my God. That phrase. Always bad news.

"About?"

"A lot. Let's start with the fact that you won't hold the Right to Life vigil your parish has been clamoring for."

O'Toole relaxed. He was on firm ground.

"Out of a parish of a couple thousand, about six parishioners are clamoring, Oliver. And they're all fruitcakes. And I can't see how holding a numb candlelight vigil about anything is exactly snapping into action."

"It's symbolic, you dummy. Our church is heavily into symbols, if you've not noticed."

O'Toole hated it when Reed called him dummy, which he did often.

"I just don't see the point, Oliver."

"It's not your place to see. We see. You *do*. Hold the damn vigil. Next: why did you mention that the Holy Virgin Mother was fourteen years old at the time of Our Lord's conception?"

"Because she was. You know that. We all know that."

"No, the punters don't. You don't mention that from the pulpit. You know how prudes and perverts think today? Unmarried at fourteen means underage and illicit sex and molestation and all sorts of filth and misery."

"The Virgin Mary?"

"We're dealing with dirty, suspicious minds these days, if you haven't noticed. The Church must keep up with the times. Now for the last thing. This college girl, Molly Roth."

"Mary."

"What?"

"Her name is Mary -- *Mary* Roth."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph." Reed moved quickly on.  
"Too many tongues wagging around here about how much time you two spend together."

"Oliver, this is a perfectly innocent and appropriate association. She's doing her thesis on Catholic themes in the work of British novelists, and so naturally turned to me."

"Of course she did. With all your Boston College education." He released a cloud of cigar smoke. Reed made no secret of his contempt for Jesuit intellectualism. He said, "Why's a Jewess interested in Catholic theology?"

"A Jewess? She's not Jewish."

"I was told she was. Her name's Roth."

"Her name's Roth, but she's not Jewish. And so what if she was?"

"That's the kind of outlook I'm talking about, Brendan. How old are you?"

"Thirty-eight."

"Young, good-looking."

O'Toole chuckled. "Oh, I don't know if you can really say I'm - "

"Don't tell me what I'm saying. You're a young man become a priest late in life who's confused after cutting a swath. You miss it and it's still everywhere to tempt you. That's your cross. You're not lusting after children, but you're getting too cozy with women."

Reed drained his glass and stared unhappily at its emptiness.

"Knock off this association, as you so prettily put it. And start acting like an ordained priest."

O'Toole felt insulted, angry, and weak. Reed abruptly rose, and O'Toole followed him out of the study into the foyer. All thoughts were rocketed into the stratosphere when Mary Roth loomed into view.

She was seated on a divan in the foyer, knees pressed primly together, dressed in a Catholic school girl costume - plaid skirt, white knee-socks, navy blue sweater with white collar. She was twenty-two and favored jeans and cotton blouses. Why was she dressed like this?

And why was she here? This was some horrid joke. He wanted to pretend she did not exist and completely ignore her, but she rose cheerfully as the two men approached.



"Are you Bishop Reed?" she said to the old devil with glee.

Reed smiled, eyes lively. "I am, my dear. And who might you be?"

"I'm Mary Roth."

Reed's pug smile collapsed like a pudding. He shot a glance at O'Toole, then to Mary, then back to O'Toole. O'Toole might have found it funny had he not felt so sick.

"Of course you are," Reed said and strode out. O'Toole opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. The front door slammed.

"Hi, Brendan," said Mary. She glanced at the door. "Was he okay?"

"Why are you dressed like that?"

She giggled. "Oh, this -- I know it's dumb. We had a fund-raiser tea for CYO at my sorority. It was prep-themed. A bunch of us dressed as schoolgirls. I came straight from there."

"You should have called first."

"I'm sorry." She curled her lower lip into a pout

She had recently done her blonde hair in Clara Bow ringlets. The sex kitten impact was diabolical.

"I got you this," she said, pulling from her bag a book with a woven cover. "We talked about it."

Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation*, the 1949 New Directions edition.

"Also," she said, "There's this?" She pulled out a copy of the local Breckenridge arts and culture weekly, *The View*.

"*The Seventh Seal* is at the Bijou Arts. You said you wanted me to see it. We could watch it on the big screen..."

He pictured her two perfect knees pressed primly together beneath that skirt, but next to him in a darkened theater. He felt wretched. What was she saying?

"It's on Tuesday and Wednesday at seven. You said some of it might tie in with my thesis? I mean -- it'd be really fun to go with you. Nice, I mean -- if we could go together."

"I have to leave right now," he said. "The book, thank you, that's unbearably nice of you, and the movie, yeah, I think if I - "

She stared wide-eyed, looking like Thumper, the Walt Disney bunny. Her face was so pretty.

Good God, it made him ache so, her prettiness. O'Toole felt, at this instant, that he could commit his life to this young woman, marry her, father her children, wear cardigans.

He also knew he could ravish, even strangle her from spite, rage and frustration. And he was a man of God.

O'Toole frightened himself.

## **8      Take it Easy**

George's friends and family were surprised at the apparent ease with which he took the advice of his doctors, Sissy in particular. She had watched him from the beginning bringing his work home and toiling without cease until one project after another and another was finished.

When he wasn't working hard, he was playing hard - golf, tennis, squash, and basketball. He did not swim, run or work out, as none of these pursuits were deemed competitive. He was driven. A few years earlier he had broken an ankle, only to re-break it precipitately during a company picnic softball game. He had seemed pleased.

He followed sports, politics and finance. He considered books, music and movies a waste of time. It had never once occurred to him that there might be a non-material world.

Now things were different. George was sleeping late, saying he enjoyed his dreams. He read thick books of theology and philosophy that appeared from nowhere. He meditated and napped each afternoon. One night, he watched a nearly eight-hour Marx Brothers marathon on cable, his laughter waking both Thatcher and Buffy.

His lumberjack breakfasts were replaced by fresh fruit, plain, nonfat yogurt with brewer's yeast and wheat germ, herbal teas or hot water with organic lemon juice, raw honey or black molasses with unfiltered apple cider vinegar.

His favorite meal of steak and lamb grilled with rock-salt was replaced by lightly steamed fish and vegetables with brown rice. He showed no interest in the goings on at his company - his business and livelihood. He stopped drinking alcohol and smoking cigars.

Sissy was growing increasingly concerned.

After a week, she felt a productive conversation was in order.

She waited until her husband had prepared and consumed his ascetic lunch. He was sunning himself, shirt off on the deck, dipping into a thick, decrepit book, a dandelion root ice tea within reach.

The kids were at school, and Sissy had made sure that both her secretary and her husband's would not disturb them.

For some reason she could not crystallize, she wanted to look pleasing for him. She chose a powder-blue cotton blouse and a pair of tight khaki shorts, white sandals and a gold ankle-chain that she disliked but knew George loved.

She approached him with the sweetest face she could compose, a huge glass of vodka and Clamato juice stuffed with olives, limes, celery and cucumber in her grip.

"Do you mind if I smoke, George?" He usually did mind.

"Of course I don't. I want you to be happy."

Sissy decided not to pursue that. Instead lit up. She looked at her husband. He was gazing off into the

distance with a serene smile. She knew from the last week that his habit was not to speak unless spoken to.

"How are you feeling, George?"

"I've never felt better, Sissy-Wissy."

She made a pained expression, gulped her drink, and dragged deeply on her Sherman's. "Physically you're good?"

"Tip-top."

"How about everything else?"

"Pure bliss, I'd say."

"Ah," she said with warm assurance. "That's another thing, bliss. Now I know you've had a head injury and the accident was traumatic. I completely get that - but the doctors say there isn't any serious damage."

He beamed. "Oh, I know that."

"But you don't seem to be quite yourself, George."

"No?"

"No. You're not taking any interest in the business or your friends or talking and -- stuff."

George put down his book and adjusted himself in his seat.

"Listen, Honeypot. If I do anything or think anything or say anything or know anything or desire

anything that is not purely for the love of God, it cannot give me peace, rest, fulfillment, or joy."

He settled back in his chair with satisfaction.

She allowed a respectful silence, then said, "I don't know what that means, George."

"It's simple. To find love I must enter into the sanctuary and sanctity where it is hidden, which is the essence of God. And to enter into His sanctity, I must become holy as He is holy, perfect as He is perfect. None of this can be done by any effort of my own, by any striving of my own, by any competition with other men. It means leaving behind all the ways that men can follow or understand."

Sissy studied him for a long while. Then she tried, "You see, darling, you're talking in a way that makes me think that you're most likely nuts."

He looked surprised. "You mean mentally ill?"

She nodded gravely.

He laughed. "What did I say that makes you think I'm crazy?"

"I didn't understand anything you said."

"Let me give it another shot."

She drained her drink and wanted another, but resolved to keep a clear head.

"Okay," he began, like an enthusiastic tutor. "I'll take it slow. The only true joy on earth is to escape from our own *selfhood*."

"Stop right there. Say that again, then explain to me what that means."

"I say that the only true joy on earth is to escape from our own selfhood. That means material things don't really bring us joy, but pain."

"You mean material things like - a home and a -- car and maybe a - time share condo?"

"Exactly! All of that, everything! But at the heart of it - the root of all of it - is the pursuit of wealth. Of money! Until we love God perfectly, everything in the world will be able to hurt us. And the greatest misfortune is to be dead to the pain this inflicts on us, and not realize what it truly is."

Sissy remembered a paperback novel she'd read one summer as a teenager, called *Night of Camp David*, where the president of the United States revealed himself to a colleague as totally insane.



"When did you know you felt this way, George?"

He looked surprised. "Why, the accident, of course. Our Lady appeared to me and offered me a chance at redemption. She's been instructing me every day since, right here. This is our big opportunity -- for salvation, purity, and grace, Sugarbum."

Sissy could only stare.

"You have to understand, Cupcake - to worship ourselves is to worship nothing. And the worship of nothing is hell."

I understand, Sissy thought. Stark, raving nutcase.

## **9        Things Get Worse**

Sissy saw no point in attempting theological debates with her husband. Within the realm of his insanity, he was making perfect sense, and she had no rejoinders. She took this as further proof he badly needed help. The morning after the conversation on the deck, before Sissy could even look up a shrink, things got worse.

It was Monday, the first day of March. Sissy liked to go early to her fitness club to avoid the sweaty young

hard-bodies. They played the television too loud and stomped obnoxiously on the treadmills. She was back home by eight with a cardboard tray of coffee and bagels, stunned to see Thatcher and Buffy dressed and moving around before noon.

"Daddy's on the roof," said Buffy.

"What?"

"And he's naked," said Thatcher.

"Why is he naked?" Sissy asked.

"Why is he on the roof?" Thatcher said.

"We don't want to ask," said Buffy.

"You don't have the guts to ask your father why he's on the roof naked?" said Sissy. "I'm proud of the both of you. Where on the roof, exactly?"

Buffy pointed to the deck area while her brother pointed above. Sissy thrust the food into her son's hands and strode to the door.

"There's more," called Thatcher. "You need to listen to the - "

"One thing at a time!" she said.

She calmed herself, slid open the glass door, and walked casually onto the deck, deliberately taking a

longing look at her well-kept garden first. Spring was about to arrive. Then she turned.

She had pictured him perched like a bird, knees under his chin, rocking back and forth, a maniac gargoyle freak. Instead, he lay completely stretched out on the angle of the roof, his face tilted to the sun. She thought he actually looked pretty good. Certainly uninhibited. She told herself she must be careful and cheerful and humoring, no sudden moves. She shaded her eyes with her hand.

"Hey, George! Getting some sun?"

He looked down at her.

"That wasn't my original intention," he said. "I came up here to talk to God, and the sun felt so good, I just took my clothes off." Sissy could see the neatly folded pile next to him.

"Is God up there naked, too?" she asked.

He laughed. "You're a card."

"How'd you get up there, George?"

"Easy," he said with his eyes closed. "I just went from the railing to the roof."

One glance and she knew this was impossible. The step-ladder and sixteen-foot aluminum slider from the

garage were nowhere in sight. For a distressing instant she pictured him carried up there on the wings of angels. Naked angels.

"So you're feeling well?"

"Never better."

"Okay, that's great. Can you let us know when you're coming down so you don't hurt yourself?"

"Of course I will. But don't you worry. I have this feeling I'm never going to hurt myself again."

She couldn't construct any reply. She smiled and went inside, sliding the door behind her.

Her two children were seated at the island in the center of the kitchen. Containers of salmon and cream cheese, and hot pepper jam were open before them, the contents smeared abundantly on the two sesame bagels she had bought for George and herself. They were washing down their mouthfuls with both ice coffees.

"My God, but you two are selfish and inconsiderate creeps," she said.

"You raised us," Thatcher said, chewing.

She took his point. "You said there was something else to tell me?"

He took his time chewing and swallowing. "Listen to the tape machine," he said finally.

All four members of the family had their own cell phones with voice mail, but the household kept the landline plugged into a twenty-year old AT&T answering machine, rarely used. Sissy entered the dusty dining-room, saw the blinking light, and pushed the button. The tape whirred, merrily rewinding. It occurred to her the tape had never been replaced. The first message beeped on.

"Yeah, hi, this message is for George...George, this is Temple from the club? Dede told me you called and she said you said that you won't be doing the golf or the tennis this season, and I know that can't be right...and she said you said another crazy thing...but... anyway, George, I can't get through to your cell and your office says they can't, either, and...well, we're starting up real soon, big guy! Okay? Can ya gimme a ring?"

Beep.

"Hi, George, this is Phil calling at seven in the morning, and I'm real sorry, my apologies to call so damn early on a weekend, but I just got a call from Gustav in Munich, and Gustav said they never got the package you

told Bonnie you were going to fax yourself? Gustav is pretty bent out of shape, George, and his English is as bad as my German, so I really need your help with some damage control on this one. Can you give me a call ASAP? I'd really appreciate it."

Phil Bottomley, Director of international sales for George's company.

Beep.

"Hi, Mr. St. Hilaire, this is Lorraine Page from the parish office. Father O'Toole said he'd be happy to meet with you any morning after nine, and he told me to tell you that there are, in fact, many cases of men and women called to service later in life, and this shouldn't be an insurmountable thing for acceptance into a seminary."

Beep.

Sissy stood there, listening to the rewinding tape. She returned to the kitchen.

Her son and daughter had finished eating, and for some unfathomable reason had cleaned up after themselves.

"What's a seminary?" asked Buffy.

"I told you shit-wit," Thatcher said. "It's a place where guys go to become priests."

"I want to hear Mom tell me," Buffy said. Then she started to cry.

Sissy said, "Don't cry, Buffy. Please don't cry. At the moment, I don't have the energy to comfort you or smother you. Your brother's right - a seminary is a place where men study for the priesthood."

Thatcher whistled. "What's going on, Mom?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"I'd say it's obvious," said Thatcher. "Dad's had a goddamned nervous breakdown - some kind of psychotic thing. He's nuts."

Sissy eyed her son coolly. "Until we figure out what's wrong with your father from professionals, I don't want to hear words like 'psychotic' or 'nuts' from either one of you - you got that?"

Her two kids silently left the table. It was a few moments before Sissy even noticed their absence. Her mind had drifted to considering she might lose her husband, that he might be desperately ill. She recently had come around to the idea that maybe she did love him. She had made a

family and a life with him. She was also cheating on him, and knew she would not stop any time soon.

Now she imagined a new life as a rich, sexy, still relatively young widow. The thought was not wholly unpleasant.

Sissy felt almost unbearably confused.

## **10 Catholic Jokes**

Father O'Toole was meeting Temple Jordan. Father O'Toole did not like Temple Jordan, and he knew Jordan did not like him. Jordan was no parishioner, but he was, oddly, a financial advisor to the local chapter of the Knights of Columbus, and occasionally had to deal with the parish. This morning he was bringing a check for a Catholic singles retreat in Rutland, and the priest needed to be gracious and diplomatic. Jordan made this difficult, as he was provocative and tactless. It began with jokes that were intended to be light hearted.

"What's the difference between a Catholic wake and a Catholic wedding? One less drunk!"

O'Toole smiled thinly.



"How are you, Reverend?" Jordan asked, slapping O'Toole on the back. Jordan was the only actual back-slapper O'Toole knew. "Staying out of trouble?"

O'Toole disliked the question.

"I'm fine, Temple."

"Here's the check, your worship. I don't need a receipt, I trust you - not! I was just reading last Sunday's weekly bulletin. You're nothing if you ain't transparent."

"Thank you. That's high praise."

"I hear you're tutoring my niece."

"Your niece?"

"Yeah, my sister's kid -- Mary Roth?"

Oh, Christ. Mary. The word *tutoring* brought images of plaid skirts and caning he quickly drove from his mind.

"I'm not tutoring her, Temple. She just asked for some help with her thesis."

"*Help?*" He managed to make the word sound salacious.

"Intellectual input." Oh, God.

Jordan grinned. "That's jake, Father. Keeps you busy, eh? Well," he said, yawning, "I gotta be off. Hope the cash helps out your lonely hearts."

Jordan walked ahead of the priest to the door. He grabbed the knob, then turned abruptly and said, "And watch my niece Mary's ass, okay? Seems she's a little too generous with it sometimes, if you take my meaning. Maybe you could have a good influence there."

He strode off.

O'Toole did not like the sound of any of this.

## **11        The Last Straw**

When her husband came down off the roof, he told Sissy he wanted to take a walk. She didn't want to confront him about the phone messages and their grotesque implications just now. With George and the kids out of the house, she could call George Humphreys on her cell. He had left six messages since the day before.

"Where the hell have you been?" was his greeting.

"Don't give me any shit, George. I am really not in the mood."

"What in hell is going on with your husband?"

"What do you mean?"

"Several things. Three things, to be precise."

"I can't wait."

"First, he assured us after the accident that he was working at home. Simple stuff, but deals too important for us lackeys. You know what a corporate genius your husband thinks he is, unlike the rest of us incompetent - "

"George."

"Well, he didn't do shit and it's costing us a lot. I won't get into it now, but there's a Munich situation where the shit has hit the fan. It's like he deliberately sabotaged the whole deal! Second, he hasn't answered a single call or text or e-mail in over a week, and the board is going ape-shit."

"And?"

"And I saved the best for last. Tim Warner just called me."

"Am I supposed to know who he is?"

"He's the weekend first shift foreman for the company that supports us all, Sissy."

"Tim Warner. I knew that. Why did he call?"

"He tried Jory and Carl and Bryce first, but couldn't reach them, so he tracked me down on the course at the club. Warner says that some kid came by about an hour ago with a hand-delivered note from George, addressed, 'To Whom it May Concern'."

"Some kid?"

"A boy, like a twelve-year-old boy or something. You know what the note says?"

"How would I know that, George?"

"Warner read it to me over the phone. It said the factory - not the company, the corporation, or the business mind you, but the factory - should finish filling all present orders, then immediately stop taking any more, as he - your husband -- would soon be closing the factory to become a Catholic priest."

"He couldn't have."

"He fucking well did! I'm on my way over to Warner right now to see this insane note. Warner was pretty upset, but he knows enough to keep his mouth shut. You do realize that your husband's completely lost his marbles?" He went

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on to mumble, "I was in the middle of the best goddamned game I've ever shot..."

Sissy almost choked on, "I have to go right now, George. I promise I'll call you soon. Please don't call me."

She hung up and sobbed.

## **12        Mania & Ecstasy**

"He's calling me Sissy-Wissy and Pumpkin-Butt!" she yelled to the psychiatrist. "I can put up with Honeybuns, but this is getting ridiculous. The George I know is gone, Doctor. Do you understand me? Gone!"

Dr. Offer was standing in his large, resplendent office, looking out a floor-to-ceiling window at the lovely grounds of the Breckenridge Retreat, which advertised in the Yellow Pages: "We'll help you find the strength to seek the care needed for you or someone like you." Sissy thought Offer was trying to look deep but failing.

"He's in the grip of some sort of mania," he said.

"Could he be faking?"

"Oh, no, most definitely not," said Dr. Offer, his clipped delivery adding to his authority. "Your husband has clearly suffered some trauma triggered by the accident, but he appears quite sane and rational, even serene. Except for..."

Sissy noticed his gaze settle on her crossed legs, pretty in tights beneath a short wool skirt. Given the circumstances, she found the attention annoying.

"Except for the fact that he wants to be a priest," she said.

"That's correct."

"Have you ever seen a case like this before?"

"Not exactly. Certainly amnesia or split personality, yes. But your husband isn't suffering from either of those. He doesn't think he's Napoleon. Given his calm demeanor and sound, reasonable arguments - "

"Is it sound or reasonable to throw away your fortune, to abandon your business and family, to take a vow of celibacy, and stop looking at my legs!"

Dr. Offer's face flushed. "Have you considered that perhaps your husband has had a genuine spiritual awakening?"

She considered this for a moment.

"Oh, bullshit," she said. "George was raised Unitarian. They don't believe in anything. I've known him twenty-five years and he's never once mentioned God, picked up a Bible, or talked of any void in his life, so spare me."

"Did he ever exhibit any hostility towards religion?"

"No. We never gave a damn what other people were up to Sunday mornings. People can do whatever the hell they want, so long as it doesn't bother me. Us."

"Which brings us to the present situation."

"That's right," she said with narrowed eyes. "So what the hell do we do? Drugs? Therapy? Shock? I want my husband back. I had a hell of a time getting him to commit himself."

Dr. Offer bristled. "He isn't committed. He can discharge himself whenever he wants."

"Over my dead body."

Dr. Offer sighed heavily. "How did you get him here voluntarily?"

She didn't really want to get into it, but knew this could be part of painting the big picture.

"I told him that if he was serious about becoming a priest, he was morally beholden to his wife and children to at least explore the possibility that he might be crazy."

"You said that?"

"Yes. I told him that after twenty years of marriage he owed it to me. I also told him that I loved him."

Offer seemed impressed. Sissy did not add that George remarked he wouldn't be celibate until he took his vows, got horny, and that they had copulated like rabbits.

"Your husband seems determined to become a Catholic priest, with all that entails. Let's keep him here for awhile and see what happens."

"See what happens?"

She was incredulous and had to stand up. "He says he's leaving me. He says he's going to put on a dog collar and we'll never have sex again. He plans to give away every cent we have - our money, our children's money, my goddamned money! - to Catholic Charities! He's laying off



two hundred employees! I'm on my way right now to face the board about George's mental state. I'm supposed to tell them we're going to wait and see what happens?"

Dr. Offer's mind had wandered, but snapped back.

"What does your company make again?"

"Clocks," she said. "All kinds of clocks. Who gives a shit?"

She wanted a cigarette and excused herself without waiting for a response. Sissy thought Dr. Offer looked as if he had a grand idea for a conference paper.

The grounds of the Breckenridge Retreat were completely smoke-free, so Sissy had to hike down a flagstone path to the far edge of the back garden. As she walked she turned and saw a priest behind her. She changed paths. So did the priest. He was pursuing her.

She muttered, "What now?"

"Mrs. St. Hilaire?" He was trying to get her to stop. She did. He reached her slightly winded and panting. "I'm Father Brendan O'Toole of St. Helena's parish, and I'm out of shape," he said, bending to place his hands on his knees.

She didn't laugh. "A young, thin guy like you?" I'm older than you are and I'm in better shape. And I smoke," she said lighting her cigarette. She exhaled a plume. "You should get more exercise."

"Thanks. Never occurred to me. Can I have a word with you?"

"About what?"

"George."

She was instantly on guard and about to ask which one when he said, "Your husband."

"Oh, God."

He smiled and gestured to a nearby bench. "Shall we?" They sat down.

"Did he call you, Father? Do I have to call you Father? Answer the last one first."

"You can call me Brendan if you'd like, and yes he did."

"Why?"

"Huh?"

"Why did he call you?"

"Oh, yes!" he said, tapping his lower lip as if mulling over a tricky math problem. "I'm out here a lot to

hear confessions and give communion or counsel, so I figured it was one of those, but to be perfectly honest with you - "

"Why would you be anything else?" Sissy asked.

He was taken aback. "Is it priests you don't like, Mrs. St. Hilaire, or just me?"

Her face fell. "Okay, okay. I'm just trying to assess where you're coming from."

He fell silent, and he waited for her to continue.

She said, "Since this all began, suddenly you're the enemy - as if the Catholic Church were doing this to him. My apologies. And call me Sissy. What did he want?"

"He wanted to know which seminary I thought he should apply to."

"Had you ever met my husband before?"

"No. I know who he is, of course. I was so stunned by the question that before answering, I asked him how old he was and why he wanted to do this. He then gave me a perfect, theologically sound answer."

"What did he say?"

"Well...stuff like -- everything we love for its own sake, outside of God alone, blinds our intellect and ruins our judgment of moral values, and we don't truly know God's will, so - "

"Okay, skip it."

"Yeah, a lot of Thomas Merton mumbo jumbo mostly -- to which I happen to subscribe - but when he told me he was forty-five and married with children and an entrepreneur and had never been religious - "

"You thought he was cracked."

"Not quite. But I had to put it in context. I mean, after all, he's in the Breckenridge Retreat, right? Then he told me about the accident and seeing the Virgin."

"Seeing who? Who's he been seeing?"

"The Virgin Mary? The mother of our Savior?"

"Oh! Oh, yes -- of course. Go on."

"He says he's seen her pretty regularly of late. That's when I started to think he'd been through some kind of trauma."

"You bet," she said softly, stubbing out her cigarette.

"Shermans," he said, and smiled. "I miss those. I miss all tobacco."

"What else did you talk about?"

"I told him that he was at a pretty advanced age to enter a seminary. I did it at thirty, and was considered an old man."

"Would they take him?"

"Doubtful, and I told him that. He seemed utterly astonished, like it never occurred to him. His argument was if God was calling him, an admissions board was going to stand in God's way?"

"I thought there was a priest shortage."

"There is -- a dire one. First I was honest. Now can I be blunt?"

"Please."

"Shortage or not, the church doesn't need any more clerics with bats in their belfry, if you'll forgive the expression. If they detect even a whiff of anything weird, the most he could hope for is to become a monk, and even the orders are getting more and more selective. It's not like the old days when any misfit could go monastic."

She wanted to light another cigarette and didn't think he would mind. She noticed he had kind eyes. She also realized he was quite good-looking. If she lit up again it might seem like she was teasing a reluctantly reformed smoker. It might also seem like she should have a can of beer in her hand.

"What if it's genuine?" she said.

"What?"

"What if he did see the mother of God and God is really calling him now?"

"You think that's likely?"

"You're the professional."

He shook his head. "After a head injury and a brush with death? I don't think so."

"But it's not impossible?"

"Sissy, speaking off the record, I have never met a single priest - not one - who has ever encountered a case of genuine religious ecstasy."

"You're kidding," she said.

"No, I'm not. You have to go down South to the Evangelicals for that kind of thing. Of course, I've never

met a single priest who believed in the Book of Genesis, either."

Sissy was bewildered. She realized that, theologically speaking, she had been living in a cave.

Now the priest looked puzzled. "Why does he want to be a Catholic priest? I mean, why not an Anglican? Or a Congregationalist minister or something?"

"He said he thinks you guys are the real deal."

"Oh. Well, that's nice."

"Can you talk him out of it?"

"It's not my place to do that, Mrs. -- Sissy. What do the doctors say?"

"To wait and see what happens. I can't wait."

"Look, I can continue to counsel him, and I can do something underhanded. There's a man here who was in the seminary but left for some really sound reasons. Let me put him on to talking to your husband."

"He's a doctor?"

"No, he's a patient."

"So he's nuts too?" She didn't like the sound of this.

"No, he, well. Oh hell, look, I don't want to say too much, but I can see that you're in real pain here. The guy tried to kill himself, but I really think it was just cry for help."

"How?"

"How what?"

"How did he try to kill himself?" she asked.

"He drank tiki torch fluid. Why?"

"Thank you, Brendan."

They shook hands and he promised to call her the next day after speaking to George again. As he walked off, she admired his rather cool, confident stride, almost a modest swagger, although she realized this was contradictory. She wondered if he was straight.

## **13            We are Met**

When Sissy arrived at Kukol corporate headquarters, she steered her BMW with aplomb into George's "Reserved for President" parking space. It was understood by all on the company lot that when George was not in, his



space belonged to Sissy. She prided herself on her execution of the elegant trajectory involved in winding the car around high shrubs, then docking seamlessly in the space. This afternoon she would have performed the move with her usual perfection but had to hit the brakes with a jerk to avoid colliding with the new, tacky red Corvette parked there. George Humphreys' red Corvette. This was too much. She rammed her car into a visitor's space, stepped out of her car, straightened her skirt with ferocity, and strode inside.

She was slightly late, and this was deliberate. Sissy knew that despite a hierarchy of senior officers and civilian board members, she was being perceived as second-in-command with the president's complete approval. They were waiting for her to tell them what was going on and what was going to be done. As she strode into the Dresden Room used for meetings of the board, she felt like Woodrow Wilson's wife about to address the president's cabinet after his 1919 stroke.

If George Humphreys possessed the gall to take over her husband's parking space, he did not have the imprudent nerve to sit in George's seat at the head of the

huge, round conference table. Before making her way to the this seat, she stopped behind George Humphreys' chair. He had not seen her enter and was pontificating to a clearly bored Hutchins Hapgood.

"Sure it's a buyer's market, but the property damn well cost me and I'm damn well not going to give it away. We're talking lake front here. This Arab thinks I'm supposed to be impressed because he comes over from Iran to run a motel chain and some gas stations." He snorted.

Sissy bent over and murmured in his ear, "Iranians aren't Arabs, you illiterate ass. And I just smashed in the heap you parked in my husband's spot."

He glanced up at her in alarm, and she smiled sweetly and strolled to her entitled place. He shot to his feet.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen!" she announced brightly. "Thank you for coming on such short notice. Sit down, George, we're about to start."

"Jesus, George" she heard Hutchins mutter. "Who does she think she is?"

"Good question," murmured George.

Sissy was pleased.

Company executives met on a regular basis only once a month, with departmental meetings called weekly as needed. When George entered Breckenridge, Sissy had asked all players to convene on twenty-six hours notice.

She settled in and exchanged some pleasantries about the new landscaping and how the Red Sox were looking in spring training. (This was not gratuitous. Sissy was a devoted and knowledgeable baseball fan.) Then she announced it was brass-tacks time.

"I'm going to ask you gentlemen - " She faltered when she realized for the first time that not one Kukol executive was female. Not one woman. How had this escaped her notice? How had she allowed this to escape her notice? How had she allowed this situation to exist? Because she was busy with her own career and family and affairs? She rejected this instantly as lame and shameful. The men stared at her, waiting.

"I know I don't need to ask you gentlemen to keep everything discussed here today between yourselves. We're in an extremely difficult situation. We need to be honest and transparent with our employees and customers, but not just yet."

There was a volley of exchanged glances and mutters. Sissy waited for the hum to subside.

"As you are already aware, my husband, George St. Hilaire, Kukol's owner and Chief Executive Officer, is presently incapacitated. We need to talk about what happens now at Kukol."

There was no muttering now, but the wide-eyed silence of held breath. Glancing around the gigantic table that was reminiscent of both King Arthur and the Pentagon, Sissy saw the scared expressions of small boys. She did not feel contempt, but genuine empathy. She was scared, too. She continued.

"Evidently the head injuries he sustained in his accident less than two weeks ago have resulted in a series of cognitive -- and even personality -- aberrations." Sissy silently blessed her Uncle Bob for giving her that Build Your Vocabulary series when she was sixteen.

"Although there seems to be no damage to George's speech or physical abilities, he quite clearly is no longer himself. By now you've certainly all heard about his recent bizarre behavior. He has willingly entered the Breckenridge Retreat where he is being treated with the best medical

care available. But until a diagnosis, prognosis, and course of treatment have been determined, George cannot fulfill his duties and responsibilities leading the company. George is well aware of this and understands that we have a business to run."

Sissy's inclusion of herself in running the business resulted in a variety of tremors, tics and glances, and she felt gratified that all was going according to plan. Her plan.

She continued, "Now there is no reason for George's health issues to be perceived as any kind of crisis, or disruptive in any way to the company's day-to-day operations. We've always prided ourselves on tight production, and can invoke the company motto with conviction - 'We Run Like Clockwork.' George often boasts that Kukol can run itself."

It occurred to her this sounded like commentary on the redundancy or irrelevance of the men present, so she quickly added, "Providing our accomplished and essential executives continue to command their divisions with the surety, talent and know-how that has built this company into an industry leader."

There were satisfied smiles and nods.

"Any questions?"

Vice President for Finance Ralph Fisher held up his hand.

"Yes, Ralph?"

"We've heard rumors George is going to close the company - just shut down and lay us all off."

Sissy tried to fix her expression in a reassuring blend of the maternal and masculine, but realized she was simultaneously grinning and wincing. She knocked that off and said, "No, Ralph. Nobody's closing the company and nobody's losing their jobs. That's a fact, not a rumor, you can feel free to spread."

Amidst the sighs of relief George Humphreys cleared his throat. Sissy almost laughed at the idiocy of his obviousness. "Yes, George?"

"Is there some sort of plan in the works in the unfortunate event that he's unable to resume his duties? I mean, we all know this board is empowered to elect and appoint officers to act on behalf of the corporation."

"Of course. This company is led by its CEO, George St. Hilaire. In his absence, Owsley Stanley, our President,

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is in charge. There will be no struggles and no major reorganizations. I'm glad you asked that, George."

Now she moved on to the finale.

"Until my husband returns -- or does not return -- I will be making the few, final executive decisions absolutely necessary after thorough consultation with our incredibly capable team of executives."

She smiled at the clutch of men. They seemed pleased. She went on.

"Kukol must continue with or without - " she stumbled, but finished -- "George. Now is the time for all of us to lead by example and step up to the plate. I'm counting on you, gentlemen."

Sissy was truly shocked by the burst of spontaneous and clearly genuine applause.

The remainder of the time concerned itself with the relatively pedestrian, and was conducted by Owsley, who adjourned the meeting with his signature, "Thank you, gentlemen. We are met."

George Humphreys waited, visibly irritated, until the throng around Sissy dissolved. He fairly galloped up to her.

"Did you really smash my car?"

"No. But next time I will."

"And what's all this 'we' shit? Who suddenly made you queen of the castle? The company's already got a business plan in place, you know. Since when are you running things?"

Sissy realized she felt pretty good about herself. She had just won over the board as Elizabeth I had the clergy. She smiled, looked into his eyes, and decided Humphreys was, as of this moment, her former lover.

"George," she said. "We are met."

## **14      Playing with Fire**

O'Toole was seated at his office desk, his notes on the case of George St. Hilaire in front of him.

A CD of Journey's greatest hits blared from the stereo. Next to his yellow legal pad was a color Sunday newspaper supplement for a sale on women's lingerie at J.C. Penney. A pretty girl in pink bra and panties seemed delighted to see him. He tore a page from the legal pad and folded it carefully into a delicate swan. He moved the swan



like a chess piece around the happily unclothed model. He thought of the myth of Leda and her feathered lover. He placed his little sculpture between the legs of the girl in the picture. He realized what he was doing, and methodically ripped the swan and the girl into pieces and tossed them into his wastebasket.

He had always struggled with the tired dichotomy of an intellectual faith as opposed to an emotional one -- the old head versus heart wheeze. He loved the thoughtful scholarship that Catholicism allowed, as practiced by his cherished Jesuits. As a seminarian, O'Toole had debated doctrine and dogma through meals at Georgetown, and long into the night in the dormitory on a river of cigarettes and bourbon. He had read every word ever put to print by Merton, Sheen, and Woods, as well as the novels of Greene, Waugh, and Burgess.

And yet. His moments of absolute unshakeable faith -- a surety that God exists and exists as the church founded by St. Peter explains it, that Christ is Lord, and that this life is meaningful and the one to come is everlasting -- were few and far between. He had hoped that taking his vows, donning his robes, and doing the good work

of the church, including saying Mass daily, would strengthen his belief, as a muscle is steadily strengthened through exercise. He had hoped he would think less and feel more.

This hadn't happened. On a pilgrimage to the monastery at Taize in Burgundy, France, he had the rare honor of speaking to Brother Roger, the aged and revered founder. Brother Roger told him if you lead the body and the mind, the heart will follow. O'Toole took great reassurance from his words. The next day Brother Roger was stabbed to death during a service by a mentally ill young woman as horrified faithful looked on. It still took an effort for O'Toole not to read anything diabolical into this.

George St. Hilaire had just experienced divine intervention. Whether it was provided by the true Almighty, or by a brain congealing into a Christmas fruitcake, was debatable.

But still. O'Toole had liked George immediately. He was warm, kind, polite, and funny. It occurred to O'Toole during their one conversation that George was the most

serene and content man he had ever met. And now he was in the bin.

O'Toole had never considered having to deal, as a priest, with exorcisms, stigmata, or passionate religious ecstasy. Good Christ. O'Toole wanted to help George, but he needed to think through not the question of how to help him, but why? Perhaps George actually should depart his present life and become a priest - or more likely, as he had suggested to George's wife, a monk - whether he was bat shit or not.

O'Toole had been a social worker before becoming a priest, and he had strong views on the macro and micro value of the family unit. On the other hand, Sissy St. Hilaire would be available.

He caught himself like a drunk long sober suddenly considering a drink. It was not an unfamiliar presentiment. The teenage O'Toole had seen the celibacy of the clergy as laudable in concept, and probably a crock. On a practical level, he thought it an invitation for disaster. His prescience had been sadly proved correct, world-wide.

The next CD had begun when Mary Roth peeked her face around his door.

"What are you listening to?" she asked with a sunny smile.

He was not displeased to see her. "The Kingston Trio," he said.

She entered, presenting a lovely vision in a flirty daffodil-colored dress and chunky-heeled shoes. "Nope."

"You look beautiful," he heard someone say.

She smiled and shut the door behind her, leaning against the knob, her butt on her folded hands. "You too," she said.

"But you know the Kingston Trio?"

"Of course. I'm not that young! They did that flower thing about Vietnam and stuff. Right?"

"Right. They also did a very famous number about the subways in Boston - this guy called Charlie who couldn't get off the train?"

"You mean the Charlie Pass?"

"Exactly, Ms. Roth."

She made sure the door was shut behind her with a quick thrust of her bottom.

"Don't call me Ms. Roth, Father. It's so formal."

"Have a seat. And don't call me Father."

She sat as he went to turn down the stereo. She looked simultaneously young and grown up. She seemed to notice his scrutiny.

"I just got a make-over at Her Majesty the Baby's. Nails, toes - other stuff," she added demurely. "Do you like my hair?"

"I love it." He knew he would burn in Hell.

"Did you read my the draft of my essay?"

"I did," he said, pulling it from his desk. "I thought it was great. I made notes - some comments and suggestions. Use them, don't use them..."

"Of course I'll use them," she said, taking the pages. "I just need to interview you one more time. I've saved the best and heaviest for last."

"And what's that?"

"Celibacy and the priesthood."

This would have been an appropriate time to gulp, but he stayed as cool as she did as they looked into each other's eyes.

"Sure," he said. "Why not? Good topic. Did you bring your - "

"I don't want to do it now. *The Seventh Seal* is playing at - ha! - seven. You want to go?"

"I'd like that."

"Then I'm off like a prom dress," she said. "I'll be back in exactly three hours." She wagged her fingers in a sweet farewell and left.

The Bijou Arts, where the film was screening, was one town over, but he might still be seen by parishioners dressed as a civilian on the arm of a delicious young piece. Was he nuts? Was he completely self-destructive? Bishop Reed had just told him to cease and desist. Now he was going on a date, a fucking date. Did he want to be defrocked for Christmas?

O'Toole had studied psychology and pathology, and had read Freud, Jung and Reich for pleasure. He recognized that he had become a priest because he was in search of sanctuary, just like any pathetic pedophile. (Once when a member of his congregation observed that so many priests became child molesters, O'Toole replied that he believed it was the other way round.) He had been appalled when Bill Clinton, a man he greatly admired, was seemingly incapable of keeping his pants zipped for the eight years of his

presidency. Now O'Toole was in danger of behaving as badly as the president. He was playing with fire.

Later, in his bedroom, he played the Rolling Stones song, "Play With Fire" while he dressed. He shaved and used his bottle of Bay Rum. Women in the congregation had complimented the scent.

## **15        All in God's Time**

When Sissy arrived at home, she found her youngest with one hand on Facebook and the other texting, her iPod earplugs firmly implanted. A wave of contempt washed over Sissy, but she made an effort to let this ebb. She knew that people of her generation, when teenagers, read books because it was something to do. Had all this techno-crap been available in her youth, she probably would have been logged on, plugged in and tuned out, too. She considered herself lucky, forgave her daughter, and yanked one of her earplugs out by the wire.

"Ow! Mom! I hate it when you do that! It's so childish."

"I like to think it's child-like."

"Huh?"

"Let's go see your father in half an hour."

"Okay."

Sissy considered that if she didn't count her regular affairs, her true self-indulgence was her purchase, once a year on her birthday, of a two-ounce tin of Caspian Imperial caviar from Bemka for an obscene amount of money. She worshipped the stuff. She wouldn't dream of profaning it with toast or crackers or garnish. She ate it straight from the tin, each teaspoonful squeezed with a touch of fresh lemon juice. Her family understood that even a glance at her treasure in the fridge was committed at their peril. They also knew Sissy had nothing to worry about. Each would rather starve than eat what they deemed cold, black, salty, smelly fish eggs.

Now Sissy was enjoying her caviar, seated at the kitchen island with a split of cheap champagne merrily bubbling away in a fat goblet.

"Mom?"

"Yeah?"

"What's going to happen to Dad?"



To cover her tracks, Sissy was compelled to lie fairly regularly to her family - nothing she thought terribly important, but she had to make sure they were never too close to the truth. She welcomed any opportunity to actually be honest.

"I don't know, Buff. He really seems to have flipped his lid. The question is, is it permanent? What's really wrong with him, and how can we help him?" She spooned in a mouthful of Imperial as Buffy grimaced.

"Mom -- you love Daddy, right?"

Sissy was caught off-guard by the question and momentarily stopped chewing, then nonchalantly took a gulp of champagne.

Did her daughter know of her extramarital activities? Everyone always knows, right? Oh, God.

"I married him."

"That's not an answer."

"Of course I love him," she answered truthfully.

"I've loved him for over half of my life. Why would you ask me that?"

"Don't be mad. I know you love him."

"Then why did you ask me?"

"Sometimes I just worry you're not very happy."

Sissy's irritation quickly melted to tenderness.

She took her daughter in her arms and hugged her.

"I'm happy, Buff," she said. "Happy enough, I mean. And I love your father very much."

"Are you scared?"

"More than I seem, yeah."

Thatcher walked in holding a copy of Jung's *The Undiscovered Self*.

"What's with the love-fest?" he asked.

"Here's robot-boy to wreck the moment," said Buffy.

"Your sister and I are going to see your father. You want to come?"

"I'm really kind of in the middle of - "

"I'm glad you're free. Get your jacket."

On the drive to Breckenridge Retreat, Sissy tried to calm her nerves with the familiar sound of a Pat Metheny CD. Buffy's simple concerns had unleashed a wave of fear. What if they did lose George? What if he really did become a priest or a monk or went off to live in a cave? What if the man she married never returned to the body of the man she was going now to visit? Did she even want him back? She

had a brief flash of an idea that maybe she should stop cheating. If she got her husband back, maybe she would strike a bargain with the God she didn't believe in. She filed this away for further thought.

When they entered the clinic on the high hill, they were told that George was playing badminton. They strolled across the grounds and arrived at the net to find George kicking the ass of an overweight, bespectacled girl who looked about twelve. She was dressed in a sweatshirt that was too small and a skirt that was too big. It was an unusually warm day for March, and George was in blue plaid pajama pants and stripped to the waist. His perfectly toned torso glistened with sweat, and Sissy felt a pleasant mix of pride and desire watching him. He leapt and whipped his racquet with amazing dexterity, smashing the birdy out of reach of his hapless opponent, who was grunting and moaning with every hit and miss. Finally, going for a return, she fell over onto the grass with a loud flop.

"Get up, Chelsea!" yelled George. "Don't wimp out on me now!"

Chelsea didn't move, but just lay there and moaned. When George saw his family, his face brightened, and he

left the clobbered kid to grab a white towel to mop himself.

"Looks like you just slaughtered her, George," said Sissy.

"Yeah, twenty-one, zip. She plays like a girl."

Sissy laughed.

"There. I'm all dry. Give us a hug." He crushed Sissy in his arms, then hugged his giggling daughter and a reluctant but grinning Thatcher.

"Buff, can you grab my shuttlecock?"

Buffy stood frozen, eyes wide.

"The birdy, tramp," mumbled Thatcher.

Buffy retrieved the white plastic missile and handed it to her father. Sissy said, "Thatcher, why don't you - "

"I'll go get six Cokes with Buffy, okay?" said Thatcher sharply. "Come on, slut."

George beamed like Ward Cleaver. Sissy spied a bench. "Let's have a seat, George."

He startled her when he promptly dropped to the ground and sat cross-legged like a Navajo. Sissy sat down

next to him, smoothing her skirt. Chelsea rose wavering to her feet and wandered off.

"Why's *she* here, George?" asked Sissy, gesturing to the limping girl.

"Oh, she's crazy, poor thing. Pretty much everyone here is." He said this without the slightest hint of irony.

"How are you, George?"

"Never better." He placed his hand on her stockinged thigh and squeezed. "How are you, my little Sweet Cheeks?"

She held his hand on her leg. She felt as if she were with a man she barely knew.

"I'm fine, George. I spoke to the board this morning."

"I heard."

"You did?"

"Sure. George Humphreys called me and told me you scared the piss out of everyone. That's my girl!"

He kissed her on the cheek.

Humphreys the bastard, that male chauvinist fuck put more faith any day in an incarcerated, desperately ill

man than a competent and capable woman. She would have his balls if it was the last thing she did.

"He bothered you here?"

"Why not?"

"But - I mean - why exactly did he call you?"

"To tell me you're a power hungry bitch on wheels who's going to ruin the whole company." He smiled.

"And what did you say?"

"I told him I love you with all my heart and whatever you do is fine by me."

Sissy felt like crying and straddling her husband right then and there. She was vexed and confused.

"You mean that, George?"

"Of course I do. I've been thinking. Maybe I shouldn't liquidate the company and give all the money away. I mean, those jobs are a big part of some people's lives. Why don't you just be the boss from now on?"

"We'll need to get that in writing."

"No sweat."

"George..."

"Yes, my little honey-bunny?"

"Are you still going to try to become a priest?"

"Oh, you bet. Justify my soul, O God, but also from Your fountains fill my will with fire."

"What?"

"I cannot fucking wait."

Sissy stared off across the grounds and actually saw, far off, an old man in robe and pajamas chasing a woman. She turned back to her husband.

"I met Father O'Toole here," she said.

"Fine man. He knows full well that when we try to please God, we tend to try to please our own ambition, and our ambition is God's enemy. There can be death and impurity even in natural zeal, even in the ardent love of great perfection, even in the desire of virtue, of sanctity. Even the desire of contemplation can be impure, when we forget that true contemplation means the complete destruction of all selfishness, and the most pure poverty and cleanness of heart."

Sissy stared at him, then said, "Goes without saying. But Father O'Toole said he - well - he wasn't convinced that a seminary would accept you to be a - man of the cloth."

"That's up to God, Pumpkin-Butt. If a seminary won't take me, God will guide me somewhere."

And that's what I'm worried about, thought Sissy. She knew full well that history was stacked with the bodies of misguided fools who thought the Lord would provide and protect, only to discover too late that they were shit out of luck. Sissy didn't believe in God, but she did buy the idea that if He did in fact exist, the old deists probably had it right - God created all, but did not intervene in the sorry activities of His creation. Prayers went unanswered. Two world wars and the Holocaust would forever shore up this theory for Sissy.

"And where am I going to be while God's leading you, George?"

"That's up to Him, too, Cecelia. All in God's time."

She put her head on his shoulder, then rubbed her face and mouth against his sweat-slicked skin. She was frightened.

"Don't be scared," he said.

Now he could read her mind? Perhaps he was getting messages from Heaven.



"It's time for my appointment with Dr. Offer," he said, standing. He helped Sissy to her feet, brushing grass off her skirt. "I'm sorry I have to go."

"No, no, that's all right, darling. That's important."

He smiled. "Not really."

She embraced him tightly.

"If you come back later we can make love in my room." Sissy suddenly felt like a teenager and giggled in embarrassment.

"What do you say?" he asked.

She stammered, "Well, I - I don't know if - I -"

"You know, sweetheart, I don't mind that you've been sleeping with George Humphreys. I know why you've been doing it, and I don't blame you at all. I don't blame you for all the others, either. I know I haven't been much of a husband, and I hope you forgive me. I certainly forgive you."

Sissy looked up at him for a swaying instant. He patted her bottom and smiled. The blood rushed from her head, and she crumpled to the ground before George could catch her.

## 16 Brother Rogers and the Calculus of Kites

Father O'Toole roared up the half-mile private drive to Breckenridge, although the BSA motorcycle's roar was more like a purr. O'Toole had discovered the bike when *Hot Rod* magazine declared it the fastest thing ever made, but not particularly noisy, one reason the priest would never own a Harley.

O'Toole entered the lobby, helmet and leather gloves in hand, when he encountered Rogers. Patients were encouraged to dress each day and appear indistinguishable from the staff, but not Bob Rogers. He paraded around the wings and grounds in silk pajamas and a velveteen bathrobe, both as loud and colorful as their owner. He was the size of a small planet.

Spying O'Toole, Rogers broke into a wide grin.

"It's the Motorcycle Monsignor!" he bellowed.

O'Toole smiled. "I'm not a Monsignor, Bob. That's an honorary title conferred by the Vatican."

"Yeah, I know that. I was at seminary myself, remember? Before I gave up on the God crap?"

"You'll never let me forget. Actually, Bob, I came here today to talk to you about that."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, why?"

"Let's stroll."

Bob looked interested. O'Toole stowed his helmet and gloves at the front desk, and the two men set out across the grounds. O'Toole knew Rogers liked it when the priest was provocative.

"You free right now, Bob??"

"I keep to myself. This place is full of nut-jobs."

"I take it you haven't had any self-destructive thoughts lately?"

"Nah. That was just a momentary lapse in judgment."

"That's good to hear. So life's worth living after all?"

"Especially if the one awaiting us is even more pointless."

O'Toole laughed. "Boy, I sure hope you're wrong."

"Me, too. But I'm not. Okay, enough with the rebop. What do you want?"

O'Toole related the story of George's background, accident, and ecstatic conversion. Rogers listened intently and whistled.

"Thinks he saw the Light? Good Christ, the guy's crazy as a rat in a drain-pipe."

"Well, yeah, but Bob, you had a similar experience in Mexico, right?"

Rogers adopted a smirk of superiority, looked the priest straight in the eye, and mimicked him.

"Well, yeah, but Brendan, I wasn't shithouse crazy like your pal, was I?"

"What did you see?"

"None of your beeswax." He paused and stooped to pick up a small velvet bag. He opened the drawstrings and spilled out a multi-colored handful of marbles -- aggies, turtles, and one Devil's Eye.

"Look, Brendan. Somebody lost their marbles."

He returned the small glass balls to the bag and slipped it into his robe pocket.

"Whatever I saw wasn't real. I was young, stupid, idealistic - deluded - you name it. So I believed it. For a

time. Then I came to my senses. Maybe some day you will, too."

O'Toole felt a slight sting, but said nothing.

"I saw a History Channel thing about your namesake last night."

"My namesake?"

"Brendan Behan, famous mick drunk and writer. On his death bed he opened his eyes to a bunch of nuns in attendance. His last words were, 'God bless you, and may all your sons be bishops.' What a wag, huh?"

O'Toole smiled at the joke, which he had heard.

"I was named for my great-grandfather."

"Sure you were. Anyway, what do you want me to do about your fruitcake?"

"I was hoping being such an unrepentant apostate, you might sound him out about pursuing this calling -- see how strongly the conviction holds up."

Rogers started to chuckle and shake his head.

"What?" asked O'Toole.

"This screwball must really be bananas if you guys don't want him."

"There are other reasons."

"Such as?"

"Need-to-know basis, Bob. What do you say?"

"Let me get this straight. You want me to talk a guy who wants to be a priest out of the priesthood?"

"No, I do not. Just sound him out, that's all."

Rogers roared a laugh, alarming a passing patient in earphones.

"'T'will be the work of a moment, Brendan," he said in a passable brogue. "And a pleasure to boot."

"I thought as much."

"And what's in it for me?"

This took O'Toole by surprise. He hadn't expected his request to come at a price.

"You'll get your reward in Heaven?"

"I'm heavy into the temporal, Your Worship."

"What do you want?"

Rogers thought for a moment. "I don't know. I'll think of something."

"Oh, no, Bob. We're not leaving this open-ended."

"I'll name a fair price, and you get final cost approval."

"You're a creep, Bob. Deal." O'Toole didn't like this arrangement. He said his farewell to Rogers and was striding off in search of George when Rogers yelled,

*"Extra ecclesiam nulla salus!"*

*No salvation outside the Church.*

Now O'Toole felt uncertain and weirded out.

None of the Breckenridge staff seemed to know the whereabouts of George St. Hilaire. O'Toole went in search on his own.

A patient with a thick Italian accent and a stammer that could stop a clock pointed O'Toole down a path densely lined with primroses.

He found George St. Hilaire in a wide field overlooking a placid pond. Ducks paddled serenely under an ascendant kite flown superbly by George himself. O'Toole was instantly delighted. He had always loved kites.

"Hey George, that's great! You really know what you're doing!"

George smiled happily. "First time, too!"

O'Toole laughed, then abruptly stopped.

"You're kidding, right?"

"No sir! Can you believe I never once made the time to do this? Not once. And I had the time, let me tell you. Every kid should have this."

The two men watched the beautiful half-turns of the soaring kite -- silk, gentle and playful -- a cloth manta ray, its tail fluttering joyfully in flight.

"But my Dad was too busy with business. Always too busy."

O'Toole realized that the kite's design was a gold cross on a blood red background. It looked like a standard from the Crusades.

"But I don't blame him. He did his best. We all make mistakes. If you're a good parent, you don't repeat the mistakes your parents made. You just make your own new ones."

"Where did you get this?" asked O'Toole.

"Found it in the closet in my room. I've been finding all kinds of things lately, as if they were deliberately left for me. Do you believe in divine intervention, Father?"

O'Toole was speechless.



George took his eyes off the kite, and said, "Oh, Jesus, I'm sorry! Look who I'm asking, right? Dumb! Oh, man, can I be dumb sometimes! Dumb as a box of rocks. That's my cross to bear -- but I'm hoping for lots better ones."

"Better ones?"

"Oh, I think I've been pretty dense most of my life. And selling clocks around the clock, as we used to say - well, sometimes I got lazy, too, because I was tired. Man, I was more tired in business sometimes than you might be in combat."

"No, I meant what do you mean better crosses?"

"Oh - right."

A gust of billowing wind lifted the kite like a thrashing marlin. It swooped and dove. George expertly caught another wave and sent the kite up and up, letting out the line, then tugging it back. O'Toole was feeling something close to elation. Both men began laughing.

"Better crosses," George said.

"What?" O'Toole was beaming.

"You asked me what do you mean by better crosses."

"That's right. I did."

"I mean doing God's work. I'm guessing that can sometimes be a real bitch. I don't think anybody's going to allow me to be in any situation like Father Damien or Mother Teresa, stuff like that. But I'd still like to prove my faith and devotion through some hard slog. It's got to be physical, real Peace Corps digging-wells stuff. After I take my vows, I'm thinking maybe a mission somewhere - you know, like Haiti or Paraguay -- or the Congo. Someplace like that."

"The Congo?"

"Yeah. Someplace that would bust my chops. I've been averaging a five million dollar profit on twenty-four million in sales for years, always increasing, with an annual theft and inventory error loss of only ninety thousand bucks. I mean, I didn't even care! I was cunning as a fox - pay cash for all materials, never assume the liability of credit interest, and always, always buy when no one else is. It worked, too."

George looked at the priest. "Pretty good business model, huh?"

"It made you rich."

"Yes, indeed. I figure if I can do that, I can sure help starving lepers and the underprivileged children of God in the Third World."

O'Toole felt a sudden numbing sense of being cut off from everything he had wanted to say to George St. Hilaire. He had planned to present a list of why George must abandon his present course. Now George had gone from the priesthood to being a new Father Damien among the lepers.

"Listen," said George. "If you can't say everything you wanted to say to me today, we'll have lots of opportunities in the future. Soon as I check out of this loony bin, I'm steaming straight to the sacred."

"Why are you still here, George?"

He looked surprised. "Out of respect for the doctors, the keepers of the great somatic mysteries. I need to let them finish whatever they think they need to do. It's fine by me. It's the right thing to do. Isn't it?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course."

"I'd like to lift every half-naked, fallen woman off her knees and clasp her to my bosom. Do you know what I mean, Father?"

"I think so."

They agreed to meet again the next afternoon and shook hands.

O'Toole marveled at the high-flying, colorful swath of fabric one last time, and left. Despite his disappointment in failing to accomplish his intended goal, he felt unexpectedly serene.

As he made his way back down the primrose path, he came upon an obese, white-haired black woman in a multi-colored caftan. She was seated on a heavy bench, a cane with an ivory handle between her arthritic fingers. He smiled as he approached.

"Lovely day!" he said.

He had barely passed her when she said in a West Indian accent, "Plenny vexing if you ax me."

O'Toole abruptly stopped.

"Beg pardon?"

"No need. I sez dere's sumteen plenny freakish 'bout dis day."

"How so?"

"Dat crazy white mon out dere flyin' dat kite!"

He waited. She said nothing, just stared intently ahead.

He said, "Yes, I saw him - I was speaking to him, actually. It's a wonderful kite, and he really knows how to -- "

"It not de kite I speak of, priest! I speak of dis only -- how you get a kite up in de air when dere no air to get it up in?"

O'Toole was lost. "I'm sorry?"

"Dere be no wind, mon! Not eef-un de smallest breeze. How anybody do dat, you tell me?"

The priest felt a rush of ice-water in his veins.

There was no wind and never had been. Not the slightest breeze, as the old woman said. Not the slightest breeze, and George St. Hilaire was flying a kite well over a hundred feet up in the silent, motionless air.

"Dat mon flyin' a kite where dere be no wind to fly it!"

O'Toole looked up and slowly took in the stillness the tops of the trees, the calm look of shrubs, the absence of sound. Doldrums. Not the slightest stir.

He was frightened.

He hurried off to his motorcycle.

The old woman called after him.

"You best beware, boy! You best beware!"

## **17        The Late George Humphreys**

It was clear to George Humphreys from Sissy's low, husky voice on the telephone that her request for a meeting was not to be denied. He now found himself sitting across from her at Ethan Allen's Pub.

Ethan's - or "the furniture store" as Sissy called it in code - was an ersatz colonial tavern with fine examples of fake colonial décor, passable ales, and not very good pub food. Its saving graces were found in its stunning bend-in-the-river view, its utter lack of any afternoon customers, and its location in Bennington, nearly an hour's drive from the prying eyes and wagging tongues of Breckenridge.

Sissy was on her second Beefeater martini while George nursed a bottle of root beer.

"Why in hell would I say anything to your husband?"

"To make trouble. To make me get divorced. To drive George nuts."

"I don't want any trouble. I like my job and my marriage. I could care less if you get divorced. And George obviously doesn't need me to drive him nuts, now does he?"

"Couldn't."

"What?"

"You said could. You said you could care less, meaning you could care less than you do now, meaning you actually care. You mean to say you couldn't care less."

"Why don't you shut the fuck up?"

Sissy served up a steely stare.

"That's right, Sissy. Now that I'm in your rear-view mirror, I no longer have to walk on eggs. And don't give me your bullshit about mixed metaphors."

She chewed the three olives on her large, ribbon-trimmed toothpick, her mouth in an unhappy, crunching grimace. She realized she must look like a sad little girl, and this was not disingenuous.

Humphreys shook his head, and said, "Aw, Sis. I'm not happy about any of this. Your husband's off his rocker, we're all pissing ourselves about our jobs, and you're a

goddamned mess. But I swear on my grandfather's grave, I've never told anybody, never breathed a word to anyone, about us. Certainly not your husband -- my boss!"

She believed him.

"Then how does he know, George?"

"Fucked if I know."

"My God, what if my children know? What if my parents know? My friends?"

"What if my wife knows, Sissy?"

She was stung for all of three seconds, realized he was right, drained her martini and offered to buy him another root beer.

"No thanks. I've got to go."

"Where?"

"Anywhere but here."

Two perfect streaming tear drops rolled quickly and symmetrically down both her cheeks as if released by technicians. Humphreys was not moved.

"Don't call me for awhile, okay, Sis? Let me vibe out what the little woman knows."

He stood and pocketed his key-chain. He thought for a moment. He said, "Mrs. St. Hilaire. You're not going to



make any trouble if some of us try to save Kukol Clocks -- and our jobs - are you?"

He didn't look warm or supportive. She wiped both cheeks with the heel of her hand, started truly crying, and shook her head, feeling she looked like Shirley Temple.

"I'm glad to hear that, Sissy. Good luck with all this shit. You're going to need it."

He left. There was no farewell kiss.

## **18        Spanish Bandits**

On her drive back from Ethan Allen's, Sissy's phone rang, a number she didn't recognize calling. She never answered when she was driving, but this time she did. It was Owsley Stanley, the COO for Kukol Clocks.

"Hello, Owsley. What a surprise."

"Yes, Sissy, I'm a bit surprised myself," he said in his warm, easy manner. "Ralph Fisher and I would really like to talk to you - I mean, away from the board room and the company, and - and..."

"And everything."

"Yes! Yes, that's it - away from everything," he agreed gratefully and laughed.

"When would you like to meet?"

"Yesterday."

"That's a bit soon."

"Can we see you this afternoon?"

"Of course. Can you come to the house, or would that look bad?"

"No, that's fine. It's not like we're being watched or anything." He laughed again, but with less surety, and Sissy let his silence play out for a moment.

"Okay, Owsley. It's four o'clock. I'll see you at my place at five thirty?"

"That's perfect, Sissy, and thank you so much."

"You're welcome."

Sissy thought that one of her favorite writers, Dorothy Parker, would say at this point, *What fresh Hell is this?*

When she arrived at home, she knew Thatcher and Buffy would be absent, but did not expect to find Hobart in cashmere jacket and polka-dot bowtie. He was seated in the living room on the second floor. He was frowning, thumbing

through one of Buffy's issues of Glamour like a man looking for clues. He heard Sissy come in, but did not look up. She sighed, displeased.

"Hello, Hobart. What brings you home?"

He put down the magazine and smiled, but did not get up.

"My tutorial this afternoon was cancelled and we have tomorrow off. I thought I'd come see how Dad's doing."

"That's very nice of you."

He picked up the magazine again and resumed his study.

"'And how are you coping, Mother, during this especially difficult period?'" Sissy said.

There seemed to be a slight delay before this sunk in, then Hobart again put down the magazine and turned to face her with an indulgent smile and raised eyebrows.

"Hobart, don't you dare use that self-confident and contemptuous smirk with me. You look just like your favorite asinine president."

"You seem a bit fragile, Mother."

"You make me sound like a half-wit. I'm anything but fragile, thanks. And I realize upon this instant that I

owe you an apology. Why I thought, even momentarily, that you had an ounce of consideration for anyone but yourself is beyond me - my fault. There's good news, though - I'm officially past blaming your father and myself exclusively for how you turned out."

He looked shocked.

"Okay, whoa, time out, please. I didn't come here to fight with you, or be insulted."

"Right. You came to visit your father. That's sweet. Go visit him."

"I thought we might spend some time together first," he said without one shred, Sissy knew, of sincerity. She looked at his outstretched palms of supplication.

"Forget it. Go see your father."

He shook his head in an approximation of hurt bewilderment.

"Besides," said Sissy, "Two company men are going to be here soon to meet with me."

"About what?"

"We're getting new plants for the lobby. What the hell do you think?"

Now he looked genuinely hurt. "Do you have to be so mean to me? Do you dislike me that much?" He returned her steely gaze.

Sissy suddenly felt a wave of guilt. Hobart was what he was, and young, and stupid. He might someday grow out of being what he was. Sissy felt sorry for herself, not for her son. The impulse to embrace him flashed like heat lightning, and vanished as quickly.

"I'm sorry. I'm under a lot of stress, and I'm not being very nice to anyone. Don't take it personally, as laughable as that sounds."

"It's not laughable. Can I attend the meeting?"

"In God's name why?"

"In God's name because I'm concerned about a) the future of a family business I hope to enter, b) the well-being of my father, and c) what kind of future I might rough out for myself based on current events. All in that order, in point of fact, and when do you ever invoke God's name?"

"I'd prefer if you didn't attend, in point of fact."

"Now it's my turn to ask why."

She wouldn't tell him what he could probably guess - that he embarrassed her, he asked awkward questions, he would cramp her style.

"I don't want it to seem like I'm using your presence as some kind of crutch. You know, having a man in the family present. The eldest," she added.

"A woman sometimes needs that sort of thing, Mother."

"Like a fish needs a bicycle."

"I'm sorry?"

"Eva Braun. Skip it. You're not staying. Go see your father."

"If you look at this from my - "

"Beat it!"

"Right."

While preparing refreshments for her guests, Sissy heard her son slam a few doors and quickly drive off.

Sissy didn't know either Owsley Stanley or Ralph Fisher very well, so she liked them. Her first thought had been a work station around the kitchen island, but opted for George's comfortable den. A passionate fan of the novels of Ian Fleming, he had wanted a Jamaican motif, and

the dark, cool room provided sturdy rattan, heavy  
jalousies, and a lobster-trap coffee table. Prints of  
foreign 007 book covers adorned the walls. When the two men  
arrived, they were ushered into George's sanctum to a  
waiting tray of almonds and walnuts, pretty good onion dip,  
crackers, and a cold pitcher of daiquiris.

"Sissy," said Owsley reprovingly. "You didn't need  
to go to all this trouble." He looked ecstatic.

"No trouble at all, Owsley. The nuts and dip were  
on hand, and I can whip up a batch of daiquiris in two  
shakes of a lamb's tail. George got the original, secret  
recipe - through a bribe -- from the Army and Navy Club in  
Washington, D.C." She winked.

The three settled onto the tropical upholstery of  
the rattan, and Owsley sipped his drink with approval.

"My God, that's terrific, Sissy."

Ralph thoughtfully held a mouthful, then swallowed.  
"I've had them frozen," he said quietly. "At Applebee's."

"What are we talking about today?" Sissy asked  
Owsley.

"First and foremost, how is George doing?"

"Very well, thanks. He's at the - he's been resting voluntarily and coming home soon."

"That's great," said Owsley. We're happy to hear it."

"When's he coming back to work?" asked Ralph coldly. Sissy was learning more of Ralph, and liking him less.

"When he's ready."

"As it should be," said Owsley.

"Fine," said Sissy. "What else?" She realized she was pushing things, and that was fine, too.

"Yankee Springs, Incorporated," said Ralph, frowning.

Sissy waited for some elucidation, but got two stares instead.

"What's that, I wonder?" she asked.

Owsley cleared a throat that didn't need clearing.

"Yankee Springs, Incorporated, is Vermont-based, but owned by San Pablo el Padre, Ltd., in Spain. They're seeking to build and operate a bottled water enterprise here in Breckenridge. Yankee's permit application and incorporation papers state that it intends to bottle the



water for sale domestically and export it to other countries."

Owsley paused. Sissy waited. Nothing happened, so she said, "And?"

"You haven't got a clue what we're talking about, do you?" said Ralph.

"No, I don't, Ralph. I do know you're starting to get on my nerves."

"Alright, let me handle this, Ralph," said Owsley. "The proposed area from which the water will be drawn includes several apparently negligible brooks and streams, the major Deerfield River, and - the Lectio Divina Springs."

Sissy was pissed at her ignorance of all of this and Ralph's awareness of her ignorance, but the best she could muster was, "Okay, that rings a bell. Where is that?"

"Where is it? It's on the goddamn - "

"Ralph!" Owsley snapped with authority.

Owsley took a long sip of his drink, then said, "Lectio Divina Springs is on Kukol acreage - our property - about a quarter-mile from headquarters. You remember we

were thinking of putting a company park there a few years back?"

"No, I don't. And I don't care that I don't," she said. "Can you explain to me why we're talking about this?"

"Yes, I can," said Owsley. "Yankee has spent seven years applying for permission to bottle the water, and they've been stopped repeatedly by the Department of Environmental Services, but - "

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but how can some Spanish company take water from a spring we own?"

"We don't own it. The town does," said Ralph.

"You just said it's our property," said Sissy.

"It's our property, but not our water. The town controls the water rights."

Sissy was confused.

"Okay, so what? These Spaniards bottle the water and sell it, so what?"

"They're seeking to withdraw about 700,000 gallons a day. With an operation of that magnitude, there's going to be contaminants - naturally occurring ones, like radon, uranium and even arsenic. These have to be filtered out by treatment."

"I'm with you."

"Vermont's Groundwater Protection Act mandates that the company bottling the water control all filtration of contaminants up to one half-mile away. This was to protect public health, making us responsible. But that also means they can claim control of impacted areas, such as Kukol's wells."

"And?"

"They have the right to evict us from our own property under eminent domain."

Sissy laughed. "That's insane. They can't do that."

"Actually, they can," said Ralph. "Breckenridge Town Hall is on their side, no surprise."

"Why?" she asked.

"Big tax revenue," said Ralph morosely. "Job creation -- a hell of a lot more jobs than we provide. And the rationale that we can make clocks anywhere, but they need to bottle the water where the water is."

"And no one opposes this?"

"Of course they do," said Owsley. "There's a local group called SOG -- "

"SOG?"

"Save Our Groundwater - they've been fighting this thing in five different cases in Vermont and New Hampshire alone. But they don't have any money, and there's been dithering in the legal proceedings - no sworn testimony or cross-examination of witnesses. Now the whole thing's gone directly to the State Supreme Court."

"Tell her about their offer," said Ralph.

"Yeah, tell her about that," said Sissy.

"San Pablo wants to buy us out."

She stared at them for a moment, then said, "Well, San Pablo can go fuck themselves."

"Hang on, Sissy - "

"This is a family owned company, a privately owned corporation that makes its own decisions about its own business, and no goddamn foreign water bottlers are going to waltz in here and tell us what's what! How much did they offer?"

"One hundred million," said Ralph. "Jack shit."

"So what happens now?" asked Sissy.

"The Supreme Court happens. If they rule in Yankee's favor, that's that. This is small-town politics and big money in action, Sissy. San Pablo has real estate

investment trusts all around us - Green Mountain Place, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Realty Trust, Easy Street Realty Trust."

"How long has this been in the works? Why didn't I know any of this?" She was practically yelling.

"George has known all about it from the beginning," said Ralph quietly.

Owsley looked down into his empty glass when he saw the hurt expression on Sissy's face. There was a long pause as he refilled his glass.

Sissy asked, "Is Lew Overaker on this?" Lew headed Kukol's cheerfully efficient legal representation.

"No," said Owsley. "Lew felt we needed bigger guns, so we've got Harp and Finial from Burlington. They'll be arguing the case in Montpelier."

"When?"

"Next week."

Sissy sighed achingly. "Well that's just great. George is sick, and now we may be kicked off our own land by Spanish water bottlers. I don't fucking believe this."

Owsley looked embarrassed. Ralph nodded, then asked directions to the closest bathroom and excused himself.

"I don't like that guy very much," she said.

Owsley opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and said, "There's a lot going on with him right now."

"We all have a lot going on right now, don't we?"

"That's true."

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

"We wait. It's in the hands of the lawyers and the judges. And Sissy, if the worst-case scenario comes true and we have to relocate, it's not going to bankrupt us."

"That's not the point. There's a principle at stake here."

"I know."

She carefully considered whether to ask her next question, then did. "Did you assume I knew about this? That George had told me?"

Owsley now looked so embarrassed Sissy felt sorry for him.

"Never mind," she said. "Don't answer."

When Ralph returned, she walked the men to the door, receiving assurances from Owsley that he would keep her informed of every development. Before leaving, Ralph turned to her.

"Your son - Hobart, right?"

"Yes?"

"He was on the debate team in high school with my Emma. My God, he's grown up."

Sissy smiled. "You've seen him recently?"

"Just now, in the hall."

"He's here?"

"Sure."

Sissy glanced through the door at the driveway. Both bays of the garage were blocked by her car and George's car. Thatcher and Buffy had their cars with them. Hobart's car was not parked outside.

"Did you see him drive off?" she asked.

"No. He went out the back. He seemed to be in a hurry."

The men left.

## **19        The Pond**

O'Toole's morning was monstrous. The total take for donations from the weekend was \$10,741.45, meaning his parish had earned approximately 79% of its weekly operating costs and obligations to Catholic Charities, Respect Life,

the New Generation Shelter for Women, and the September pilgrimage to Our Lady of Guadalupe Shrine in Guadalajara, Mexico. He had promised Habitat for Humanity that the parish would contribute this month, and his promise looked to be drying up fast. They needed another yard sale. And a bake sale. Pathetic.

Something atrocious had been discovered in the men's rest room in the church basement, but Jorge, the good and dependable maintenance man, would not allow himself to describe the nature of the atrocity to the Holy Father.

Mrs. Page had made him an unsolicited cup of tea, something she only did when she wanted to let him know something unpleasant. O'Toole had told Mrs. Page repeatedly that he liked a lot of milk in his tea. Again she brought a straight, steaming cup bereft of any enhancement.

"Spoke to Lorraine Gordon today, over at the Diocese," she said, setting down the cup on the priest's desk.

"Oh?" he asked evenly.

"Reed said they're making noises about shutting us down, and combining us with St. Matthew's in Whitingham."



O'Toole smiled, went to sip his tea, realized he would be peeling skin off his soft palate for a day, and said, "I'm sure I would have heard about anything like that before Lorraine Gordon."

"I wouldn't bet on it," she said, and left the room.

O'Toole was vaguely thinking he'd like to reread Samuel Beckett's plays when his cell phone rang. He recognized Bob Rogers' number.

"Hi, Bob. What's up?"

"Oh, uh - I'm fine, actually. Really good."

"Well that's great. How're things with George?"

"George?"

"Yes, Bob. George. George St. Hilaire. Our mutual project."

"George?" Rogers asked again.

"Yes, Bob, George, George. You know - George?"

"Oh, um - well..."

O'Toole waited. "Yes?" he asked.

Rogers took a deep breath. "You know, he really has some very sound ideas."

"What?"

"Well, I mean - he's got me thinking..."

"Thinking? Thinking about what, Bob?"

"He said something the other day."

"What did he say?" O'Toole suddenly felt uneasy.

"He said that our minds are like crows. They pick up everything that glitters, no matter how uncomfortable our nests get." He paused.

"And?"

"It makes you think, doesn't it?"

"Bob, what are you telling me?"

"I think I've been bothering about myself too much. Lots of bother. I've been defending illusions. I need to get out of here and start living and doing God's work."

"I'm going to come out there to see you today."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

The call was abruptly cut off. Had Rogers hung up on him? Rogers the ghastly apostate was supposed to bring crazy George St. Hilaire back down to earth. What the hell was happening up on that hill? O'Toole decided to go there immediately. The phone rang again.

It was Mary. He had ignored two previous calls.

"Hi, Mary. How are you?"

"I'm angry and confused."

"Oh. That's not good."

"No, it's not. Can we talk in person, please?"

"Today's really not a good - "

"I want you to kiss me and caress my boobs and now  
you won't even - "

"Yes, we should talk in person."

They made a date for early evening at a picnic  
ground in the middle of nowhere.

O'Toole changed out of his priest's blacks and into  
jeans, cotton shirt, and leather jacket to see Rogers.

At the front desk of Breckenridge Retreat he was  
greeted warmly and told that Bob Rogers was in the gardens,  
that he had been spending a lot of time in the gardens  
lately.

O'Toole dumped helmet and gloves at the desk, and  
made it for the gardens.

As he entered the almost labyrinth-like arrangement  
of high shrubs and as-yet-unbloomed plants, he noticed his  
sneaker was untied. He propped his foot on a bench to tie  
it. He was wearing dark glasses that hid his eyes. As he

tied his shoe, he saw Bob Rogers round a corner twenty feet away. He was reading a book as he walked, dressed in matching purple sweat-pants and jacket.

Rogers saw O'Toole and pivoted like a mechanical bear and scurried. O'Toole took off after him.

"Oh no, you don't!" O'Toole yelled.

O'Toole had gained ten yards on his quarry when Rogers rounded a hedge.

"Bob! Stop, damnit!"

O'Toole rounded the hedge to find Rogers frozen to the spot. O'Toole half-expected him to put his hands in the air. Slowly he turned to face the priest.

"Hi, Father. Sorry we got terminated. On the phone, I mean."

"Not to worry, Bob. I'm here now. Let's talk. Want to sit down?"

"No."

"You're kidding me."

"No, I'm not. It's my own decision."

O'Toole thought that an odd turn of phrase.

"Okay, then we'll just stand here. You were

supposed to convince George to give up his wacky idea of joining the priesthood, remember? You were happy to do this for me, because you're an atheist who has nothing but contempt for the Church, and that's fine by me, as choice and blessed free will are the heart of the matter, right? But on the phone you sounded like Bishop Sheen. What the hell's going on?"

"Do you have a cigarette?"

"No, I don't."

"I have to quit. My body isn't something I should profane."

"Now, you see Bob? It's comments like that one that get me all perplexed."

Rogers looked defeated. O'Toole was startled when Rogers abruptly dropped his heavy bulk to the ground and sat cross-legged, pulling his ankles together with resignation. O'Toole slowly lowered himself to the grass.

"What's the book?" he asked.

Rogers handed it to him sheepishly, as if it were evidence. *The Last Temptation of Christ*, by Nikos Kazantzakis.

"Where did you get this?"

"From George. George gets lots of books," Rogers said in a child-like way.

"From where?"

Rogers frowned. "I don't want to talk about that. And that's my decision."

"That's fine, Bob. But can you tell me why you decided not to clean George's clock when it came to all the God crap, as you put it the other day? When was it you made the decision to do that?"

Rogers began tearing up handfuls of grass and piling them at his feet. O'Toole was disturbed by how odd he seemed.

"Bob?"

Rogers looked quickly around, glanced at O'Toole several times, then said, "George knows things that we don't know."

"What things?"

More grass-tearing. No response.

"You mean like the crow's nest thing you told me about, Bob?"

Rogers shook his head and chuckled. "No, not like that." He kept chuckling.

"What, then?"

Now Rogers began to rock back and forth.

"Like what, Bob?" he demanded, sharper and louder than he intended.

Rogers stopped and looked him straight in the eyes.

O'Toole saw that Rogers looked mad, and had the immediate feeling that Rogers was actually insane.

"He knows," said Rogers, slowly and with emphasis, "the most hidden of sanctities." He practically whispered this.

Rogers did not look away and neither did O'Toole.

"What do you mean, Bob? What sanctities?"

Rogers threw himself violently to one side, slapped his palms on the grass, and catapulted clumsily but quickly to his feet, and began running. O'Toole was so shocked that he sat dumbly watching Rogers flee for a full seven seconds before jumping up to pursue him.

For a man whose top speed seemed an enthused waddle, Rogers was really barreling along. O'Toole, in lousy shape, was gaining on him, but already winded. Rogers took a wide turn down a hedge-lined lane with the finesse

of a cannonball. O'Toole executed the same turn, and saw the lane drop downhill dramatically - the momentum was propelling Rogers faster than his fat legs could carry him, but he did not fall. O'Toole checked the pain in his knees with each stride, to avoid a sprain or a break. He began to stumble, had to slow, but kept up the pursuit. He saw Rogers reach level ground, an open expanse before a pond half the size of a football field. O'Toole expected Rogers to slow down.

Rogers ran pell-mell straight to the gravel-lined edge.

"It's my decision!" he yelled, and hurled himself into the pond.

O'Toole continued running to the edge of the pond, then stopped himself, wheezing, and waited for Rogers to surface.

He didn't.

O'Toole was aware of the ticking seconds that Rogers was under the water.

He would have to jump into the cold water and save Rogers from drowning. He did not want to do this. But he needed to save a life.



A priest was compelled to save a life. As was any decent human being. Even an atheist.

O'Toole would later recall with shame how slowly he removed his sneakers and jacket. He didn't dive into the water heroically, but waded tentatively to the spot where Bob Rogers had gone under. His socks sank unsettlingly into the muddy bottom, and his pants got immediately heavy with water.

He peered down where Bob had flopped. The pond bed was thick, dark silt, making visibility impossible, the water the color of dark copper.

He did not dive in, but lowered himself into the water like an eighty-year-old man with heart trouble.

He filled his lungs with air, and went under. He opened his eyes, briefly saw bright, swirling filaments. There was a quick stinging. He closed them, and realized they were already swelling. He crouched in what he knew to be about a depth of five feet, and clawed blindly at the bottom around him, identifying only a brick and some small branches before he had to break the surface for air.

He stood morosely, the water at his midsection. A voice yelled from the shore. O'Toole turned.

"What the hell's going on?" yelled a woman in a red track-suit. She had a whistle on a cord around her neck.

He trudged slowly to shore.

"Can you explain yourself?" she asked.

"A patient jumped in the pond. I tried to - I tried..."

"Well, where is he?" she asked.

O'Toole realized he was breathing heavier than he should have been, even under the circumstances. He fought for air to support his words.

"He didn't come up."

"What are you talking about?"

"You work here?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Fine. Tell them inside that Bob Rogers jumped in the pond and may have drowned and to call the police."

"He jumped in?"

"Really - you'd better go."

O'Toole dragged himself dripping up to the office to await what would ensue.

## 20        **Mutual Collapse**

When her guests had gone, Sissy decided to soak in the hot tub. She had had two drinks at the tavern and two drinks with Owsley and Ralph, and was now mixing a fifth. She realized she should not be drinking so much. She decided to make another pitcher.

When it was ready, she changed into a canary yellow bikini with cute little diaper-ties at the hips, and was crossing from the bedroom to the kitchen when the doorbell rang. She glanced at the clock -- 4:30 on the nose. This was Katie the courier from Kukol, a nice, wry college kid who daily brought over all the mail and documents that couldn't be e-mailed or faxed. Katie was a pretty and sassy chick of East Indian stock, first generation. Sissy flung open the door with her arm seductively over her head, her hand on the jamb, as a gag.

There stood smiling Katie and shocked Father O'Toole. Upon seeing Sissy, Father O'Toole smiled.

"Oh, shit!" said Sissy.

"Hiya, Miz Sissy," drawled Katie.

"Is this a bad time?" asked O'Toole.

"No, no. Come in." She turned abruptly to fetch a robe in the bedroom, suppressing the urge to cover her ass with the back of her hands. She yelled over her shoulder.

"I'll be right with you!"

Rattled, she searched her closet. Getting dressed would be time-consuming and stupid. She grabbed her little pink "terry romper," ultra-soft, and eased with elasticized smocking for the perfect fit. It was great to lounge in or wear by the pool, featuring gentle shirring, side-seam pocket, and full legs for comfort. It also looked asinine. She put it on over the bikini, and returned feeling like a twit from a '70s sitcom.

Katie and O'Toole were standing in the living room talking economics. Sissy immediately interrupted.

"Look, I'm sorry. You must think I'm a pervert." She giggled nervously.

"Which one of us are you talking to?" asked Katie.

"Both of you!" Sissy snapped. She turned to the priest. "Father O'Toole - "

"Brendan."

"Brendan. I know that Katie always comes by every day at 4:30 on the dot, right, Katie?"

"Father, I have never seen this woman before in my life," said Katie, straight-faced. O'Toole laughed.

"I was about to get into the hot-tub!"

"Of course you were," said Katie. "Here. There's copies of account statements and a sympathy card you need to sign. Jacob's mother died in Hawaii. He's flying out tomorrow."

Sissy had no idea who Jacob was, but dutifully signed her condolences, then handed the card back to the savvy young woman.

"Father O'Toole is counseling my husband," said Sissy. "He's a Catholic priest."

"I approve," said Katie. "I attend St. Chrystosom. We're Anglican."

"Close enough," said O'Toole.

"I'm a Catholic wanna-be," said Katie. "I just can't seem to make the leap."

"Me either," said O'Toole, and instantly regretted the quip.

Katie hugged Sissy and left. Sissy was going to offer O'Toole iced tea when he spied the pitcher, inquired about its contents, and practically begged for a glass. They settled down in the living room.

"I'm sorry about that," said Sissy.

"About what?"

"Coming to the door like that," she said.

"Oh, yes, that. Thank you, Sissy. Women in bathing suits always induce hysteria in me, if not lycanthropy. You know I've totaled three cars?"

She was chastened. "Okay, now I'm sorry again."

"Why?"

"Presuming that you couldn't handle seeing a woman in a bikini. Treating you like a child. Or less than a man. Or something."

"Well done, Sissy." He toasted her, sipped, and seemed to visibly relax. " Sissy -- is that a nickname?"

"I should hope so. I don't like it, but it stuck, as they do. If I run for president I'll use Cecilia - you know, like Simon and Garfunkel's slut?"

"Not to mention Saint Cecelia."

"I got a namesake saint?"

He spelled it for her. "Different than yours, right? She's the patron saint of musicians."

She considered this. "A little dull, but it could be worse. Did she die horribly?"

"Of course," he said.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Is George here?" he asked.

Sissy stared at him, bewildered. She would not have been more taken aback if the priest had asked to borrow her aardvark.

"George is at Breckenridge," she said.

"Actually, he's not," said O'Toole. "He didn't discharge himself, but his things are gone and his room is empty. He hasn't been seen since this morning."

"When - how -- did you find this out?"

O'Toole speculated that she was as depleted and depressed as he was.

"I found out right after I jumped into the cold and nasty Breckenridge pond, trying to save Bob Rogers from killing himself."

"What?"

"I was talking to Bob Rogers about George. George has convinced Bob to be a devout Catholic again, which if you know Bob, is completely insane. I asked Bob what in hell was going on with George, and he gave me a lot of mystical claptrap. Then he jumped into the pond." O'Toole paused. "The pond was pretty cold."

"Is he okay?"

"No, I don't think so. He never came up, so we're all pretty sure he's dead. Guess I was way wrong about him not being genuinely suicidal, huh?"

"Oh, God." Sissy sobbed.

"Yeah. I went home and changed my wet clothes, then came here, thinking your husband might be home. Home, home..." he said wistfully. "This has surely been one of the worst days of my life, Sissy, and I'm also thinking I need a new job, but that's for some other time."

Sissy burst into tears - wracking, coursing tears - and she felt for an instant as if she might collapse.

O'Toole shamefully concluded his self-pitying display had goaded her already ghastly mood. Should he go to her? Take her hand? Good Christ, no. Hold her? No! -- even worse.



Before he could rue any further, Sissy rose to her feet and crossed the room, weeping. She plopped down next to him, and tried to speak. She seemed helpless. She was coming apart.

He put his arms around her, and it felt very natural, a "the-moment-called-for-it" gesture.

Sissy sobbed violently, and clutched O'Toole tightly.

## **21        Brandy and Benedictines**

O'Toole would recall all that had bedeviled him that day sprawling on her sofa. After she stopped crying, he insisted she fulfill her hot-tub intentions. He could amuse himself.

While Sissy soaked, he sipped good cognac from a bottle she handed to him. Play the stereo, she said. He chose *Sketches of Spain*. Miles Davis and Gil Evans would help numb his mind along with the Remy.

His mind had other ideas.

O'Toole wrestled again with that which he knew he should have banished long ago - desire and all doubt.

He believed God existed. God was the creator of the universe, of all earthly things, including sex. God was an intelligent, omnipotent being.

What frightened O'Toole was the unvanquished inkling that the God of the Roman Catholic Church was nowhere near the real deal. He feared that God did not watch over every one of us; that, in fact, He was largely unaware of us; that He was not listening to prayers, whether from individuals or groups, thereby rendering prayer useless beyond its ability to comfort; that God had no grand plan; we were essentially alone, save for one another, and life was cheap, and death, in unbearable and ghastly forms, ever-present and inevitable. Life's meaning and God's intentions were as beyond human comprehension as the conception of an afterlife.

How could a priest entertain such theories? If these ideas were not exactly blasphemy, they were certainly close to heresy.

On the eve of making his commitment to seminary and then his vows, O'Toole would work with discipline to appreciate the mystery of God, to try to attain union with

Him. O'Toole now realized that his enthusiasm flowed on a river of intent - his desire to become a priest and have a vocation. Getting there was half the fun: he would capture his faith later.

Now he considered himself as pathetic and deplorable as a doctor or teacher who has diligently prepared, only to discover upon arrival that the work was disagreeable and uninspiring. No, he was worse - this was not simply a job with merit, like medicine or education - O'Toole was a clergyman, invested with maintaining the faith of the flock. Only an incompetent fraud could experience a crisis of faith so early in his spiritual life.

And yet: even Mother Teresa had doubts. Hadn't the Savior?

O'Toole considered that perhaps he had chosen the wrong profession.

Sissy emerged after nearly an hour, feeling sober and dressed soberly in jeans and a sweater. She listened to the music flowing from the speaker.

"Miles Davis. What a lovely choice."

"Yours?"

"They're all mine."

"That's a pretty impressive collection."

"Thank you. I realized I cherish music, so me and Saint Cecelia have more in common than I thought."

"I like your taste. What does your husband like?"

"Nothing. He's tone-deaf. When we were dating, he bought albums for the girls on the cover."

She frowned.

"Since the accident, he's developed a liking for Don Ho."

She sat on the sofa opposite him. O'Toole thought this as good a time as any.

"Do you have any idea where he might be?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Are you okay?"

"Never better."

"Yes, you seem fine. Why is that?"

O'Toole thought she might take offense, but she giggled.

"I just thought about that. Should I jump into my car and start driving? Where to? Call the cops and bring even more attention to this stupid mess? Imagine the

headlines - 'Local Entrepreneur Escapes Nuthouse, Wife Oblivious'. No, thanks."

"Isn't his safety more important?"

She didn't bristle.

"George is safe," she said. "He isn't a threat to himself or anyone else. He's as gentle as a lamb these days. He used to be ruthless. Not physically, but emotionally. There was a stunning absence of feeling. That's all changed. He'll turn up. I trust him."

"Does he have access to money?"

"It's his money. You think I'd cut him off from it?"

"No. I'm sorry."

Sissy realized she liked this man, and fear rose up inside of her. She had lately taken to dispelling frightening thoughts by almost ritually invoking the words, "Black Hole!" - and the terror was sucked into a place where no matter could escape. The past and future did not exist; there was only the present.

"But your husband - "

"Let's talk about something else."

"Music?"

"No. Religion."

"Oh, Christ."

"Exactly."

Sissy decided she wanted a nosh -- did he know the Yiddish term? What might he like? Anything? Oh, really? Would he respond favorably to chopped liver with onions and brown mustard on pumpernickel or sour dough? He was adventurous, good. They could wash it down with Newcastle brown ale.

He watched her get their snack in the kitchen. Neither knew how hungry they were. They had cleaned the platter of bread and meat, as well as the pickled herring and half-sour dill pickles placed in matching bowls. Each downed two bottles ale. They did discuss only music, but O'Toole knew he was not off the hook.

"How can you be certain God exists?" she asked.

O'Toole finished chewing his last bite.

"You can't," he said. "No one can prove God exists any more than prove He doesn't. An absence of proof is not proof of absence. Besides, the very nature of faith demands a lack of surety."

"How do you know?"

His answer surprised him.

"I suppose I don't. Not really. I don't mean to get mystical on you, but it's just a feeling I have. And I don't mean the beauty of a sunset or the complexity of nature or any of that bullshit. If I can't be one hundred percent sure God exists, then I'm eighty percent. I think it's more probable than not."

"So you have doubts."

"I have lots of doubts. Surprised?"

"Somewhat."

"Like Al Jolson said -- you ain't heard nothin' yet."

"If God created everything, who created God?"

"Don't bother. It's imponderable and unknowable. I've pondered and I know. As Barry Fitzgerald might say: It's a mystery. We can't possibly speculate."

"So I shouldn't look forward to tall, blonde angels playing harps on clouds?"

"Nor being reunited with your dead loved ones, all in their physical prime. Most people would probably consider spending eternity with their family Hell."

"That's a relief," she said. "I saw a mural once in a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall. It was a depiction of paradise - Bambi with a butterfly on his nose, birds straight out of Snow White. The wholesome white family all outfitted at Sears. Dad even wore a plaid flannel shirt. It looked like Disneyworld."

"And not a black, Hispanic, Asian or gay to be seen."

"Nor cripples. I guess that would be Heaven for some people."

"I know those people, and some are Catholics. Next question?"

"Why does God allow horrible, terrible things to happen to good people - to innocent children?"

"That's easy. Imagine life with no sickness, disability, want, poverty, hardship, even death. Sounds perfect, doesn't it?"

Sissy weighed this for all of two seconds. "I guess anything that's good would lose its value, wouldn't it? As would life without death. And there certainly wouldn't be any need for God."



"Well done. You'd be great in a catechism class, Sissy, well ahead of the third-graders."

"Thanks."

"One thing I cherish about Catholicism is the idea of free will - choice. Without evil, good would be meaningless. Sin has its value."

"You believe in true evil? That tangible evil exists? Satan and demons and all that?"

"Damn right I do. If there's a God, there's a Devil. My worst fear is that they're both the same. That's called Manichaeism. It's heresy, of course. But my church no longer responds to such notions by burning people alive."

"Does Hell exist?"

"No."

"You seem very sure."

"Hell would be the province of the Devil. If you do the bidding of the Devil - I mean, really bad stuff: sell your soul, torture and murder children for pleasure - then the Devil should reward you with an orgiastic paradise for your loyalty, not eternal misery. And God certainly

wouldn't allow it. It's theologically unsound, and makes no sense."

"Birth control, homosexuality, abortion?"

"I'm for all three."

"You telling me you're pro-choice?"

"I'm very much against abortion. I also think it's the only option for some women and young girls, and should remain safe and legal. Mother Church fucks with public policy too much. She's an imperfect mother, but the only one we've got."

"It's a wonder they don't burn you at the stake, Father. Where do you stand on vows of celibacy?"

"I'll skip that one, if you don't mind."

"Not at all. Was Jesus really the Son of God?"

"I think so, but I also think it doesn't really matter. Christ formulated a beautiful philosophy, wondrous guidelines for living. All we know of Jesus is from the Gospels, and they're staggeringly inaccurate when you compare them to recorded history - everything's wrong as far as dates, events. Who cares who wrote Shakespeare's plays? We have the plays."

"And you believe in immaculate conception?"

"What do you mean?"

"That Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb without sex? A virgin birth?"

"That's not the immaculate conception. Immaculate conception is the idea that Mary was born without original sin, unlike the rest of us. You know, we're all cursed because Eve tempted Adam with a piece of fruit. Ezra Pound called it the Christers' hex-hoax."

"I didn't know any of that. I feel dumb. You believe that fairy tale?"

"Not on your life, and I've never met a single priest who did. Many, many cultures long before Jesus had stories of virgin births. I believe in the Holy Spirit, and we're told He came upon her - or in her, I'd say."

"You're one different priest, Father O'Toole."

"You think so? I also believe the earth is billions of years old, and that human beings emerged through evolution. I wish Marxism worked, but it doesn't. I think Christ would agree with me on that one. I have fantasies of being a shepherd on Cape Breton Island. Catholicism seems to be the only effective way to combat evil. I think it works. What do you think?"

"I'm confused. By everything." She sighed. "I'm sorry I lost it when you got here. I'm going through a lot."

"I can imagine."

"I'm trying to be strong."

"You can't maintain that every minute. Don't go bucking for sainthood, Cecilia."

Sissy rose, crossed to O'Toole, and sat next to him. She took his hand.

"You seem like you might be a nice guy. I haven't met many of those."

He looked at her honey-colored skin, her thick, silky hair, and her full lower lip that seemed to beg to be kissed. She smelled good, some musky scent.

Sissy's cell phone rattled on the coffee-table, an electronic, hopped-up version of "Hava Nagila." To his mild annoyance, she answered.

"Hello?"

"Is Sissy St. Hilaire available?" A man's voice with an accented inflection, harsh and Germanic.

"This is she."

"This is Brother Wolfgang, Ms. St. Hilaire. I'm calling from the Priory in Weston. We're a community of Benedictine monks."

"Monks?" Sissy's heart sank.

Brother Wolfgang chuckled. "Ah, yes, that's' right. We're a monastery. Of monks."

"Is my husband there?"

"How did you know?"

"Is he okay?"

"Oh, yes, he's quite fine. Evidently he arrived quite early this morning, before dawn, but we're up each day before first light. Visitors aren't allowed to stay without special arrangement, but he mesmerized a few of our brothers in the garden at daybreak. One after another joined the circle, and it all became quite Socratic. Luckily our spiritual leader, Abbot Caspar, is at a conference in Lisbon. I say luckily, as Abbot Caspar takes a dim view of anything irregular."

"Did George ask you to call me?"

"No, although I doubt he would object. He told us he had been a businessman, and one of the brothers recognized his name as the Kukol clock fellow. Kukol

wouldn't give me your home phone, but I got it through directory assistance."

"Brother Wolfgang, my brother - I mean, my husband - isn't well. He's had a breakdown. He must have come to you straight from the Breckenridge Retreat."

"I figured it was something like that."

"Where did you say you were?"

"In Weston, at the edge of the Green Mountain National Forest. We're a little over an hour's drive from Breckenridge."

"How did he get up there?"

"I have no idea."

"He couldn't have just walked over fifty miles overnight."

"I promise you I don't know, Ms. St. Hilaire."

"I'm sorry."

"No worries," said the monk. Sissy despised the expression.

"Please call me Sissy. I happen to have a priest right on hand -- can I put him on?"

"You have a priest there?"

"Yes. Will you speak to him?"

"Of course."

Sissy handed the phone to O'Toole. "It's Brother Wolfgang. George is at the Weston Priory."

Sissy sat with her hands between her knees, not listening to O'Toole's low-voiced end of the conversation. After about two minutes, he hung up and looked at her.

"He's in the Weston Priory," he said.

"I know that."

"They're Benedictines. Not silent like Trappists, but pretty intense."

"Now what?"

"We go get him. Brother Wolfgang said there was no real hurry, as Abbot Caspar won't be back for three days, and everyone's having such a good time being inspired by George. Learning about truth, wisdom and the meaning of life. This is the same George who never gave a rat's ass about religion or theology or spirituality in his whole life, right?"

"You sound jealous."

"Damn right I am. Where he does he get off suddenly knowing everything when he doesn't know anything? He's got

a group of fucking monks, for Christ's sake, hanging on his every word like a bunch of apostles. Don't you find that intriguing?"

"I don't know what the hell is going on, I promise you." She realized she was repeating Brother Wolfgang's phrase. "But I need your help right now. Not your anger at my husband for - esoteric reasons."

"I'm sorry." He allowed his apology a reverent pause. "Are we proceeding to Weston?"

"Can you come with me?" she asked.

"It's too late to go there tonight. Tomorrow morning?"

O'Toole figured that he had to blow off a brunch he had pledged his life to attend. Carmine Guerette had asked him twice to attend events at her home for which he had been a no-show. He promised come hell or high water he would be there tomorrow morning. Now he would not show for a third insulting time. He should call. On the other hand, Carmine would get a lot of mileage out of what an asshole he was if he simply blew her off, and she'd enjoy that. He had also told Mary Roth he would call that evening. He knew he wouldn't.



O'Toole called the priory back and told them that he and Ms. St Hilaire would be driving up to collect George in the morning. Brother Wolfgang sounded disappointed.

## **22        A Chance Encounter**

O'Toole, in dog-collar, collected her at eleven the next morning. Sissy and he lunched at one of the few remaining Kentucky Fried Chickens in Vermont, devouring the greasy offal with delight, then hit the road for Weston. Sissy insisted they travel in her car.

It was dark from lowering rain-clouds by the time they neared Weston, and what had been a light drizzle was turning into a heavy downpour. They had driven largely in silence, O'Toole at the wheel, Sissy chain-smoking, when a small car with its hazard-lights flashing in the breakdown lane loomed up ahead. O' Toole slowed.

"You're going to stop?" said Sissy. "It's pissing down."

"All the more reason, right?"

"The Good Samaritan."

He parked ahead of the stopped car as Sissy pulled a furled golf umbrella from the back seat. He hurried to Sissy's waiting umbrella and they walked to the flashing car. O'Toole unzipped the top of his windbreaker to reveal his clerical collar - *I am a friend, I come in peace.*

A short, pretty college-aged girl under a soaked copy of Cosmopolitan was studying the screen of a Blackberry when they reached her. She turned her attention to them.

"Hi! Thanks for stopping. I don't have Triple-A or any money and my parents are in Lisbon. I'm Casey."

"Lisbon?" asked O'Toole.

"We ran out of gas," she said.

"Is anyone coming?" asked Sissy.

"I can't reach anybody. We're screwed."

"We?"

"Me and my friend. She's in the woods."

The priest peered into the dark.

"Why is she in the woods?" he asked.

Both women stared at him.

"She's picking blackberries," said Sissy. "What else would she be doing out in the woods in the rain, Brendan?"

"Right."

The girl emerged from the trees, and something about her slow saunter in the tall grass grabbed O'Toole's attention.

The girl was Mary Roth.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"We ran out of gas. What are you doing here?"

"We stopped to help you."

"Thanks," she said.

"Where are you going?"

"To see a friend of Casey's. In Stowe."

"Stowe?" He sounded irritated.

"Yeah. You know - the Von Trapps and shit? I'd think you'd approve. Where are you going?"

"To a priory in Weston."

"What the hell's a priory?"

"A monastery. Monks. Look, it's pouring and we're all soaked. Can I call you tomorrow?"

"You were supposed to call me last night."

Butler--156

"I know."

Casey announced triumphantly that an old boyfriend would be bringing a can of gas within a half-hour. Texting was the greatest invention ever, huh?

## 23     **The Monks**

Brendan insisted on following his AAA map, rather than Sissy's GPS system, citing an occasion when this same system brought him two hours out of his way.

"You a Luddite, Brendan?"

"Screw the technology. I like maps."

They passed a wet sign welcoming them to Weston.

"What do the monks do here?" Sissy asked as O'Toole steered the car off the main road.

"Live a cloistered life. They speak to each other, but sunrise to sunset is mostly conducted in silence and solitude. I've timed our arrival for after *lectio divina* and Mass."

"What's *lectio divina*?" She recalled this as the name of the natural spring on Kukol's property.

"An hour spent in the monk's cell, his room. It's

personal time to pray, meditate, or read scripture. Then they attend a Mass where they chant, would you believe."

"Sounds restful."

"I would think. I might consider it tempting, were I not certain that I would soon become restless. I've spent time in monasteries before. I miss my music. And the Marx Brothers."

"Do these guys make anything cool?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean like jam or beer or cognac? I heard there's this group in upstate New York that trains German shepherds."

"Not these guys."

O'Toole pulled the car up a drive to a compound of attractive wooden offices and bungalows, like buildings on a studio lot. Sissy thought that it looked like an expensive summer camp. They parked and walked to a man-made pond. Everything was beautifully landscaped.

A smiling, bespectacled moon-faced man with blond ringlets appeared behind them. He was dressed in a white monastic robe and blue high-top sneakers.

"Are you Brother Wolfgang?" O'Toole asked.

"Yes, yes, I am," said the monk, extending his hand. O'Toole introduced himself and Sissy.

"Thank you so much for calling me," she said.

"No, no, my pleasure. It has all been a great pleasure," he said, chuckling softly and nodding his head. "Would you care for some refreshment?"

"That would be most welcome, thank you," O'Toole said.

"We take our meals as a group in the refectory, but I'm afraid that's a silent experience. Would you care to lunch with me in the Abbot's office?"

"That sounds lovely," said Sissy.

"That will give us a chance to exchange some information, Brother Wolfgang," O'Toole said. "If you don't mind."

"Again, my pleasure."

The monk led the pair down wide, bright corridors, the walls of which were adorned with traditional religious art and framed photos and posters of priory events. Brother Wolfgang seemed cheerfully at peace with himself and the world.

"Here we are," he said, opening a thick wooden door that led to a large and tastefully decorated room with a large, cleared desk set in front of wide windows.

"Make yourself comfortable. I'll just let Brother Anton know we're here. For the meal, I mean." He smiled and went out.

"My guess is they don't care we might be vegans," Sissy said.

They settled into plush chairs on either side of the desk and sat in silence.

Brother Wolfgang quickly returned followed by two young Asian men carrying trays.

"Here we are again," he said, snatching a cloth napkin from one tray and regally spreading it across his lap as he took the desk's central seat.

Steaming bowls of what looked to be cabbage soup were placed in front of them, with a large hot loaf of fresh French bread. There was also a bowl of Cortland apples and Anjou pears. One of the Asian men took a cut-glass pitcher of ice water and filled chalices for each of them.

"The bread is excellent here," he said to Sissy, closing his eyes and chuckling to himself as if he were blessed. The three tucked into the soup and bread and butter. Sissy and O'Toole exchanged a look of approval.

"As we would say in my hometown, *Wunderbar, Ja?*"

"Germany or Austria?" asked O'Toole.

"Neither," said Wolfgang triumphantly.

"Switzerland," said Sissy.

"Well done, *Frau St. Hilaire*. A town called Schaffhausen. Do you know the Turner painting?"

"The Falls. Switzerland's beautiful," said Sissy.

"You've been? Yes, and then I continued my fancy ways by attending the University of Heidelberg."

"Theology?" asked O'Toole.

Brother Wolfgang shook his head. "Marketing."

"How is my husband, Brother?" Sissy thought she sounded like a hip black man in a 70s sit-com. Or a Quaker.

"He's a gift from God."

The monk had not looked up, but spoke with emphasis as he consumed his soup.

"That's good to hear. So he's feeling and - acting - well?" Sissy asked.



He set down his spoon in his bowl and looked at her.

"My dear woman, if ever the power of the Holy Spirit can be heard in all its glory, can be seen - even felt - it's embodied in George St. Hilaire."

Sissy stared at him. "You don't say."

"He's changed my life. I think he's changed the lives of all the brothers here."

O'Toole choked loudly on his bread. Sissy and the monk turned to him.

"Has he said he wants to join the order?" O'Toole asked, coughing.

"Drink some water. Oh, no. He said he came here by instinct - to explore the values of community, prayer, good work and hospitality. He said he came by instinct - but I say the hand of the Lord can be seen in his coming."

"Did he say anything about becoming a priest?"

Brother Wolfgang looked puzzled. "Not to me. Why do you ask?" He and Sissy finished their portions together.

"George said recently that he'd like to do that. Our children and - myself -- are confused. May we see George, Brother Wolfgang?"

"Of course. By all means."

The monk rose quickly, scraping his heavy chair on the floor, and placing his napkin on the table. O'Toole looked sadly at his unfinished meal, but followed Sissy from the room.

"We can go straight to his cell. I'll take you there himself. *Myself*," he corrected.

He led them across the grounds up a dirt road toward bungalows. The rain had not let up, and between her husband's circumstances, the dark day and wet weather, the priory and its monks, Sissy felt in a dismal, Gothic film.

They reached the last bungalow before the road petered out onto a footpath. The lights shone from inside. Brother Wolfgang rapped on the door. There was no response.

"We have a policy of no locked doors. In fact, the doors have no locks. It's perfectly proper for us to enter at any time."

The monk went in first, and Sissy and O'Toole followed. The little cottage was one large room with a single bed, a desk, chair, bureau, closet, and a door to somewhere.

Sissy's attention was caught by a red notebook that was sitting in the center of the desk, a pen on top of it. She flipped it open, and recognized George's handwriting:

*Once you suffered passions and called them evil.  
But now you have only your virtues left: they grew out  
of your passions. You commended your highest goal to  
the heart of these passions: then they became your  
virtues and passions you enjoyed.*

*And whether you came from the tribe of the choleric  
or of the voluptuous or of the fanatic or of the  
vengeful, in the end all your passions became virtues  
and all your devils, angels.*

There were several pages consisting of one or two paragraphs, with several one-liners interspersed. She read one: *If there is no humility in the world, then everybody would long ago have committed suicide.*

Brother Wolfgang excused himself and went into what turned out to be a bathroom.

"What is it?" asked O'Toole.

She handed him the notebook. He skimmed the pages.

"It's aphorisms."

"Read the first one."

While he read, Sissy looked around the room for evidence of insanity, but found none. There was a vase filled with fresh daffodils.

"I know this passage," said O'Toole. "I've read it before."

The toilet flushed in the bathroom.

"It might be Nietzsche," he said.

As Brother Wolfgang emerged from the bathroom, George entered from outside. He was soaked to the skin, gently cradling an equally sopped black kitten. He looked up at Sissy and said, "Hello, Pumpkin."

"What have you there, my friend?" asked Brother Wolfgang.

"She must be from the feral litter Brother Carlo's been keeping tabs on, in the gardening shed. He said the mother was young and not taking very good care of her kittens. She keeps moving them. And dropping them!"

"Sounds like a lousy mother," said Sissy.

George smiled at her kindly.

"She's inexperienced. This is all new to her."

"I think your wife would like to speak to you, George," said the monk. "Would it be acceptable if we bring this little one to Brother Carlo?"

"That would be terrific," said George. He crossed to the bathroom, grabbed a white hand-towel, and wrapped up the kitten, then handed the bundle to Brother Wolfgang.

"Make sure he dries her."

"She will be a fluff-ball, *ja*?" said the monk with affection. Wolfgang and O'Toole left them, Wolfgang "to work." O'Toole said he wanted to stretch his legs.

Sissy asked, "How do you know it's a she?"

He smiled. "You can always tell."

"You can?"

"You sense it."

Again, Sissy felt the annoying and exciting sensation that she had just met her husband. He stood staring at her and smiling.

"Would you like some mead?"

"Mead?" she asked.

"It's an alcoholic drink made from honey. It's absolutely delicious."

"Sure."

George went to the closet and produced a bottle of amber-colored liquid and two red plastic cups.

"Where did you get it?"

"In my travels," he said cheerfully.

While he poured, Sissy sat down on the narrow bed. George handed her the cup and settled down next to her.

"To God's will," he toasted.

"*L'Chaim*," she said. George grinned and they both drank. She liked the stuff, and knocked back the remainder.

"So about those travels, George."

"Yes?"

"Why did you leave Breckinridge?"

"Everyone seemed to think it was time."

"No one told me that," she said.

"Well, they didn't really know they knew, but I knew they knew. So I left."

"Why did you come here?"

"I felt a calling."

"How did you get here?"

"I got rides from some really nice people."

"You hitchhiked?" she asked, horrified.

"God, no. Hitchhikers scare people. I didn't want to do that. I just asked people for rides."

"Do you want to come home, darling?"

"I sure do. We have work to do before I enter the seminary."

Sissy, vaguely and without really examining this, thought he was talking about gardening. The pre-accident George liked to make a big deal about landscaping and planting decisions for all of one day a year in the spring.

"George, I have to tell you -- " She stopped.

"Yes, Pumpkin?"

"I don't understand what's happening. I've known you for over twenty years, and you never gave a damn about religion for a single moment in your life. You only cared about the business and money and living well."

"Didn't really work, did it?"

She didn't want to respond to this, so she ploughed ahead.

"And now you get a concussion and you're a completely different person and you want to be a priest. Do you see why someone might think you're crazy?"

"Absolutely. Do you think I'm crazy?"

Sissy looked into his eyes and he smiled back at her with such charm that she felt a slight melting within her. She had not been this attracted to her husband in quite some time.

"I don't know, sweetheart. I'm frightened. I'm more frightened than I've been since I was a little girl."

He took her hand, and she was embarrassed that hers was chill and moist. His was warm and dry.

"There's nothing to be frightened of. God loves you, and I love you. I promise you nothing bad is going to happen."

She wanted him to hug her, and he did. She thought she would cry, but just nestled her face against his neck. She wanted to make love, immediately, but that was impractical and confusing. She didn't cry, but clutched him tightly. He had always worn expensive cologne he'd had specially designed for himself that she had never liked. Now he smelled different - his skin had an exciting, but



comforting smell, sandalwood, maybe -- with citrus? She had to pull her face away from him to be heard.

"What's that cologne, George?"

"Bay Rum. The real deal from Ogallala, Nebraska."

"I like it."

She felt wonderfully intimate with him; at the same time, he seemed almost a stranger to her. Again he seemed to read her thoughts.

"I now appreciate the mystery of God, Cecilia. I want to attain union with that mystery, with Him. I want to be the best possible version of myself that I can be. Don't you want that, too?"

She had no clue how to respond.

"Silence is frequently the best response," he said.

"George, if you enroll in a seminary and become a priest, you'll be leaving me. You'll be leaving the company and your family."

"The company, yes. You and the children, never."

"I don't see how that's true."

"You need to trust me. But above all, you need to trust in God. I don't know exactly what's going to happen, but I'll always be here for you."

She felt the sadness within her, and the feeling was painfully bittersweet; she would luxuriate in it.

"The best thing to do," George said, "is to get out of yourself and focus on good works for others. That's the work I want you to help me with."

Sissy was expecting a proposal that they both move to Haiti for Habitat for Humanity. She sighed quietly.

"What work?" she asked.

"Keeping those bottled water thieves from taking over Kukol's property."

She was floored. She had not expected this. She immediately tamed her excitement with watchfulness.

"You know about that?"

"I know all about that. I don't want to run a company anymore, or lead any kind of a material life. But if you try to escape from the world merely by leaving it and hiding yourself in solitude, you'll only take the world with you into solitude. And yet you can be entirely out of the world while remaining in the midst of it, if you let God set you free from your own selfishness and live for love alone."

"What?"

"I'm damned if I'm going to let those corporate raiding bastards displace my family's legacy."

Sissy felt like applauding.

"Oh, George - I'm so - I'm so happy to hear you say that." She realized her eyes were tearing up.

She hugged him. He hugged her back, and squeezed her rear-end with both hands, which got her giggling.

"Could I have another glass of mead, George?"

## **24        The Man with the Bow Tie**

While Sissy and George were talking, Father Brendan O'Toole was alone in another part of the priory, reading the latest issue of *Parable* magazine, the publication of the Catholic Archdiocese of New Hampshire. Father Kerper's column, which O'Toole never missed, dealt with what the Catholic line was on ghosts, spectral apparitions, haunted houses, et cetera. Like all of Kerper's writing, the piece was excellent, but still O'Toole felt restless and uncomfortable.

He had been ushered from Sissy and her husband to the information center of the monastery to sit and ponder

whether to wait it out or trudge back, and if to trudge, why?

He was also pondering the meaninglessness he felt in his very being, if not his soul. He had a recurring mental image of himself on a Broadway stage, in top hat and tails, high-kicking with a cane, singing, "My life is a hollow lie!" in a bright follow-spot.

He had to pull up from within himself - or elsewhere - the strength, reserve, conviction, energy, ambition - the - the --

Oh, fuck it.

He was attracted to Mary Roth. He was attracted to Sissy. He was attracted to lots of women. He didn't belong in the priesthood. Given his recent observations of George St. Hilaire - a supposed lunatic who apparently possessed mystical ability - he didn't belong in the priesthood as much as George.

O'Toole realized it had stopped raining. He went to the door and looked out, then stepped out into the chill, damp air, closing the door behind him. It had been an unseasonably warm February, but the cold was back with a vengeance on this evening. His warm breath was visible. He

glanced around at some of the other buildings, most of which were dark. Then his gaze fell on a bright light emanating from a cabin a hundred yards across the quad. He began to walk slowly towards it.

As he approached, he saw a brightly lit room with a stark white wall visible. There was no shade or curtain. Then a figure stepped in front of the window, as if to look out. The familiarity of the small head on the stocky frame set off an intangible alarm in the priest. He moved closer.

The figure was standing, still and frozen, staring out of the window as it framed him in a full-faced portrait. The direction of his stare was straight, but did not seem fixed on anything, as if he were studying something that wasn't really visible from this or any vantage point. He also wore an expression of pained sadness. When O'Toole was ten feet from him, he realized it was Bob Rogers.

Bob Rogers. Bob Rogers was dead.

He was dressed in the white robe worn by the Weston brothers. This was impossible, as Bob Rogers could not suddenly appear as a monk here, being dead.

O'Toole was as close as five feet from the glass. There wasn't a single outside light to illuminate him, and the lighting inside the cabin was as intense as if it had been set up for a photo session. O'Toole realized that Bob Rogers couldn't see him: the window was acting like a two-way mirror. Rogers stood stock-still and stared right through O'Toole as O'Toole studied him. O'Toole's shock gave way to anger.

Suddenly a man stepped into the frame of the window and spoke to Rogers. O'Toole started, afraid he would be seen, then reminded himself that this man - young, college-aged in a jacket and bow tie - couldn't see him any better than Rogers. Rogers didn't move or even turn his head as the man spoke, but his eyes shifted in the man's direction. What he said seemed to make no change in Roger's demeanor.

Again the simple question twisted the priest's mind and nerves: what was Rogers doing here and why was he dressed like a monk? O'Toole's rage rose in him like bile.

Without pause or any notion beyond his fury, O'Toole rushed to the door and banged on it loudly. The noise startled him, and he realized his pounding sounded like the cops, or perhaps a jealous husband. He then tapped

lightly, as if this follow-up would cancel out, or at least modify, his initial onslaught.

The door was jerked open by a woman in a dowdy dark dress, dark stockings and what O'Toole would later think of as sensible shoes. Her hair was in a bun, her face devoid of make-up. Her expression in the light of the doorway looked a combination of sadness and deep concern.

"Yes?"

"Thanks for answering," he said. He stepped abruptly over the threshold and brushed past her.

"Well!" she said, stepping back as he entered.

He glanced around the room, which was another undistinguished bungalow with cheap but serviceable furniture. He glanced to his right in time to see the young man with the bow tie step into the room, closing the door behind him - the room with Bob Rogers.

"Good evening," the fellow said easily. "Wet, eh?"

"It's stopped."

"Has it? Ah, good."

"Can you tell Bob Rogers I'd like to see him?"

"Why? I mean, what are you talking about?"

"Bob Rogers? The stocky guy who's not a monk but is dressed like one? He's behind that door?"

"I'm afraid he isn't."

"I just saw you speaking to him."

"How did you see that?"

"Through the window you were both standing in front of, making no attempt to hide your presence."

The young man considered this. "He's not here."

"Where is he?"

"I mean - I don't know who you're talking about."

"When I said Bob was here, you didn't ask who he was, but immediately denied he was here. When I said I saw you together, you didn't deny that, but wanted to know how I'd seen you. When I explained, you confirmed that Bob - who's not supposed to exist, right? - was, in fact, not here. You see why you're bad at this?"

"He's -- " He checked himself.

"He's what?"

The young man gave his bow tie a reassuring tug.

"He's - there isn't any he, okay? I was a tad befuddled when we first addressed this. But there's no Bob Rogers here."



"Good memory. You didn't have to ask his name twice. Even once, actually."

He smiled. "I have a sharp mind. And who are you, Father?"

O'Toole had the sense that this young man was soft and silly, and despite the cold, dark and vaguely sinister situation, he felt more annoyance than caution.

"I'm Father O'Toole, a Catholic priest, not so out of place in a Benedictine priory. Who are you?"

"I'm here on business."

"Personal?"

"Private."

O'Toole saw the young man's gaze fix on something behind O'Toole. He nodded. O'Toole wheeled around to see the dour woman. He half-expected her to be swinging a blackjack. The young man stepped towards her, and O'Toole moved with determination to the door and twisted the knob. It was locked. He glanced at the young man and dour woman, who regarded him quizzically. He suddenly felt foolish and decided to go for broke. He pounded on the locked door.

"Bob! Bob Rogers! Are you in there? Are you all right?"

Silence.

"Why is this door locked?" O'Toole demanded.

"That's none of your business, Father."

O'Toole stared at them both. "We'll see about that," he said. His suddenly deep voice sounded like Sean Connery, and he liked that. He strode decisively to the front door and out into the cold darkness. Neither the man nor the woman made any attempt to stop him.

The priest moved swiftly in the raw air. A sense of urgency stepped up his stride until he realized he was waggling like an Olympic speed-walker. Now feeling ridiculous as well as alarmed, he broke into a more dignified sprint back to George's bungalow.

## **25        Thy Will be Done**

Brother Wolfgang had assigned O'Toole his own cabin, but after the episode with the man in the bow tie, graciously offered O'Toole and the St. Hilaires the exclusive and cheery Guest House, with its heavy-beamed open loft bedroom, fireplace, spacious rooms and multiple beds. O'Toole had been quietly relieved not to be alone.

It was late, and Sissy was curled up in front of the fire-place. George had quickly and handily built a blaze in the hearth, something she knew he had been incapable of doing at home. George and Brendan were talking in the large, open room, the latter excitedly discussing the events of the last two hours, since his return, the former quietly sitting and musing. A fourth glass of mead in her hands, Sissy was no longer listening.

"But how could Brother Wolfgang possibly have no idea who these people are or why they're here?" asked O'Toole.

"It's not impossible," said George. "This place is very open-door. There are maybe three dozen brothers in residence, but there are scores of guests, short stay people, tourists."

Sissy caught the word *scores*, which George had never used in his life. Even as an entrepreneur on international business, George had no use for eloquence. Or, for that matter, kites, hearths, Bay Rum, mead or the Almighty. She sipped.

O'Toole was unsatisfied. "I just strolled by, George, and saw Bob Rogers, deceased, this punk in the bow-

tie and his gargoyle companion, all lit up in the window. They weren't trying to conceal themselves. Surely one of the brothers would see them and wonder who the hell they were."

"You would think so."

Sissy was drained almost to despair. She realized much of her state could be attributed to needing sleep, but this was far worse than mere exhaustion. She had raised three children (detesting the perverse but popular mother's joke of listing her husband as the fourth child, although George was, in fact, useless at child-rearing) while working as businesswoman, housekeeper, hostess and socialite. She could handle fatigue -- this was different.

It had been exactly twenty-one days since the accident. The Catholic liturgical calendar on the wall of the abbot's office informed her that day three weeks ago was Ash Wednesday.

Only three weeks. It felt like three years, or as the stock phrase went, a lifetime ago. Of course, this was almost completely true.

The life she had known for over twenty years was being torn away, strip by strip. She had just made the

mistake of opening a ponderous coffee-table book of Renaissance art on the table next to her. The first full-color print she opened to depicted a medieval heretic being flayed alive, his skin surgically removed by executioners. She slammed the book shut, startling Brendan, but the lingering image was taking on a deft meaning.

"It makes absolutely no sense that no one would know they're here. And Bob Rogers - "

"I'm sorry to interrupt," said George.

Sissy laughed and they both looked at her.

"Sorry." It had simply struck her as funny. George had been interrupting everyone his entire life.

"Go on," O'Toole said to George.

"You can't be certain it was Bob. It was dark, at a distance. It might just have been a dead ringer for him. And he's supposed to be dead."

O'Toole had telephoned the Breckenridge Retreat after telling George and Sissy what he had witnessed. The night receptionist said No, Rogers' corpse had not been found, despite repeated dives and dragging the entirety of the relatively small pond. The authorities were baffled, the patients agitated.

"That doesn't prove he's alive."

"It's intriguing."

Sissy feebly made the decision that she was in no shape to make decisions or ponder her husband's condition, the future of Kukol, or her own uncertain fate. She downed the contents of her glass and rose heavily to her feet.

"I'm going to bed."

George smiled. "I'll be up soon. I won't wake you."

"We'll keep our voices down," said Brendan.

Sissy smiled. She thought of kissing each man goodnight, but instead padded to the upstairs bathroom.

The two men were considerably silent for nearly twenty minutes, until they heard soft, irregular snoring from the loft. Then George stoked the fire and began speaking in a low tone.

"I'm glad Sissy went to sleep. She's very saddened and confused by everything. It doesn't help that she thinks the whole universe is full of misery because God has willed and planned it that way."

O'Toole had started to hit the mead too, and it took a moment for this to sink in.

"I got the impression your wife doesn't really believe in God."

"Oh, sure she does," said George, still crouched in front of the hearth. "She's just out of touch with her own knowledge, like most of us."

O'Toole was puzzled by this, and decided to say nothing. George continued.

"Perhaps this is all some kind of a test for me."

"What kind of test?"

This was steadier ground. George was surely speaking of his marriage, his business, his burgeoning faith.

"My ability to take arms against evil. Maybe even my worthiness to do so."

O'Toole noticed a slight wisp of down - a small fluff of feather, probably from the passing geese that sometimes stopped in the priory pond for a rest - on his pant-leg. He carefully tweezed it from the fabric with his thumb and forefinger. He examined it from several angles, then let it drift to the floor.

"Arms against evil?"

"Exactly! - " George suddenly jumped to his feet with the excitement of a cheerleader, and landed in front of O'Toole, who snapped back in his chair in alarm.

"You know, when I was called here yesterday, I was certain about my destiny."

"Who called you?" asked O'Toole.

"God."

"Oh, yes," he said in a whisper.

"It was like following magnetic north, the Holy Ghost as my compass. But almost as soon as I arrived, I learned that this San Pablo in Spain was planning to destroy Kukol. And when Brother Wolfgang said I wouldn't be accepted here as a novitiate, I knew God had other plans for me."

"You wouldn't be accepted as a novitiate?"

"I was told so. "

"By?"

"Brother Wolfgang."

"Why?"

"He said that I was on a higher plane than a scant monk. Odd word to choose, huh? He said that God had



foreordained me for a greater mission. And I think he's right."

O'Toole smiled and nodded slightly, and dropped his gaze in what he hoped to be a soulful manner.

"I'm going to prepare myself to take up arms against evil, to gird myself for battle. I may need your help, Father. God will guide us."

George looked upward and said, "Thy will be done, Lord, not mine."

O'Toole also looked up.

Sissy snored from on high.

## **26      Serve the Lord**

The next morning, all three of them decided to skip the 6:00-7:30 silent breakfast, and grab something on the drive home.

O'Toole sampled some of George's Bay Rum after he shaved. He liked the smell, and it went on with just a hint of oiliness. Nice. Then the priest's skin erupted in an explosion of stinging, as if a Portuguese man o' war had been placed on his face like a barber's towel. He shook

convulsively, stifled a scream, and splashed himself with cold water, but just like a burn from eating hot peppers, the water only intensified the pain. O'Toole shocked himself when he let out a high-pitched yell. He panted and pressed a towel to his scorched skin until the agony subsided. It had lasted nearly half a minute.

"You use that every day?" he demanded of George.

"Sure do. Serves as a good reminder."

Sissy stared at them both, bemused.

George said he wanted to go for a long walk before they left. Sissy was uneasy about this, but Brendan gently urged her to let him go. She could tell he wanted to be alone with her. As soon as George left, he began.

"I think your husband is insane."

She looked at him for a long moment.

"What makes you say that?"

"He thinks he's on a mission from God. Brother Wolfgang told him he wouldn't be accepted here as a monk because God had bigger plans for him. Personally, I think the good Brother sold him a mystical bill of goods because he knows George is as mad as a hatter, and loves him. Sorry. George essentially took this to mean that San

Pablo is an embodiment of evil against which he must now take up arms."

"He said all that?"

"In essence."

"He seemed so normal last night."

"I think we need to get him back to Breckenridge."

"We are."

"I mean the hospital," he said.

"Oh." She fell silent.

"Don't you think that's the right thing to do?"

"I don't know what I think."

O'Toole went to her, placed his hands on her arms and looked into her eyes.

"Don't go adrift, Sissy. He needs you."

She nodded. "What's Ash Wednesday?" she asked.

"It was last month."

"I know, but what does it mean?"

"Ash Wednesday." He thought for a moment. "Ash Wednesday, in the Western Christian Calendar, is the first day of Lent and occurs forty days, not counting Sundays, before Easter. It's what's called a 'moveable feast,' falling on a different date each year, depending on when

Easter is. It can be as early as the first week of February on leap years - or as late as the Tenth of March. Now tradition holds that - "

"What the hell does it mean? To Catholics?"

"It means we're repenting to God. For our sins."

"Why the ashes on the forehead?"

"It's the sign of the cross -- just a symbol of repentance. It's from ages ago, when the Near Easterns threw ashes on their heads. Or something."

"I see."

"What made you ask that?"

"George's accident was on Ash Wednesday."

"You're kidding."

"No."

The priest wandered over to the window and looked out at the early morning landscape. He chuckled mirthlessly.

"Well that's just fucking perfect, isn't it?" he said.

"Divine intervention?"

During the drive home, O'Toole played a CD of spare Takemitsu chamber music. None of the three of them spoke.

At one point, a pickup truck passed them. Sissy saw that its lone bumper sticker read, *Grab a Sword and Serve the Lord*.

Neither Brendan nor George noticed it.

## **27        A Certain Amount of *Finesse***

It was decided upon arrival back in Breckenridge that a breather was in order. O'Toole needed to get back to his work. Sissy needed to check in with her office and make plans for Buffy's sixteenth birthday next month. George said with a confident grin that he needed to brood and plot. The three confirmed that separation for a time would be welcome.

O'Toole was sidelined as soon as he stepped into the rectory. A message on his directory voice-mail notified him that Bishop Reed would be visiting that afternoon in the company of Fathers Burton and Harris to discuss with O'Toole a matter of "the most serious import."

Damn him, thought O'Toole. Reed refused to call O'Toole's cell-phone, and wouldn't deign to show the

consideration to ask O'Toole if this afternoon was convenient.

The priest quickly worked through his pile of messages, obligations and postponements, re-rigging his schedule through Sunday with the ever-vigilant Mrs. Page.

At the estimated time of arrival of the three clerics, he was freshly put together and seated at his desk, working on a draft of this weekend's homily while Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* played in inoffensive softness on the stereo.

Right at the appointed hour, Mrs. Page ushered the three men into O'Toole's office.

Father Harris had been to seminary with O'Toole. He was the species of priest that inspired views in O'Toole. His pudginess and multiple chins at such a young age -- he looked early thirties, but who knew with that weight? -- were not in themselves objectionable, but the unwavering expression of distaste pursing his wet lips and tipping up his nose, as if always responding to a bad smell, added to an overall impression of a spoiled, petty, self-important prig, which he was. Harris didn't oversee a parish, but worked in some lick-spittle capacity for the Diocese.

The one unknown to him, Father Burton, looked like he belonged at Georgetown. He was tall, thin, middle-aged, distinguished grey. The word "dapper" sprang to mind. In contrast to Harris's *moue* of disfavor, Burton had a kindly smile set beneath sparkling blue eyes.

No booze this time (Reed even gave a perish-the-thought frown and shake at O'Toole's invitation). After introductions and brief pleasantries, the three men arranged themselves on the other side of O'Toole's desk, Burton and Harris on either side of Reed. Then Reed got down to it.

"Brendan, I'm afraid I've got some disappointing news. The Diocese has decided to close St. Helena's."

"Why?"

"For the obvious reasons. Low attendance, low revenue, high overhead. You've been - sorry - your parish has been operating at a deficit since you took over."

"We were operating at a deficit before I took over."

"All the more reason. You gave it the old college try. This parish can't break even regardless who's at the helm. It's not your fault. That should be some solace."

"I have some ideas - "

"You're not F.D.R., Brendan. You had your chance for a New Deal. Time's up."

O'Toole looked at Harris, who looked away with a sniff. Burton gave O'Toole an empathic smile. O'Toole wanted to know why these two were even present.

"What happens to my parishioners?"

"That's all been worked out. Father Harris?"

Harris opened the black attaché case he had slapped onto O'Toole's desk upon arrival. He produced a sheaf of paper-clipped pages, set them before O'Toole, and a single type-sheet that he handed to Reed.

"Now then," said Reed, scanning the sheet. "St. Helena's Mass schedule included weekday mornings at eight o'clock, Saturday at four-thirty, and Sundays at ten-thirty and four. Starting with the weekday morning Mass, St. Helena's congregants can attend Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal in Atwater."

"Atwater?"

"St. Catherine's is closer, of course, but they don't do a morning Mass."



"Atwater's ten miles," O'Toole said.

"You said you get a pretty good crowd weekday mornings?" asked Reed.

"About fifty."

"Same ones?"

"Always."

"Then they're devout," said Reed. "They're committed. They'll travel the extra mile."

O'Toole wanted to say they were almost all elderly, and certainly would find this a hardship, but Reed barreled on.

"Now, your Saturday bunch can go St. Catherine's in Ripe, as Monsignor Finney has the same Saturday schedule, and your attendance numbers are so low on Saturdays, Finney won't even notice. And you only offered organ and cantor on Saturdays, Brendan. Finney's got that whole contemporary music group of hippies. So for extra miles your folks get an upgrade on the hymns."

O'Toole laughed indignantly. Harris peered irritably at the ceiling; Burton smiled; Reed went on.

"On Sundays, Atwater, Ripe, and St. James in Greeley offer eight-thirty, nine, ten-thirty, eleven, and

four o'clock Masses between the three of them. I'd say that's more than an adequate offering."

"You can't do this."

Reed took off his glasses, but O'Toole knew this was for effect, as he was as blind as a mole without them.

"Don't take that tack with me, Brendan. You know damn well this is not my decision. We've had a budget committee looking at the whole Diocese for the last three years."

"It's not your decision alone, you mean."

"Have you been listening to me at all? Since you arrived, you knew this parish was in trouble. You were assigned with a mandate to turn things around."

"We agreed I had five years for a turnaround," said O'Toole.

"That was dinner talk, boy. These are the findings of the committee."

He shook the sheaf of clipped papers at O'Toole.

Reed's action seemed to summon, rather than dispel, any demons in O'Toole. His anger and embarrassment were burning, and viral.

"You have the power to postpone a closure. The parishioners know that."

"Ah," said Reed, and replaced his glasses. "It's true that I did. But not in light of recent developments."

"Developments?" asked O'Toole.

"Father Burton?" Reed said.

The dapper priest spoke for the first time.

"There is a prospective buyer for the property that St. Helena's occupies," said Burton. "A developer is offering \$7.75 million."

"What would they do with a church?" O'Toole asked.

"Demolish it. They want to build condominiums facing the river."

For the slightest instant, O'Toole actually felt sick.

"Destroy St. Helena's?"

"They'd remove those priceless stained-glass windows first, Brendan," said Reed.

"Oh, yes. Those exquisite windows would be fittingly preserved," said Burton.

"Bulldoze an exquisite church to make way for condos?" said O'Toole. "Is the Diocese that desperate, Bishop? It can't be -- can it?"

"Brendan, we got hit with several big money verdicts, and now we've got no less than twenty-five lawsuits pending that accuse us of negligent supervision."

"Then why not sell off some property up there in Burlington? None of the sex-abuse farces happened here."

Reed fiercely rubbed his eyes under his glasses. Harris sniffed.

"We are," said Burton evenly. "We're putting the Burlington headquarters on the market, and the twenty-six acres of Camp Holy Cross on Lake Champlain."

"You're kidding me?" said O'Toole. "This is - this is - " O'Toole was tempted to say *blasphemous*, but knew this to be over the top. He settled on, "This is obscene."

"Behave yourself, Brendan," said Reed with narrowed eyes. "Your parish has been operating at a loss before it was your parish, and since it's been your parish it's been operating at an even greater loss. Your numbers can't support your costs, it's as simple as that. These developers are offering a fortune that can be put towards

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an endless list of worthy, and might I add, extremely needy causes: counseling, adoption, healthcare, disabilities, immigration and refugee services, and the children's home."

"Bishop, not to get off topic or anything, but can I ask you why Father Harris and Father Burton are sitting across from me flanking you during this time of bad tidings?"

Reed chuckled, welcoming levity.

"Sure," said Reed. "I guess we do look like a trio of hanging judges, eh? Father Harris, as you know, works for the Diocese as Vicar of the Clergy, and also in -- what do you call it, Ricky?"

"Information management," said Ricky.

"Vicar of the Clergy?" said O'Toole.

"And Father Burton here is doing us a favor. He has a business connection through his family with the developers. In a way, Brendan, these developers are doing us a favor, and so is Father Burton."

O'Toole was thinking kickbacks and graft, but said, "Let me guess. These developers - could they be from New York? New Jersey? Boston?"

"Not at all. A local concern," said Burton. "My cousin is a partner with a Breckenridge businessman, Temple Locke."

O'Toole simply stared until Burton looked away, embarrassed.

"It's a done deal, Brendan," said Reed. "I'm sorry. I know what it means to become attached to a parish and a congregation. They're your family. But priests get transferred, and that's a fact. Goes with the job. This is the first time for you. It gets easier, trust me."

O'Toole had not given a second's thought to the fact that he would be moving, that he would be transferred, going somewhere else. Later, he would reflect that he must have cared about St. Helena's and her people more than he knew.

"Where will I be going?" asked O'Toole. His voice was weak.

"That's why Father Harris is here," said Reed.

"There are options at this point," said Harris in his sing-song simper. "In my capacity as Vicar of the Clergy, I've drawn up some options."

He went fuddling in his attaché case, but Reed held up a hand to stop him.

"Now's not the time to discuss your future," said Reed. "You two can go over all that later."

Ricky Harris looked hurt and stifled, and sulkily studied the contents of his case, then sniffed.

"Right now we need to think about the parish and the parishioners - how we're going to handle this. It needs to be announced in stages, Brendan. We have to ease into this. The closing of a church can be traumatic to the devout, and then they can act irrationally. Look at those Weymouth lunatics who occupied their church down in Massachusetts. Laid siege to it. This has to be handled with a certain measure of - of - "

"Delicacy?" offered O'Toole.

"*Finesse*," said Reed. "So please keep your mouth shut. That's an order."

Harris sniffed.

O'Toole grabbed the pink patterned box of Scott tissue from the corner of his desk and slapped it down in front of Harris with a resounding crack.

Harris jumped. Reed frowned. Burton smiled.

## **28     The Wholeness of Life**

Sissy had not been particularly concerned how her staff of two (with various free-lance agents) at her estate agency was coping in her absence. The two women, Tamber and Toni, were competent, resourceful and loyal. They had been with Sissy for several years. She paid them well and they were proud of their work. Sissy was proud that she had consistently refused encroachment by the likes of Re/Max or Century 21. St. Hilaire was a successful independent agency with a local name.

George was conferring with Kukol by phone, fax and e-mail, but declined repeated suggestions to actually appear at headquarters. He was conducting what he jocularly called "the good fight" or "my secret dirty business" from his home office.

"You're closeted like Napoleon," said Sissy.

"At least I don't think I *am* him," said George.

"Good point."

He gently rebuffed her inquiries for details of what was happening with Kukol, telling her all would be revealed. She stopped the questioning.



Sissy was seated with her daughter at the kitchen island. It had taken some hectoring to get Buffy to articulate her ideas about celebrating her upcoming sixteenth birthday.

"Why are you so sullen?" Sissy said to her daughter. "This is a big deal and it's supposed to be fun. You look like Eeyore."

"Why is it a big deal? What's so special about turning sixteen?"

"I don't know," Sissy said. "It's just one of those traditional water-marks. Sixteen, twenty-one, thirty."

"Forty, fifty," said Thatcher, who was ransacking the refrigerator.

"It's so queer," said Buffy. "What's supposed to happen to me when I'm sixteen?"

"You get your driver's license," Sissy said.

"You can have consensual sex in almost every state," Thatcher said.

"What kind?" Buffy asked.

"Shut up, Thatcher," Sissy said.

*"Sweet sixteen and never been - well, not much left*

to lose, is there, Buff?" Thatcher said.

"Shut up, Thatcher," mother and daughter said in unison. They both giggled.

"Thatcher, if you drink straight out of the orange juice carton one more time," Sissy said, "I'm going to put Clorox in it."

"Whatever," said Thatcher.

"And stop employing that lame *whatever*," Sissy said. "Don't flaunt your inadequacy."

Thatcher was about to say, "Whatever," but instead snidely drawled, "Employing," and shut the refrigerator door with a bottle-clanking rattle. Sissy opened her mouth to eviscerate her son, but downshifted and turned her attention back to her daughter as her son slinked off.

"If you don't want a party, what would you like to do?"

"How about a trip to Lourdes?"

"We can do that for your eightee - what? How do you know about Lourdes?"

"I'm not completely stupid, you know."

Sissy wasn't going near that one.

"But Lourdes? You're joking."

"Of course I'm joking, Mother! But I wouldn't say no to Paris."

"This isn't a good time right now for Paris. Some other time, okay?"

"How about a new car?"

"How about a lavish meal in an expensive restaurant with just a few close friends and no family? That would be pretty sweet, I'd say."

Buffy thought about this.

"In Burlington with a hotel room?"

"No. You pick the restaurant. A reasonable distance to home."

"Can I have a limo?" Buffy asked.

"We'll see. I'm not sure I can handle you and your friends being privileged piglets."

Buffy smiled and hugged her mother, which surprised Sissy. It didn't seem an embrace of thanks, so much as appreciation. *Subtle distinction*, Sissy thought.

"But where did you hear about Lourdes?"

"From Daddy. We had a long talk yesterday about God and stuff. You know - theology?"

Lourdes? Theology? Good Christ, her daughter's cultural frame of reference was enlarging at a gallop. Sissy found this more alarming than gratifying.

"What did he say? You say, I mean. I mean, what did you both say?"

Buffy smiled genially at her mother's spluttering.

"He said you two should have brought all of us up with some kind of religious experience. We never went to church or talked about God or Jesus or any of that. He said he's sad 'cause he knows now that was a mistake."

Sissy was dumbstruck. As parents, they had never discussed, even considered, religion as a part of family life. Neither had been raised with religion. Sissy was the child of two atheists, one Dutch, one Israeli. Sissy's in-laws made occasional hollow gestures with the Unitarians, which George found disingenuous by the time he was twelve. None of their friends went to church. Their neighbors in liberal, progressive Vermont were modern and secular. They had always viewed organized religion as responsible for more suffering than good. At best Sissy had a mental picture of the religious as bland, exclusive, small-town middlebrows; at worst, bare-foot hillbillies speaking in

tongues and swinging snakes under a revival tent. Now George had seen the light and Sissy was culpable along with him. Well, she was, wasn't she? George, you rat. You suddenly religious rat.

"Daddy said you two were too busy earning an obscenely entitled and excessive income and enjoying the fruits of materialism, fruits that were beautiful and tempting on the surface, but rotten inside."

"Daddy said all that, huh?"

"He also said we believed Easter was for ham, Thanksgiving was for turkey, and Christmas was for Wal-Mart. What do you say, Mom?"

She wasn't sure what to say, so she trusted in first thought/best thought, which was usually a bad idea.

"I guess we never thought we'd get much out of going to church."

"Being religious means more than going to church."

Sissy noticed a new, calm confidence in her daughter. She wasn't sure she liked it.

"Daddy say that, too?"

"Yeah, and I agree with him."

"So, what - you want to start going to church now, or are you just mad at me?"

Buffy laughed. "Neither. I'm not mad at you, Mom. But just listen to this."

She pulled a dog-eared paperback obviously planted beneath a pile of newspapers. She opened it to a post-it as book-mark, and read, "'How spiritual you are has nothing to do with what you believe but everything to do with your state of consciousness. This, in turn, determines how you act in the world and interact with others.' Isn't that awesome?"

Sissy tipped Buffy's hand to read the cover: *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* by Eckhart Tolle. A sticker noted this was an Oprah's Book Club selection.

"It is, yes," Sissy said.

"You know what I'd like to do for my birthday?"

"What?"

"I'd like to visit the Advent Christian Church in Boston. They're Episcopal - Catholic Anglican, whatever - but I hear they're more Catholic than Catholics. They put on a real show. I mean, I think I'd like to go to church."

"How did you find out about Advent?"

"The internet."

"Where else?" Sissy said.

"Then we could have lunch at Fire & Ice. Wouldn't that be wicked cool?"

Fire & Ice was a Cambridge restaurant, but with a carnival atmosphere. You chose your fresh, gourmet food at multiple kiosks and a series of chefs cooked it for you. Buffy loved the place. Sissy did not.

"If that's what you'd like."

"I'd like."

Buffy got up and kissed her mother on the cheek. Evidently their chat was over. She strolled out, leaving Sissy sitting there.

Thatcher came back in and made an elaborate display of pouring a glass of orange juice.

"I'm confused," said Sissy. She had not meant to utter this aloud.

"Well," said Thatcher casually, "Nature can sometimes help you become realigned with the wholeness of life. Also, don't forget, Mom - you have to love yourself before you can really know yourself -- or anything else."

Thatcher walked out as George walked in. They high-fived each other.

"There's a plastic bucket on the deck," said George. "It's half-filled with rain water. A little, itty-bitty spider was floating on the surface, his legs all splayed out, not struggling. I figured he was dead. I slipped my little finger underneath him - he just fit on the fingernail of my little finger. He sort of came to. I set him on the porch railing. He walked off a few inches and looked up at me, as if he wondered what I was going to do. I told him to have a nice day, and he toddled off."

George walked out whistling what Sissy recognized as "The Yellow Rose of Texas."

She stared down at the surface of the kitchen island, as if searching for something.

## **29        Spread-sheets**

O'Toole was bent over his desk, desultorily reading spread sheets:



**Summary Of Income**

**Ordinary Income**

Sunday Collections	\$	98,476.35
Holy Days	\$	9,567.48
Easter	\$	15,229.88
Christmas	\$	23,119.87
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>146,393.58</b>

**Stipends**

(Masses, Weddings, Baptisms, Funerals)	\$	12,610.00
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<b>Christian Formation Fees</b>	\$	8,115.00
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<b>Fundraising</b>	\$	4,133.35
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**Other Income**

General Donations	\$	1,201.17
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Flower and Candle Donations	\$	4,214.43
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Bulletin Advertisements	\$	2,000.00
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Bequest Income	\$	15,124.78
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Interest/Investment Income	\$	12,216.17
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<b>Total Other Income</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>56,913.67</b>
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<b>Special Collections</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>66,666.66</b>
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<b>Grand Total Income</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>319,978.81</b>
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**Summary of Expenditures**

**Parish-Related Expenditures**

Salaries	\$	109,899.75
Payroll Taxes	\$	12,523.55
Contracted Services	\$	15,082.90
Benefits (including health insurance)	\$	25,634.38
Workman's Comp	\$	5,572.00
Property Insurance	\$	45,216.00
Utilities	\$	63,324.65
Repairs	\$	44,802.48
Grounds keeping & Snow Removal	\$	23,885.08
Liturgy/Ministry	\$	34,323.86
Faith Formation	\$	17,992.68
Office and general supplies	\$	16,293.11
Rectory expense	\$	10,227.80
Miscellaneous	\$	2,734.84
Equipment purchased	\$	2,265.43
<b>Total Parish Expenses</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>429,778.51</b>

**Other Disbursements**

Support for Diocesan Services	\$	76,301.04
Support for Clergy, including retired	\$	57,922.91
Support for Catholic Schools	\$	77,279.28

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Special Collections (Diocese-mandated)	\$ 74,495.78
<b>Total Other Disbursements</b>	<b>\$ 285,999.01</b>
<b>Total Operating Expenses</b>	<b>\$ 715,777.52</b>

This left a budget deficit of \$395,798.71.

Instead of one fine, old-fashioned housekeeper and cook for the rectory, the parish had been forced to rely on a series of paid staff and volunteers to take over these duties, with Father O'Toole intermittently preparing his own meals or eating out. He expected any day to receive a Meals-on-Wheels delivery. He could not keep track of the parade of chefs and maids, but had informed Mrs. Page that whoever was supposed to come in tonight to make dinner needn't bother. This bothered Mrs. Page, but O'Toole took no notice. Instead he mixed himself a third Scotch and studied the parish budget sheets as if they were runes.

His Harry Nilsson CD swerved off and he set his head on the sheets on the desk. He soon fell asleep.

He was awakened by the sound of his office door shutting. He looked up, startled.

Mary Roth, in costume again. This time she was dressed as Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*, wearing a broad-brimmed hat and full-length raincoat.

O'Toole was pleased. If Mary had been impatient with him of late, she was in his court. She was not an enemy. He smiled sleepily.

"Nice to see you."

"Busy?"

"Nah. Just looking over the pathetic financial report for the miserable fiscal year my wretched parish has had. All because of me, of course."

"Sounds dismal."

"Oh, no. It's quite restful."

"You drunk?" she asked.

"Kinda."

"Can I have one?"

O'Toole's mood brightened. He would join his pretty young friend, dressed festively like a spy under a lamp-post, in a belt or two. He almost asked the time, but didn't want the implications that asking would incur, so he pulled up his sleeve to glance at his wrist-watch, which was not on his wrist. He stared like a mime.

"It's almost seven o'clock, Brendan," she said kindly. "In the evening."

"Yes, I can see that." He pulled his sleeve back. "What'll it be, little girl?"

She giggled. "What have you been imbibing?"

"Absinthe."

"You're stewed."

He knew she liked Scotch and water, which he thought was something of an affectation, as that was about as popular in her age group as a rye highball. Then again, she liked Ingmar Bergman movies.

He rose carefully from his chair. He thought of embracing her. Instead he smiled and moved as steadily as he could to the liquor. He dropped ice-cubes from the bishop-ready bucket of this afternoon into a tumbler, then poured in some cheap blended.

"We must travel to my oasis for water," he said, indicating the odd, out-of-place sink that had been placed in a corner of the room in 1906.

She smiled and followed him to the sink.

He held the glass under the tap. "A drop for my lady's libation."

He turned the faucet and a blast of water sent the whisky and ice-cubes into an explosion that splattered the wall and his face. O'Toole jerked off the knob as quickly as he had jerked it on, but stood still as water and booze dripped off his nose.

Mary was laughing like the girl she was.

"Thank you, Father. Very refreshing."

"I'll - "

"I don't really need a drink," she said.

She put her arms around him, tilted her head back and kissed him with soft, warm lips. It was a long kiss, which he made no effort to end. She ended it, pulling back to look into his eyes.

"You taste like J&B," she said, and deftly used the crook of a finger to wipe a drop from his nose.

He wanted her. He wanted her breasts and her legs and her thighs and her flat stomach, and he wanted to kiss her behind her knees and kiss her beautiful face and mouth and bottom without cease. He wanted to grasp her, clasp her, crush her, squeeze her ass in his grateful hands in a hot embrace.

He pulled her tightly to him, and drank in her perfume from her neck and cheek without succumbing to the temptation to actually lick both.

"My God, you're incredible," he said.

She giggled.

In that instant O'Toole understood everything that he had always known. He was not a priest, not a man of God, not worthy of the clergy. He couldn't handle being an administrator to his parish. He couldn't handle the problems of his parishioners, nor did he care very much about them. His religious conviction was almost wholly intellectual, a Catholicism that could function perfectly even without the existence of a deity.

He was a fraud. He had tried to escape into the church, like so many homosexuals and child molesters before him, to hide from himself. And now all it took was a gorgeous little girl, a sweet, sex-soaked little treat, to make him behave like a leech, a dirty old man, a corrupt, disgusting, dirty vicar. What a joke he was. What a travesty.

He thought for a moment he might sob. Instead, he caressed her ass.

If any man had ever chosen a worse job for himself he'd like to hear it. He wasn't some asshole who had declared himself a carpenter only to discover he couldn't even hammer in a nail. He remembered being in Boston and watching auditions for a difficult Strindberg play. The flamboyant director turned to him to appraise the poor slob on stage going through a terrible reading.

"Poor dear can't act her way out of a wet paper bag. Still, she's a major. Buy the credits, get the degree. We're a nation of credentials. Heavy is the head that wears the tiara."

O'Toole was that slob, only worse. You don't pretend to be a man of God, then fuck a college girl. Bishops and cardinals and popes might do that, but you had to reach that level of privilege, as in most institutions, through lies, deceit, duplicity, and fraudulence, to be truly ghastly.

O'Toole was suddenly very tired. Sure, he would fuck Mary Roth, then do the Church and the world a favor and resign. Perhaps he would do both a favor by committing suicide.



"That couch in your office, Brendan - it turns into a bed, doesn't it?"

He realized how plastered he was. Could he even get it up? He reached down discreetly and lightly squeezed his cock through his pants. Quite ready for lift-off. How nice. He nodded.

"Good, because I thought we might make love," she said.

She led him from the bathroom back into his office, then pulled her hat from her head and shook her long hair, bending forward to tousle it with her hands. O'Toole had never seen hair so silky.

She smiled at O'Toole, undid her coat, pulled it off, and tossed it aside.

She wore a lacey pink bra, white stockings with lace-tops clasped by a white garter-belt, and pink bikini panties with white lace edging.

Yes, he would make love to her, then kill her, then quit the Church and kill himself. What a fine night lay ahead of him.

### **30           The Feast of Gregory**

The next morning was Friday, March 12<sup>th</sup>, which was the Feast of Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome. Brendan had lost his virginity on this day when he was eighteen.

Sissy had never heard of St. Gregory.

She had spent the previous evening alone, although the house was filled. She drank heavily. She had meant to simply finish the half-bottle of Robert Mondavi pinot grigio - two scant glasses. The warm buzz they provided led her to open a bottle of Mateus Rose from Portugal (another of her 60's affectations) that had been at the back of the refrigerator. She convinced herself this was a special occasion, and popped it. When that was finished, she was astonished to find she wasn't smashed, and proceeded to Campari and soda.

George was sequestered in his study and would not come out. Thatcher was relentlessly playing the opening to the Doobie Brothers' "China Grove" on his electric guitar in the basement den. Buffy was talking ceaselessly on her cell-phone, bumbling from one room to the other, apparently without purpose. At her last pass, Sissy was getting more

ice for her drink from the freezer, and Buffy was in the kitchen babbling to a girlfriend or a boyfriend or perhaps no one, actually. Now she wore a pink Red Sox T-shirt, a pink Red Sox cap with her hair pulled through the back, and a pair of tiny tight shorts with the word PINK emblazoned across her ass.

She looked like a little slut, and Sissy sighed in resignation at the knowledge that her daughter was, in fact, a little slut, but at least good-hearted, if perhaps too much so in one department. Sissy knew that neither Buffy's brother nor her father had incestuous feelings for Buffy. So what if they happened to regularly see her dressed like hired help in a Nevada cathouse? Let her walk around like a tramp. So what? She said nothing.

She was confident that you couldn't get truly loaded on Campari. Its lovely ruby color belied a bitterness as biting as life itself. One could only really drink one. She had had four.

She fell asleep with the lights on, watching an old black-and-white Peter Sellers comedy. She awoke at 1:15 with an intense need to pee, after which she did a security check of the house.

Thatcher's room was dark, as was Buffy's. Outside her door were her crumpled PINK shorts, as if yanked off in the heat of passion. Sissy did not want to know why they were there.

George's study was ablaze with lights, his desk littered with papers and books, but he was nowhere to be found. The basement was dark; the cars all present.

Sissy crawled back into the huge and empty bed, feeling very small. She grabbed a goose-feather pillow and punched it, then hugged it fervently as she curled into a fetal position. She made a half-hearted effort to cry, failed, and finally passed out.

In the morning, hangover hit with a thudding vengeance. Sissy would use logic to combat the sense of dread and fear that coursed through her system like poison. Checklist: she had said or done nothing wrong; she had not driven or dialed drunk, had not been arrested, had not hurt herself or others; no one was angry with her. All was right. Why feel poorly?

Poorly wasn't the word. She was frightened and her hands shook. She felt an eighth of an inch from a nervous breakdown, not an unfamiliar feeling. She hurriedly

undressed to get into the shower and feel the calming spray of hot water.

She stood in the stall a long time under the cascade of water and gasping back sobs, until she felt ready to present herself as a normal human being.

It was 8:30. The kids were off to school. George was nowhere to be seen. She would have orange juice and champagne - there was a cheap bottle of California stuff in the cupboard - to steady her nerves.

She was now, and had been for some time, drinking in the morning to calm the effects of the previous evening's debauch. She was a middle-aged lady drunk. She hid it well enough not to get shit-faced at social events. She hid it well enough from her family (didn't she?). She often caught exchanged glances between her children when she poured one - looks that angered and embarrassed her. George never commented, or even seemed to notice. George never seemed to notice anything. She clanked ice cubes into a tall pint glass, then sloshed orange juice and Andre Extra Dry to make a mixture. She had carried it into the bedroom to chill while she dressed. She put on a soft baby-blue tee-shirt and a pair of pajama pants.

She took a long pull from the drink and felt the alcohol warm her blood.

She turned NPR on the stereo. They were discussing birth defects. She turned it off. She went through the pile of CDs and cases she had left in a mess the night before. She went to pick up a Diana Krall CD with the steady surety of Katherine Hepburn in her final years, and knocked the whole stack onto the floor with a crash. She went dutifully to her knees to make all of this right, then burst into tears, again. She felt helpless and hopeless.

There was a rumbling of distant thunder. Sissy thought it was incredibly early in the year for that, but it had been unseasonably warm.

She was on her knees when George came up behind her. He put his face next to hers. She smelled his new cologne and rose quickly to embrace him. She was startled and delighted when he scooped her up as if she were light as a feather. He looked into her eyes with a kind expression, and she realized she wanted him to hold her like this, lifted in his strong arms for a long time. She felt like a tiny protected bird, and she did not want the feeling to end. She remembered the simple blend of love and

lust she had felt for this man when she had met him right in college. Tall and handsome, all sinew and muscle and a perfect penis. He wasn't too smart, but he was determined, ambitious, and savvy. And he was rich. George had lots of money, and Sissy was attracted to that, too. She knew this.

"Hello, little girl," he said, and kissed her nose.

"I want you to save me," she said.

A boom of thunder echoed overhead.

"You don't need to be saved. You're fine, you silly girl."

"I'm an alcoholic - a drunk," she sobbed.

"Aw, heck, Sissy, we've all known that for years. And you're also a fine person, and God loves you. We all love you. Not to worry. All you need to do is trust in God and knock off the sauce."

"That easy?"

"Not easy, but that simple. I need to talk to you, okay?"

"Okay." She liked the feeling of being held in his arms.

He brought her over to the bed and plopped her down from an elated height. She bounced and abruptly giggled.

"You look cold," he said.

"I guess I am."

He went to the bedroom closet and pulled out a thick, quilted bathrobe and held it open for her. She slipped her arms into it and tightened the belt around her waist. She felt warmer.

"You know I'm a drunk?" she asked, wiping the tears from her cheeks with her palms.

"Of course. That was just your particular problem. Every one of us in this family has a particular problem. Just think, Cecilia - all you have to do is stop pouring booze down your throat, and your problem will be over. The direct problem, I mean. You can deal, don't you worry."

There was a flash of lightning and another thunderous boom.

"Pumpkin-butt, I have something I want to say to you. Get comfortable."

Sissy obediently plumped the fat pillows on the bed behind her, and curled up against them.

"All set?" asked George.

She nodded vigorously.



"You want a drink? I mean, you're a lush, but you don't have to quit this second."

Sissy could only shake her head mutely. She did not want a drink.

"Okay - this is important. I love you and I love the kids. I'm going to become a priest because God wants me to - I fully understand that. I will always be there for you and the kids. Always. But the work of the Lord is going to guide my sword with a great righteousness. And this will be sweet in His sight."

"Sweet?"

"I'm taking up arms against this company that thinks they can wipe us off the map. Water. *Water!* - you see the perfection in that? They're using God's medium to screw us over - I mean, give me a break! The water and the wine are sacred, and these fuckers think they can bulldoze us under for a cheap buck."

"Water?"

"I'm going to slay them, Sissy. Slay them all. No one's going to take my family business from me, or the water from the virgin body of this holy land."

Sissy tried to grasp *virgin body*. All that sprang to mind was losing her virginity to George in a sleeping bag in a dormitory lounge - a little blood, barely any pain (she didn't know she had an intact hymen, what with her gymnastics and show-jumping). Lightning flashed through the windows.

"You don't mean really *kill* them, right, honey?" she asked.

"No. I mean kill their evil plan. Strangle it in its crib before it can crawl out and walk on cloven hooves. Drown it in the bathtub!"

"Oh."

There was a pile of curtain rods next to one window. Sissy had been in the midst of changing from winter to spring bedroom curtains, but had been side tracked. George picked one up and held it like a cane. Then he kicked it sideways sending it twirling into the air and deftly caught it like a vaudeville hoofer. She had never seen him do that before. He began to gesture with the rod.

"We all want peace, Sissy. Christ preached love and peace above all, and there is nothing so Christian as turning the other cheek. But Christ also drove the money-

lenders from the temple like one righteous son of a bitch. He could be harsh when he had to be. I can feel where this is going. These corporate greed-heads - and it takes one to know one, trust me - want to destroy the environment, God's natural beauty, and steal our water and steal my family property."

"I thought you wanted to get rid of all that. Give it away."

"I did. But it's a little different when it's forcibly taken from you."

"I guess so."

"You bet." Now he began to pace back and forth, shaking his head from side to side.

"Yes, we all want peace, Sissy. But there's also much that demands action - conflict - even violence. You may not be able to feel it right now. You have to wait for a situation like this - someone encroaching on your territory. Then you feel the enormous surge of force shoot through you. Your mind races to justify, blame, attack. In other words, can you awaken at that moment of consciousness? Can you feel that there is something in you

that is at war? Can you feel something within you that would rather be right than be at peace?"

George had raised his voice, close to shouting. Sissy said nothing, heard everything, grasped little.

"We're the oppressed, Sweet Puss. We say we're free from false promises, but we're not. We aspire to a moment of truth, and if that truth brings us nothing but blood, sweat and tears, then so be it!"

He was yelling now. Thatcher, in T-shirt and boxer shorts, had wandered down the hall and was blinking sleepily into the room at his father.

"But our bonds shall not be bonds, and only by our tears shall we abide! I say and I proclaim! - I say and I proclaim! - that is more than we can bear! You, our brothers who see us now, hear the last cries of a shattered community!"

George waved the curtain rod with all the majesty of a saber, sweeping it over his head. Buffy, in t-shirt and panties, appeared behind her brother.

George was now yelling at the top of his lungs.

"Yes, brothers, to you I say: the sparks are dying and our heritage, our very destiny, are both covered with

dust. Broken are the wings of the eagle, and the lion is ill! And I say and I proclaim to any who will listen that God's will is in peril, and the spirit of a whole people is being crushed! Verily I say unto thee, God's will be done!"

A window, shade up and curtains open, provided Sissy a perfect view behind George of a large electrical transformer atop a telephone pole in front of the house. A bolt of lightning struck it in a shocking blue and white flash, dropping the wreckage in flames onto a neighbor's car, Sissy, Buffy, and Thatcher screaming to the accompaniment of thunder, smashed glass and peeling metal.

Buffy fainted, falling on Thatcher, who grappled her with annoyance.

"Dad - that was so incredibly cool," he said in almost breathless awe.

George smiled and nodded, then laughed.

Thatcher stood in admiration, then propped his sister against the hallway wall. George was as puffed as a circus strongman.

Sissy was dumbfounded.

Sissy did not know what to do.

She needed a plan.

She decided in that moment to dramatically change her life. Tomorrow. She would now have a drink or six and pass out.

### **31        Postponement**

She had made a half-hearted attempt to get George to sleep with her, although she had no interest in sex, being relatively numb from head to toe by the time she crawled between the sheets.

In the morning she awoke again hung-over, but vowed she would face the day sober, no matter how painful an ordeal it became. There would be no Bloody Marys, Screwdrivers or Mimosas. She felt something akin to religious martyrdom in denying herself the relief these restoratives would have provided.

Instead, she guzzled Alka-Seltzer and popped a B-12 capsule and two coated aspirin. She was having a wrestling match with herself at the medicine cabinet about taking a Valium when Buffy entered her bedroom bathroom.

"Dad's gone, Mom. He left a note."

Sissy took the paper from her daughter and was relieved not to be seeing Buffy in her underwear. She was dressed in jeans and a white "Pink" sweatshirt.

The note read:

*My Cherished Family -*

*I go to fight the Good Fight - God's Fight. Worry not about me or my whereabouts. Do not look for me. In God's time, all will be revealed. We shall prevail.*

*Love,*

*Gabriel (formerly known as George)*

Sissy decided to postpone her sobriety one more day.

### **31        Good Luck**

O'Toole liked to think that he would have liked Mary to stay and have breakfast with him. It was Friday morning, and neither the cleaning woman nor his secretary would be in. But in fact, he welcomed the sounds of her dressing and leaving just before first light. Like Sissy, he was suffering from the crapulous effects of his over-

imbibing. He had passed the age when he could sleep off a hangover and pretend that he was dead. He had to rise from his drunkard's bed and face the day.

He swung his feet to the floor and sat on the edge of his wrecked bed - the bed the parish allowed him to sleep in, in the rectory the parish allowed him to live in. He remembered the days when the first thing he would do was reach over for pack and lighter, then sit and smoke that first cigarette that would get him to the shower. The remembrance made him gag. And now he resented Mary for leaving in the pre-dawn penumbra, leaving him as if she had taken the money from the top of the dresser, having so easily conquered his libido and left him limp and deflated.

What nonsense. Despite the frills and lace and school-girl enticement, she was hardly some *femme fatale*. They had both been moving towards the same thing, O'Toole suspected, for vastly different reasons. If she were a slut, then he was worse, with guilt divided into equal shares.

It was not sexual guilt he was feeling now. Making love to Mary Roth had been a delicious, even if achieving orgasm in his sodden state seemed as improbable as reaching



Venus on a tricycle. But it had been wonderful, and O'Toole had happily glowed, touching nature and all her vitals. What he felt now was the guilt inspired by memory, the choice of the flesh over the spirit, and what appeared to him now to be his last rejection of God.

After showering and dressing in civvies, he filled a water glass with ice, vodka and orange juice. His body needed it less than his nerves. He needed to think clearly, and all of his cells screaming for alcoholic relief would hinder this process. He obliged them. It occurred to him this was no way to live.

By his second drink he had finished shaving without opening any arteries, and his cell phone rang. It was Sissy.

"Brendan, George is gone. He ranted like a maniac last night about God and lightning struck a transformer and Buffy fainted. I'm scared shitless. He left a note."

"What does it say?"

Sissy read him the note, word for word.

"He's nuts," said O'Toole.

"I know."

"He's flipped. He's gone round the twist."

"I get the point! What the hell do I do?" she yelled.

"When was this?"

"The rant was last night, the note this morning, like I said."

"It's too early to call the cops."

"I don't think so. I'm not buying that twenty-four hours missing shit when the missing person is now a famous local mental case. I'm calling the cops this minute."

"Good idea."

She asked O'Toole to come over, and he offered to stop for coffee and bagels, or whatever she and the kids wanted. No need, she said. She and the kids had everything they wanted right where they were. There was enough for him, too.

O'Toole's habit was to pray on his knees before breakfast. He did not. He was grateful that Father Jorge Rodriguez, visiting from New Hampshire, but staying with friends who owned a local Mexican restaurant, was conducting Mass at St. Helena's in Spanish that morning.

They were friends, and Jorge would not think it strange that O'Toole was absent.

O'Toole wanted to luxuriate in shame and despair, but could not. He did not feel what he would describe as an emotion to any great depth. If he discounted the dread, anxiety, and physical discomfort attributable to his excess, he was actually left with very little on which to ruminate. This too gave him pause. He felt like a sociopath: he had no real anguish over all that he had done. He seemed to be seeking a form of damnation, but even that was too noble a goal with which to credit himself. He remembered a recovering alcoholic who told him in confession that he had decided on suicide as his only course when he realized he could continue living neither drinking nor sober. He had no other option. O'Toole felt no emotion now as he fully accepted that his strongest efforts to earn God's grace had been worthless. He had hoped that that grace would remove his desire for the satisfactions of the flesh and the material, but it had not come. He had been either unwilling or unable to do the serious work required to refuse acquiescing to temptation. He had wanted an easy path in secular life; when it had been made

apparent to him that this was not to be the case, he chose the priesthood. Now the priesthood was failing him. Of course that was nonsense. He had failed the priesthood. And the worst part, the element that demanded his immediate self-destruction, was that he really, ultimately, didn't care very much.

"My life is a hollow lie," he said aloud.

He would not bother the Almighty with a prayer. In your hour of need, he had told countless troubled parishioners, turn to God. He will always listen; He is always willing to remove your affliction. As Jorge liked to say, "God's a big boy. He can handle it."

O'Toole did not want to bother his personal savior, or His father. Perhaps he should pray to the Virgin Mary, but he had just fucked a young girl named Mary, and this too seemed somehow inappropriate.

Redemption. Salvation. Grace. He could achieve all three if he just hung in there.

He thought what he would most like to say aloud: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive You, but only say the word, and I shall be healed." He could not.

Instead, he drove to Dunkin' Donuts.

## **32      Louis Vuitton**

O'Toole half-expected to see police cruisers parked in front of the St. Hilaire house. He quickly realized the pointlessness of the idea: even a now-celebrated crackpot like George couldn't be processed properly until he was good and missing for real. O'Toole made a note to ask Sissy if perhaps her husband was now armed. Anyone as cracked as George was certainly dangerous.

He pulled in front of the house and parked on the street so as not to block the four vehicles in the driveway. He glanced at the bag of donuts he had bought. He knew Sissy wouldn't allow them in the house, and that Thatcher and Buffy both loved this glop -- glazed, jelly, chocolate butternut, and strawberry frosted. Was he trying to be nice, avuncular Father Brendan to her kids? He smiled at the thought. Then something about the homeliness of his gesture with the donuts, the house, the entire preceding week, caught him. Before he had any idea what was happening, he had tears in his eyes.

He sat and cried, unable to catch his breath or stop the flow from his eyes. He knew this was a genuine

release, and had to be let go. He cried, but not, he noted, as he had seen a woman cry after an auto accident, when he had been obliged to tell her as she lay in her hospital bed that her husband, her parents and her three children were all dead.

The memory of that ungodly horror sobered him. He wiped his cheeks with the heels of his palms and blew his nose with a tissue. He studied himself in the rear-view mirror: he looked like he had been crying. So what? He slipped on his excessively expensive Louis Vuitton sunglasses to hide his red, swollen eyes. He now understood what kind of priest would wear glasses like these.

### **33        A Disgraceful Wife**

Sissy wanted another drink and a cigarette, but decided to forgo both. Brendan was coming; George was missing; she needed to eat.

The word *desolation* had been running through her head since she awoke. She understood when something was desolate, like a vacant lot. But desolation? She looked the word up in her Oxford American Dictionary:

*n. 1. a desolate or barren condition. 2.  
loneliness. 3. grief, wretchedness.*

That made sense.

When she drank, she had nightmares. When she didn't drink, she had nightmares. She was now used to this second existence: she fell asleep and traveled to the twisted world of her disordered unconsciousness. She bothered with neither Freudian nor Jungian interpretation, and believed not a whit about prescience in dreams. Recurring dream-settings were her high school, her grandmother's home during Sissy's childhood, and a closed Boston subway station she had actually explored in college. She was always lost, and people were always upset with her. Her husband and children never appeared.

In last night's dream, she had been alternating the words *desolation* and *redemption* in a chant, wandering a dark, snowy nightscape, lost in some unfamiliar city. Desolation as her present state? Redemption for her many affairs during her marriage?

She heard the two kids welcoming Brendan with good cheer while she made a phone call from her bedroom.

She took care dressing, as she always did when she saw Brendan, and this consideration again produced guilt. She emerged in caramel corduroy pants that expertly showed off her curves, her feet in soft suede purple boots. One of Buffy's lace-trimmed camisoles peeked out beneath a tight purple jersey.

Sissy entered the kitchen to see the three seated around the island, glutting themselves on the sugary pastries. Buffy's glance of disapproval was immediately matched by Sissy's.

"Having an orgy, are we?" asked Sissy.

"That's my camisole," Buffy said.

"Have another donut, dear."

"I'm sorry," said Brendan. "I can't help myself."

"That's what Peter Lorre said in *M*," said Sissy.

"He was a child murderer," said Brendan. He smiled.

"I just brought some donuts."

"Jesus, Mom," said Thatcher. "Sorry, Father."

"Not to worry."

Sissy fixed a toasted sesame bagel with cream cheese, onion, and Nova lox for herself - great hangover



food. She noticed Brendan was in fact not eating. He looked a little queasy.

"Some coffee, Brendan?"

"Oh - no, thank you. I've already had some," he lied.

"I've got just the thing," she said.

Thatcher was interested in hearing about the Peter Lorre film, and Brendan launched into a hesitant lecture on director Fritz Lang, and how the film *M* was inspired by the crimes of Peter Kurten, the "Vampire of Dusseldorf," whose murders so upset the city's underworld, it made a highly organized effort to catch Kurten when the police could not.

The Socratic discourse grew lively, with Buffy chiming in, "Gross!" every few moments, but clearly engaged. They were all so absorbed they paid no attention to Sissy as she mixed two tall juice glasses with Bloody Marys -- Stolichnaya, tomato and clam juice, horseradish, Worcestershire, Tabasco, and sliced sticks of cucumber. When the conversation paused, she placed one in front of him.

"Wow," said Brendan.

He took a sip, swallowed, then froze. He glanced at her. She smiled. She also caught Thatcher catching her smiling at Brendan. She dropped the smile.

"Come on, Buff," said Thatcher to his sister. "I want to show you that windsurfing DVD."

"Now?" she said.

"It's March. If you want to go with us, you better start learning what the hell to do. Sorry, Father."

Brendan waved a hand in benediction as he took another sip of his drink. The two teenagers left their used napkins, donut crumbs, and milk-streaked glasses and went upstairs.

"Why aren't they in school?" he asked when they were out of earshot.

"Professional development day for teachers. You used to teach. That's an official term for mostly academic masturbation that bears no fruit, right?"

Brendan thought for a long moment, and said, "Yes. That's exactly what that is. This is one potent Bloody Mary."

"You looked like you needed one."

"That bad, huh?"

"No worse than me. I might have let them stay home anyway, with their father MIA and all."

"Are they that upset?" he asked.

"I have no idea. I didn't see them till I stumbled upon the donut bacchanal."

"You've got quite a vocabulary, you know that?"

"Thank you." She was pleased by that.

"You also look very beautiful this morning."

She had consumed half of her drink, but was not yet at the point where a warm glow expertly trumped good judgment. She had not achieved what she called "Brick's Click" -- cribbed from Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. To hell, she thought.

She went to him, seated on his stool. She sat on his lap. He immediately put his arms around her and held her. She kissed him. He kissed her back. Then they both kissed each other for a full minute.

"We can't do this with the kids in the house," he said.

"We already did. We just can't do any more."

He loved the feel of her warm weight on his lap. Her scent was more intoxicating than his drink, and the

rich array of the fabrics on her body was savory to his caress. She pointedly pressed her bottom firmly into his lap and stood up using him as leverage, turned and kissed him fully. She took his hand.

"George is gone," she said.

"We'll find him."

"I don't mean that he's missing. I mean -- he's gone."

Brendan paused, then said, "I know."

She dropped his hand and walked away from him.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"You're asking me? I mean - I'm pleased, but I just want to make sure you're actually asking me, and not just being rhetorical."

She looked at him. "I think anything rhetorical is beyond me at this point."

He nodded. "Your husband is insane. Treatment can probably help him. Middle-aged men don't just suddenly go nuts. I'm certain it was the head injury. I don't know what can be done for him, but we have to try."

"Yes, of course. You're right. And I will. I have to. But..."

"What?"

"I don't love him anymore. I don't know if I ever really did."

He stared at her. "Yes, there's that," he said.

"It's horrible, I know. I mean - I know. We were both very young, and we were too stupid to know how stupid we were. We both acquired each other like a degree, a necessary step -- hell, like an appliance. We matched each other's criteria perfectly. Fun, money, sex, looks. We didn't know from love."

He laughed. He wanted to tell her again how beautiful she was, but realized this was not the right moment.

"I can't leave him when he's in crisis. But even if he pulls through this, I can't go on. I think when he became another person, a person I actually liked more than the old George, I realized I never really loved him. That's not his fault, and I don't blame him. I don't think he ever really loved me, either."

"He may have loved you as best he could."

"Spoken like a clergyman. Oh sure, Brendan, I know. All he was capable of. Is capable of. It's not enough, pal. Not for this chick. You see?"

"Yes. I see."

"You must think I'm a pretty disgraceful wife. Mother, too, for that matter." She waited. "Well?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm still thinking you're being rhetorical."

"No. What do you think?"

"To be completely honest, I no longer know what I think. About anything."

Sissy's cell phone rang, the ring-tone Queen and David Bowie singing, "Under Pressure."

"That's the Kukol offices," she said. "I have to take this. Excuse me."

The priest smiled, amused.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Sissy. Ralph Fisher. You better get down here. They're attempting a coup."

## **34        The Coup**

Sissy went to pull her car into her husband's reserved parking space and found another car belonging to George Humphreys, a Ford Taurus, parked there. This was not an auspicious sign.

She tore straight to the Dresden Room. A well-dressed young man she did not know and who clearly did not know her, attempted interference.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am, but you can't - "

"Get the fuck out of my way, Skippy. I still own this dump."

This stopped him wide-eyed and dead in his tracks. Sissy burst into the room.

They were all there: George Humphreys, Owsley Stanley, Ralph, Temple Locke, and four grim men she had never seen before. And Hobart.

She was so stunned at the sight of her first child, she felt as if all the blood coursing through her veins stopped suddenly in a freeze. Sissy had lately tried to be more honest with herself about her shortcomings, especially as a wife and mother. She was convinced she loved her son,

and would even give up her life for him, but she also realized she didn't really like him very much. Hobart knew this, as any child would. He looked at her with dismay, but she quickly tumbled to the fact that his look was professional, rather than personal. She pictured pulling out a bread knife and screaming in Italian.

"Okay," said George Humphreys, looking at Owsley and Ralph, "Who called Catherine the Great?"

"No one called me," said Sissy. "I came by to pick up my handgun. What's going on?"

"Why don't you ask your attorneys?"

"My attorneys, George? You mean, *our* attorneys, don't you? Kukol's attorneys? Harp and Finial are working with Lew Overaker to represent our company, right? Yours, mine -- ours?"

"Not anymore."

"What does that mean?" Sissy asked.

The men stared in grim determination. One of them said to Temple Locke, "Can someone introduce us, please?"

"Of course," Temple said. "Gentlemen, this is Sissy St. Hilaire - Mrs. George St. Hilaire. Sissy, these



gentlemen are from Yankee Springs, Incorporated. They're executives and lawyers. This is Mister - "

"Bag it, Temple," she snapped. "I don't need a dance-card. I know a lynch mob when I see one."

A couple of the men smirked. The others looked irritated.

"Would you have a seat, Ms. St. Hilaire?" asked the first man to speak, a meditation on corporate impeccability. "My name is Heaton Vorse," he said amiably. "But you don't need to put me on your dance-card."

No one laughed at Heaton Vorse's quip, including Heaton Vorse.

"What's with the cabal, Heaton?" asked Sissy.

"No cabal, Ms. St. Hilaire. Everything happening here is above board, transparent, and perfectly legal."

"And what *is* happening here, Heaton?"

"Yesterday morning the Vermont Supreme Court declined to hear your appeal -- this was not, in their opinion, a constitutional matter. The town of Breckenridge owns the water rights to Lectio Divina springs. It's up to the town whether they exercise eminent domain and transfer ownership of the land to Yankee Springs."

Sissy felt like crying. She had pinned all her hopes on the lawyers, the court, and an endless litigation process. She pushed the tip of her car-key painfully into her palm.

"And what's the town say, Temple?" she asked.

"The Supreme Court is upholding the town's water rights under existing law, and rejecting Kukol's appeal. Your lawyers agree there is no further action for them to take. This has to be approved at the next Breckenridge Planning Board, but we're confident the board will grant Yankee Springs permission to build the water-bottling plant. Members of the planning board have already said on the record that Kukol's determination to issue a large groundwater withdrawal permit pre-empted local control of the groundwater. This will be the controlling factor in their decision. That, and the large increase in tax revenue and job creation." He cleared his throat.

Sissy now started to cry. For one brief moment, she hated herself for the notion - the fragile, weeping woman surrounded by cool, stoic men, the men who ruled a man's world - and suddenly she didn't care. Her contempt for

these pompous assholes washed over her like a spring downpour.

"So what happens to Kukol?"

"You pack up and move," said Humphreys.

"You don't mean us, George?" Sissy asked.

"George has agreed to take a position with Yankee Springs," Heaton Vorse said promptly.

"Of course he has," said Sissy. "Quisling."

"What?" George said.

Heaton Vorse held up his hand in a papal manner of calm.

"We'll let you know when you need to vacate," he said.

"And will there be any remuneration involved?" asked Sissy.

"You were already offered a generous buyout," said a swarthy man who had not spoken. He looked as if he should speak with an accent, but did not.

"I see," said Sissy. Her tears had already subsided. She pulled out a tissue, loudly blew her nose, and got to her feet. She looked at this collection of

sterling heads - a triple Mt. Rushmore - and laughed.

"Something funny?" George asked.

She nodded and walked out of the room.

She had reached the vestibule when she heard Hobart yell, "Mom!" She stopped, but did not turn. She heard his familiar skip behind her.

"Mom, I'm really truly sorry about this. It's unfortunate. I didn't know you were going to be here."

"I didn't know *you* were going to be here. What's the unfortunate part?"

"Mom, this isn't the time or place to do a post-mortem. We can sit down and do that later. Now, I understand that you're hurt and angry, but I have to say for the time being that I'm acting out of deep concern for Dad and for the financial future of the family."

"You mean your financial future."

"The financial future of the family. That includes you. I've been waiting for an opportunity to prove myself, to really use my God-given gifts. This is that opportunity."

"You're working for them, too?"

"Yes."

"Hobart - do you believe in God?"

"What?" He looked not merely puzzled, but insulted.

"You said God-given."

"Mother, why don't you go home and rest."

"Good idea."

She started to walk away when he called to her again. This time she turned to face him.

"Mother - I just want to say to you here and now that you'll never know how much I love you."

Sissy was tempted to comment on the ring of a handful of worthless coins.

"See you later. Son."

She walked to her car to find George Humphreys leaning against it, arms crossed. He had evidently used a side exit to get there first.

"Get your running-to-fat ass off my car and your heap out of my husband's reserved space," she said. "We still own this place. I should have you thrown off the property, Dillinger."

"Stop calling me names!" He visibly composed himself. "I wanted to have a nice conversation with you, Sissy, but you always have to be a bitch, don't you?"

"Go fuck yourself, George."

"Yeah, that's nice. Okay, since we're being so civil to each other, let me just give you a farewell FYI."

"Fuck Your Integrity? You'd know about that, George."

"That stud priest of yours has been fucking Temple's niece. She's a college kid. So that means he's like blasphemous and could be defrocked, and he's practically a child molester to boot."

"How old is she?"

"She's nineteen."

"I was married at nineteen."

"What the fuck has that got to do with anything?"

She had started to reach for the handle of her car door just as Humphreys moved slightly off the car. This gave her a one-foot trajectory to pull the door sharply against his ass. He cried out.

"You bitch! You know your son's fucking her now, too? Maybe your priest can marry them both, or have a threesome!"

She slammed the car into drive and peeled rubber with transcendent satisfaction out of the parking lot. George rubbed his ass.

### **35        Revelation**

Both of the youngest St. Hilaire children were informed of the latest crisis. Dad was crazy and missing, and now the family company was being stolen out from under their noses.

The next day would be a Saturday. Sissy hinted to Buffy that if Buffy wanted to spend the weekend with her hard-partying and promiscuous friends, it was fine with Sissy. Buffy jumped. Thatcher, sensing the atmosphere, offered to spend the next two days with his uncle and aunt in Brattleboro. Thatcher liked Brattleboro, and seemed to draw some kind of peace from riding horses on his uncle's sprawling colonial-era estate. Sissy thought, *If the kid ever needed to draw some kind of peace, now's the time.*

Now she herself was responding to a seemingly off-hand remark of Brendan's.

"What the hell do you mean you don't care? You're supposed to care. You're a goddamned priest."

"Not for much longer, I don't think," he said.

It was after eight, the kids were gone, and Sissy and her guest were seated by candlelight in the rarely-used dining room. Sissy cooked Dover Sole in lemon butter, capers, and white wine with Brussels sprouts, red potatoes and a bottle of cold Frascati. Serge Gainsbourg's sultry *Histoire De Melody Nelson* oozed unapologetically from the speakers.

"Sissy. Aren't you afraid the neighbors..."

He gaped at her as if hoping she might provide a finish.

"Tongues might be wagging?" She shrugged. "Perhaps the clergy is providing great solace in my time of need. I suppose that's a bit thin, and I suppose I don't really care."

"Neither do I."

"Okay," Sissy said. "I'll be inquisitive. You keep saying that about everything. Or at least two things. What the hell do you mean you don't care?"

"The Diocese is going to close St. Helena's."



"When? Why?"

"Evidently there's no need for this particular church. Or me."

"Can you fight it? That congregation in Weymouth, Massachusetts, they actually - "

"I don't want to fight it."

"Oh." She bit into a Brussels sprout, chewed, and swallowed. "Will they transfer you?"

"Yes."

"To where?"

"God knows. And the Diocese."

"When will you find out?" she asked.

"Sooner than later."

"So what's this about not being a priest for very much longer?"

"Are you kidding me?"

He looked suddenly angry and strange, and she didn't like it. She asked warily, "What?"

"I'm flirting with you, I'm sexually - " he stopped himself short, about to mention Mary Roth.

"Sexually what?"

"Attracted to you, and ready and willing to act on that." His temper was rising, propelling his mind forward, and he knew this was bad.

"That's your choice," she said, adding, "Ours."

"Maybe being a disgraceful wife is easy for you, but being a disgraceful priest isn't going down too well with me, at the moment."

"Thanks."

"I'm losing my church, I'm considered a failure by my colleagues and superiors, and I've obviously lost my faith in God."

He thought it would be good if he cried. He knew he wouldn't.

"Becoming a priest was a poor choice on my part," he added. "I know that now."

He didn't want to look as if he felt sorry for himself, which he did. Nor did he want to look pathetic, which he knew he was. He wasn't sure what to do, so he assigned himself to clearing his plate of food.

Sissy thought of sitting reflectively with downcast eyes, but when she saw how Brendan was eating, she finished

her own plate with equal gusto. She also determined that he was in deep trouble.

"I don't have anything for dessert," she said.

"How about you?"

"No, wait. I just remembered. We can do fresh blackberries in heavy cream. And why don't you knock off the Cary Grant routine while we're at it?"

He folded his napkin. "That was delicious."

"Thank you. Can I ask you something personal?"

"Of course."

"I was told today that you've been sleeping with Temple Locke's nineteen-year-old niece. Is that true?"

"Who told you that?"

"My former lover, George Humphreys."

"How did he find out?" he asked.

"I have no idea. Is it true?"

"Slept with. Once. Last night."

Sissy whistled expertly. "Word travels fast. I'd say your little piece kisses and tells."

The priest looked her straight in the eyes through the candlelight.

"Humphreys also said my son Hobart is fucking her, too. I don't know if that's true."

"I'm not fucking her."

"Fucked her. Past tense, sorry. Hobart is apparently present and future."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Now, why would I want that? Quite the contrary. I've had just about the worst day of my life. Well - top three, anyway. Now that I know you're not some tortured cleric like the guy in *The Thorn Birds*, and we both understand each other a bit more, I'd really like to clean up these dishes and get into bed with you for some unadorned love-making."

The notion of having sex for a second night in a row with a different woman did not appeal to O'Toole. Nor did it repulse him. The first was a teenager, the second a married woman. If he believed in Hell, which he did not, he would have to believe he was doomed.

He ate a buttered bun and helped Sissy to clean up.

They made love as she said they would - slowly, gently, deliberately. They began with him entering her on top; they finished with him behind her, both of them

thrusting like pagans. Throughout, he held her in a strong and grateful embrace.

Later, he thought he heard her crying, but realized she was actually snoring.

### **36        St. Perpetua in Gonic**

O'Toole left the next morning through the connecting door from the house to the closed garage, and quickly sped from the premises, just clearing the door's slow electric rise. He felt like Batman.

It was early, hours before the punctual arrival of Mrs. Page. He could take his time gliding past the Dunkin' Donuts drive-through and have an elegant breakfast sitting in his car in the parking lot. He felt relatively clear and rested, despite the evening's alcohol and exertions. His appetite surprised him. He ordered a medium coffee with cream, hash browns, and a ham and cheese on a croissant with mustard, and ate it all with zeal. He saved a generous portion of the pastry for a group of hopeful sparrows watching him. St. Francis of Breckenridge.

When he pulled into St. Helena's rectory drive, his heart felt light, sailing on smooth waters. It was immediately crushed like a dinghy under the anchor of the Queen Mary when he saw Mrs. Page's car. He checked his watch in confusion: 6:52. She wasn't due until 10:00.

He knew Mrs. Page would see him enter his rectory apartment and determine he was just getting in. He had showered at Sissy's; now he changed into full priestly gear. He vigorously swished Listerine in his mouth until he couldn't stand the sting, then steeled himself and entered his office.

Mrs. Page was filling a series of empty liquor store boxes with items from her desk-top and drawers: a black-and-white photograph of her as a young woman with the first priest she had worked for; a smudged Snoopy in WWI flying ace cap and scarf; thirty-year-old issues of *Reader's Digest*; the many Sucrets lozenge tins she used to hold paperclips and push-pins. She usually played a conservative talk-radio show from Boston. The room was silent.

He cleared his throat. She did not look up.

"Good morning, Mrs. Page."

"Morning, Father."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm cleaning out my desk and cabinets and cupboards after seventeen years of service."

"Why are you here so early?"

"I couldn't sleep. All night, I couldn't sleep. Not one wink."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I'm sorry, too."

He stood mute as she packed desultorily.

"Mrs. Page, would you like me to brew us some coffee - or go buy some?"

"No. Thank you, Father - that's nice of you. I think I might just do a bit more here and attend to the important stuff. Then - if you don't mind - I might go home and try to sleep. I haven't called in sick in five years, you know."

"Yes. I know."

"Coffee would only keep me awake. But thank you."

He stood there for a long moment, not watching her, not thinking, not moving. She finally noticed, stopped her packing, and sighed.

"Father O'Toole?"

"Yes, Mrs. Page?"

"You look like a pelican. Why don't you do something useful? Here."

She picked up a letter from her desk and handed it to him. It was from the diocese in Burlington.

"Go into your office, close the door, and sit down and read that."

"Thank you, Mrs. Page."

He did as he was told. As he was closing his office door, he heard her mutter, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," under her breath. For Mrs. Page, this was swearing.

The envelope bore the parish address of the idiot Harris. The sniffing toad wasted no time - the meeting with Harris, Burton and Reed had only been two days ago. He opened the envelope.

The letter was on stationery emblazoned with a cross and *A Note from the Vermont Catholic Men's Conference*. (O'Toole knew all about the after-hour shenanigans of those men's conferences.) It read:

*Father O'Toole:*



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*Please pardon the unofficial use of VCMC letter-head, but I'm here in nearby Brattleboro and very busy.*

*I'm the key-note speaker, delivering my lecture at the close today on "Marriage and Parenting: 40 Ways for 40 Days - Give Your Family the Gift of a Meaningful Lent."*

(No one was less qualified to talk on this subject than that prissy queer, thought O'Toole resentfully.)

*The conference began last night with a lovely candle-light meditation, followed by a fine spaghetti supper. There are about one hundred attendees. Hope to see you tomorrow.*

(Fat chance. O'Toole had attended plenty of these conferences. On the up side, you heard a great speech once every few years. On the down, you observed the kind of odd male that liked doing male-only things. But the worst was encountering that saddest of creatures, the Catholic and Clearly Repressed Homosexual Married Man. He later introduced you to his dumpy, unattractive wife who astoundingly failed to pick up on her husband's preference problem, a problem that would have been obvious to Helen Keller. There would always be several children. It gave O'Toole a seasick feeling.)

*I wanted to let you know that we at the Diocese have secured you a position to fill a recent vacancy at St. Perpetua Church in Gonic.*

(Where the fuck was Gonic? O'Toole could have easily Googled the place, but he had a cartographic bent for maps, an off-shoot of his childhood admiration for T.E. Lawrence. He spread his drawer-map of Vermont on his desk. Gonic was near North Troy, on the Canadian border. Good Christ. Then he did Google the place:

*Gonic is a rural community with no industrial or agricultural base. Denizens are largely of French-Canadian extraction, working in the service industry. Illiteracy, ill health, and poverty are rampant. Businesses serve the population of 2,077 (Hispanic 5, Asian 4, African-American 2, Indian 2, Hawaiian 0). Average household income: \$26,120.00.*

O'Toole went back to the idiot Harris:

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*The late Father Leo Timm ministered at St. A's for the last forty-two years. He sadly died by his own hand in January. Regional priests have been saying Mass and fulfilling all duties in the interim.*

*We hope you can make the move to Gonic one week from today. We at the Diocese will take care of closing down St. Helena's.*

*Congratulations on what we all feel will be a very appropriate fit.*

*Sincerely,*

*Father H.*

The tubby fag was luxuriating in O'Toole's damnation. Grim exile in Gonic -- which sounded like a bowel condition -- amidst the cast of *Deliverance*. O'Toole could just imagine the doughy creep's excitation at his banishment.

Who the hell was St. Perpetua? Was that a joke? He Googled that, too:

*St. Perpetua was a 22-year-old nursing mother, arrested and executed by the emperor Septimius Severus in Carthage in the year 203, along with her slave, Felicity.*

*They were scourged then torn to pieces in a public arena by wild animals.*

"Good Christ!" O'Toole said aloud.

O'Toole knew he could not survive in Gonic. He would go mad. He would end like the pathetic cleric in *The Diary of a Country Priest*, dead of a stomach - or bowel -- ailment, but without the comfort of French bread and wine.

Fuck Harris and fuck that.

He grabbed the phone and called Bishop Burton.

Diocese voice-mail.

He called Burton's cell-phone, which Burton warned him never to do. Burton hated his "mobile," as he called it.

"What?" Burton bellowed on picking up.

"It's Brendan. Can we talk?"

"I'm taking a bath!"

"You take a bath in the morning instead of a shower?"

"What the hell do you care?" he yelled.

"Good point. That's an Irish thing, right? Listen, why am I going to Colic, Vermont?"

There was the sound of disturbed splashing, and the squeak of wet flesh gripping porcelain.

"Gonic!" he snapped. "Father O'Toole, I am not discussing this with you when I'm wet and in the all together, not to mention the tub. We'll discuss this later!"

O'Toole returned to Mrs. Page, who was now stoically wiping away tears, and said what he had not intended to say.

"Mrs. Page - I'm sorry. I feel like this is my fault. I feel terrible."

"For who?"

"Myself, mostly. And you. And the congregation."

She removed her glasses and blew her nose, and seemed to be composing herself.

"Father," she said at last. "Shall I be honest?"

"Nothing less, Mrs. Page."

"I think what you just said is very indicative of what has been the problem all along. The problem - problems - with your steerage of St. Helena's. To be frank, I'm not convinced you should really be a priest, Father. Perhaps you need a new job."

O'Toole actually had to sit to support his sense of utter deflation.

"Well put, Mrs. Page."

"I think I'll finish packing up tomorrow, if you can understand that, Father." She strode quickly out and shut the door behind her, almost slamming it, but not quite.

"I understand," he said to the empty room.

### **37        The Horror of Crapula**

Sissy awoke in her drunkard's bed some time after her priest lover had quietly left. Sissy always slept soundly after a night of drinking, until she suddenly didn't. Waking was the worst part of her day.

She had awakened at 3:52 a.m. to pee, but felt a strange rush of nervous energy, the bad kind. A panic attack was skipping on tiny feet up the back of her neck, and she became frightened. She had no desire to wake O'Toole with her fear and anxiety - not so much out of consideration for him, but from her own embarrassment. She padded into the kitchen and cracked open a bottle of Cordon

Negro Frexenet and guzzled half of it. Once the warmth had spread through her veins to calm her nerves, she settled down and sipped the rest of the bottle with a snack of Triscuit crackers and Stilton cheese. Loaded with the wine and food, she toddled back to bed and fell gratefully into sleep.

Waking six hours later, she immediately came to, steeped in dread and dry-heaving. She stumbled to the shower and tried to relax under the powerful spray, at one point curling up in the tub like a fetus, not moving, letting the hot water cascade over her skin. She did not cry. She toweled off quickly. Still naked, she popped two Valium and hurried to the kitchen to mix a shot of vodka with grapefruit juice and choke it down. Her hands did not stop shaking until the second shot. Was this a way to live? She felt as if she might die soon.

She was in no shape for anything, but she had to see Winnie Plumrose, matriarch dictator of Yankee Springs. She could not move on in any sane or logical way without first confronting the gorgon. Her decrepit physical state was pathetic. She couldn't even shave her legs. She felt

dreadful: she had just risen, but was exhausted, and knew full well she was incapable of sleep. She had no appetite and a queasy stomach, but she knew she must eat. She needed to drink to slake her raw cells screaming for alcohol, yet she knew she should not drink.

She was a mess. It would take the remainder of the morning and part of the afternoon to get in sufficient condition to face Winnie Plumrose.

She began to slowly prepare, to nurse her hangover into an approximation of normal life. She mixed a prairie oyster in a cocktail glass - a raw egg, a teaspoon of Worcestershire sauce, a tablespoon of vinegar, and dashes of salt, pepper, and Tabasco. She knew damn well it had little or no restorative value, but she thought it quaint. Besides, James Bond drank them.

## **38        A Crusade**

O'Toole decided to give Burton time to dry off and cool down before calling him back. He had a feeling of inevitability that he was going to refuse the transfer to St. Perpetua's in Gonic. Burton, Harris and Reed would



seize the opportunity to review the dubiety of his choices at St. Helena's -- liturgical, financial, and sexual. They would question his fitness for the cloth. If the parish secretary felt confident enough to raise these issues, the triumvirate of hanging judges would be downright delighted. He felt as if he were driving off in a car with no brakes.

Nonetheless, he felt a self-destructive glee in clambering into that metaphorical car as well as his real one and driving to the Archdiocese in Burlington unannounced. But that would only make things more unpleasant, and O'Toole had little stomach for conflict or confrontation today. Despite all his cultivation of a bluff and gruff Irish vicar, Burton actually liked to order his life akin to a Buckingham Palace steward.

No - screw it. O'Toole would drive the two-and-a-half hours to Burlington, and confront Burton. A crusade!

**39           A Clutch of Condoms**

As Sissy was taking slow and systematic care of her condition, she spied a zippered pink make-up bag on the stairs. It surely belonged to her daughter.

Inside was an impressive array of condoms (Trojan Ribbed, Lifestyles Ultra-Sensitive, Durex Polyisoprene), as well as a tube of Astro-Glide lubricant. A few tampons and a Tampax made up the remaining contents. At least the ninny was using protection.

But Buffy had already left for whatever fate she had planned, or not, and had forgotten her kit bag.

Sissy knew her daughter was promiscuous and dense. Someday, she feared, they were going to find a pair of panties and an ax someplace. That would be the end of her.

Sissy decided to drive to Burlington and speak to Winnie Plumrose.

**40           Champ and Baxby Blanding**

At the precise moment Sissy made the decision to drive to Burlington, O'Toole was pulling his car into the

parking lot adjacent to the imposing building that housed the Diocese of Vermont.

A portion of the 109 miles of Lake Champlain surged and swelled behind the stately headquarters. This was a windy March day, and four-foot waves with frothing whitecaps broke across the surface in contrary directions. It was no day to be sailing, and no one was. The chill winds blasting off the bright blue water shook O'Toole's car. He sat for a few moments admiring the lake's beautiful, immodest majesty.

As a college student, O'Toole had worked summers as a counselor at Camp Holy Cross in Colchester, owned and operated by the Diocese. New arrivals among the boys were always fascinated by the legend of "Champ," the lake's alleged monster, an American cousin to the pride of Loch Ness.

(O'Toole relished the supernatural, paying amused and delighted attention to yetis, chupacabras, sasquatches, alien abductions, demonic possessions, UFOs, and all else weird and fantastic. He particularly enjoyed and sought out places purportedly haunted, and had managed to spend the

night in many a domain without any intercourse with spirits, just his luck.)

During the end of his second summer as a counselor, O'Toole had been out canoeing on the lake at twilight, accompanied by one boy, a companionless sixth grader with the hapless name of Baxby Blanding and the personality of a garden slug.

Baxby had a cleft palate, a clubfoot, a colostomy bag, and an attitude that combined sullen hatred and impenetrable disinterest. His mother and father, on their one meeting with O'Toole, seemed to leave unspoken what they might have done to deserve this.

O'Toole had tried to take the kid under his wing and help him make some progress - any progress, in any sense -- but it had been hopeless. Baxby unfailingly looked to O'Toole with a bearing of stoic bemusement and tolerance, as if the older man was determined to apply shoe polish to the boy's sneakers.

By late August, O'Toole had given up attempting fruitful conversation, but continued a valiant campaign at small talk. At this, as all else, Baxby was apparently unequipped.

O'Toole had desultorily taken the boy out in the canoe after dinner that night, relieving him of having to sit through the third-rate "the boys will love it" movie before lights out.

"Nice sunset, huh Bax?"

No reply.

"Bax, you have to actually paddle with your -- paddle. If you let it drag in the water like that, you're working - well, you're not working against me, but you're - no, you need to..."

The counselors were told not to smoke in front of the campers by the Camp Director, who was smoking at the time, but since Baxby didn't speak, or seem to care about, or even be aware of, anything, and it being the end of summer and all, O'Toole lit a cigarette to quietly savor at sunset.

The two drifted and swirled in the placid water, its surface like glass. Crickets sang their calming late-summer standard. The canoe and all it contained was sedate, a hundred feet from shore.

Slowly, at first almost imperceptibly, the water began to churn three car-lengths from their craft. A scuba

diver surfacing? No, three scuba divers! No, too much churning. Weird. O'Toole remembered puffing his unfiltered Camel and thinking that must be one school of really big fish.

When the water's surface swirled, and then bubbled in a fifteen-foot maelstrom, O'Toole's cigarette dropped from his mouth into the bottom of the wet canoe. He realized he was witnessing the rise of an extra-terrestrial spacecraft from the depths of the lake.

He wasn't.

The black humped back of a creature rose from the water, followed by an equally gigantic neck, at the end of which was a flat, huge head like some mythic, demon horse. It made no sound, but turned slowly to look about, belching water, weeds clinging to its open mouth.

O'Toole wanted to scream, but was paralyzed.

The thing slowly swiveled its head in the direction of the canoe, but didn't seem to notice them.

What might come flashed through O'Toole's imagination: all the stories were true. This ancient beast would surge forward, bite O'Toole in half, flinging his bisected body into the air, then swallow the small,

deformed boy whole and headfirst. There would be much screaming, and geysers of blood.

Instead, the creature regarded them, if it regarded them at all, lazily (O'Toole could not discern any eyes in its head by the fading sunset) then sank contentedly under the water, leaving a quick swirl of black bubbles.

O'Toole stared for a long time at where the monster had disappeared. Then he remembered Baxby, and swung his head with such ferocity that his neck would hurt the next day. The little misfit was staring at the water as if he had watched an empty Coke bottle fill up and sink.

For the first time in his life, O'Toole became hysterical.

"Did you see that?! Oh, my God! Oh, my Christ! Oh, sweet God in heaven, sweet Jesus, what the fuck was that?! Did you see it? Did you see it?! It was the *thing*! It was the *monster*! It was the fucking monster! We saw the monster! Didja see it?! Jesus fucking Christ, Baxby, did you see that?!"

O'Toole wanted to cry. He felt faint. He realized he had voided some urine.

Baxby dipped his paddle in the water and looked to his counselor. After a few moments, O'Toole did the same, and trembling uncontrollably, rowed them back to shore.

Later, O'Toole regretted his choices. He babbled uncontrollably of what he had seen to everyone and anyone. He kept checking mirrors to see if his hair had turned.

His supervisor cloistered him and wrote up a report.

The reception at the camp, both children and adults alike, proceeded from shock and alarm to skepticism and inevitable amusement, finally to mockery.

By breakfast the next morning, most seemed more interested in whether the sausage was in links or patties than what the counselor and the boy had witnessed.

When harshly pressed for his account, Baxby swore he had seen nothing -- absolutely nothing.

This put O'Toole in a bad light.

He considered a non-confrontational dialogue with the lad, or perhaps a benign interface with a third party, or perhaps bashing the little fuck's head in with a can of crushed tomatoes.



No report was ever filed to anyone. O'Toole had imagined that the Diocese, the media, the Pentagon, and NASA would all be keen to interview him in preparation for his book and movie, both to be produced after he received the Nobel Prize.

Instead, by Labor Day, as the camp packed up and shut down, O'Toole was regarded as an amiable boob who had concocted one wild and addled tale, poor ass.

O'Toole now sat in his car, staring at the choppy waves on this bright, cold day. His encounter with the monster was more than twenty years past. He had been a fool then, and he felt a fool now.

But he knew what he had seen.

When O'Toole became a priest, he decided to invite Baxby Blanding to his Rite of Ordination ceremony, not sure as to why.

He learned that the withdrawn and malformed mess born to briefly live as Baxby Blanding had died of a congenital heart defect at fifteen, throwing a Frisbee on Boston Common.

God worked in wondrous ways.

## **41        Epiphany**

On the ride up to Burlington to confront Winnie Plumrose, Sissy eschewed her collection of CDs for the local - and as one traveled -- ever-changing radio stations. The classical was desultory, the "alternative rock" obnoxious, and the fave hits of the 60's, 70's and 80's tiresome. She settled on a station from Quebec that apparently played only Polish polkas, in French. This wasn't so much diversion as fascination. German had been her language in high school and college, but she recognized the tunes, if not the words, of "Beer-Barrel Polka," "She's Too Fat for Me," and several more polack ditties (her Uncle Nick had played the accordion at weddings when she was a child). The incomprehensible French lyrics did not distract her concentration on her rehearsal for the confrontation with Winnie Plumrose.

*(Winnie Plumrose. What a name.)*

Sissy was tiring of showing up to every fight she was invited to, or not invited to. She imagined she couldn't feel more tired if she had been in combat.

Instead of an in-your-face, woman-to-woman battle, perhaps she would try appealing to the empathy, sympathy, and common humanity of this person who held the future of her family's fortune in her hands. She must try - as hard as she could - to prevail.

She punched the button to the alternative station and a song she remembered from her college days abruptly twanged on: Marianne Faithful's "Broken English," with its gloomy refrain:

*What are we fighting for?*

*What are we fighting for?*

For the money, of course.

Really? No.

Sissy abruptly pulled her car into the parking lot of a Kwiki-Mart, parked and switched off the ignition.

Sissy prided herself on being far more self-aware than almost anyone she knew. At the same time, she was plagued by the nagging suspicion that if intelligent, educated individuals she admired could be so damned obtuse about their own shortcomings - completely oblivious, in

some cases - it seemed likely that she too was unaware of a glaring character flaw that any fool might have picked up on within five minutes of meeting her.

She felt she was having an epiphany. Sissy distrusted the concept of the epiphany. She recalled a handful of them in her life - the decision to betroth herself to George; the decision to have children; the decision to sell real estate; the decision that cheating on George was not, in the grand scheme of things, much of a sin.

Not exactly the stuff of profound *gravitas*.

This epiphany she was experiencing now struck her as distasteful.

If Kukol sank, Sissy would still end up with half of George's personal fortune. If he were to be deemed *non compos mentis*, she and the kids might get a great deal more. Either way, they would all be set for life.

If George recovered, and returned to his old materialistic, inconsiderate bastard self, he might legitimately and judiciously fuck her six ways to Tuesday in court for being a serial adulteress and a drunk. Mama was a lush who spread her legs for anything in pants. Even

with a savvy feminist chick lawyer, or even better, a savvy feminist guy lawyer, who in hell would sympathize with her fornicating and heavy drinking? Bad fathers, considered redundant, were sometimes given a pass. Bad mothers were routinely crucified by juries, with the female members gleefully competing to hammer the nails into a woman who made them look good by comparison.

She loved George. Was she certain of this? How? Deeply and forever? Sissy liked metaphors. She flashed on the thought that her love for her husband was akin to her love for her lavender Gucci bathrobe. No, that would not work.

Then she was not in love with George. Now she realized she no longer wanted to be married to George, or to anyone.

An epiphany, with complications that demanded to be thought through.

Sissy turned on the ignition. The stereo introduced the funky opening from the Doobie Brothers' soothing, "It Keeps You Running."

She lit a cigarette and pulled the car from the parking lot with renewed purpose.

**42        Epiphany, Too**

O'Toole was still staring at the choppy whitecaps of Lake Champlain. That last summer, the summer of the monster, included a steamy sexual affair with a sweet high school girl working as a camp counselor at the Catholic youth camp in Morristown, an hour's drive from Colchester. O'Toole was twenty-one, Rachel Hinman, seventeen and about to be a freshman at Bowdoin College. Little Rachel! A svelte girl's body, with a nice plumpness of bum and boobs, and short, blonde wavy hair that shined to dazzle his eyes in the summer sun, her skin the color of honey. Her face with its button nose, then and now, moved him to tears. Rachel had treated him with more kindness than any woman he would ever meet, even when she ended their relationship to head off to college in Maine.

She would not sleep with him -- a good Catholic girl with a knocked-up older sister -- even in those liberated times, but allowed both digital and oral perversions that kept them satisfied for the summer. She liked to be naked in front of him. Sunsets and warm breezes

accompanied a temporary joy. It would all end soon enough, and it did.

They did not keep in touch. She earned a degree in something from Bowdoin, married a good, solid provider, and produced for him five children, never actually pursuing any kind of career beyond wife and mother, and all that it entailed.

Good for her.

He learned all of this from an acquaintance eager to keep O'Toole informed from Brunswick.

He wondered what Rachel was doing this very moment.

He also scanned the water. The monster would not rise with this chop.

The building that housed the Diocese of Vermont was impressive enough, vaguely Gothic to O'Toole's untrained guess. Carved in stone high above the doorway was an announcement of the purpose for which the building had first been erected. Now worn by the winds of the lake and the waters of many winters, it was unreadable. All statuary of the Catholic faith - the Virgin Mary, this or that saint, even Christ Himself - was nowhere to be seen.

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Removed, O'Toole guessed, from fear of attracting attention.

He got out of his car and walked to the front door.

No flyers announcing bean suppers or candle-light vigils or Lenten events. Nothing but:

*Use Side Entrance.*

With an arrow. He followed its trajectory and arrived at a thick steel-and-glass door that allowed him to view the inner lobby: television monitors, a slender microphone, bright florescent lights, and a placard in the window which read:

*All Guests Check in to Declare  
the Department They are Visiting*

Just like East Berlin during the Cold War.

O'Toole spied no guard.

It sadly dawned on him that the stress imposed on the Diocese of Vermont in recent years - so much like that of the Boston Archdiocese under Cardinal Law, and the scandals from coast to coast, and Germany and England and Ireland - had resulted in this present bunker mentality.



The Diocese was paying out \$17.6 million in settlements to twenty-six men who had been sexually abused - raped or interfered with - as altar boys in the 1970's. At least one of the priests had been defrocked by the Vatican, and he had publicly gone on the record to say that he was sorry about what he had done, what a guy.

How many times had O'Toole had to chirp that only ten percent of American priests were pedophiles, leaving a solid ninety to devote themselves to God's work and the good work of Holy Mother Church?

O'Toole, of course, had recently fucked both a married woman and a college girl. Sin-wise, he wasn't as bad as those awful child-molesters, small comfort.

O'Toole knocked on the glass door - there was no buzzer to push or intercom to bellow into.

He slipped a hand into the pocket of his suede jacket - one of Sissy's cigarettes was there, bent at the end.

O'Toole glanced inside again, then trudged back to his car to retrieve a green Bic lighter. He straightened the cocked end of the unfiltered Havana Oval, and lit it, dragging the smoke deep into his lungs.

*You may die of some form of cancer or heart disease. Do not be so arrogant to think you can change God's plan for you.*

O'Toole's plans? A trip to the Aegean Islands to commune with the old and dead gods. To make love to Sissy St. Hilaire on that Mediterranean beach.

Scratch that. Sand was a lousy surface on which to make love.

To marry her?

An epiphany. This might carry him through.

A security guard built like a linebacker emerged from the fortress and coolly appraised the priest, then signed him in.

O'Toole had visited the Bishop's office on only a few occasions. He liked it. It was a high-ceilinged, spacious old cell in the musty, capacious old building. Bishop Reed had allowed the contributions of others to furnish his space, but a large, blown up and lovingly framed photograph of Bishop Sheen in his popular television prime held a place of prominence.

O'Toole checked his feelings. He had run the gamut from flinty anger during the drive up to regretful

sentimentality in the parking lot. Now he felt resignation, which he knew to be useless. Reed's stalwart secretary ushered him into the sanctum, and one look at Reed's expression turned O'Toole's calm resignation to child-like fear.

"Brendan." Higher register on the second syllable. Reed did not stand, but motioned to the chair in front of his desk. O'Toole dutifully sat and waited for Reed to ask to what he owed the pleasure. He did not.

"Bishop Reed," O'Toole began evenly, "I can't go to Gonic."

"As opposed to St. Perpetua?"

"I don't follow you."

"Obviously."

"I'm not convinced that St. Helena's needs to be closed - "

"It will be closed and that case is closed. We're not going to discuss it again. You're like a soldier, man. You go where you're sent."

"A Christian soldier."

"That's right. I'm glad you know that, and since you clearly do know that, what the hell are you doing here?"

O'Toole mumbled, "I don't know."

"What? Speak up."

"I don't know. I thought I knew, but now I don't."

O'Toole could see the old man soften, and for this he was grateful.

"Brendan. St. Helena's would be closed even with a better priest than you at her helm. And at the risk of hurting your feelings, you're not amongst the best and the brightest."

O'Toole considered that. "I know."

"I sincerely believe this is a good move for you, in every sense. You need time and quiet to consider whether you're fit to continue in your vocation."

"But Gonic?"

"You see?" he asked, not unkindly. "That's what I'm talking about. You're only comfortable assigned to a comfortable parish. You don't find that even remotely intriguing?"

Such clarity. O'Toole was ashamed he had not seen the obvious. He was kidding no one.

"Besides," Reed said, "Good pastoral leadership requires a vision of one's own eventual obsolescence. We're trying to move away from a 'priest-centric' form of parish to something much broader and more durable - a parish not completely dependent on one specific man."

"I understand."

"No, you don't. You don't understand. Healthy parishes thrive on change. While longevity of pastoral leadership provides needed stability, there is a very thin line between stability and stagnation. Change provides fresh perspectives, allows new lay leaders to emerge, heals the alienated, and shakes out the organizational cobwebs that inevitably accumulate when pastors - like any leaders - stay too long."

O'Toole knew the old man spoke sense, the old son of a bitch.

"I'm confident that the change will be good for Breckenridge, for Gonic - and for you, my boy. Now do you understand?"

"Yes, Bishop."

"I'm still not convinced you've on the right path, Brendan. I know you love God, Our Savior, and Our Lady dearly - I know that - but I'm not sure that your calling is for the priesthood. The Lord calls some of us to serve, some to marry, some to remain single. I don't think you're clear on God's calling for you."

"How do I find out?"

"Only you can do that."

"Can I get a severance package if I quietly quit?"

"You want me to pay you to go away?" asked the Bishop.

"It's an idea."

"No. I need your presence, Brendan - and your forbearance. And don't speak to anyone of abortion ever again, you hear me?"

"The Church trying to stop abortion is as futile as the Church trying to stop wars. If we're going to throw our effort into futility, we should start with wars first."

"That's what I mean, Brendan. Shut up about abortion."

O'Toole nodded.

Reed continued to speak of things that needed no reply from the younger man - the closing of St. Helena's, the brass tacks of O'Toole's transition and relocation, a recommendation of therapy for O'Toole through the privacy of the Diocese.

"I'm hearing chatter that the Vatican is messing with the prayers and responses of the Mass. Some new translation that's closer to the original, which means we all start from scratch, God look down on us and pity us this night and day. What are your thoughts?"

O'Toole's thoughts were along the lines of how much he wanted to rest his face on the cool flesh of Sissy's perfect bare ass.

Reed ushered him out with a mild slap on the back.

At his car, O'Toole scanned the whitecaps of windy Lake Champlain. If only the monster would rise now terrifically from the depths, and solve all his problems. How miraculous that would be.

### **43           The Essence of Democracy**

Sissy used her GPS to find the headquarters of Yankee Springs in Burlington. She did not like this toy that George had insisted on purchasing for all three vehicles. The infernal contraption had once taken her two hours out of her way in Massachusetts, giving contrary directions to the plain and obvious laid out on her AAA map. She vowed never again, but today she went with it as part of an attempt to reduce her uncertainty.

She passed strip-malls where the under-privileged, hired by the hour, held signs on sidewalks directed at the passing traffic, advertising sales at local stores. She had seen this on the sweltering dog days of summer, and in the frigid, bone-numbing winter. It made her sad and angry, and she thought she might, in the splendor of her 2.5 million dollar home, read *Das Kapital*.

She also passed too many daycare centers: Humpty Dumpty, Busy Bees, L'il Folks, People's Liberation Army. She had stayed home when her children were small. She could afford to. It dawned on Sissy that hating herself for all the many reasons she should would benefit no one.



The GPS robotically found Yankee Springs at the end of Ginger Snap Lane, the same name as Sissy's home address. How odd. Sissy thought it looked terribly corporate. Like Kukol. There was a placid pond, large, and surrounded by artfully placed benches, but the pond was fed by six fountains, making the whole impression one of profound fakeness. The lawns and gardens were beautifully trimmed, and with spring, Sissy knew, would be seeded and flowered to fine effect.

As Sissy entered the building, she was not disappointed: the interior was a perfect complement to the outside. A row of artificially fuelled flame licked at fake logs in a hearth. Above this cascaded a sheet of rippling water down an immense wall of glass - an artificial waterfall that would not be out of place in a miniature golf course in Reno.

"Can I help you?" piped a bright, blazered and name-tagged Courtney behind the reception desk.

"I'd like to see Mrs. Plumrose."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but I think she'll want to see me even without one. I'm Sissy St. Hilaire - the wife of George St. Hilaire

and we own the Kukol Clock Works in Breckenridge that your company is about to displace for bottled water rights and filthy profits."

Sissy realized she had said too much.

"I see." Courtney looked like she didn't see at all, and was irritated by this complexity, but dutifully picked up the phone in accordance with her obligations.

"Yes, I have a Mrs. St. Hilaire here..."

She was speaking in a low voice, and Sissy would have to strain her ears at the girl's turned-away figure to hear Courtney's side of the conversation. Sissy opted for a wander round the lobby, an ample place to land a plane. After some brief dithering, Courtney hung up. She then adjusted the glasses on her pert little nose, and turned to Sissy.

"She'll see you."

Sissy was tempted to exclaim, *Well, whoop-dee-doo!* but merely displayed an insincere smile. Sissy was mildly concerned she was becoming the kind of middle-aged woman that disliked younger, attractive women on general principles. She realized it was a woman thing, spawned by

the premium American society put on the brief summer of a woman's beauty. George, with his "distinguished" good looks, money and power, would never feel threatened by a younger man. A man in his forties wasn't old. When was life ever fair?

Sissy strode from the corporate waiting room, swinging her hips like a bell for Courtney's benefit, and entered Winnie Plumrose's den expecting an office like the hundred other corporate offices she had entered in her lifetime. She was stunned. This was not an office so much as a cocoon.

Thick draperies had been drawn against high windows, blocking out all light. Tiffany lamps dappled the room with diffused colors, almost too dim to make out the surroundings they were intended to illuminate. The walls were hung, not with prints, but actual oils on canvas, framed and arranged haphazardly, as in a Victorian parlor. The furniture continued the conceit: chairs and divans upholstered in velvet. Some tall bookcases held bound volume sets obviously for show, but others were crammed with books that were clearly genuine choices.

The effect was cozy, but constricting, like being trapped in a Thomas Kinkade painting.

"Come in, dear."

She was standing behind her large mahogany desk, every surface inch of which was covered with papers, journals, files, books -- stacked and scattered -- allowing only enough room for a green desk-lamp and a pen set.

Winnie Plumrose looked like the perfect choice to sell pancake mix or syrup. She was the consummate grandmother, and Sissy already felt safe with her, a feeling she immediately distrusted. She would have to resist this ether.

"It's a true pleasure to meet you. May I call you Sissy? Please have a seat."

Both the younger and older woman sat down. Sissy heard a ticking, which she traced to a grandfather clock.

"I wanted to see you in person, Mrs. Plumrose."

"Call me Winnie, dear."

"Winnie. I don't understand what's happening to my family's business - what you're doing to Kukol Clocks."

"You have a bee in your bonnet." She smiled.

"What?" Had the old lady really said that?

"Sissy, this is a very, very sad, difficult and angering experience for you and your family. I know how you feel. Yankee Springs is *my* family's business."

Sissy noticed there were no family pictures anywhere.

"I thought San Pablo of Spain owned Yankee Springs," Sissy said.

"They do, dear, but my late husband Horace, now with God, stayed on as CEO after San Pablo acquired controlling interest. I have been attempting to fill Horace's considerable shoes since he passed away. My children all work for Yankee, as do several grandchildren. Why, my sixteen-year-old great-grand-daughter Courtney works on the bottling line!"

Another Courtney. Winnie laughed as if this were some sort of divine marvel.

She continued, "We live in the greatest country in the history of the world, I'm sure you'll agree."

"Sometimes Switzerland looks pretty nice."

Winnie ignored this. "And we became the greatest country in the history of the world through Dame Democracy and her faithful hand-maiden, Capitalism."

*She's out of her tree,* thought Sissy.

"We pay a price for democracy, a price for freedom. The price for capitalism is a thing called business, and a thing called competition is an essential element of business. This is a basic cornerstone, like the law of supply and demand, on which rest business, capitalism, democracy, freedom, and the greatness of the United States of America. Now, that's a very simple equation, but it's not an easy one. Communism may have had fine equitable ideals in theory, but we've seen that in practice, it simply doesn't work. Marx was no economist. Certainly not an economist for the 21st Century."

Sissy realized she had no objections thus far.

"Sissy, capitalism isn't perfect, and only a fool would say it is. Democracy isn't perfect, either. But both of these systems - one economic, the other political - are the best the world has to offer - the best mankind has managed to concoct over the last millennium. Personally, I feel a great deal of pride, and yes, even patriotism, in the fact that our nation was the first to implement a democratic form of government, and that we still reign as the world's most successful financial power."

Winnie looked as if she expected applause.

"So you're fucking my company out of existence for the greatness of America?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that, dear."

"The injustice of that makes me want to become a Marxist," Sissy said.

"But you won't. You well know the costs and rewards, the joys and sorrows, if you will, of free enterprise. And it's not unjust. Kukol can survive if you roll up your sleeves and put your nose to the grindstone."

"Or if you leave us alone." She knew she was beat.

"Business is business. I'm looking out for my family first, Sissy, and so are you. We're at loggerheads, but I'm sure where there's a will there's a way."

"You're quite the sweet old shit-heel, aren't you, Winnie?"

"Sticks and stones, dear."

"And you're just bubbling over with platitudes, aren't you?"

"Yes, dear. There's nothing more satisfying than a good platitude. And here's another one: to the victors belong the spoils."

Sissy rose and walked to the door.

"Here's one for you, Winnie: why don't you take a bottle of Yankee Springs and stick it up your ass?"

Winnie Plumrose did not look shocked.

Sissy left.

#### **44        African Talking Drums**

O'Toole took one last look at the waters of Champlain, and then drove a few blocks into town. He reached Pine Street, parked his car, and was relieved to find a 12:05 Mass about to begin at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception.

O'Toole took a pew in the modern, pretty, oddly designed church. He had not been part of a congregation for some time, and the double meaning of that stung an already open wound. A priest named Thomas J. Ball said Mass. Prior to receiving the blessed sacrament, O'Toole found himself fervently repeating, "I am not worthy to receive You, but only say the word and I shall be healed," in a whispered tone. He also found himself sticking his tongue out for the Eucharistic wafer, something he hadn't done since boyhood,



instead always proffering his open palm. He sipped the surprisingly strong, apparently non-watered, dark wine and returned to his pew to pray.

That morning he had reread some of Dietrich von Hildebrand, a philosopher he had always admired, and who had been derisively dismissed by one of his Jesuit professors as "light theology." The words rang clearly for him now: *The man who lacks reverence because of pride and arrogance approaches everything with conceit and presumption, imagines that he knows everything. He is interested in the world only insofar as it serves his self-glorification, insofar as it enhances his own importance.*

O'Toole understood that this self-absorption makes a person totally oblivious to anything beyond the self.

A young man who O'Toole took to be disturbed (he knew the signs) was seated not far from him, the ear buds of his iPod pouring music into his head. Across the aisle from him, a man of mature years was engaged in a loud conversation on his cell phone while those around him attempted to pray.

"Mass is ended. Go in peace."

O'Toole stayed so long on his knees with his eyes closed and his hands clasped, that he drifted away. He was not praying by this time, but came to as if he had woken up at the seashore on a hot summer's day. He saw the church was empty.

As he exited, the priest was standing near the doors as if waiting for him. He put his hand out warmly.

"Are you visiting us, Father?"

"Yes, sir. I'm Father O'Toole of St. Helena's in Breckenridge."

"Oh, yes, of course! I've heard of you." They shook hands.

"Oh," O'Toole said dubiously.

"All good things, Father. You seem to be considered a very interesting man."

"That's a nice way of putting it."

Father Ball smiled amiably.

Should O'Toole tell him he had just lost his church and was experiencing a crisis of faith? That he was a fraud who fucked girls and women left and right?

"Can I invite you to lunch, Father O'Toole?"

He thought he would lie and say he was seeing the Bishop, but decided against lying ever again for the rest of his life. If possible.

"Thank you very much, sir, but I need to get back."

"I hope some other time, then."

With great familiarity and affection, Father Ball took Father O'Toole's arm and walked him to the doors.

"I'm sorry to see people with iPods and cell phones in church," O'Toole said.

"I know. It's disappointing. But I don't think they mean malice or disrespect. They're just self-absorbed, and I think unconsciously so. I don't even blame them for that. They have no sense of what their actions reveal. They see very little - if anything, anymore -- as sacred. Everything is for consumption, for use. The church is now like any other building - a place first and foremost for social interaction."

They stopped at the open doors. O'Toole looked into his calm, grey eyes.

"I envy your acceptance. I believe I would find that very -- tiring."

"But one can't - can you?"

O'Toole didn't answer, but squeezed the older man's hand, smiled, and turned away without another word.

He walked through the streets, having decided to look for a place to have lunch, although he was not doing much looking. He pulled his coat collar tight against his dog collar and the biting, thrashing wind. He thought of wintry photos of Bob Dylan and James Dean in Greenwich Village. Always a love of glamour, projected from within. He did, in fact, feel numb, but he knew the numbness was part showboating to himself. He wouldn't lose his way, he would have lunch, and he would find his way back to his car. He was not truly lost, and he knew it.

He stopped outside an eatery (also, presumably, a drinkery) off a festive promenade of shops, restaurants, and bars that seemed acceptable. He entered, took a seat, and quickly settled on his order by scanning the waiting menu. When the waitress arrived, his heart sank.

The feeling was the familiar ache, but with a touch of extra misery this time.

"Anything look tasty?"

She was five foot two with eyes of blue, and short, dark, silky hair. The thick curls framed a triangular face

with a thin upper lip and a plush lower one, tolerantly tiding over a sweet set of white teeth, hostess to a slight overbite. Her nose was just a bit too big, which might have made her imperfect, but a tiny brown mole on the left side of her upper lip transformed her face into instant perfection. Her small breasts were perfectly round, attentive and small, nipples like happy pencil erasers poking ardently through a soft green blouse. When she turned in her tight, white skirt to grab a pitcher of water to fill his glass, he savored a plump and tightly wrapped derriere complete with delicious panty-lines. That would be his first choice for lunch. The second would be two perfectly lovely legs. Her smooth skin was artificially tanned to the color of honey, like Rachel Hinman's, like Mary Roth's. Hot butterscotch coursed through her veins and would ooze from the bite-wound if he sunk his teeth into her. The term "achingly beautiful" seared his mind as if it were a slice of veal.

He was aching for her - yearning, hankering -- a palpable, physical ache.

Could this be normal? Did other men's hearts bleed in the presence of female (or for that matter, male)

beauty? We were all attracted and entranced by different faces and bodies, but didn't the feeling of attraction reach a reasonable end-point? For him, the physical being of a lovely young girl with a pretty face and a curvy figure inspired a sweet and sugary sadness. My God, this girl was toothsome.

At times he felt a kind of dignity in his aesthetic appreciation - he should have been an easel painter, sculptor, photographer; someone whose intense love of female beauty manifested itself in passionate work - like Picasso, Renoir, J. Frederick Smith, David Hamilton, Frank Gallo. He could justify wanting to lick the thighs of his waitress if he immortalized her lovingly in a work of art. Picasso painted a masterpiece, fucked the model, smoked a Gitanes.

But O'Toole had no creativity - he was one who appreciated, then taught about, the fine arts. His own attempts at writing and painting had been laughable. He had once considered photography to be relatively simple, and quickly discovered how wrong he was. No, he would never justify his lust through representational art. He would

simply become a dirty old man once the Church kicked him out.

He had no business being a priest.

Just then, Sissy entered the restaurant and approached his table.

O'Toole stood.

"How did you know I was here?" he asked.

"I didn't. Good Lord, I didn't. I just came in for lunch." She looked as if she had to catch up with her own thoughts. Finally, she smiled. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He stood mute, feeling numb again. Life's rich pageant.

"Would you join me?"

"No," said Sissy. "I'd prefer a table alone in the corner. What the hell do you think?" She sat.

"I was being polite. You seem annoyed."

"I am. I've had a shitty morning, and now you're here."

"Gee, thanks. It would be nice if you were surprised and pleased to see me."

Her face fell. "I'm sorry. You're right. I am surprised, and I'm being a complete cunt. Listen, I need a cigarette before we order. Come outside with me."

O'Toole told the waitress that he and his friend were stepping outside and would be right back to order. She smiled in empathic understanding.

Sissy was doggedly trying to light her Sherman's in a wind that would not have been unusual in Chicago. He helped shield her with his coat and body until she was sufficiently flared up. She had just expelled her first yawp of smoke when her gaze fixed intently on something over his shoulder. He turned to look.

It was the man with the bow tie. The man with the bow tie from the Weston Priory who was keeping Bob Rogers prisoner there, now still wearing a bow tie.

And chatting amiably on the corner with Mary Roth. Brendan's Mary Roth. She was wearing a short plaid skirt he loved.

He recalled a word he had first encountered at seminary: *ensorcelled*. Yes, he was ensorcelled.

Without turning back to Sissy, he began the one-block stretch between himself and his target.



Sissy had spied her son with a girl way up here in Burlington and had no clue why Brendan was marching toward them or what in hell was going on. She followed in a scurry.

When Brendan and Sissy's rapid approach had apparently entered the periphery of Bow Tie's vision, he turned to look, as did Mary.

"You bastard," the priest said.

"Brendan!" Mary said.

"Hobart - " Sissy said.

"Mom," Hobart said.

"Mom?" Brendan said.

"Brendan, this is my son, Hobart."

"Your son? This is the bow-tied son-of-a-bitch I saw when we were in Weston, Sissy!" Brendan said.

"What?"

"Brendan -- you know Hobart?" Mary asked.

"Who is *she*?" Sissy asked.

"This is Mary Roth, Sissy, the girl we talked about. What the hell are you doing with *him*, Mary?"

"He's my boyfriend! What the hell are you doing with his mother?"

"What are you doing here, Hobart?" Sissy yelled.

"And why the hell were you at the Weston Priory?"

Mary, Brendan and Sissy all spoke together:

"Mary - "

"Brendan - "

"Hobart?"

They turned together to face Hobart. Brendan thought he looked sufficiently smug and self-assured to produce a pipe and take his sweet time to fill, tamp, and light it. But Hobart began lightly shaking his upturned index finger and touching his lower lip with it as if encouraging his mouth to come up with a good one. His brain seemed to be on loan. He turned away from them and took a few tentative steps in what they took to be the start of a fine go at pacing to facilitate the brainstorming process. Instead, he quickened his step and walked in a brisk clip down the sidewalk away from them. All three stood watching for a staid moment, then took off after him.

"Hobart, wait!" Sissy and Mary yelled in tandem.

This inspired Hobart to break into a run.

"Wait, you bastard!" O'Toole yelled. A passing elderly woman clutching an umbrella looked at the collared

clergyman in astonishment. He smiled and nodded, then took off running. The two women followed.

O'Toole ran as fast as he could during this initial burst, as he knew this initial burst might be the only one.

He walked thirty minutes each day on the track at his health club as men in their seventies huffed by him in a real run. He was afraid of a heart attack. He felt like Churchill in his last years. He would then do some reps for ten minutes on the weight machines. He noted that in six months his abs and pecs had gone from nonexistent to unimpressive. Then he would sit in the steam-room at a frighteningly high temperature until he believed all the toxins had been flushed through his pores. Then he would swim for five minutes, mostly just stretching his limbs. That was his workout. Wimp City.

Now he was running full-bore, and he knew the burning in his lungs was still to come.

Hobart ran on the tips of his toes, as O'Toole imagined George Plimpton might have. Where was he going?

Hobart had gained a great deal of ground from his pursuers, and O'Toole was thinking that he was lost, when providence intervened in the form of an honest-to-God fruit

cart. A man wearing a red apron and straw boater suddenly appeared whistling from around a brick-wall corner. Hobart hit the cart like a ton of bricks himself - BOOM! - and went cart-wheeling over the cart onto the pavement. He fell so hard, ass over teakettle, O'Toole's first thought was that he was probably dead. As he tried to remember the questions for the Sacrament of the Last Rites, he slowed his pace, settling into heavy breathing and a pounding heartbeat. At times like this, he expected cardiac arrest like a letter that had been posted and was now late in the mail.

The fruit-peddler looked like he was from Central Casting. O'Toole supposed he might speak with a Greek or Italian accent. He was kneeling next to Hobart, who was moaning on the pavement.

"He just crashed into me! I didn't even see him!"

"I know," O'Toole said, panting. "I saw the whole thing. Is he badly hurt?"

"He landed on his back. I think his head's okay. Hey, buddy," the peddler said to Hobart, "can you hear me?"

The two women arrived, taking either side of the prostrate Hobart.

"Why was he running like that?" demanded the fruit-peddler.

O'Toole spied a pile of Rainier cherries from the West Coast - these plump, yellow and pink lovelies were hard to find in New England.

"How much for the cherries?" asked O'Toole.

"What?" asked the peddler.

"The cherries - how much?"

"Buddy - Father - whatever - I'm an actor, not a fruit seller. I'm wheeling this thing up two blocks for a T.V. commercial."

"I thought you were real."

"Yeah, sure - eighty years ago in Boston I might be a-sellin' dese-a banans anna melon-ays. What, are you stupid?"

"No. But thanks for asking."

Hobart had opened his eyes and was shaking his head. O'Toole had the idea he was faking, but couldn't be sure. The clincher was when Sissy attempted to loosen his bow tie and he reacted quickly and unhappily.

"Am I alright?" Hobart asked.

"Yes, baby, I think so," said Mary.

"I wouldn't go that far," said Sissy.

"What would you take for the cherries?" asked O'Toole.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" said the fruit peddler.

"Are you a real priest? I bet you're not. Here - " he pulled a clump of the fruit from the bunch and plopped it roughly into O'Toole's hand. "Now leave me alone!"

He adjusted his apron and boater, and pushed his cart with indignation away from the sprawled Hobart, the two women, and the priest holding a fistful of cherries. Mary picked up Hobart's glasses, and went to place them on his head, but he pulled her head to his for a kiss. She took his hand. At this point, Sissy rose.

"We'd better take him to the hospital," she said.

"Really?" O'Toole asked.

"Just to be safe."

"Yeah, he may have bruised his bow-tie," he said.

O'Toole popped one of the cherries into his mouth, biting off the stem, chewing with pleasure, then spitting the pit into his palm.

"Are they really that good?" asked Sissy.

He handed one to her. She chomped with enthusiasm and spit her pit onto the sidewalk.

"Shit, those are delicious!"

"Tell me about it," said O'Toole.

Hobart moaned as he tried to sit up.

"Should we call an ambulance?" Mary asked.

An EMT van came whipping round the corner, siren squealing.

"No need," said Sissy.

"I'm going to ride with him!" said Mary.

"Good," said Sissy. "I need to eat. We'll follow. Can I get your cell number?"

"I have it," said O'Toole.

"Of course you do," said Sissy.

Four black musicians in African garb were setting up their instruments on the sidewalk, oblivious to Hobart's plight.

The EMT technicians were two cheerful lesbians with crew cuts and builds like young sumo wrestlers. They checked Hobart's vitals, reflexes, cognition, and entire Ivy League psychic ensemble before slamming him onto a stretcher. As they hefted the stretcher into the van, the

musicians struck up the weird stringed instruments and talking drums, tuning. O'Toole soon recognized "The Girl From Ipanema." Mary leaned forward and scrambled into the van, her skirt hiked up revealing her polka dot, bikini-panty-clad bum. The two lesbians exchanged grins. Sissy looked at O'Toole, who was looking at Mary's butt, and grinned at him, then O'Toole grinned, feeling creepy. So much mirth caused by one little bottom.

#### **45        Mother and Son**

Sissy and O'Toole returned to the restaurant and their waitress, whose name turned out to be Sissy, a coincidence that O'Toole thought seemed to mildly annoy both women.

Aware of her unsettled state, O'Toole thought it wise not to mention Sissy's apparent unconcern for her son, manifested in her slow consumption of her food, then her lingering over dessert and Irish Coffee. She finally sighed and admitted that, yes, they should probably head to the hospital.



One of the EMTs had told O'Toole, when asked, that they would be taking Hobart to Fletcher Allen, the University of Vermont's medical center right there on campus. They proceeded.

Hobart was reclining behind a curtain off of the emergency room. Mary Roth had resumed clutching his hand. O'Toole thought it wasn't exactly the end of *Camille*, but close.

"Is he alright?" Sissy asked Mary.

"I'm fine," said Hobart valiantly.

"Just some scrapes and bruises," Mary said.

"It could have been worse," Hobart said.

"You could have been killed!" Mary said.

"Death by fruit-cart," Sissy said.

"I may sue," Hobart said.

"He was an actor," O'Toole said.

"What?"

"He wasn't a real fruit-peddler. He was on his way to shoot a commercial."

"The fruit was real," Hobart said. "I saw you eating it, Mother."

"I was hungry. Are they letting you go?"

"As soon as he's strong enough," Mary said.

"What the hell are you doing here, Hobart?" Sissy asked.

"Trying to save Father's fortune."

"Which part?"

"I'm thinking of all of us. I met with Winnie Plumrose."

"So did I," Sissy said.

"What?" This startled him, and he jerked his head forward, causing a yelp of pain. Mary cooed.

"You didn't queer the deal, did you?" Hobart asked.

"Intriguing semantics, Hobart. No, your deal's queer enough and apparently going through," Sissy said.

"Thank God."

"What are you doing here, Mary?" O'Toole asked.

"I'm with Hobart," she said, thrusting her chin out defiantly.

"So you were traveling up to Weston to see him, right? Where's Bob Rogers, Hobart?"

"I'm not talking to you," said Hobart. "I've heard about you from Mary. Some priest."

Mary looked embarrassed, and O'Toole felt ashamed. Sissy's face was unreadable.

"I'm worried about Dad," Hobart said.

"We all are," Sissy said.

"No - I think he's truly lost his marbles. We got word he's on an island in Lake Memphremagog."

"What in where?" Sissy asked impatiently.

"It's a huge lake. Part of it's in Newport, most of it's in Canada," Mary said.

"Did you tell the police?" Sissy asked.

"That would have been an interesting call, Mother. 'My mad-as-a-March-hare father may be exiled on some island in the middle of a lake. Could you check that out for me?'"

"I wonder if you really want him found," Sissy said.

"I was just thinking the same thing about you."

Mother and son stared each other down until Sissy's face colored and she walked off. Neither Mary nor Hobart looked at O'Toole. He could think of nothing to say, so he followed Sissy.

## 46        **Geography and Scrambled Eggs**

"Sissy's idea of an adventure in the great outdoors is sprinting in her bikini from the house to the hot tub in the cold dead of snowy winter. A real walk on the wild side."

Katie the Kukol Courier had been waiting for Sissy and O'Toole when they pulled into the driveway of Sissy's house. She was leaning against a retro Vespa-styled motor scooter. It was pink. She wore tight jeans with 80's-style beige leg-warmers over suede boots, and a thick, beige wool sweater. (O'Toole hadn't noticed at their first meeting how pretty and sexy she was. Perhaps his libido was stirring more often these days. Perhaps Nessie would rise to the surface in Inverness.) Now Katie and her boss were gathered with O'Toole in Sissy's kitchen.

"You're very lyrical," Sissy said. "Brendan, have I mentioned Katie's a wise-ass with no fear of her boss?"

"I picked up on that when we first met," O'Toole said.

Katie unfolded a map of Vermont particular to waterways and spread it on the kitchen island. She referenced a blue line with a pencil as a pointer.

"This is Lake Memphremagog. It drains north via the Magog River in Quebec to the Saint-Francois River."

"Magog? Like Gog and Magog, from the Bible?" O'Toole asked.

"No," Katie said. "It's from the language of the Algonkian Indians. Algonquins to you whites. It means, 'Where there is a big expanse of water.'"

"Deep," Sissy said.

"It is," Katie said. "285 feet in places. And right now, as cold as a witch's tit. It's glacial."

"Is it going to be difficult to navigate?" O'Toole asked.

"Shouldn't be, if you can handle a speedboat, and teach Nature Girl here to do the same."

"Aren't you coming with us?" Sissy asked. "Isn't she coming with us?" she asked O'Toole.

"No can do, Bwana. I'm headlining a blue-grass festival at Bennington."

"She plays music," Sissy said sourly. "Who knew?"

"You might have asked."

"What about the islands?" O'Toole asked.

"Islands?"

"There are islands on the lake."

"Oh, yeah," of course," said Katie. "Sorry. There are about twenty of them, spread out over twenty-seven miles."

"Oh, God," O'Toole said.

"You stopping off at all of 'em? That could take a while."

Neither Sissy nor O'Toole spoke.

"And beware the Memphre," Katie said.

"The what?" Sissy asked.

"Memphre, the lake monster. Like Champ. And Nessie."

"Oh, God," O'Toole said.

"You keep saying that," Katie said. "Guess you really are religious, huh?"

O'Toole fixed her a look.

"Anyway," she said quickly. "If you don't know which island you're looking for..." Her voice trailed off.

"Is there some sort of atlas of them?" Sissy asked.

"I dunno," Katie said flatly. "Do I look like Ranger Rick?"

Katie declined an invitation to dinner with what O'Toole took to be genuine graciousness. She said she had a banjo lesson and left, leaving the map.

"Ranger Rick?" Sissy said.

"Children's magazine published by the National Wildlife Federation. Rick's a raccoon."

"The things I've missed."

Sissy ticked off several restaurants that would provide fine dining, but O'Toole said firmly that he felt like cooking for her and staying in over a quiet meal. She looked chastened, then pleased.

He didn't want to do any shopping, either.

"There's nothing in the fridge," she said.

"Your fridge? Nonsense."

He found fresh asparagus and red potatoes and set her to mixing a hollandaise sauce from scratch.

"You're my *suisse-chef*," he said.

"That's a polite term for what I am."

O'Toole took six eggs, real butter, and heavy cream and whipped up a golden-brown omelet filled with brie,

Portobello mushrooms, diced Spam and *fines herbes* from Sissy's well-stocked and seldom used spice rack. Candles, a dusted-off bottle of malbec from a show rack, and a CD of Beethoven piano sonatas would do the rest. He cautioned her to wait till all had cooled sufficiently before tucking in.

"This is incredible," she said after the first bite. "It's delicious. With Spam, for Christ's sake!"

"I like Spam. I'm surprised you keep it."

"George," she said, forking in gooey tendrils of brie. "I'm too much of a snob."

"It's comfort food."

She swallowed her mouthful, put her fork down, and daintily touched her lips with her napkin.

"Brendan. My idea of comfort food is Oysters Rockefeller."

He laughed happily and realized how relaxed and content he was, being with her. Her smile was especially beautiful in the candlelight. Sissy had impeccable table manners, but he liked the fact that she was a woman with no self-consciousness about eating in front of a man. (He had encountered this baffling reluctance even among confident women, a hand constantly fluttering to cover a mouth.)



"Try some of the jalapeno jam with your omelet," he said.

"How are we going to find this one island out of twenty in twenty-seven miles, Brendan? Should we even make an attempt?"

Without a split-second's thought, he replied, "You sure you really *do* want to find him?"

It was as if he had just rolled down a window at 30,000 feet. He had said the wrong thing.

Her face set itself into a mask of hurt and anger, and her eyes flashed wetly.

"Why did you say that?"

He failed to rally, weakly saying, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean - " He could have kicked himself for that one, too.

She rose and walked to the window. He knew he should jump up and hurry to her, or sit stoically for an adult exchange, or beg her forgiveness, or turn back the clock, and he knew he didn't know what to do. He did know he was sad, mute, and stupid. He stared bleakly at his food.

"I shouldn't have said that," he said, finally.

"And your son shouldn't have said that."

"It's true."

"Oh."

"Yup. I'm sorry."

"So am I."

"For me?" she asked.

"No. Well - for everything."

Sissy sat down and finished her food, joking that her state of mind and multiple cigarettes never inhibited her appetite. She praised O'Toole's cooking again, saying someday he'd make some lucky girl a fine wife. He was charmed, as always.

O'Toole made no assumptions about the remainder of the evening, but after she had cleared the table and O'Toole was sitting in a plush chair in the living room, she approached with two heated snifters of Remy. She settled herself on his lap and went to work.

**47        Laurel Might Be a Sociopath**

Sissy and O'Toole realized they had no idea what they were doing. How were they to go about finding George in the vast 27-mile expanse of the lake? Katie had been no help on this point either: she had never tried to find someone potentially encamped on a series of inland islands, nor did she know of anyone who had tried. They were on their own.

They decided that the next morning they would simply travel the many miles up to Newport, find a hotel ("I wonder if Newport has any hotels," said Katie), and take it from there. An earnest of this knowledge was their complete lack of conversation all the way up. They alternated two albums - his CD of Dennis Wilson's *Pacific Ocean Blue*, and hers of Serge Gainsbourg's *Histoire de Melody Nelson*. They barely said a word while traveling, and both were just fine with that.

They passed the "Welcome to Newport - the Friendliest Little Town in Vermont" sign when a Comfort Inn loomed on a promontory jutting into Lake Mehempregog.

"Accomodations!" O'Toole sibilated in his campiest voice. Sissy laughed and had a frightening, split-second flash that she might love him.

They checked in as Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert K. Chesterton. Unpacked and freshened up, they went together to speak to the desk clerk, who looked young enough to be working towards her next merit badge.

"We were hoping to hire a boat to explore the lake," said O'Toole. It was March and cold, and all three suddenly looked as if this remark were very strange indeed.

"There's boat rentals in the summer," said the clerk, whose name-tag announced her as Ashley. "But they ain't open now." Sissy noticed Ashley had a green and red dragon-fly tattooed at the base of her throat.

"They ain't open now," O'Toole said to Sissy in a low voice. She suppressed a smile.

"I could prolly get ya a boat," piped in a deep voice from a back office.

"Hello?" Sissy called to the empty space.

"That's Chauncey," Ashley said. "He's the manager."

Chauncey emerged from the rear -- fat, bald, sixtyish. "Ya needs a valid pilot's license."

"Got one," said Sissy.

"You do?" asked O'Toole in amazement.

"Yes, my darling husband, I do." She turned to Chauncey. "Amazing the things that escape notice when you're married."

"Got that right. Was with the missus six years afore she knowed I jarred piccalilli on a annual basis. Can you beat that?"

"Thing is," O'Toole said, "We really need a guide out on the lake."

"You fishin'?" asked Chauncey.

O'Toole and Sissy answered no and yes, respectively, at the same time.

"I hope to catch a few bass," Sissy said. "My husband doesn't like to bait the hooks."

"Uh huh," Chauncey said.

O'Toole managed an anemic smile, then said, "I'm bringing a Methodist church youth group up here in the summer, and wanted to check out some of the islands as potential picnic spots."

"Picnic spots?" Chauncey asked. He and Ashley exchanged a glance.

"Yeah," Sissy said. "You know - to eat lunch?"

O'Toole could feel her temper rising like a wave of heat.

"There ain't any boats this time of year," Ashley said.

"Then I guess we're screwed," Sissy said, looking down at the counter.

"Not necessarily," Chauncey said. He squeezed his plump lower lip with thumb and forefinger to facilitate the thinking process. "My nephew got laid off when the cannery closed last Thanksgivin'. He's got a boat and knows the Memph like the back of his hand. He'd prolly take ya."

"That's great!" Sissy said.

"Take ya to the cleaners, too."

"How's that?" O'Toole asked.

"I expect he'll charge you an exuberant fee, bein' unemployed and all, and likin' his beer like he does."

"Exuberant?" O'Toole said.

"Yeah, couple a hundred, prolly."

Sissy and O'Toole looked to one another, then she said, "That's fine."

"I'll give him a ring," Chauncey said, and withdrew to the back office.

Sissy, O'Toole, and Ashley stood in silence for only a brief moment when Ashley asked, "You two swim?"

"Yeah," O'Toole said.

"Why?" Sissy asked.

"Just askin'," she said, then glanced nervously at the back office.

"Is Chauncey's nephew a good boater?" O'Toole asked.

"Oh, sure," she answered quickly. "He's a great boater, a great boater alright, but Laurel..." She trailed off.

"Laurel?" Sissy asked.

"That's Chaunce's nephew. Laurel's a really nice guy -- until he ain't."

"Come again?" Sissy said.

As Chauncey entered the front desk area, Ashley whispered, "They joke that Laurel's a great bunch of guys. I think he's what they call a sociopath, but don't take my word for it."

## **48     The Church and Chili Dogs**

They had left Breckenridge at dawn; by now, it felt to both like late afternoon, but was, in fact, time for lunch. Chauncey said that Laurel would meet them with his boat at the slip down by the Getty 'bout two-ish. They decided to stroll.

"What's up with your church?" Sissy asked.

"In what sense?"

"I mean St. Helena's."

"Ah, yes, my church. Nothing's up."

"Meaning?" she said.

"Meaning this lovely church is going to close, and not one of my devout and devoted parishioners is raising even a single voice in protest. No petitions or angry phone calls, e-mails, sit-ins or even a candle-light vigil. Much less the siege of the church like that gang did down in Massachusetts."

"You would have liked some of that at St. Helena's?"

"Hell, yes."



He was silent for a moment, then said, "I guess I wanted them to care. I thought I cared. But I guess I didn't care enough if this was their response. Or lack thereof."

Sissy took his hand.

"I *thought* they liked me," he said.

This seemed to Sissy no time to spoon him any pap.

"Why did you become a priest in the first place?" she asked.

"Another time - I promise," he said.

Although the lakefront road in tiny and remote Newport was deserted, she was aware that a married woman was romantically sauntering hand-in-hand in public with a Catholic priest. She did not care. In fact, she felt so good about this man, a lovely warmth spread within her. The chill air sharpened her appetite.

She smiled and said, "Let's find some food."

The only place they found was called the Dog House, which suited both fine. Sissy had a steamed hot dog with chili, onions, and Tabasco, O'Toole two steamed dogs with sauerkraut, hot red peppers and brown mustard. They sat outside and ate, washing the food down with cold Cokes.

"Hangover food," Sissy said dismally.

"I know." He lifted his red plastic cup, packed with ice and the bubbly, biting soft drink. "Coca-Cola. Against which may no man say a word."

Sissy shoveled a plastic forkful of runny chili and crisp hot dog into her mouth and munched with full cheeks.

"I like the way you talk," she said with her mouth full, then laughed, and wiped her lips with her paper napkin.

"I like the fact that you eat with relish and don't give a damn. You're a doll."

"No relish. Just Tabasco."

"Gusto, then."

"Ain't that what Errol Flynn and his Hollywood pals used to have in the forties?"

They had been saying *ain't* a lot that day.

She took another forkful of chili and hot dog, and her luscious lips were smeared red and brown. She looked much the enticing slob. O'Toole leaned forward over the table, placed his hand gently on the back of her head to hold her steady, and licked her lips clean before kissing them with gusto.

When he pulled away, she looked misty-eyed, smiled sweetly, resumed chewing, and swallowed.

"I love you," he said.

"Me, too, " she said. "Now what?"

## **49      Ghost Ship**

They arrived at the dock early, and Nate, the owner of the Getty, said it was okay to park next to the tarpaulin-covered motor home.

Laurel was waiting.

Laurel was tall and thin, bony with a shaved head, a spiky week's growth of beard, beady eyes behind bead-enhancing wire-framed glasses. He wore an impossibly thick, filthy wool sweater that had once been off-white. It looked as if spun directly from the ram. He looked about fifty, and he grinned widely as Sissy and O'Toole approached, revealing a gap from a missing tooth, dead-center in his insincere smile.

They approached and O'Toole thought he might speak. He didn't.

"Mr. - Laurel?" Sissy asked.

He grinned even wider. "Don't call me mister," he said. "Just kidding." He didn't offer his hand, but kept his arms tightly folded across his chest.

O'Toole stepped up. "We were hoping you could pilot us around the lake," he said.

"Hope springs eternal," Laurel said.

"What?"

"Just kidding. Why you want to go to the islands?"

"We're looking for someone," said Sissy.

"On the islands?" Laurel asked.

"Yeah," Sissy said.

"Wow. That's weird. Like a runaway or somebody abducted or something?"

"No. Nothing like that," O'Toole said. "Just someone who might be - staying there. On one of the islands."

"My husband," Sissy piped in.

O'Toole could see Laurel grin and look from him to her and back again. O'Toole realized he didn't like Laurel.

"Your husband might be on one of them islands?"

"Possibly," she said.

He whistled, looked off in the distance, then asked, "You both swim?"

"Yes, we do," said O'Toole with authority. "But we were hoping to avoid that today."

Laurel laughed like that was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. "Well, o' course. I just need to know, as the captain of this vessel."

O'Toole saw for the first time the name painted on the boat: *The Mary C.*

"You have life-jackets?" Sissy asked.

"Just the one," said Laurel, and chuckled. "Just kidding. Course I got life-jackets!"

"How much for a few hours on the lake?" Sissy asked.

"I ain't goin' into Canadian waters," Laurel said sharply.

"That's fine," O'Toole said. "What about here on the domestic side?"

Laurel visibly appraised them, scratched his beard, rolled his eyes and said, "Three hundred."

"Two," Sissy said.

"Deal. I gotta go to the can. Suggest you do the same. Be right back."

When he was gone, Sissy said, "Can it get any worse?"

"You see the name of the boat?" O'Toole asked.

"Yeah. So?"

"*The Mary C.* Like the *Mary Celeste*?"

"The who?"

"The *Mary Celeste*. It was found abandoned, under sail in the Atlantic in 1872. No signs of violence or piracy, but everyone was gone. It's one of the most famous ghost ships in history."

"And you think this hedgehog named his dinghy after that?"

"Prolly."

"You know what your big problem is, Brendan? Your imagination. He prolly - *probably* -- christened this crate after some Dairy Queen chick he banged in high school. You need to go to the can, as Captain Laurel put it?"

"No."

"Well, I do. I'm off to the Getty."

She flounced off, swinging her hips like a bell, then disarmed O'Toole by spinning around to grin at him: she knew he was watching her pretty rear view. He was embarrassed. And delighted.

They returned at the same time, Laurel with a tall can of Pringle's potato chips, and Sissy with two half-sour pickles, straight from the convenience store barrel.

"You're kidding," O'Toole said.

"Nobody seems to be kidding around here," she said. "A touch of the quaint. They settle my tum. Eat yours or I will."

O'Toole crunched into the crisp pickle with a snap. Sour as hell, and delicious.

"You two ready to haul?" Laurel asked.

"Aye-aye, sir," Sissy said, dead-pan.

Laurel tossed the lines, gunned the engine, and backed the boat out. O'Toole gestured to the worthy-looking life-jackets in the corner of the boat. Sissy nodded. They both sat down behind Laurel as he gunned the engine and motored away from the dock.

Sissy grinned at O'Toole, then said as coyly as yelling over the outboard would allow, "Laurel - why did you name your boat *The Mary C.*?"

"Ever hear of the *Mary Celeste*?" he shouted over his shoulder. "She was this ghost ship found abandoned...."

She coughed violently, choking on her pickle, and glanced at a blank-faced O'Toole.

## **50        Diary of a Lousy Priest**

They had not ventured far when their pilot steered his boat to a ramshackle, bleached dock at the first island they came to.

"Will this thing hold us?" O'Toole asked as Laurel tied the boat to the buckled, rotting structure.

"This is Mathers' Rock," said Laurel. "Ain't nothing here."

True, the island was little more than a huge rock elevated from the blue water of the lake, thatched with weeds and scrub-growth. A few trees seemed to proudly claim ownership.

"Then why are we here?" O'Toole asked.



"You said you wanted to see all the islands."

"Only the islands that someone might stay on,"

O'Toole said.

"Well, how in hell am I s'posed to know which ones they are?"

"Good point," Sissy said, putting a hand on O'Toole's arm.

"Okay," O'Toole said. "Let's move on to the first big island we can get to. Where would that be?"

"That'd be Big Island," Laurel said. "Few miles up-lake." He grunted and untied the knot he had just tied.

Laurel shifted the boat, cutting into the water, but kept the motor low as he steered the boat through the lake. Sissy and O'Toole entwined around each other at the back of the boat, and with the engine in a low gear, found they could speak with relative ease.

"I swear I could smell pot when he came back from the Getty," O'Toole said.

"You know what pot smells like, Father?"

"I do. You?"

"George and I quit together."

"How sweet."

"It was Buffy's imbecility. We kept dope in the freezer and told the kids hands off. The boys abided, but my daughter swiped some one afternoon to take up with a boy friend."

"How did you find out?"

"It wasn't pot. She and her equally brain-dead companion had rolled a joint using thawed-out catnip. They were sick as dogs. George took that as a sign to quit."

"Why was there catnip in the freezer?"

"Keeps it fresh, natch."

"I was never much of a fan," O'Toole said. "Of pot, I mean. Guess I'm paranoid enough without any enhancement."

Laurel sat at the wheel, his back lightning-rod straight, and guided the boat through the water with expert ease. They were both confident he would not overhear their conversation.

O'Toole said as if about to tell a long and sorry tale with great reluctance, "Why I became a priest."

"By Brendan O'Toole, defrocked priest, now a monk ministering to the lepers on the island of Molokai," Sissy added.

"It's *unfrocked*," O'Toole corrected. "And Molokai hasn't been a leper colony since 1969. Its famous Father Damien is a hero of mine."

"So tell me."

O'Toole thought a speedboat cutting across a cold lake in far northern New England in March would not seem the ideal setting for biography, but their strange pilot kept the speed slow and steady, and the volume of the engine was more an accompaniment than hindrance.

He spoke to her of his fears as a younger man; his realization that even if he attained all the material comforts he could ever desire, they would most likely not bring him any real satisfaction; his suspicion that even the deep and enduring love of a good woman and the siring of his own flesh and blood would not fill the void. A legacy lives on, but not for the dead. He was self-absorbed, and needed to serve his fellow man, to serve God he wanted to be nearer to God. Only then would he achieve anything close to grace. He did not want to waste any more of his time and life in the pursuit of a paycheck, a car, a mystical orgasm. He craved the ascetic, the monastic, and a

higher plane. Did he enter the seminary to counter his self-obsession, or to indulge it by flirting with God?

Seminary was a breeze. He ignored, even accepted, the clandestine and self-lacerating homosexuality all around him, and concentrated on his studies with a single-mindedness he hitherto was unaware he possessed. He realized he was more at home with what his Jesuit professors dismissed and he enjoyed - more Garry Wills, less Saints Paul and Augustine - but felt the thrill of the heretical as he briefly considered both Jansenism and Quietism. He truly believed, despite a twenty-year subscription to *Playboy*, that giving up sex would be relatively easy with the taking of vows. The spirit would overcome the weakness of the flesh.

The chinks in his spiritual armor appeared almost immediately. He spent time in monasteries - Trappist, Carmelite and Cistercian - in New England and Europe. The first week was an exhilarating swoon of meditation, reflection and serenity. By the second week, without fail, he was going nuts. He needed his music and his DVDs, and to push his car just that much too fast around a hair-pin

turn. He needed to cook, and not leek and potato soup for twenty.

The second crack appeared when he was asked to try missionary work in some obscure outpost where he would slowly go to pieces under a ceiling-fan. He liked the concept of this exile amongst brown-skinned peoples, and was told of potential postings in Africa, Haiti, Costa Rica, and Latin American backwaters he had never even heard of.

An Australian priest named Matt Gats spoke to O'Toole at a men's Catholic conference on Long island and told him of his three years building wells in Ecuador. The work was filthy, exhausting, and monotonous. He was surrounded by Peace Corps misfits. The peasants dutifully took communion, then ritually cut the throats of game-cocks. Father Gats said that while "in the bush," he became addicted to the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and *punta*, the burning sugar-cane home-brew that was cheap and plentiful.

"The *punta* greased the skids that slid me right into the *senoritas*," he unabashedly informed a shocked O'Toole. "They thought it a privilege to take in the holy

white man's semen. Gorgeous girls, all cinammon skin and musky smell, with those great sixteen-year-old boobs. Got the clap non-stop, of course."

In the space of a month O'Toole had determined he was unfit for a monastery or a mission. He was assigned to a parish in Machias, Maine, under a gentle and elderly Monsignor named Burns, who dropped dead during a baptism a month after O'Toole's arrival. He was then dispatched to Breckenridge, where he served under Father Donilon for a year until Donilon's retirement six months ago. O'Toole told a fascinated Sissy that teenage girls and young women and middle-aged wives all emerged from the congregation to let it be known that they were willing to sexually lead him to Hell if he were interested.

"I don't believe it," she said. "How many propositions are we talking about?"

"Half a dozen. High school girls to grandmothers in their sixties. Had I become a priest to get laid, I would have been in Heaven."

"And this prompted doubt?"

O'Toole looked sheepish. "Aw, Sissy. I know - knew - I'd made a mistake. And it's not just sexual temptation.

I hate to say it, but I could probably live with that if I truly believed I was a good priest. But I'm not. I don't know if God's listening, or if I'm worthy of being listened to, and that's almost blasphemy, in my book. Maybe mankind was just some kind of experiment that He or She took a shot at, and now we are -- God having lost interest -- in those Last Days the crackpot Evangelicals keep talking about."

Sissy put her arm around his shoulder.

"I don't believe God could be that juvenile," she said.

"You see? And I'm the priest."

"That's it!" yelled Laurel.

An honest-to-goodness, land-ho! tree-lined stretch of cliffs and trees loomed up ahead of them.

"Next stop, Big Island," said Sissy.

## **51        The Two Jessies**

A young man and young woman, college-age, descended a path to the waterfront as Laurel tied up his creepy boat.

"Ahoy," said the young man.

He and the girl both had thick heads of blond dreadlocks. His untrimmed, bushy beard grew straight down his throat to his chest. Both were under-dressed for the weather in tee-shirts. Sissy noticed the twin spikes of the girl's presumably frigid nipples, ready to slice through the thin material of her blouse.

"Welcome to Big Island!" the girl said.

"Thank you," Sissy said. Laurel, without the discreet cover of dark glasses, studied the girl's turgid little protuberances as if deciding whether to bite them off. Both the boy and girl seemed to dig Laurel's bad vibes right quick.

"To what do we owe the pleasure? I'm Jessie." He said.

"And so am I," the girl said.

"Really?" Sissy was grinning.

"Yep. Water seeks its own level," he said. "Even though I'm six-two and she's four-eleven."

"Must make for interesting arithmetic," Laurel said. "Just kidding."

Jessie and Jessie gave O'Toole and Sissy uncomfortable looks.



"Can we offer you a cup of tea or coffee?" asked Jessie the girl.

"That would be lovely," Sissy said.

"Clamber this way," said Jessie the boy.

He led them up a steep path and over an embankment, and O'Toole almost laughed with delight when the sight of their little homestead came into view.

There were two shack-like structures -- big bungalows - built on sandy bluffs that looked as if they couldn't possibly support the structures. They faced each other across a beach lapped by a tranquil lagoon-like bay of sparkling, shallow water that dropped off to dark depths a dozen yards off shore. Smoke billowed from chimneys jutting from the roofs of the twin houses. A black Lab and a golden retriever sloppily jawed each other in the sandy, sparkling "yard."

"You live here?" asked Sissy.

"We sure do," said girl Jessie.

"Don't be too impressed," said the gangly guy.

"We're not self-sufficient, though I'm proud of that garden," he said pointing to a large plot of turned soil on

a grassy knoll. Plastic sheets were spread over rows with stakes.

"A garden? In March?" O'Toole asked.

"Cold-weather gardening. People have been doing it in New England for centuries. I got parsnips, turnips, potatoes, cabbage, rutabaga, and carrots so sweet with cold-protective enzyme-rich sugar, your head would spin."

Laurel snorted.

"We go to the mainland twice a week," said the petite, dimpled girl. O'Toole thought the coupling of the tiny dread-locked Jessie with the tall, dread-locked bearded Jessie rather charming.

"What do you do out here?" Sissy asked.

"Live well," said male Jessie.

"We're into Tao," the girl said.

Laurel snorted again. O'Toole happened to be right behind him and said into his ear, "If you do that one more time, I'm going to break both your little fingers, and you'll puke all over yourself."

Laurel turned slowly and narrowed his eyes at O'Toole. The priest knew a line had been crossed, and he felt fine with that. Laurel smiled. There was no warmth

emanating from his widely-spaced teeth. O'Toole was reminded of a happy shark.

Jessie and Jessie invited them into their home, the interior of which immediately delighted Sissy - big, deep wicker and rattan sofa and chairs covered with fat pillows and quilts, a roaring wood-stove popping and sparking in a corner of the room. The glass of the windows looked thick and hand-blown, and a smell of delicious herbs and meals recently cooked hung in the air. A fat, three-legged cat happily and loudly greeted them. "That's Jamaica," male Jessie said.

"He came home one day with a mangled leg. The vet said we could splint it, drug him, spend tons of money, and probably provide him with years of agony."

"Or we could lop it off," female Jessie said, "and he'd be right as rain in two weeks."

"And he has been," said her namesake. "How about some dandelion root tea? It's bitter as gall, but great for the liver."

"Sounds swell," O'Toole said.

"That would be lovely," said Sissy.

"None for me," Laurel said. He appeared to O'Toole to be casing the joint.

"Have a seat," said the girl as she bustled her pretty, corduroyed bottom into the kitchen to make the tea.

"So - you three touring the lake?" the young man asked.

"We're actually looking for some one," Sissy said.

Jessie paused only a moment. "It wouldn't be George, would it?"

## **52        The Isle of Capri**

Girl Jessie had brought forth tea on a tray, and served it unassumingly, with an approximation of Chinese manners. Sissy had to dump spoonfuls of sugar - a substance she didn't use - into the acrid beverage, and was awed by O'Toole's drinking his straight without a grimace.

"How do you know about my husband?" Sissy asked.

"George is your husband?" the two Jessies asked together, then laughed.

"Yes. Brendan is my - friend. Priest."

"A Catholic priest?" the boy asked with interest.

"Yes." O'Toole said.

"You telling me you're a Catholic?" Laurel asked with a scowl.

"You have to be a Catholic to be a Catholic priest. They insist," O'Toole said. "That displease you, Laurel?"

The tension in the room was almost visible. Laurel made no answer, but looked around as if to find a place to spit, then evidently thought better of it.

"We haven't met him," the boy said. "But there are steady travelers up and down the river. Less so this time of year, but the Coast Guard and the Customs officers stop in for a visit pretty regular."

Laurel whistled, lowly and pointlessly.

"But we've heard about him," the girl said.

"Everyone who meets him comes away impressed."

"Even changed," the boy said.

"We'd like to meet him, though," the girl said. "Is he in some kind of trouble?"

"Not exactly," Sissy said. "He's just going through some personal problems."

"People seem to be going to *him* with their personal problems," the boy said. "Capri's becoming kind of a Mecca."

"The authorities are okay with him staying there?"

"He's a guest - and some friend of his, too, I guess."

"A guest?" Sissy asked. "Of who? Whom?"

"The owner, a surly old woodchuck named Ezra Pinkham. There's a shack on the clump, I think built just for overnight fishing, but it's got a stove. Word has it that Ezra went out there with a shotgun to drive them off, spent twenty minutes talking to George, then gave him unlimited use of the island and all its amenities."

"That sounds like George," Sissy said without humor.

"Only six miles of Lake Memphremagog is in the U.S. We sure have the widest part - but it's only three miles," the boy said. "The largest island - about seventy acres - is on the Canadian side. It's called Province. The cottages that are visible from the water are all in serious need of repair - I mean very, very rustic."

Sissy glanced at the extreme rusticity of this domicile and tried to imagine a more severe form.

"There was rum-running from Canada during Prohibition," said the female Jessie brightly. "Probably still is."

"So, boating's the big attraction?" O'Toole asked.

"Not at all," male Jessie said. "The winter."

"The winter?" Sissy asked.

"Snowmobiling on the lake, and ice-fishing - there are virtual shanty-cities that crop up in the cold months."

"We have our own monster, too," the girl said proudly.

"Come again?" O'Toole said.

"Memphre," she said. "Just like Nessie in Scotland and Champ in Burlington. He's been spotted countless times."

"I seen the videotape," Laurel said.

Good God, O'Toole thought. "Have you seen this beast?"

"Never had the pleasure," the boy said.

"Me neither," Laurel said. "Bunch of crap."

"So where's George?" O'Toole asked.

"He's on a clump called Capri," male Jessie said.

Sissy was impressed that the young man pronounced the name properly, with the accent on the first syllable.

"An illustrious name for a clump," Sissy said.

"Indeed."

"Is it on the Canadian side?"

Girl Jessie said, "If you're planning on going into Canada, I hope you filled out local port reporting requirements with the -- "

"I ain't goin' into Canada!" said Laurel fiercely.

She paused and stared at him. "...Office of Customs in Newport."

"Like Laurel says," O'Toole said, "We ain't going into Canada."

Laurel glared at the priest.

"It's on our side," the boy said.

"I know that," Laurel said.

"But do you know where it is, Laurel?" Sissy asked.

"Course."

"Can you bring us there?"

"I could, yeah." Then Laurel grinned in a manner that the four others found disquieting. The party broke up.



The boy spoke to O'Toole in a low voice as Laurel readied his boat and Sissy and the girl chatted pleasantly.

"You both have cell phones?"

"Me and the Captain?"

"You and Sissy."

"Yes. Doesn't inspire a great sense of security, does he?"

"Where did you find him?"

"On the waterfront."

"I have a bad feeling about him," the boy said.

"Don't forget, water's water, and the lake is deep. People get a false sense of safety on the lake."

"I won't forget."

Jessie shook hands with O'Toole and wished him the best of luck. His girlfriend Jessie actually hugged O'Toole and Sissy as Laurel revved the outboard.

The sky had turned dark and the air cold and windy.

O'Toole and Sissy huddled together against the chill as best they could without actually embracing. It  
Butler--362

infuriated O'Toole that he and Sissy would keep up appearances for the ignorant, mean-spirited Laurel, but O'Toole had been stung by Laurel's apparent hostility to the Church, and felt he was upholding his integrity by continuing a charade of platonic relations. A fine concatenation, he thought.

"Good grief," O'Toole said aloud. Sissy didn't hear him over the roar of the engine, which Laurel was pushing with determination.

Then abruptly, Laurel brought down the throttle. Both Sissy and O'Toole looked up.

A bank of fog - more of a wall - was rolling towards them, obscuring all visibility. O'Toole was at first delighted.

"My God!" he said in astonishment.

"Look at that!" Sissy said with pleasure.

"Don't make no sense!" Laurel said with agitation.

"What?" O'Toole asked.

"It don't make no sense! You don't have fog like  
'at in March! It's crazy!"

He sounded edgy -- even frightened.

Butler-363

Sissy realized the logic. She recalled from a college Weather and Climate course that high humidity and the clash of warm and cold fronts were necessary to produce fog, usually an early morning occurrence. A titanic 1950's London Fog on a chilly Vermont lake in early spring didn't make sense.

"It's not impossible," she said weakly.

Laurel was barely idling the motor as the *Mary Celeste* slowly coasted forward through the still water. He finally killed the engine.

"Can't see," he said with finality.

There was a silence that should have seemed peaceful, but Sissy instead found eerie. No birds. No echoes of distant sound. It hung in the air for an almost immeasurable moment, and then there was a wild, freakish screech calling from the distance.

"What the hell was that?" Sissy whispered.

Laurel appeared frozen.

"What was that?" Sissy almost hissed.

Laurel whispered, too. "Ain't a loon or a cormorant." He paused. "Maybe a short-eared owl. Yeah, that's right. A short-eared owl. They're rare."

Butler-364

The high-pitched cry came again, as if bouncing off the walls of the fog bank. The three stood stock-still.

"Shit!" Laurel said, breaking the soundlessness.

"That ain't a bird or no animal I ever heard. That's a human being - some sinister lunatic playing games with me!"

O'Toole opened his mouth to comment on the irrational paranoia of Laurel's remark, then thought better of it. He was reminded of Sir Edmund Hillary's comment about his unprecedented ascent of Everest. An unearthly cry screeched through the impossible elevations. His Sherpa guides casually commented that this was the cry of the Yeti - the "abominable snowman" of the Himalayas. Sir Edmund later gave a charmingly ambiguous interview during which he was asked if he believed the horrific sound had been made by the mythic creature.

"Of course not. But I do know it wasn't an animal.  
Nor a man."

The fog had parted evenly, cleanly, like the Red Sea must have -- if it ever had -- to reveal a huge fortress of cliffs and trees, high and squat, about thirty feet dead ahead of them.

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"Shit!" Laurel said again, and raged the engine into action, then lowered the throttle to control a close approach. Huge stones lined this strange, almost atoll-like location.

"Gotta be a dock somewhere," Laurel said.

O'Toole didn't bother to ask if he was planning to circumvent the island, as Laurel began to do just that, with a slow and steady wariness of steering his vessel too close to the shore.

An impassable shoal of rock ringed the island. O'Toole wondered if he could clamber wetly across them to dry land without breaking a limb. The place seemed as intelligently designed as a castle keep.

Laurel pulled his boat wide to approach the last section of the gigantic rock before their circle was complete. The fog had completely lifted from this side of the island, and a sturdy, newly-built-looking dock with a steep set of wooden steps up an almost vertical face-cliff came into view.

"There she is," Laurel said.

"Thar she blows," Sissy said.

"The Rock of Saint George," O'Toole said.

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## **54        Ascension and Descent**

"Ahoy there, ye scurvy seadogs!" a voice boomed from the cliff above. O'Toole looked up and could not believe what he saw. It was Bob Rogers, dressed in some kind of robe and waving gleefully to the visitors.

"I'm not clambering all the way down, then all the way back, so come on up, Padre!"

"Friend of yours?" Laurel asked.

"No," O'Toole said. "We thought he drowned at a mental hospital, but then he turned up as a prisoner in a monastery."

"What?" Laurel said.

"Nice, Brendan," Sissy said.

"He's who?" Laurel asked.

"Let's go up," Sissy said.

She helped O'Toole off the boat while Laurel grappled with the lines. She wanted a head start.

The staircase was rickety and steep, and seemed to be an almost entirely vertical series of steps and landings. By the time the priest and Sissy reached the top, both were breathing heavily. Laurel trailed them slowly.

Butler-367

"I guess twelve thousand unfiltered Shermans have had an impact on my lung capacity," Sissy said.

"James Bond was a heavy smoker, and he never lost his wind," O'Toole managed to stammer while panting.

Sissy nodded in agreement.

Bob Rogers had stepped back and framed himself between two trees, arms folded across his chest for a fine presentation. He wore a scruffy thatch of beard, a denim beach hat, red basketball high-tops, and a monk's brown cassock. Around his neck hung three crosses of different style, a crucifix, and a set of rosary beads.

"Welcome to the Isle of Cap-ree!" Rogers said, grinning. He appraised O'Toole's condition and asked, "You gonna make it, Padre?"

"Never better," O'Toole said. "Well, Bob, Bob, Bob. You are so full of surprises."

"This the wife? George's, I mean?"

"Sissy St. Hilaire, meet Bob Rogers. Bob first drowned in the pond at the Breckenridge Retreat, then washed ashore in the murky goings-on at the Weston Priory."

Neither Rogers nor Sissy made a move to shake hands.

Butler-368

"I love the way he talks," Rogers said.

Laurel had now joined them and he and Rogers eyed each other like a pair of hyenas. O'Toole thought perhaps they recognized a kinship.

"What the hell are you doing here, Bob?" O'Toole asked.

"The Lord's work, Father Phony. Some of us have actually been touched by God's grace, FYI. I know why *you're* here, and you can forget it."



"I'm looking for my husband," Sissy said. "I'm worried about him."

Bob laughed indulgently.

"What's funny?" she asked.

"If you want to worry about something, worry about your own soul. George is right with the Lord, his house is in order, and he's been washed in the blood of the lamb."

O'Toole was tempted to make a crack about platitudes, but there was something about the intensity of Rogers' concentration - and a gleam in his eye - that the priest didn't like.

"But how is he?" Sissy said. "I have a right to know."

Butler-369

Bob smiled. "He's incredible. The man is a genius and a saint. He saved my life - and my soul. I have been redeemed." Rogers raised both hands on high and looked heavenward.

O'Toole had his suspicion reconfirmed that Rogers was insane.

"I need to see him," Sissy said.

Rogers' demeanor changed on the instant. He glowered.

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"He's gone. He left. He's not here."

"Where is he?" Sissy asked.

"He's gone away. So you can just leave."

O'Toole studied him coolly, then began in a gentle tone, "Can we have a tour of the island before - "

"No! I told you he's gone!"

"No, he's not, Bob. You wouldn't be here alone if he'd left. He's here. Just bring us to him," O'Toole said.

"Yeah," Laurel said. "Or maybe I'll have to kick your ass until you tell us where he is."

"Laurel - "O'Toole began.

Butler--370

Bob Rogers folded his arms across his chest and beamed a beatific smile.

"I'm not afraid of death," he said. "My reward will be in the life everlasting, with the Father, and the Son and the - "

Laurel stepped forward and slapped Rogers hard across the face. Rogers was no more stunned than Sissy or O'Toole.

"Let's go," Laurel said.

Rogers turned obediently and started walking. The others followed.

O'Toole felt an existential wave that almost moved him to tears: why was he here, in this ridiculous situation? He was the worst of men - one who had taken vows to serve God and his fellow men, and instead perpetrated a spineless faith and sexual abominations. Was he trying to help Sissy because he loved her, wanted to continue making love to her? Both? Why did he not possess the courage to obtain a single worthy conviction? *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the*

Butler-371

*difference.* That was from scripture, co-opted by the alkies, bless them.

Sissy was alsowhelmed by the moment: she was searching for a husband she no longer knew, and no longer knew if she wanted. She was acutely aware of her detachment from him, her children, and any sense of higher purpose. She wondered whether she should continue to live.

O'Toole and Sissy followed Laurel and Bob Rogers.

They didn't have far to go. The crest of the island was the size of an Olympic pool, with tall grass, weeds, trees, and bushes. Whole sections were clear of growth, and much of the top was rocky. Sissy, who had visited the real Isle of Capri, could see how some clever wag had hit on the name.

On the other side of the crest, they descended a mildly sloped hill that led down to a one-story shack. Beyond what could have been a beautiful vista of the lake were it not for the fog, an old but serious fence had been erected twenty feet past the house, and O'Toole saw this to be another sheer drop-off.

The roof of the shack had once been red with shingles, but the winds off of Memphremagog had made slow and steady work at eroding the color.

As they approached the door, Rogers said, "I'm not responsible for anything."

O'Toole was tempted again to upbraid Rogers, specifically on how rosary beads are never to be worn as jewelry, but he was nervous and frightened, and did not want to kick a crazy man who had just been struck.

Rogers opened the door and entered, followed by Laurel, O'Toole and Sissy.

There were no curtains or shades on the windows, but the room was dark and dank, smelling of stale garbage and urine from long ago. The meager furniture consisted of two single beds, a table and two chairs. O'Toole knew that something was very wrong with the place, as if some form of evil had taken up residence. He was reminded of Van Gogh's description of his painting *Night Café, Arles*, where he called the place a devil's furnace, where one can ruin oneself, or go mad.

On one of the beds lay George St. Hilaire. Sissy approached slowly.

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George was on his back, but propped up by blankets and pillows. He was much thinner than last they had seen him, his robust, well-muscled frame having dropped a good deal of weight, but his face provided the worst shock. He was deathly pale, clearly feverish, sweaty, hollow-eyed, and shivering. O'Toole knew he was very ill.

"George - darling - what's wrong?"

George focused on Sissy, and said matter-of-factly, "Hi, Pumpkin. What are you doing here?"

"What's wrong with him?" Sissy asked Rogers.

"Temperature. I don't have a thermometer."

George coughed, a rattling, phlegm-filled hacking.

"Sounds like pneumonia to me," Laurel said. "My mom died of that."

Sissy felt George's forehead and said, "Oh, good Lord."

"He'll be alright," Rogers said. "We've got lots of bottled water."

Sissy's voice came out in the even, fearless tone of a woman protecting her children - or someone she loved.

"He's going to the hospital this instant, and you're even going to help us, Bob."

George feebly protested, but his voice was weak and his words delirious.

They hefted George's tall, thick frame to his feet. It was immediately apparent he could not stand, much less walk.

"What if we each take an arm or leg?" Sissy asked.

"Then his ass is gonna drag across the ground," Laurel said.

"Oh. Right."

"Maybe I can heft him over my back," Brendan said.

Laurel snorted. "Yuh, right. You'll collapse under him like a cheap card-table."

"You saying you could do it?" O'Toole snapped.

"No, I aint. *I'd* collapse under him like a cheap card-table. Guy's built like a logger."

"Let's make a sling with the blanket," Sissy said.

"I think that's our only option," O'Toole said.

"Them stairs are gonna be a bitch," Laurel said.

O'Toole was filled with a sense of dread.

"We need to go slowly and carefully, that's all," Sissy said.

"That's all," Rogers said.

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Sissy spread out the musty blanket like they were setting up for a picnic, and O'Toole and Laurel carefully lowered George onto it. Each took a corner of the cloth in a tight, two-handed grip.

"I hope it holds," O'Toole said.

On the count of three they lifted George unsteadily - Laurel and O'Toole in front at his head -- and with more effort than they imagined required. Each exchanged worried looks.

"Let's go," Laurel said. They began to move.

They crossed with to the doorway and out of the shack. A light drizzle began to fall.

"Aw, shit. That's all we need," Laurel said.

They had barely carried George ten feet from the shack when O'Toole fully grasped how ghastly a task this was to be. George was Paul Bunyan big, and a dead weight hanging in this half-assed blanket-sling with no grips. The weight strained his arms, legs, and hands. A term from various math problems in grade school flashed across his mind: *pig iron*. What the hell was pig iron? What



distinguished it from regular iron? What was the relation to swine? For some reason the term had offended him as a

Butler-376

child, as if it were emblematic of rural, therefore masculine, things that he had no understanding of. The term offended him now. He decided when he got back to what passed for reality he would find out once and for all what pig iron was.

"Why did you hit me?" Bob Rogers asked, sounding more hurt than angry.

Laurel took a long time before answering, struggling, swaying George's bulk along with the others towards the long flight of steps.

"Figured it would eliminate arguments."

"What kind of man casually strikes someone he doesn't even know?" Sissy asked.

"Sissy," O'Toole said, and he wished he hadn't. To his ears, he sounded nervous and weak. She ignored him.

"I mean, that's kind of mentally ill, isn't it?" she asked. Laurel said nothing.

This time O'Toole tried to sound tough and commanding, as though giving an order.

"We all better conserve our breath and our energy," he said in a deep tone. Sissy merely glanced at him.

Butler-377

"I do what I have to do," Laurel said.

"You're a bully and an asshole," Rogers said angrily. "I bet everyone hated you when you were a kid."

Rogers seemed to draw strength from an idea that he and Sissy were united against Laurel.

"Look, you fat pig - "Laurel said, twisting around quickly to face Rogers. The abrupt move threw the balance off of the mission, and George spilled silently to the ground as if poured from a saucepan.

"What the hell?" Sissy yelled.

"I may be fat, but at least I'm not a psycho!" Rogers yelled.

"That's debatable!" O'Toole yelled.

The four stood staring at each other, letting George sprawl on the ground. His breathing was shallow. The drizzle was chilly, and their breath came out in misty puffs. A far-off bird cry broke the silence.

"You are a psycho," Rogers said to Laurel.

"And you're a fatty," Laurel said.

"Do either of you know what pig iron is?" O'Toole asked.

Butler-378

"What?" Rogers said, incredulous. Sissy watched O'Toole intently.

"Pig iron. Why's it called that? How's it different than good old plain iron?"

"Cause the mold looks like a bunch o' piglets at a sow. It's iron ore smelted with coke."

O'Toole smiled. "I get it. Well, thanks, Laurel, that's great." He turned to Sissy. "Learn something new every day!"

"Why the fuck are you asking about pig iron?" Rogers asked.

"It just occurred to me," O'Toole said. "No reason."

"Can we pick up my husband and get him to a doctor now?"

The three men regarded Sissy, then stooped and bent without a word to re-sling George's large and heavy body.

They at last reached the stairs.

"We can't do this," Rogers said. "It's impossible."

"We're taking him down these stairs, Bob," Sissy said, in a level, threatening, tone. "And that includes you. Do you understand?"

Butler-379

He stared at her, clearly weighing his options, then looked down in a form of surrender.

"I understand."

"It ain't impossible," said Laurel. "We just gotta go slow. And careful."

"Thank you," Sissy said.

The descent was harrowing. The steps were too narrow, the angles steep and dizzying, the railings too confining for their wholly inappropriate endeavor.

Each of the four asked to stop at least once. George seemed to grow heavier by the minute. At one point Bob Rogers slipped and lost his grip, but with stoic steeled nerves, the other three hung on until he righted himself.

After a slow and plodding ten minutes or so, they reached one of the three wider platforms that had been erected against the crumbling face-cliff.

"We've got to stop," Rogers said.

"No!" Sissy snapped.

"Lady," Laurel said. "Fatty's right. If we don't rest for at least a minute, we're going to lose our grip

Butler--380

and send him to the bottom. Now that won't help your husband any, will it?"

"Let's stop for a moment, Sissy" O'Toole said.

She said nothing, but gently set George down with the others on the small platform. Rogers sat down next to him.

"What have you been doing out here?" O'Toole asked gently.

"None of your beeswax," Rogers said coldly.

Not even slightly nonplussed, O'Toole said warmly, "Come on, Bob - I'm really interested. As a man of God and all that?" He smiled. Rogers thawed somewhat.

"We were communing."

"Communing?" O'Toole asked.

"With nature?" Sissy said.

"With *God*," Rogers said.

"How did you do that?" O'Toole asked.

Rogers shrugged. "It just happened."

"No - I mean, *what* did you do to commune with God?"

"Oh. We fasted. Well, George fasted. I had a big bag of cheese-doodles. We prayed, and sang."

"George sang?" Sissy asked incredulously.

Butler-381

"He has a beautiful voice," Rogers said.

"What did he sing?" Sissy asked.

"Lots of stuff. 'In the Sweet By and By' - 'I Am Thine, Oh Lord' - he taught me a lot of 'em. We sang all the time. 'California Girls' - that was fun."

"Give me that old time religion," Laurel said.

"And you prayed?" O'Toole asked.

"All the time. Not out loud."

"How did he get sick?" Sissy asked.

Rogers rubbed his face violently with his hands, then fisted his eyes. O'Toole was reminded of a man imitating a huge, absurd baby.

"He, uh - he would get into these - states."

"States?" Sissy asked.

"Yeah, like - altered states. He wasn't himself. This was after he'd meditate and pray for like, a couple hours. Then he'd..."

"What, Bob?" Sissy asked gently.

"He'd take all his clothes off. He'd stand in the wind facing the ocean, like this." He demonstrated, stretching his arms out like Moses in commandment, or a saint in supplication.

Butler-382

"Why?" O'Toole asked.

Rogers looked embarrassed. "He said it elevated his spirit and sharpened his concentration. I told him he'd catch cold."

Sissy and O'Toole looked at each other.

"He was in the rain one night, and it was really cold. He was soaked. I tried to pull him inside - I mean physically - and he got rough with me."

"What did he do?" O'Toole asked.

"He pushed me, hard. I fell over. I wasn't hurt," he added quickly. "Just surprised. He wasn't himself. I

didn't try that again." He paused. "He got sick right after that."

"Didn't you think he should get off this rock and see a doctor?" Sissy said angrily.

"Sissy," O'Toole said.

"I couldn't even get him to come in out of the rain! How the hell was I going to get him to leave? He didn't want to!" Rogers looked hurt.

"I'm sorry," Sissy said, unconvincingly.

"Are you?" Rogers asked.

"She said she was," Laurel said.

Butler-383

"Why don't you go kill yourself?" Rogers said.

"Let's go," O'Toole said.

As they bent in tandem to raise George again, the drizzle suddenly turned to heavy rain, striking and soaking them. Sissy studied the big drops splashing on her husband's face, then running in rivulets down his cheeks.

"Come on, Sissy," O'Toole said. "Lift. Everyone ready?"

They nodded or grunted.

"One - two - three - up."



They staggered upright, George in his sling swinging between them.

"The stairs are really wet now," Laurel said. "Be careful and don't fucking slip."

They took one step at a time, and it was excruciatingly slow going. O'Toole was wearing Brahma hiking boots, Laurel a similar pair. Sissy was in white Tretorn sneakers, but Bob Rogers was in smooth-soled espadrilles - a poor choice for the job and conditions. O'Toole worried about those espadrilles.

As they descended the staircase - built step by step and platform by platform at such absurd angles that it

Butler-384

appeared a German Expressionist joke to O'Toole - they each individually, then by apparent collective consent, descended into a trance-like state of utter silence and controlled breathing, a careful preservation of muscle exertion and tension. The chill air and tranquil sound of the rain seemed to create a Zen-like atmosphere, although O'Toole did notice Sissy's worsening shiver.

O'Toole was certain it took them at least forty-five minutes to reach the dock. They set George, who seemed unconscious, onto it to catch their collective breath. Sissy checked George's pulse and heartbeat.

"Jesus, his pulse is weak," she said, near tears.

"Let's get him in the boat," Laurel said quietly.

They maneuvered George into the *Marie Celeste* as best they could manage, with a seat cushion under his head.

It began to rain harder. Laurel, Sissy and O'Toole climbed into the boat. Rogers was still on the dock.

"I'm staying here," he said.

"Don't be crazy, Bob," O'Toole said. "How are you going to get off?"

Butler-385

Bob smiled. "I come and go with considerable ease," he said.

"Leave him," Laurel said.

"We have to go!" Sissy said. "George might be dying!"

"Last chance, Bob," O'Toole said evenly.

"No, thanks, and good luck. You'll hear about me, Padre - you can bet on it."

As the boat pulled away into the fog and rain, Rogers yelled, "God bless you!"

## 55      Sacrament

Sissy sat cradling her husband's head as the priest hugged himself against the wet cold.

"There's two slickers in that chest you're sitting on," Laurel said. "You should wear 'em."

"Thank you," O'Toole said. He removed the coats and handed one to Sissy, who wrapped it around George. O'Toole then offered his coat to her, but she shook her head with unmistakable finality. O'Toole hoped the return would be faster than the trip out.

Butler-386

The island was out of view, enveloped again by a huge fog bank, when the rain stopped. The outboard motor, seemingly taking its cue from the rain, also stopped. It didn't sputter or cough or shudder. It simply stopped, ceasing to make noise or movement in an instant.

"Please tell me you killed the engine," O'Toole said.

"Now why in hell would I do that?" Laurel asked irritably. He hit the ignition several times, but received only the click of a dead starter.

"Is it the battery?" O'Toole asked.

Laurel ignored the question, pulled out his cell phone and studied it.

"Dead. Nothing," he said in disgust.

Sissy tried hers: *Error in Connection*.

O'Toole's read: *Network Busy*. Technology was killing them all.

Sissy closed her eyes and looked about to cry, when George opened his, and looked around intently.

"Where are we going?" he asked. He looked happy.

"Darling -- are you alright?" Sissy asked.

"Do you have a cell-phone?" O'Toole asked.

Butler-387

"What?"

"Oh, never..." She choked audibly. "You might have pneumonia, George," she said. "You have a bad fever and your lungs are congested. I'm scared."

"Don't be scared, sweetheart," George said. "Oh -- hello, Father."

"I really wish you'd call me Brendan, George."

"Why?"

The sound they had heard on the trip out screeched again across the water. Laurel slumped heavily into the pilot's seat and tried the starter. It clicked impotently.

"Darling, where have you been?" Sissy asked.

"Everywhere. It's been a long, strange trip as we used to say, Cecilia. I've been making lots of plans and preparations."

"For what?" Sissy asked.

George looked around. "Where's Bob-O?"

"He wouldn't come with us," Sissy said.

"He stayed on the island," O'Toole said.

George closed his eyes. "Good for him," he said, smiling.

Butler-388

Sissy thought he was drifting off, but again, his eyes opened with feverish intensity.

"Why have we stopped?" George asked.

"Outboard stopped," Laurel said. "And we stopped with it."

"We'll be fine," George said. "We'll get there."

He exploded with a series of convulsive coughs.

"Oh, George," Sissy said fearfully.

"Father O'Toole," said George, as if summoning his strength. "Can I speak to you?"

"Of course."

"I have learned so much these last few weeks since the accident."

It came as a shock to Sissy that all that had occurred since then had taken only a few weeks. She felt like crying, but held it in.

"The accident was the best thing that's ever happened to me. God revealed himself to me in all His glory, and I finally understand why we're here, what He wants from us, what His purpose is."

O'Toole looked intently into George's burning eyes.

"Then tell me," he said.

Butler-389

"Don't you know? God is love. No, wait - " George started to laugh, then heaved in a spasm of coughing. It

took him a full minute to recover while Sissy squeezed his hand. "I don't mean hippie-guru stuff - I saw the expression on your face. I mean, Jesus and W. H. Auden said the same thing: 'We must love one another or die.' That doesn't mean a temporal death, but our precious time here on earth, with all of God's creations, and you don't look like you're buying this."

"I'm listening," said the priest. "I'm listening to every word."

"I remember when I was a kid, I heard the story of a man killed by a German soldier - in Poland, I think it was. And as the man lay dying, knowing he was leaving his wife and children, the young soldier approached and looked in horror at what he had done. And the man began to say the Lord's Prayer in German, and the soldier said it with him.

"When the story was related to my grandfather - who was not a veteran, I might add - by a man who had witnessed this, it was suggested by someone that the man was forgiving that soldier at the moment of his own death. My

grandfather laughed and said only a fool would forgive his own killer. I always agreed with that.

"Now I understand the simplicity of Christ's message. It's only through rising above our own fears - and that's all that hatred and greed and selfishness stem from, fear - and aspiring to something better, that we can receive God's grace. It's the only life worth living. And dying for.

The three listeners said nothing.

"There is only one God, and all religions worship Him and praise Him for His glory. It's only the fear and hatred and the fighting and the killing in His name that cause Him such pain."

"What do we do?" the priest asked.

"We love God and love each other. And dump all the scriptures into the lake. I mean *all* of them."

Laurel looked puzzled. Sissy smiled sadly.

"And be a Buddhist-Christian-Jewish-Muslim," O'Toole said.

"Now you got it." George furrowed his brows.  
"Sounds like the Unitarians."



The screech came again, bouncing off the surface of the lake.

"That crazy-ass noisy bastard," George said. "He never shuts up."

"What *is* that?" Laurel asked in a whisper.

George closed his eyes, coughed, then said, "I wasted my life, Sissy, but I know now what it is to live - and love."

"You're a good father, George - and husband."

"Oh, horseshit. You know that better than anyone. The truth shall set you free, Pumpkin-butt. Next you'll be telling Marley's Ghost he was a good man of business."

George began to wheeze and his speech was shelled with explosions of coughing -- a rattling, frightening punctuation.

"Try to rest, George," Sissy said. "Don't talk."

"Do you think God will forgive me?" George asked O'Toole.

"Of course He will."

"I know. I'm sure of it." He closed his eyes again and shivered violently.

"Father, years ago, there was this little girl, just a toddler, someplace in Florida, and she almost died from multiple cottonmouth bites - a water moccasin. And a priest prayed over her suffering body for days, and she recovered."

George stared silently ahead.

"That's wonderful," O'Toole said, finally.

"Do you remember about five years ago, that horrible story about the woman who chopped up her three children with an ax? She said the Devil told her to do it?"

O'Toole swallowed. "Yes."

"That mother was the little girl. The same person."

"Dear God in heaven," O'Toole said.

Laurel tried the starter again, at least a dozen times.

"If evil can come out of good, do you think good can come out of evil?"

O'Toole did not want to have this conversation, and was ashamed of himself.

"I suppose so, yes."

"Me, too," George said.

"Why do you ask?" O'Toole said.

Butler-393

"Because we are doing a very good thing, finally."

"What are we doing, George?" O'Toole asked.

"'He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword'," George said.

"I don't understand, darling," Sissy said.

George convulsed horribly, his lungs fighting for life, jack-knifing his body. He let out a cry and Sissy almost screamed. He fell back on the cushion, gasping for air. The gasping subsided into shudders, his eyes clenched tightly shut. Then he relaxed and they opened, his gaze fixed elsewhere.

"Bezdna," he muttered.

No one questioned this. He continued.

"The Olympianity of it...Oh, Lord my God...*Quarens Serenitatem, Quarens Serenitatem...*"

George closed his eyes again.

"What's he saying?" Sissy whispered. O'Toole did not respond. George began to speak in a murmur, and Sissy and O'Toole leaned forward to hear.

"Because I do not hope to turn again...because I do not hope...because I do not hope to turn..."

Butler-394

"That's T. S. Eliot," said Laurel. "It's called 'Ash Wednesday'."

Sissy and O'Toole looked at Laurel in utter shock.

"What?" Laurel asked.

"Sister, mother, and spirit of the river..." George said.

"He's delirious," O'Toole said.

"Let no one deceive you with shallow arguments; it is for all these things that God's dreadful judgment is coming upon his rebel subjects. Have no part or lot with them. For though you were once all darkness, now as Christians you are light. Live like men who are at home in daylight, for where light is, there all goodness springs up, all justice and truth. Make sure what would have the Lord's approval; take no part in the barren deeds of darkness, but show them up for what they are. The things they do in secret it would be shameful even to mention. But everything, when once the light has shown it up, is

illuminated, and everything thus illuminated is all light. And so the hymn says: 'Awake, sleeper, Rise from the dead, And Christ will shine upon you...' "

They waited for him to continue, but he didn't.

Butler-395

George had closed his eyes. His chest expanded as if fighting for breath, and a horrible sound came out of him, a sound O'Toole had heard before at bedsides.

The priest made the sign of the cross on George's forehead and said, "Through this holy anointing may the Lord in His love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit."

He took George's hands and said, "May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up. Amen."

Both Sissy and Laurel responded with *Amens*.

The skies opened and the rain poured down. Laurel tried the outboard and it fired immediately and healthily to life. Sissy stared at her husband's dead face. She was completely mute.

O'Toole looked up to the downpour and listened to the engine as they roared off, and began to laugh, first

quietly, then loudly. Laurel shot him a nervous glance.

O'Toole thought he might, even should, sob, but didn't.

During the rest of the trip back, he scanned the surface of the lake. He expected to see some sign of a monster, but saw nothing.

Butler--396

**56        Front Page of The Burlington Free Press, March 25:**

*Explosion at Clock Factory Sabotage*

Destruction but no injuries

By Kerry Mooney

Staff

An overnight explosion that tore through a section of stone wall that helped contain the Lectio Divina Springs in Breckenridge was clearly sabotage, authorities said today.

With a gaping hole blown in the side of the wall, the early-morning blast sent millions of gallons of water spilling into the acreage of property owned by the Vermont-based Kukol Clock Company. A second blast

at the source of the spring seems to have at least temporarily stopped all flow of the fresh water.

"It was a massive amount of dynamite," said Lieutenant Tom Alvernia. "Whoever detonated it really knew what they were doing."

Alvernia said that although an investigation will be on going, at this early stage the event does not look like an act of terrorism.

Butler-397

"We're thinking more environmental sabotage, like that old Monkey-Wrench Gang stuff," he said.

The Lavinia Springs has been the object of a huge dispute between the Kukol Company and Yankee Springs of Burlington. Yankee, owned by San Pablo el Padre of Spain, recently acquired water rights through eminent domain when the Vermont Supreme Court ruled in its favor earlier this month. The company had planned to bottle up to 700,000 gallons of spring water per day.

The move was vehemently opposed by local citizens' groups, particularly SOG (Save Our Groundwater), and SOG's defeat was felt a bitter one.

Seth Turner, regional director of SOG, was quick to deny any involvement with the destruction.

"We don't do this kind of thing," said Turner by phone from Seattle. "But since no one was hurt and no homes destroyed, I can't say I'm really crying about it."

When asked if he preferred a dry spring to corporate bottling, Turner laughed and said, "No comment."

Yankee Springs could not be reached for comment at press time.

Kukol's operations were in no way harmed by the blast, but the violent explosion shook the complex. Third shift employees there immediately called 911.

Lieutenant Alvernia said the crime scene is still a mess, with water continuing to spill from the nearly depleted pond, and it would be sometime before forensic evidence could be properly collected.

Butler-398

A firefighter who wished to remain anonymous did say that a monk's cowl was found at the scene, "Like a Halloween get-up," but that there is no reason to believe there is any connection.

The cost of restoring the structure is estimated to be in the millions.

## **57        Epilogue**

After George's body was collected by a local funeral home and shipped to Breckenridge, O'Toole, Sissy and Laurel gave statements to the police. They all expected to be grilled at length, but instead were told to dry off, get something to eat and some rest, but not to leave town



without notifying them. There was no farewell handshake from Laurel.

They checked into the Newport City Motel. Sissy paid with her company credit card. Other than giving a statement to the police, she had said nothing until she emerged from a hot shower in a thick bathrobe. She settled onto the big bed with a Scotch from a travel-bottle.

She began to speak, without a hint of emotion.

Butler-399

"That man we watched die today - he wasn't my husband. I liked him, but he wasn't my husband. My husband never read a poem or a novel in his life. He didn't use words like 'temporal'. He was as shallow as spit on a rock."

O'Toole couldn't conceal his shocked expression.

"Oh, I loved him once," she said. "At least I think I did. He never loved me. That man who died today seemed to love me - for a little while."

O'Toole fixed himself a drink.

"No," she continued, "My husband died in that car accident on February twenty-seventh. That's when George St. Hilaire died. Not today."

Later, Sissy said she was fine and wanted to be alone and take a nap, but she was crying softly when O'Toole left the room.

He bought some sweat pants and a shirt in the hotel gift shop and drove to the beautiful St. Mary, Star of the Sea church, perched high on a hill overlooking Lake Memphremagog. He was grateful to find it open.

He knew that something had died in him today, too, something that had been dying for a long time, perhaps from  
Butler-400

the moment he was born. He found himself mildly excited at the prospect of finding out whether this was beneficial or disastrous.

He went inside and sat alone in the sacred silence for a long while, then prayed. He prayed for himself - nothing more. He no longer believed that God was listening, at least not to him, and this was probably for the best.

The next few weeks were a whirlpool of activity.

O'Toole quit the priesthood. He underwent laicization, or reduction to the lay state. He appreciated that his ordination could not be undone, but that he was now forbidden to ever again perform priestly duties, unless someone was in danger of death. He hoped that never happened.

Hobart and Mary Roth announced their engagement.

Sissy drove a castrating bargain to reach a satisfactory settlement with Kukol Clocks, but prevailed in the end. George Humphries and Hobart clawed their way to control of the company, then undertook savaging each other.

In light of the sabotage, Yankee Springs dropped all plans to restore the source of water to acceptable output, citing unacceptable costs. It was theorized that

Butler-401

Some day the water might naturally spring forth once again. Both Thatcher and Buffy opted for boarding school in the fall. Thatcher, to a Jesuit prep near Boston, Buffy to an all girls in Wellesley.

At the funeral, attended by hundreds, Sissy swore she saw George rise from the congregation and walk quickly out a side door of the church. He smiled at her on the way,

and even gave a little wave. When she told O'Toole, he did not scoff. He had seen far too much.

George's will had been finalized two years before his death, and his wife was stunned to learn that he had stipulated that Glenn Miller's jaunty, "In the Mood" was to be played as his casket was wheeled out of the church. George simply didn't listen to or care about music, and wouldn't have known Glenn Miller from Mitch. Sissy was stunned for all of ten seconds, and allowed the CD to be played. George's parents and many mourners were outraged.

"It was his last wish," Sissy said sweetly in her black mini-dress.

She decided to sell the house. She asked O'Toole if he would like to go live with her somewhere.

"Cape Breton Island," he said without hesitation.

Butler-402

"What the hell do we do there?" she asked.

"Raise sheep? Demand for lamb is going up. All these new immigrants."

One late summer day before they left town, O'Toole decided to pay a last visit to St. Helena's, deserted of a congregation, but scrupulously maintained by the diocese

until it could be sold. He heard that three little nuns from Mexico were living in the rectory in the meantime, visiting to serve the growing Spanish-speaking community. Perhaps they ate lamb.

O'Toole stood for a long while in front of St. Helena's lovely façade, feeling everything and nothing. It was, of course, locked.

At one point he sensed he was being watched and turned. He thought he glimpsed Bob Rogers drive off in a classic, white VW bug, but he couldn't be certain.

The End